



Strategies for Vocabulary Learning among Iraqi EFL Students

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Abstract

Over the recent past, language learning in many institutions has focused on learning and teaching grammar hence leaving non-native students to explore vocabulary learning strategies individually without much assistance leading to some adopting ineffective approaches. This has made the English learning process very difficult, complex, and confusing for many learners. In this regard, this paper empirically explores the different methods applied by Iraqi EFL students in learning English vocabulary. In this study, 88 Iraqi EFL second year undergraduate students from the Arts and English departments in a middle of Iraq University were selected as the sample and issued with questionnaires regarding vocabulary learning methods and strategies. The respondents filled the questionnaires appropriately and the results were presented in a bar graph for analysis. The study focused on finding and comparing the frequency levels of vocabulary learning strategies applied by students from these departments using the Strategy Inventory for vocabulary learning methods. The responses obtained from the questionnaires were applied in eliciting the findings and the pedagogical as well as appropriate recommendations were made in regard to these findings. Finally, the findings showed that the use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies was low in terms of frequency and only memory vocabulary development strategies were predominantly used by learners. As such, little initiatives existed for encouraging vocabulary learning.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, Iraqi EFL students, vocabulary size, mental lexicon

INTRODUCTION

Non-native speakers obviously have a huge challenge in learning a new language including the terminologies and phrases involved. Therefore, the primary focus for Iraqi EFL students and their tutors is to apply effective Vocabulary Learning Strategies not only to facilitate the process and but also to ensure the appropriate fluency levels are achieved within the appropriate duration. According to Rababa (2003), Iraq students have limited opportunities and contexts to develop their English fluency and literacy naturally since they rarely get the opportunities to interact with native English speakers. Another challenge faced by the Iraqi EFL students is that they only use English for communication during classes and lessons hence seldom communicate in English but thus making the vocabulary learning process very slow and challenging as they speak in Arabic most of the times. In addition to this, most studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies are

pedagogically oriented due to the perception that the language instruction process is highly fruitful when based on what students indulge in while learning the specific language. As such, the strategies applied in the vocabulary learning process encompass the processes, steps, techniques, operations, thoughts, or the behaviors applied by students in facilitating, guiding, and solving the challenges associated with learning a new language. Vocabulary learning processes have been classified using different approaches in the past and one of the most effective and comprehensive methodology applied is the Oxford's taxonomy which categorizes Language Learning Strategies into the six groups. As such, tutors have been reluctant in the exploration of the appropriate vocabulary learning strategies to facilitate better English comprehension among second language learners. In addition to this, there has been a literature gap in regard to the appropriate vocabulary learning strategies suitable in the many contexts, regions, and languages. Vocabulary Learning Strategies is a collective term which therein comprises of vocabulary learning strategies which are the methodologies used to facilitate vocabulary comprehension and understanding. Therefore, this paper is an empirical investigation on the Vocabulary Learning Strategies applied by Iraqi EFL students in enhancing English comprehension and understanding.

Aim of the Study

This paper explores the different Vocabulary Learning Strategies applied by undergraduate Iraqi EFL students in learning new English words and vocabularies.

Hypothesis

This paper hypothesized that Iraqi EFL students entirely used memory strategies for learning new English words.

Study Limitation

This paper exclusively applies to Iraqi EFL undergraduate students hence its findings cannot be assumed to be generalized for any other group hence its application in different contexts might otherwise lead to making invalid assumptions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Taxonomy of Vocabulary learning Strategies

Prior to the introduction of vocabulary learning in the eighties, this field of learning a second language had never been explored in depth (Abid, 2012). Richards (1976) pointed out that language development was one of the essential aspects of learning that had been neglected, especially in second language or foreign instruction. A decade later however, more and more attention was paid to vocabulary studies, which was depicted by the ever increasing number of publications which focused on empirical language learning strategies. In addition to this, several authors published an array of books exploring the issue of foreign or second language learning and the acquisition of vocabulary. According to Schmitt and McCarthy (1997), the initial studies on vocabulary learning focused only

on a tiny proportion of the language learning strategies and only an insignificant number managed to view the entire group wholly.

