

**IN THE NAME OF
ALLAH**

The Compassionate

The Merciful

118.9A



دانشگاه گیلان

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**Strategies for Learning and Remembering of Vocabulary Items by Iranian
EFL Learners at Intermediate Level**

By:

Ebrahim Panah

Supervisor:

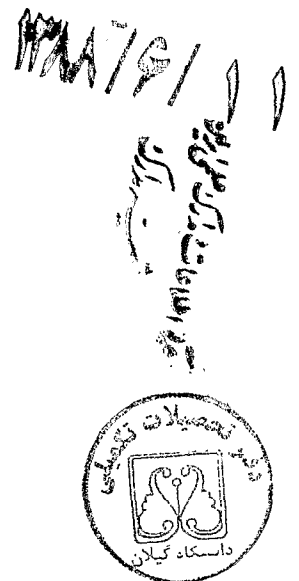
Dr. Amir Mahdavi Zafarghandi

Advisor:

Dr. Masoud Khalili Sabet

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Dedicated to:

My Family

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Abstract

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Ebrahim Panah

The purpose of this research was to investigate the strategies used by Iranian EFL students at intermediate level in the process of their vocabulary learning and remembering, to find the effect of gender variable on the use of the strategies, and finally to examine the congruence between the strategies introduced by the teachers and those used by the students. The data for this study were collected through a standardized paper based TOEFL Test, a vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. First, a paper-based test of TOEFL was given to three hundred and eighty four language learners from Fars and Hormozgan provinces from both State and Azad universities (153 males and 231 females) to select intermediate students (95 males and 135 females) according to their TOEFL band scores. Then, a 56-item questionnaire of vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford's (1990) Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, the validity of which was reported by Kudo (1999). Next, the Nation's semi-structured interview (2001) was adapted to interview ten university lecturers to explore what vocabulary strategies they introduced in their classes. At the next stage, the following analyses were used. Factor analysis was performed to validate the questionnaire and find the underlying factors. A descriptive statistics was employed to determine the frequency of the used strategies whereas the chi-square was done to analyze the gender differences in choosing vocabulary learning and remembering strategies. The data analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively showed that there was a rather distinct factor loading on four categories (i.e., cognitive, associative, social, and classroom-based) in a reliable manner. In fact, the basis of category naming was a modification of Oxford's (1990) classification scheme and Kudo's (1999). Another finding was that students used cognitive strategies more than the other ones. More specifically, they tended to use strategies such as 'Paraphrasing the meaning of words by themselves, guessing from textual context, using a monolingual dictionary'. The third finding was that both male and female learners made a similar use of the strategies. Finally, concerning the difference in the use of strategies, it was revealed that there was no congruence between the strategies taught by the teachers and those used by the students, and that the teachers did not keep abreast of a wide range of strategies for learning and remembering vocabulary items. Our findings can have implications for the field of language learning/teaching by deepening our understanding of the nature of vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian EFL learners.

Key terms: EFL learners, intermediate level, learning, remembering, strategy, vocabulary

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CALLA= Cognitive Academic language Learning Approach

EFL= English as a Foreign Language

ESL= English as a Second Language

ETS= Educational Testing Service

FL= Foreign Language

KMO= Kaiser-Meyer- Olkin Measure

L1= First Language

L2= Second Language

SILL= Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

SL= Second Language

SLA=Second Language Acquisition

SSBI=Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction

TOEFL=Test of English as a Foreign Language

VL= Vocabulary Learning

VOLSI=Vocabulary Learning Strategy Inventory

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Chapter one

Introduction

1.1. Preview

Vocabulary is central to language and of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning. The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been recently recognized by theorists and researchers in the field. The crucial role that lexis plays in second language learning and teaching has been repeatedly acknowledged in theoretical and empirical second language acquisition (SLA) vocabulary research. The major challenge of learning and using a language—whether as L1 or L2—lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the nitty-gritty of the lexicons (Singleton 2007).

The nature of vocabulary learning and acquisition is complex and involves several processes that can inform instruction. Nagy and Scott (2000) described five noteworthy components of word knowledge. First, they pointed out that word learning is incremental—that is, we learn word meanings gradually and internalize deeper meanings through successive encounters in a variety of contexts and through active engagement with the words. For example, the average tenth grader is likely to have a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the term *atom* compared to the knowledge of an average fourth grader, who still has a more simplistic understanding of the term. We also know words at varying levels of familiarity from no knowledge to some knowledge to a complete and thorough knowledge, which serves us especially well in speaking and writing (Beck, Perfitti, & McKeown, 1982). It may be that, for some words, students may only need to have a general understanding of a

term to keep comprehension intact. In other words, a deeper understanding may be necessary for students to successfully comprehend a passage.

Another aspect of word knowledge is the presence of polysemous or multiple meaning words. Many words have different meanings depending upon the context in which they are used. This is especially evident in the various content areas such as mathematics, where polysemous word meanings differ greatly from the common usage of words (Durkin & Shire, 1991: cited in Wood & Harmon, 2008; Rubenstein & Thompson, 2002). For example, a common word such as *table* represents an entirely different meaning in science texts when authors discuss the Periodic Table.

