

University of Kashan

Faculty of Humanities

English Department

**THE EFFECT OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY
LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THEIR BELIEFS ABOUT
VOCABULARY LEARNING ON THEIR VOCABULARY
LEARNING OUTCOMES**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR MASTER DEGREES IN TEACHING
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TEFL)**

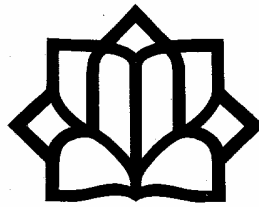
SUPERVISOR:

MOHAMMAD RAOUF MOINI, PhD

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ALIREZA DADVAR KASHANI

MARCH, 2009



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By

ALI REZA DADVAR KASHANI

WAS SUBMITTED TO THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF KASHAN IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR MASTER DEGREES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TEFL) AND APPROVED BY THE COMMITTEE MEMBERS OF MARCH, 4, 2009

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KASHAN, IRAN

MARCH, 2009

بسمه تعالی



تاریخ:
شماره:
پیوست:

مدیریت تحصیلات تکمیلی دانشگاه
صورتجلسه دفاع از پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد

نام و نام خانوادگی دانشجو: علیرضا دادور کاشانی
شماره دانشجویی: ۸۵۲۳۲۱۰۲۰۲
رشته: آموزش زبان انگلیسی
دانشکده: علوم انسانی
عنوان پایان نامه: تأثیر استراتژی و باورهای زبان آموزان ایرانی در یادگیری واژگان زبان انگلیسی

این پایان نامه به مدیریت تحصیلات تکمیلی به منظور بخشی از فعالیتهای تحصیلی لازم برای اخذ درجه کارشناسی ارشد ارائه می گردد. دفاع از پایان نامه در تاریخ ۱۴/۱۲/۸۷ مورد تأیید و ارزیابی اعضای هیأت داوران قرار گرفت و با نمره ۱۹.۱۶ به عدد و با درجه عالی به تصویب رسید.

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

I here by declare that the present work is the result of my own sincere work and it is by no means plagiarized in any way.

Ali reza Dadvar Kashani

Date: March, 4, 2009

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my appreciation to individuals who guided and supported me until completion of this thesis.

I am very grateful to Dr. Mohammad Raouf Moini, my supervisor, who guided me to develop my study into a practicable frame in the very beginning and offered valuable suggestions while the work was in progress. He encouraged me to move on with my research with strong confidence in my abilities to achieve the academic goal. His dedication to students has proven his beautiful and courageous spirits to offer the best possible to us.

I do appreciate Dr. Gholamreza Sami, my advisor, for always being there to solve my problems when I got stuck and to support me mentally and intellectually. My thanks also go to all the teachers that have instructed me at the University of Kashan.

I would like to thank all the students who participated in the study and helped me with data collection. I also owe special thanks to Mr. Mahvash for his conscientious information and support with respect to the analysis of data.

Last but not least, I wish to express my immense gratitude to my family who always supported, encouraged, and motivated me to complete the study.

Abstract

The Effect of Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning Strategies and their Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning on their Vocabulary Learning Outcomes

