In The Name Of God,

The Compassionate,

The Merciful

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Faculty of Foreign Languages

Department of English Language

M.A. Thesis

The Relationship Between Iranian EFL Learners' Beliefs about Rote Learning, their Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and their Success in Vocabulary Learning: A Think-Aloud Protocol Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about the role of rote learning (RL) in vocabulary learning strategies; besides, the study examined if English proficiency would influence learners' vocabulary learning strategy use. This study addresses the need for a clear understanding of the role of RL in EFL vocabulary learning by looking at Iranian EFL learners' own beliefs. The participants of the study consisted of 25 freshmen and 25 senior in the English department of the University of Isfahan. Three instruments were used to collect the needed data, i.e., a vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire, a vocabulary test, and think aloud protocol. After taking the vocabulary learning questionnaire, out of each proficiency group, three participants were randomly asked to take part in think-aloud sessions. The results indicated that Iranian EFL learners used rote learning strategies more frequently than other categories of memory strategy and applying images and sound the least frequently. However, quantitative data and think-aloud revealed that there were some differences between high-proficient and low-proficient learners regarding the order of other categories of memory strategy and the way they used these strategies. The triangulation of the data showed no relationship between the learners' beliefs about rote learning and their achievement in vocabulary test. Overall, the findings of this study imply the need for classroom pedagogy to explicitly integrate strategy instruction and some changes for vocabulary testing.

Keywords: Learners' beliefs, Rote learning (RL), Think-aloud protocol (TAP), Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs).

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Introduction

1.1　Background to the Study

Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign. Although vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching, interest in its role in second language (L2) learning has grown rapidly in recent years, and specialists now emphasize the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary learning by both the teacher and the learner (Decarrico, 2001). Effective second language vocabulary acquisition is particularly important for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners whose native language is not genetically related to English and frequently acquire impoverished lexicons despite spending a couple of years for formal study (Hunt and Beglar, 2005).

Given the difficulties of vocabulary learning in a second or foreign language (L2), along with the obvious necessity of trying to overcome them, one would expect that vocabulary instruction would be at the top of the agenda for language teachers. However, the opposite is often the case. That is, vocabulary is not explicitly taught in most language classes, and students are expected to "pick up" vocabulary on their own without any guidance (Oxford and Crookall, 1990). Many instances of so-called

vocabulary instruction involve merely giving students lists of words to memorize or providing limited practice opportunities, with no further assistance to the often overwhelmed learner.

In order to learn or even master a language and specially its lexicon, learners should make well use of language learning strategies. Different learners adopt different strategies that work for them. For example, some learners focus their attention on learning words in lists or completing various vocabulary exercises. Perhaps this way of vocabulary learning seems time-and-effort consuming to some other learners (Li, 2004). Many studies on learning strategies encourage the learners to use all means available to them as they work to learn English vocabulary. Various researchers have studied factors related to choice of language learning strategies, as shown in a review by Oxford (1989). These factors include: (a) the language being learned; (b) the level of language learning proficiency; (c) the degree of metacognitive awareness; (d) gender; (e) affective variables such as attitudes, motivation, and language goals; (f) specific personality traits; (g) overall personality type; (h) learning style; (i) career orientation or field of specialization; (j) national origin; (k) aptitude; (l) language teaching methods; (m) task requirements, and (n) type of strategy training.

With respect to language proficiency, several studies reveal that effective learning strategies are beneficial in helping learners overcome learning difficulties as well as in improving learning performance. For example, researchers (Gu, 1994; O'Malley et al, 1985; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999) proposed that effective second language learners used various and more moderate strategies with learning tasks. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) found that successful language learners used certain language learning strategies effectively based on their own needs. Gu & Johnson (1996) proposed that the most proficient learners in English vocabulary used various kinds of strategies significantly more often than the less proficient students.

In addition, one of the first problems a foreign language learner encounters is how to commit a massive amount of foreign words to memory. The first and easiest strategy people pick up and use naturally is, simply, repeating new words until they can be recognized. This strategy is known as rote learning. "A rote learning (hereafter RL) system does not involve any processes which enable the learner to understand or interpret the information learnt. The only thing such systems do is to memorize or to

store the incoming information for later use. RL is basically a simple and passive process" (Li, 2004, p.9). No matter whether it is positive or negative, there should be no denial that RL is used by language learners, and that it can be as effective as other strategies.

The available evidence suggests that, at early stages of acquisition, rote repetition requiring shallower processing result in less retention than mnemonic and non-mnemonic elaboration techniques that involve deeper processing. The difference between mnemonic and non-mnemonic techniques lies in whether novel words are integrated into previous knowledge through visual and verbal imagery (mnemonic) or through semantic properties (non-mnemonic).

