

PERCEPTIONS OF AN EL LEARNER ON VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

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This single case study addresses an action research design (Wolcott, 1994) that utilizes observations, interviews, and documents to access what teaching and learning techniques have improved the acquisition of vocabulary of a single intermediate English language (EL) learner from Turkey. Findings are reported and discussed in terms of the student's perceptions of vocabulary learning. The study indicates that there were gains in vocabulary knowledge and use as well as progression of strategies. In addition, findings also show that the student failed to utilize advance vocabulary strategies when he needed them the most. Implications for future studies for diversified learners are also discussed.

One of the most vital components to learning a language is learning vocabulary. Learners in general learn words in different ways and at different rates. This means that it is often necessary to find out, from a diagnostic and research perspective, how and why words are learned and utilized. Secondly, for foreign language learners, learning new vocabulary is a continual process. They may use their first language or different mnemonics to remember these new words. Vocabulary then becomes essential to the study of any language, whether it is a first, second, third, or fourth language. In addition, the direct study of vocabulary may also involve learning vocabulary strategies, word parts, pronunciation and spelling of words, and/or higher level development of word meanings. The methodology of vocabulary learning varies just as much as the styles of individual learning as well as ability levels which create a challenge for any diversified learner (Holmes, Rutledge, & Gauthier, 2009).

Changes in vocabulary learning strategies for the adult learner also reflect the nature of the learner and language learning (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Others studies throughout the literature indicate diverse degrees on how adult language learners approach language from an individual standpoint (Gu, 2003) to technical vocabulary (Chung & Nation, 2003), to vocabulary retention (Hulstijn, 1997; Schmitt, 2000) as well as through integrative motivation (Gardner, 2001). According to Gu (2003):

When a person approaches a relatively challenging task, s/he adopts certain strategies to solve the problem. This problem-solving process is constrained by the learning context where the problem is being tackled. Language learning in general and vocabulary acquisition in particular are such problem-solving tasks. (p 1)

These consist of different levels of complexity. Gu (2003) continues by saying:

The strategies a learner uses and the effectiveness of these strategies . . . depend on the learner. . . (e.g., attitudes, motivation, prior knowledge), the learning task at hand (e.g., type, complexity, difficulty, and generality), and the learning environment (e.g., the learning culture, the richness of input and output opportunities) (p 1).

Processing strategies such as association have been found more effective in vocabulary retention rather than rote repetition strategies (Hulstijn, 1997; Schmitt, 2000). Given the complex nature of learning vocabulary, instructors need to consider the various facets of knowing and learning vocabulary. Potential knowledge that can be known about a learning vocabulary is rich and diverse. Schmitt (2000) further states that there are different kinds of knowledge that learners need to learn words and that the

processing of these words can be a useful framework. However, *knowledge of individual words grows over time both in ability to use them receptively and productively and in different kinds of word knowledge we come to master* (p. 11). In addition, integrative motivation, according to Gardner (2001), is complex, takes time and effort, and requires identification with a second language community. It incorporates, in Gardner's perspective, numerous variables, integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, and motivation (integrative motivation). The integratively motivated learner is one who is motivated to learn a second language, has a desire or willingness to identify with a language community, and tends to evaluate the learning in a positive format (p. 6). If the learner is motivated either via work or school, he or she may move quicker through the process and/or pursue it deeper.

In the following section, key areas that have an impact upon EL learners will be discussed. These key areas include teaching unknown vocabulary through repetition and practice, using pictures and context clues, and accessing words.

Teaching Vocabulary

According to the Center for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (as cited in Antunez, 2002), scientific research on vocabulary development demonstrates that children learn the majority of their vocabulary indirectly by: 1) talking and listening, 2) listening to adults read to them; and 3) reading on their own. Such a finding then has serious consequences for English language learners and their parents who are not fluent in English. Vocabulary development then becomes one of the greatest challenges to reading instruction for English language learners because in order to read fluently and comprehend, students need to use not only phonics but also context clue. The study by Chun and Plass (1996) states: *A further implication is that explicit instruction may be useful in closing the gap between students with the highest levels of vocabulary knowledge and those with the lowest* (p. 194). Learners need an explicit introduction to vocabulary, accurate and effective support in interpreting new vocabulary, and practice in order to remember vocabulary.

