

# VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY EAP LEARNERS: THE CASE OF THE STUDENTS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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## ABSTRACT

*The significance of using language learning strategies in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular is quite clear to both language learners and language specialists. Being familiar with and making use of a range of different vocabulary learning strategies is a great aid for EAP learners in dealing with unknown words. The present study deals with vocabulary learning strategies used by EAP students at Guilan University, and, it aims at investigating the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among Iranian EAP students majoring in the field of Social Sciences. It also seeks to find out whether there are difference between male and females regarding their use of these strategies. Data collection was done using a modified version of Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies taxonomy in the form of a questionnaire, and asking 55 students to complete it. The results indicate that the EAP learners who took part in this study use more or less the same kind of vocabulary learning strategies with a rather similar frequency of usage, and also the issue of gender makes no significant difference in their strategy use.*

*Keywords: EAP, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Gender Differences.*

## INTRODUCTION

The significance of using language learning strategies in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular is quite clear to both language learners and language specialists. Being familiar with and making use of a range of different vocabulary learning strategies is a great aid for the learners in dealing with unknown words. Furthermore, the learning process of new vocabularies can be simplified for the students provided that they have a substantial knowledge of strategies and are able to apply them in appropriate situations. (Ruitmets, 2005)

Vocabulary learning plays a central role in EAP (English for Academic Purpose) situations in which English is used as a foreign language and university students who mostly do not have a good command of English language are required to study and comprehend a great deal of texts written in English. As vocabulary is one of the main building blocks of any text, developing and making use of vocabulary learning strategies can help the EAP learners in dealing with the texts and comprehending them.

In recent years, a number of studies have been conducted on the type and range of vocabulary learning strategies

used by learners of English as a second or foreign language (Catalan, 2003; Gu, 2003; Nation, 2001) and those strategies used by ESP learners (such as studies conducted by Jurkoić, 2006; Akbary & Tahiriian, 2009). However there are very few studies regarding vocabulary learning strategies used by EAP learners. Additionally, there is no research on finding out whether there is a gender difference in using vocabulary learning strategies among EAP learners in Iran which is an EFL context.

## Review of Literature

### *Language Learning Strategies*

According to Weinstein and Mayer (cited in Lessard - Clouston, 1997), learning strategies are behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning. Rubin (1975, as cited in Griffiths, 2003) defined learning strategies as the techniques that a learner may use to acquire knowledge.

### *Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are a subcategory of language learning strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define language learning strategies as the special thoughts or behaviors used by individuals to help them

comprehend, learn or retain new information. Vocabulary learning strategies constitute knowledge about what students do to find out the meaning of new words, retain them in long-term memory, recall them when needed in comprehension, and use them in language production (Catalan, 2003, as cited in Ruutemets, 2005).

Cameron (2001: 92) states that vocabulary learning strategies are "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary". Nation (2001) believes that learners can acquire a large amount of vocabulary items with the help of vocabulary learning strategies.

As Ruutemets (2005) states, VLS can be viewed from at least three perspectives. First, a vocabulary learning strategy can be regarded as any action taken by the learner to aid the learning process of new vocabulary. Second, vocabulary learning strategies could be related to actions taken by the learner to improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning. Third, vocabulary learning strategies can be regarded as conscious actions taken by the learner to study new words.

### ***Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies Taxonomy***

There are different VLS taxonomies in the literature. In the present study we used Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy, therefore in what follows a brief description of this taxonomy will be presented.

To Schmitt, Determination Strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience". Therefore, learners try to discover the meaning of a word by guessing it with the help of context, structural knowledge of language, and reference materials. Social Strategies can be asking somebody for help with unknown words. Cooperative group learning through which learners study and practice the meaning of new words in a group can be an instance of social strategies. Memory Strategies involve relating the word with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of imagery or grouping. Cognitive Strategies include repetition and using mechanical means such as, word lists, flash cards and vocabulary notebooks to study words. Metacognitive Strategies are those strategies used by learners to control and evaluate their

own learning by having an overview of the learning process in general. Testing oneself is an instance of metacognitive strategies.

### ***Vocabulary in ESP***

Given the central role of vocabulary and lexis as carrier content in ESP, Robinson (1994, as cited in Jurković, 2006) states that it may often be thought that a crucial feature of ESP is that a course should contain specialist language and content.

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:5) also include lexis among absolute defining feature of ESP: "ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, and register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities".

### ***Research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies in ESP***

To date there are very few studies on vocabulary learning strategies used by ESP/EAP learners. One of the recent studies with regard to vocabulary learning strategies has been done by Akbary and Tahririan (2009). They investigated VLSs used for specialized and non-specialized vocabulary learning among ESP students. The findings of their study showed that the most frequent strategy was "using bilingual dictionaries" and the most commonly used learning strategy was "oral or written repetition".

