An Analysis of Various Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by EFL University Students

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Abstract

The current study aimed to identify vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL university students. The sample consisted of 290 students at Taibah University during the academic year 2020-2021. They responded to the questionnaire which consisted of forty-six items under five main categories. strategies. The five categories of the vocabulary learning strategies (Memory, Determination, Social, Cognitive, and Metacognitive) were used in this study following Schmitt's taxonomy. The Results showed that Memory strategies got the highest rank followed by Social, Determination, and Cognitive strategies. Whereas Metacognitive strategies got the lowest mean scores.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, educational strategies, adult learning, metacognitive strategies

INTRODUCTION

Learning vocabulary items plays an important role in learning a foreign language since it is the heart of language acquisition (Laufer 1986). Burton (1992) believes that acquiring vocabulary items effectively motivate students to use foreign language appropriately and successfully. The process of learning vocabulary items has been challenging for the students (Rezvan, Firooz & Mohammad, 2020). Davies and Pearse (2000) state that vocabulary in communication situations is needed rather than grammar to communicate effectively. Similarly, Ellis (1994) believes that lexical errors may lead to misunderstanding in communication more than grammatical errors. Accordingly, foreign language learners should understand its essential role in the language learning process" since they feel that it is necessary to understand and communicate with others in English. They learn them to build their knowledge of words and phrases and helping them in enhancing their English knowledge and use" (Ta'amneh, 2014, p. 154). Consequently, analyzing the vocabulary learning strategies used by students is needed to identify the effectiveness of these strategies in such learning. Language learners usually use several strategies to learn new lexical items to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Choosing suitable vocabulary learning strategies may help learners to develop their vocabulary knowledge and improve their overall learning. According to Khany & Khosravian (2014),

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students who do not have sufficient vocabulary learning strategies might encounter a lot of difficulties and challenges during their learning.

One of the problems a foreign language learner faces is how to increase the number of foreign language words. To develop the process of learning vocabulary, learners should expose to the new vocabulary items and use them in different situations and contexts (Cook, 2013). Choosing appropriate vocabulary learning strategies is a process that depends on the learner. Researches define vocabulary learning strategies in different ways. Cameron (2001) defines them as "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary"(p. 92). Similarly, Oxford (1990) describes them as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Rabadi (2016) considers "vocabulary learning strategies are intended mental strategies that language learners employ to enhance vocabulary learning and retrieve easily new words" (p.48). Learners cannot memorize all the words in any language. Consequently, they should use appropriate strategies and techniques during their learning to facilitate their vocabulary acquisition and memorize these words.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Investigating learning strategies used by the students to facilitate the process of learning vocabulary items provides essential data to the process of English learning. Some students have difficulties in understanding and using English these items. Alqarni (2018) believes that "many EFL learners, including the Saudi students, have difficulty with vocabulary learning which is, in many cases, reflected in their poor communication, both verbally and in writing"(p. 141). Similarly, Ta'amneh (2015) states that "learners have problems in using English vocabulary items appropriately in their learning" (p.78). Consequently, they have to use educational techniques and strategies to improve vocabulary learning. This study aims to explore vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL students to learn vocabulary items. Moreover, it aims to identify the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among the participants.

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study explored the students' vocabulary learning strategies. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

   1- What are the strategies that EFL university students use to facilitate learning vocabulary?

   2-What are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL university students?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study may help EFL instructors in identifying students' techniques and strategies used to learn English vocabulary items. Besides, it may help both teachers and students to recognize the effectiveness of different vocabulary learning strategies and help them in using appropriate strategies when learning these items.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Researchers classified vocabulary learning strategies into several categories. Schmitt (1997) talked about five categories which were social, memory, determination cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Cohen (1987) divided vocabulary learning strategies into three main categories. They included remembering strategies, semantic, and practicing strategies Gu and Johnson (1996) suggested eight categories and dimensions of vocabulary learning strategies. They included beliefs about vocabulary learning, metacognitive regulation, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note-taking strategies, memory strategies (rehearsal), memory strategies (encoding), and activation strategies. Cook (2001) discussed two major categories of vocabulary learning strategies. Se talked about getting meaning strategies and linking lexical items to cognates. Besides, Nation (2001) classified them into three main categories. These categories included planning, sources, and processes.

Asgari and Mustapha (2011) investigated vocabulary learning strategies among Malaysian learners. The findings showed that the participants used memory, determination, and metacognitive strategies; while cognitive strategies were the least used by the students. Likewise, Alhaisoni (2012) explored the most preferred vocabulary learning strategies among Saudi students at Hail University. The findings revealed that the most used strategies were cognitive and metacognitive; whereas, memory and affective strategies were the least used strategies.

