Vocabulary Learning Strategies of MA Students at YUFL and Their Effect on Reading Comprehension

**Lwin Lwin Hla Pe*

Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is one of the challenging tasks for foreign language learners. Although learners can face difficulties in acquiring new vocabulary, they must overcome these difficulties through appropriate strategies. Knowing a wide range of vocabulary makes learners have confident in both their receptive and productive skills. The present study tries to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by MA English specialization students at Yangon University of Foreign Languages and their effect on reading comprehension. The data are collected using the questionnaire which is based on the classification of vocabulary learning strategies – Determination, Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies – by Schmitt (1997). Moreover, the students are also given a reading comprehension test which is an IELTS reading test to find out vocabulary learning strategies which effect on reading comprehension. The results show that Memory strategies are used frequently whereas Social strategies least frequently. Moreover, the results through the use of stepwise multiple regression indicate that Metacognitive and Cognitive strategies have effect on the marks which students got in taking an IELTS reading comprehension test. It is hoped that the present study will help both teachers who are teaching vocabulary and learners who are trying to improve their vocabulary range.

Key words: learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Learner-centred approach has been popular in teaching context. Therefore, language learning strategies have been paid attention in the context of foreign language teaching. The reason is that when students have awareness of their learning strategies in foreign language learning context, they could be independent ones who know how to take responsibilities to learn successfully. In other words, students who can apply learning strategies based on their strengths and weaknesses can become successful students in the long run. Learning strategies could also help in their life-long learning. Moreover, teachers could suggest students appropriate learning strategies for their success in language learning.

The use of vocabulary learning strategies which is the main concern of the present study has been the centre of attention by researchers. Vocabulary learning strategies have been paid attention as if students know strategies to learn vocabulary, they can apply their knowledge of vocabulary in their four skills of language: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Nation (2005) also suggests that teaching vocabulary in a deliberate way is not as effective as incidental learning.

Rationale

It is crucial to know vocabulary learning strategies applied by students as these strategies have effect on students' performance in language learning. Knowing a wide range of vocabulary plays an important role in learning a language. In second language teaching and learning context, teachers could notice how students acquire new vocabulary items which are useful in both receptive and productive skills through vocabulary learning strategies. In this

---

* Lecturer, Department of English, Yangon University of Foreign Languages

way, teachers could give students good suggestions for using suitable vocabulary learning strategies. Students in different proficiency levels apply different vocabulary learning strategies to widen their vocabulary range. The present study emphasizes vocabulary learning strategies of MA second year students specialized in English as it is interesting to note how post graduate students, who are assumed to be in advanced proficiency level, learn vocabulary.

Scope of the study

As the present study is a small scale research done in a language classroom, the vocabulary learning strategies of 15 MA students, who specialize in English at Yangon University of Foreign Languages, are explored through a set of questionnaire and an IELTS reading comprehension test.

Aim and objectives

The aim of the study is to examine vocabulary learning strategies used by MA students who specialize in English at Yangon University of Foreign Languages and the contribution of these strategies in reading comprehension. The aim is achieved through the objectives as follows:

- to find out the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies and

- to explore the contribution of vocabulary learning strategies in reading comprehension.

With specific aim and objectives, the following research questions will be answered in the paper.

(1)   Do MA students who specialize in English use vocabulary learning strategies?

(2)   What vocabulary learning strategies are the most and least frequently used by MA students?

(3)   What vocabulary learning strategies have effect on reading comprehension of those students?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learning strategies

As the trend of language teaching has been focused on student-centred approach, learning strategies used by students to accomplish the tasks are important to investigate. Learning strategies are used by students in their learning process (Towell and Hawkins, 1994). Quoting Rubin (1981), Steinberg and Sciarini (1993) mention six strategies of language learners: 'verification', 'inductive processing', 'deductive reasoning', 'practice', 'memorization' and 'monitoring'. 'Verification' strategy makes learners check if their language use is correct. 'Inductive processing' strategy makes learners create hypothesis based on their first or second language. The strategy 'deductive reasoning' makes learner think logically. According to strategy 'practice', learners have a lot of practices through imitations. 'Memorization' strategy helps learner to keep new language in their memory. According to 'monitoring' strategy, learners are aware of their mistakes and they also observe how speakers and listeners deliver and receive messages.