In his taxonomy, Schmitt makes use of the Purpura categorization approach in analyzing memory storage strategies. Memory storage strategies are then classified into: summarizing, linking with prior knowledge, associating, using mechanical means, repeating, and using imagery (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011). In this vein, Schmitt criticizes Oxford's approach on the grounds that it lacks a category which convincingly accounts for the approach in which a learner can seek and know the meanings of various English words without necessarily having to get external assistance from anyone. It is from such grounds that Schmitt introduced the 'Determination Strategies' category to cater for the same.

These discrepancies led to the emergence of different frameworks for exploring the different groups of methods for vocabulary learning and development. One of such frameworks was created by Oxford and was the grouping of the six basic parameters which included Social, Metacognitive, Memory, Compensation, Cognitive, and Affective strategies. Another approach was by O'Malley and Chamot (1985), who categorized language learning strategies in three major groups namely social/affective, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. The focus of most undergraduate students as well as their teachers has been the use of general Language Learning Strategies (LLS'), which is the same case with the Iraqi EFL undergraduates. According to Uglu (2015), the language learning activities such as oral presentation, comprehension, and listening are complex hence tutors prefer the application of learning strategies due to its simplicity and reliability. Nevertheless, he explains that classrooms are designed to discourage integrative activities while promoting discrete ones. Vocabulary retention methodologies as well as vocabulary learning strategies have been highly emphasized in undergraduate second language studies hence a primary focus for the vocabulary learning process. Nonetheless, the process of learning new vocabularies has been emphasized on many topics in the English and Arts classes. The vocabulary learning process however was hypothesized as one which is comprised of different steps and stages which ensure better word comprehension and understanding. The first theory was developed by Richards (1976) who proposed the following assumptions in learning about words in any second language.

1. Understanding a word entails acknowledging the semantic value for that word.
2. Understanding a word encompasses the knowledge of the different association networks existing between the specific word and other terms in the language.
3. That understanding a word entails acknowledging the different derivations which can be obtained from the word as well as its root formation.
4. Understanding that knowing a word entails knowing and appreciating the syntactic attribute linked with the word.
5. Understanding the use of words in different contexts also encompasses knowledge on the limitations of their use in accordance to the situation, function, and variation.

6. Knowing a word entails understanding the other different meanings which might be associated with the word.
7. That to know a vocabulary, one must understand the likelihood to coming across that vocabulary in their written as well as spoken contexts.
8. That the learners progressively improved their vocabulary understanding and knowledge all through their learning lives.

Another definition as to what amounts to knowing a word was described by Carter as meeting the following requirements (Yan, 2005).

1. Knowing a word entails understanding the probability of coming across such a vocabulary in written or spoken word.
2. Knowing a word entails understanding how to apply such a vocabulary productively and remembering the word for active usage in different contexts though in some cases passive knowledge is acceptable and users know them passively.
3. Knowing words involves the ability to understand them a whole or part of expressions which can be conveniently memorized for repetition or adapted for use when the appropriate occasion arises.
4. Understanding the different things, the word implies, and in a connected manner, as well as its different collocational patterns.
5. Knowing a word refers to understanding its marked discourse functions and pragmatic style-levels as well as its relative coreness.
6. Knowing a word refers to understanding its contradiction or relation not only to related words but also unrelated terms.
7. Knowing a word implies to the comprehension and appreciation of the underlying derivations and forms which can be constructed from the word as well as syntactic frames which the word can be inserted.

Carter also emphasizes the need for using appropriate methodologies to help students comprehend the various lexical items as well as memorizing the same. Moreover, vocabulary learning for production mainly focusses on the use of methods meant to activate the lexical depository of such items in the intended manner according to the context. Maskor and Baharudin (2016) describe the distinction which exists between productive and receptive aspects of knowing vocabulary by asserting that productive vocabulary entails the need to pass a meaning through writing or oral means while producing and retrieving such written or spoken form of the word. On the contrary, receptive vocabulary entails the perception of the word form through reading or listening and retrieving the appropriate meaning of the word.