Teaching Repetition and Practice of New Vocabulary

Repetition of vocabulary occurs either through multiple exposures during reading or listening (serving as a type of repetition) or through explicit teaching. Learners must additionally receive overt learner attention through simultaneous or follow-up vocabulary tasks supported by strategy instruction (Jones & Plass, 2002). Research suggests that the more types of help that students use (e.g., verbal help and imagery rather than verbal help alone) the better for their vocabulary acquisition. In one study, Yoshii and Flaitz (2001) discovered that pictures and annotations lead to better learning of key vocabulary terms. In short, more interaction is better for learning words.

Teaching with the Use of Pictures and Context Clues

The results of a study conducted by Chapelle and Jamieson (2008) indicate that *if pictures and definitions were provided by glosses, incidental learning with multimedia annotations yielded 25 percent accuracy on production tests and 77 percent on recognition tests* (p. 21). Furthermore, in Kamil's (2003) study, students remembered word translation and recalled a passage better when they had *selected both written and pictorial annotations while listening rather than one of these types and no annotations* (p. 11).

Teaching Access of Word Definitions While Reading

A number of studies have found that learners who have access to word definitions while they are reading or listening on the computer are able to remember word meanings. Such a strategy provides an ideal means of teaching vocabulary in context, rather than having students guess meaning from context. In short, more interaction is better, according to Chapelle and Jamieson (2008), for learning words and CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) provides numerous useful types of interactions by offering learners a variety of assistance (p. 11). In their research, classroom teachers have taught us how to best use specific instructional strategies. One such strategy for teaching vocabulary is referred to as *the six-step process* (Marzano, 2009). It involves the following steps:

1. Provide a description, explanation, or example of the new term.
2. Ask students to restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words.
3. Ask students to construct a picture, pictograph, or symbolic representation of the term.
4. Engage students periodically in activities that help them add to their knowledge of the terms in their vocabulary notebooks.
5. Periodically ask students to discuss the terms with one another.

6. Involve students periodically in games that enable them to play with terms. (p. 83)

Knowing how and when to teach vocabulary is perhaps the most difficult task facing a teacher of English. The needs of language learners obviously crosscut many different teaching approaches, lesson plans, and episodes of learner interaction. Many of these approaches may also be of value to learners with special needs (Holmes, Rutledge, & Gauthier, 2009).

Background of the Study

This study represents an attempt to examine the process of vocabulary learning for an EL learner from Turkey. It is based on the assumption that only by studying the perceptions or processes of students can we begin to evaluate and understand the appropriateness of the teaching methods and approaches toward vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000). EL instructors and researchers are becoming more aware of the paradigm shift in vocabulary learning (Nation 2001; Li, 2004).

The present study addresses three questions: 1. Why were the participant's scores in the Verbal Section of the GRE Examination, a section that tests students on academic vocabulary and other aspects of the English language, not as high as were expected based on the participant's previous success in learning English? 2. Can his scores be attributed to the strategies that he used to learn vocabulary? 3. How can the participant's experience and conclusion that the researchers came to be of value to the participant himself and other students?

Method

Participant

One participant took part in the single case study. Merriam (1988) affirms that a case study *can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit* (p. 16). Fitzpatrick, Al-Qarni, and Meara (2008) add, *Single subject case studies are, of course, a standard methodology in the study of vocabulary acquisition in an L1, and it is surprising to us that the methodology has not been more widely exploited in L2 studies* (p. 240). The authors continue by saying that single subject case studies *allow us to be methodologically innovative and to ask questions which are exploratory and risky* (p. 240). Segalowitz, Watson, and Segalowitz (1995) as well as Horst and Meara (1999) have used the same methodology, according to Fitzpatrick, Al-Qarni, and Meara (2008).

The single participant E. C., a native speaker of Turkish, was 19 years old when he entered Eskisehir Osmangazi University Electrical and Electronics Engineering Department, Turkey. Upon arrival at the university, he took an English examination given by the Preparatory English Program to determine his level of English fluency. He was exempted from the program. Only students who are at the intermediate or higher level of English, that is, those who receive at least 70 out of 100 points in the examination, are exempted from the program. The program teaches English to students from 1-2 years to prepare them to take courses in English in their departments which is the case of the Electrical and Electronics Engineering Department with 100% and the Computer Engineering Department with at least 50% of courses in English. Due to his high GPA in his freshman year of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, E. C. was accepted to pursue a second major, Computer Engineering.