Takač (2008) defines language learning strategies as 'specific actions', 'behaviours', 'steps' or 'techniques' which are used by learners in learning a language. Takač (2008) also

emphasizes four categories of learning strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective. Schmitt (1997) also cited language learning strategies by O'Malley and Chamot. They are 'metacognitive', 'cognitive' and 'social/affective'. Cognitive strategies are mainly concerned with 'mental steps or actions that are employed in learning or problem solving' whereas metacognitive strategies are mainly focused on 'planning of learning, setting of goals, thinking about the learning process, monitoring of performance and comprehension'. Social strategies are strategies which are used by learners in interacting with peer learners or teachers. Affective strategies help learners understand their feelings.

Vocabulary learning strategies

Learning vocabulary in a foreign language is not an easy task. Learners need to put effort in learning vocabulary. Nation (2015) states that learners learn vocabulary in 'certain mental conditions'. In these conditions, learners have chances to meet new vocabulary items and then they pay attention them. It is also important to note the frequency of exposure to new vocabulary items and the quality of attention by learners in these conditions.

To learn vocabulary effectively, learners use vocabulary learning strategies. It is noted that good learners use more vocabulary learning strategies than poor learners. Moreover, the use of vocabulary learning strategies changes when learners move from high school level to tertiary level (Read, 2000). Learners apply language learning strategies in learning vocabulary items (Takac̆, 2008). As language learning strategies could be applied in studying vocabulary learning strategies, various scholars suggest different learning strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies suggested by Stoffer (1995) can be grouped into (9) groups: '(1) strategies involving authentic language use, (2) strategies involving creative activities, (3) strategies used for self-motivation, (4) strategies used to create mental linkages, (5) memory strategies, (6) visual/auditory strategies, (7) strategies involving physical action, (8) strategies used to overcome anxiety and (9) strategies used to organise words' (Takac̆, 2008 and Schmitt, 1997).

Schmitt (1997) cited vocabulary learning strategies by Oxford. These strategies can be grouped into four different categories: Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive. Schmitt (1997) develop a taxonomy for vocabulary learning strategies. In his taxonomy, Schmitt (1997) adds one more category which is concerned with Determination strategies.

Schmitt's taxonomy (1997) includes Determination strategies, Social strategies, Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies and Metacognitive strategies. Determination strategies help learners acquire the meaning of new vocabulary. According to Schmitt (1997), in the process of acquiring new vocabulary, learners do the four significant things: 'guessing from their structural knowledge of the language', 'guessing from an L1 cognate', 'guessing from context' and 'using reference materials' or 'asking someone'.

When learners use social strategies, they try to learn new vocabulary by interacting with teachers or classmates or friends. Social strategies can also be used for the purposes of consolidating new vocabulary. In this case, learners learn new vocabulary cooperatively in groups of friends. Leaners also learn new words by asking teachers to check the list of vocabulary they make. Moreover, through the interaction with native speakers, learners can also consolidate new vocabulary items.

According to Memory strategies, learners relate new vocabulary to their existing knowledge. There are certain things learners do when they use Memory strategies. Learners use pictures in learning new vocabulary. Learners learn new words through associated words. Moreover, learners group words according to categories, for example, animals, jobs and so on. Learners can also recall words through 'the target words' orthographical or phonological form' (Schmitt, 1997). In other Memory strategies, learners learn new words through the use of

paraphrase of target words, the use of idioms or proverbs, the use of physical actions or semantic feature grips (Schmitt, 1997).

Cognitive strategies involve 'repetition' and 'mechanical means to study vocabulary' (Schmitt, 1997). Learners learn a new word by writing and saying it repeatedly. In learning new vocabulary, learners also keep notes, word lists and flash cards to help them learn target vocabulary. By doing these things, learners review vocabulary they learn.

In Metacognitive strategies, learners 'control and evaluate their own learning' (Schmitt, 1997). Learners try to find out the most suitable strategies for learning new vocabulary. Then, learners monitor, review, assess and reinforce the strategies which are suitable for them. Through Metacognitive strategies, learners can maximize the opportunities to learn target words.

According to Schmitt (1997), 'a taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies' can be divided into two major groups: Discovery strategies and Consolidation strategies. In discovering the meaning of new vocabulary, learners use Determination strategies and some Social strategies in which learners ask someone the meaning of new vocabulary. Consolidation strategies specifically include Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies. Learners use these strategies for reviewing the vocabulary items.