Another vocabulary learning strategy adopted by Schmitt (1997) was the consolidation and discovery group methodology. The consolidation methods are those whose objective is to retain vocabulary after the initial encounter while the discovery strategies were those which focused on the initial determination of the meaning of a word. The two broad

groups were classified down further. Social strategies were those which focused on forging a working relationship with other parties such as fellow students and teachers while determination strategies were those which involved the analysis of new vocabulary including its surrounding context and constituent elements by checking the dictionary or checking its cognate. Consolidation strategies were further classified into four subgroups. Metacognitive Strategies are the various approaches for managing the process of learning and handling the myriad of tasks associated with the learning process such as the identification, selection, and planning of learning resources. Memory strategies are methods used in learning vocabulary are commonly applied in helping learners retrieve information by making connections between related thoughts, objects, and ideas. As such, this approach makes great use of keywords and groupings. Social Strategies on the other hand are the processes of learning vocabulary which tend to focus on the improvement of social skills through interaction and learning with/and or with other students through cooperation and socializing with peers. The processes of learning a language by focusing on language learning processes which are based on analyzing and improving the information processing and structuring capabilities such as summarizing and analyzing are known as cognitive strategies. The affective Strategies are those strategies meant to enhance vocabulary development and which focus at the identification of specific characteristics of the student and how to promote the process through activities such as self-encouragement and anxiety reduction. The strategies aimed at promoting the learning of vocabulary through offsetting the gap in knowledge such as gesturing and guessing are known as compensation strategies. According to Baayen (2007), all human beings have the unique ability to store and retrieve vocabulary for future use. In this perspective, the vocabulary size of the Iraqi undergraduate students is simply the amount of English words they know in their minds.

METHOD

In the determination of the number of respondents needed for this research, the confidence levels as well as the goals of the study were considered. In this case, a margin of error of 10% at 95% confidence levels was acceptable. In this case, the sample size calculation formula was:

$$\frac{\frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2}}{1 + \left(\frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2 N} \right)}$$

Where

N: The size of the population.

e: The error margin

z: The confidence levels of the study

p: The percentage value in decimal form.

In this case, the sample population was 1000 Iraqi EFL students and a 10% error level was tolerable, and 95% confidence levels were acceptable.

Therefore, from calculation using the above formulae, the sample size (S) would be 88 Students.

Sample

Therefore, in selecting the sample, 88 students, half of which were male, and the other half female were selected from the first and second year classes in the English as well as the Art Departments. The selection was aimed at achieving gender balance and preventing bias associated with gender selection. This would ensure both genders are appropriately represented in the study for more general conclusions which would be arguably valid for both genders. Nonetheless, first and second year students were the appropriate choice for the study as they were relatively free during the study and were not expected to have developed effective vocabulary compared to their senior counterparts.

Instruments

This research relied on questionnaires as the sole primary data collection method although applied secondary sources for analysis, comparison, and drawing conclusions from the trends exhibited by the students regarding language development. The questionnaires were structured to comprise of twelve items. These items were a representation of the vocabulary learning methods and strategies used in learning new words in English such as the social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, with three distinct items representing every strategy. All the three unique items meant to represent the four English language learning strategies which had been tested through distinctive questionnaires designed to calculate the summative weight of every strategy. In this perspective, the frequency of the respondent's use was used to weigh every item listed for research in the paper. The questionnaire adopted a four degrees frequency approach in which such parameters and was represented by the appropriate weights assigned to the responses (Never, rarely, sometimes, and always).

