

# **Vocabulary Learning at Secondary Schools: Strategies and Learner's Actual Performance**

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## **1. Introduction**

Learning a foreign language entails acquiring the different language subsystems such as its grammar, phonology and lexis as well as developing the four macro skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking). Regarding lexical competence, several researchers have recognized the importance of lexis in order to foster both receptive and productive skill development, and consequently, effective communication (Nykos & Fan, 2007; Sánchez & Manchón, 2007). Research in the latest decades has focused considerable attention on both the external and the internal factors that affect vocabulary acquisition, teaching and learning. External factors include the instructional practices teachers deploy as well as the teaching materials, among others, whereas internal factors comprise, for example, the learners' beliefs and the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) they employ. The present study aims to examine the VLSs that elementary level learners from private and state-run secondary schools make use of both within and outside classroom settings and establish links between their strategy use and their level of performance on two vocabulary tests.

## **2. Literature review**

Research on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) has addressed numerous issues and concerns. Some researchers have sought to explore the multiplicity of variables that may intervene in VLS use. Nyikos and Fan (2007) found four factors: proficiency level, individual variation, strategy use development and the learning environment to influence the choice and effectiveness of VLSs in several environments. As regards proficiency level, both Nyikos and Fan and Celik and Toptas (2010) reviewed studies that support the fact that more successful learners evince more frequent and more elaborate strategy use. These findings are in line with those by Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999, as cited in Nyikos & Fan, 2007) who found more proficient learners to practice vocabulary outside the classroom, and those by Ahmed (1989, as cited in Celik & Toptas, 2010) who reported on good learners' wider use and repertoire of VLSs. Individual variation has also been found to account for differences in VLS use among different learners. Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) revealed that the learners' initial VLS repertoire may have influenced their choice and use of VLSs, thus suggesting that less frequent strategy users and moderate strategy users took greater advantage of VLS instruction whereas active strategy users did not show any gains in terms of VLS use. Strategy use development has also been reported to influence VLS use as numerous studies have identified patterns of VLS change over time as learners become more proficient or mature (Ahmed, 1989, as cited in Celik & Toptas, 2010; Harley & Hart, 2000; Schmitt, 1997, as cited in Nyikos & Fan, 2007).

Other studies have attempted to elicit learner voice, or in other words, the participants' own perceptions of their use of VLSs. Çelik and Toptaş (2010) employed questionnaires to collect information about Turkish EFL learners' perceptions of both their actual VLS use and usefulness. Along similar lines, Mizumoto and Takeuchi

(2009) resorted to not only questionnaires, but also self-reports (study logs in this case) and interview sessions to collect information about Japanese EFL university students' own perceptions of the VLSs they make use of, all of which brought to the surface the participants' "inconsistencies, anomalies, false starts, contradictory actions, and task-incompatible VLS use" (Nykos & Fan, 2007, p. 254) through a more qualitative methodology. A question remains; however, whether what participants in both studies say they do corresponds exactly with what they actually do. Therefore, it is of interest to examine the VLSs that learners perceive they employ and correlate their use with their level of performance on vocabulary tests to see whether they actually put them to use.

### **3. Theoretical background**

Language learning strategies (LLS) are defined as "specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 2003, p.8). There is a wide-ranging inventory of LLS taxonomies in the literature; nevertheless, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) has had the most significant influence on second language acquisition. Oxford suggests two categories of LLS: direct or indirect strategies. Direct strategies entail memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, and indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The importance of instructing learners on strategies has been promoted by Chamot and O'Malley (1994) who claim that strategies represent the dynamic processes underlying learning. Thus, raising learners' awareness of different learning strategies can help them become active and autonomous learners. Along the same lines, Bruner (1996) indicates that learning entails not only the acquisition of content but also the development of strategies, learning how to learn, so that learners can transfer strategies to new learning situations.

