An Overview of Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Learners

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Abstract

This article aimed at examining the various vocabulary learning strategies used by learners to learn a word. Data from the study showed that learners do use certain vocabulary learning strategies and that strategy has become their preferred vocabulary learning strategies. The study also showed that learners use more than one strategy to learn a vocabulary. Thus, the study confirmed that multiple use of vocabulary learning strategies are preferred by learners especially the cognitive, determination and metacognitive strategies.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, preferred, multiple strategy

1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies (Nation, 2001). Since the late 1970's, vocabulary learning strategies have been receiving greater attention. There is an improved understanding of how learners process their skills in acquiring a second or foreign language. Language learning strategies are operations used by learners to aid the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Better language learners generally use strategies appropriate to their own stage of learning and use a variety of strategies.

Vocabulary learning strategies have gained much interest among many researchers who have attempted to define and classify vocabulary learning strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies are defined as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to comprehend, learn or retain information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 1), whilst Oxford (1990, p. 11) refers to them as "… specific actions or behaviors accomplished by students to enhance learning." (p. 11). On the other hand, vocabulary learning strategies are "what learners utilize when confronted with a learning task" (Gu, 2005, p. 9) and these strategies are dependent on the learners themselves. Another view of vocabulary learning strategies states that it is "what learners do to learn and regulate their learning" (Rubin, 1987, p.19). Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies can be defined as the learning style of individual learners that they utilize to enhance learning in an effective way.

1.1 Classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies have many classifications. Oxford (1990) has divided them into two categories, direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies comprise memory, cognitive and compensation whereas indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social. Gu and Johnson (1996) developed a list of vocabulary learning strategies that comprise: beliefs about vocabulary learning, metacognitive, regulation, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note taking strategies, memory strategies and activation strategies. These strategies may be placed into two categories: Metacognitive (of planning, monitoring and evaluating) and Cognitive strategies (of attention, rehearsal, production). In contrast, O'Malley and Chamot (1990), classify learning strategies into three groups: Metacognitive, Cognitive and Social/Affective strategies.

Remarkably, Schmitt (1997, 2000) identified the overlap of cognitive, metacognitive, memory and social functions in 58 vocabulary learning strategies that he adapted from Oxford's (1990) classification of vocabulary learning strategies. He then added determination of meaning strategies and went on to classify vocabulary learning strategies into two major groups: strategies for the discovery of new word meaning, and strategies for

consolidating a word once it has been encountered. Thus, Schmitt's classification of vocabulary learning strategies combine the direct (memory, cognitive, compensation) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, social, affective) found in Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990). Schmitt's classification of vocabulary learning strategies is more precise and comprehensive after the identification of overlap in Oxford's (1990) classification of strategies.

Many learners do use strategies to acquire vocabulary. The type of strategies that learners choose and how effectively the strategy is carried out is dependent on the vocabulary task (Gu & Johnson, 1996) and several linguistic skills (Schmitt, 2000). Based on the various definitions and classifications of vocabulary learning strategies, it may be stated that the choice of a strategy to enhance vocabulary depends on several factors. These include "degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality, general learning style, personalities, motivation level and purpose for learning the language" (Oxford, 1990, p. 13). Besides these variables for strategy choice, culture is another learner characteristic that determines vocabulary choice (Schmitt, 1997).

1.2 Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

1.2.1 Memory Strategies

Memory strategies traditionally known as mnemonics involve "relating the words to be retained with some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery or grouping" (Schmitt, 2000, p. 135). He states that this strategy entails elaborative mental processing that assists long-term retention. The new words can be integrated into the existing knowledge through imagery, use of keywords, grouping, associating or semantic grids (Schmitt, 1997). According to him if words are organized in systematic ways before the words are memorized, remembering of the word is improved.

Other memory strategies consist of creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing and employing action (Oxford, 1990, p. 39). According to Oxford, memory strategies involve arranging things in order, making associations and reviewing. These principles involve meaning which must be personally meaningful to the learner. Also the materials used must have significance to the word.