Throughout his academic career, E. C. did very well in all his courses, including non-technical required and elective English courses. Thus, his knowledge of English improved throughout his academic years. In his senior year, he took the TOEFL test (Test of English as a Foreign Language), a test taken by all foreign students planning to study at universities in the USA. He scored 94 out of 120 points which was considered above average. Finally, E. C. graduated Magna Cum Laude from the Electrical and Electronics Engineering Department. At the time of his graduation, he was given a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a Master of Science degree in Electrical Engineering at a university in the USA. However, in addition to the TOEFL test, he took the GRE Examination (Graduate Record Examinations), an examination required of all students before they enroll in Master of Science programs in the USA. E. C. thought that his score in the Verbal Section of the GRE Examination was not good (320 points) and took the examination again. The second time there was a considerable drop in his Verbal Section score (270 points). The maximum number of points he could have received in the Verbal Section was 800. It appears that due to the nature of the examination, 320 points was considered average, according to the requirements of several universities in the USA. Then he applied for the Master of Science degree in Electrical Engineering and was accepted.

Researcher Role

Throughout the research project, the role of one of the researchers, the first author, was an insider with one focal student. The first author was the student's English professor in the Computer Engineering Department and professor as well as advisor in the Electrical and Electronics Engineering Department. The student took several of her courses and received the highest scores, that is, AA in all of them. Since the first author was not only his professor but also his advisor, this provided ample opportunities for her to observe him in and out of class as well as throughout his academic career. He would weekly visit her in order to improve his English. He also knew that the conversation was equally as important to her since it allowed her an opportunity to also speak English. In addition, since English is not her mother tongue, it further helped to build a common bond between the participant and researcher which made it easy for her to establish rapport with and, eventually, to approach him to conduct this study. At the same time, the rapport allowed him to feel comfortable enough with her to reveal facts about his learning English and in particular vocabulary in a very trustworthy manner.

Data Collection

From fall 2003 to spring 2008, the first author collected data attended through participant indirect observation, interviews, and document collection. Indirect observation (Fox, 1969), in this study, was not scheduled and was unknown to the participant. The researcher's fieldwork entailed weekly classes (three hours per week) with the student for five years. The researcher evaluated the participant in all the courses he took from her. Towards the end of his academic career, two semi-structured interviews (one at the beginning and one at the end of the study) were conducted. Semi-structured interview is a combination of structured and unstructured interview, according to Fontana and Frey (as cited in Patton, 2002). Myers and Newman (as cited in Wengraf, 2002) state that in this type of interview, *there is an incomplete script* (p. 4); that is to say, *questions are only partially prepared in advance (semi-structured) and will therefore be largely improvised* (p. 3). Myers and Newman add that the semi-structured interview is conducted by one of the researchers and that was the case in this study. The interviews took place in the researcher's office and lasted about one hour each. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed.

The researcher began the first interview with two questions: How do you learn vocabulary? How do you retain vocabulary? Based on the information provided by the participant, the following question was asked: Did your teachers teach you any learning strategies or did you come up with them by yourself? Then the participant led the researcher to ask about specific approaches to learning vocabulary: Did you only write the words or pronounce them, too? Did you read stories to learn new words?

Given that the participant focused on the past while talking about his learning vocabulary, the time he was in senior high school (one year in the Preparatory English Program to enter high school and three years in high school), and it appeared that he had nothing else to add. The researcher then asked him about his experience with vocabulary learning in college. The interview prompted the researcher to ask the participant few more questions: What did you read in English in college? How did you use a dictionary when you did not know the meaning of words and could not figure them out from the context of what you read? How did you retain the words you learned?

Additionally, documents were added to the data collection: an essay written by the participant on his learning vocabulary, and his vocabulary notebook and folder. Documents, according to Merriam (1988), refer to written information belonging to participants. The reason these documents were added to the data collection was that the researchers wanted to make sure there was validity in the data gathered. House (as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1981) affirms that *validity is provided by cross-checking different data sources and by testing perceptions against those of the participants . . .* (p. 106).

Two weeks after the first interview was conducted, the participant wrote an essay about his learning vocabulary as far back as he could remember to explain his perceptions on vocabulary learning. Then the participant handed in his vocabulary notebook and folder for analysis. The second and last interview was conducted much later to clarify some of the information provided by the participant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a continuous procedure throughout the study, especially once the first interview started. Miles and Huberman (1984) agree that *the ongoing process of data collection allows the researcher to move back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new – often better quality – data. . .* (p. 49).