The review of the literature suggests that research on LLS has attempted to focus on diverse dimensions of second language acquisition. Asgari and Mustapha (2011) state that VLS are part of LLS since the majority of the LLS listed in Oxford's taxonomy in the memory category refer to VLS or most strategies can be applied in vocabulary learning tasks. Different researchers have proposed several classifications of VLS (Schmitt, 1997; Gu, 2003; Nation, 2013). One of the most widely used taxonomies is Schmitt's (1997), which draws on Oxford's classification of LLS and provides a full range of VLS. Schmitt classifies them into two main categories: discovery strategies, i.e. strategies deployed by learners to learn new words; and consolidation strategies, i.e. strategies used for recalling words. Likewise, the taxonomy divides VLS into five subsets. *Determination strategies* refer to individual learning strategies; *social strategies* comprise strategies learners use to learn new words by interacting with others; *memory strategies* refer to strategies learners apply to remember the meaning of a word; *cognitive strategies* are those by which learners engage in more mental processing such as repetition or labelling objects; and *metacognitive strategies* relate to processes involved in monitoring, decision-making, and evaluation of one's progress.

#### **4. Methodology**

Two instruments: a survey and two vocabulary tests were used to collect data. They were designed and piloted by a research team who are currently working on vocabulary acquisition. The survey consisted of sixteen questions, which aimed to gather information about the learners' VLSs, beliefs about vocabulary learning as well as self-assessment of their vocabulary learning. The tests were given on two different occasions during the first and second semester of 2014. The participants of the study were secondary school learners from three different institutions: a private secondary school, a state-run secondary school and a pre-university school. Data analysis comprised examining the VLSs the learners say they employ

by drawing on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs and correlating the learners' performance on the tests with their VLSs use.

## **5. Findings**

The responses provided by learners were analyzed in the light of pedagogical approaches and research findings in VLSs. The questions aimed at gaining insights into secondary school learners' VLS use within and outside the classroom setting. The results will be presented in two parts. First, we will refer to the VLSs learners make use of and then we will compare those findings with the average mark obtained in the two tests.

### **5.1. VLSs learners from secondary schools employ**

The findings show that the participants from the three secondary schools make use of memory, cognitive, social and metacognitive strategies but to varying degrees. No instances of determination strategies were found in the data set because they were not included in the survey administered. As regards memory strategies, the participants reported that they employed all of the strategies included in the survey, namely: *using new words in sentences*, *studying words with a pictorial representation of its meaning*, *using cognates in study* and *grouping words together to study them*. However, *using cognates in study* was by far the most frequent strategy mentioned by the learners since they reported that they associated new words with other words with a similar pronunciation or spelling. A larger number of learners from the pre-university school reported that they made use of this strategy when compared with the number of learners from the other two schools. Secondly, the learners identified *using new words in sentences* as another memory strategy they frequently used. In this case, the learners from the pre-university school ranked much higher than the learners from the state-run

and the private schools. *Studying words with a pictorial representation of its meaning* was only mentioned by few learners from the private and the pre-university schools but none of the students from the state-run school said they used this strategy. Finally, *grouping words together to study them* was scarce among the three groups. All in all, although some differences can be observed among the three groups with more learners from the pre-university school employing memory strategies, the frequencies for each strategy found were not high and amounted to less than 30% in all cases.

Cognitive strategies are those by which learners engage in mental processing such as repetition or labelling objects. Schmitt's taxonomy (1997) includes 9 different cognitive strategies, to which we added *dictionary using* following Gu (2003). Nevertheless, the survey administered at the three schools only elicited the learners' perceptions of their use of 6 cognitive strategies: *dictionary using*, *verbal repetition*, *written repetition*, *using the vocabulary section of the coursebook*, *writing the meaning of the words in a notebook/folder* and *underlining new words in the book and writing the meaning next to them*. Most learners ranked both *verbal repetition* and *writing the meaning of the words in a notebook/folder* higher than other strategies. This was a common finding across schools. Next, the participants mentioned *written repetition* as another commonly used strategy to consolidate words they had already learnt. Again, there were no significant differences among the learners from the three schools. As regards *using the vocabulary section of the coursebook*, it is interesting to note that it was reported to be a common strategy among learners from the private and the pre-university school. However, learners from the state-run school were found to use it only seldom. This difference may be motivated by the fact that the learners from the state-run school who participated in this study do not use a coursebook in the English lessons at present, so they may not have available written material to practice on their own.

