



دانشگاه حکیم سبزواری

Hakim Sabzevari University
Faculty of Letters and Humanities
Department of English Language and Literature

Exploring Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Grounded Theory Study

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts (M.A.) in English Teaching as a Foreign Language
(TEFL)**

By:
Akram Malekpour

Supervisor:
Dr. S. A. Ostovar-Namaghi

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We hereby recommend that this thesis

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Strategies: A Grounded Theory Study**

Be approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts (M.A.) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

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

To my family
for their love, patience, and support

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Abstract

This study aimed to provide a view into the sphere of learning vocabulary. The chief aim of the thesis was to develop awareness of the processes involved in learning, especially, to explore what strategies EFL learners employ to learn vocabulary. The researcher used Grounded Theory Method to conduct the research. To collect data, the researcher interviewed ten Intermediate EFL learners. In order to choose the ten participants, theoretical sampling procedures were used. Open-ended interviews were utilized as the instruments to collect data. All the data were transcribed, coded, compared constantly, categorized into concepts, and analyzed in a narrow way. The rigorous coding schemes of the grounded theory method yielded a set of categories – "Vocabulary Learning Strategies" as the core category, and three subcategories including "Cognitive Strategies", "Metacognitive Strategies" and "Social Strategies" to capture the learners' opinions on vocabulary learning strategies. Under these categories, the learner participants expressed their in-depth perspectives about how they take advantage of these vocabulary learning strategies. Based on the findings, the researcher offered some suggestions for the learners, teachers and the future research.

Key-words: grounded theory, strategy, vocabulary

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Although "vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner" (Zimmerman, 1997, p. 5), it was marginalized by the importance that practitioners, researchers, and language teachers bestowed on syntax and phonology. Language has been traditionally divided into grammar and vocabulary. For a long time attention was diverted to grammar and it was believed that once certain grammatical rules are learned, learners can acquire as many words they need in order to communicate. Only a few scholars realized the fallacy of such beliefs.

Vocabulary has been considered central to the development of language proficiency. The most pressing need of people learning another language is vocabulary. They need to have a pool of lexical items in order to express themselves. However, in most cases they do not know how to master the essential items. It seems, therefore, necessary that language learners should be given instruction on how to learn lexical items better by using a limited number of strategies that good language learners report using. This is possibly a convincing reason that vocabulary instruction has been regarded very important and teachers use various techniques to familiarize students with the use of these strategies.

There have been significant shifts of emphasis in the field of Second Language Acquisition over the past few decades. We have witnessed "the reemergence of interest in one area of language study, vocabulary, and the appearance of a newly recognized aspect – learner strategies" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 199). The appreciation of the role and significance of these areas have motivated many scholars to investigate this issue more closely.

Most of the latest studies are focused on general language learning strategies. In the process of identification of language learning strategies, researchers realized that many of

these strategies deal with vocabulary learning (Schmitt, 1997). Despite this awareness, very few studies have dealt with the issue in depth and few vocabulary learning strategies have been investigated until recently and little attention has been given to vocabulary learning strategies. Continuing this line of research, the present study will look at the vocabulary learning strategies employed by Iranian learners.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading which lead to effective communication. One crucial factor is the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language (McCarthy, 1988).

Vocabulary, however, is the biggest problem for most learners. In view of this, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in second language pedagogy and research. But it is still a contentious issue how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently or how it can best be taught.

Although many articles have been conducted over the last decades, an explicit guideline on how vocabulary is learned efficiently is still lacking. Furthermore, it is true that some studies have dealt with investigating the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by Iranian EFL learners in Iran, but these are still inadequate since nearly all of them are theory-first and theory-driven in nature, and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first one to explore vocabulary learning strategies using grounded theory method.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study aims to explore learners' vocabulary learning strategies. The researcher believes that understanding students' beliefs about vocabulary learning and their vocabulary learning strategies use will enable teachers and researchers to design appropriate materials and activities to help them improve their vocabulary learning so as to enhance their lexical competence.

Furthermore, it will permit them to match teaching and learning so as to develop students' potentials in EFL learning as well as to assist students to become cognizant of the ways they learn most effectively. Teachers will be able to enhance the students' learning when become aware of the number of strategies used by successful and unsuccessful learners.

