

# THE VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY UUM STUDENTS IN RELATION TO THEIR PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study is concerned with the vocabulary learning strategies used by Band 1 and Band 4 undergraduate students of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The main objectives of this descriptive study were to survey the vocabulary learning strategies used by the respondents and to determine to what extent their use of the strategies was influenced by their proficiency level. The instrument employed in the study was a questionnaire developed by Lachini (2007) based on Cottrell's (1999) classification of learning strategies. It consists of five categories of vocabulary learning strategies, namely creative, reflective, effective, active and motivated (CREAM). The responses of 100 Band 1 and 100 Band 4 students to the questionnaire were examined on the frequency of their use of the vocabulary learning strategies. The results indicated that there were no significant differences in terms of the frequency of use between Band 1 and Band 4 participants as the findings showed that a majority of both groups employed the strategies either 'a little' or 'often'. The findings of the study perhaps could help instructors to facilitate the learning of English vocabulary by UUM students.*

Key words: Key words: Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary, Language  
Proficiency

## **INTRODUCTION**

Vocabulary is always regarded as the building blocks of a language and it is actually what makes up a language. According to Oxford (1990), although some teachers think vocabulary learning is easy, language learners have a serious problem remembering the large amounts of vocabulary necessary to achieve fluency. Vocabulary is not limited to studying its significance in language learning only. As what this study intended to see of vocabulary, this component of language, was investigated with respect to its strategies that the language learners employed in learning a language. Nation (1990) proposes that it is more important for teachers to teach learners strategies for dealing with words than to teach the words themselves, especially for low-frequency words.

It is argued by many researchers (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) that there are some factors that influence the choice of language learning strategies. As for vocabulary learning strategies, this theory can also be applied in examining whether there are factors that make certain vocabulary learning strategies more preferable than the others. Learner differences namely age, gender, nationality or ethnicity, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, stage of learning or proficiency level (Oxford, 1990) are among the contributing factors to the preferences for some particular language learning strategies. With regard to vocabulary learning strategies, proficiency level of learners is considered an important indicator for the choice of vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000) because it can determine what strategies are better for the learners at a certain stage of learning a language. Therefore, the present research had the focus on investigating if there were any significant differences in terms of the vocabulary learning strategies used by students in relation to their different proficiency levels: "very limited user" (Band 1) and "satisfactory user" (Band 4).

### **Statement of the Problem**

According to Macaro (2003), the issue that has most divided theorists and teachers is how vocabulary should be taught. Macaro (2003) also raises a few questions: "Do teachers want to force learners to learn by rote lists of vocabulary? Will learners be demotivated by this? Should vocabulary be 'embedded' in a series of motivating real-life activities?" These are among the questions that need to be answered when language teachers try to find the

effective ways of teaching vocabulary and such questions can only be answered when teachers know the ways their students learn vocabulary. This is what suggested by Wu (2005) that, to offer better vocabulary instruction requires a good understanding of learner's vocabulary learning strategies.

Hamzah, Kafipour and Abdullah (2009) claim that it is still a contentious issue how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently or how it can best be taught. Also, it is always an issue of debate among researchers about the relationship between the preferred vocabulary learning strategies and the language proficiency of their participants. Some researchers believe there is a relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and the level of language proficiency, while some do not. For example, the study of cognitive and metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies in relation to English major and non-English major students conducted by Alavi and Kaivanpanah (2006) indicated that the more proficient the students were, the less they used the cognitive and metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies. The research done by Gu and Johnson (1996) discovered that language proficiency of their subjects did not correlate to all vocabulary learning strategies that were studied. For example, the strategy, visual repetition of new words and vocabulary retention strategy were found to have a weak relation to language proficiency. These findings indicate that it is not an absolute certainty that proficiency levels will determine the kinds of vocabulary learning strategies preferred by learners, and proficiency level may affect some strategies only. Thus, clearly, it is an ongoing problem for researchers of vocabulary learning strategies to decide whether language proficiency affects the vocabulary learning strategy(s) employed, or whether it does affect it or not and if it does, what strategy(s) is affected.

### **The Significance of the Study**

Alavi and Kaivanpanah (2006) claim that it is vital for language learners to be given instruction on how to learn lexical items better by using a limited number of strategies that good language learners report using. Macaro (2003, p. 82) also has the same view as Alavi and Kaivanpanah's as he poses the questions: "Are some learners better vocabulary learners than others? Can poor learners be trained to use strategies better thus making them better learners?" These are the questions that are important to be answered because when teachers

know how their learners prefer to learn vocabulary, then only the teachers can help their students to use their preferred strategies better to enhance their learning

Macaro (2003) discovers that the possibility to learn more words than the ones which are expressly taught by a teacher can only be achieved by the learner if he or she takes an active part in learning process both inside and outside the classroom. Macaro (2003) adds that learners probably have their own strategies in learning vocabulary outside the classroom, but do teachers know what the strategies are? Nation (1990) asserts that strategies which learners can use independently of a teacher are the most important of all ways of learning vocabulary. Therefore, Nation (1990) recommends that it is worthwhile ensuring that learners are able to apply the strategies and that they get plenty of help and encouragement in doing so.