Using a sample from Jordan University of Sciences and Technology, Al-Khasawneh (2012) identified the most used vocabulary learning strategies among students. The findings revealed that the most used strategies were determination; while, the least employed strategies were metacognitive. In the same vein, Ta'amneh (2014) investigated vocabulary learning strategies used by students at Taibah University. Ninety-eight students responded to the instruments of the study(questionnaire and interviews). The findings showed that the participants used rote learning strategies and ignored other vocabulary learning strategies. The results also revealed that the ignorance of these strategies affected negatively students' vocabulary knowledge in specific and learning the English language in general.

Fatima and Pathan (2016) explored vocabulary learning strategies used by 180 students in two universities in Pakistan. The results revealed that the most used strategies were cognitive regulation strategy and activation strategy. In the same vein, Rabadi (2016) investigated vocabulary learning strategies used by 110 EFL Jordanian students from eight Jordanian universities. The participants were asked to respond to forty items under five categories of vocabulary learning strategies. The findings showed that memory strategies were the most commonly used whereas metacognitive strategies were the least.

Using a sample of eighty-one Saudi male students at King Saud University, Alqarni (2018) investigated vocabulary learning strategies employed by Saudi Freshmen students majoring in English as a foreign language. The results showed that learners used all vocabulary learning strategies (determination strategies, memory strategies, cognitive

strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social strategies). The results also showed that the metacognitive strategies were the most used strategies by all participants followed by social strategies, determination strategies, cognitive strategies, and memory strategies. The findings also affirmed that the participants were poor users of vocabulary learning strategies. Similarly,

Al-Omairi (2020) investigated the most and the least vocabulary learning strategies used by Iraqi students. One hundred students participated in this study. They were responded to a questionnaire and a follow-up interview. The findings revealed that determination was the most used strategy by the participants. While the least used strategy was metacognitive. The results also showed that the majority of participants asserted the significant role of vocabulary learning strategies.

In the same field, Thiendathong and Sukying (2021) investigated students' vocabulary learning strategies. 491 participants responded to forty-seven items of the questionnaire and twenty-one students responded to semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that determination strategies were the most commonly used by students, whereas memory strategies were the least. The findings also showed different vocabulary learning strategies.

The previous studies investigated language learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies in general and the impact of learners' levels on the use of such strategies. It is clear-cut that there is no dominant category agreed upon by all students. This issue should encourage researchers for more studies on vocabulary learning strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample of the Study

The sample of the study consisted of all 290 EFL university students from different departments at Taibah University\ Badr Branch during the academic year 2020/2021. They were asked to respond to the forty-six items of the questionnaire.

Instrument

The researcher prepared forty-six items about vocabulary learning strategies under five main categories (Memory strategies, Determination strategies, Social strategies, Cognitive strategies, and Metacognitive strategies) to identify students' opinions about vocabulary learning strategies. He followed Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy which is considered as one of the most popular taxonomies among learners and researchers in vocabulary learning strategies. The participants were asked to give their agreement with these statements by choosing one of the five alternatives (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree).

Validity and Reliability

Ten experts were asked to look at the questionnaire and gave their comments. Their comments included deleting some irrelevant statements, writing new items, and editing some of them. The researcher took their comments seriously and did their recommendations accordingly. To establish the reliability of the questionnaire, 30

students were asked to respond to the items of the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient was computed using Cronbatch Alpha. The calculated value was 0.91.

Design of the Study

The researcher used a quantitative approach in this study. He adopted Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. The responses of the participants were analyzed. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The results are presented in the following tables.

RESULTS

The first question was about the strategies that EFL university students use to facilitate learning vocabulary. To answer this question, the mean scores and standard deviations were calculated. Table 1 presents the results.

Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations for the five categories of vocabulary learning strategies used by participants

No.	Strategy Category	N	Mean	S. D.
1	Memory strategies	290	3.48	1.104
4	Determination strategies	290	3.19	1.175
3	Social strategies	290	3.25	0.703
2	Cognitive strategies	290	3.16	1.105
5	Metacognitive strategies	290	2.30	0.834

Table 1 shows that the mean scores range from 3.48 to 2.30. It shows that Memory strategies got the highest mean (3.48) and so the highest rank. Whereas Metacognitive strategies got the lowest mean (2.30). It is obvious that Memory strategies were the most frequently used strategies by EFL students. This result goes with the findings of Huang and Naerssen (1987) and Rabadi (2016) who found that Memory strategies were commonly used by students. While it contradicts with the findings of Wharton's (2000) and Alqarni (2018) who found Memory strategies were the least commonly used. The second vocabulary learning strategies used by students were Social strategies. Determination strategies were found in third place, and Cognitive strategies were placed in fourth place. Finally, Metacognitive strategies were found in the last.