Research studies on the relationship between beliefs and language learning strategies have suggested that beliefs would be likely to be an underlying factor in the use of strategies (e.g. Horwitz, 1987; Oxford, 1994; Wenden, 1987). "Language learners' strategy choice and use reflect their beliefs, which are strongly determined by different cultural backgrounds" (Li, 2004, p.41) and in this regard rote learning (RL) is no exception. Learners' beliefs can have considerable effect on the quality and quantity of their rote learning (RL) strategy use.

The purpose of this study was to investigate English vocabulary learning strategies used by high proficient and low proficient Iranian EFL learners through a think-aloud protocol study. Besides, the study examined the students' beliefs about the specific role of rote learning strategies and its relationship to their vocabulary learning success and proficiency level.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Among language learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategy is one of the most important areas of investigation. Especially, for an EFL environment like Iran, vocabulary learning strategy plays a more crucial role in language learning since L2 learners are not exposed to L2 context frequently and naturally. The purpose of this study was to identify Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about rote learning as one of the vocabulary learning strategies. As beliefs about language learning can affect the way learners use vocabulary learning strategies and their learning achievements, the second aim was to see whether there is any relationship between the learners' beliefs and

vocabulary learning strategy use on the one hand and their vocabulary test results on the other hand. This study also aimed to investigate the differences in vocabulary learning strategy use in these two proficiency groups of Iranian EFL learners.

The field of language learning and teaching has evolved significantly over the last fifty years exposing the learners to a wide variety of different methods and approaches to learn the target language: Audio-lingual Method, Natural approach, Communicative Language Teaching, among others, have appeared on stage (Rojas 2008). Vocabulary learning has been an important issue in the applied linguistics field for almost the last three decades. Vocabulary is the smallest and the most important unit that learners have to know if they want to use the language. Meara (1984) stated that vocabulary is the most important aspect of second language acquisition. One cannot learn and use a language without learning a large repertoire of its vocabulary. "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed. Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111). This is also echoed by Laufer who stated that "… solid vocabulary is necessary in every stage of language learning, as is now being openly stated by some second language acquisition researchers" (1997, p. 147). However, vocabulary learning is never an easy task for language learners, especially for Iranian EFL learners. In most of Iranian EFL English classes, teachers just give the translated meaning of new vocabulary to students, and vocabulary instruction and explicit grammar analyses are the main foci in regular English classes. They do not teach students the strategies to learn new words by reading. This encourages a passive approach to learning, which in turn leads to poor learning outcomes.

Matthew (1996) drew the conclusion in his research that the practice of direct L1 translation of words supplied by teachers made students turn to rote learning and it helped students shape a strong belief that language learning is about memorizing new word forms and grammar rules. As a result, the students seldom associate English words with their sounds and forms, meaning and usage and rely much on memorization of single words in the process of vocabulary learning. Most of them try to seek similar sounds from their L1 language system to help memorize the newly-encountered L2 words. They may also neglect other aspects of knowing a word, such as, parts of speech of words, word relationships, collocation, usage and register of words. Teachers put emphasis on rote learning of the equivalent translated meaning of new vocabulary, and

on grammar. Law (2003) showed that most of the students in Hong Kong focused on the L1 equivalent meanings of certain words but did not tend to make use of vocabulary to help construct the meanings of the whole text effectively.

The learners' beliefs and practices may create problems in their vocabulary learning. Therefore, it is very important to find out Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and help them to deal with vocabulary effectively. The situation is even tougher for Iranian EFL university students. They have just left high school and faced a huge amount of vocabulary, which is overwhelmingly much larger than that they learnt in high school. They bring a repertoire of vocabulary learning strategies to the task of learning as a result of six years of studying English in guidance school and high school.

A number of researchers (Garins & Redman, 1986; Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 2000; Waring, 2001) have indicated that, when learning vocabulary, if it is not repeated, forgetting is quite normal and thus practicing and reviewing previously taught vocabulary is very important. Moreover, Schmitt (2000) claimed that since forgetting is natural and vocabulary is incremental, words are learned gradually by numerous exposures. Nation (1990) reviewed previous studies on word repetitions and found that five to sixteen repetitions are necessary for learners to acquire a word. A wide range of vocabulary practice or learning activities have been suggested by lexical researchers. Despite the fact that practicing and reviewing vocabulary previously learned is considered important, it seems that empirical research focusing on vocabulary practice or learning activities is lacking and their effectiveness is still under investigated. Therefore, a good deal of researches is still needed to determine the most suitable vocabulary practices and activities for language learners.

According to the literature, there are many studies on language learning strategies and they are mainly carried out to examine factors that affect language learning strategy use such as gender (Chen, 2000), motivation (Chung, 2000), language proficiency (Bremner, 1998; Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Chen, 2000; Park, 1997; O'Malley et al., 1985; Tzeng & Huang, 2000), type of language task (O'Malley et al., 1985), learners' beliefs (Yang, 1999), learners' learning style (Sy, 2003), and cultural context (Bremner, 1998). A majority of these studies are based on Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) including six strategy categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Also, some

studies have focused on language learning strategy instruction and training (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Huang, 2002).