To ensure face validity, the jury had to analyze the study's preliminary form to ensure they complied with the necessary test item validity. As such, the study had to modify a number of the test items in the study to ensure they complied with the notes proposed by the jury. In addition to this, the members of the jury who were responsible for analyzing the preliminary test had their names arranged alphabetically and the corresponding rows contained information of the degree programs they taught as well as the positions they held in the institution. This approach was adopted for easier identification and reference as listed on the chart below. However, names and places of jury were kept anonymous.

Table 1. Tutor information chart

Name of Tutor	Degree	Position
Assistant Professor Ahmad Mohammed (fictitious name)	PhD in English language and translation.	Linguistics Department, College of Arts, Mosel University (fictitious place).
Dr. Bill Smith (fictitious name)	PhD in English teaching Methods.	Linguistics Department, College of Basic Education, Baghdad University (fictitious place)
Professor Khaliq Khaled (fictitious name)	PhD in English teaching methods	Linguistics Department, College of Education, Kerbala University (fictitious place)

RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The study employed statistical means in coming up with the appropriate frequencies for every parameter used in measuring the different vocabulary learning strategies listed. The items were then grouped as shown below according to their appropriate categories as shown below.

Table 2. Metacognitive Strategies and Parameters (Frequency and Power).

No	Parameter	Power	Frequency
1	I always seek as many reading opportunities as possible for the purposes of enhancing my English vocabulary.	0.9	14
2	When speaking in English, I am keen to monitor any pronunciation mistakes or writing mistakes when writing new English vocabulary.	0.8	12
3	I am always actively seeking different methods and approaches for learning new English vocabularies in a successful manner.	1	15

Calculation

$$0.9 * 14 = 12.6$$

$$0.8 * 12 = 9.6$$

$$1.0 * 15 = 15$$

$$\text{Summation} = 14 + 12 + 15$$

$$\text{Total} = 41$$

$$\text{Sum} = 12.6 + 9.6 + 15$$

$$\text{Sum} = 37.2$$

$$P = 37.2/41$$

$$P = 0.907$$

Table 3. The memory English Vocabulary learning strategy parameters (Frequency and Power)

No.	Parameter	Power	Frequency
1	I usually spell different English vocabularies in my mind silently to learn them.	2.8	43
2	I normally write English vocabulary words a couple of times in order to learn them.	2.7	41
3	I normally associate different English vocabularies with previously leaned words in the English language in order to learn them.	3	45

Calculation

$$2.8 * 22 = 61.6$$

$$2.7 * 31 = 83.7$$

$$3 * 25 = 75$$

$$\text{Summation} = 75 + 61.6 + 83.7 = 220.3$$

$$\text{Total} = 78$$

$$P = 220.3/78$$

$$P = 2.824$$

Table 4. Cognitive Vocabulary Learning Strategies (Frequency and Power Chart)

No.	Parameter	Power	Frequency
1	I usually create a mental images of appropriate situations in which a word was used to learn its meaning.	0.8	13
2	I often use new vocabularies learned by using them in my class notes, summaries, or academic reports to ensure they stick.	0.7	11
3	I usually learn new vocabularies by making wise guesses of their meanings by considering how they have been applied in different contexts.	0.8	12

Calculations

$$0.8 * 13 = 10.4$$

$$0.7 * 11 = 7.7$$

$$0.8 * 12 = 9.6$$

$$\text{Summation} = 10.4 + 7.7 + 9.6 = 27.7$$

$$\text{Total} = 13 + 11 + 12 = 36$$

$$P = 27.7/36$$

$$P = 0.769$$

Table 5. Social Vocabulary Learning Strategies (Power & Frequency)

No	Parameter	Power	Frequency
1	I often learn new English vocabularies by enquiring of their applications and meanings from my teachers during class time.	0.6	10
2	I usually enhance my English vocabulary by having online conversations with Native English Speakers.	0.5	8
3	I usually learn my English vocabulary through indulging in conversations when interacting with my classmates.	0.4	6

Calculation

$$0.6 * 10 = 6$$

$$0.5 * 8 = 4$$

$$0.4 * 6 = 2.4$$

$$\text{Summation} = 6 + 4 + 2.4 = 12.4$$

$$\text{Total} = 10 + 8 + 6 = 24$$

$$P = 12.4/24$$

$$P = 0.517$$

From Fisher Analysis and Standards of Analysis:

Table 6. Power Testing Analysis

Number	Degree of Testing
1 - 0	Items which fell within this range were referred to as less powerful.
3 -1	All items which fall within this range were referred to be more powerful.

