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## Teaching and Learning Vocabulary: What English Language Learners Perceive to Be Effective and Ineffective Strategies

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☞ Vocabulary constitutes an essential part of every language-learning endeavour and deserves scholarly attention. The objective of the present study was three-fold: 1) exploring Iranian English language learners' Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs), 2) examining language learners' perceptions of vocabulary learning, and 3) exploring Iranian English language teachers' Vocabulary Teaching Strategies (VTSs). In total, 145 intermediate learners of English as a foreign language, consisting of 114 males and 31 females aged 15 to 27, participated in the study. The triangulated data were collected using three tools: questionnaires, interviews, and class observations. Sixty-seven learners (31 females and 36 males) filled out a 56-statement questionnaire, adopted and adapted from Takač (2008) and translated into Persian. The questionnaire comprised two parts, enquiring as to the learners' VLSs and the teachers' VTSs. The findings indicated that females and males differed significantly in their reported VLSs and their teachers' use of various VTSs. Additionally, 78 learners were interviewed as to their perceptions of effective and ineffective VLSs as well as VTSs. The findings revealed that the most effective VLSs were reported to be: a) reciting, repeating and listening to words, b) using words, and c) memorising words while the most effective VTSs revolved around: a) explanation, b) repetition, and c) dictation. The observations also confirmed the findings obtained via the questionnaire and interviews. In general, the findings are indicative of the limited repertoire of vocabulary acquisition techniques employed by Iranian EFL learners, hence the need for strategy training in how to acquire vocabulary.

**Keywords:** EFL learners, strategies, target language, vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching

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## Poučevanje in učenje besedišča: Katere so uspešne in neuspešne strategije po mnenju učencev angleškega jezika

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~ Besedišče predstavlja eno ključnih vlog pri učenju tujega jezika, zato si zasluži našo znanstveno pozornost. Sledeča študija si je zastavila tri cilje: 1) preučevanje iranskih učencev angleškega jezika in njihovih strategij za učenje besedišča, 2) raziskovanje, kako učenci tujega jezika dojemajo učenje besedišča, in 3) preučevanje iranskih učiteljev angleškega jezika in njihovih strategij za poučevanje besedišča. V raziskavi je sodelovalo 145 učencev (nadaljevalcev) angleščine kot tujega jezika, od tega je bilo 114 moških in 31 žensk, starih od 15 do 27 let. Triangulacijski podatki so bili zbrani z uporabo treh orodij: vprašalnika, intervjujev in opazovanjem razredov. 67 učencev (31 žensk in 36 moških) je izpolnilo vprašalnik s 56 vprašanji, ki je bil vzeta iz Takač (2008) in prilagojen ter nato preveden v perzijsščino. Vprašalnik je bil sestavljen iz dveh delov in je povpraševal po strategijah učencev pri učenju besedišča in strategijah učiteljev pri poučevanju besedišča. Rezultati so pokazali, da se ženske in moški občutno razlikujejo glede na odgovore o njihovih strategijah za učenje besedišča in o strategijah za poučevanje besedišča, ki jih uporabljajo njihovi učitelji. 78 učencev je bilo intervjuvanih o njihovem zaznavanju uspešnih in neuspešnih strategij za učenje besedišča ter strategij za poučevanje besedišča. Rezultati so pokazali, da so najbolj uspešne strategije za učenje besedišča naslednje: a) recitiranje, ponavljanje in poslušanje besed, b) uporaba besed, in c) učenje besed na pamet, medtem ko so bile najbolj uspešne strategije za poučevanje besedišča sledeče: a) razlaga, b) ponavljanje, in c) narek. Opazovanja so prav tako potrdila rezultate, ki smo jih pridobili s pomočjo vprašalnika in intervjujev. Na splošno te ugotovitve kažejo na to, da obstaja omejen repertoar tehnik za pridobivanje besedišča, ki jih uporabljajo iranski učenci angleščine kot tujega jezika, zato obstaja potreba po učenju strategij, kako pridobivati besedišče.

**Ključne besede:** učenci angleščine kot tujega jezika, strategije, ciljni jezik, učenje besedišča, poučevanje besedišča

## Introduction

It goes without saying that vocabulary plays a pivotal role in every endeavour to learn a new language. The importance of the lexicon has been recognised in almost every language-teaching method from the traditional Silent Way in which the most versatile and functional vocabulary was emphasised (Richards & Rodgers, 1999) to the more recent Communicate Language Teaching in which teachers utilise a wide variety of techniques such as definition, synonyms and antonyms, to teach vocabulary (Savignon, 2002).

Vocabulary is believed to be the cornerstone of language courses (Torki, 2011). Vocabulary acquisition also remains a very active area of research with significant implications to inform practice (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2004), and it is assumed that growth in vocabulary takes place as a result of gains in language proficiency (Milton & Alexiou, 2009). Therefore, research on vocabulary teaching has also assumed central importance in language teaching research (Milton & Alexiou, 2012). Over a decade ago, Read (2000, p. 1) cautioned that 'even at an advanced level, learners are aware of limitations in their knowledge of second language (or L2) words'. Researching vocabulary learning (VL) is of valuable help to pedagogy (Laufer, 1998) as 'vocabulary is now a current focus in ESL pedagogy and research' (Wei, 2007, p. 94).

Furthermore, successful vocabulary acquisition has been associated with successful reading ability (Dickinson, Flushman, & Freiberg, 2009), with becoming more communicative, able, and skilled (Milton & Alexiou, 2009), among others. Conversely, failure in learning vocabulary is believed to lead to difficulties in language reception and production (Wei, 2007) as well as to 'a sense of insecurity' and 'breakdown in communication' (Hurtado, 2002). Saunders (2013) contends that it is important to determine the VLSs favoured by students prior to embarking on research that aims at determining the best strategy to learn vocabulary. Accordingly, the present study is an attempt to delve into the perceptions of Iranian EFL learners concerning the role and importance of vocabulary, and the strategies utilised to learn and teach it.