The data was analyzed to answer three research questions. These were: 1. Why were the participant's scores in the Verbal Section of the GRE Examination, a section that tests students on academic vocabulary and other aspects of the English language, not as high as were expected based on the participant's previous success in learning English? 2. Can his scores be attributed to the strategies that he used to learn vocabulary? 3. How can the participant's experience and conclusion that the researchers came to be of value to the participant himself and other students?

During data analysis, codes which generated themes were written and the themes helped to answer the research questions. The first two questions were analyzed taking into consideration strategies used by the participant to learn vocabulary. The following is the result of what the researchers gathered based on the observations, interviews, vocabulary notebook and folder, and an essay (See Appendix).

Findings

The following themes occurred throughout the data collection. These reoccurring themes and methods of learning will be discussed in the section that follows. These themes present the following concepts regarding how this student perceived learning vocabulary in senior high school, and early and later years of university studies: learning from repetition, learning from index cards, learning from context clues and dictionary, learning from linguistic and sound associations and learning from computer games, (Table 1) and retaining and recalling vocabulary.

Table 1. Tracing and Learning Vocabulary Strategies

	<i>Senior high school</i>	<i>Early years of university</i>	<i>Later years of university</i>
Rote repetition	X	X	X
Index cards		X	X
Context clues (reading)	X	X	X
Context clues (listening)		X	X
Bilingual dictionary	X	X	X
Monolingual dictionary		X	X
Online monolingual dictionary			X
Linguistic association		X	X
Sound association		X	X
Computer games		X	X

Senior high school = 9th-12th grade. Early years of university = freshman year only, sophomore year only, or freshman and sophomore years. Later years of university = junior and senior years.

Learning from repetition. At first, the participant said that when he started learning English in high school, his teacher asked the students to write and memorize new words, *In high school, the teacher wrote new words on the board and asked us to write them ten times. . . . At first, I memorized new words this way.* Listening and repeating after learning the meaning of new words is one way to learn vocabulary. The participant thought that this strategy taught in high school was effective, and so he continued to use the same strategy:

On a piece of paper, I write the unknown word ten to twenty times, and at the same time I repeat the meaning of the word in my mind. This strategy helps me not only to learn the spelling of the word but also to memorize the meaning of it. I believe that the best way to learn an unknown word permanently is to repeat it again and again. I know that the human brain remembers things more easily if they are repeated many times.

Like most learning, Nation's (2006) perspective is that vocabulary acquisition will become more effective when the learner initiates the control and responsibility for his or her own learning. This is not easy to achieve and in one study Moor and Nation (as cited in Nation, 2006) have indicated the opposite point of view. In Sanaoui's (1995) study, she was very specific about the way participants learned words: participants repeated words they had learned many times both silently and out loud immediately after learning them. Then they repeated them again much later. Sanaoui refers to this approach as *immediate repetition* and *spaced repetition* (pp. 22-23). Sanaoui affirms that her study corroborated *the emphasis on learners' management of their own learning lexis* (p. 26). To be more specific about the number of repetitions a learner should engage in, Nation and Rott (as cited in Hinkel, 2007) suggest that being exposed to new vocabulary 6-12 times helps with learning. Additionally, another problem a foreign learner may face is how to commit a massive amount of foreign words to memory. Therefore,

learning vocabulary by repeating unknown words may be the first and easiest strategy selected or one that comes naturally. Gu (2003) concludes in his research that it is not surprising to see most of the early research studies focusing on numerous aspects of vocabulary rehearsal.

Learning from index cards. The participant added that he had moved a step ahead by adding a new strategy to help his learning vocabulary. Nation (2001) states that as unfashionable as it may sound, there is overwhelming research evidence to show that learning from index cards is a very efficient and effective learning strategy.

. . . I sometimes make my own note cards and write unfamiliar words and their meanings on the cards. I usually stick the cards in front of my desk or any place where I spend most of my time every day. In addition to the word itself and its meaning, I also add the type of word on the card, such as verb or noun, and a sentence that contains the word. Some of my friends do the same I do with note cards and also carry the unknown words written on cards with them and check them often. I don't find their strategy efficient.

