

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH

**LEARNERS' STRATEGIES IN VOCABULARY  
LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN EFL  
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Learners' Strategies in Vocabulary Learning : A Case Study of Iranian EFL University Students**

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Vocabulary is one of the most important building blocks of all languages. However, it is believed that it has been neglected by linguists, methodologists, curriculum designers and even teachers. Most language experts think that this negligence has been because of the importance given to other language components, and also because of a false belief that vocabulary is the easiest part of languages to be learned. During the last two decades however vocabulary study which has been eclipsed for a long time, began to come to the limelight gradually and now it is gaining more significance than before. During this time a great many articles and books in the area of vocabulary teaching and learning and the role of vocabulary in language acquisition were published.

In teaching, however, most experts believe that vocabulary is still the neglected part of the language. Their claim is that while we

have different individual independent courses for language skills and subskills, vocabulary study is an exception, and it is still considered as a secondary course accompanying reading skill. In this case usually the burden is mostly on the students' shoulder, and they have to compensate for it themselves. Consequently the way they study and the strategies they utilize for mastering the vocabulary items become very important.

This case study aims at investigating the strategies used by two groups of Iranian university students majoring in English, for learning the vocabulary items. Forty university students (20 in each group) in Ahwaz participated in this study. During a period of 10 weeks they were asked to monitor and report daily, the strategies they used for their vocabulary learning together with the words they learned and the number of hours they spent on the task of vocabulary learning every week.

The students were then tested on three tests based on 20 vocabulary items taken randomly from their own reported words. First they were tested on a multiple choice test of four items as the main test and then they were tested on a recall and recognition test based on the same words two weeks later to see how much they could remember the words

The gains for the two groups were then compared through

relevant statistical procedures. The result showed that the students in the first group who had used more different strategies for mastering the vocabulary items learned better, and they sustained the words better in their long term memory, so they had a better retention.

The result supported the idea that learners' strategies have a profound effect in learning the language skills in general and vocabulary in particular, and they have to be taught and learned in a way.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### 1.0. Preliminaries

In our everyday communication with other people we utter an unknown number of utterances and sentences. We express our grief, sorrow, happiness, or better to say our feelings of love, hate, satisfaction, anger, friendship, and so on by using these utterances. These sentences and utterances are the manifestation of a very complex system of communication called language. Language is the human based means of communication, although not the only one, but certainly the most important one. People use an implicit shared knowledge of their own language rules or their linguistic competence, and communicate with others. This linguistic competence entails mastery of an elaborate system of rules that enables them to encode and decode a limitless number of utterances in that language, and exchange ideas of interest with other people through what is called linguistic performance. It is through this vital linguistic task, the language performance, that people come into verbal or written contact with others. Wilkins (1987: 1) claims that: "it is inconceivable that we could have

constructed so complex and social interaction without having a written and spoken language at our disposal .

The sentences and utterances uttered by people are themselves composed of some strings of smaller units called words. Lyons (1985: 22) claims that "sentences can be represented as combination of meaningful unites. we will call these words ."Wilkins (1987: 6 ) also says that: "Words are the smallest unites capable of relatively independent occurrence," without which, languages of the world can not be productive. Whenever they communicate with each other, whether in written or spoken form, people use thousands and thousands or better to say a torrent of words. These strings of words are not put together haphazardly, but in a well-formed order, by some syntactic, semantic, discorsal, and grammatical rules. Overall, these rules make us able to produce or perceive new or novel sentences and utterances never heard or produced before. People are able to produce an infinite number of novel sentences, they are also able to understand such sentences produced by others, unless they do not have enough knowledge or the new ones are uttered in another language. Despite this special characteristic of human languages which is called productivity, the means by which they are performed are finite. The idea of finiteness of the syntactic rules and infiniteness of sentences and utterances , put forward by many linguists like Chomsky and his followers, clearly proves the claim.

The state of novelty of these sentences does not, however, show the novelty of grammatical structures, for we are able to make hundreds of different sentences with similar underlying structures or syntactic rules just by changing and substituting the words. Although the number of potential sentences in any language is infinite, the means by which they are constructed are limited. It happens most of the time that the novelty of the sentences is because of the new words we use, that is, the grammatical frame might be intact, but with different words used within the same structure.

While some attribute this novelty to the syntactic rules, there are others who think it is the words which make us able to produce new and novel sentences. Certainly having more words in command would make it easier to make new sentences. This shows, on the one hand, the productivity of languages, and on the other hand, the importance of words, and the important role they play in creating new sentences and utterances. This means more words more sentences. Fromkin & Rodman (1988: 3 ) claim :

We live in a world of language. We talk to our friends, our associates, our wives and husbands, our lovers, our teachers, our parents and in loves. We talk to bus drivers and total stranger, we talk face to face and over the telephone, and every one responds with more talk.

Televisions and radios further swells this torrent of words.

hardly a moment of our waking lives is free from words.

The above quotation implies that words are the cornerstone of human communication. They are not only of the tools in people's command, but also very important and probably of the most powerful ones.

Almost all people, even the most illiterate ones in certain ages reach a state of puberty in grammar, and they are able to produce and comprehend grammatical sentences when communicating with other people. Cummins (1979 cited in Volmer, 1983) states that everybody except for the retarded and autistic children acquire the basic skills in his/her first language regardless of IQ or academic aptitude. Richard (1976, cited in Twaddell, 1973: 61) claims:

Native speakers of a language have acquired all the rules of syntax and phonology at a very early age (roughly corresponding to the time of lateralization of the brain); yet, those same speakers will still continue to increase the number of words in their vocabularies throughout their lifetime and never master all the lexical items in their native language.

As the above quotation implies people are always in a state of increasing their vocabulary repertoire. Krishna (1975 cited in Hatch,