By

Alireza Dadvar Kashani

The purpose of this study was ten fold: 1) to identify Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about and attitudes towards vocabulary and vocabulary learning; 2) to discover the pattern of vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian EFL learners; 3) to examine the relationship between beliefs about and attitudes towards vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies; 4) to find out if there were any beliefs that could predict vocabulary learning outcomes; 5) to find out if there were any strategies that could predict vocabulary learning outcomes; 6) to study the differences between the beliefs and attitudes of EFL learners with more learning experience and those of EFL learners with less learning experience; 7) to study the differences between vocabulary learning strategies of EFL learners with more learning experience and those of EFL learners with less learning experience; 8) to study how gender could affect EFL learners' beliefs about and attitudes towards vocabulary learning and their choice of vocabulary learning strategies; 9) to examine whether there was any differences between vocabulary learning outcomes of female EFL learners and those of male EFL learners and 10) to find out whether EFL learners of different language learning experiences were different in terms of vocabulary learning outcomes. The participants in the study included 58 freshman, 50 sophomore, 55 junior and 50 senior students majoring in English translation and English literature at the University of Kashan. The total number of female and male EFL learners who participated in the study was 149 and 64, respectively. A Receptive Vocabulary Levels test, a Productive Vocabulary Levels test, a questionnaire on beliefs about vocabulary learning and a questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies were used for data collection. Descriptive statistics, Spearman correlation, One Way ANOVA, Independent Samples T-Test and Tukey HSD Test were employed for data analysis. The results revealed that 1) most of the EFL learners had a neutral attitude towards vocabulary learning and the number of those who believed in use of combined strategies was more than the number of those who believed in the use of contextualized or the use of decontextualized strategies; 2) the most preferred strategy was the one related to

perception strategies and the least preferred strategies were creative rehearsal strategies; 3) positive attitude had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, creative rehearsal, note-taking, association and imagery, perception and management strategies. Neutral attitude had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, note-taking, guessing, dictionary use, sources of words, association and imagery, perception and management strategies. Negative attitude had negative significant correlation with creative rehearsal and perception strategies. Beliefs about the importance of vocabulary in language learning had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, association and imagery, perception and management strategies. Beliefs about decontextualized vocabulary learning had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, note-taking, miscellaneous, association and imagery, perception and management strategies. Beliefs about contextualized vocabulary learning had significant correlation with guessing, sources of words and perception strategies. Beliefs about teaching vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, note-taking and association and imagery strategies. Beliefs about use of combined strategies had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, sources of words, association and imagery and perception strategies. Beliefs about dimensionality of vocabulary learning had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, creative rehearsal, note-taking, dictionary use, miscellaneous, association and imagery, perception and management strategies and finally, miscellaneous beliefs had significant correlation with rote-rehearsal, guessing, dictionary use, miscellaneous, sources of words, association and imagery, perception and management strategies; 4) beliefs about contextualized vocabulary learning, beliefs about decontextualized vocabulary learning and neutral attitude were found to be predictors of receptive vocabulary knowledge and beliefs about the use of combined strategies and neutral attitude were found to be predictors of productive vocabulary knowledge; 5) perception strategy was found to be a predictor of receptive vocabulary knowledge and perception and note-taking strategies were found to be predictors of productive vocabulary knowledge; 6) EFL learners of different language learning experiences were not significantly different in terms of beliefs about and attitudes towards vocabulary learning but EFL learners were significantly different just in terms of note-taking strategies; 8) male EFL learners had more negative attitude than female EFL learners but, in practice, males and females were not significantly different in terms of vocabulary learning strategies ; 9) male EFL learners performed significantly better than female EFL learners on both receptive and productive vocabulary levels tests and 10) EFL learners of different language learning experiences were significantly different in terms of vocabulary learning outcomes. Finally, the results of the present study showed that EFL teachers need to familiarize their students with different vocabulary learning strategies and teach them how to use them effectively so that these strategies can improve and facilitate their vocabulary learning. Since the use of contextualized, decontextualized and combined strategies were found to be positive predictors of vocabulary learning outcomes, these strategies should be emphasized in EFL classrooms.

TABLE of CONTENTS

Content	Page
List of Tables -----	XI
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION-----	1
1.1. Introduction-----	1
1.2. Statement of the Problem -----	5
1.3. Objectives of the Study -----	6
1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses -----	6
1.5. Significance of the Study -----	8
1.6. Definition of Terms -----	9
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW -----	10
2.1. Introduction -----	10
2.2. Language Learning Strategies -----	12
2.2.1. Classification of Language Learning Strategies -----	14
2.2.2. Language Learning Strategies versus Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	15
2.3. Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	16
2.4. Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	18
2.5. Research into Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	27
2.5.1. Research into Contextualized Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	28
2.5.1.1. Does Guessing Lead to Vocabulary Learning? -----	29
2.5.1.2. How Many Exposures are Needed to Learn a Word? -----	30
2.5.1.3. Is Incidental Learning Better than Intentional Learning? -----	31
2.5.2. Research into Decontextualized Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	32
2.5.2.1. Dictionary Use and Vocabulary Learning -----	32
2.5.2.2. Note-Taking and Vocabulary Learning -----	34
2.5.2.3. Rote-Rehearsal and Vocabulary Learning -----	35