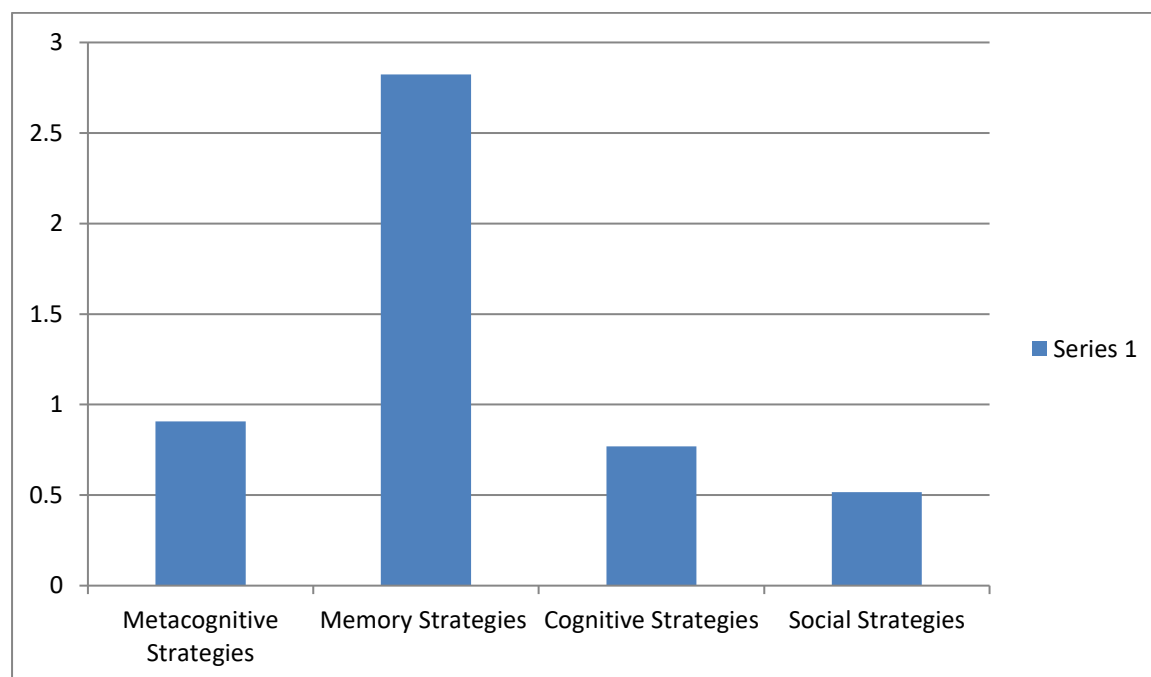


Figure 1. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Fisher proposed that the three parameters for testing the respective power of the frequency of the item use were analyzed as shown above (Winner, 2009). Above is a chart showing the rankings of the various Vocabulary Learning Strategies used. Among the different strategies tested, memory strategies exhibit the highest levels according to the respective frequency and power levels which is in accordance to the hypothesis of the study. Although the metacognitive strategies are second after the memory strategies, they fall below 1 hence not powerful. The third and fourth parameters from the chart above are the cognitive and social vocabulary strategies hence showing that they are the least powerful.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS

The results obtain show that the use of memory strategies for vocabulary learning purposes as a predominant method among the Iraqi EFL undergraduate students. This implies that tutors as well as learners are more likely to associate new vocabularies with unique groupings or some image when learning them for the first time. This method implies that learners heavily depend on the simple principles associated with memory for derivation of meanings and also in aiding students to accommodate the unmanageable and large number of vocabularies they come across in their daily learning (Schmitt, 1997). In this regard, the students are most likely to use memory strategies in deriving meaning and learning new English words using related strategies such as placing new

words into appropriate contexts, elaborating or associating words, the application of imagery, creating mental linkages through groupings, etc. On the contrary to Iraqi EFL students who are mostly second language learners, native English speakers begin learning the English language in their childhood by forming 'slang associations' thus relating every vocabulary they come across in their daily learning with a unique sound similarity (Nural et al., 2013). This hence leads to the next stage where the developed 'word associations' consequently grow into syntagmatic lines which form sequential associations. After this stage, their speaking practice enhances their language knowledge to a point where how they associate different words becomes predominantly paradigmatic. According to Schmitt (1997), it would be beneficial to ensure the lexicons of Iraqi undergraduates to assume similar arrangement with native speakers for maximum benefit. This strategy would thus be initiated by a phase whereby Iraqi EFL students would make 'syntagmatic associations' in their early learning stages, which would then develop to 'paradigmatic associations'. Nevertheless, it is expected that this approach would take a long time to bear significant fruits hence learners are usually advised to be patient and not to be disappointed by the long duration it would take for the new language acquisition.

In this approach, the use of organized material, which is often simpler to remember of to learn, is advisable for Iraqi EFL vocabulary learners as it is fundamental in the activation of the mental semantic processing of the new vocabulary. The use of the many diverse second language learning strategies can significantly enhance the vocabulary learning process among Iraqi EFL students as they actively participate in taking notes of the different vocabularies they encounter in their daily lives. Some of the approaches used such as the thorough semantic processing of the focus vocabularies associated with decontextualized memory strategies have been found to be highly effective compared to other shallow processing memory strategies. Generally, the degree of processing has a direct correlation with efficiency of every strategy (Nemati, 2009).

Another notable trend from the results obtained above is that the respondents exhibited an intention to look for English vocabulary opportunities. However, this strategy was integrated with guidance on how to apply the different vocabulary learning strategies in achieving meaningful learning such as the way to schedule for reading to ensure the appropriate vocabularies are learned and the students come across the new targeted English words as well as their meanings in different contexts. While the use of metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies is low, allowing learners to control the process of learning through organized coordination methods such as self-evaluation and self-monitoring indicates the effectiveness of the methodology. Nevertheless, this approach ought to be inculcated with performance monitoring methods such as keenly following on vocabulary improvements which is an essential part of second language learning.

The chart showed low frequency for cognitive leaning strategies used in learning English among the Iraqi EFL students. This can be attributed to their low abilities to link the new vocabularies they come across with the appropriate situations or contexts they are commonly applied. According to Gu (2010), cognitive strategies are not necessarily aimed

at manipulative mental processing which is contrary to memory strategies. As such, the low frequency evident in regard to the use of this vocabulary development strategy implies that the tutors as well as the students rarely apply cognitive strategies or apply them inadequately. Such strategies include the use of revision materials such as vocabulary sections in text books, class-notes, flashcards, word lists, repeated listening, written repetition, verbal repetition, etc. In this perspective, the tutors are obliged to adopt revision materials which may involve the materials which have been published or those which have been designed by the students in accordance to the desired memory strategies. Another feasible approach would be the use of repetition strategies which encourage recalling of new vocabulary words learned in class as they focus on repeating the spoken or written words thus encouraging students to associate form and meaning. Nevertheless, when a new vocabulary is repeated often loudly, there are higher chances of recalling such a word (Gu, 2010). In addition to this, repeatedly listening to a word or words being loudly pronounced initiates the learners to concentrate on the constituent syllables, sounds, and also the point of stress. Repeatedly writing a word on the other hand helps learners to concentrate on the spellings of such vocabularies hence helping them to easily recognize such terms in any context easily. The repetitive vocabulary learning strategy according to previous studies into linguistics are very common for second language learners and learners who have predominantly applies the repetition approach are more likely to resist other vocabulary learning strategies (Al-Fuhaid, 2004).