Finally, the three groups reported their infrequent use of both *dictionary using* and *underlining new words in the book and writing the meaning next to them*. The frequency of *verbal repetition* and *writing the meaning of the words in a notebook/folder* was higher than 50% for all learners but the frequency of the other cognitive strategies was lower than 30%.

Concerning metacognitive strategies, the findings show that *using the English-language media* (songs, movies, the Internet, computer games, TV programs, etc.) is the most highly used strategy by the learners. More specifically, the learners stated that they perform activities on different websites to practice vocabulary. As regards exposure to authentic language and vocabulary use, *listening to songs in English* is the most frequent activity followed by *watching TV programs and movies* and *surfing the Net in English*. It is worth noting that these strategies are ranked high by learners from the private and the pre-university school. Learners from the state-run school rarely use the metacognitive strategies described above.

As regards social strategies, it is interesting to observe that the participants hardly try to *practice the L2 when they meet English speakers* or *chat in English*. With respect to the evaluation of their progress in vocabulary learning, the three groups of learners stated that they were able to recognize, understand and use *almost all* and *lots* of the words taught during the school year when speaking or writing. Finally, as regards the time learners devote to studying words outside the classroom setting, learners show differences in the number of hours. While learners from the private and the pre-university school agree on devoting at least *one hour a week*, learners from the state-run school claim that they *do not study outside the classroom setting*.

## **5.2 VLSs and the learners' performance on two tests**

The results of the tests are varied when comparing both the learners' performance within the same school and across the three schools. In the case of the learners from the pre-university school, their performance ranged from good to very good even though there were some cases in which a lower performance (acceptable) could be observed (50% - 60%). As regards the learners from the state-run and the private school, the results in the tests were mainly assessed as poor with most scores being lower than 50%. These results seem to support the fact reported above that a larger number of learners from the pre-university school showed a higher VLS use, which may have resulted in a better performance on the tests. Nevertheless, less than 30% of the learners from the three schools reported their use of most of the strategies researched, except for *verbal repetition* and *writing the meaning of the words in a notebook/folder*. Bearing in mind that the participants of this study were elementary level students, it can be said that these findings are consistent with those reported by some researchers who found more proficient learners to have a wider VLS use (Ahmed, 1989, as cited in Celik & Toptas, 2010; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999, as cited in Nyikos & Fan, 2007). Individual variation has also been found when comparing the learners from the same school, which lends support to the findings of other research studies such as Mizumoto and Takeuchi's (2009).

## **6. Conclusions and implications**

The purpose of this study has been to analyze the VLSs that elementary level learners from private and state-run secondary schools make use of both within and outside classroom settings and establish connections between their strategy use and their level of performance on two vocabulary tests. Memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies are the most widely



used strategies by the participants. Among these types of strategies *using cognates in study, the English-language media, verbal repetition* and *writing the meaning of the words in a notebook/folder* are the most appraised by the participants. Strategies that require social interaction in the target language are not popular among the participants. Nevertheless, the learners' VLS use in the context of this study can be described as low. When correlating the learners' performance on the two tests with their VLS use, it may be concluded that the pre-university learners' may have performed better since they seemed to show a slightly higher and more varied use of VLSs.

Bearing in mind the results of this study, some implications can be drawn. A more extensive use of VLSs may account for a better performance on vocabulary tests. Nevertheless, elementary levels learners show a low VLSs use; therefore, explicit instruction on VLSs may be useful in order to enhance vocabulary learning.

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