Previous studies

In the paper titled 'An investigation into vocabulary learning strategies used by senior high school students in Taiwan', Yeh and Wang (2004) study vocabulary learning strategies used by senior high school students in Taiwan. Their study aims to explore vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by the students and to find out the different use of vocabulary learning strategies between good and poor learners. In their research, a questionnaire which is based on Schmitt's vocabulary learning strategies (1997) and vocabulary levels test (Nation, 1990) are used for data collection. The findings show that cognitive strategy is most frequently used whereas social strategy is least frequently used. Moreover, significant difference between good and poor learners is found as verbal repetition and learning words in context are preferred by good learners whereas written repetition and learning words in isolation are preferred by poor learners.

There are previous studies done on vocabulary learning strategies. Kafipour and Naveh (2011) did the research entitled '**Vocabulary learning strategies and their contribution to reading comprehension of EFL undergraduate students in Kerman province**'. Their paper aims to find out vocabulary strategies used by undergraduate students in Kerman Province and the contribution of these strategies in reading comprehension. For data collection, one questionnaire and one reading comprehension test are used. The questionnaire which is based on Schmitt's vocabulary learning strategies is adopted from Bennett (2006). Reading comprehension questions are taken from TOEFL reading comprehension test. The results show that the students in the study are medium strategy users. Moreover, metacognitive strategies are used most frequently whereas social strategies are least frequently used. According to the results, only social strategies have contribution on students' reading comprehension.

Kafipour et al. (2011) studied the vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary level of Iranian EFL learners. They also found out the relation between the strategies and the students' level of vocabulary. In data collection process, they used Schmitt's vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire (VLSQ) and nation's vocabulary level test (VLT). There were 238 participants which were selected using random cluster sampling. Their findings showed that Iranian EFL learners were medium strategy users and learners preferred memory strategy most whereas cognitive strategy was the least preferred. Through statistics, the findings also revealed

that memory strategy had the highest contribution to vocabulary level of the learners whereas social strategy had the lowest contribution.

The previous studies focused on vocabulary learning strategies of undergraduate students. Although the present study focuses on vocabulary learning strategies, the participants in the study are post graduate students who specialize in English. Moreover, the effect of vocabulary learning strategies on a reading comprehension test is also focused.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

In the present study, the participants are 15 MA students who specialize in English at Yangon University of Foreign Languages.

Instruments

One questionnaire and one reading comprehension test were used in the data collection process. The questionnaire in the study was mainly constructed using Schmitt's vocabulary learning strategies (1997). In the questionnaire which is given in appendix section, A1 to A8 were concerned with Memory strategies, B1 to B8 with Determination strategies, C1 to C18 with Metacognitive strategies, D1 to D8 with Cognitive strategies and E1 to E4 with Social strategies. The questionnaire consists of 46 items with 5 likert-scale. Moreover, IELTS reading comprehension test which was taken from 'The official Cambridge guide to IELTS' was also used.

Procedure

In data collection process, first, students were distributed the questionnaire to complete. Second, the next day, they were given 1 hour to take an IELTS reading comprehension test. Third, the data from the questionnaire and the test were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings show that MA students who specialize in English at Yangon University Foreign Languages use vocabulary learning strategies: Determination, Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive. Although they use vocabulary learning strategies, their preference for these strategies differs. Table (1) shows the most and least frequent use of vocabulary learning strategies by MA students.

Table 1 : Rank order of the use of vocabulary learning strategies by the students

Strategy	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Memory	3.3111	0.44830	1
Determination	3.1833	0.39772	2
Metacognitive	3.1500	0.53285	3
Cognitive	2.5667	0.55675	4
Social	2.0250	0.40422	5

As shown in Table (1), Memory strategies with mean score of 3.3111 are the most frequently used by the students and they are followed by Determination (mean = 3.1833), Metacognitive (mean = 3.1500) and Cognitive strategies (mean = 2.5667). Among five different strategies, Social strategies with mean score of 2.0250 are the least frequently used by the students.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was done to find out the effect of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension. Table (2) reveals the result of stepwise multiple regression to know the effect of vocabulary learning strategies used by the students on the reading comprehension test.

Table 2 : Stepwise multiple regression result for the effect of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension

Variable	B	Beta (β)	T	Sig.T
Metacognitive	5.526	0.625	3.705	.003
Cognitive	-3.578	-0.423	-2.507	.028

The results of stepwise multiple regression show that Metacognitive and Cognitive strategies have effect on the reading comprehension test as they have significant correlation which is ($p < 0.05$). Metacognitive strategies have significant correlation value (0.003) whereas Cognitive strategies have (0.028).

