IMPROVING ENGLISH VOCABULARY FOR EFL PAKISTANI LEARNERS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN PAKISTAN

Arbab Fatima

MPhil Scholar,
Institute of Liberal Arts,
Department of Language and Communication
University of Management and Technology (UMT),
Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Abstract

Learning of words is an activity that begins the day a learner enters the language classroom and continues throughout the lifetime. This fact sufficiently underlines the place of vocabulary building in the language, and even more, in the EFL and L2 classroom. A 'good' language user is invariably the one who can use words well. However, as in the case of any other language skill, the knowledge and facility with learning strategies can make all the difference between successful or otherwise language learners. This paper aims to study the vocabulary learning strategies employed by the EFL learners at Lahore University of Central Punjab (UCP), to find out the worthy strategies and make useful pedagogical recommendations for future studies.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, EFL learners,

Introduction

Since "language ability is to quite a large extent a function of vocabulary size" (Alderson, 2005), it is imperative that language educators understand the processes that lead to vocabulary growth (Dodigovic,2017). Second Language Acquisition in Pakistani society has come a long way from the conventional classroom where the teacher dictated grammar rules to the learners and required of them to master the art of translation as the one and only means of learning the target language. In modern times, communication rather than mastery of grammar rules has taken the centre stage in the EFL or L2 classroom. To this end, it is realized that vocabulary is a very basic and desirable element in the process of language learning and acquisition because in any language it forms the basic building block. It is the concrete ground that the other language skills and the elements of sound and grammar can be built on; otherwise language learning cannot take place.

Without vocabulary, second / foreign language learning or acquisition will not occur: for these learners, they need knowledge of effective vocabulary leaning strategies to develop a sizeable vocabulary bank. We believe that the present study will arouse the learners' interest in the importance of vocabulary learning strategies for successful learning of a foreign or a second language.

Further, this will enable them to develop and/or adopt individual learning strategies that will eventually improve their vocabulary, the building blocks of communication. Thinkers and language researchers have long arrived at this conclusion.

The famous linguist, Wilkins (1972) rightly said that though some meaning may be conveyed with poor knowledge of Grammar, no meaning may be conveyed at all without vocabulary.

Carthy (1990 as cited in Zhi-liang, 2010) states that even with good command over grammar and the sounds of L2, meaningful communication cannot happen without knowledge of words. Lewis (1993) says that vocabulary acquisition is foundation of Second Language Acquisition. Further, that the four language skills are heavily dependent on vocabulary. Harmer (1997, as cited in Nosidlak, 2013) states that vocabulary is like the vital organs without which language cannot function. Yang and Weiping Dai (2011) assert that any language acquisition has lexis as the basis. According to Jassim & Dzakiria (2019) games are used not only for making children successful in EFL classes but more importantly, for motivating them and increasing the cooperation among children. Min (2013) claims that irrespective learner competency in grammar and pronunciation, effective communication is still a factor of vocabulary.

According to Hong Shi (2017) communications and cooperation among learners help arouse and recall their memory of newly learned vocabulary. Moreover, interactions between teachers and students facilitate language learning.

Objectives of the study

The main aim of this study is to paint a preliminary picture of vocabulary learning strategies employed by University of Central Punjab (UCP) students. Further, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. To explore the range of general strategies used by the EFL learners' in English vocabulary learning.
2. To detect the specific strategies employed by EFL learners in English vocabulary learning.

Literature Review

In the field of L2 learning and pedagogy, the learners are classified as successful and unsuccessful. It is believed that behind this difference is the fact that the successful learners employ different and more effective strategies than the less or unsuccessful ones. The strategies responsible for successful and unsuccessful learners have been defined differently by different scholars.

Rubin, (1987, p. 23) has defined language learning strategies as those means which help the cause of language system development in the learner thus directing having an outcome on language learning (cited in Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006).

Ellis (1999) is more direct in his definition when he says that vocabulary learning strategies are those that contribute to learning of vocabulary in the learner.

In a similar vein, Cameron (2001) defines VLSs as those learner actions that help them understand as well as remember words (cited in Rahimy & Shams 2012: 141) .