## Review of Literature

Although the scholarly literature on vocabulary learning (henceforth VL) and vocabulary teaching (henceforth VT) is vast nowadays, vocabulary was not given the recognition and acknowledgment it fully deserved due to the overwhelming emphasis laid on syntax for decades (Hurtado, 2002). However, this line of research remains an active area of debate and discussion so that,

in addition to research articles, full volumes have been dedicated to the issue of vocabulary as well (e.g., Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Gewehr, 2002; Richards, Daller, Malvern, Meara, Milton, & Treffers-Daller, 2009).

A respectable stockpile of research has concentrated on distinct and diverse issues with regard to VL and VT. In this regard, Nilsen (1976) analysed the concept of 'context' in providing words with meaning by means of contrastive semantics. Richards (1976) focused on the various aspects of vocabulary as the building blocks of lexical competence. In contrast, Lawson and Hogben (1996) examined VLSs of students of Italian as a foreign language by use of think-aloud protocols with the result that the students were found to rely heavily on repetition as a major VLS. Laufer (1998) examined gains in three types of English vocabulary, passive, controlled active and free active. More recently, Suberviola and Méndez (2002) discussed the necessity, methods and activities of vocabulary acquisition, emphasising the importance of semantic maps in enhancing students' ability to recall words. Sex differences in VLS use were examined by Catalán (2003) who determined that while many of the strategies were common among males and females, females used higher percentages of vocabulary strategies. Qian (2004) investigated lexical inferencing strategies among Korean and Chinese students of English to find that a top-down approach, specifically guessing from context, was the major strategy used. In an experimental study, Zhiliang (2008) examined the effect of three learning strategies on Chinese EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning. The study produced evidence for the superiority of the combined method of guessing and an e-dictionary over guessing from context using an e-dictionary.

Various researchers have stressed distinct issues concerning lexis. Hurtado (2002), for instance, conducted a study on how to teach vocabulary, suggesting that 'lexical hierarchies' are a suitable way of presenting words systematically since 'One of the paradoxes in VT in the FL classroom is that despite the amount of time devoted to explaining and defining words, vocabulary is rarely presented to students in a systematic way' (p. 176). While Li (2004) and Sinhaneti and Kyaw (2012) focused on rote learning in vocabulary acquisition and its efficacy, the size of the vocabulary needed for unassisted comprehension of spoken and written language was the central point of Nation (2006). Brown's (2013) study demonstrated that content and language-integrated learning (CLIL) has positive effects on VL among medical students. Similarly, in an online survey, Saunders (2013) showed that memorisation of the translations of words and writing them were the most popular methods Japanese EFL learners used to learn vocabulary. In another study, Akpınar and Bardakçı (2015) examined and highlighted the positive impact of grouping and collocation on vocabulary retention.

Further research can yield a more profound understanding of the nature of vocabulary acquisition among language learners. As for the Iranian context, examining the effect of the type of task with a focus on the type of dictionaries on lexical learning among Iranian EFL university students, Maghsodi (2010) demonstrated that monolingual dictionaries were more effective in lexical retention. Ahour and Esfanjani (2015) determined that cognitive strategies were the most frequent strategies used in learning vocabulary among poor Iranian EFL learners. Considering the lack of rigorous research on VL and VT in an EFL context like Iran, the present study set out to examine these two issues further so as to provide more illuminating insights in this connection.

## **Research Questions**

The present study aimed at exploring the beliefs of Iranian EFL learners about FL vocabulary acquisition and instruction. Specifically, the study set out to provide answers to the following research questions:

- RQ 1. What are the most common VLSs of Iranian EFL learners?
- RQ 2. Do Iranian male and female EFL learners differ significantly in their VLS use?
- RQ 3. What are the most common VTSs of Iranian EFL teachers as reported by the learners?
- RQ 4. Is there any significant difference in male and female learners' reports of teachers' VTS use of Iranian EFL teachers?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The overall number of the participants was 145 intermediate learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) including 114 males and 31 females. In general, three data collection tools were used in the current study: questionnaires, interviews and class observations. Two groups of participants took part in the study: the questionnaire respondents (67 participants) and interviewees (78 participants). Since it was too time-consuming and cumbersome to administer both data collection instruments to all the participants, the questionnaire was administered to 67 participants while the remaining 78 other participants were interviewed only. Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative data were generated. By doing so, which was because of practicality issues, more reliable data were produced. Further details on the participants are provided below.

The questionnaire respondents consisted of 67 students of English (31 females and 36 males). They were within the age range of 15–27 (mean =18.5) and came from Ahvaz, Iran. As regards their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, the participants consisted of 63 Persians (94%) and four Arabs (6%). Furthermore, regarding their educational background, the participants included 48 high school students (72%) and 19 university students/graduates (28%). All the participants were at the intermediate level of their English language learning. Additionally, regarding the duration for which the participants' teachers had been teaching the participants when the study was conducted, the participants reported that their teachers had taught them for almost one year in 92.5% of the cases, two years in 6%, and three years in 1.5% of the cases. The participants were also asked to report their last score in English out of 100. The results for this part showed that the scores varied from 60 to 98, with 15% of the scores falling within 60–84 and the remaining 85% falling within the range of 85–98. Finally, the demographic information elicited indicated that while 57% of the participants had started learning English before their teenage years, 43% had started it after their first teenage year (i.e., after age 13). (To see the questionnaire, see Tables 1 & 3).