The researcher also calculated the mean scores and the standard deviations for each item of the students' questionnaire as follows:

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the Memory strategies

No.	Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I put new words in sentences repeatedly.	2.23	1.057
2	I categorize new words that have similar pronunciation and spelling	3.99	.964
3	I translate new English vocabulary items to the Arabic language.	4.62	1.118
4	I study prefixes and suffixes for the new vocabulary items.	3.51	0.909
5	I categorize new words according to their synonyms and antonyms	3.85	1.585
6	I repeat a word aloud to memorize it.	4.01	1.273

7	I study the parts of speech of the new words.	3.67	0.902
8	I learn new words through pictures.	3.66	1.236
9	I group new vocabulary items together to learn them better.	3.40	0.867
10	I use semantic maps to learn new vocabulary items.	1.81	1.128

Table 2 shows the Memory strategies used by EFL students. Through a close look at the above Table, The researcher identified that the most frequent strategies that the students used when learning new vocabulary items were item 3 (I translate new English vocabulary items to the Arabic language) with a mean score of (4.62), item 6 (I repeat a word aloud to memorize it) with a mean score of (4.01), item 2 (I categorize new words that have similar pronunciation and spelling) with a mean of (3.99), item 5 (I categorize new words according to their synonyms and antonyms) with a mean of (3.85), item 7 (I study the parts of speech of the new words) with a mean of (3.67), item 8 (I learn new words through pictures) with a mean of (3.66), item 4 (I study prefixes and suffixes for the new vocabulary items) with a mean of (3.51), and item 9 (I group new vocabulary items together to learn them better) with a mean of (3.40). The researcher also identified that the least frequent strategies that the students used when learned learning new words were item 1 (I put new words in sentences repeatedly) and item 10 (I use semantic maps to learn new vocabulary items) with mean sores of (2.23) and (1.81) respectively.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the Determination strategies

No.	Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
11	I predict the meaning of unknown words from context.	3.87	0.831
12	I learn the meaning of unfamiliar English words by looking at the context and the topic of the whole paragraph.	3.95	1.694
13	I look for any word in the passage that supports my guesses about the meaning of a word.	3.32	0.630
14	I use an English–Arabic dictionary to identify the meaning of new vocabulary items.	4.65	1.215
15	I use an English–English dictionary to identify the meaning of new vocabulary items.	2.72	1.411
16	I replace the unknown word with guessed meaning to check if the sentence makes sense.	2.54	1.646
17	I predict the meaning of new words from pronunciation	2.45	0.670
18	I analyze the affixes and roots of the unknown word after the guessing process.	3.57	1.472
19	I learn the meanings of the most common affixes.	2.39	.956
20	I guess the meaning of new words from grammatical structure of a sentence.	2.41	1.227

Table 2 shows that the most common Determination strategies used by the participants were item 14 (I use an English–Arabic dictionary to identify the meaning of new vocabulary items), item 12 (I learn the meaning of unfamiliar English words by looking at the context and the topic of the whole paragraph), item 11(I predict the meaning of unknown words from context), item 18(I analyze the affixes and roots of the unknown word after the guessing process), and item 13 (I look for any word in the passage that supports my guesses about the meaning of a word.) with mean scores (4.65), (3.95), (3.87), (3.57), and (3.32) respectively. It is obvious that the least frequent strategies that

the students used concerning Determination strategies were item 15(I use an English–English dictionary to identify the meaning of new vocabulary items), item 16 (I replace the unknown word with guessed meaning to check if the sentence makes sense) item 17(I predict the meaning of new words from pronunciation)item 20 (I guess the meaning of new words from grammatical structure of a sentence), and item 19(I learn the meanings of the most common affixes) with mean scores of (2.72), (2.54),(2.45),(241) and (239) respectively.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the Social strategies used by students

