



**IN THE NAME OF GOD,
THE COMPASSIONATE, THE MERCIFUL**

١٢٩٧٥



University of Isfahan

Faculty of Foreign Languages

Department of English

Ph.D. Thesis

**An Investigation into Good and Poor, Male and Female Iranian EFL
Majors' Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

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MY WIFE,

MY DEAREST MAHAN,

MY FAMILY AND

THE SOUL OF MY LATE FATHER

Abstract

This study investigated vocabulary learning strategies of good and poor, male and female Iranian students majoring in English as a Foreign Language in terms of most and least frequently used strategies, and their overall as well as specific strategy use. To this end, 328 participants completed a Background Questionnaire (BQ), consisting of personal information such as name, age, sex, etc and a Likert-scale Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) containing 45 statements. The results indicated that three out of five most and least frequently used strategies were commonly shared by both good and poor learners though their positions sometimes varied in the related Tables. The most frequently used strategies included learning new words through reading, repetition strategies and focusing on the phonological form (i.e., the pronunciation) of the new word. The least frequently used strategies consisted of drawing a picture of the new word, using flashcards to remember the meaning of a new word and using physical actions when learning vocabulary items.

Also, the results of independent samples t-tests indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between good and poor learners in terms of *overall* strategy use. However, their performances were statistically significantly different on the frequency of use of some *specific* strategies. That is, out of forty five specific strategies in the VLSQ, twelve were used statistically significantly more frequently by good learners, seven, significantly more frequently by poor learners and the remaining twenty six specific strategies were used significantly more frequently by neither good nor poor learners. Also, gender was found to have no significant effect on the frequency of overall strategy use. The possible reasons why both groups

commonly used some strategies most or least frequently and why a given group (either good or poor learners) used a specific strategy significantly more frequently than the other are discussed in details.

The findings of the study imply that foreign language teachers should encourage their learners to use various vocabulary learning strategies, especially those typically employed significantly more frequently by successful learners. Based on the findings, curriculum developers, materials writers and syllabus designers are also recommended to incorporate into their curricula, materials and syllabi those vocabulary learning strategies found in the study to contribute to success in L2 vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Strategy Training, Good Learners, Poor Learners, Overall Strategy Use, Specific Strategy Use, Iranian EFL Majors

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed (Wilkins, 1972, P. 111).

Despite the fact that vocabulary is central to language and plays a pivotal role in learning a second/foreign language, during much of the twentieth century, vocabulary learning was considered to be a “neglected” area and the Cinderella of the field of the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research (Levenston, 1979; Meara, 1981; Richards, 1979).

Zimmerman (cited in Coady and Huckin, 1997) claims that “the teaching and learning of vocabulary have been undervalued in the field of Second Language Acquisition throughout its varying stages and up to the present day” (P. 5). However, more recently the researchers seem to have waken up to the realization that words provide the building blocks of communication without which serious obstacles to

progress in foreign/second language learning could be created. This is represented by the fact that lexical errors are usually considered to be the most common among second language learners (Meara, 1984; Politzer, 1978) and the most disruptive ones for native speakers in terms of interpretation.

Laufer (1997), clearly emphasizing the centrality of lexicon and the increasingly growing attention to vocabulary maintains:

Vocabulary is no longer a victim of discrimination in second language learning research, nor in language teaching. After decades of neglect, lexis is now recognized as central to any language acquisition process, native or non-native. What many language teachers might have intuitively known for a long time, that a solid vocabulary is necessary in every stage of language learning, is now being openly stated by some second language acquisition researchers.

(P. 147)

This increasing attention to vocabulary learning is also evident from the great number of publications in the field such as I.S.P. Nation's (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (which has deservedly become the bible of the field), *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition* (Coady and Huckin, 1997), *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy* (Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997) and *Second Language Reading and Vocabulary Learning* (Huckin, Haynes, and Coady, 1993), to mention only a few. Also, some of the general recent studies of the psychology of second language vocabulary learning include Ellis (1993), Papagno, and Valentine (1991), Service (1991).

Vocabulary learning strategies are a sub-category of language learning strategies which in turn are a sub-classification of learning strategies in general. The last twenty

years have witnessed an explosion of activity and a large body of second language research targeting language learning strategies (Anderson, 2003; Chamot, 1999; Chen, 2002; Macaro, 2001; Nunan, 1997; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990; Tseng, Dornyei, and Schmitt, 2006; Wenden, 1991).

The reasons for this recent increasing attention to vocabulary in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular seem to originate from two sources. The first might be the fact that in many EFL/ESL classes, in spite of the teacher's devotion of much time to vocabulary learning and teaching, the results have not been so encouraging. That is, sometimes after months or even years of studying English, many of the words most needed have never been learned (Allen, 1983).

The second reason which is of paramount importance is the shift in the centre of attention in language teaching from the traditional teacher-centered instruction to learner-centeredness in which learners play an active role in the learning process and take responsibility for their own learning. In other words, recent trends in foreign/second language teaching and learning seek to explore ways of enabling and encouraging language learners to become self-directed and effective in their learning and thus stress the need for strategic learning. This line of thought is clearly evident in Levin et al. (1992) who maintain that familiarizing learners with effective vocabulary learning strategies can facilitate the overall process of vocabulary learning and help students remember and apply new vocabulary in various situations.

