



Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by UPM TESL Undergraduates

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is one of the most challenging factors that learners will face during the process of second language learning. The main pursuit of the present study was to investigate the vocabulary language strategies among Malaysian ESL students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at University Putra Malaysia. There are five different categories of vocabulary learning strategies determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Quantitative research design has been used in this study by providing a set of questionnaire of 58 items that was given out to 50 participants at the Faculty of Educational Studies in UPM. The findings of this research hope to help all educators to acknowledge the type of vocabulary strategies used by students in acquiring second language (L2).

Keyword: vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning strategies, Malaysian ESL learners

1. Introduction

Recently research on language learning strategies has received much attention in the field of education especially in learning the second language. Studies on language learning strategies actually started in the mid 1960. Subsequently, the past twenty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of second language learning strategies (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990 and Oxford, 1990). Nevertheless, Oxford (2003) defined language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations"(p.8).

Besides, researchers believe that in order to learn English effectively, learners need to ensure that the way they learn is appropriate and suitable in acquiring the target language. In addition, language learning strategies are directly or indirectly connected to the self direction to a great extends. Based on Cohen (1998) and McDonough (1999), learning strategies are choices made by the learners themselves in acquiring the target language. 'Language learning strategies' form a sub class of 'learning strategies' in general whereas 'vocabulary learning strategies' constitute a sub class of language learning strategies.

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are steps taken by the language learners to acquire new English words. Vocabulary is an important issue in language learning and an essential component in order to increase the proficiency in the second language acquisition. Vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and vocabulary is the biggest problem for most learners. According to Schmitt (1997), vocabulary learning strategies are even more important in second language learning with the increasing nature of vocabulary acquisition and its emphasis on large exposure to the language.

In this situation, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) is one of the important language learning strategies which have received much attention lately. There are a wide range of different vocabulary learning strategies as demonstrated by the classifications of vocabulary learning strategies are proposed by different researchers (Stoffer, 1995; Nation, 2001; and Gu, 2003). In addition, there is a wide-ranging inventory of vocabulary learning strategies developed by Schmitt in 1997.

He categorized vocabulary learning strategies into five sub-categories. The first is determination strategies which is individual learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). Next is social strategy which is learners learning new words through interaction with others (Schmitt, 1997). Then it is memory strategies which are strategies, whereby learners link their learning of new words to mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with the new words (Schmitt, 1997). Furthermore it is cognitive strategies which are strategies that do not engage learners in mental processing but is more mechanical means (Schmitt, 1997). Last but not least, it is metacognitive strategies which are

strategies related to processes involved in monitoring, decision-making, and evaluation of one's progress (Schmitt, 1997).

The literature has reported on the relationship between vocabulary size and learners' strategy use. In addition to various research designs in the past (Lawson and Hogben, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; and Fan, 2003) inquiring what kind of vocabulary learning strategies language learners use, a present study of Lip (2009), with a group of Chinese EFL postsecondary students, has questioned the most frequently used and most useful vocabulary learning strategies. Some recent studies (Hamzah, et al, 2009; Kafipour, et al, 2011; Komol & Sripetpun, 2011; Rezvani Kalajahi & Pourshahian, 2012) have intended to identify the relationship between vocabulary learning strategy use and vocabulary size.

A number of studies, such as Şener (2009) and Alemdari (2010), have examined the relationship between the use of vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size in the Turkish context.

All the recent studies mentioned above found that vocabulary learning strategies contributed to the overall vocabulary learning of the learners. This study sought to determine the most frequently and least frequently used category of vocabulary learning strategies among the UPM TESL Undergraduates. The additional purpose of this study was to investigate if significant relationships exist between the year of study and the type of vocabulary learning strategies used.

2. Methods

The sample of the study was the 50 participants all of whom were undergraduates undergoing their B.ed TESL. They were randomly selected from which the response rate was 100% and were given the questionnaires. In order to find out their vocabulary learning strategy, the questionnaire which was given was based from the inventory of vocabulary learning strategies developed by Schmitt in 1997.

The questionnaire that was used in this research consists of two sections which are Part I and Part II. Part I of the questionnaire was designed for the demographic purpose such as gender and year of study. Next, Part II of the questionnaire was designed to identify the student's preference in vocabulary learning strategies. This questionnaire aims to find out the most frequently and least frequently used category of vocabulary learning strategies as well as whether the year of study has an influence on the preferred category of vocabulary learning strategy.