In reference to the strategy utilized by the participant's friends but not by the participant, it does not mean that the participant never thought about or used the specific strategy. The participant came to the conclusion that the specific strategy did not work for him. Mercer (2005) states, that learners *reflect on, experiment with, and practice a range of strategies until they discover those they feel comfortable with and consider effective.* (p. 25) Ur (1996) concurs that some strategies work for some learners but not others.

Learning from context clues and dictionary. Memorization of new words and their meanings may assist some learners at the beginning stage of language learning. Once learners become more fluent in the language, they should learn to use or be introduced to more advanced strategies. The participant was aware of the pitfalls of persisting in using low-level strategies after becoming more proficient in vocabulary learning. According to Sathl and Fairbank's study (as cited in Gu, 2003), meta-analysis of L1-based vocabulary studies did reveal that a combined approach is more effective than either dictionary only or contextual guessing only. Nagy (1988) agrees that learning from context only does not help with vocabulary learning; it does not lead to understanding. A combination of approaches such as definition and contextual approach may increase but does not guarantee comprehension. For comprehension to be effective, Nagy suggests *three properties of vocabulary instruction* (and learning): integrating, repeating, and using the unknown word meaningfully (pp. 7-8, 10).

Once you learn basic words [high-frequency words], you realize you need to learn . . . academic words. . . . Reading is the only way. You read something and whenever you come across an unknown word, you immediately check the dictionary When you want to use that word again later, the context comes to your mind and you remember the meaning of the word. By doing extensive reading, I came to that level [learning from context]. I always read different kinds of books and newspapers, and checked the dictionary immediately when I encountered unknown vocabulary. I always thought that was useful.

According to the participant, the use of traditional dictionaries can cause problems to students, but online dictionaries are easier to handle:

It was hard to always check the dictionary whenever I came across unknown vocabulary. You end up forgetting the meaning of other vocabulary you have just learned; you lose concentration, too. The best way is to: first, underline the unknown vocabulary; second, check them all at once; and third, write the synonym or explanation under the new vocabulary. When I was in the 9th or 10th grade, our teacher told us to try to understand words in context . . . so we could avoid using the dictionary too often. Today when I read for pleasure, I still use an online dictionary.

Recent developments in computers have also triggered a whole line of interest in electronic dictionaries, online dictionaries, or vocabulary glosses integrated into language learning software or web pages (Knight, 1994; Gu & Johnson, 1996). As opposed to Gu's study published in 2003, both studies published in 1994 and 1996 support a positive correlation with vocabulary knowledge and use.

In reference to instructors in high school and at the university, the participant noticed that in high school teachers had the same level of English fluency; they were not very fluent. As he started taking courses at the university, he realized that the level of English of most professors was much higher than that of high school teachers. That created a problem for him. Thus, he decided to talk to one of the professors to see what the best way to understand his professors was since they used technical vocabulary in addition to daily vocabulary in the courses. The participant still had no knowledge of technical vocabulary in English. Should we not use quotes?

I was terrified. I went to Prof. A. B.'s class. . . . He had good vocabulary. I thought of withdrawing from his course. I then told myself to be patient. Let's see what will happen by the end of the term. But, I went to talk to Prof. A. B. I told him I had skipped the university preparatory English program and was having difficulties understanding his course, Calculus. Prof. A. B. said, *Just be patient for a couple of months and come back to see me.* I returned two months later and he asked me how I was doing, *Perfect*, confidently I replied. I guess I was unfamiliar with the technical vocabulary not only in Calculus but also in other technical courses. I had learned daily words, so by encountering the same technical vocabulary over and over again, listening to my professors and reading my textbooks, I learned the vocabulary necessary to succeed in Calculus and in the other courses. Step by step when you get used to technical vocabulary, you understand it.

Therefore, the participant had the opportunity to listen to his professors' use of technical vocabulary and learn what was necessary to succeed in his courses. The advantage was that all technical courses required textbooks and the participant could read his textbooks before his classes and learn the necessary vocabulary. In case he did not understand unknown words from context clues, he could use a dictionary. The best help that he received came from the professor that told him what to do to learn unknown vocabulary. And, the professor's guidance proved to be invaluable for all his technical courses. *Learning from linguistic and sound associations.* The participant described how different, advanced strategies worked for him:

The first thing I look for when I come across an unknown word is to find a similarity between the unknown word and the corresponding meaning of it in my native language, if at all possible. . . . This is the most effective way to learn a word. For example, the word *alliance* means an agreement with somebody to achieve something. In my first language, the pronunciation of *alliance* is very similar to the word *band*, a wedding band, and it represents somehow having an agreement to live together. So, with the help of a logical relationship that I build between two words in English and in my native language, I can easily recall the meaning of the word and use it without problems.