Regarding gender differences in the use of learning strategies research on language learning strategies in general indicates that females tend to use more strategies than males (Ruutmet, 2005). With respect to vocabulary learning strategies, Gu's (2002) study showed that females employed VLSs more frequently in learning English. Catalan's study (2003) also revealed clear differences between the two sexes and the results of his research confirmed that of Gu (2002).

### ***Research Questions and Hypothesis***

The present study, in investigating vocabulary learning strategies of EAP students of Social Sciences at Guilan University in North of Iran, aimed at answering the following research questions:

- (i) What are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among the EAP learners?
- (ii) What are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among the male EAP

learners?

(iii) What are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among the female EAP learners?

(iv) Is there any difference between male and female EAP learners in terms of using vocabulary learning strategies?

Regarding the fourth research question, we developed the following null hypothesis: "There is no difference between male and female EAP learners in terms of using vocabulary learning strategies".

## Research Method

### Participants

The participants of this study were 55 university students (30 females and 25 males) at B.A level studying in Social Sciences at the state-run Guilan University. All of the participants were sophomores taking disciplinary courses in English in a bilingual environment. The mother tongue of all the students was Persian language. The selection of the participants was based on convenient sampling and they were informed of the purpose of the study before being required to take part in it.

### Materials and Instruments

The main instrument used in this study was a questionnaire prepared on the basis of Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Taxonomy. The questionnaire consisted of 25 items about vocabulary learning strategies with a five-point likert scale. (The questionnaire is available in the appendix). The questionnaire was piloted by being distributed among a random sample of the participants. After piloting it was revealed that there were some strategies, especially "metacognitive" ones which are seldom used by the students. So those strategies were not included in the final version of the questionnaire. In order to increase the comprehensibility of the items to the participants the questionnaire was translated into Persian language, and it has been reviewed by two outstanding university professors.

### Data Collection Procedure

For the purpose of data collection we arranged the appropriate time with two university professors at Guilan University and the students studying Social Sciences in the

two classes were asked to complete the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire distributed by the researchers on the same day. Completing the questionnaire took about 15 minutes of the class time.

### Data Analysis

After collecting data, we gave a score of 100 to the items in each of the completed questionnaires. The score was given on the basis of the number of strategies used by the respondents. In doing so we gave scores from 0 to 4 to each scale and since there were 25 items the scores were given out of 100. Then the scores of females and males were compared. Moreover, in order to find out the most and the least frequency used strategies, the frequency and percentage of given answers to each scales of the questionnaire were calculated for females, males and for all of the participants.

### Results and Discussion

This section reports on the results of the questionnaire and the independent sample t-test. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentages of the most frequently used strategies among male and female EAP learners separately, and those used by both of them.

As is shown in the table among determination strategies number 5 (I use a bilingual dictionary) is the most frequently used strategy for all groups. Considering the social strategies number 9 (I ask a teacher for translation of the new word into Persian) and 12 (I ask classmates for the

Strategies	Frequency and percentage					
	Males		Females		Males and Females	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Determination Strategies						
5. I use a bilingual dictionary (English / Persian).	5	20	11	36	16	29
Social Strategies						
9. I ask a teacher for translation of the new word into Persian.	2	8	4	13	6	10
12. I ask classmates for the meaning of the new word.	5	20	4	13	9	16
Memory Strategies						
16. I paraphrase the meaning of the word I am learning in another way.	6	24	6	20	12	21
Cognitive Strategies						
22. I repeat the new word over and over.	7	28	7	23	14	25

Table 1. Most Frequently Used Vocabulary Learning Strategies

meaning of the new word) are the most frequently used strategies. Regarding the memory strategies number 16 (I paraphrase the meaning of the word I am learning in another way) is most frequently used and with respect to cognitive strategies number 12 (I ask classmates for the meaning of the new word) has the highest frequency and percentage of usage.

Table 2 shows the least frequently used strategies by males, females and the whole participants. As the table shows there are differences in the use of some strategies among males, females and the whole participants. Regarding memory, strategies number 14, 18, 19 (I make a picture in my mind of the new word's meaning, I say the new word aloud when studying and I connect the new word to its synonyms) are the least frequently used strategies only among males. Moreover, number 18 is the least frequently used strategy in general and among females. With respect to cognitive strategies, number 23 (I write the new word many times) has the least frequency and percentage of usage in general and among males.

Table 3 shows the results of the independent sample t-test. As is indicated in the table, on the degree of freedom of 52, and on the probability level of  $p < 0.5$ , the observed t ( $t = 0.24$ ) is smaller than t-critical ( $t_{critical} = 2.000$ ).