A third aspect of word knowledge described by Nagy and Scott (2000) is the different types of knowledge involved in knowing a word. The types of knowledge include the use of words in oral and written language, correct grammar usage of words or syntactical knowledge, semantic understandings such as appropriate synonyms and antonyms, and even morphological understandings that involve correct usage of prefixes and suffixes. Surprisingly, more than 60% of words encountered in academic texts can be taught morphologically (Anderson & Nagy, 1992). In particular, Milligan and Ruff (1990), in their analysis of social studies textbooks used from elementary through high school, found that approximately 71% of the glossary terms contained affixes and roots that could be directly taught.

A fourth aspect of word knowledge is the notion that learning a word meaning is inextricably related to knowledge of other related words. We do not learn word meanings in isolation; we learn word meanings in relation to other words and concepts. For example, knowing the concept of *rectangle* involves knowing about *polygons*, *quadrilaterals*, *right*

angles, squares, and other related concepts. Finally, Nagy and Scott (2000) noted that word knowledge differs according to the type of word. Knowing the meaning of prepositions (e.g., *under, around*) differs greatly from knowing the meaning of specific science terminology, such as *nucleus, proton, and neutron*.

Vocabulary learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies (Nation, 2001). Along with the movement away from the audio-lingual method in the 1970s and towards a communicative approach in the 1980s; second language acquisition (SLA) also shifted from a focus on teachers to a focus on learners and language learning strategies encourage greater overall self-direction for learners. Self-directed learners are independent learners who are capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning and gradually gaining confidence, involvement and proficiency (Oxford, 1990). So is the case with vocabulary learning strategies. This era also gave birth to the notion and importance of what we know today as learner strategies. Thus, students need training in vocabulary learning strategies. Most research has shown that many learners do use more strategies to learn vocabulary especially when compared to such integrated tasks such as listening and speaking. But they are mostly inclined to use basic vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). This in turn makes strategy instruction an essential part of any foreign or second language program.

The notion of learning strategies was born in two fields that have developed it independently: cognitive psychology and second language acquisition. The former tried to analyze the strategies that experts employ and then train novices to use them as well. The latter preferred to describe the kinds of strategies that are used (Griffiths and Parr, 2001).

Many interesting patterns have been followed in most quantitative studies on vocabulary acquisition and a variety of strategies have been identified; however, the current state of the

art of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) is typified by lack of a comprehensive taxonomy of lexically-focused strategies. So, there is urgent need for theoretical research to enhance the precision of our conception of strategies. Despite the interesting patterns seen in the quantitative studies (Gu & Johnson, 1996: cited in Kojc-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999), they do not show how a particular type of strategy is used in the development of vocabulary. In this regard, the qualitative approach has been more insightful. In addition, extensive attention has been devoted to incidental learning through reading while intentional learning of vocabulary has not received its fair share of research effort (Gu, 2003).

In the area of VLS taxonomy, the most comprehensive effort has been that of Schmitt's (1997). Schmitt provides a classification scheme for a wide range of VLSs revising and expanding on Oxford's (1990) classification scheme in two important respects: (a) it is especially geared to vocabulary learning and, (b) compared to Oxford's typology of general language learning strategies, the potential overlap of multiple classification of strategies is minimized.

He distinguished the strategies which learners use to determine the meanings of the new words when they first encounter from the ones they use to consolidate meanings when they encounter the words again. The former includes determination and social strategies and the latter includes social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The social strategies are included in the two categories because they can be used for both purposes.

Schmitt defined each category as follows. Determination strategies are used "when faced with discovering a new word's meaning without resource to another person's expertise" (p. 205). Social strategies are used to understand a word "by asking someone who knows it" (p. 210). Memory strategies are "approaches which relate new materials to existing knowledge" (p. 205). The definition of cognitive strategies was adopted from Oxford (1990) as

“manipulation of transformation of the target language by the learner” (p. 43). Finally, metacognitive strategies are defined as “a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring or evaluating the best ways to study” (p. 205). Although definitions are clear, it is unclear whether the strategies classified into the five categories above really share the common underlying factors. This is because factor analysis was not run as an indication of the validity of the questionnaire (Kudo, 1999). Kudo (ibid), using factor analysis demonstrated that there were only two major factors involved in vocabulary learning activities which were identified as strategies directly involved in learning and strategies indirectly involved in learning.

However, strategies are affected by a number of factors (e.g., Riazi and Alavi, 2004) different intended purposes for a strategy in different situations can affect its classification. Different tasks also demand different strategies. In this regard, Gu (2003) mentions that the strategy a learner uses and the effectiveness of these strategies depend on the learner himself, the learning task at hand, and the learning environment.