## Instruments

Triangulation is believed to enhance the reliability and validity of research and is divided into three types: theoretical, investigatory, and methodological triangulation (Mackey & Gass, 2005). As Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen (2010) pointed out, 'Triangulation seeks to examine the convergence of evidence from different methods that study the same phenomenon or to corroborate findings from one method by examining the findings using a different method' (p. 561). The current study benefited from methodological triangulation by using different data collection instruments, and the required data were gathered by means of three data collection tools, as outlined below.

### *Vocabulary Learning and Teaching Strategies Questionnaire*

In the first place, the data required for this study were collected by means of a questionnaire, adopted and adapted from Takač (2008), which consisted of two parts which comprised 56 statements. The participants were required to select each statement on a three-point Likert scale (i.e., 1: Never, 2: Sometimes, and 3: Always). Part 1 included 27 statements enquiring as to the learners' VLSs while Part 2 comprised 29 statements enquiring about the teachers' VTSs. The original questionnaire was in English but for the better comprehensibility it was translated into Persian, the participants' mother tongue. The translation

was checked out by two more researchers who spoke Persian as their native language and who were also fluent in English. Based on the researchers' comments, the questionnaire underwent some slight modifications.

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Flexibility has been mentioned as one of the most important features of interviews (Ary et al., 2010). In line with this feature, the participants were interviewed so that a deeper understanding of their perceptions of VLSs and VTSs could be gained. The interviewees consisted of 78 male EFL learners with characteristics similar to the questionnaire respondents. The interviews revolved around such aspects of vocabulary knowledge as the students' views of the most and least effective VLSs and VTSs, the interviewees' own VLSs and the students' and teachers' role in vocabulary acquisition. The interview data are reported separately in the Results section, and the interview questions appear in Appendix A.

### *Classroom Observation*

As Mackey and Gass (2005) noted, observations, commonly used in classroom research for gathering data on such phenomena as language, activities and instruction, 'can allow the study of a behaviour at close range with many important contextual variables present' (p. 187). This final phase of data collection included class observations which were done following the purpose-built Observation Checklist (Appendix B) in six randomly selected private language institute classes on a period of six months (composing three consecutive institute semesters). In total, 10 class observations were done.

The data collection procedure included a phase in which the questionnaire was piloted with a number of 20 students with features similar to those of the main and final sample of the study. As predicted, the answers provided by the participants in the pilot study suggested that some of the statements of the questionnaire needed further clarification, modification, and rewording. For example, the Persian translation of Statement 15 (Part 2) was further clarified as the participants pointed out that they found it ambiguous. Furthermore, the original 'spaced word practice' (Statement 24, Part 1) was replaced with the more familiar (and more 'popular') 'Leitner box' exercise. As a result, the number of the questionnaire statements was not changed but the content was modified to assure the participants' full comprehension.

## Data Analysis

The data were collected in the order in which the instruments were introduced above. That is to say, first, the questionnaire was administered to the participants. Next, the participants were interviewed and, finally, the class observations were conducted. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software by means of descriptive statistics and independent samples *t*-tests, which were utilised to compare the results of gender differences in perceptions. Additionally, qualitative interview data were analysed by extracting, classifying, and categorising the strategies and themes mentioned by the participants. Finally, the data gathered through class observations were engendered by use of an observation checklist.

## Results

The findings are presented in this section which, for readability purposes, has been divided into two main parts, namely 'vocabulary learning strategies' and 'vocabulary teaching strategies'. The questionnaire results and the interview results are then provided for each section. It is noteworthy that most interviewees named more than one VTS and VLS, hence the discrepancy between the number of the interviewees and that of the VLSs and VTSs. The boldfaced percentages in Tables 1 and 3 indicate the highest percentages for each statement for both males and females.

### Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was intended to provide insights into, primarily, the participants' VLSs and, secondarily, their reports of teachers' VTSs. Table 1 presents the participants' VLS use. It also presents the percentages with which female and male participants selected each VL strategy. Therefore, this part is an attempt to answer the first research question.



Table 1  
 VLS Results across Gender (N=67)

No.	Statement	Female			Male		
		1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always	1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always
1	I use new words in a sentence in order to remember them.	6.5	<b>67.7</b>	25.8	13.9	<b>66.7</b>	19.4
2	I make word lists and write their translations in my mother tongue.	12.9	38.7	<b>48.4</b>	36.1	22.2	<b>41.7</b>
3	I review words regularly outside the classroom.	3.2	<b>71</b>	25.8	13.9	<b>52.8</b>	33.3
4	I test myself to check if I remember the words.	3.2	<b>48.4</b>	<b>48.4</b>	8.3	41.7	<b>50</b>
5	I pick up words from films and TV programmes I watch.	6.5	<b>51.6</b>	41.9	11.1	30.6	<b>58.3</b>
6	If I cannot remember a word in a conversation, I use another one with a similar meaning.	3.2	<b>54.8</b>	41.9	2.8	50	47.2
7	I write down words while I read books and magazines for pleasure.	51.6	<b>48.4</b>	0	38.9	<b>44.4</b>	7
8	I plan for vocabulary learning in advance.	35.5	<b>48.4</b>	16.1	<b>44.4</b>	33.3	8
9	I remember a word if I see it written down.	0	45.2	<b>54.8</b>	0	<b>47.2</b>	9
10	I say a word out loud repeatedly in order to remember it.	9.7	19.4	<b>71</b>	27.8	<b>41.7</b>	30
11	I connect an image with a word's meaning in order to remember it.	16.1	<b>61.3</b>	22.6	25	<b>50</b>	11
12	I associate new words with the ones I already know.	9.7	<b>67.7</b>	22.6	30.6	<b>41.7</b>	12
13	I write down words when I watch films and TV programmes.	41.9	<b>51.6</b>	6.5	<b>47.2</b>	38.9	13
14	I write down words repeatedly to remember them.	22.6	<b>64.5</b>	12.9	<b>44.4</b>	<b>44.4</b>	14
15	I read and leaf through a dictionary to learn some new words.	<b>48.4</b>	41.9	9.7	41.7	<b>47.2</b>	15
16	I make a mental image a word's written form in order to remember it.	25.8	<b>48.4</b>	25.8	44.4	36.1	16
17	If I cannot remember a word in a conversation, I describe it in my own words in the foreign language.	3.2	<b>64.5</b>	32.3	16.7	<b>55.6</b>	27.8
18	I imagine a context in which a word could be used in order to remember it.	12.9	<b>71</b>	16.1	27.8	<b>52.8</b>	19.4

