



Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Afghan Undergraduate EFL Learners

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Abstract

The English language is immensely rich in terms of vocabulary. When learning vocabulary, successful students employ specific strategies. Several studies have been conducted to explore the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) English language learners employ. However, there is a lack of empirical research on the topic in Afghanistan. Therefore, the aims of this study were to 1) explore the VLS undergraduate English learners employ; 2) examine the correlation between VLS and gender; 3) examine the correlation between VLS and students' year of studies; and 4) examine the correlation between VLS and students' English proficiency level. The study used a descriptive-quantitative research design. The study discovered that metacognitive and memory strategies were the most frequently used, while social strategies were the least frequently used. Moreover, the correlation results revealed that metacognitive strategies were more prevalent among males, while memory strategies were more popular among females.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning; strategies; English language; EFL; Kabul University

بررسی راهبردهای یادگیری لغات توسط دانشجویان رشته‌ی انگلیسی دوره‌ی لیسانس

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چکیده

زبان انگلیسی دایره‌ی لغات گسترده‌ی دارد و دانشجویان موفق از راهبردهای مشخص برای یادگیری لغات استفاده می‌کنند. تحقیقات متعددی جهت بررسی راهبردهای یادگیری لغات توسط دانشجویان زبان انگلیسی انجام گردیده است؛ اما تحقیقات تجربی در این مورد تاکنون در افغانستان انجام نشده است. اهداف این تحقیق عبارت اند از: 1. بررسی راهبردهای مختلف یادگیری لغات توسط دانشجویان دوره‌ی لیسانس زبان انگلیسی، 2. بررسی ارتباط میان راهبردهای یادگیری لغات و جنسیت، 3. بررسی ارتباط میان راهبردهای یادگیری لغات و سن دانشجویان و 4. بررسی ارتباط میان راهبردهای یادگیری لغات و سطح تسلط دانشجویان در زبان انگلیسی. در این تحقیق از روش پیمایشی توصیفی کمی استفاده گردیده است. نتایج تحقیق نشان می‌دهد که راهبردهای فراشناختی و حافظه‌ی بیشتر مورد استفاده قرار گرفته ولی راهبردهای اجتماعی کم‌ترین میزان استفاده را دارا می‌باشد. بر علاوه، راهبردهای فراشناختی در میان طبقه‌ی ذکور و راهبردهای حافظه‌ی در میان دانشجویان اناث معمول می‌باشد.

اصطلاحات کلیدی: یادگیری لغات؛ راهبردها؛ زبان انگلیسی؛ EFL؛ پوهنتون کابل

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Introduction

Vocabulary is the core of learning a language since anything that happens in a language classroom involves vocabulary. According to Rubin and Thompson (1994), "One cannot speak, understand, read, or write a language without knowing many words." Therefore, vocabulary learning is at the heart of mastering a foreign language. (Rubin and Thompson, p. 79). Similarly, Wilkins (1972) states, "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed." "Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Also, Gass (1999) states that if learners make syntactic errors, their utterance is still understandable; however, vocabulary errors often hinder communication. For English language learning, having a rich vocabulary is imperative. Vocabulary is essential in language learning; thus, possessing a vast and vibrant vocabulary directly relates to learners' enhanced reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills (Nation, 2001; Kaur, 2017).

The principal goal of teaching vocabulary to English language learners is to promote learners' autonomy. As a result, the learners would successfully deal with novel terminology. Catalan (2003) lists the goals for learning vocabulary as 1) "to find out the meaning of unknown words, 2) to retain them in long-term memory, 3) to recall them at will, and 4) to use them in oral or written mode" (p. 56). Learning vocabulary helps students understand word meaning and allows them to use words appropriately in spoken and written contexts.