1.2 . Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing popularity of research on learning strategies since the mid 1970s with the movement away from the audio-lingual method, the topic of learning strategies is a relatively new research area in Iran, especially L2 vocabulary learning and remembering strategies. This needs to be taken into account by Iranian teachers because their students need to keep on learning foreign languages, even when they are no longer in a formal classroom setting. On the teachers' part, if they include learning strategies as part of their instruction, they can play an active and valuable part in helping their students to become successful learners of the target language. Considering the significant role attributed to vocabulary learning in second or foreign language learning, one can implicitly understand the importance

of vocabulary teaching as well. (Richards and Renandya, 2002). In addition, research on the language learning strategies of Iranian students should not only sensitize Iranian students and teachers to the use of these strategies but also encourage them to develop their own profiles of the learning strategies at work in their classrooms (e.g., Riazi and Alavi, 2004). Thus, the present research intends to focus on the strategies introduced by the teachers and those used by the intermediate students for learning and remembering vocabulary items.

1.3. Significance of the Study

In the field of language teaching and learning, vocabulary acquisition is considered by many experts to be the single most important aspect of foreign language learning (Singleton 2007). The majority of students studying language cite vocabulary as their number one priority. It is also considered a priority by teachers as well (Crow, 1986)

It has been constantly demonstrated that mastering a good fluency in the use of language in the four skills is strongly related to the number of vocabulary items learned or at hand. Laufer (1997) believes that reading comprehension is more related to vocabulary knowledge than to any other components of reading. Extensive attention has been devoted to incidental learning through reading while intentional learning of vocabulary has not received its fair share of research effort (Gu, 2003).

The people's ability to use and understand words is a significant index of their mental ability. Vocabulary tests are of major importance in intelligence, job placement, and college entrance tests, because they effectively measure our ability to think clearly, to acquire information and skills to read and listen with understanding, and to communicate successfully with others. Unless one is skilled in the use of words in verbal communication, s/he cannot succeed in college or the job. Without ability to use, and to understand words, no one can

deal with ideas or people. Students learning English for higher education face a formidable task. They have almost internalized a good knowledge of grammar, but a very poor supply of vocabulary knowledge. Naggy and Herman (1981: cited in Brown & Perry, 1991) summarized a number of studies investigating the acquisition of vocabulary in native speakers, and estimated that by the last year of high school the typical students have learned 40,000 words, an average of around 3,000 words per year. A logical extrapolation is that an ESL student who is learning academic English would have to learn an average number of more words per year than this. However, the picture Brown & Perry (1991) represent is completely different and disappointing. Talking about the students aiming to enter universities, she claims that these students have mastered many useful and many not so useful grammatical features, but only very limited number of vocabularies. She states that the students about to enter universities in Asian countries often have a smaller vocabulary than a five-year-old native speaker. This makes a lot of problems for students at the university level, where the courses are usually so designed to give a rapid expansion in vocabulary, while they are not prepared for the situation. This puts a pressure on them to compensate the wide gap but this is sometimes too much a burden for them to tolerate. Aitchison (1987: cited in Parry, 1997: 630) estimates on the basis of various studies that she reviews, that the vocabulary of an educated adult is unlikely to be less than 55,000 [words] and may be as high as 250,000. The question is how learners of a new language as English can build up such a large and complicated structure in a few years: A good example is our own educational system in this regard considering the language learners in our guidance and high schools, the students learn between one or two hundred words every year. That means after six or seven years of studying English, to be very optimistic, a student enters the university with a whole number of 1,500 to 2,000 words. But the case is sometimes even more disappointing. It almost 80 to 90 per cent of the time happens that students pass their English courses without

any success and motivation. If tested for vocabulary they might have about 5, 00 words at their disposal. This is very disappointing, For almost 90 per cent of the time the students except for those who have attended places like language centers, or they have in a way or another studied more English courses in addition to their usual school programs and curriculums, the rest are terribly weak in English. If tested for the grammar points, we will surprisingly notice that most of these students have a good knowledge about the grammatical rules and structural points of the language, but since their command of vocabulary is miserably weak, they are not able to show off and that's because, they have put all their eggs in the basket of grammar. This makes vocabulary and the study of vocabulary at the heart of language teaching and learning. Thus, this study hopes to investigate and account for the strategies which will prove to be fruitful for Iranian EFL learners in their mastering of English words. In that case, the study becomes very significant in introducing EFL learners and teachers to a number of strategies which can be practiced in different EFL classes.

1.4. Objectives of the Study

Most previous quantitative studies of language learning strategy use have focused on differences in overall strategy use and in broad strategy categories, and there are few studies which specifically deal with L2 vocabulary learning strategies. As vocabulary is gaining more importance and is seen as an integral area of language teaching by linguistic researchers (e.g., Riazi and Alavi, 2004) and Celce-Murcia (2001), it would be crucial to seek out language learner's attitudes toward learning vocabulary and find ways that can help them improve their knowledge of vocabulary. This study intends to investigate the strategies Iranian EFL learners, especially at the intermediate level, utilize in their vocabulary learning. Since the students are put to themselves for almost 90 per cent of the time to learn the