No.	Statement	Female			Male		
		1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always	1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always
19	I translate the words into my mother tongue to understand them.	3.2	16.1	<b>80.6</b>	8.3	19.4	<b>72.2</b>
20	I group words together in order to remember them.	<b>45.2</b>	38.7	16.1	36.1	<b>52.8</b>	11.1
21	I repeat the word mentally in order to remember it.	3.2	29	<b>67.7</b>	5.6	38.9	<b>55.6</b>
22	I listen to songs in the foreign language and try to understand the words.	9.7	38.7	<b>51.6</b>	22.2	33.3	<b>44.4</b>
23	I pick up words while reading books and magazines in the foreign language.	9.7	<b>58.1</b>	32.3	5.6	<b>47.2</b>	<b>47.2</b>
24	I use Leitner's box in order to remember words.	<b>77.4</b>	19.4	3.2	<b>69.4</b>	25	5.6
25	I connect words to physical objects to remember them.	38.7	<b>51.6</b>	9.7	<b>55.6</b>	36.1	8.3
26	I test myself with word lists to check if I remember the words.	9.7	29	<b>61.3</b>	8.3	<b>44.4</b>	<b>47.2</b>
27	I pick up words from the Internet.	29	<b>58.1</b>	12.9	19.4	33.3	<b>47.2</b>

As can be seen from Table 1, the three most frequent strategies include: a) Statement 1: using words in sentences (67.2%), b) Statement 19: translation of words into mother tongue (76.1%) and c) Statement 21: mental repetition of words (61.2%). In contrast, this table also shows that the least frequent strategies are: a) Statement 13: writing down words from films and TV programs (44.8%; Never), b) Statement 15: using dictionaries (44.8%; Never) and c) Statement 24: using Leitner's box (73.1%; Never).

Table 2 displays the results of an independent samples test which was run to examine if males and females differ significantly in their VLS use, an issue that was addressed in the second question.

Table 2

*Independent Samples Test of VLSs*

Questionnaire item	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Item 10	-3.286	65	.002	-.585
Item 27	2.499	65	.01	.439

Note.  $t_{\text{Item 10}}(65) = -3.286$ ;  $p < .05$ .  $t_{\text{Item 27}}(65) = .68$ ;  $p < .05$ .

According to Table 2, males and females differ significantly in statements 10 and 27. By referring to Table 1 above, one can understand that while females are more willing than males to 'say out a word out loud to memorise it' (statement 10), males are more inclined than females toward 'picking up words from the Internet'.

As Table 1 indicates, using words in sentences is among the most frequent VLSs. The next common strategy was found to be translating target language (TL) words into the mother tongue. This finding concurs with results obtained by studies carried out in other cultures, for example, Chinese (Li, 2004) and Burmese (Sinhaneti & Kyaw, 2012). This strategy is believed to be ineffective and to lead to unsuccessful vocabulary learning (Suberviola & Méndez, 2002). Finally, the third most favoured strategy was the mental repetition of words. Another finding is the low interest of the learners in using dictionaries and Leitner's boxes, two strategies that have been documented to be effective and essential tools for developing one's lexical abilities and vocabulary retention (e.g., Bruton, 2007; Linares, 2002).

The low appeal of dictionaries to Iranian EFL learners is surprising and can be attributed, tentatively, to their lack of what Linares (2002) terms 'dictionary awareness', asserting that, 'a person with dictionary awareness is one who knows where to find the information he needs and how to extract it' (p. 163). Linares further states that dictionaries can serve the purposes of vocabulary learning independent of the teacher. Therefore, it can be assumed that dictionaries can be used to foster learner autonomy to some extent. However, students should be made aware of the superiority of monolingual dictionaries over bilingual dictionaries as pointed out in the literature (e.g., Maghsodi, 2010).

The learners saw it as the teacher's responsibility to expose them to a considerable amount of contextualised vocabulary. Meara (2002) proposed that exposing learners to large texts 'provides enough examples for the meanings of a core vocabulary to be identified with a fair degree of reliability' (p. 405). Overall, the results of the interviews and the questionnaire clearly demonstrated that the participants had three main concerns regarding the lexicon: spelling, pronunciation and use. This conclusion is particularly grounded upon the participants' responses in the interviews in which they declared they would write a word to learn it, repeat it after the teacher or the CD to learn its pronunciation, and ask their teachers for clarifying examples or look up a word in a dictionary to see how and in what context it is utilised.

This section reports the findings obtained by means of the interviews, which were carried out with 78 participants. The interview transcripts were analysed closely, and the VLSs named by the learners were extracted and presented in Figures 1.