According to stepwise multiple regression results, a unit use of Metacognitive strategies increases (0.625) units in the level of reading comprehension test. On the other hand, a unit use of Cognitive strategies decreases (-0.423) units in the level of reading comprehension test. Therefore, only Metacognitive and Cognitive strategies have effect on the result of reading comprehension test.

V. DISCUSSION

MA students who specialize in English at YUFL have awareness of using vocabulary learning strategies and they also use them in learning and revising vocabulary items. Among (5) vocabulary learning strategies, the students favour Memory strategies the most and it is followed by Determination and Metacognitive strategies. The two strategies: Cognitive and Social strategies are the least favoured by the students.

Memory strategies are the most favoured by MA students at YUFL in learning vocabulary. It is assumed that in learning vocabulary the students rely on their memory. They relate what they have learnt to what they have already learnt. The students in the present study seem to like simple and traditional ways of learning vocabulary. The present study is similar to the study done by Kafipour et al. (2011) as in their study, Memory strategies are also favored by Iranian EFL learners.

The second most favoured strategies by the students are Determination strategies. It means that when the students first find new vocabulary items, they use Determination strategies to find out the meanings. It can be said that the students guess the meaning of new vocabulary they encounter from the contextual clues or they also find help from people around them. Guessing the meaning of new vocabulary is also one of the strategies which teachers ask students to use. Therefore, it is noted that the students prefer simple and direct ways of learning new vocabulary. This result agrees with the result in the study done by Sahbazian (2004). In her study, Turkish university students prefer Determination strategies in discovering the meaning of new vocabulary.

Metacognitive strategies are the third frequently used strategies. It means that the students learn new vocabulary items through authentic materials, for examples, English movies, songs or news on TV or in newspapers. Through the use of internet, these kinds of materials can be accessed easily. Therefore, the students could learn vocabulary independently through exposure. As they are post graduate students, it is reasonable for them to learn new vocabulary by using Metacognitive strategies.

Although Cognitive strategies are useful in learning vocabulary and they are used to get higher level of proficiency, these strategies are the second least frequently used by the students. It can be justified that the students do not usually use mechanical means to study vocabulary. Besides, they do not seem to use new vocabulary through repetition in written or spoken forms.

Social strategies are the least frequently used by the students. It means that the students prefer learning vocabulary items in individuals to learning them in groups. Moreover, it can be noted that the students have rare chances to talk to native speakers to learn new vocabulary items through conversations. This finding is similar to the findings of the studies done by Yeh and Wang (2004) and Kafipour and Naveh (2011). Social strategies are the least favoured by the participants in their studies.

Stepwise multiple regression results show that among five vocabulary learning strategies, Metacognitive and Cognitive strategies have effect on the level of reading comprehension test. It is surprising to note that although the use of Metacognitive strategies increases the level of reading comprehension test, the use of Cognitive strategies decreases. It can be justified that the students do not understand the key features of Cognitive strategies well and they do not apply these strategies appropriately. Therefore, the students could be raised the awareness of using Cognitive strategies appropriately in learning new vocabulary so that they can apply these strategies in reading comprehension test.

Determination, Memory and Social strategies do not have effect on reading comprehension test as there is no significance correlation between these strategies and the test. Through these results, it can be said that the students could be encouraged to use these strategies to make improvement in their reading comprehension.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present paper investigates the use of vocabulary learning strategies by MA students who specialize in English at Yangon University of Foreign Languages and the contribution of these strategies in reading comprehension. The data was collected through a questionnaire and a reading comprehension test which is take from 'the official Cambridge guide to IELTS'. The questionnaire, which consists of 46 items with 5 likert-scale, was constructed using Schmitt's vocabulary learning strategies (1997). The results show that Memory strategies are the most frequently used by the students whereas Social strategies are the least frequently used. Moreover, Metacognitive and Cognitive strategies have effect on the reading comprehension test.

It is hoped that the findings of the current study have contribution to both teachers and students in EFL classes. Students have awareness of using vocabulary learning strategies in learning new vocabulary, through the questionnaire. Teacher also can give some guidelines in using useful vocabulary learning strategies to students. In this way, vocabulary can be learnt effectively in classes.

The present study has some limitations. As it is a small scale research, the number of participants is only 15. Moreover, only post graduate students can be focused. Therefore, it is

recommended that in further research, more participants from different proficiency levels should be participated in the research. Moreover, not only the effect of vocabulary learning strategies on reading skills but also the effect of these strategies on listening skills, writing skills and speaking skills should be focused. The correlation between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size of students can also be emphasized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Kafipour, R & Naveh, M. H. (2011). Vocabulary learning strategies and their contribution to reading comprehension of EFL undergraduate students in Kerman Province. *European Journal of Social Science*, *23*(4), 626-647.

