

## Vocabulary Learner Strategies Used by Iranian EFL Learners in an "Input-Poor" Environment



### Linguistics

**Keywords:** Vocabulary Learner strategies, Metacognitive awareness, input-poor environment, Metacognitive strategy instruction, Learner autonomy

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### Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is of incomprehensible importance and complexity for EFL learners. Successful vocabulary learners tend to deploy a variety of strategies and they employ them more frequently than less effective ones to help them access and learn new words. Developing and managing the use of appropriate strategies for enhancing vocabulary knowledge deem absolutely essential for learners in input-poor environments. The purpose of this survey study was to shed light on the frequency of the use and types of vocabulary strategies employed by Iranian EFL university students in an input-poor environment. To achieve this, an adapted version of Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire (VLSQ) (Gu & Johnson, 1996) was administrated to 144 EFL university students. The analyses of the vocabulary questionnaire through using descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) indicated that the students' metacognitive awareness of vocabulary strategies was moderate ( $M= 3.04$ ). Although a careful consideration of the findings showed that they are mostly poor vocabulary learners by relying heavily on memorization and bottom-up strategies such as repetition or translation into L1 rather than focusing on Top-down and metacognitive strategies. It concluded that vocabulary strategy instruction should be incorporated into EFL vocabulary training to enhance the learners' vocabulary knowledge.

### 1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is of nearly incomprehensible importance and complexity whether it is in a first, second, or foreign language learning. With regard to the centrality of vocabulary to language acquisition David Wilkins, the prominent linguist, maintains that: "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Cited from Thornbury, 2002, p. 13). That lexical competence is at the very heart of communicative competence and the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately is currently generally accepted (Coady and Huckin, 1997).

The most effective and successful vocabulary learners tend to deploy a variety of strategies and they employ them more frequently than less effective ones to help them access and learn new words (Klapper, 2008). Developing and managing the use of appropriate strategies for enhancing vocabulary knowledge deem absolutely essential for all ESL or EFL learners. This is a task of particularly invaluable importance for learners in "input-poor" environments defined by Kouraogo (1993) as "language learning contexts where learners have little opportunities to hear or read the language outside or even inside the classroom" (p. 167). All in all, strategy experts accept that "learners with strategic knowledge of language learning, compared with those without, become more efficient, resourceful, and flexible, thus acquiring a language more easily" (Tseng et al., 2006, p. 78).

This study is to find out what learner strategies students apply in their vocabulary learning in an input-poor environment as well as to what extent they have developed those strategies.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Vocabulary learner strategies (VLS)*

As a subset of general learner strategies, vocabulary learner strategies have come to the fore as an important area of research into vocabulary. A surge of researchers' interest in learner strategies first began to develop in the 1970s with the idea of the quest for finding the truth and secrets behind the success of good language learners (Rubin, 1975; Naiman et al., 1978). Learning strategies are "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p.1). This broad view on defining learner strategies has been also taken by Schmitt (1997) about vocabulary learner strategies in that he articulated learning is "the process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved and used... therefore vocabulary learning strategies could be any which affect this broadly defined process" ( p. 203).

### 2.2. *Importance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

The research findings inside the field of LLS have corroborated the teachability of learner strategies, including strategies for vocabulary learning, to less successful language learners in order to help them become better and active language learners (Wenden, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Nation, 2001; Hsiao and Oxford, 2002; Chamot, 2005;). "The use of strategies embodies taking active, timely, coordinated responsibility for learning. This is both learnable and teachable" (Oxford, 2008, P. 52). She also adds that "learning strategies are generally signs of learner autonomy" (p. 52). Hsiao and Oxford (2002) acknowledged that "[l]earning strategies for L2s help build learner autonomy, which requires the learner to take conscious control of his or her own learning process" (p. 369). What seems to be quite clear is that proficient L2 learners show strong tendency to possess and employ a wide array of strategies than less proficient learners (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; 2008).

As to the importance of learning strategies in FLLIPE (foreign language learning in input-poor environments), Kouraogo (1993) maintains that

Learning strategies deserve in fact more attention in these contexts where unconscious acquisition caused by exposure to an abundant second language input outside the classroom is likely to be less critical than conscious strategies in influencing gains in linguistic and communicative competence.