As for the present study, the data obtained was expected to determine the vocabulary learning strategies mostly preferred by Band 1 and Band 4 students out of the creative, reflective, effective, active and motivated (CREAM) vocabulary learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence. Thus, it is hoped that the results of this study will help the learners identify their preferred strategies in learning vocabulary and to use them efficiently so that their language learning can be enhanced. Nation (1990) firmly believes that by mastering a few strategies, learners can cope with thousands of words, and any time spent on these strategies is well repaid. Also, once the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies have been discovered, teachers can encourage learners to use the strategies that can promote their learning.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study mainly attempted to understand one component of language that was vocabulary and what strategies were the most used by Band 1 and Band 4 learners, and what strategies were the least used by these two groups in learning vocabulary. This study also intended to see if there were any differences in terms of the preferred choice of vocabulary learning strategies made by the two groups of learners. At the end of this research, the data collected is expected to be the baseline for future research on vocabulary learning strategies.

In summary, the main objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To investigate whether UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students use any of the CREAM vocabulary learning strategies.
2. To determine if there are any significant differences between UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students' preferences for CREAM vocabulary learning strategies.
3. To discover if there is any relationship between UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students' English language proficiency and their use of CREAM vocabulary learning strategies.

### **Research Questions**

For this study, there were some specific research questions addressed. Based on its objectives, this study aimed to obtain the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the CREAM vocabulary learning strategies used by UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students?
2. Are there any significant differences between UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students in terms of their preferences for CREAM vocabulary learning strategies?
3. Is there any relationship between UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students' English language proficiency and their use of CREAM vocabulary learning strategies?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s with the influence of the development in cognitive psychology. The nature of language learning strategies began in the 1970s as a reaction to teacher-centered education. Since the early 1970s, language teaching practices had increasingly developed to be learner-centered (Wenden, 1991). Learner-centeredness in teaching and learning has attracted researchers to investigate the language learning strategies used by learners.

According to Manguascha (1993, as quoted in Wu, 2005), before the mid-1980s, vocabulary learning was considered to be a 'neglected' area of second language learning and teaching. The view on vocabulary as a once neglected component of language is also expressed by Hedge (2000). According to Hedge (2000), in the literature of English language teaching and

learning, recurring theme has been the neglect of vocabulary. She further quotes that in the early 1970s, a scholar, Wilkins (1972, p. 109) wrote, “Linguists have had remarkably little to say about vocabulary and one can find very few studies which could be of any practical interest for language teachers.” Vocabulary studies only began to receive attention after the late 1990s (Wu, 2005). This is evident based on the number of publications that has mushroomed since 1990 (e.g: Taylor, 1990; Nation, 1990; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997).

There have been some evidences discovered by researchers out of their studies that there was a correlation between language learners’ proficiency levels and their particular choices of vocabulary learning strategies. Some proofs can also be traced back to as far as in the 1980s. For instance, Chamot (1984) found that grouping words as a strategy for recalling words worked better for more proficient learners than beginners as the former favored grouping strategies more. Sternberg (1987, as quoted in Macaro, 2003) mentions that a number of studies have demonstrated that students especially those with higher verbal ability, can correctly guess at the meaning of unknown words. The study of Lachini (2007) discovered that there was a correlation between his subjects’ proficiency levels and their vocabulary learning strategy preferences. For example in learning vocabulary, active learning strategies were used by the intermediate and elementary students, and as for the advanced-level students, creative learning strategies were more preferred.

Despite the significant relationship found by many researchers regarding the vocabulary learning strategy preferences and language learners’ proficiency levels, there were some researchers that discovered there was no obvious relation between these two variables (e.g: Gu & Johnson (1996). For example, Lessard-Clouston (1988) did a study which showed that there was no correlation between students’ approach to vocabulary learning and their proficiency level as it was revealed that structured vocabulary learning strategies were not used by most of them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design using a questionnaire survey on the vocabulary learning strategies used by the participants. The present research

tried to see whether there was a significant difference between the participants' language proficiency levels and their most preferred choice of vocabulary learning strategies.

### **Research Participants**

The participants were selected based on their results (Band 1 and Band 4) in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). MUET is an integrate test instrument designed to measure a candidate's productive and receptive skills and the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in the context of language use (Don et al, 2002).