The English language has hundreds and thousands of words, and students often ask, "How is it that people have learned so many words?" In many contexts, several studies are conducted to find a suitable response to this question (Chang, 1990; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001; Oxford, 1989; Schmitt, 1997, 2000, 2010). Their results indicate that students applied various vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Among the most commonly used VLS are word lists, dictionaries, guessing from context, flashcards, learning the spelling, analyzing word parts, grouping, and visual or aural imagery.

The choice of VLS differs among learners. Many studies have been conducted to look into the VLS used by English language learners

worldwide. However, as far as the Afghan context is concerned, there is a lack of empirical research on the topic.

Literature Review

According to Gu (1994), second language learners use specific strategies to learn new vocabulary. These strategies are called "vocabulary learning strategies." Nation (2001) declares that VLS falls under language learning strategies, which are a subcategory of general learning strategies. Cameron (2001) defines VLS as "the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items" (p. 92). Likewise, Intaraprasert (2004) asserts that VLS refers to "any set of techniques or learning behaviors that language learners reported using in order to discover the meaning of a new word, retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and expand their knowledge of vocabulary" (p. 53).

The studies' findings on learners' vocabulary learning and VLS reveal that EFL/ESL learners use various VLS. However, it is essential to know that no strategy is superior or inferior; it only depends on how effectively the learners apply the VLS (Gu & Johnson 1996; Schmitt 1997).

As the focus of this study is to explore EFL learners' VLS, in this section, first, the most commonly reported VLS are discussed. Then several taxonomies of VLS are presented. Finally, the findings of previously conducted studies related to VLS in ELT contexts are briefly explored.

Taxonomies of VLS

There are many different types of VLS. Commonly mentioned VLS include using word lists, dictionaries, guessing from context, evaluating word parts, grouping, connotation, visual and aural imagery, verbal repetition, written repetition, a vocabulary notebook, semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, physical response, and media such as magazines, newspapers, TV, songs, and movies. (Thompson, 1987; Oxford & Schmitt, 1997).

Several taxonomies for VLS have been proposed. Oxford (1990) split VLS into direct and indirect strategies. According to Oxford, direct strategies contain memory, cognition, and compensation, whereas indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Similarly, Ahmed

(1989) separated VLS into two major classifications: 1) macro-strategies and 2) micro-strategies. In his categorization, macro-strategies comprised memorization, practice, note-taking, and using different information sources. Furthermore, micro-strategies involved specific performances within a single macro-strategy. Gu and Johnson (1996) generated a VLS questionnaire consisting of 108 items. The listed items were built on Oxford's (1990) research on VLS. Their questionnaire encompassed three categories: 1) beliefs about vocabulary learning, 2) metacognitive strategies, and 3) cognitive strategies. Schmitt (1997) grouped VLS into 1) strategies for discovering a new word and 2) strategies for consolidating a term that has already been learned. Schmitt used Oxford's (1990) taxonomy and Mayer & Nation's discovery/consolidation division list of VLS. Using this, Schmitt took up social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies from Oxford's taxonomy and added a fifth category, naming it "determination strategies." Thus, the total items in Schmitt's taxonomy comprise 58 strategy items divided into five categories:

1. Social strategies (SOC): use interaction with other people to improve language learning.
2. Memory strategies (MEM): relate the new material to existing knowledge.
3. Cognitive strategies (COG): exhibit the common function of the learner's manipulation or transformation of the target language. They are similar to memory strategies but are not explicitly focused on mental processing.
4. Metacognitive strategies (MET): involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best study methods.
5. Determination strategies (DET): strategies used by an individual when discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise. (Schmitt, 1997, p.205).

The classifications above are different from one another. However, it should be noted that even though the classifications of VLS above might have been done differently, the strategies intersect because all the categorizations include the same common strategies. One basic pattern in

these classifications is that most of these strategies fall under the categories of memory, metacognitive, cognitive, social, and determination.

