

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) LEARNERS IN VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

This study is an effort to examine cognitive, metacognitive and motivational dimensions of self-regulation in vocabulary learning among a group of International ESL learners in order to provide some insights into vocabulary instruction in language education. The study therefore, emphasizes on the use of vocabulary learning strategies used by 30 ESL students who were considered intermediate proficient English learners, with age average between 25-45 years. These students were questioned about their usage of vocabulary learning strategies following GU and Johnson Taxonomy. The subjects of this study were 30 ESL learners and 12 students within the 30 participants in three classes voluntarily participated in an interview. The result showed that strategies such as repetition strategies, dictionary use are still dominant among learners, while the deep processing strategies like semantic encoding and word structure, which are advocated in the literature are minimally used by learners. The findings of the study suggests that the learners need to engage in more active use of cognitive vocabulary learning strategies, and more importantly to enhance their metacognitive awareness and control of the use of the strategies so as to improve their perception (i.e., self-efficacy) and motivation in vocabulary leaning.

Keywords: Acquisition, Vocabulary, Self-Regulation, Learning, Strategy

1. Introduction

Self-regulation in academic learning has been intensively investigated outside the ESL context. However, similar terms have been gaining increasing attention in language education since the early 1970s, such as, Self- Directed Language Learning (SDLL), Learner Autonomy, and Self-instruction (McDonough, 2001). One of the basic justifications for these concepts is to assist learners to learn how to learn, and to develop their independent learning capacity (Benson, 2001).

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) has been exerting a strong influence on the research area of learning strategies (Benson, 2001). Different from the metacognitive view of learning strategies, which focuses on cognitive thinking skills and processes, SRL emphasizes the interdependent relationships between motivational beliefs (self efficacy) and cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Duckworth, Akerman, MacGregor, Salter, & Vorhaus, 2009). In the literature of vocabulary acquisition in language education, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) play an essential role in developing learners' self-regulatory capability in learning vocabulary (Graves & Fink, 2007). However, most studies on VLS focus on cognitive strategies, while less concern has been given to metacognitive and

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affective factors of vocabulary learning (Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003). Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of SRL, this study attempts to investigate cognitive, metacognitive and motivational dimensions of self-regulation in vocabulary learning among a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in order to provide some insights into vocabulary instruction in language education.

2. Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Vocabulary-learning strategy (VLS) demonstrate a fundamental role in developing learners' self-regulatory competency in learning vocabulary (Graves & Fink 2007). Though, most studies on VLS emphasize cognitive strategies, and minor concern has been given to metacognitive and affective dynamics of vocabulary learning (Rasekh & Ranjbary 2003). Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of SRL, this study attempts to investigate cognitive, metacognitive and motivational dimensions of self-regulated learning strategies of International ESL learners.

According to Nation (1990), from the late 1980s, vocabulary has been an area that had drawn researchers' interest within the mainstream of second (L2) acquisition. Researchers realized that many learners' difficulties, both receptive and productive, result from an inadequate vocabulary, and even when they are at higher levels of language competence and performance, they still feel in need of learning vocabulary. Gu and Johnson (1996) pointed out most research on vocabulary learning strategies have focused on various methods of vocabulary presentation, and their effects on retention. Hatch & Brown (1995), however, discovered vocabulary as central to language and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning. Theorists and researchers in the field have recently recognized the prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning. Accordingly, numerous types of approaches, techniques, exercises and practice have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary. Moreover, Nation (2001) makes it clear that vocabulary-learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies, which in turn are part of general learning strategies. Oxford (1990), also observes language-learning strategies encouraging greater overall self-direction for learners. Self-directed learners are independent learners who are able to assume responsibility for their own learning and gradually gaining confidence, involvement and proficiency. Thus, students need training in the vocabulary learning strategies to improve their receptive and productive vocabulary. Research has shown that many learners use more strategies to learn vocabulary, especially when compared to such integrated tasks as listening and speaking. Yet Schmitt (1997) claims that they are mostly inclined to use basic vocabulary learning strategies. This in turn makes strategy instruction an essential part of any foreign or second language program. However, a greater knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies could be very useful in supporting teachers to plan their lessons more effectively and give guidance to students in adopting successful strategies. Over the decades, many researchers have made efforts not only to classify, but also gather, these strategies in order to support learners' efforts in vocabulary development. According to Seal (1991), word knowledge is an important part of communicative competence, and it is essential for both production and comprehension in a language. Knowing a word involves general frequency of use, its underlying form and the forms that can be derived from it, the network of its semantic features and, the various meanings associated with the item.