A Band 1 English user is described as a user who is hardly able to use the language in terms of communicative ability, has a very limited understanding of the language and context with respect to his comprehension of the language, and as for his task performance, this user has a very limited ability to function in the language (Don et al, 2002). In contrast, a Band 4 user in terms of communicative ability corresponds to a generally fluent English user who presents generally appropriate use of the language with some grammatical errors. As for comprehension of the language, a user at this level demonstrates a satisfactory understanding of the language and context, while his task performance generally indicates satisfactory ability to function in the language (Don et al, 2002). 100 Band 1 and 100 Band 4 students were randomly sampled for this study.

### **Research Instrument**

The instrument employed in this study was the CREAM vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire developed by Lachini (2007) based on the strategies in learning proposed by Cottrell (1999). A CREAM vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire consisted of 60 items which were self-reporting statements: creative (12 items), reflective (13 items), effective (11 items), active (12 items) and motivated (12 items).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Overall, based on the range of scores, most of the respondents used the strategies averagely 'a little' for the first four types of strategies: creative, reflective, effective, and active strategies in learning vocabulary (see Table 1). This degree of frequency of use

indicates that most of the respondents did not employ those strategies very often. The students also can be viewed as selective in terms of the type of strategies they preferred to use and at what level of frequency, since they in majority rated a lot of motivated strategies as what they ‘often’ used. Only this category of strategies whose items mostly received the highest scores for ‘often’ as compared to the other response options. One possible reason for this was perhaps they preferred to learn vocabulary in a motivational way. Also, for the degree of frequency, ‘very frequently’, the same category of strategies (motivated) was given the highest score by the respondents. This indicates that the respondents involved motivating themselves in learning vocabulary most of the time and it seemed important. Of all the five types of vocabulary learning strategies, creative strategies had the largest number of respondents who rated they had ‘never’ used those strategies. The characteristic of being creative or non-creative of the learners can be related to one’s personality traits which are proposed by Oxford (1990) as one of the factors influencing language learning strategy choice. Clearly, the respondents’ proficiency levels did not affect their degree of creativity to result in using more or less of the creative strategies.

**Table 1: Frequency (*f*) Distribution (in percentage) for All Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Band 1 and Band 4 Students**

**(n=200)**

Vocabulary Learning Strategy	Never		Very Little		A Little		Often		Very Frequently	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Creative</b>	18	9	38	19	71	36	52	25	21	11
<b>Reflective</b>	12	6	31	16	74	37	63	32	20	10
<b>Effective</b>	14	7	34	17	64	32	61	31	27	14
<b>Active</b>	16	8	35	18	70	35	57	28	22	11
<b>Motivated</b>	5	3	20	10	57	28	72	36	46	23

Of all the five types of vocabulary learning strategies, three categories (reflective, effective and active) showed a difference in terms how frequent their strategies were used by



Band 1 and Band 4 participants (see Table 2). Band 4 students mostly employed the strategies of each type more frequently than Band 1 respondents. In contrast to Band 4 students who in majority rated the strategies in the three categories as what they ‘often’ used, most Band 1 students nevertheless felt they used the strategies slightly less frequent than Band 4 students since they rated them ‘a little.’

Since ‘a little’ and ‘often’ do not signify a very wide gap in terms of how often the strategies were used, the difference discovered then was not so significant. One possible reason for the Band 1 participants to use the strategies only ‘a little’ could be their lack of interest in reflecting and evaluating how they learned vocabulary (reflective and effective strategies) and their tendency to play a less active role in learning vocabulary (active strategies). This could be due to their level of proficiency that perhaps restricted them from exercising the strategies more often as what practiced by Band 4 students. For instance, some strategies such as item 19 (“I reflect upon the words’ meaning and their usage”), item 32 (“I try to make meaningful connections between the new words of different lessons”), item 33 (“I try to use the newly learned words in daily conversation”), item 39 (“I always make a meaningful link between the newly learned words and the words I knew before”), and item 44 (“I teach the newly learned words to the others or I use them to talk about a topic”) probably required a better command of the language than the Band 1 students’ since those strategies involved the learners’ ability to apply the words and to see how they were related. With the Band 1 students’ limited command of the language, it could be hypothesized that the students had a very small vocabulary and poor understanding of the language (unlike Band 4 students) that made them unable to function well in the language (Don et al, 2002).

For the other two categories of CREAM vocabulary learning strategies (creative and motivated), the participants of both groups mostly displayed similar levels of frequency of using their strategies. However, of the two categories, motivated strategies were more frequently used by both Band 1 and Band 4 respondents as the majority of them assigned ‘often’ to the strategies. A large number of Band 1 and Band 4 participants on the other hand indicated their using of creative strategies as ‘a little.’ This shows that their frequency of use of the creative and motivated strategies was not affected by their different levels of proficiency. They seemed to have the same preferences to use the strategies in the two categories. Perhaps the strategies did not reflect any association with a particular level of

proficiency in using them that they could simply be employed by learners with any proficiency.