Nevertheless, compared to language learning strategies, relatively few studies have been conducted on vocabulary learning strategies. The three more comprehensive quantitative studies on vocabulary learning strategies are Chen (1998), Gu & Johnson (1996), and Schmitt (1997). One qualitative ethnographic study is on learners' approaches to vocabulary learning (Sanaoui, 1995). Other studies have focused on one specific vocabulary learning strategy like key word strategy (Lawson & Hogben, 1996), guessing strategy (Parry, 1991; Fraser, 1999) or focused primarily on combined strategies of vocabulary learning (Rodriguez & Sadoski, 2000; Brown & Perry, 1991).

Therefore, there is a compelling need to conduct another study in an EFL context, Iran, to add some plausible findings to the previous studies done in the field of vocabulary learning strategies and the learners' beliefs' about specific strategies such as rote learning with the advantage of using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and data analysis.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned purposes and problems, the present study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do high and low proficient Iranian learners of English differ in their vocabulary learning strategy use?

2. Do Iranian EFL learners use rote learning strategies more than other memory strategies?

3. Is there any relationship between beliefs about rote learning and Iranian learners' achievement in the English vocabulary test?

4. Is there any relationship between Iranian learners' English proficiency and rote learning strategy use?

 In relation to the research questions 2, 3, and 4 mentioned above, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

2. Hypothesis: There is no difference between rote learning strategies and other memory strategies used by Iranian EFL learners.

3. Hypothesis: There is no relationship between beliefs about rote learning and learners' achievement in the English vocabulary test.

4. Hypothesis: There is no relationship between rote learning strategy use and learners' English proficiency.

1.4. Purpose and Significance of the Study

In language learning, vocabulary learning plays a crucial role for learners to facilitate their learning efficiency and outcome. In addition, most college students are asked to use English-version textbooks or learning materials to acquire basic knowledge or information. This means adequate vocabulary sizes will contribute to their intake. As a result, to comprehend and master vocabulary learning strategies will surely help learners a great deal in language learning. A number of strategies specifically for learning vocabulary have been identified since vocabulary learning rapidly changed in status from the 'Cinderella' of language learning to an area of growing research and publication (Li, 2004). Memory strategies and their uses have also been studied extensively by researchers (e.g. Ran, 2000).

It is evident from the abundant research literature that learners use a wealth of strategies to memorize words. However, the topic of rote learning as one of the memory strategies and its use by Iranian EFL learners is rarely discussed. The relevant literature indicates that in the past, the majority of research into RL has been centered on Asian learners or Hong Kong-based Chinese learners, to support educational reform for teachers. There are not enough specific studies of RL used by Iranian EFL learners in Iran, or of the influence of the learners' own beliefs, to see the reason why RL is so popularly used by them. Thus, there is a compelling need to understand the role of RL better by looking at the learners' beliefs. There is a considerable gap in the literature in the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs and their rote learning as preferred learning strategies that this study intends to fill.

According to the literature, to date a host of studies have been conducted on learning strategies and vocabulary learning strategies. However, almost none of these studies (e.g. Hong, 2006; Li, 2010; Ngan-ha, 2007; Rojas, 2008, Sung, 2006; Wu, 2005, Yamini and Dehghan, 2005) has so far focused on the specific or systematic investigation of the most important issue concerning Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about

the role of rote learning (RL) strategy choice and use in their vocabulary learning through a think aloud study. The purpose of the present study was to investigate Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about the role of rote learning (RL) in vocabulary learning and to look at their preferences of vocabulary strategy choice and use. More specifically, this study focused on the following aims in relation to Iranian EFL learners:

any significant difference in the strategy use between high and low proficient learners; their preference of rote learning (RL) strategies more than other memory strategies; any relationship between beliefs about rote learning (RL) and learners' achievement in the English vocabulary test; and any relationship between RL strategy use and learners' English proficiency.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

In this section, a number of terms which may function as either the main variables or the minor ones will be both theoretically and operationally defined in the following order:

1. **Learners' beliefs**: A belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behavior (Borg 2001, p.186). They tend to be culturally bound, to be formed early in life and to be resistant to change. (Williams & Burdens, 1997, p. 56). In this study, students' beliefs are operationally defined as the students' performance on the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire.

2. **Foreign or second language vocabulary items and foreign or second word**: The terms are used interchangeably in this study in the sense that both the above terms are used to include fixed and idiomatic phrases as well, although Nation (1983) defines "word" as a word family which includes inflectional as well as derivative forms of the word (Nakamura, 2000, p.6).

3. **L2 learners, EFL learners and FL learners:** These terms are used interchangeably in the sense that all of the terms indicate those who are learning English as a non-native, additional language (Nakamura, 2000, p. 6).