2.5.2.4. Mnemonics and Vocabulary Learning -----	37
2.6. Research into Vocabulary Learning Approaches of Good and Poor	
Learners -----	39
2.7. Factors Influencing the Choice of Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	41
2.7.1. Gender and Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	42
2.7.2. Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and Vocabulary Learning	
Strategies -----	43
2.7.2.1. Construct of Knowing a Word-----	44
2.7.2.2. Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	44
2.7.2.2.1. Beliefs about the Use of Decontextualized Vocabulary	
Learning Strategies -----	44
2.7.2.2.2. Beliefs about the Use of Contextualized Vocabulary	
Learning Strategies-----	46
2.7.2.2.3. Beliefs about the Use of Combined Strategies -----	47
2.8. Concluding Remarks on Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and	
Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	49
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD -----	51
3.1. Introduction -----	51
3.2. Participants -----	51
3.3. Instruments -----	52
3.3.1. Vocabulary Learning Beliefs Questionnaire-----	52
3.3.2. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire-----	54
3.3.3. Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Levels Tests-----	56
3.4. Procedures -----	57
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS -----	58
4.1. Introduction -----	58
4.2. Results of Descriptive Statistics for Beliefs about Vocabulary	
Learning -----	59
4.3. Results of Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Learning	
Strategies -----	64

4.4. Results of the Correlation between Iranian EFL Learners’ Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and their Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	68
4.5. Results of Multiple Regression of Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and Vocabulary Learning Outcomes -----	78
4.6. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Vocabulary learning Outcomes -----	81
4.7. Results of Differences between EFL Learners of More Language Learning Experiences and EFL Learners with Less Language Learning Experiences with Regard to their Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning -----	84
4.8. Results of Differences between EFL Learners with More Language Learning Experiences and EFL Learners with Less Language Learning Experiences with Regard to Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	85
4.9. Results of Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Differences in Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning -----	87
4.10. Results of Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Differences in Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	89
4.11. Results of Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Differences in Vocabulary Learning Outcomes -----	91
4.12. Results of One Way ANOVA for Vocabulary Learning Outcomes across Four Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	92
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION -----	97
5.1. Introduction -----	97
5.2. Summary of the Study -----	97
5.3. Discussion -----	101
5.4. Conclusion -----	112
5.5. Pedagogical Implications -----	116
5.6. Recommendations for Further Research -----	117
References -----	120
Appendices -----	128
Appendix A: Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire-----	129

Appendix B: Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire-----	132
Appendix C: Receptive Vocabulary Levels Test-----	135
Appendix D: Productive Vocabulary Levels Test-----	139
Farsi Abstract -----	142

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Stoffer (1995) -----	18
Table 2.2 Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Gu and Johnson (1996)--	20
Table 2.3 Schmitt’s Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies-----	22
Table 2.4 Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Nation (2001)-----	26
Table 3.1 Belief Factors and their Subcategories-----	54
Table 4.1 Results of Descriptive Statistics for Belief Factors-----	60
Table 4.2 Results of Descriptive Analysis of EFL Learners’ Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning-----	61
Table 4.3 List of Five Belief Items with the Highest Mean and Five Belief Items with the Lowest Mean-----	63
Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics for Strategy Factors-----	64
Table 4.5 Results of Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Learning Strategies ----	65
Table 4.6 List of Five Strategy Items with the Highest Mean and Five Strategy Items with the Lowest Mean -----	67
Table 4.7 Spearman Correlation Matrix for EFL Learners’ Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and their Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	68
Table 4.8 Results of Multiple Regression: Analysis of Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and Vocabulary Learning Outcomes of Receptive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	78
Table 4.9 Results of Multiple Regression of Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and Receptive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	79
Table 4.10 Results of Multiple Regression: Analysis of Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning and Vocabulary Learning Outcomes of Productive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	80
Table 4.11 Results of Multiple Regression of Beliefs about Vocabulary learning and Productive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	81
Table 4.12 The Results of Multiple Regression: Analysis of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Vocabulary Learning Outcomes of Receptive Vocabulary Levels Test-----	82