Nation (2001) states that there are important features by which vocabulary learning strategies are defined. These:

(1)   involve choice;
(2)   are complex, i.e. consisting of several steps;
(3)   require knowledge and benefit from training; and
(4)   increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and use.

Catalan (2003) gives an exhaustive definition of vocabulary learning strategy as the processes or steps that fulfill the following objectives: (a) finding the meaning of new words hitherto

unknown to the learner, (b) to retention of these in long-term memory, (c) ability to recall the newly acquired words at will, and (d) ability to use new vocabulary in oral or written communication.

Oxford (2003) defines VLSs in a direct definition as specific actions of the learners that make learning of new words simpler, quicker, more enjoyable, more self-directed, effective and applicable to new language situations.

Intaraprasert (2004) defines vocabulary learning strategies as a complex of techniques used by language learners to comprehend the meaning of a new word, to restore and expand their knowledge of newly acquired vocabulary.

Takač & Singleton (2008), however, believed that vocabulary learning strategies are only one of the several aspects of the overall language learning strategies.

Souriyavongsa, et. al. (2013) consider vocabulary learning as a kind of map to learning of language by students of EFL.

Classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies
The vocabulary learning strategies have been classified variously by scholars.

Social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive are the four categories defined by Oxford (1990) as ideal for language learning strategies. Ever since many language studies have been employing this classification to study strategies in the language classroom.

Gu and Johnson (1996) carried out extensive research in the Chinese classrooms to develop the following taxonomy to categorise vocabulary learning strategies:
•   Beliefs about vocabulary learning,
•   Metacognitive regulation,
•   Guessing strategies,
•   Dictionary strategies,
•   Note-taking strategies,
•   Memory, rehearsal strategies,
•   Memory encoding strategies,
•   Activation strategies.

Thus their classification is more specific than earlier scholars. Schmitt (1997) classifies VLSs into two main groups of strategies:
1.   Discovery strategies: means employed by language learners to explore new words;
2.   Consolidation strategies: internalization of the new word encountered.

Further, he categorized vocabulary learning strategies into five sub-categories:
1.   Individual strategies known as Determination strategies
2.   Acquisition of new words by means of interaction with other users, known as Social strategies
3.   Forming new connections in the memory linking new words to existing schema known as Memory strategies
4.   Employment of mechanical means such as memorization to acquire new words known as Cognitive strategies
5.   Tracking, making decisions and evaluating own progress in language learning known as Metacognitive strategies

Gu (2003), in his more recent article, names two important factors that divide vocabulary learning strategies on the basis of task and person. Task-based VLSs are applied depending upon

the language task at hand. Person based strategies can be differentiated by individual variations in language learning strategies. He also states that memory, form, meaning and use, in addition to context play a vital role in VLSs.

Xhaferi& Xhaferi, G. (2008) classified vocabulary learning strategies into two types namely: shallow and deep strategies. Shallow Strategies rely upon the short-term memory as they involve guessing meaning from the context, as in the case of fast readers. Deep strategies are used by the learners who learn slowly but lead to greater retention. These rely more on the use of the dictionary, forming associations with already known words and keyword method.

Tragant, Thompson, & Vicrori (2013) categorize VLSs into six strategy types, based

on:

1)   Memory;
2)   Cognition;
3)   Compensation;
4)   Metacognition;
5)   Management of feelings;
6)   Social interaction

Xu, and Hsu (2017) classified VLS into four broad categories and twenty-five subcategories. The four main strategies are Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, Memory Strategies and Socio-affective Strategies.

According to Akbari and Tahririan (2009) the VLSs are divided into two major groups: strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning (comprehension strategies) and strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered (learning/acquisition strategies). Comprehension strategies included determination strategies and transactional strategies. Determination strategies are divided into three main sub strategies: guessing meaning from the context, word analysis and looking up the word in the dictionary. With regard to transactional strategies, since asking the meaning from the teacher or classmates was not the way by which words were learned in social interactions, this strategy was called transactional strategy.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

In a study of Spanish male and female ESL learners, Catalan (2003) found significant differences in the number of strategies used. Further, male and female students differed in the variety of strategies that they employed for language learning.