Considering the first research question ("what are the most

Strategies	Frequency and percentage					
	Males		Females		Males and Females	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Determination Strategies						
7. I use a monolingual dictionary (English / English).	8	32	14	46	22	40
Social Strategies						
11. I ask a teacher for a sentence including the new word	6	24	10	33	16	29
13. I discover new meanings through group work activity.	6	24	5	16	11	20
Memory Strategies						
14. I make a picture in my mind of the new word's meaning	4	16	*	*	*	*
18. I say the new word aloud when studying.	4	16	7	23	11	20
19. I connect the new word to its synonyms.	4	16	*	*	*	*
Cognitive Strategies						
21. I use the new word in sentences.	3	12	6	20	9	16
23. I write the new word many times.	3	12	*	*	6	10

Table 2. Least Frequently Used Vocabulary Learning Strategies

	Mean	Sd.	d.f.	t
Males	48.8	16.48	53	0.24
Females	45.36	13.89	53	0.24

Note:  $p < 0.5$

Table 3. The Results of Independent Sample T-test

and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among EAP learners?"), the results of the questionnaire indicate that Determination strategy of "using bilingual dictionaries", Cognitive strategy of "repeating the new word over and over", and Memory strategy of "paraphrasing the meaning of the word" are most frequently used by both male and female EAP learners who participated in this study. On the other hand, the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies are Determination strategy of "using a monolingual dictionary", Social strategies of "asking the teacher for a sentence including the new word", and "discovering new meanings through group work activity".

Regarding the second research question ("what are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among male EAP learners?"), the findings showed that "repeating the new word" and "paraphrasing the meaning of the word" are the most frequently used strategies; and "using a monolingual dictionary", "asking the teacher for a sentence including the new word", and "discovering new meanings through group work activity" are the least frequently used strategies among the male EAP learners under investigation.

With respect to the third research question ("what are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among female EAP learners?"), the results showed that "using a bilingual dictionary" and "repeating the new word" are the most frequently used strategies. Additionally, "using a monolingual dictionary" and "asking the teacher for a sentence including the new word" are among the least frequently used strategies by the female EAP learners who participated in this study.

Finally, considering the fourth research question ("is there any difference between male and female EAP learners in terms of their use of vocabulary learning strategies"), the results of the independent sample t-test showed no significant difference between the two groups and our null

hypothesis was confirmed.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

Vocabulary is the main building block of any text and using some strategies to learn vocabularies is an essential activity for any language learner. This becomes a pivotal issue for EAP learners who are required to study texts written in English.

The present study aimed at investigating the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among Iranian EAP students majoring in the field of Social Sciences who should pass some compulsory courses of reading, including texts related to their field; and whether there are difference between male and females regarding their use of these strategies. For this purpose we made use of a modified version of Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies taxonomy.

On the basis of the results of the study, it can be concluded that the EAP learners who participated in this study used more or less the same kind of vocabulary learning strategies. Also, the issue of gender makes no significant difference in the frequency of their strategy use. There are also some useful strategies which were rarely used by the learners, particularly the Social strategies of "asking the teacher to use the new word in a sentence", or more importantly, "discovering new meanings through group work activity". Thus, we can suggest that it could be useful for the EAP learners to make use of these strategies in learning English vocabularies. Furthermore, EAP instructors can make use of the results of this study in order to encourage EAP learners to make better use of vocabulary learning strategies by trying to engage them in using these strategies in the classroom.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire

The present questionnaire is prepared for the purpose of a research on the vocabulary learning strategies used by EAP learners. Please read each sentence carefully and then choose the scale which best suits your answer. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

Gender:            Male                       Female

## Strategies

1. Determination Strategies	Never use	Seldom use	Occasionally use	Often use	Always use
1. I identify the part of speech of the new word (verb, noun, adjective) to help me know its meaning).					
2. I break the new word up into the main parts (un-safely = unsafely).					
3. I analyze any available pictures to help me understand new words.					
4. I analyze any available gestures to help me understand new words.					
5. I use a bilingual dictionary (English / Persian).					
6. I use a bilingual dictionary (English / Persian).					
7. I use a monolingual Dictionary (English /English).					
8. I guess the meaning of the new word from the context in which it occurs.					
<b>2. Social Strategies</b>					
9. I ask a teacher for translation of the new word into Persian.					
10. I ask a teacher for a paraphrase of the new word.					
11. I ask a teacher for a sentence including the new word.					
12. I ask classmates for the meaning of the new word.					
13. I discover new meanings through group work activity.					
<b>3. Memory Strategies</b>					
14. I make a picture in my mind of the new word's meaning.					
15. I study the spelling of the new word.					
16. I paraphrase the meaning of the word I am learning in another way.					
17. I study the sound of the new word.					
18. I say the new word aloud when studying.					
19. I connect the new word to its synonyms.					
20. I connect the new word to its antonyms.					
<b>4. Cognitive Strategies</b>					
21. I use the new word in sentences.					
22. I repeat the new word over and over.					
23. I write the new word many times.					

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