Kafipour, R. Yazdi, M. Soori, M. & Shokrpour, N. (2011). Vocabulary Levels and Vocabulary learning strategies of Iranian Undergraduate students. *Studies in Literature and Language*, *3*(3), 64-71.

Nation, P. (2005). Teaching vocabulary. *Asian EFL Journal*. Retrieved from https://www.asian-efl-journal.com/sept_05_pn.pdf

Nation, P. (2015). Principles guiding vocabulary learning through extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 27(1), 136-145.

Read, J. (2000). *Assessing Vocabulary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sahbazian, S. (2004). *Perceived vocabulary learning strategies of Turkish university students*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma, USA.

Schmitt, N. (1997). Vocabulary learning strategies. In N. Schmitt & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary: description, acquisition and pedagogy* (pp.199-228). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Steinberg, D. D. & Sciarini, N. V. (1993). *An introduction to psycholinguistics*. Great Britain: Pearson education limited.

Takač, V. P. (2008). *Vocabulary learning strategies and foreign language acquisition*. Great Britain: the Cromwell Press Ltd.

Towell, R. & Hawkins, R. (1994). *Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*. United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Yeh, C. & Wang, Y. (2004). An investigation into vocabulary learning strategies used by senior high school students in Taiwan. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL*, *1*(2), 1-44.

Appendix

Before answering the questionnaire, please read the instructions carefully.

  (a) There is no true or false answer.

  (b) Please choose what you really do in learning new vocabulary in English.

  (c) All your data will be kept confidential and will be only used by the researcher.

  (d) Please write any other methods, techniques or strategies you use in learning new vocabulary in English in the space provided at the end of the questionnaire.

When I find a new English word and want to know its meaning, I …		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
A1	analyse the part of speech of the new word (e.g., now, verb, adjective, etc.)					
A2	analyse any word parts the new word (e.g., patient, impatient, important, unimportant, etc.)					
A3	analyze any available pictures or gestures to get the meaning of the new word					
A4	guess its meaning from the context					
A5	use a Myanmar-English dictionary					
A6	use an English-English dictionary					
A7	make word lists					
A8	use flash cards					
B1	ask the teacher the translated version the new word					
B2	ask the teacher a paraphrase or synonym of the new word					
B3	ask the teacher for a sentence which includes the new word					
B4	ask my classmates for meaning of the new word					
B5	discover new meaning through group work activity					
When I consolidate a new English word and widen my vocabulary range, I …		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
B6	try to study the meaning of the new word and practice meaning of the new word through group work activities					
B7	ask the teacher to check my flash cards or word lists for accuracy					
B8	have conversation with native-speakers					
C1	study the meaning of the new word with pictures					
C2	try to have image of the new word's meaning					
C3	connect the new word to my personal experience					
C4	connect the new word to its synonyms and antonyms					
C5	use 'scales' for gradable adjectives					
C6	learn the new word by recalling related memories I have					

		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
C7	add the new word in the group of words to study					
When I consolidate a new English word and widen my vocabulary range, I …						
C8	use the new word in sentences					
C9	use the new word in an appropriate context					
C10	study the spelling of the new word					
C11	study the sound of the new word					
C12	say the new word aloud when studying					
C13	make mental image of word form of the new word (e.g., mental images for the words 'important' or 'importance')					
C14	remember the new word with its prefixes or suffixes (e.g., im-, un-, -less, -ful, etc.)					
C15	remember the new word with its parts of speech					
C16	try to paraphrase the new word's meaning					
C17	learn the idiomatic expression of the new word					
C18	use physical action when learning the new word					
D1	repeat the new word verbally					
D2	write the new word repeatedly					
D3	add the new word in the word list I learnt or use flash cards					
D4	take notes in class for the new word					
D5	use the vocabulary section in my textbook					
D6	listen to tape of word lists					
D7	put English labels on physical objects					
D8	keep a vocabulary notebook					
E1	use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.)					
E2	testing myself with word tests					
E3	skip or pass the new word					
E4	continue to study the new word over time					

Please answer the following questions.

Have you taken IELTS or TOEFL exams? If so, when did you take it?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Do you have your own methods, techniques or strategies in learning new vocabulary in English? If so, please write them in the space provided.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

If you do not understand the sentences, phrases or words in the questionnaire, please write it in the space provided.

…………………………………………………………………………………………………