Possessing a variety of strategies (metacognitive knowledge) and the ability to employ them appropriately in suitable contexts (metacognitive regulation) can facilitate the process of learning new words for learners (Ranalli, 2003). Similarly, Nation (2001) contended that developing a large amount of vocabulary could be made possible with the help of vocabulary learner strategies.

Learning how to use vocabulary learner strategies is not inherited, nor does it happen naturally and overnight, yet it necessitates specific instruction of basic vocabulary skills and strategies.

The research questions are as follows:

**Research question 1:** Are Iranian EFL students high, medium, or low vocabulary learner strategy users?

**Research question 2:** What are Iranian EFL students' beliefs about vocabulary learning?

**Research question 3:** What are the most and the least frequently used categories of vocabulary learner strategies by Iranian EFL learners in an "input-poor" environment?

**Research question 4:** What are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learner strategies by Iranian EFL learners in an "input-poor" environment?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a brief account of the design of the study, the participants, instrument, procedures, and data analysis methods. This study examined whether metacognitive strategy training enhanced the EFL students' reading proficiency in an input-poor environment.

#### 3.2. Design of the study

To gain new insights into vocabulary learner strategies EFL students in an input-poor environment apply, a qualitative research design has been used to serve the objectives of this study.

#### 3.3. Participants

The students who took part in the study were consisted of 144 university students (80 males and 64 females), 18-24 year-old majoring in biology at Islamic Tonekabon Azad University, Iran. Selection of the participants for the study was based on a simple random sampling from the five hundreds freshmen university students enrolled in biology faculty.

#### 3.4. Instrument

This study used an adapted version of the vocabulary learner strategy questionnaire (VLSQ) proposed by Gu and Johnson (1996). It has been translated into Persian to remove any possible ambiguity in the process of responding to the questionnaire on the side of the learners. There are three parts in the questionnaire: demographic information, items on vocabulary learning beliefs and items on vocabulary learning strategies. In the demographic section, background information is asked for such as gender, age, and major. aside from section concerned with demographic information, the questionnaire consisted of 48 statements grouped under 9 categories: 1) Beliefs about vocabulary learning (11 items), 2) Metacognitive regulation, 3) Guessing Strategies, 4) Dictionary Strategies, 5) Note-taking Strategies, 6) Memory Strategies, 7) Activation strategies 8) Sources, and 9) Anxiety and Motivation. The subjects responded using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

### 3.5. Procedures

About 160 copies of VLSQ were distributed among the participants at the individual class periods and were administered with the help of the classroom instructors. The students were informed of the purpose of the questionnaires and of the fact that there were no right or wrong answers, and asked to express their honest opinion by choosing the appropriate number printed on the right side of each VLSQ statement. The completion of the VLSQ took about 45 minutes. Each completed survey was manually examined, and, after discarding the incomplete ones, 144 participants managed to complete the questionnaires appropriately and then those questionnaires were coded for statistical analysis.

### 3.6. Data analysis

Descriptive statistical procedures were used to analyze the data obtained from the adapted version of Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire (VLSQ) to provide insight into EFL learners' metacognitive awareness and use vocabulary strategies. It was sought to examine vocabulary strategy use among the students on the VLSQ scales, which ranged from 1 to 5, through three types of usage levels proposed by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995, p. 12) for general language learning strategy usage: high (mean of 3.5 or higher), medium (mean of 2.5–3.4), and low (2.4 or lower).

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

The basic idea behind the survey study was to throw light on Iranian EFL learners' metacognitive awareness of vocabulary strategies, their beliefs about vocabulary strategies, and whether they are high, medium, or poor vocabulary strategy users. The data regarding to research questions were analyzed and tabulated in the following tables. To interpret the results of the vocabulary questionnaires, Oxford and Burry-Stock's usage levels have been used: **high** (mean of 3.50 or higher), **medium** (mean of 2.50–3.49), and **low** (2.49 or lower).

**Research question 1:** Are Iranian EFL students high, medium, or low vocabulary learner strategy users?

The mean value for the learners' overall vocabulary strategy use was 2.83. Therefore, the analysis of data obtained from VLSQ revealed that Iranian EFL learners are **medium** vocabulary strategy users based on three usage levels proposed by Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995): **high** (mean of 3.50 or higher), **medium** (mean of 2.50–3.49), and **low** (2.49 or lower).