1.2.2 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies refers to the "manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (Oxford, 1990, p. 43) or general mental processing (Schmitt, 2000). In addition, cognitive strategies are techniques that directly affect incoming language information. Cognitive strategies are found to be the most preferred strategies among language learners (Oxford, 1990; Rafik-Galea & Wong, 2006). Cognitive and memory strategies have some similarities, but cognitive strategies are not focused so specifically on manipulative mental processing but rather they include "repetition, and using mechanical means to study vocabulary including keeping vocabulary notebooks" (Schmitt, 2000, p. 136).

The use of cognitive strategies is important for vocabulary learning as it involves the element of practice. Practice promotes internalization of vocabulary items. The subcategories of practice of strategies are repetition, recognizing patterns and recombining (Oxford, 1990). Repetition through practice is so well-established amongst learners that they refuse to give it up (O'Malley & Chamort, 1990). Repetition is a mechanical method of acquiring vocabulary (Schmitt, 1997; O'Malley & Chamort, 1990) and it is similar to memory strategies. Another sub-division of cognitive strategies is receiving and sending messages. This strategy helps learners to locate the main ideas by skimming and scanning (Oxford, 1990). It means that learners need not focus on every single word that they encounter. The third sub-division of cognitive strategies is analyzing and reasoning. Adult learners tend to reason out the new vocabulary by constructing a formal model in their mind based on analysis and comparison, and by creating general rules and revising them when new information is obtained (Oxford, 1990).

1.2.3 Compensation Strategies

Compensation strategies which belong to the direct strategies of vocabulary learning involve using the new language for comprehension or production (Oxford, 1990) and is intended to help learners with limited or complete absence of vocabulary knowledge and grammar. Compensation strategies are divided into two categories of guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

In contrast Schmitt (1997) categorizes compensation strategies differently. Based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, guessing from context, guessing from L1 cognate and consulting dictionaries are grouped under determination strategies. According to him, when a learner encounters lexis for the first time, he has to "use the knowledge of the language, contextual clues or reference materials to figure out the new

meaning" (p. 206).

However, Oxford (1990), explains compensation strategies as guessing intelligently through the use of linguistic or non-linguistic clues by a learner who encounters new words. Sometimes guessing can also be based on the learner's experiences. The other compensation strategies relate to overcoming limitations. For example, synonym, miming or gestures can be utilized to compensate for the inadequate vocabulary repertoire of a learner communication in both speaking and writing.

1.2.4 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies involve consciously over-viewing the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring or evaluating the best ways to study (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). In other words, through metacognitive strategies learners are able to improve access to input and decide on the best methods of studying. Metacognitive strategies are further classified by Oxford (1990) into three sub-categories. Firstly, centering learning includes over-viewing and paying attention. These strategies can be employed by learners who experience confusion with unfamiliar vocabulary or confusing rules. Next, Planning Learning involves organizing, setting goals and objectives, considering the purpose, and planning for a language task. Language learners who are serious with acquiring vocabulary must take responsibility and practice as much as possible to improve their vocabulary (Oxford, 1990). Finally, the third sub-categories of metacognitive strategies relate to Evaluating Learning that incorporates self monitoring and evaluating. This strategy is pertinent for learners who are worried when making errors and therefore, try to learn from their mistakes by evaluating themselves.

It has been suggested by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), that the division between cognitive and metacognitive strategies is not very transparent. Cognitive strategies range from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarizing which involves a wide range of activities, for instance, "inferencing or guessing contextual meaning, elaboration or relating new information to other concepts in memory" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 99). It is also found that cognitive strategies are preferred and used frequently by learners in comparison to metacognitive strategies (Hunt & Beglar, 2005; Rafik-Gales & Wong, 2006).

1.2.5 Social Strategies

Social strategies involve interaction with other people to improve vocabulary learning (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 2000). Learners can ask their teachers or peers for assistance about the unknown lexis by using paraphrases, synonym or translation (Schmitt, 2000). If the main purpose of the learner is to use the L2 efficiently, then paraphrasing or using synonyms would be more favorable than translation. Social strategies can also be employed to consolidate information. For example, Sanaoui (1995) highlighted how learners create their own opportunities for using the language outside the classroom. Learners can seek opportunities to interact with L1 speakers or make an attempt to use L2 among themselves outside the classroom.