Nation (1990) defines word knowledge as the knowledge of its spelling, pronunciation, collocations, and appropriateness in usage. Therefore, vocabulary competence goes beyond the ability to know the meanings of a number of words. Vocabulary competence covers a wide range of knowledge, which in turn, requires a variety of strategies to gain the knowledge. L2 language learners may use various strategies to acquire the target language's word knowledge. Taking this into consideration,

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many L2 language researchers make a great effort to classify vocabulary-learning strategies, used by L2 language learners. For instance: Gu and Johnson (1996) have a taxonomy which notes L2 vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. **Metacognitive strategies** consist of selective awareness and self-initiation strategies. L2 learners who employ selective awareness strategies know which words are important for them to learn and are essential for adequate comprehension of a passage. Learners who employ self-initiation strategies use a variety of means to make the meaning of vocabulary items clear. **Cognitive strategies** in Gu and Johnson's taxonomy involve guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. Learners using guessing strategies draw upon their background knowledge and use linguistic clues like the grammatical structures of a sentence to guess the meaning of a word. **Memory strategies** are classified into practising and encoding categories. Word lists and repetition are instances of practicing strategies. Instructing strategies include such strategies as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word-structure (i.e., analyzing a word in terms of prefixes, stems, and suffixes). The **activation strategies** include those strategies in which the learners actually use new words in different contexts. For example, learners may construct sentences using the words they have just learned.

Schmitt (1997) has a taxonomy that is a comprehensive inventory of vocabulary learning strategies. He divides the strategies into two groups: the ones to determine the meaning of new words when learners encounter them for the first time, and the ones to consolidate meaning when learners encounter the same words again. The former group contains determination and social strategies and the latter cognitive, metacognitive, memory and social strategies. Schmitt (1997) includes social strategies in both categories since they can be used for both purposes. To Schmitt (1997), determination strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience". Accordingly, learners try to discover the meaning of a new word by guessing it with the help of context, structural knowledge of language, and reference materials. For Schmitt (1997), another way to discover a new meaning is through employing the social strategies of asking someone for help with the unknown words. By the initial discovery of a word, learners need to employ a variety of strategies to practise and retain vocabulary. Learners, thus, use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies combined to improve their vocabulary knowledge. Cooperative group learning through which learners study and practice the meaning of new words in a group is an instance of social strategies for consolidating a word. Memory strategies, traditionally known as Mnemonics, involve relating the word with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of imagery or grouping. Cognitive strategies in this taxonomy are similar to memory strategies but are not focused on manipulative mental processing. They include repetition and using mechanical means such as word lists, flash cards, and vocabulary notebooks to study words. Finally, metacognitive strategies in Schmitt's taxonomy are defined as strategies used by learners to control and evaluate their own learning, by having an overview of the learning process in general. Testing oneself is an instance of metacognitive strategies, which provide "input to the effectiveness of one's choice of learning strategies, providing positive reinforcement if progress is being made or a signal to switch strategies, if it is not".

Nation (2001), also gives a taxonomy of various vocabulary learning strategies. The strategies in the taxonomy are divided into three general classes of 'planning', 'source' and 'processes', each of which is divided into a subset of key strategies. The taxonomy separates different aspects of vocabulary knowledge (what is involved in knowing a word). The first category, which is planning, involves deciding on *where, how and how often to focus attention on the vocabulary item*. The strategies in this category are choosing words, choosing aspects of word knowledge and choosing strategies as well as planning repetition. The second category in Nation's taxonomy involves getting information about the word. This information may include all the aspects involved in knowing a word. It can come from the word form the context, or other source like dictionaries. Process is the third and last

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category of vocabulary learning strategies. It includes establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies.