A relatively significant difference can be observed in Table 2 in terms of the participants' tendency towards using the strategies 'very frequently.' For every category of the vocabulary learning strategies, there is a clear doubling in the number of Band 4 respondents in using the strategies 'very frequently.' As for Band 1 students, there was only about half the number of Band 4 students who rated the strategies as being used 'very frequently.' Obviously, Band 4 participants were more active in using the strategies than Band 1 students.

The outnumbering of Band 4 respondents was perhaps due to their higher proficiency that made them to have more confidence to use the strategies more often. With their proficiency, most probably Band 4 students managed to use some strategies such as consulting a dictionary to find the appropriate usage of a word (item 3), reflecting upon the words' meanings and their usage (item 19), comprehending the words in their context (item 35), and summarizing a passage and replacing the new words with their synonyms (item 38) more frequently as they perhaps did not face any difficulty in doing so. Possibly, what the Band 4 respondents were able to do in the language that prompted them to use some strategies very frequently.

In contrast to the scores for the strategies that were used 'very frequently', in each category of the vocabulary learning strategies, Band 1 participants appeared to have contributed more participants who associated themselves with non-using of some strategies. In other words, there were more Band 1 students who had 'never' used the strategies than Band 4 students. One possible reason could be their lower proficiency that limited their ability in using some strategies. For example, many Band 1 respondents felt that they had 'never' employed creative strategies such as combining two words to create a new word (item 4), trying to make semantic or structural charts of the words for learning them (item 10) and, keeping a notebook with themselves to write down their ideas on learning new words and later to see which ones work better (item 12). To use such strategies a learner probably needs to possess a higher proficiency level than Band 1 since those strategies demand not only a good command of the language but also a higher cognitive ability in learning vocabulary. Clearly,

some strategies were not favored at all by the participants perhaps because of the difficulty in using the strategies or simply it was a matter of individual choice.

**Table 2: Cross Tabulation for Frequency (*f*) of Use of CREAM Vocabulary Learning Strategies between Band 1 and Band 4 Students**

**(n=200)**

Category of Strategies	Scale	Band 1		Band 4	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Creative	Never	10	5	8	4
	Very Little	20	10	18	9
	A Little	40	20	31	16
	Often	24	12	29	15
	Very frequently	6	3	15	8
Reflective	Never	7	4	6	3
	Very Little	21	11	13	7
	A Little	41	21	32	16
	Often	27	14	35	18
	Very frequently	5	3	15	8
Effective	Never	8	4	5	3
	Very Little	20	10	12	6
	A Little	39	20	30	15
	Often	25	13	34	17
	Very frequently	8	4	19	10
Active	Never	9	5	7	4
	Very Little	21	11	14	7
	A Little	41	21	29	15
	Often	24	12	33	17

	<b>Very frequently</b>	5	3	17	9
	<b>Never</b>	3	2	2	1
	<b>Very Little</b>	12	6	8	4
	<b>A Little</b>	33	17	23	12
	<b>Often</b>	37	19	33	17
	<b>Very frequently</b>	15	8	34	17

## CONCLUSION

Based on the data, it is evident that generally in spite of their dissimilar proficiency levels, both Band 1 and Band 4 students did not reveal a great deal of differences in how much they used CREAM vocabulary learning strategies. No matter how far the students had achieved of the language, their proficiency levels in general did not operate as the key factors that determine how often they should use the strategies and which strategies they should favor. The significant difference expected to appear after the data was analyzed between Band 1 and Band 4 students, however was not discovered. Rather, minor differences were exposed by the results that showed the different proficiency levels did not contribute much to revealing substantial differences. It can be concluded that the proficiency levels of the students did not reflect a great deal of distinctive learner characteristics or preferences in learning vocabulary.

In conclusion, there are many other possible reasons for the data to appear as it is and further research should be conducted to confirm the reasons. As suggested by Schmitt (2000), in fact, there are so many different variables that affect second language vocabulary acquisition, such as L1, age, amount of exposure, motivation and culture, that it is very difficult to formulate a theory of acquisition that can account for them all. In addition, the study did not aim at uncovering the reasons behind the differences in preferences of the Band 1 and Band 4 students towards using the vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, the reasons pointed out are merely hypothetical and further research is needed to clarify the issue. The present research however has given some ideas of which vocabulary learning strategies that were most commonly used by the respondents. Some of the insights gained in the present research

perhaps can help the instructors in UUM to come up with better approach of teaching vocabulary to students that can suit their needs.

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