Previous Research on VLS

Carranza (2015) directed a study at Sorsogon State College to explore students' VLS. The study revealed that most students, when reading books and other materials, frequently used VLS, such as "looking for clues in sentences and using the dictionary to check the unfamiliar words." XU (2014) directed research on the types of English VLS used by Chinese EFL college students. His study results indicated that proficient English learners more often used a variety of VLS compared to less proficient learners. Compared to less proficient learners, proficient learners used more resources and monolingual dictionary strategies. However, both high- and low-proficient students found VLS very useful. Kafipour (2011) investigated the VLS and vocabulary size of EFL learners in Iran. He also examined the potential association between VLS and vocabulary size. The results indicated that the EFL learners in his study were "medium strategy users" (p. 645). Memory strategies were also the most frequently used, while cognitive strategies were the least frequently used. Fan (2003) led research regarding the English VLS of Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong. The study outcomes revealed that the students used VLS even though they thought of them as beneficial.

Moreover, dictionary strategies were used highly frequently among Cantonese speakers. Gu and Johnson (1996) studied advanced learners' practice of VLS. They discovered a significant correlation between vocabulary size, the use of VLS, and English language proficiency. Marefat & Ahmadi (2003) conducted a study to investigate 60 Iranian female English Language Learners' VLS. Their research findings disclosed that the learners mostly utilized memory strategies, followed by cognitive and compensation strategies.

Research Problem

From the summary of the studies discussed above, VLS has been studied in a variety of countries. However, as far as the Afghan context is concerned, there is a lack of empirical research on this topic. In Afghanistan, English is learned as a foreign language. It is considered a

vital language and subject in both schools and universities (MoE, 2010). Afghan students take English as a mandatory subject in schools for eight years, and then, other than English major students, they take an English course for at least another two years at the university level (Noori, 2018).

Significance of the Study

The current research aims at finding out Afghan undergraduate EFL learners' VLS. This study is critical because it will inform learners of various types of VLS since, regrettably, the importance of vocabulary is often neglected in ESL/EFL classrooms (Oxford, 2000). Furthermore, it is also beneficial for the teachers since it will remind them of the vitality of learning vocabulary and VLS in second/foreign language teaching and learning. As a result, teachers would place emphasis on increasing students' vocabulary and vocabulary learning skills through exploiting authentic vocabulary learning activities.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What VLS do Afghan undergraduate EFL learners use?
2. Do learners' choices of VLS vary significantly with respect to gender?
3. Do learners' choices of VLS vary significantly with respect to their year of studies?
4. Do learners' choices of VLS vary significantly with respect to their English language proficiency?

Research Methodology

A descriptive quantitative survey design is used for the current study. According to Creswell (1994), quantitative research is "a type of research that explains phenomena by collecting numerical data and analyzing it using mathematically based methods" (p. 343). Furthermore, a questionnaire is often used in a survey method.

Research Instrument

The study uses an online questionnaire developed using "Google Forms" as the key instrument for data collection. The questionnaire used in this

research is an adaptation of Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLS. The questionnaire encompasses two main parts: (1) Part one explores the demographic information (gender, age, proficiency level, and year of studies). (2) Part two explores the frequency and degree of the students' opinions regarding the strategies they utilize to acquire English vocabulary. The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale in which (1=Never – 5=Always) examines the frequency of using VLS. To establish the instrument's validity, the researcher consulted with colleagues for constructive feedback and comments. To ensure the instrument's reliability, the Cronbach- α reliability coefficient was computed. The Cronbach α was calculated at 0.90, which is highly acceptable.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study is English major students in the English Department of Kabul University. A random sample of 105 students (Sophomore, Junior, and Senior year students) currently studying in the department of English participated in the current research. The respondents participated voluntarily in this study.

Data Analysis Procedure

Once all survey questionnaires were collected, the data was coded, and using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 23, the results were examined using descriptive and inferential statistics. The data were analyzed in terms of mean score and standard deviation, where the highest mean score that could be obtained is 5, signifying the highest frequency, and 1, indicating the lowest frequency of using VLS.

Findings

Demographic

The first section of the questionnaire requested the respondents provide information about their age, gender, English language proficiency level, and year of study. The summary of the demographic information is presented in Table 3.1 below:

Table 1: Demographics

	Characteristic	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
<i>Gender</i>	Male	55	52.4	52.4
	Female	50	47.6	47.6
	Total	105	100.0	100.0
<i>Age</i>	17-19	15	14.3	14.3
	20-22	65	61.9	61.9
	23-25 & above	25	23.8	23.8
<i>Year of Study</i>	Sophomore	34	32.4	32.4
	Junior	32	30.5	30.5
	Senior	39	37.1	37.1
	Total	105	100.0	100.0
<i>English Proficiency Level</i>	Elementary	6	5.7	5.7
	Intermediate	31	29.5	29.5
	Upper-Intermediate	50	47.6	47.6
	Expert	18	17.1	17.1

Students' perception of the importance of vocabulary learning

Next, the questionnaire asked for the respondents' perceptions of the importance of vocabulary learning. The responses of the respondents are summarized in Table 3.2 below.

The results presented in Table 3.2 indicate that a vast majority of 46 (41.0%) students perceived vocabulary learning as very important, while another 54 (48.6%) perceived it as important. Nonetheless, only 5 (9.5%) students thought learning vocabulary was unnecessary.

Table 2: Students' perception of the importance of learning vocabulary

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Not Important at All	0	1.0	1.0
	Not Important	5	9.5	9.5
	Important	54	48.6	48.6
	Very Important	46	41.0	41.0
	Total	105	100.0	100.0

The Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Research question one examines the use of VLS among Afghan undergraduate ELF learners. The descriptive analysis in Table 3.3 below indicates that EFL learners use the most and the least frequently used VLS. Table 3.3 shows that metacognitive strategies ($M = 4.01$; $SD = .80$) are the most commonly used strategies across all five categories. This is followed by determination strategies ($M = 3.89$; $SD = .81$), memory strategies ($M = 3.77$; $SD = .71$), cognitive strategies ($M = 3.55$; $SD = .85$), and social strategies ($M = 3.07$; $SD = .68$).

Table 3: Frequency of VLS

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Metacognitive Strategies (MCOG)	4.01	.80
Dictionary Strategies (DET)	3.89	.81
Memory Strategies (MEM)	3.77	.71
Cognitive Strategies (COG)	3.55	.85
Social Strategies (SOC)	2.90	.68

Across all five categories, the highest-ranked individual strategy items are presented in Table 3.4. The highest mean score ($M=4.34$ & $SD=.98$) was obtained by item 29 in the questionnaire and item 54 ($M=4.32$ & $SD=.98$). This is followed by mean scores of ($M=4.19$ & $SD=.1.06$), ($M=4.18$ & $SD=.1.00$), ($M=4.10$ & $SD=1.05$), ($M=4.08$ & $SD=.1.14$) for items 50, 58, 45, and 7, respectively.

Table 4: The most frequently used individual VLS items

Item#		Category	Mean	Std.
29	“I use a new English word in a sentence so that I can remember it better.”	MEM	4.34	.98
54	“I watch and listen to English movies, songs, and news to learn more vocabulary.”	MCOG	4.32	.95
50	“I highlight the words that seem important to me.”	COG	4.19	1.06
58	“I use newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing.”	MCOG	4.18	1.00
45	“I repeatedly practice the new words I learn.”	COG	4.10	1.05
7	“I use an English-to-English dictionary to help me learn English words.”	DET	4.08	1.14

In terms of the least frequently used VLS in terms of individual items, the list is occupied by social strategies by far. Table 3.5 illustrates the least frequently used VLS in terms of individual items. The lowest mean score ($M=1.93$ & $SD=1.18$) was obtained by item 10, followed by the mean score ($M=2.07$ & $SD=1.39$) by item 47.

Table 5: The least frequently used individual VLS items

Item	Category	Mean	Std.
10 "I ask the teacher to translate the words into Dari/Pashto."	SOC	1.93	1.18
47 "I make vocabulary cards and take them wherever I go."	COG	2.07	1.39
12 "I ask the teacher to put an unknown word into a sentence to help me understand the meaning of the word."	SOC	2.21	1.28
48 "I write a new word on a flashcard to remember it."	COG	2.25	1.35
13 "I ask my classmate for meaning."	SOC	2.90	1.23

Correlation between the Use of VLS and Gender

Research question two aims to observe if there is any significant difference between male and female participants' choice and frequency of using VLS. An independent samples t-test was used to investigate research question number two.

Table 6: Independent Samples t-Test: VLS with respect to gender

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig
Metacognitive Strategies	Male	4.91	.84	1.245	104	.006
	Female	3.02	.74			
Dictionary Strategies	Male	3.89	.93	-.011	103	.991
	Female	3.89	.68			
Memory Strategies	Male	3.35	.81	.442	103	.050
	Female	3.92	.59			
Cognitive Strategies	Male	3.53	.95	-.237	103	.813
	Female	3.57	.76			
Social Strategies	Male	2.99	.75	-1.15	103	.250
	Female	3.15	.62			

The results of the independent samples t-test presented in Table 3.6 above reveal a significant difference ($t(142) = 2.308$, $p = .022$) between gender and the frequency of using VLS in terms of metacognitive strategies (t

(104) = 1.245, $p = .006$). The results indicate that metacognitive strategies were reportedly used more frequently by males ($M = 4.91$ & $SD = .84$) than females ($M = 3.02$ & $SD = .74$). Oppositely, a significant difference ($t(103) = .442$, $p = .50$) was found between gender and the use of VLS in terms of memory strategies. It indicated that females reportedly used memory strategies more frequently ($M = 3.92$ & $SD = .59$) than males ($M = 3.35$ & $SD = .81$).

However, no significant differences in the mean scores were found between gender and the frequency of using determination strategies ($t(103) = -.011$, $p = .991$), cognitive strategies ($t(103) = -.237$, $p = .813$), and social strategies ($t(103) = 01.15$, $p = .250$).

Correlation between the Use of VLS and Year of Study

The third research question seeks to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the frequency of VLS use among participants and the year of study. To examine this, a one-way ANOVA was conducted.

According to the one-way ANOVA results in Table 3.7, there is a significant ($f(2, 102) = 4.853$ & $p = .010$) difference in participants' frequency of using metacognitive strategies depending on the year of study. The Tukey post hoc test for significance revealed that senior students ($M = 4.15$ and $SD = .55$) used metacognitive strategies more frequently than juniors ($M = 3.97$ and $SD = .59$) and sophomores ($M = 3.60$ and $SD = 1.08$).

Furthermore, there was a significant difference ($f(2, 102) = 4.006$ & $p = .021$) between the participants' year of study and the frequency with which they used memory strategies. The Tukey post hoc test revealed that senior students ($M = 4.0$, $SD = .94$) used memory strategies more frequently than juniors ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .61$) and sophomores ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .94$).

In the meantime, no significant differences were found among participants' years of studies in the frequency of using determination strategies ($f(2, 102) = 4.006$ & $p = .021$), cognitive strategies ($f(2, 102) = 2.341$ & $p = .101$), and social strategies ($f(2, 102) = .902$ & $p = .409$).

Table 7: One-Way ANOVA: VLS of the Participants with respect to Year of Studies

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Metacognitive Strategies	Between Groups	5.78	2	2.89	4.853	.010
	Within Groups	60.79	102	.59		
	Total	66.58	104			
Dictionary Strategies	Between Groups	3.04	2	1.52	2.341	.101
	Within Groups	66.26	102	.65		
	Total	69.29	104			
Memory Strategies	Between Groups	3.88	2	1.94	4.006	.021
	Within Groups	49.35	102	.48		
	Total	53.22	104			
Cognitive Strategies	Between Groups	3.11	2	1.55	2.155	.121
	Within Groups	73.47	102	.72		
	Total	76.57	104			
Social Strategies	Between Groups	.85	2	.43	.902	.409
	Within Groups	48.39	102	.47		
	Total	49.25	104			

Correlation: The Practice of VLS and Students' English Proficiency Level

Research question 4 aims to observe if there is any significant relationship between the respondents' frequency of using VLS and their English proficiency level. To examine question 4, a one-way ANOVA was conducted.

The one-way ANOVA results in Table 3.8 below reveal that students' English proficiency level was significantly associated with their frequency of using metacognitive strategies ($f(3, 101) = 2.909$ & $p = .038$), dictionary strategies ($f(3, 101) = 5.188$ & $p = .002$), and social strategies ($f(3, 101) = 4.304$ & $p = .007$).

Similarly, a Tukey post hoc test analysis revealed that the intermediate and upper-intermediate groups differed significantly at $p < 0.05$ level. The other

two groups, the expert group, and the elementary group, were not very different from the other two groups.

Table 8: One-Way ANOVA: VLS with respect to participants' level of English Proficiency

		Sum of	df	Mean	F	Sig.
		Squares		Square		
Metacognitive Strategies	Between Groups	5.29	3	1.77	2.909	.038
	Within Groups	61.29	101	.61		
	Total	66.58	104			
Dictionary Strategies	Between Groups	9.25	3	3.08	5.188	.002
	Within Groups	60.04	101	.59		
	Total	69.29	104			
Memory Strategies	Between Groups	3.64	3	1.22	2.477	.066
	Within Groups	49.58	101	.49		
	Total	53.24	104			
Cognitive Strategies	Between Groups	3.03	3	1.01	1.389	.251
	Within Groups	73.53	101	.73		
	Total	76.57	104			
Social Strategies	Between Groups	5.58	3	1.86	4.304	.007
	Within Groups	43.67	101	.43		
	Total	49.25	104			

Discussion

This study investigated the VLS among Afghan undergraduate ELF students using the VLS taxonomy presented by Schmitt (2000). First, the findings uncovered that the participants were well informed of the significance of vocabulary in language learning, as 97% reported that vocabulary learning was "important and very important." Second, the findings of this study uncovered metacognitive strategies, which were reportedly highly popular with the students. One possible reason why the students in this study use metacognitive strategies such as "watching and listening to English movies, songs, and news to learn vocabulary" could be that nowadays, these technological and media tools are easily accessible. They have opened a new way to learn vocabulary. This result is unlike the conclusions of Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013), who reported determination strategies, and Kafipour's (2010) report that memory strategies are highly frequently practiced among Iranian university learners.

The findings of this study also revealed that students ranked Determination Strategies second, Memory Strategies third, and Cognitive Strategies fourth as the most frequently used strategies. In the meantime, social strategies such as "applying new English words in daily speaking" were reported as the least popular by the students. This finding is in agreement with the conclusions of Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) and Arjomand and Sharififar (2011), who reported that the respondents reported social strategies as the least frequently utilized strategies. However, it is not in line with the research findings reported by Schmitt (1997), who stated that social strategies were rather popular among his participants. A possible explanation for why the respondents in this study ranked social strategies lower could be that they do not have the opportunity to use English or the new vocabulary other than in the classroom setting. Another reason could be that classes in Afghanistan are usually teacher-centered (Noori, 2017); therefore, the students cannot practice vocabulary in group discussions or communicative activities.