Strategies at this level include putting the word in a vocabulary notebook or list; putting the word onto a word card and orally and visually repeating the word. He argues that although these strategies are all of recording type, they are useful steps resulting in deeper processing of words. Retrieval involves recalling the items met before. It contains recalling knowledge in the same way it was originally stored. Nation (2001) also finds that generating strategies include “attaching new aspects of knowledge to what is known through instantiation (visualizing examples of words), word analysis, semantic mapping and using scales and grids. Generating strategies include rule-driven generation as well, such as creating context, collocations, and sentences containing the new word. Besides, the mnemonic strategies and using the word in a different context through these skills above are also defined as generating strategies. Generally, even though the taxonomies cited above may slightly differ in terms of strategies they categorize, they all provide a list of widely applicable vocabulary learning strategies, which the ESL learner may use.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL): SRL is the learning that is directed by metacognition (thinking about thinking), strategic action (planning, monitoring, and evaluating personal progress), and motivation to learn. Paris and Paris (2001), claim that self-regulated learning stress is independence and control by the specific monitors, directs, and controls actions concerning goals of information acquisition, increasing proficiency, and self- improvement. Precisely, self-regulated learners are conscious of their academic potencies and limitations, and have a repertoire of strategies they aptly use to confront the challenges of the academic undertaking. Perry et al., (2006), believe that students who are self-regulated learners think that chances to take on challenging task, practice their learning, develop a hidden understanding of subject matter, and utilize power will give rise to academic success. This may in part justify why self-regulated learners frequently show a high sense of self-efficacy (Pintrich & Schunk 2002).

Self-regulated learning is a practice that helps students in handling their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions in order to successfully direct their learning skills. This process occurs when a student’s determined actions and procedures are focused towards the acquisition of information or skills. Generally, models of SRL are separated into phases. One popular cyclical model discusses three distinct phases: Forethought and planning, performance monitoring, and reflections on performance (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). During the forethought and planning phase, students examine the learning task and set detailed objectives toward finishing that task. When students learn new topics, nevertheless, they may not know the best ways to attack the task or what objectives might be the most suitable. Teachers and/or more knowledgeable colleagues often can coach students on efficient methods in situations like these.

In the performance-monitoring phase, students engage in strategies to make progress on the learning task and observe the usefulness of those strategies as well as their motivation for steady progress regarding the goals of the task. Sadly, when strategies are new, students sometimes backslide to using more conversant and possibly unproductive strategies. Whereas taking the time necessary to practice and learn the new strategy might lead to significant learning, but students’ use of their fallback approach will likely leave them with a significantly less efficient means to their learning.

3. Methodology

The subjects for this study were 30 International Intermediate ESL learners. They are of Nigerian, Malaysian, and Iraq origin in the University of Putra, Malaysia. The subjects' age ranged between 25 and 45 years. And they were both male and female subjects. In the study both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted to answer the three research questions. In the first instance, an adapted questionnaire developed by GU and Johnson (1996) was used to study the students' use of vocabulary learning strategies. The results of Cronbach's Alpha reliability test suggested that the constructs had acceptable internal consistency, particularly for those constructs with a smaller number of items. Descriptive statistics are used to assess the students' cognitive vocabulary learning strategies, and both mean and standard deviation of item are calculated using SPSS.

A structured interview was also conducted to investigate the participants' metacognitive and motivational aspects of self-regulation in vocabulary learning. Twelve (12) students within the thirty (30) participants in three classes voluntarily participated in the interview. Some interview questions on motivational and metacognitive dimensions were adapted from the general interview questions developed by GU (2003). The students were required to provide their responses on tape recorded by the researcher. The information from the preparation step was used in the process of designing the questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted with ten (10) students who were similar to the actual subjects. Items that were problematic were discarded.

The statistical package, SPSS program, and the descriptive statistics were used for the analysis of the study thus answering these research questions, What are the cognitive vocabulary learning strategies used by the learners? What are the metacognitive self-regulatory strategies used by the learners? And what are the learners' motivational beliefs in learning vocabulary?