Table 4.13	Results of Multiple Regression of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Receptive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	82
Table 4.14	Results of Multiple Regression: Analysis of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Vocabulary Learning Outcomes of Productive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	83
Table 4.15	Results of Multiple Regression of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Productive Vocabulary Levels Test -----	84
Table 4.16	Results of One-Way ANOVA for Belief Factors across Four Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	85
Table 4.17	Results of One-Way ANOVA for Strategy Factors across Four Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	86
Table 4.18	Tukey HSD Test -----	86
Table 4.19	Results of Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Differences in Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning -----	88
Table 4.20	Results of Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Differences in Vocabulary Learning Strategies -----	90
Table 4.21	Results of Descriptive Statistics for Gender Differences in Receptive and Productive Levels Test Performance -----	91
Table 4.22	Results of Independent Samples T-Test for Gender Differences in Receptive and Productive Test Performance -----	92
Table 4.23	Results of Descriptive Statistics for Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Level Test according to Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	93
Table 4.24	Results of One Way ANOVA for Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Level Test across Four Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	94
Table 4.25	Tukey HSD Test for Receptive Vocabulary Levels Test across Different Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	95
Table 4.26	Tukey HSD Test for Productive Vocabulary Levels Test across Different Levels of Language Learning Experiences -----	96

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Words are the basic building blocks of language and the units of meaning from which large structures such as sentences and paraphrases are formed (Read, 2000). They are the building blocks of language because they label objects, actions and ideas without which people are not able to convey their intended meaning and purposes. Many theorists and researchers have recognized the prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in foreign or second language acquisition.

“Despite the fact that vocabulary is central to language and crucially important for second language learners, lexis has traditionally been the Cinderella of the field of Second Language Acquisition research” (Segler, 2001, P.1). In other words, students’ vocabulary knowledge and acquisition appears to be an area of research that has not received adequate attention (Cassidy and Cassidy, 2004). This lack of attention has prompted researchers to look at vocabulary and vocabulary learning from different perspectives, choose some issues or areas and conduct their studies. Among them, we can refer to the scope of vocabulary (vocabulary size and depth of vocabulary knowledge), foreign language vocabulary pedagogy, beliefs about vocabulary learning, vocabulary knowledge and its effect on different language skills and vocabulary learning strategies.

Vocabulary size and depth of vocabulary knowledge, which are subsumed under the scope of vocabulary learning, is one of the issues which has been studied by researchers. The existing literature on vocabulary learning shows that researchers such as Laufer (1989), Hu and Nation (2000) and Nation (2006), who worked on vocabulary size, have offered a range of vocabulary which is necessary for EFL learners to know. For instance, it was previously thought that about 95% coverage was sufficient for EFL learners to understand written and spoken discourse (Laufer, 1989), but more recent study shows that the figure is closer to 98-99% (Hu and Nation, 2000), at least for written discourse.

By 98% coverage, they meant that one word in 50 was unknown. Nation (2006) also worked in the same area and calculated that 6000-7000 word families were required to reach the 98% goal. However, it is not clear whether a 98% coverage figure is the most appropriate for dealing with spoken discourse (Schmitt, 2008). Keeping these points in mind, we should note here that depth of vocabulary knowledge is also important and a lot has been said about it. Researchers believe that learners must know a great deal about each lexical item in order to use it well (Schmitt, 2008). The issue of depth of knowledge has also been examined in terms of receptive and productive levels of mastery. As a result of previous studies, it is said that the ability to use words in written and spoken discourse is not equivalent. Milton and Hopkins (2006) found that the written English vocabulary size of Greek and Arabic-speaking learners was generally larger than the spoken one.