Figure 1 displays the VLSs that the interviewees reported to be effective in learning English vocabulary.

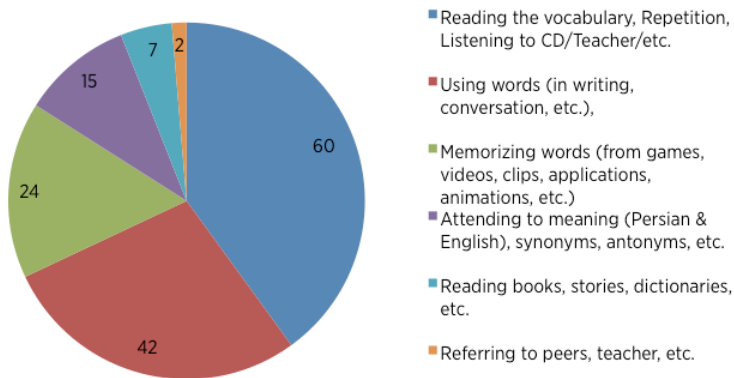


Figure 1. Effective VLSs (Interview results).

According to Figure 1, reading and repeating constitutes the learners' most favoured strategy to learn vocabulary followed by using words in a specific context. The participants also stated that every strategy that is not in accordance with the abovementioned 'effective' VLSs is ineffective and should not be used by learners.

The participants' responses, both in the interviews and to the questionnaire, show that they perceive the role of the L1, if judiciously used in and out of class, as facilitating the VL process. The idea of the use of the students' L1 has been hotly debated in the literature with L1 viewed as both a help (Auerbach, 1993; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Jafari & Shokrpour, 2013; Khresheh, 2012; Mart, 2013) and a hindrance (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Mart, 2013). Additionally, while the participants mentioned that they were interested in the use of more innovative ways of learning vocabulary such as through videos, clips, applications, imagery, laptops, computers, and so on, their information concerning how this should be carried out was limited. This amounts to saying that students are in need of considerable cognizance in how to utilise new VL techniques on their own.

## Vocabulary Teaching Strategies (VTSs)

This part presents the results of the students' reports of the VTSs practiced by the teachers; therefore, it is an attempt to answer the third research question.

Table 3 presents the results of VTS use as selected by females and males with the purpose of highlighting the differences across gender groups.

Table 3  
VTS Results across Gender (N=67)

No.	Statement	Female			Male		
		1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always	1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always
1	The teacher helps us to remember words by giving us the initial letter of the word.	19.4	<b>74.2</b>	6.5	30.6	<b>50</b>	19.4
2	The teacher tells us to group words.	<b>61.3</b>	29	9.7	<b>61.1</b>	30.6	8.3
3	The teacher gives us (oral and written) tests to check our vocabulary knowledge.	16.1	<b>48.4</b>	35.5	38.9	19.4	41.7
4	The teacher tells us to mentally repeat words in order to remember them.	12.9	41.9	<b>45.2</b>	11.1	33.3	<b>55.6</b>
5	The teacher gives us instructions and advice on how to study words at home.	3.2	<b>71</b>	25.8	19.4	<b>52.8</b>	27.8
6	The teacher gives several example sentences in which new words are used.	3.2	29	<b>67.7</b>	5.6	36.1	<b>58.3</b>
7	In tests, the teacher gives us a word and we have to use it in a sentence.	35.5	<b>41.9</b>	22.6	<b>63.9</b>	19.4	16.7
8	The teacher writes new words on the board.	25.8	<b>48.4</b>	25.8	16.7	13.9	<b>69.4</b>
9	The teacher asks us to review words regularly at home.	0	<b>51.6</b>	48.4	5.6	16.7	<b>77.8</b>
10	The teacher uses real objects when explaining the meaning of new words.	38.7	<b>48.4</b>	12.9	36.1	<b>44.4</b>	19.4
11	The teacher tells us to make a mental picture of the new word's meaning in order to remember it.	38.7	<b>58.1</b>	3.2	38.9	<b>50</b>	11.1
12	When testing, the teacher shows a picture and we have to supply the word in the foreign language.	<b>67.7</b>	22.6	9.7	<b>63.9</b>	33.3	2.8
13	The teacher tells us to write down the word several times to remember it.	45.2	<b>48.4</b>	6.5	<b>66.7</b>	27.8	5.6

No.	Statement	Female			Male		
		1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always	1-Never	2-Some-times	3-Always
14	The teacher asks for translation into the mother tongue.	<b>64.5</b>	29	6.5	<b>69.4</b>	27.8	2.8
15	The teacher draws the word's meaning on the board.	45.2	51.6	3.2	<b>52.8</b>	30.6	16.7
16	When testing, the teacher gives us a word in the mother tongue and we have to translate it into the foreign language.	<b>80.6</b>	16.1	3.2	<b>86.1</b>	11.1	2.8
17	The teacher explains the new word's meaning in the foreign language.	0	19.4	<b>80.6</b>	0	19.4	<b>80.6</b>
18	The teacher asks us to look up the new word in the dictionary.	0	<b>61.3</b>	38.7	11.1	44.4	44.4
19	The teacher tells us to use the new word in a sentence.	9.7	12.9	77.4	5.6	47.2	47.2
20	The teacher advises us to write down words we hear in films and TV programmes in the foreign language.	<b>48.4</b>	45.2	6.5	<b>44.4</b>	36.1	19.4
21	When we cannot remember a word, the teacher reminds us of where it appears in the textbook.	<b>54.8</b>	35.5	9.7	<b>63.9</b>	25	11.1
22	The teacher advises us to write down words when we read books and magazines for pleasure in the foreign language.	<b>48.4</b>	41.9	9.7	30.6	<b>50</b>	19.4
23	The teacher points to the similarities in sound and meaning between mother tongue and foreign language words (cognates).	22.6	<b>64.5</b>	12.9	25	<b>44.4</b>	30.6
24	The teacher connects new words with the ones we have learnt previously.	6.5	<b>67.7</b>	25.8	8.3	<b>50</b>	41.7
25	The teacher tells us to imagine a situation in which the new word would be used in order to remember it.	32.3	<b>54.8</b>	12.9	16.7	<b>58.3</b>	25
<b>26</b>	The teacher describes a situation in which the new word could be used.	12.9	<b>64.5</b>	22.6	16.7	22.2	<b>61.1</b>
27	The teacher tells us to underline new words in the text.	35.5	<b>51.6</b>	12.9	36.1	25	<b>38.9</b>
28	The words we learn are repeatedly mentioned in foreign language classes.	6.5	<b>51.6</b>	41.9	5.6	38.9	<b>55.6</b>
29	When testing, the teacher gives the foreign language word and we have to translate it into our mother tongue.	<b>80.6</b>	16.1	3.2	<b>91.7</b>	8.3	0