4. Results

Student's use of vocabulary learning strategies: An overview of vocabulary learning strategies used by the entire group was compiled. A total of nineteen vocabulary learning strategies were categorized into six groups, i.e., dictionary, guessing, memory, note taking, activation and metacognitive vocabulary strategies. The ranking of the strategies are according to the mean of each strategy used.

The results indicated that the least used strategies for ESL learners were self-initiation ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.39$); extended dictionary strategies use ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.78$), word structure ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.73$) and semantic encoding ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.82$); while the mostly used strategies were dictionary strategies for comprehension ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.69$), meaning-oriented note taking strategies ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.73$), and oral repetition ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.78$). According to the depth of processing theory (Craik & Tulving, 1975), the findings indicated that shallow processing strategies, such as repetition strategies, dictionary usage (mainly for looking up the meaning of a word). In contrast, the deep processing strategies, such as, semantic encoding and word structure, which are advocated in the literature, are less preferred by the learners particularly self-initiation.

Metacognitive learning strategies used by the Interviewed learners

Goal setting and planning The responses of 11 learners out of the thirty (30) respondents indicated that they did not set a goal for their vocabulary learning. During the follow-up clarification, most of the participants stated that they usually looked up the word in a dictionary when they encountered a new word or before memorizing the new word. Only three participants stated that they set learning goals and plan vocabulary learning, ("remember 20-30 words per day" "repeatedly memorizing words everyday", "first plan what I want to learn, such as doing vocabulary exercise, learn twenty (20) new words every day). Besides, most of the respondents indicated that they did not purposely try new strategies. Only three students clearly indicated that they purposely used strategies to learn

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vocabulary ("learn English vocabulary in magazine;" use English-English dictionary, writing in English). Besides, listening to English news sometimes, "read newspaper, watch movies and listen to music, only one student mentioned that he tried the memory encoding strategies, such as, " imaginary word association Goal setting and planning are closely related concepts in SRL. The responses given by the participants about goal setting and planning for vocabulary learning indicated that they lacked strategy awareness and knowledge and skills in vocabulary learning.

Monitoring strategies: A Total of twelve (12) respondents stated that they did not keep record of their progress in vocabulary learning. Only one respondent stated that: "On weekdays, I usually learn twenty (20) new words every day, and then on weekend I review the words I learned during the week and I mark those I could not remember, and review them again the following day". With regard to the interview questions on the monitoring strategy used during reading, six (6) respondents said that they looked up the word in a dictionary when they encountered a difficult word during reading, for example, "I think I usually use a dictionary. I know this is not good idea, but I feel learning word is hard for me. So I have to use it"; " I can check the word in computer then get its meaning". Some of them stated that they usually guess the meaning first, then use dictionary, ("I think guessing the word first, and then using dictionary to check if your guess is right or wrong. Then you know the meaning of the word"). It is in line with the results of strategy use survey, the learners most frequently use dictionary for comprehension purpose, that is, look up the meaning of word rather than using dictionary as a resource to exploit the information of a word so as to expand their vocabulary knowledge. The respondents did not indicate regular review and using notebook to record word information.

Self-evaluation: The responses of the ten (10) participants indicated that they were not sure of which words or expressions were important to learn, ("I don't know which words are worth remembering. I just try to remember all the words I see; just feelings, sometimes, I don't know"). Only four (4) respondents clearly stated that "identifying if it is a key word in an essay "and "read a lot and find it is used many times"; " if it is used widely in daily life, I will remember"; similarly "I'll see if the word is often used and useful to express meaning. As for evaluating their own vocabulary, ten (10) respondents stated that they did not evaluate their vocabulary. Some of the evaluation methods stated by the other students were general statements, ("when reading an article, I notice how much vocabulary I could understand"). None of the respondents stated that they used self-check or self-test in their vocabulary learning. The above responses regarding evaluation in terms of vocabulary learning indicated that the respondents had little awareness in evaluation of vocabulary learning and strategy use.