In an extensive study of 675 Taiwanese learners of English, Tsai and Cheng Chang (2009) found that the most used strategy was dictionary use and the least used one were perceptions strategies. However, in contrast to Catalan's study, no significant differences between male and female students' employment of VLSs were found. One expected outcome was that the lower, intermediate and higher-level students used vocabulary strategies ranging in that order.

Zhi-liang (2010) studied the pattern of English VLSs used by the non-English major students in Chinese Independent Colleges on the following counts, such as: attitudes to vocabulary learning; strategies most commonly used; problems encountered in vocabulary acquisition; the most effective strategies used; differences in vocabulary by grades, and gender. The findings showed that female students used a wider range of strategies than the male students, and also devoted more time to vocabulary learning and practice.

The most preferred strategies included use of the bilingual dictionary, guessing meanings from the context, seeking teacher assistance when encountering a new word in a sentence, oral and written repetition of new, whereas, use of English dictionary, seeking peer assistance for the meaning of new words, word analysis for part of speech, affix or root were the least-used strategies.

In a study of Iranian language learners Soureshjani (2011) observed that learners employed association ie connecting a new word to its synonyms and antonyms and using physical actions to describe a word as the most frequently used strategies.

In a surprising finding, Asgari and Ghazali Bin Mustapha (2011) while examining the vocabulary learning strategies used by Malaysian ESL students majoring at teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) found that the participants were not aware of most of the vocabulary strategies being discussed in the language arena. If at all they employ any of these, the frequency is very low.

In a study to find the frequency of the use of VLSs by Jordanian EFL learners at Jordan University of Science and Technology, Al-Khasawneh (2012) arrived at the clear result that determination strategies were the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among the students. On the other hand, the least frequently used were metacognitive strategies.

Kameli, et. al (2012) conducted a study to evaluate the influence of formal language learning environment (classroom, teachers, and peers) on vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL students studying in the programme Teaching English as a Second Language in University Putra Malaysia. The most supportive factors for new word acquisition were found to be the teachers, peers and classroom environment.

Nosidlak (2013) conducted a study to analyse the language learning strategies used by 102 advanced students of English philology at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland to specify the most favoured vocabulary learning strategies used by the advanced students and related the same to their proficiency. It was found that the advanced learners used a combination of strategies to learn new words with internet being a popular source of these. Further, traditional sources of vocabulary acquisition were also much used. Finally, the advanced learners used similar but diverse VLSs.

Lin and Yang (2014) found that: instrumental motivation exerts primary effects on the participants during their junior or high school period, for expanding vocabulary in pursuit of good performance on English tests, for entering an ideal school, or for parents'/teachers' compliments. They found also some vocabulary strategy use, the participants' instrumental motivation and integrative motivation subtly interweaved at a later stage of their life, alternately activating their English learning; and cognitive, memory and compensatory strategies were more facilitative for the participants' vocabulary learning.

Rashid's (2014) findings suggest that looking for chances to encounter newly learnt words in resources such as English language newspapers/magazines or books on literature, writing words in sentences, using words in everyday conversation in English, and listening to English-Language TV programmes are strategies both most frequently used and perceived to be most effective. The keyword method, followed by listening to words on computers/tape-recorders/mobile phones/mp3 or electronic dictionaries, and repeating words aloud are reported as the least-frequently used and considered least effective strategies.

The results of Ming Wei's (2007) study indicated an overall medium use of VL strategies of Chinese students, with high-proficiency students learning vocabulary in a more systematic and

organized way. The study also showed that Chinese female students make insignificantly more use of VL strategies than male learners; in addition, there are some important differences at the micro level, and female students are more aware of the importance of management in VL.

Methodology

The questionnaire used in the study is an adaptation of Gu and Johnson's (1996, pp. 673-679)
 The final version comprised 38 items that sought learner feedback on vocabulary learning strategies that were grouped as per the following layout:
1.   Guessing;
2.   Dictionary use;
3.   Making a written note of new words;
4.   Memorizing;
5.   Activation;
6.   Metacognitive;
7.   Social;
8.   Translation to mother tongue.
For each of the strategies a minimum of three and a maximum of sixteen questions were included to ensure reliability of the responses. The questions were arranged corresponding to the strategies listed above. The questionnaire was administered to 78 male students to whom English is taught as an EFL Course at UCP University, Lahore

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