From the graph, social strategies recoded the lowest usage thus the least used among the Iraqi EFL students. This can be attributed to the fact that the institution as well as facilities created no or very few opportunities for learners to constructively interact with native English speakers for the purposes of vocabulary enhancement. With English being a second language, Iraqi EFL students have to understand the degree of applying those words in the appropriate contexts. This can be achieved with constant interaction with native English speakers who have been exposed to the English vocabulary since their formative years such that they can learn from them. The social vocabulary learning strategies involve the learning of a language through interacting with others hence copying the way words are used in different contexts such that the learner attributes a meaning to such new words. In this regard, the learners should integrate this approach by interacting with native speakers and enquiring from them the respective meanings of the different vocabularies they come across. Nonetheless, the learners can indulge their teachers to provide the appropriate translations as well as to explain the meanings of different vocabularies in different circumstances. In this regard, an English vocabulary can be explained in both the first language of the Iraqi EFL student as well as in simple English terms to enhance their comprehension as well as understanding. Other information which can be included to facilitate understanding and derivation of meaning includes antonyms, synonyms, and use in different sentences. There is therefore a need for Iraqi EFL students to interact more with native English speakers if the social vocabulary learning strategy would bear desirable results. Furthermore, a student would benefit more when learning a foreign language from a native speaker from that language rather than from one from their home country as they are usually ineffective, scarce, or even unavailable (Tarnopolsky, 1999). In addition to this, since many tutors might be

reluctant in cooperating with learners or might not be able to use the necessary instruction material, which can be associated with the lack of sufficient information on the nature of their work requirements, there is a need for Iraqi EFL students to take a personal initiative in effectively integrating these social learning strategies.

The findings obtained from this study have many impacts in the English vocabulary learning process among Iraqi EFL students as it provides insights on the appropriate teaching approach on a tertiary education platform. This Study exhibits the diverse vocabulary learning strategies and their consequent incorporation into the learning process which would enhance the ability of Iraqi EFL students to communicate effectively in correct English hence creating immense communication as well as educational opportunities within the classroom as well as beyond. Moreover, the study enlightens teachers on the need for inculcating discourse competence, sociolinguistics, grammar competence, and strategic competence in ensuring second language students achieve the best educational outcomes possible within a short time duration.

CONCLUSION

From the results obtained above, the Iraqi EFL students apply several Vocabulary Learning Strategies on their daily learning lives but in varying dimensions. However, the most dominant vocabulary learning strategy were the memory strategies which focused on enhancing the ability to recall new words learned through activities such as spelling different words silently in the mind, associating new vocabularies with previously learned English words, and writing down the new vocabularies as many times as possible in order to learn them. From the results obtained, it is evident that the vocabulary learning strategies have not been sufficiently emphasized; hence, undermining their abilities to communicate effectively in English. To achieve this, the students ought to be encouraged to interact more with native speakers to learn English vocabulary better from them by effectively employing social vocabulary learning strategies. In addition to this, the tutors as well as the learners either acknowledged the other strategies for the development of vocabulary or hardly considered them as of any benefit to the learning process.

Notably, the University has not exhibited significant initiatives in regard to teaching methodologies in coming up with appropriate tasks and activities for training Iraqi EFL students on the varied strategies which can help them in learning new English vocabularies. This had led to the situation in which the students only rely and stick on one vocabulary learning strategy, the memory strategy, which might be ineffective in ensuring the learners gain sufficient knowledge in the English language with the shortest duration possible. The use of appropriate contexts and situations is necessary for effective vocabulary learning; hence, the need to integrate the same as a fundamental language learning approach for Iraqi EFL students. Lastly, the multi-directional approach and integration of the different vocabulary learning strategies would make their written as well as spoken vocabulary precise, efficient, and variable (SetterAbid, 2017).

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