Moreover, teachers can identify and instruct vocabulary learning strategies to learners and help students to become autonomous learners. It also helps the students to develop strategies and ways to become more motivated and independent learners. If they become aware of their own strategies, they will try to learn other strategies which they do not use. This process will increase their success in learning English. In this case as Oxford (1990) mentions, students take more responsibility of their learning and more learning happens. Second language acquisition depends on the expansion of a strong vocabulary to a large extent. According to Schmitt (2000), in second language vocabulary acquisition which is a sub-discipline of second language acquisition, researchers have focused their attention on the need for second language learners to utilize their vocabulary knowledge. This can be done through the help of vocabulary learning strategies.

"By conducting studies with clear instructions in nonthreatening circumstances, researchers have found that many or most L2 learners are capable of remembering their

learning strategies and describing them when asked" (Oxford, 1996, p. 125). So the learner participants will take advantage of this study since they can be aware of their strategy profile.

1.4. Objectives of the study

As Johnson and Johnson (1998) state, it seems “increasingly unlikely that we are going to understand very much about teaching if we fail to try to understand learning at the same time” (p. 280). This study mainly tried to understand aspects of one area of language learning i.e., vocabulary learning in order to possibly identify implications for teaching. First, this study seeks to explore EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies. Second, the study will explore how these strategies help them to learn new vocabulary and retain them better. This research was designed to provide baseline data for future research on the vocabulary learning strategies of EFL learners and to provide insights for the EFL classroom

1.5. Research Questions

According to the above research objectives, the following research questions will be addressed:

- 1) What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian Intermediate EFL learners?
- 2) How do vocabulary learning strategies help EFL learners to learn vocabulary better?

1.6. Limitations of the Study

This study concentrated on investigating vocabulary learning strategies of intermediate EFL learners in Sabzevar. Since the population which involved in the investigation was confined to EFL learners in Sabzevar, this study had no attempt to investigate vocabulary learning strategies used by different learners in a different context. Moreover, the findings in the discussion were based on the learner participants' opinions; further empirical data (e.g., questionnaires), especially from longitudinal studies, should be eventually collected and analyzed to add up insight into the nature of this phenomenon. In this research, due to the lack of time, the participants were limited to ten learners, more interviews with other learners in other levels or students in other contexts may provide deeper understanding of this study.

1.7. Definition of Terms

The following are the terms that have been used in the entire study. It will be of help if they are clearly defined prior to the body of the study.

Grounded theory: Grounded theory, "the discovery of theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1), provides the opportunity for the researcher to theorize from evidence existing in the data.

Open coding: Open coding occurs at the beginning of a study. The primary goals of open coding are to conceptualize and categorize data, achieved through two basic analytic procedures: making comparisons and asking questions of the data.

Axial Coding: The second stage of data analysis is axial coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 123) described axial coding as "the process of relating categories to their subcategories . . . linking a category at the level of properties and dimensions".

Selective Coding: The final stage of data analysis in grounded theory is selective coding, which builds upon the foundation of the previous open and axial coding efforts. Selective coding is "the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116).

Theoretical sampling: is defined as: "...the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his [sic] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his [sic] theory as it emerges" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Theoretical sampling is terminated once theoretical saturation is reached.

Theoretical saturation: is achieved when (a) no new data emerges regarding a category, (b) the category is dense enough to cover variations and process, and (c) relationships between categories are delineated satisfactorily as well aids for Data Analysis.

Learning strategy: They are the moment – by moment techniques that we employ to solve "problems" posed by second language input and output (Brown, 2007).

Vocabulary learning strategy: Vocabulary learning strategies can be considered a subset of general learning strategies in second language acquisition.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Review of Related literature

Within the field of education over the last few decades, a gradual but marked shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching but greater stress on learners and learning. In a word, language teaching has become more learner-focused and interactive. Thus, there has been more emphasis on helping students assume more responsibility in their language study. A consensus has been reached that learning will be facilitated and students will become more autonomous if students are explicitly trained to become more aware of and proficient in the use of language learning strategies.

Brown (2007) in a brief historical note on the study of second language learners' strategies stated that as the knowledge of second language acquisition increased markedly during the 1970s, teachers and researchers came to realize that no single research finding and no single method of language teaching would usher in an era of universal success in teaching a second language. They saw that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods or techniques of teaching. They began to see the importance of individual variation in language learning. Certain people appeared to be endowed with abilities to succeed; others lacked those abilities. This observation led Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) to describe "good" language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. Rubin (Rubin & Thompson, 1982) later summarized fourteen such characteristics. Good language learners:

1. Find their own way, taking charge of their learning
2. Organize information about language
3. Are creative, developing a "feel" for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words
4. Make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside