Telling ELT Tales out of School

Vocabulary learning strategy use of Turkish EFL learners

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Abstract

This survey study aimed to examine vocabulary-learning strategies adopted by Turkish EFL students, specifically the frequencies and helpfulness ratings of strategy use, strategy patterns, as well as their change for students across different language levels. The study involved 95 tertiary level English as a foreign language learners. Data were analyzed statistically and the results indicated that the participants' general use of vocabulary learning strategies was somewhat inadequate and there was a gap between their use of strategies and related perceptions of strategy usefulness.

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*Key words:*Vocabulary learning strategy; Turkish EFL learners;strategy use; strategy patterns; perceptions.

1. Introduction

The research to date highlights the consensus on the importance of developing lexical competence throughout the foreign language acquisition process. Following Schmitt's (1997) proposed taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies on the basis of Oxford's study (1990) there have been numerous studies focusing on EFL / ESL learners' use of vocabulary strategies. However, these studies have not considered whether the use of vocabulary learning strategies varies according to learners' language levels. The purpose of this study was to identify the vocabulary-learning strategies adopted by Turkish EFL students, specifically the frequency and helpfulness ratings of the strategy use, as well as whether the patterns of strategy use change for students across different language levels.

Vocabulary learning strategies have been examined by psychologists, linguists, and language teachers for over the past decades (Levenston, 1979). Vocabulary is generally considered as the basic communication tool, and often labeled as the most problematic area by language learners. Vocabulary learning process is triggered by various factors including not only explicit and implicit techniques or individual and group based activities but also motivation and learning strategies (Coady, 1997b; Nation & Newton, 1997).

Generally, vocabulary learning strategies are considered a sub group of general language learning strategies in foreign language pedagogy (Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). O'Malley and Chamot (1997, p. 203) view learning strategies as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend,

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learn or retain new information" Oxford (1990, p. 1) defines them as "actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use, often unconsciously, to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2". The main benefit gained from all learning strategies, including strategies for vocabulary learning, is the fact that they enable learners to take more control of their own learning so that students can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). On the other hand Schmitt (1997) points out that learning methodology depends on a process in which information is gathered, stored, retrieved and used, with vocabulary strategies possibly influencing the process.

1.1. Vocabulary Learning Strategy Taxonomies

The literature on language learning has proposed several vocabulary learning strategy taxonomies (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 1997). Nation (2001, p. 218) in his taxonomy distinguishes the aspects of vocabulary knowledge, the sources of vocabulary knowledge and learning processes. Further, Nation classifies vocabulary learning strategies into three general groups, planning, sources, and process.

Another noteworthy classification scheme has been offered by Stoffer (1995), who developed a Vocabulary Learning Strategy Inventory (VLSI) comprising fewer items compared to Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. Stoffer (1995) has demonstrated that the 53 items on the VOLS I clustered into nine categories by factor analysis as follows :

1. Strategies involving authentic language use
2. Strategies used for self - motivation
3. Strategies used to organize words
4. Strategies used to create mental linkages
5. Memory strategies
6. Strategies involving creative activities
7. Strategies involving physical action
8. Strategies used to overcome anxiety
9. Auditory strategies

Schmitt's taxonomy has been extensively exploited in the relevant studies due to its several advantages over others. Namely, these advantages are as follows: Schmitt's taxonomy can be standardized for assessment goals, can be utilized to gather the answers from students easily, is based on the theory of learning strategies as well as on theories of memory, is technologically simple, can be applied to learners of different educational backgrounds and target languages, is rich and sensitive to the other relevant learning strategies, and allows comparisons with other studies (Catalan 2003, cited in Ruutmets, 2005). The general classification of the vocabulary learning strategies in this study was inspired by Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy which can be basically classified into two dimensions as discovery and consolidation strategies of vocabulary learning. Discovery and consolidation strategies distinguish the strategies which learners utilize to define the meanings of new words when they first encounter them from those they utilize to consolidate meanings when they encounter the words again. Discovery strategies refer to determination and social strategies, whereas consolidation strategies include social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. The total number of strategies is 58 and the categorization is based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies containing six groups: social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and compensation. Social strategies are used in interaction with other people to enhance language learning. Memory strategies relate new material to existing knowledge. Cognitive strategies display the common role of manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner. Metacognitive strategies refer to a conscious perspective of the learning process and taking decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study. Affective strategies show how to manage one's emotions in language learning. Compensation strategies include different ways of compensating for missing knowledge. Schmitt (1997) only adopted four strategy groups: Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive. He noted that there was no category in Oxford's system which adequately describes the kind of strategies used by an individual when faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's knowledge. Accordingly, he proposed another category, determination strategies, which are used by learners when they encounter a word for the first time. Schmitt (1997) also claimed that cultural background is

another learner characteristic which has been regarded as important for vocabulary. He stated that learners from different culture groups sometimes have quite different opinions about the usefulness of various vocabulary learning strategies.

1.2. Research into the Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary acquisition research within the linguistics tradition has largely concentrated on vocabulary (target: what is to be learned; or product: what is learned) rather than acquisition (how vocabulary is learned, the learning/acquisition process). In order to determine effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies for language learners, researchers adopted different approaches (Erten & Williams, 2008). A great part of the research on vocabulary learning strategies has aimed at determining the most effective vocabulary memorization techniques, developing taxonomies of strategy usage, and identifying the vocabulary learning strategy usage that distinguishes good and poor language learners. Other related studies have attempted to identify the ways in which 'good' and 'poor' learners approach learning of lexis. Ahmed (1989), in a study involving 300 Sudanese learners of English, found that the good learners not only used more vocabulary learning strategies but also relied on different strategies more than the lower level learners.

Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) assigned learners into groups according to the vocabulary learning strategy. Learner independence and time were shown to be linked with the vocabulary learning profiles of the two most successful groups. The same study also revealed that the foreign language learners were more likely to exploit a review strategy than the second language learners. However, the latter exhibited a better creativity in their preference for reviewing techniques. Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) also suggested that "time and learner independence were the two measures most closely related to success in vocabulary learning and higher overall English proficiency" (p. 176).

Schouten-van Parreren (1989) explored students' ability levels and guessing strategies. The results of the study can be summarized as follows: compared to their strong counterparts, the weak pupils tended to focus on the problem word and ignore the context; their knowledge of the word was more restricted; they had difficulty integrating knowledge from different sources; they lacked mother tongue vocabulary knowledge, and they had difficulty generalizing from words they had already learned to different new words. Gu and Johnson (1996) involved 850 university EFL students in China in their study, and tried to establish how different vocabulary strategies were related to language learning outcomes. Both Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses showed that self-initiation, selective attention, and deliberate activation of newly learned words consistently predicted both vocabulary size and general proficiency. Other predictors of success included contextual learning, dictionary, and note-taking strategies.

Research has also indicated that patterns of strategy usage can change over time as a learner either matures or becomes more proficient in the target language (Nielsen, n.d.). The study by Ahmed (1989) found some evidence of a progression in strategy usage as the learners became more experienced. In addition, it was found that many of the strategies reported by the mature respondents as useful involved "deeper" processing and greater cognitive effort. Therefore, the mature learners seemed to realize the value of those strategies.

2. Method

The study addressed the following research questions:
1. What vocabulary learning strategies were reportedly used most frequently by the Turkish EFL learners?
2. What were the students' perceptions regarding helpfulness of vocabulary learning strategies?
3. Did the patterns of vocabulary learning strategy use change across students of different language levels?

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 95 Turkish EFL learners enrolled in Ankara University School of Foreign Languages. These learners were randomly selected among those who received language instruction at different levels according to the results of a placement test. Thus, the reliability of the group variable of the study depended

on a school placement of learners at three different language levels, elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate, throughout the year.

2.2. Instrument

The survey in the present study was mostly based upon Schmitt's (1997) study and the instrument was designed to identify the vocabulary learning strategies the participants employed, as well as their rating of the most helpful strategies. Accordingly, the survey included two Likert type scales for defining strategy use frequency, and perceptions on their helpfulness. The first scale ranged from 'never' to 'usually', and the latter from 'not helpful' to 'totally helpful'. The Cronbach's alpha values for each scale were calculated as .84 and .91 for the survey, with overall reliability of .94.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were collected and entered into 15.0 version of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to compute descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics and analysis of variance were used to determine frequencies of the items and ratings of the vocabulary learning strategies among the three language levels of students. Before running variance analysis, data were checked via SPSS to examine whether the assumptions of ANOVA were met. The values obtained from both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Levene's tests were within required levels to be able to pursue the analysis of variance.

3. Results

Table 1 illustrates the participants' ratings of their use of various categories of vocabulary learning strategies. The scale used in the instrument was as follows: 'I do this… never, seldom, sometimes, often, very often'. The survey with items related to the strategy categories was administered to three groups of language learners at different levels. For the first strategy category (Determination Strategies), the highest rating was identified for the highest language level learners (Intermediate: 3.18). For the other strategy categories, the scale of the learner groups from top to bottom was as follows: Social Strategies (Elementary > Pre-intermediate > Intermediate), Memory Strategies (Intermediate > Pre-intermediate > Elementary), Cognitive Strategies (Intermediate > Pre-intermediate > Elementary), Metacognitive Strategies (Intermediate > Pre-intermediate > Elementary). As it can be understood both from the table and the findings above, except for the social strategies all the other strategy categories were rated in accordance with the language level of the learners. That is to say, (again except for the social strategies) there was a positive relation between the frequency of the learners' use of strategies and the rank of their language levels. Here, the exceptional category is the social strategies because the data showed that the low level learners preferred to use the social strategies more than the other level learners. This result also seemed to indicate that the positive relation observed between the other strategies and language levels turned out to be adverse regarding the social strategies. Though the difference of means was not that high, the elementary students indicated their preference for utilizing social networking opportunities more than the higher level learners. When we examined the rank of the learners' ratings of all strategy categories (DS: 2.99 > MS: 2.73 > MCS: 2.65 > SS: 2.48 > CS: 2.36), we found that the Turkish EFL learners at different levels preferred to use determination strategies more than the other strategies. On the other hand, we found that the least preferred strategy category was the cognitive strategies.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of learners' responses on frequency of strategy use

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Determination Strategies (DS)	Elementary	31	2.72	.59
	Pre-intermediate	33	3.07	.43
	Intermediate	31	3.18	.54
	Total	95	2.99	.55
Social Strategies (SS)	Elementary	31	2.55	.65
	Pre-intermediate	33	2.46	.53
	Intermediate	31	2.44	.57
	Total	95	2.48	.58
Memory Strategies (MS)	Elementary	31	2.49	.58
	Pre-intermediate	33	2.69	.59
	Intermediate	31	3.03	.61
	Total	95	2.73	.63
Cognitive Strategies (CS)	Elementary	31	1.94	.82
	Pre-intermediate	33	2.28	.71
	Intermediate	31	2.89	.67
	Total	95	2.36	.83
Metacognitive Strategies (MCS)	Elementary	31	2.34	.68
	Pre-intermediate	33	2.78	.45
	Intermediate	31	2.84	.55
	Total	95	2.65	.60

Further, an analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether the groups' responses differed in terms of their use of strategy categories. Table 2 demonstrates that learner groups' responses had some statistically significant differences in terms of the majority of the vocabulary learning strategies (DS, MS, CS, and MCS), except for the social strategies (SS). Examination of the mean values of groups' responses (Elementary: 2.55; Pre-intermediate: 2.46; Intermediate: 2.44) revealed that all level learners had very close ratings on their use of the social strategies. For those strategy categories on which learners' responses showed variations (DS, MS, CS, and MCS), a further post hoc test was conducted to find out the source of the difference. According to this post hoc test (Scheffe) conducted on determination strategies, significant differences were observed between the elementary and the other two levels. Examination of the mean scores of all groups revealed that the means of the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels (3.07; 3.18) were very close to each other and were higher than the mean of the elementary level (2.72), which suggested that the elementary level learners did not use the determination strategies as much as the upper level learners did. For the social strategies Scheffe test revealed no significant differences, with the mean scores of the learners' responses on social strategies obviously not very distant from each other (E: 2.55; P: 2.46; I: 2.44). However, according to the post hoc test results, another significant difference was observed between the elementary and intermediate levels in terms of the memory strategies. Respectively, the mean scores of these levels were different (E: 2.49; I: 3.03), which suggested that the intermediate level learners reported a more frequent use of the memory strategies than the elementary level learners. As regards the cognitive strategies, Scheffe test revealed some differences among the participant groups. In other words, the intermediate level learners (2.89) preferred to use the cognitive strategies more frequently than the pre-intermediate (2.28) and elementary level learners (1.94). Regarding the metacognitive strategies, Scheffe test indicated a difference between the elementary and the other two levels. The mean score of the elementary group (2.34) was lower than those of both the pre-intermediate (2.78) and intermediate level (2.84) learners. This finding seemed to indicate that compared to the low level learners (elementary group), the upper level learners (pre-intermediate and intermediate) exploited the metacognitive strategies more frequently.

Table 2. ANOVA results of frequency of vocabulary learning strategy use across different language levels

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Determination Strategies (DS)	Between Groups	3.601	2	1.800	6.511	.002
	Within Groups	25.438	92	.276		
	Total	29.038	94			
Social Strategies (SS)	Between Groups	.215	2	.108	.313	.732
	Within Groups	31.700	92	.345		
	Total	31.915	94			
Memory Strategies (MS)	Between Groups	4.709	2	2.355	6.577	.002
	Within Groups	32.937	92	.358		
	Total	37.646	94			
Cognitive Strategies (CS)	Between Groups	14.673	2	7.336	13.391	.000
	Within Groups	50.402	92	.548		
	Total	65.075	94			
Metacognitive Strategies (MCS)	Between Groups	4.589	2	2.294	7.026	.001
	Within Groups	30.041	92	.327		
	Total	34.630	94			

Table 3 illustrates the participants' ratings on usefulness of the vocabulary learning strategies. The scale used in the instrument was as follows: ('I think this is … not useful, not sure it is useful, quite useful, very useful, and extremely useful'). Similar to the above-mentioned results of the frequency of the learners' strategy use, the highest helpfulness rating was identified for the determination strategies as reported by the intermediate level (3.41) language learners. The scales of the means of the learner groups' responses from top to bottom were as follows: Social Strategies (Intermediate > Elementary > Pre-intermediate), Memory Strategies (Intermediate > Pre-intermediate > Elementary), Cognitive Strategies (Intermediate > Pre-intermediate > Elementary), Metacognitive Strategies (Intermediate > Pre-intermediate > Elementary). This finding seemed to indicate that (except for the social strategies) all of the strategy categories were rated in accordance with the language levels of the learners. The data analysis revealed that the low level learners perceived social strategies as more useful than the other level learners. Examination of the rank of the learners' ratings of all strategy categories (CS: 3.57 > MS: 3.37 > MCS: 3.34 > DS: 3.13 > SS: 2.95) suggested that the Turkish EFL learners perceived the metacognitive strategies as more useful than the other strategies; whereas the least preferred strategy category was identified as social strategies. Compared to the most (DS) and least (CS) frequently used strategy categories, the learners indicated very different strategies as useful. This finding suggested that the Turkish EFL learners did not use the cognitive strategies but

they regarded them as useful and effective, however they used the determination and social strategies but they did not perceive them as helpful.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of learners' perceptions of the usefulness of vocabulary learning strategies.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Determination Strategies (U)	Elementary	31	2.7419	.64950
	Pre-intermediate	33	3.2303	.61262
	Intermediate	31	3.4129	.58864
	Total	95	3.1305	.67273
Social Strategies (U)	Elementary	31	2.9129	.66169
	Pre-intermediate	33	2.4424	.80740
	Intermediate	31	3.5387	.66967
	Total	95	2.9537	.84259
Memory Strategies (U)	Elementary	31	2.9290	.78153
	Pre-intermediate	33	3.3455	.66478
	Intermediate	31	3.8484	.83860
	Total	95	3.3737	.84239
Cognitive Strategies (U)	Elementary	31	3.0548	.94051
	Pre-intermediate	33	3.1939	1.07702
	Intermediate	31	3.8032	.65293
	Total	95	3.3474	.95826
Metacognitive Strategies (U)	Elementary	31	3.0484	1.02368
	Pre-intermediate	33	3.7545	.76774
	Intermediate	31	3.9032	.64729
	Total	95	3.5726	.89840

Table 4 shows the results of the variance analysis conducted to determine whether the groups' responses differed in terms of their perceptions of usefulness of strategy categories. Examination of f values revealed that the learner responses were statistically different for all vocabulary learning strategies. In other words, the language learners receiving instruction at various levels perceived the usefulness of the determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies in different ways.

Table 4. ANOVA results of learners' perceptions of the usefulness of vocabulary learning strategies

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Determination Strategies (H)	Between Groups	7.481	2	3.741	9.816	.000
	Within Groups	35.060	92	.381		
	Total	42.541	94			
Social Strategies (H)	Between Groups	19.287	2	9.644	18.698	.000
	Within Groups	47.449	92	.516		
	Total	66.736	94			
Memory Strategies (H)	Between Groups	13.141	2	6.571	11.286	.000
	Within Groups	53.563	92	.582		
	Total	66.704	94			
Cognitive Strategies (H)	Between Groups	9.872	2	4.936	5.940	.004
	Within Groups	76.445	92	.831		
	Total	86.317	94			
Metacognitive Strategies (H)	Between Groups	13.000	2	6.500	9.512	.000
	Within Groups	62.869	92	.683		
	Total	75.869	94			

Another post hoc test was conducted to find out the source of the differences among the language levels. According to the post hoc test (Scheffe) conducted on the determination strategies, significant differences were observed between the elementary and the other two levels. Examination of the mean scores of all levels for the determination strategies revealed that the means of the pre-intermediate (3.23) and intermediate levels (3.41) were very close to each other and higher than the mean of the elementary level (2.74). Specifically, whereas the upper level learners perceived the determination strategies as helpful, the elementary level learners did not share the same perception. As regards the social strategies, Scheffe test revealed that all three groups' ratings were statistically different from each other. The mean scores of the learners' related responses supported this finding (E: 2.91; P: 2.44; I: 3.55). However, the pre-intermediate level's mean was below than those of the other two levels. According to the post hoc test results on the memory strategies, significant differences were revealed among the language levels (within Elementary and Intermediate / within Pre-intermediate and Intermediate). Examination of the mean scores of the first two levels showed (E: 2.92; I: 3.84) a positive difference in favor of the Intermediate level learners. This seemed to indicate that the intermediate level learners regarded the memory strategies as more helpful than the elementary level learners. Further examination of the mean scores (P: 3.34; I: 3.84) of the other two levels revealed a positive variation in favor of the intermediate level learners. This finding related to variations of the learners' responses on the memory strategies suggested that the upper level language learners regarded these strategies as more helpful than the middle and low level learners. Regarding the cognitive strategies, whereas the elementary and pre-intermediate learners' means were very close to each other, the intermediate learners perceived the cognitive strategies as more helpful than the other two level learners. The post hoc test showed a difference between the elementary and intermediate learners' reports as well as between the pre-intermediate and intermediate learners' reports. The intermediate level learners (3.80) regarded cognitive strategies as more helpful than the elementary (3.05) and pre-intermediate (3.19) level learners. Further, Scheffe test results indicated some differences between the elementary and both the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels in terms of the metacognitive strategies. In this regard, the mean score of the elementary level (3.04) was lower than those of both the pre-