Self-directed learners are independent learners who can take responsibility for their own learning and can gradually gain confidence, involvement and proficiency (Oxford, 1990). Oxford (1986, p. 9) concludes that learning strategies "improve language performance, encourage language autonomy, are teachable and expand the

role of the teacher in significant ways”.

The bulk of learning strategy research including vocabulary learning strategies has concentrated upon the type of strategies good/successful and poor/less successful language learners employ in the process of foreign/second language acquisition. The findings of some studies reveal that effective and successful students use a greater number of strategies in comparison to non-effective or less successful students (Ahmed, 1989; Bialystock, 1981; O'Mally and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1986; Zimmerman and Pons, 1986). However, some other studies (e.g., Kouraogo, 1993; Vann and Abraham, 1990) seem to be in opposition with the studies mentioned above and reveal that there is no difference between successful and less successful learners in terms of the number of strategies they adopt in language learning.

1. 2. Statement of the Problem

As researchers in the field almost unanimously maintain, vocabulary learning strategies facilitate the acquisition of new lexis in the second/foreign languages as they aid in discovering the meaning of a new word and in consolidating a word once it has been encountered. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, strategic knowledge and use of learning strategies could make learners self-directed and autonomous which is of crucial importance in recent trends of foreign/second language acquisition especially in the so-called “post-method era”.

Also, as findings of previous studies indicate, good language learners are usually identified by the greater number of strategies which they use more frequently than their poor counterparts as well as by the choice of particular strategies not usually employed by less successful learners (Abraham and Vann, 1989; Zhang, 1999, cited

in Zhang, 2003). However, studies done by Vann and Abraham (1990), and Kouraogo (1993) indicated no significant differences in the number of strategies employed by good and poor learners.

Although some rather comprehensive studies have been carried out with regard to vocabulary learning strategies typical of *good* and/or *poor* language learners in non-Iranian contexts (e.g., Ahmed 1989; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Lawson and Hogben, 1996; Sanaoui, 1995; Schmitt, 1997), to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no such a study has been done in the Iranian context. The findings of some learning strategy studies (e.g., Bialystock, 1981; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) reveal that good and successful students use more and a greater variety of strategies in comparison to poor or less successful students. However, some other studies (Vann and Abraham, 1990; Kouraogo, 1993) reveal that good and poor learners are not significantly different on the number of strategies they use. This shows that the findings in this respect are sometimes in conflict with each other. Thus, because of the reasons mentioned above, the present study will make an attempt to fill the research gap which is felt to exist concerning Iranian EFL learners in this regard. Also, efforts will be made to delve into the effect of gender on the use of vocabulary learning strategies in the Iranian context.

1. 3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Proceeding from the findings of previous research on the one hand, and filling the research gap which is felt to exist regarding Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies in details (i.e., overall as well as specific strategy use), answers were sought specifically to the following research questions in the present study:

1. What are the five most frequently used and the five least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies adopted by *all* (both good and poor) Iranian EFL majors?
2. What are the five most frequently used and the five least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies employed by *good* Iranian EFL majors?
3. What are the five most frequently used and the five least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies adopted by *poor* Iranian EFL majors?
4. Is there any significant difference between good and poor Iranian EFL majors' mean reported frequency of *overall* strategy use? That is, generally speaking, does one group use vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than the other?
5. Are there any significant differences between good and poor Iranian EFL majors in the mean reported frequency of *specific* strategy use?
6. Is there any significant difference in the mean reported frequency of overall strategy use between male and female Iranian EFL majors?

Based on questions 4, 5, and 6, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant difference between good and poor Iranian EFL majors' mean reported frequency of *overall* strategy use.

H₀₂: There are no statistically significant differences between good and poor Iranian EFL majors in the mean reported frequency of *specific* strategy use.

H₀₃: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean reported frequency of overall strategy use between male and female Iranian EFL majors.

1. 4. Significance of the Study

Vocabulary seems to be one of the biggest components of all aspects of learning a

foreign language. Nation (1982) noted that teachers and researchers have seen lack of vocabulary as one of the main obstacles to progress in the receptive skills of listening and reading. Krashen (1970) noted that adult learners of second languages who travel in foreign countries carry around dictionaries, not grammar books.

Effective language learning has been found to be significantly associated with the use of learning strategies in general (e.g., Bransford, Ferrara, and Campione, 1983; O'Malley, 1987; Willing, 1988; Wittrock, Marks and Doctorow, 1975) and vocabulary learning strategies in particular (e.g., Brown and Perry, 1991; Cohen, 1990; Cohen and Aphek, 1981; Nation, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). The main advantage of learning strategies in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular is the fact that they enable learners to take more responsibility for their own learning (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szab, 2000), and help foster "learner autonomy, independence and self-direction" (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p. 291). Since, as Nation (2001) puts it, a large number of vocabulary could be acquired with the help of vocabulary learning strategies, another benefit gained from this line of research is the fact that a good knowledge of strategies and the ability to apply them in suitable situations might notably simplify the processes of learning new vocabulary items for the learners as shown by the findings of Atkinson (1972). Therefore, it is significant to find techniques, ways or strategies which help EFL learners increase and retain the vocabulary they need in the process of learning a foreign/second language.

Since cultural background and ethnocentric bias might jeopardize the generalizability of the findings of language learning strategy research (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Kouraogo, 1993; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Rees-Miller, 1993; Wharton, 2000), some scholars in the field (e.g., Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Rees-