The second area which has received attention is vocabulary acquisition and pedagogy. The literature shows that language experts and researchers have examined this issue and expressed their ideas. For example, Laufer (1988) stated that some words are confusing for students because they are similar except for suffixes. Similarly, Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) noticed misanalysis of word forms by EFL learners. Also, as far as learning or acquiring a word is concerned, some researchers such as Ellis (1997) argue that form is mainly acquired through exposure. Thus, it can make sense that learners allot attention to learning form, particularly as knowing it can help them learn other aspects of vocabulary learning. Finally, the idea of engagement with vocabulary is another point which was offered in the literature on vocabulary. Craik and Lockhart (1972) stated that more attention given to an item and more manipulation involved with the item could increase the chance of remembering lexical items.

The third area of research is EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning in a foreign language. The issue of beliefs about vocabulary learning and its relation to vocabulary learning strategies, which will be discussed later, is the focus of the present study. So far, we have talked about two issues or areas researched in the field. The third one puts the focus on beliefs about vocabulary learning. As noted earlier, vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary acquisition are very important and their importance has been recognized by researchers in the field. It implies that EFL learners need to expand their

vocabulary knowledge if they want to succeed. One of the solutions to expanding students' vocabulary knowledge can be found in an examination of the literature on students' beliefs. Although there are differences in opinions on how to characterize or describe students' beliefs, some teachers and experts believe that students' beliefs about vocabulary learning can affect their vocabulary learning outcomes. That is, EFL learners' beliefs may function as a filter or standard through which they compare their subsequent learning (Francis, 2006). For example, students holding strong beliefs about vocabulary knowledge may choose to process new information using elaborate strategies. Conversely, students with naïve beliefs would more often be dependent on rote rehearsal strategies to learn new information.

In addition, some language teachers and researchers think that EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary can influence the choice of vocabulary learning strategies. In other words, there is a relationship between EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies they use to learn English vocabulary. The literature shows that researchers have conducted few correlational studies on EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning and their relation to their vocabulary learning strategies and their effects on vocabulary learning outcomes. Among few studies in this area, we can refer to Gu and Johnson's (1996) study on beliefs about vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies and their effects on vocabulary learning and language learning outcomes. In their study, they found that some of the EFL learners' strategies and beliefs could predict their language and vocabulary learning outcomes. Another study in this area was conducted by Wei (2007) in the same area but with some differences in terms of context, participants and instruments.

The fourth area which has been investigated through correlational studies is vocabulary knowledge and its effect on other skills. Some believe that vocabulary knowledge can improve EFL learners' language skills. For instance, vocabulary knowledge can play an important role in the educational domain where studies have shown the relationship between lexical development and reading comprehension ability (Segler, 2001). Studies have shown that people with large vocabulary are more proficient readers than those with limited vocabulary (Lupescue and Day, 1993). But the question raised here is that how learners can best build a large vocabulary and how language

teachers can assist students in becoming independent learners during the process of vocabulary learning. English as a foreign language classrooms show that vocabulary learning is one of the major challenges foreign language learners face during the process of learning a language. Perhaps, making EFL learners become independent learners during the process of L2 vocabulary learning could be achieved through familiarizing learners with vocabulary learning strategies and instructing them to make effective use of vocabulary learning strategies that are one part of language learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies help learners become self-directed. Self-directed learners are independent learners who are able to take responsibility for their own learning and gradually gaining confidence, involvement and proficiency. So, is the case with vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, teachers should train their students in vocabulary learning strategies they need most.