No.	Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
21	I create a mental image of the new word.	2.01	0.747
22	I ask teachers for the Arabic translation of new words.	4.45	0.639
23	I ask teachers for English synonyms of new words.	3.89	0.667
24	I surf the internet for extra English information to understand new words.	4.35	0.679
25	I speak in English with my classmates to know the meaning of new words.	2.85	0.664
26	I listen to CDs of word lists.	2.68	0.531
27	I communicate with native speakers of English to learn new words better.	1.90	0.670
28	I discover the meaning of new words through group work activities.	3.86	1.045
29	I learn new words through Communicating with instructors of English in English to explain them.	3.88	0.747
30	I learn new vocabulary items through playing English games with others.	2.65	0.639

Table 3 represents the descriptive statistics of ten individual vocabulary learning strategies under social strategies. The most frequently social strategies used by students were item 22 "I ask teachers for the Arabic translation of new words" with a mean score of (4.45), item 24 "I surf the internet for extra English information to understand new words" with a mean score of (4.35), item 23 "I ask teachers for English synonyms of new words" with a mean score of (3.89), item 29 "I learn new words through communicating with instructors of English in English to explain them" with a mean score of (3.88), and item 28 "I discover the meaning of new words through group work activities" with a mean score of (3.86). Whereas, the least social strategies that used by students were item 27 "I communicate with native speakers of English to learn new words better", item 21" I create a mental image of the new word", item 30 "I learn new vocabulary items through playing English games with others", item 26 "I listen to CDs of word lists", and item 25 "I speak in English with my classmates to know the meaning of new words" with mean scores of 1.90, 2.01, 2.65, 2.68, and 2.85 respectively.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for the Cognitive strategies used by students

No.	Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
31	I use new words by writing them repeatedly in sentences.	3.88	1.180
32	I learn new words by repeating them orally with their meanings.	3.95	0.969
33	I learn new vocabulary items by making a revision to the previous lessons held in the classroom.	3.45	0.860

34	I practice new vocabulary items orally with their lexical sets.	2.45	1.312
35	I use a notebook for new words lists with their meanings and examples.	3.99	1.537
36	I learn new words by connecting them with physical objects.	3.04	0.874
37	I use CDs to listen to the pronunciation of new words.	2.45	1.138
38	I learn new words by connecting them with physical objects	2.04	0.969

The highest statements for the Cognitive strategies according to the students were "I use a notebook for new words lists with their meanings and examples." (M= 3.99), " I learn new words by repeating them orally with their meanings." (M=3.95), " I use new words by writing them repeatedly in sentences." (M= 3.88), " I learn new vocabulary items by making a revision to the previous lessons held in the classroom." (M=3.45), and " I learn new words by connecting them with physical objects" (M=3.4). The lowest statements as shown from the above table were " I learn new words by connecting them with physical objects" (M=2.04), "I use CDs to listen to the pronunciation of new words." (M=2.45), and " I practice new vocabulary items orally with their lexical sets." (M= 2.45).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for the Metacognitive strategies used by students

No.	Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
39	I listen to English songs to learn new words better.	3.01	0.790
40	I watch English movies to learn new words better.	3.06	0.476
41	I learn new words from advertisements, songs, notices, and movies.	3.58	0.936
42	I read articles, researches from different English sources.	2.01	1.473
43	I use word lists to learn new words.	1.57	0.664
44	I listen to radio programs to learn the pronunciation of new words.	1.50	0.499
45	I write some English articles and texts to expand my knowledge of lexical items.	1.10	0.662
46	I learn new vocabulary items by connecting newly-learned items with previously learned ones.	2.55	1.169
		2.30	0.834

Table 6 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of Metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies. There were no high means for these strategies. Their means ranged from 3.58 to 1.10. For example, the mean scores for the highest statements were 3.58 for item 41 " I learn new words from advertisements, songs, notices, and movies", 3.06 for item 40 " I watch English movies to learn new words better", and 3.01 for item 39 " I listen to English songs to learn new words better". The responses of the participants indicated that they hardly ever used these strategies especially the last five statements that had the lowest mean scores which were item 46 " I learn new vocabulary items by connecting newly-learned items with previously learned ones", item 42 " I read articles, researches from different English sources", item 43 " I use word lists to learn new words.", item 44 " I listen to radio programs to learn the pronunciation of new words", and item 45 " I write some English articles and texts to expand my knowledge of lexical items" with mean scores of 2.55,2.01, 1.57, 1.50, and 1.10 respectively.