### **Table 1: Score analysis for overall vocabulary strategy use**

**Research question 2:** What are Iranian EFL students' beliefs about vocabulary learning?

The data showed that the participants believed in the memorization of words ( $M= 3.66$ ) and bottom-up strategies and approaches ( $M= 3.67$ ) as one of the ways to learn words. Both of them fell in the high usage group (mean of 3.5 or above). On the other hand, it seemed that they did not believe in top-down strategies and approaches of vocabulary learning as much ( $M= 2.69$ ).

**Table 2: Learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning**

**Research question 3:** What are the most and the least frequently used categories of vocabulary learner strategies by Iranian EFL learners in an “input-poor” environment?

Table 3 indicates the most and the least frequently used categories of vocabulary learner strategies by Iranian EFL learners. The most frequently used categories of strategies were Memory/repetition strategies (M= 3.17), Sources (M= 3.15), and Note-taking strategies (M= 3.11). In addition, the least frequently used categories of strategies were Activation strategies (M= 2.58) and Guessing strategies (M= 2.78). It is surprising that no category of vocabulary strategies used with high frequency.

**Table 3: Rank order of the most and least frequently used categories of strategies**

**Research question 4:** What are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learner strategies by Iranian EFL learners in an “input-poor” environment?

In terms of individual vocabulary learner strategies, the learners reported to use Oral repetition (M= 3.83), Translation from English to Persian (M= 3.69), and Using the dictionary to find out only the meaning of the word (M= 3.50) more frequently than any other vocabulary strategies.

**Table 4a: Rank order of the most frequently used vocabulary strategies**

Table 4a shows the least frequently used vocabulary strategies by the learners. Making use of the words learned in everyday situations (M= 2.40), Analyzing the word structure (prefix, root and suffix) (M= 2.63), and Looking at the part of speech of the new word (2.63) were among the least frequently used strategies by the Iranian EFL learners.

**5. Conclusions and discussion of the study**

The results indicated that these learners are moderate strategy users. In interpreting the results regarding the mean value of the overall vocabulary learning strategies other findings should be taken into consideration. Generally, the findings of the VLSQ revealed that EFL learners in this “input-poor” environment mainly believed that memorization of words (such as memory of individual words or repetition), and bottom-up strategies were effective ways of vocabulary learning. In other words, they showed a tendency towards using bottom-up strategies more often than top-down strategies. This is because presumably their language/cultural backgrounds and experiences of literacy traditions impacted upon their belief of vocabulary learning strategies. The students' focus on repetition, memorization, and bottom-up strategies suggest that the common practice for teaching English in this environment is based on behavioristic theories of learning which sees language learning as habit formations through repetition, memorization, and rote learning. More attention should be paid to top-down strategies and to teaching students strategies which help them take charge of their own learning.

Similarly, the participants reported not to be well aware of cues for guessing the meaning of words such as analyzing the word structure or looking at parts of speeches. Instead of using their background knowledge or guessing strategies to arrive at meaning, they skipped words they

did not understand. This is perhaps because of their lack of linguistic or strategic schemata. Proficient language learners tend to guess the meaning and make inferences through using contextual clues (Zhang, 2001).

Regardless of the mean value of their using overall vocabulary strategies, the results indicate that these students are poor vocabulary learners by focusing on strategies (shallow strategies) that basically are used by less proficient learners (for example, repetition or memorization) (Nation, 2001). According to Gu and Johnson (1996), less proficient vocabulary learners use 'shallow' strategies more and actually may find them of greater help, while proficient vocabulary learners benefit from 'deep processing' strategies.

It appears that it is time for a complete rethink of the way we teach our junior high school, high school, and university students English language, particularly reading and vocabulary. Spoon-feeding students the bits of language gets nowhere. Instead, we need learners who assume great control over their learning processes by giving them the right form of the instruction and equipping them with strategies which brings learners to the center of attention. Metacognitive strategy instruction seems to be a right option for teaching students in this input-poor environment. Metacognition proved to be highly effective in fostering independent thinkers and lifelong learners who are able to grapple with new situations and learn how to learn and continue to learn throughout their lifespan (Eggen and Kauchak, 1995; El-Koumy, 2004; Pilling-Cormick and Garrison, 2007; Papaleontiou- Louca, 2008;).

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