Oxford (1990) has classified social strategies into three sub-categories: Asking Questions, Cooperating and Empathizing. Asking questions helps learners to get closer to the intended meaning and thus, helps their understanding (Oxford, 1990). It also indicates a learner's interest and involvement in the language and provides an opportunity to obtain indirect feedback about the learner's productive skill. In addition, a learner can also cooperate with peers to learn vocabulary. Cooperation does not involve competition among peers but group spirit (Oxford, 1990). Besides, cooperating with peers, learners can also demonstrate empathy by developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings. However, cooperative and empathy strategies in particular and social strategies in general are not much favoured by learners due to the learning environment that stresses competition for grades.

1.2.6 Affective Strategies

An effective strategy is another indirect strategy of acquiring vocabulary. Affective refers to emotions, attitudes, motivation and value (Oxford, 1990). There are three main sub-categories in Affective strategies: Lowering Anxiety, Encouraging and Taking Emotional Temperature. It is impossible to describe each of these categories within definable limits as these strategies encompasses domains like self-esteem, attitudes, motivation, anxiety, culture shock, risk taking and tolerance for ambiguity (Oxford, 1990).

According to Oxford, the affective side of a learner determines the learners' success or failure in vocabulary learning. Positive emotions and attitudes contribute towards learning. This can help learners to confront the emotional problems encountered and try to resolve them. Self-esteem is one of the main affective elements where learners are able to make judgmental of worth or value based on their feeling of efficacy. Low self-esteem can be destructive towards learning. Efficacy that is reflected in attitudes through mental disposition, beliefs or

opinion, influences the learners' motivation to keep on trying to learn. Apparently, a certain amount of anxiety helps learners to reach higher performance levels but too much of anxiety, or serious culture shock may disrupt learning. Therefore, self encouragement and anxiety-reducing strategies can assist learners towards learning (Oxford, 1990).

1.2.7 Determination Strategies

There are two categories of vocabulary learning in Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning: discovery and consolidation. Determination strategies are grouped under discovery of the meaning of anew word. When words are unknown to learners, there are a few avenues for discovering the new word. Learners may analyze the unknown word, its constituent elements or the surrounding context to conclude the meaning. Besides, analyzing the part of speech it belongs to would offer some information about the unknown word.

The communicative approach has been more comfortable with the strategy of guessing unknown words from the context as compared with other discovery methods (Schmitt, 1997). Contextual clues comes in a variety of modes, for instance, textual context, pictures, spoken discourse, gestures or intonation can give clues to meanings. Nevertheless, most commonly employed method for contextual guessing is the "use of surrounding words in a written text" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 209).

Another method used to find a word's meaning is through the use of a dictionary. Dictionaries while lacking the depth of processing are frequently used by many learners to determine meaning. Although monolingual dictionaries offer valuable information and improve learner ability to paraphrase, Schmitt's (1997) survey of attitudes to learning strategies showed a preference for bilingual dictionaries. Word lists and flash cards are part of determination strategies, but they are not favored by learners to find out the meaning of unknown words (Schmitt, 1997).

In sum, learners can choose learning strategies (see Table 1) that they prefer to acquire vocabulary. In doing so, they need to process the information in short-term memory through cognitive process. With repeated exposures to the new vocabulary would then be able to transfer and store it in long-term memory for future retrieval. As suggested by researchers, a combination of strategies for acquiring vocabulary would be effective rather than adopting one particular strategy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997, 2000).

Table 1. Summary of vocabulary learning strategies

Categories of Strategies	Types of Strategies
Memory	• Creating Mental Images • Applying Images and sounds • Reviewing Well • Employing Action
Cognitive	• Practice • Receiving and Sending Messages • Analysing and Reasoning • Creating Input and Output
Compensation	• Guessing Intelligently • Overcoming Limitations
Metacognitive	• Centering Learning • Planning Learning • Evaluating Learning
Social	• Asking Questions • Cooperating • Empathizing
Affective	• Lowering Anxiety • Encouraging
Determination	• Analysing speech, affixes • Contextual Guessing • Check L1 Cognate • Consulting Dictionary

2. Findings on Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Research has also shown that learners show preference for specific vocabulary learning during their language studies. The next part discusses learners' preferences in vocabulary learning strategies. Schmitt (2000) observes that many language learners do use strategies to learn vocabulary especially language tasks that integrate several linguistic skills, for example, oral communication that involves writing of speech content, constructing clear pronunciation or making questions. He goes on to provide reasons for learners to apply certain strategies such as the discrete nature of vocabulary learning compared to more integrated language activities. Memorization, repetition and taking notes are other frequently used vocabulary learning strategies. These mechanical strategies are often preferred by learners as compared to more complex ones, such as imagery, inferencing, or the keyword method that needs more considerably more active manipulation of information. Learners are also said to prefer "shallow" strategies even though they are less effective than "deeper" ones (p. 132). In fact, research on some "deeper" vocabulary learning strategies, for example, forming word association and using key word method has shown better vocabulary retention than rote memorization.

Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) introduce the use of vocabulary notebooks in enhancing vocabulary. New words encountered by learners can be enriched in multiple ways through semantic mapping or learning from context. Learning from context can be defined as incidental learning of vocabulary (Nation, 2001) that is through listening or reading. Whether learning is incidental or intentional, it is important that there was "quality of and frequency of the information processing activities" such as "elaboration of … a word form and meaning and rehearsal" (Hulstijn, 2001, p. 275) that takes place during learning. Keeping a vocabulary notebook can be used as a vocabulary learning strategy by learners.

Studies have shown that learners utilize multiple strategies to learn and acquire vocabulary (Gu & Johnson, 1996; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rafik-Galea & Wong, 2006; Schmitt, 1997; Wong & Abdullah, 2003). Rafik-Galea and Wong's study (2006) was conducted locally on adult university learners studying foreign languages. The respondents were given a questionnaire to state their preferences for vocabulary learning strategies. The five categories of vocabulary learning were cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, memory and social categories. From the five categories, cognitive strategies were highly preferred by the learners and metacognitive were the least preferred.

A similar study was conducted by Gu and Johnson (1996). The respondents in their study were first-year university students who were non-English majors. Unlike, Rafik-Galea and Wong's study (2006), the respondents in Gu and Johnson's study preferred metacognitive strategies, especially, the subcategories of self-initiation and selective attention. Learners who prefer metacognitive strategies to acquire vocabulary need to put in additional effort as metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring and evaluating learning experiences (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Further, the respondents also made extensive use of guessing strategies from the compensation category in learning a word. The respondents reported that they made use of the surrounding clues when reading a text. As such, findings from both Rafik-Galea and Wong's study (2006) and Gu and Johnson's (1996) study, reveal that the learners used multiple strategies to learn vocabulary.

Another study on the multiple uses of vocabulary learning strategies was conducted by Schmitt (1997) in Japan. The survey was conducted to study the pattern of usage of the various vocabulary learning strategies and to find out if usage of strategies change as learners mature. In Schmitt's study the use of bilingual dictionary was the most used strategy among the Japanese students and this was followed by guessing meaning in context. These two strategies belong to the determination strategy. The next frequently used strategy by the Japanese students was asking their classmates. This strategy belongs to the social strategy and both the determination and social strategy are from the discovery strategy according to Schmitt's grouping of vocabulary learning strategies. He divided the vocabulary learning strategies under discovery and consolidation strategies.

The data also showed that under the consolidation strategies, verbal or written repetitions were frequently used by the students. The other most-used strategies emphasized form, that is, to study spelling, say a new word aloud and study the sound of words. The study also showed that many of the vocabulary learning strategies taught to young learners are neglected as they mature. Word lists and flash cards which were frequently used by the junior high school learners were slowly abandoned as they become adult users of vocabulary learning strategies. Therefore, Schmitt's (1997) study confirms that learners naturally mature into using different strategies as they grow. The study also indicates that learner cognitive maturity and language proficiency must be taken into account when recommending vocabulary learning strategies. Hence, the present study seeks to determine if language learning games would be effective as another form of vocabulary learning strategy.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, all the studies discussed above regarding the use of vocabulary learning strategies confirm that learners do use specific vocabulary learning strategies to learn and acquire vocabulary. The cognitive strategies are frequently used as compared to the metacognitive and social strategies. The determination strategy as used in Schmitt's (1997) is comparable with the cognitive strategy as used in Rafek-Galea and Wong's (2006) study especially the use of the dictionary and contextual guessing. Meanwhile, in Gu and Johnson's (1996) study, the metacognitive strategies were more favoured by the learners. The studies also reveal that multiple uses of vocabulary learning strategies are more helpful than using only an individual strategy in the ESL or EFL writing tasks.

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