Another efficient way to learn a word is to associate the sound that the word makes when you pronounce it to its meaning. For example, the word *dungeon*, comes to mind. Let's say that prisoners are placed in a dark underground room. When they hit a water pipe, the sound they hear is like *dun-geon*. It's difficult to make this type of association, but once you do, you won't forget the word.

When discussing *aural imagery*, Oxford and Crookall (1990) mention what learners can do to connect a word in L2 (second language) with a word they know in L1 (first language), exactly the way the participant explained above.

Learning from computer games. What the participant revealed to the researcher was quite uncommon. She had thought about computer games but since she has not been as exposed to popular culture as students have, she never thought of their relationship with learning English and especially learning vocabulary.

I recently realized that computer games . . . help us learn different and unknown words. The texts that the speaker reads and some visual cues we observe playing computer games help words enter our minds more easily than the conventional methods we use.

In the article *The use of popular culture as a stimulus to motivate secondary students' English learning in Hong Kong*, Cheung (2001) affirms,

Popular culture touches the lives of student [sic], [sic] and grows out of their natural experience and interests. If teachers can make use of popular culture in a teaching context, in which students find a need to learn and have something to achieve, students' attention can be organized through desire rather than coercion. (p. 58)

The participant concluded his essay on his perceptions of vocabulary learning by saying that *learners should find their own strategies to learn vocabulary and a combination of techniques makes learning more efficient*. Researchers have been saying the same. The author of *How to increase vocabulary: when a combination of strategies is best* (n.d.) believes that learners should combine different strategies to learn vocabulary.

Retaining and recalling vocabulary. We understand that learning vocabulary is essential when learning English; nevertheless, learners must make sure that they will retain what they learn and are able to recall the vocabulary when necessary in order to use it. The participant agrees with this statement by explaining that,

When I don't use a word, I don't remember it. So, when I learn a word, I try to use it in my conversation. When I use it a second or third time, I keep it in my mind; I don't forget it any longer. This is the key to put the word in your long-term memory. In research, they say that when you bring the word from your back memory to your front memory, it will be in your mind longer. And, the more you repeat the word, the longer it stays in your long-term memory.

Nation (2001) says the same, *At the most general level, knowing a word involves form, meaning and use* (p. 26).

The researchers understand that the participant used both low and high-level strategies to learn vocabulary throughout his English studies, from high school to college. There is somehow a progression from low to high-level of strategies, but some of the strategies that he started using in high school, he continued to use throughout college. Ahmed's study (as cited in Çelik & Toptaş, 2010) indicates that as learners advanced in their language usage, they also progressed in strategies.

Some of the strategies that the participant utilized were introduced by his teachers and some he figured them out himself. When he needed to utilize high-level strategies the most to prepare for the Verbal Section of the GRE examination, he resorted mostly to low-level strategies. This is how he explains his failing to do well in the Verbal Section of the GRE examination and his disappointment and frustration:

I first read the vocabulary for the GRE examination in sentences many times [the first time he took the examination]. Since I didn't do well at first, I tried to memorize [rote repetition] the words out of context [the second time he took the examination], which did not help... I had to memorize 350 words which were the most frequently used words in the Verbal Section of Barrow's textbook. I wrote them on a notebook and memorized them, but I never had a chance to use them. When I saw the words in the examination, I realized I couldn't remember them. . . Yes, I remembered memorizing them, but I couldn't remember the meaning of the words at all.

By examining the vocabulary notebook and folder that the participant put together in preparation for the Verbal Section of the GRE examination, we confirm what the participant said above. The participant's notebook contains three and a half pages with a total of 37 words, all with translation in his first language. After that, there are 116 pages labeled *Low-Frequency Words* used in the Verbal Section of the GRE Examination. Most words have both translation and sentences/phrases. For example, one of the entries is *laud*. The sentence reads, *He was lauded for his courage*. *Dupe* is another entry and the phrase he wrote is *an innocent dupe*. Unless the translation helps the participant to remember both words, the sentence and phrase are of no use. Many were done the same way.