As shown in Table 3, the participants reported that, most frequently of all, teachers sought recourse in: a) Statement 6: providing example sentences

(62.7%), b) Statement 9: asking students to review words at home (64.2%), c) Statement 17: explaining words in the FL (80.6%).

Additionally, the three least frequent VTs were: a) Statement 14: translating FL words into mother tongue (67.2%; Never), b) Statement 16: translation of words from mother tongue into FL (83.6%; Never) and c) Statement 29: translation of words from FL into mother tongue (86.6%; Never). As can be seen, other less common VTs also include: Statement 2: Grouping words (61.2%; Never), Statement 12: showing pictures to assess vocabulary acquisition (65.7%; Never) and Statement 21: Reminding students of where a word appears in a book (59.7%; Never).

As with the VLSs, an independent samples test was run to check if there was any significant difference between males and females in their views of VTs (Table 4 below). This part addresses the fourth research question.

Table 4

*Independent Samples Test of VTs (Part 2)*

Questionnaire item	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Item 8	2.856	65	.006	.528
Item 26	2.035	65	.046	.348

Note.  $t_{\text{Item 8}}(65) = 2.856; p < .05$ .  $t_{\text{Item 26}}(65) = 2.035; p < .05$

As Table 4 shows, according to the participants' reports, teachers made more use of the boards (statement 8) and described a situation for the use of the new word (statement 26) more often with males than with females.

This part presents the results of the interviews concerning the most effective VTs. Figure 2 displays the VTs that the interviewees considered effective and helpful.

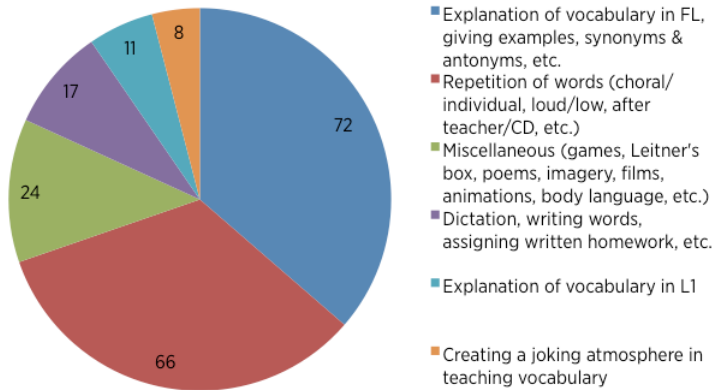


Figure 2. Effective VTSs (Interview results).

According to Figure 2, the participants regarded explanation in the TL accompanied by the provision of examples and repetition as the first two most effective strategies. Explanation in L1 was, however, the least favoured VTS. Notably, while the former strategy was found to be congruent with some previous research, the latter did not support it (see, e.g., Alexiou, 2001).

Figure 3 displays those strategies that the interviewees considered to be ineffective and unhelpful for teaching vocabulary.

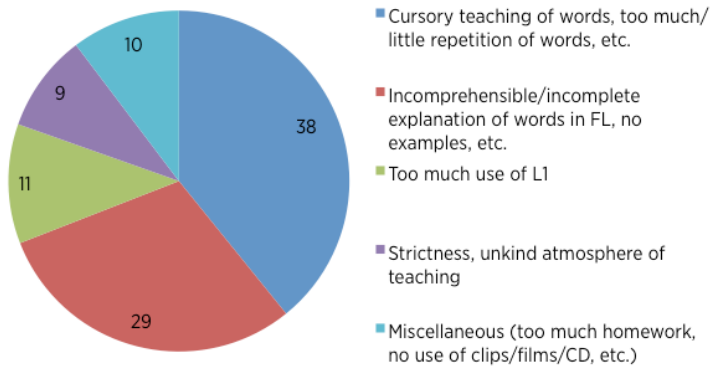


Figure 3. Ineffective VTSs (Interview results).

It can be seen from Figure 3 that superficial attention to words is regarded as the major cause of the unsuccessful instruction of foreign language words. This is followed by inadequate or complicated and, as a result, inexplicable explanation of words, particularly in the TL. The third factor was stated



to be the unreasonably excessive use of L1. Finally, the atmosphere of the classroom setting along with a number of ‘miscellaneous’ causes were mentioned as other influential factors.