Motivational beliefs in learning vocabulary: Nine (9) respondents stated that they felt they were not good at learning vocabulary, while the other five (5) respondents stated that they were good in certain aspects, e.g. "I'm good at pronunciation". It might indicate the perceptions of most respondents on their capabilities in vocabulary learning were low. Furthermore, nine (9) respondents stated that they were interested in learning English vocabulary. One respondent stated that she was very interested in learning English vocabulary. The other four (4) stated that they were not interested at all. However, different from the responses on interest in learning English vocabulary, nine (9) participants stated that they were low in motivation in learning vocabulary; and one participant stated that he was not motivated at all. Only four (4) participants stated that they were motivated in learning vocabulary.

In the interview conducted, it was revealed that though most of the respondents recognized the importance of vocabulary in their language learning, and they did not show interest in learning it. Many of them however, in practice, regarded learning vocabulary as a tiresome memorizing task; thus, motivation in learning words was low.

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Besides, eight (8) participants think that it is hard to learn English words. The difficulties stated by the respondents, e.g., "I always forget new words. I didn't read enough and cannot use the words in a proper way"; most difficulties are remembering and using the word". It reveals that the difficulties confronted by learners might reduce their self-efficacy in vocabulary learning, and it is likely related to their lack of vocabulary knowledge and the ways of learning vocabulary effectively. It also indicates that lack of knowledge and strategies and low motivation are impediments to vocabulary learning.

5. Discussion of Results

Based on the research questions, the results of the study are summarized and discussed in three ways. First, it was found that a variety of vocabulary strategy use was lacking among the learners, especially, review, note taking, and memory encoding strategies. Both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, revealed this deficiency. Besides, the low processing vocabulary learning strategies (oral repetition, meaning-oriented note taking and using dictionary for comprehension purpose) are still dominant among the learners, which is in line with the findings of the previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese EFL learners (Zhang, 2005). However, deep processing strategies (word structure and semantic grouping), are less used by the learners. Furthermore, the sharp difference between dictionary use for comprehension purposes and for extended purposes indicated limited use of the dictionary among the participants. Fan's (200) study with a group of Chinese Hong Kong EFL learners also found that information given about a word (i.e., collocation, pronunciation, frequency, appropriateness) tended to be ignored by the students when looking up a new word in a dictionary. Besides, the difference between meaning oriented note taking strategies and usage-oriented note taking strategies also shows that students tended to focus on the form and meaning of a word rather than the usage of a word in a context. This was also found in a study done by Tang (2001). From his observations in Chinese college English classrooms, he found that upon learning a new word, the students merely stored its meaning in memory, and made no attempt to use it actively. Also, metacognitive learning strategies (goal-setting, planning, self-monitoring and evaluation), were minimally applied by the learners. It might indicate that learners lacked the knowledge and performance of strategies for vocabulary learning. This resonates with the findings on metacognitive strategy training by Zhao (2009) who found a lack of metacognitive strategy use in vocabulary learning among Chinese EFL learners. Though most of the learners recognized the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition, the low self-efficacy and low motivation found by the study might be due to the lack of knowledge and skills in vocabulary learning, which in turn affected their strategy performance.

Therefore, the findings of the study suggest that the learners need to engage in more active use of cognitive vocabulary learning strategies, and more importantly to enhance their metacognitive awareness and control of the use of the strategies so as to improve their perception (self-efficacy) and motivation in vocabulary learning.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the use of vocabulary learning strategies used by learners. A total of thirty(30) ESL students who were ranked intermediate proficient English learners at University of Putra Malaysia participated in the study. The age average of the participants was between 25-45 years. Participants were asked about their usage of vocabulary learning strategies following GU and Johnson Taxonomy. It was discovered that variety of vocabulary strategy use is lacking among the learners, especially review, note taking, and memory encoding strategies, which are evident in both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Furthermore, the sharp difference between dictionary use

for comprehension purposes and for extended resolves showed partial use of the dictionary among the participants

Some of the limitations discovered during the study include the use of subjects from different nationalities, though they are of the same proficiency level in English, but being from different nationalities has to some extent affected the result of the study. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies be carried out without the said limitation.

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