Another significant finding of this research was that there was a significant difference between gender and respondents' frequency of using VLS. The outcomes revealed that metacognitive strategies were popular among males, while memory strategies were popular among females. This is in line with Gu (2002), who asserts that gender in language learning is often an influential factor. Gu's research discovered that learners chose VLS differently depending on gender; however, male students used Memory Strategies more frequently than female students. Gu also asserts that female respondents in his study outperformed male participants in the frequency and variety of VLS use.

Then, in terms of years of studies and the frequency of using VLS, the current research uncovered that metacognitive and memory strategies were more prevalent among senior and junior students compared to sophomore students. This finding is in harmony with Schmitt's (1997) report that students with high proficiency levels are more motivated to utilize sophisticated and meaning-focused strategies compared to students with low proficiency levels.

Finally, in terms of the correlation between English proficiency level and frequency of using VLS, the results revealed that the English proficiency

level of the respondents was a potent background factor in defining the frequency of using VLS. This finding also revealed that students with varying proficiency levels did not use a single strategy but rather a variety of strategies. This is in line with XU's (2014) research, in which proficiency was found to be a very influential factor in the application of VLS, as Chinese-proficient English-language learners more often used VLS compared to the less proficient learners.

Conclusion

This study investigated the VLS among Afghan undergraduate ELF students using the VLS taxonomy presented by Schmitt (2000). First, the findings uncovered that the participants were well informed of the significance of vocabulary in language learning, as 97% reported that vocabulary learning was "important and very important." Second, the findings of this study uncovered metacognitive strategies, which were reportedly highly popular with the students. One possible reason why the students in this study use metacognitive strategies such as "watching and listening to English movies, songs, and news to learn vocabulary" could be that nowadays, these technological and media tools are easily accessible. They have opened a new way to learn vocabulary. This result is unlike those reported by Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013), who reported determination strategies, and Kafipour's (2010) report on memory strategies, which are highly practiced among Iranian university learners.

The findings of this study also revealed that students ranked determination strategies second, memory strategies third, and cognitive strategies fourth as the most frequently used strategies. In the meantime, social strategies such as "applying new English words in daily speaking" were reported as the least popular by the students. This finding is in agreement with the conclusions of Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) and Arjomand and Sharififar (2011), who reported that the respondents reported social strategies as the least frequently utilized strategies. However, it is not in line with the research findings reported by Schmitt (1997), who stated that social strategies were rather popular among his participants. A possible explanation for why the respondents in this study ranked social strategies lower could be that they do not have the opportunity to use English or the

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Another significant finding of this research was that there was a significant difference between gender and respondents' frequency of using VLS. The outcomes revealed that metacognitive strategies were popular among males, while memory strategies were popular among females. This is in line with Gu (2002), who asserts that gender in language learning is often an influential factor. Gu's research discovered that learners chose VLS differently depending on gender; however, male students used memory strategies more frequently than female students. Gu also claims that female participants outperformed male participants regarding both frequency and variety of VLS.

Then, in terms of years of studies and the frequency of using VLS, the current research uncovered that metacognitive and memory strategies were more prevalent among senior and junior students in comparison to sophomore students. This finding is in line with Schmitt (1997), who reported that students with high proficiency levels are motivated to utilize sophisticated and meaning-focused strategies compared to students with low proficiency levels.

Finally, in terms of the correlation between English proficiency level and frequency of using VLS, the results revealed that the English proficiency level of the respondents was a potent background factor in defining the frequency of using VLS. This finding also revealed that students with varying proficiency levels did not use a single strategy but rather a variety of strategies. This is in line with XU (2014), who found proficiency to be an influential factor in the application of VLS, as Chinese-proficient English-language learners more often used VLS compared to the less proficient learners.

Suggestion for Further Research

Finally, this study was a small attempt in which only a quantitative method was used to look into the VLS that Afghan EFL students use. Therefore, it is suggested that for even more thorough results, mixed-method research be conducted in which, besides a questionnaire, other research instruments such as interviews should be used. Also, stretching this research to other public and private universities in the country would be even more valuable for correlational studies.

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