As reported in Table 3, the questionnaire respondents reported that their teachers utilised three major strategies: providing explanations in the FL, example sentences as well as asking students to review words out of the class setting. It is very comforting to see that Iranian EFL teachers use these strategies, and it is expected that such strategies will result in the learners’ improved retention of words. Interestingly, although using context to teach vocabulary is enthusiastically recommended by researchers, Lawson and Hogben (1996) suggested that a distinction should be made between contextualising a word for the *generation* of meaning and contextualising it for the *acquisition* of meaning. They emphasised that these two functions of contextualisation are not of the same value and reported, somewhat warningly, that although students were able to generate meaning for words, they were not able to recall them for subsequent use. Lawson and Hogben attributed this inability to teachers’ focus on contextualisation for meaning generation instead of their focusing on the acquisitional contextualisation. Other researchers have stressed the significance of training learners in the use of context as an effective strategy in comprehending texts replete with unfamiliar vocabulary (e.g., Walters, 2006) as well as to enhance students’ collocational ability with the purpose of subsequent lexical improvement (e.g., Akpınar & Bardakçı, 2015).

The findings of the current study do not lend full support to some previous studies. For instance, unlike Takač’s (2008) findings, the results of the present study confirm that the participants’ VLS use is congruent with and parallel to their teachers’ VTS use. To set an example, learners used words in sentences to learn them and teachers provided the students with example sentences to teach words. Ježek (2016) defined context as ‘the set of words that immediately precede or follow it, that is, its immediate linguistic environment’ (p. 55), dividing it into three different kinds of syntactic, semantic, and situational (or pragmatic or extra-linguistic) context. Implied in this division of contexts is the fact that teachers are to be made aware that they can rely on these different types of contexts to teach vocabulary. Emphasis on context from which the meaning of unknown words can be guessed is considerable (see, e.g., Qian, 2004).

In contrast, the results confirm Takač’s (2008) findings in that the participants were found to use VLSs that were not necessarily utilised by teachers. For example, while the majority of the students translated words from the FL into their mother tongue, teachers were reported to use this strategy the least frequently of all (see Tables 1 and 3). To set another example, while teachers were

reported to emphasise dictionary use, nearly half of the participants asserted that they never used dictionaries to learn vocabulary. This finding warrants attention since the importance of the use of dictionaries in learning vocabulary has been regularly acknowledged in the literature (Linares, 2002).

The last question of the questionnaire enquired as to the amount of importance of both the teachers' and learners' role in vocabulary acquisition, requiring the participants to assign a percentage to the teacher and learner. Figure 4 presents the results of the calculation of the mean of percentages assigned to such roles.

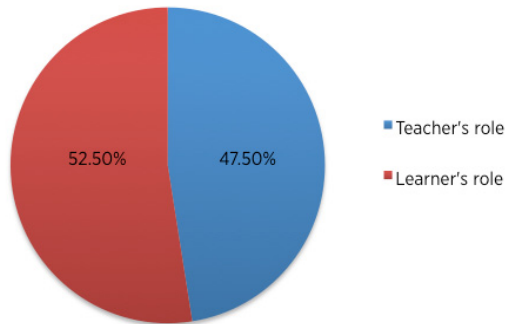


Figure 4. Importance of Teacher's and Learner's Role in Vocabulary Acquisition.

According to Figure 4 and the percentages reported for the roles of the teacher and learner, the participants viewed both roles as almost equally important.

### A word on Gender

Regarding the role of gender, the results indicated that the two gender groups differed significantly in both their VLSs and VTSs although the differences were limited to only four statements of the questionnaire. Gender-induced differences have already been documented in the literature. Catalán (2003), for instance, found differences in the number and type of strategies that males and females used to learn vocabulary and attributed these differences to the possible discrepancies in the perceptions of the two genders. The results of our study can be taken as further evidence to support Catalán's (2003) tentative statement, thus suggesting that teachers might wish to utilise different strategies to teach vocabulary in male-only or female-only classes.

This conclusion well applies to the Iranian context owing to the policy of single-sex education followed nation-wide. On the face of it, our results might imply that teachers should utilise different strategies to teach vocabulary to the two genders. As Takač (2008) also obtained similar results, the significant differences found between the two genders' VLSs and VTSs were both very low in number, and the mean score differences were not very high. It may, therefore, be more reasonable to ignore the possible theoretical significance of these differences and instead focus on the VLSs and VTSs as the findings of major interest.

### Emerging Categories

By casting a closer glance at the results of the interviews, as shown in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4, it can be concluded that almost all of these VLSs and VTSs, both effective and ineffective, can be grouped under three unifying, inter-related, and perhaps inter-dependent, sets as shown schematically below:

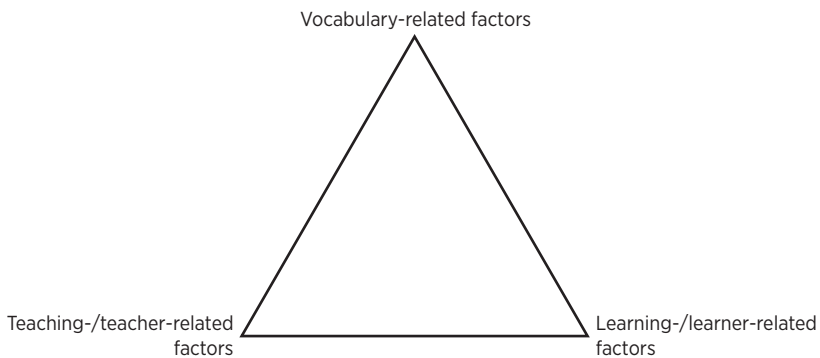


Figure 5. Three sets of factors influencing VL.