To answer the second question "What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL university students?", the highest frequency used strategies were ranked in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7. The highest used strategies by participants

No	item	Category	M	SD
1	I translate new English vocabulary items to the Arabic language.	Memory	4.62	1.118
2	I repeat a word aloud to memorize it.	Memory	4.01	1.273
3	I categorize new words that have similar pronunciation and spelling	Memory	3.99	.964
4	I use an English–Arabic dictionary to identify the meaning of new vocabulary items.	Determination	4.65	1.215
5	I learn the meaning of unfamiliar English words by looking at the context and the topic of the whole paragraph.	Determination	3.95	1.694
6	I ask teachers for Arabic translation of new words.	Social	4.45	0.639
7	I learn new words through Communicating with instructors of English in English to explain them.	Social	3.88	0.747
8	I ask teachers for English synonyms of new words.	Social	3.89	0.667
9	I use a notebook for new words lists with their meanings and examples.	Cognitive	3.99	1.537
10	I learn new words by repeating them orally with their meanings.	Cognitive	3.95	0.969

Table 7 shows that the highest mean scores employed strategies used by the EFL university students. Three were Memory strategies, Two Determination strategies, three Social strategies, and Two Cognitive strategies. This indicates that the participants prefer using a variety of vocabulary learning strategies when learning new English words. It also indicates that the participants do not use Metacognitive strategies during their learning. To know the least used strategies by the students when learning new English words, Table 8 shows them.

Table 8. The least used strategies by participants

No	item	Category	M	SD
1	I use semantic maps to learn new vocabulary items.	Memory	1.81	1.128
2	I put new words in sentences repeatedly.	Memory	2.23	1.057
3	I learn the meanings of the most common affixes.	Determination	2.39	.956
4	I communicate with native speakers of English to learn new words better.	Social	1.90	0.670
5	I create a mental image of the new word.	Social	2.01	0.747
6	I learn new words by connecting them with physical objects	Cognitive	2.04	0.969
7	I write some English articles and texts to expand my knowledge of lexical items.	Metacognitive	1.10	0.662
8	I listen to radio programs to learn the pronunciation of new words.	Metacognitive	1.50	0.499
9	I use word lists to learn new words.	Metacognitive	1.57	0.664
10	I read articles, researches from different English sources.	Metacognitive	2.01	1.473

Table 8 shows that the least strategies used by the EFL participants. Ignoring Metacognitive strategies by the students" indicate that the participants are not highly exposed to the target language (English) outside the class and they do not have a good opportunity to practice it outside the class" (Rabadi 2016, p. 56).

DISCUSSION

The result of the first question, which was about the strategies used by students to facilitate learning vocabulary, revealed that Memory strategies got the highest rank followed by Social, Determination, and Cognitive strategies. Whereas Metacognitive strategies got the lowest mean scores. Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the students' responses about vocabulary learning strategies. This means that the students consider the first four vocabulary learning strategies as useful, simple, and effective techniques that can be used to learn new vocabulary items. While they consider Metacognitive strategies as less used strategies to learn new words. An explanation for this comes from the fact that students view the first four strategies as comfortable and applicable approaches to learn and comprehend new vocabulary items. They think that these strategies facilitate learning vocabulary and improve their communication skills. Metacognitive strategies require higher levels of thinking. Students may consider that these strategies could be used by teachers since they need different levels of thinking and much exposure to the English language. Besides, students might find Metacognitive strategies difficult to be taught and to be practiced. They liked to learn new English words through using familiar strategies like translation, depending on their instructors when learning new words, and asking their teacher about the meanings and pronunciations of new vocabulary items. The results of Rabadi (2016), Al-Khasawneh (2012), Al-Omairi (2020) confirm the results to which the present study ends up. While it contradicts with the findings of Whartons (2000), Alhaisoni (2012), Alqarni (2018) who found Metacognitive strategies were the most commonly used.

Concerning the second question, which was about the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies employed by EFL university students, the results revealed that the most used strategies referred to Memory Social, Determination, and Cognitive strategies. Whereas the least used strategies were related to Metacognitive ones. The existence of Metacognitive strategies as the highest number in Table 8 showed that EFL students were not highly exposed to the English language and they did not use it in real-life situations. This result corresponds with the researchers' findings of the most and the least commonly used vocabulary learning strategies among university students (Asgari and Mustapha 2011, Ta'amneh 2014, Rabadi 2016, Al-Khasawneh 2012, Al-Omairi 2020).

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated the vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL university students. The findings of the study revealed that the participants used a variety of Memory strategies Social, Determination, and Cognitive strategies. While they did not use Metacognitive strategies as other strategies. The results also illustrated the most frequently used strategies among EFL students. For example, translating the meaning of new words to the first language, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary items, depending on teachers' explanation, and visual information, This indicates that the participants used several strategies to improve their vocabulary learning. Finally, it would be very interesting to conduct more studies on this topic using more students from different places.

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