The participant's folder, however, contains two separate handouts. With a total of 37 pages, the handouts were downloaded from the Internet and organized in alphabetical order. They both appear incomplete. The first one starts with words beginning with the letter A and ends with the letter H. The second handout goes from the letter A to C. The two handouts have the same pattern: word, part of speech, explanation or synonym, and a sentence. The participant has added a translation to most entries. The words that lack translation were left that way due to the participant's familiarity with them or not finding them in his dictionary. The same happens with the second handout.

At this point, the researchers tried to figure out why the participant, *a good language learner*, resorted to low-level strategies to learn unfamiliar vocabulary for the Verbal Section of the GRE Examination, knowing that these strategies had very little learning value. It is possible that the large unknown and infrequent vocabulary made him resort to mostly translation due to the lack of use of the same vocabulary in his first language. Also, his frustration of not receiving a high score on the first examination made him rely on these strategies. In addition, it is likely that he was very busy at the time he studied for the GRE examination since it was the end of his academic career. He did not have much time to dedicate himself to the GRE Examination and was aware that he would be accepted by a university in the USA to pursue his master's degree even if the university were not in the top ten best universities in the country.

Looking at the third research question -- How can the participant's experience and conclusion that the researchers came to be of value to the participant himself and other students? -- we can say that the participant in this study knew what strategies were effective for learning both daily and academic vocabulary. *A good language learner* knows what to do to learn vocabulary and should do what it is required to continue progressing. Students can figure out what strategies work best for their own needs at different times and should employ the required strategies. Moreover, instructors are responsible for teaching learners strategies appropriate for different stages of learning if learners cannot figure them out by themselves. Instructors should not only teach students appropriate strategies but also encourage them to come up with their own strategies, those that students find most effective.

Limitations

This study focused on vocabulary learning of one single EL learner from Turkey, *a good language learner*. Therefore, it is quite limited in scope. One single learner was studied versus a large group of learners. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other learners; they are limited to the participant of the study. Also, the learner's native language may have influenced his approach to learning vocabulary. As different languages approach learning in different ways, this is one more limitation. In addition, the study excluded average and below average learners, focusing only on *a good language learner*. As a result, the participant's strategies may be the same strategies used by other *good language learners* but different from those employed by average or below average learners. About the length of time for collecting data, it is possible that had the researcher questioned the learner all those years that she observed him, she might have got more information to answer the research questions. Nevertheless, she did not know what type of student he would turn out to be, and that in spite of becoming *a good language learner*, he would not do well in the Verbal Section of the GRE examination. His lack of success in the examination prompted her to find out about his vocabulary learning.

Conclusions and Implications for Research

From this single case study (Nabei & Swain, 2002; Farrell, 2006; Fitzpatrick, Al-Qarni, & Meara, 2008), it appears that learning unknown vocabulary from repetition, index cards, context clues and dictionary, linguistic and sound associations, and computer games plus the provision of opportunities for the learner to reflect upon his learning of vocabulary led to greater sensitivity and increase in language learning. Fitzpatrick et al. (2008) states in their study, that . . . *list-learning vocabulary should not be dismissed as out-dated and uncommunicative, but should be valued as a means to threshold-level acquisition* (p. 248). Furthermore, Oxford and Crookall (1990, pp. 16-18) explain that some vocabulary learning strategies such as word lists, index cards, and traditional bilingual dictionaries are the most *decontextualizing techniques*; *word or concept association, visual imagery, aural imagery, and keyword* (a combination of the two previous techniques) are *semi-contextualizing techniques*; and reading, listening, speaking, and writing are completely *contextualizing techniques*. However, the writers agree that practice in the four skills is not enough for vocabulary development. Based on what the writers said above, the researchers of the present study concluded that the approach used by the participant was relevant for his vocabulary development.

Documents used in the study indicated a greater connection between English and application of the vocabulary. Also, as evidence by the documents or themes that engagement on tasks increase the learning process varies from learner to learner. Additionally, the participant was able to articulate the differences between learning vocabulary in high school and at the university.