However, the point worth attention here is that teachers should not choose some strategies in advance and teach them to their students. Before strategy training can be carried out, several issues need to be considered. First, we need to convince some learners that strategy training is to their own benefit (Ellis, 1994). Second, the teachers should identify and take into account the learning strategies known and preferred by learners. Keeping these two points in mind, we can say that these two points, together with other possible reasons, have prompted researchers to conduct their studies on vocabulary learning strategies. Stoffer (1995), Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001) are among researchers who worked on vocabulary learning strategies and are famous for their taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies. Researchers such as Kudo (1999), Wei (2007), Gu and Johnson (1996) tried to identify EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies. Researchers such as Ferris (1988), Summers (1988), Avila and Sadouski (1996) and other researchers are also among those who conducted studies to examine the effects of vocabulary learning strategies on vocabulary learning outcomes.

Based on the literature review on vocabulary and vocabulary learning, the present research aimed at identifying Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary and vocabulary learning, discovering their vocabulary learning strategies, examining the effects of beliefs about vocabulary and vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies on vocabulary learning outcomes, studying gender differences in terms of

beliefs about vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies, and more importantly and specifically examining the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning and their vocabulary learning strategies.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The present study was motivated by different issues raised in English vocabulary learning. First, Iranian EFL learners' difficulty in learning and remembering English vocabulary and lack of considerable research to address this problem led us to conduct the present study. To the best knowledge of researchers, a few studies have been conducted so far to discover why Iranian EFL learners have problems with learning new vocabulary in English as a foreign language. Perhaps, different reasons such as beliefs about vocabulary learning, their attitudes towards vocabulary learning and their vocabulary learning strategies can have a role in this respect. Thus, these factors are put in focus in the current study.

Second, since beliefs about vocabulary and vocabulary learning can be one of the factors that can influence vocabulary learning, some dimensions of beliefs were selected for this purpose. The current study was intended to find out if and how beliefs about and attitudes towards vocabulary learning could contribute to vocabulary learning.

Third, vocabulary learning strategies as well as beliefs about vocabulary learning can affect vocabulary learning. The literature on vocabulary learning shows that there are different identified vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL learners. The results of previous studies revealed that these strategies could affect vocabulary learning differently and some strategies could work better than other strategies. The literature also shows that vocabulary learning strategies is a cultural issue. Therefore, to find out to what extent these ideas are true, we decided to put these questions in focus as well.

Fourth, some language teachers believe that vocabulary learning strategies EFL learners use are influenced by their beliefs about and their attitudes towards vocabulary learning. For instance, those who believe that dictionary use strategy is effective in vocabulary learning use this strategy more than those who believe this strategy is not effective. As mentioned earlier, this issue has received little or no attention. Therefore, lack of research on this issue and our curiosity to find out if there is a relationship

between beliefs about and attitudes towards vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies encouraged us to address this issue in the current study.

Finally, the relationship between gender and beliefs about vocabulary learning and also the relationship between gender and choice of vocabulary learning strategies are other two issues under study in the current research. It is believed that gender is one of the factors that affect EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning. In addition the choice of vocabulary learning strategies, as claimed by researchers in the field, is also influenced by gender (Catalan, 2003). To find out if the findings of the present study support the previous findings, the present research investigated these issues as well.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

Since Iranian EFL learners often complain about difficulty in learning English vocabulary and EFL teachers and language professionals do not know what language learners think about vocabulary learning and what they do to learn and remember words in a foreign language, we conducted the present study to discover Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies, their beliefs about vocabulary learning and more importantly, to see whether the choice and use of strategies are influenced by their beliefs about vocabulary learning or not. Finally, the present study was intended to examine gender differences in terms of beliefs about vocabulary learning and vocabulary learning strategies and to study how EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and their beliefs about vocabulary learning could affect their vocabulary learning outcomes. In particular, the study seeks to answer the following research questions.

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

- 1) What are the Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning?
- 2) What are the vocabulary learning strategies Iranian EFL learners use to learn English vocabulary?
- 3) Is there any relationship between EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning and their vocabulary learning strategies?
- 4) Is there any relationship between EFL learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning and their vocabulary learning outcomes?
- 5) Is there any relationship between EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and their vocabulary learning outcomes?