intermediate (3.75) and intermediate level (3.90) learners. This finding seemed to indicate the upper level learners (pre-intermediate and intermediate) regarded the metacognitive strategies as more helpful than the low level learners (elementary group). Interestingly, the post hoc tests identified most differences between the intermediate and either the elementary level or the elementary and pre-intermediate levels.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to survey the Turkish EFL students' vocabulary learning strategy use. The major findings of the study were as follows. The data analysis related to the learners' preferences for the vocabulary learning strategy use showed a positive relation between the frequency of the strategy use and the language levels, except for the social strategies, in that the elementary level learners' related preferences were higher than those of the upper level learners. The finding in relation to the most and least used strategies showed that while the determination strategies were utilized very frequently by the learners, the cognitive strategies were not operated as much as the other strategies.

The frequencies of the strategy use across various levels of language learners revealed statistically significant variations which seemed to indicate that the elementary level learners did not use the determination strategies as much as the upper level learners. Further, the intermediate level learners reported a more frequent use of the memory strategies than the elementary level learners. Furthermore, the intermediate level learners preferred to use the cognitive strategies more frequently than the pre-intermediate and elementary level learners, the upper level learners (pre-intermediate and intermediate) exploited the metacognitive strategies more frequently than the low level (elementary) learners, .

The second scale in the survey, related to the usefulness of strategy use, showed that the intermediate level learners regarded the strategy categories as more useful than the other level learners. Specifically, the intermediate level learners' usefulness ratings for all vocabulary learning strategies were the highest, with the pre-intermediate level learners' related ratings being the second highest ones. Therefore, the usefulness of all strategy categories was rated in accordance with the language levels of the learners. Another finding was that the Turkish EFL learners perceived the metacognitive strategies as more useful than the other strategies and the social strategies as the least preferred strategy category. In terms of the most (DS) and least (CS) frequently used strategies, the learners' perceptions of usefulness of strategy categories were different. Specifically, they did not use the cognitive and metacognitive strategies; however, they believed that they were useful and effective. Interestingly, they reported using the determination and social strategies; however they did not perceive them as very helpful. Further, the upper level learners did not regard the determination strategies as helpful; however the elementary level learners did not share the same perception. The analysis of the learners' related responses revealed that the upper level language learners regarded strategies more helpful than the middle and low level learners.

To conclude, the overall means of the language learners in relation to all items in both scales were not over the medium (2.50) level. These relatively low means suggested that the language learners did not frequently use strategies, as well as did not perceive them as very useful. One of the main implications of the study was that the vocabulary learning strategy instruction needs to be improved. Moreover, language learning programs should be revised to promote teaching of vocabulary learning strategy use across all language levels since the language learners did not exploit some vocabulary learning strategies although they perceived them as effective. The researchers believe that an awareness of individual differences in learning can help EFL educators and curriculum designers become more sensitive to their roles in teaching and learning. Furthermore, it can ensure compatibility between teaching and learning in order to develop students' potential in EFL learning as well as to help them become cognizant of the ways they learn most effectively. It can also help students develop strategies and ways of becoming more motivated and independent learners. Understanding of language learners' beliefs of vocabulary learning and related strategy use would enable teachers and researchers to design appropriate materials and activities to help learners improve their vocabulary learning, hence to enhance their lexical competence.

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