In practical terms, this study supports the fact that all diverse learners should be taught different strategies to learn vocabulary, and instructors should encourage advanced learners to use strategies appropriate for their level (Oxford & Crookall, 1990; Oxford, 2002). Some strategies are more suitable

for the beginning level of fluency; however, as learners become more fluent in the language, they should be persuaded to try to incorporate advanced strategies when learning vocabulary. As the researchers could see from the study, the participant could have done much better in the Verbal Section of the GRE Examination had he utilized advanced strategies instead of strategies used by beginning-level learners, or had he used a combination of strategies as he himself suggested. He affirmed, . . . *It is true that a combination of multiple techniques make the memorization of unfamiliar words more efficient.* The various techniques would have helped him to learn the unknown words, to keep them stored in his mind, and to retrieve them when necessary, according to Oxford and Crookall (1989).

Moreover, this study attempted to show how a student can be actively involved in the research, discovery, and exploration of vocabulary strategies. It is hoped that the form of *action research* (Whitehead, 1993; Burns, 1999; Jones, 2004; Finch, 2005; Fadiño, 2009) work illustrated will assist instructors to raise students' awareness of options available to them, encourage them to experiment with a variety of approaches, and help them to take an active role in their own vocabulary learning. This is especially important when working with students that have special needs as well as any English language learners.

What we have found in this study yields several implications for future research. It would be interesting if researchers could conduct a similar study with learners who speak different mother tongues to see what types of strategies these learners utilize and how they progress in their learning of vocabulary. Also, a study with not only good but also average or below average learners, as well as students with special needs might yield different results. Furthermore, a longitudinal study with good, average, and below average learners to understand what strategies they use to learn vocabulary at different levels of language learning and how they move from one strategy to the next would be useful for instructors.

In reference to different genders, exploring strategies that female learners use at different levels of fluency might result in different findings. And, including both females and males in the same study will give researchers the opportunity to compare both genders and understand what differences and similarities emerge as well as what works for the two groups. Additionally, identifying foreign students who have scored high in the Verbal Section of the GRE examination and studying them to understand how they learned the specific vocabulary would be very helpful to those learners who plan to take the same examination or to instructors who prepare learners to take the examination.

Additional research is needed to determine if vocabulary strategies for learning unfamiliar words, for example, the ones described here, result in direct gains or perhaps rather more in indirect gains such as increased learner motivation, self-efficacy, awareness of language learning options, and awareness of oneself as a language learner. However, it can be said that the approach to vocabulary and learner development described here may prove to be, at the very least, motivating and enlightening for instructors and students alike.

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Appendix

Participant's Essay on His Learning Vocabulary

I have been studying English as Foreign Language for eleven years now, that is, since the beginning of high school. Throughout this time, the most challenging task was to learn new words and use them in my daily life. In order to overcome this problem and enhance my vocabulary, I have developed my own learning strategies to keep the meaning of unknown words in my mind.

The first thing I look for when I come across an unknown word is to find a similarity between the unknown word and the corresponding meaning of it in my native language, if at all possible. In my opinion, this is the most effective way to learn a word. For example, the word *alliance* means an agreement with somebody to achieve something. In my first language, the pronunciation of the word *alliance* is very similar to the word *band*, a wedding band, and it represents somehow having an agreement to live together. So, with the help of a logical relationship that I build between two words in the English and in my native language, I can easily recall the meaning of the word and use it without problems.

The second thing that foreign learners usually suffer with as far as vocabulary is concerned is the spelling of words in English. In order to overcome this problem, I myself use a technique that I learned from my high school teachers. On a piece of paper, I write the unknown word ten to twenty times and at the same time I repeat the meaning in my mind. This strategy helps me not only learning the spelling of the word but also memorizing the meaning of it.

I still believe that one of the best ways to learn an unknown word permanently is to repeat it again and again. I know that the human brain remembers things more easily if they are repeated frequently. Therefore, I sometimes make my own note cards and write unfamiliar words and their meanings on the cards. I usually stick the cards in front of my desk or any place where I spend most of my time every day. In addition to the word itself and its meaning, I also add the type of word on the card, such as a verb or noun, and a sentence that contains the word.

In addition to the techniques discussed above, I recently realized that computer games that we young people play on our PCs also help us learn different and unknown words. The texts that the speaker reads and some visual cues we observe playing the games help words enter our minds more easily than the conventional methods we use.

In conclusion, in order to have a good knowledge of vocabulary, learners should discover some personal techniques to memorize unknown words. These techniques may vary from learner to learner. But, it is true that a combination of multiple techniques make the memorization of unfamiliar words more efficient.