In a sense, Figure 5 can be said to provide a synopsis of all the findings of the present study in that it comprises issues concerning the vocabulary itself (e.g., synonymy, polysemy, pronunciation, etc.), issues regarding the context of teaching vocabulary (e.g., creating a playful and funny setting, providing good, comprehensible explanations, etc.) and finally factors relating to the learning and learner including repetition, constant, steady practice, and so on. The findings demonstrate that the participants have deemed all these factors to be intertwined, one set of factors influencing the other, one complementing the other but each somehow independent of the other.

## Observational Results

The data engendered through class observations were congruent with the questionnaire and interview data. Specifically, teachers were observed to rely on explanations, giving example sentences and synonyms and antonyms more than any other VT techniques. Games, realia and objects were rarely used and were mostly limited to classes with young learners or beginners. Most of the objects included those already present in class such as whiteboard, desks, tables and neighbouring objects such as apartments, streets, and shops. Rarely, if ever, did teachers bring any objects to class except for personal things, such as car keys, sunglasses, and pens.

It was also observed that students were more attentive when the class atmosphere turned more playful. This playfulness was at times due to cultural reasons, too. For instance, in clarifying the use of 'Miss', a male teacher stated that 'Miss' is used as an attention-seeking address term when a woman is addressed, giving the example: '*May I have your phone number, Miss?*'. Interestingly enough, occasional situations such as these produced a high level of attention among learners. This congenial atmosphere, notwithstanding, was only sporadic and it seems that teachers did not favour it for such reasons as it becoming tiresome, fatigue, burnout, discipline issues and so forth.

Generally, as was predicted from the questionnaire and interview results, the class observations lent much credence to the questionnaire and interview findings but the difference was that in the case of observations, more tangible, practical findings were obtained. Teachers read the word list and the students repeated after them. This technique, which on the surface of it seemed monotonous and boring to adults, was mainly favoured by young learners. Repetition was either choral or individual followed by teachers' explanations, examples and asking students to present their own examples. This technique was used in nearly all classes observed though not to the same extent. The observations therefore confirm the findings obtained from the questionnaire and interviews.

## Conclusion

The main thrust of this research study was to capture a triangulated picture of VLSs among Iranian EFL learners along with a depiction of teachers' VTSs. Implied in the discussion above is the fact that Iranian EFL learners use a good variety of VLSs. Despite this finding, the participants asserted that their teachers' vocabulary instruction revolved around certain types of VTSs. The claim here is not that teachers' VTSs are ineffective but that teaching vocabulary

may require the use of a larger number of strategies. The limited number of VTSs practiced by teachers might be attributable to the fact that teachers themselves are not trained in employing strategies wider in variety and number. If this statement turns out to be true, then it follows that VT training workshops and courses, by way of example, are to be set up where teachers are trained as to how to enhance students' lexical repertoire and their VL techniques.

Provided that there is a consensus among researchers on this issue, then research attention will understandably shift to teachers who are expected to shoulder the burden of strategy teaching in VL. The use of tasks in teaching vocabulary has also been strongly recommended as highly useful VTSs (Brown, 2013; Keating, 2008). The suggestion here is that the participants' mention of games as ways of VL is indicative of their interest in tasks as methods of VL.

### **Implications of Study**

The present study has clear implications to inform practice. As Qian (2004) pointed out, unknown words can be perceived as potential obstacles to comprehension. It, therefore, follows from this statement that teaching effective VLSs will result in improved comprehension. Since, obviously, it is not feasible to teach all the vocabulary items of the target language (TL) to the students, it is then reasonable to predict that capitalising on teaching VLSs instead of spending too much time and effort on teaching vocabulary items themselves can result in more effective lexical learning. This conclusion is warranted and can also lead to learner autonomy in VL as pointed out by Wei (2007).

Additionally, the learners' slight tendency to use dictionaries is of significance with the implication that learners should be made aware of the value and importance of dictionaries in enhancing one's lexical repertoire.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research, as Saunders (2013) asserts, is expected to focus on whether students' self-reported VLSs are effective or not. Indeed, this advice, therefore, calls for experimental research on VL. In addition, future research can be directed at exploring the possible relationships between such variables as learning styles, multiple intelligences and personality types and VL. Previous research has provided some evidence but there remains much to be explored (see, e.g., Golaghaei & Sadighi, 2011).

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## Appendix A. Interview

1. Describe three vocabulary learning strategies that you consider effective.
2. Describe three vocabulary teaching strategies that you consider ineffective.
3. Describe three vocabulary teaching strategies that you consider ineffective.
4. How important is the role of the teacher and learner in vocabulary learning? Assign a percentage to each.

## Appendix B. Vocabulary Teaching Class Observation Checklist

No.	Technique	Yes	No
1	Teacher explains the (new) words in the foreign language.		
2	Teacher explains the (new) words in the students' native language (i.e., use of translation).		
3	Teacher draws figures on the board to explain the new vocabulary.		
4	Teacher uses body language, gestures and motions to explain new words.		
5	Teacher asks one or some students to explain words to other students.		
6	Teacher asks students to make guesses as to what the new words mean.		
7	Teacher asks students to look up words in their dictionaries.		
8	Teacher shows pictures to explain new vocabulary items.		
9	Teacher uses example sentences to explain and contextualize new words.		
10	Teacher tells a short story, an anecdote or a joke to explain new words.		
11	Teacher associates new words with previously learned words to explain meaning of new words.		
12	Teacher asks students to make a mental image of something or someone to explain meaning of new words.		
13	Teacher groups words under one topic and attempts to relate them to each other in terms of meaning on the board.		
14	Teacher uses objects in class and realia to explain meaning of new words.		
15	Teacher contextualizes meaning of new words by bringing new texts to class and reading them aloud.		
16	Other: .....		