The questionnaire of 58 items encompasses 5 sub categories of Determination strategies with 9 items, Social strategies with 8 items, Memory strategies with 27 items, Cognitive strategies with 9 items and Metacognitive strategies with 5 items.

3. Results and Discussions

SPSS version 20 was used to analyze the data. The descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, standard deviations and variance, were implemented in order to investigate the strategies used to learn vocabulary. The reliability of the questionnaire was quite high which is 0.941 as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.941	58

As indicated in table 2, the category of the vocabulary learning strategies with the highest mean is the Metacognitive strategy while the category of the vocabulary learning strategies with the lowest mean is the Social strategy. UPM undergraduate TESL learners prefer the metacognitive strategy the most and least prefers the social strategy. It may be due to the course and study skills needed for them to pass in their semester of studies. This course makes them familiar with different learning techniques and strategies in order to have better learning

Table 2. The descriptive statistics for the mean and standard deviation

Descriptive Statistics					
Strategies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
DET	50	1.78	4.89	3.4044	.54097
SOC	50	1.75	4.13	3.2350	.56279
MEM	50	2.15	4.19	3.4526	.47568
COG	50	1.56	4.67	3.3044	.61958
MET	50	2.00	5.00	3.5960	.69340

To determine whether the year of study between the second year and the third year has influence on the categories of the vocabulary learning strategies, a descriptive statistics was used to determine the mean. Table 3 shows the year of study of the second year learners.

Table 3. Year of study (Second)

Descriptive Statistics					
Strategies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
DET	32	2.44	4.89	3.4583	.50070
SOC	32	2.25	4.13	3.2812	.53223
MEM	32	2.56	4.19	3.5289	.42679
COG	32	2.44	4.67	3.4306	.51481
MET	32	2.60	5.00	3.7063	.64655

Both second year and third year of learners prefer the metacognitive vocabulary learning strategy. The same results are found for the least preferred vocabulary learning strategy which is the social strategy. Table 4 shows the year of study of the third year learners.

Table 4 . Year of study (Third)

Descriptive Statistics					
Strategies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
DET	18	1.78	4.22	3.3086	.60924
SOC	18	1.75	4.00	3.1528	.62065
MEM	18	2.15	4.00	3.3169	.53810
COG	18	1.56	4.00	3.1802	.73486
MET	18	2.00	5.00	3.4000	.74833

One sample t-test was the statistical procedure employed to determine the significance of the categories in the vocabulary learning strategy. The significance level between the second year and third year students is low and does not have much difference. This is because they face the same classes and lecturers all throughout their course of study. The researchers believe that lecturers and curriculum designers should be advised to focus more on these strategies in their teaching and designing teaching materials such as books, assignments, and etc. Table 5 shows the significance of the second year of study and also the third year of study.

Table 5. Significance between the second year and third year of study

Year	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Upper	Lower
Second	32	3.4838	.37738	1.747	48	.087	.22043	.12616	-.03323	.47408	
Third	18	3.2634	.50792	1.608	27.731	.119	.22043	.13705	-.06043	.50129	

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the finding in relation to the most and least used strategies showed that metacognitive strategies were utilized very frequently by UPM undergraduates TESL learners, and social strategies were not operated as much as the other strategies. Metacognitive strategies was most preferred by the respondents maybe because due to the fact that as university students, they are high order in planning, monitoring in their own learning process. Good readers have also been shown to possess a great deal of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge and awareness about the reading process and are able to reflect on what they know.

On the other hand, social strategies were least preferred because most of the curriculum design doesn't promote collaborative and social learning. Opportunities for such approach have not been provided in educational institutes and universities. Whether successful learners can build on their reading strategy success and less-successful learners can internalize and automatize these strategies may well decide who ultimately succeeds and fails in the pursuit of becoming a proficient L2 learner.

Indirectly, the result of the study can assist teachers to enhance their teaching methods and skills in classroom and in the same time to make sure that the lessons are able fulfill their needs. Teacher can introduce various kinds of vocabulary learning strategies to their students by designing useful tasks and giving relevant tasks to them. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary size of the learners, and the relationship between them. They may help students, teachers, and administrators to become aware of vocabulary learning strategy profiles, vocabulary knowledge, and competency in order to design and deliver vocabulary instruction and training accordingly (Rezvani Kalajahi & Pourshahian, 2012).

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