

Original Research Article

Vocabulary Learning Strategies and their Relation to Vocabulary Size in Saudi Female Undergraduate EFL Learners

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: May 15, 2020

Accepted: June 30, 2020

Volume: 3

Issue: 7

DOI: 0.32996/ijllt.2020.3.6.22

KEYWORDS

Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Size, Saudi EFL Learners

ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed in the field of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) that Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) are a subcategory of the more general Language Learning Strategies (LLSs). Research into LLSs began based on the belief that language aptitude was not the only determinant factor of language achievement, and that the learners' own learning effort and the way they approach language learning also played a major role. The purpose of this study is to investigate VLS use of Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners in each stage of the Vocabulary Learning Process (VLP) and its relation to their vocabulary size. The study population consisted of female students enrolled in the final year of the undergraduate English language program in an English department in a Saudi university. Forty-one students participated in this study, and two data collection instruments were used. The first instrument was a frequency of use questionnaire designed based on the learning process-oriented taxonomy of VLSs. The second was a Vocabulary Size Test. The analyses show that the participants used 17 strategies with a high frequency in all the stages of the VLP except for Stages Four and Six. The analyses also show that the most frequently used strategies were mainly cognitive strategies (nine strategies) and metacognitive strategies (five strategies). In terms of the relationship between the use of VLSs and vocabulary size, two strategies were found to be positively correlated with the participants' vocabulary size. Interestingly, other strategies that are known to be effective in vocabulary learning were found to have a negative correlation with the participants' vocabulary size.

Introduction

Research Background

Researchers have noticed that learners have different levels of success in terms of language learning, and that the ones who are more successful employ a variety of strategies to facilitate language acquisition more than their less successful peers do (Alkatib, 2013). As a result, many research efforts have been directed towards identifying and recording these helpful Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) (Ma, 2009). In light of the growing interest in this topic, this study attempts to examine how Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners use LLSs, more specifically, how they use these strategies to build their vocabulary.

Although Schmitt (1997) noted that there is no exhaustive list or taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs), there have been many attempts to classify them. One comprehensive taxonomy of VLSs was presented by Schmitt (ibid). It consists of 58 items and was developed based on four categories of the LLSs presented by Oxford (1990) namely, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies with the addition of determination strategies. These strategies are divided into two groups: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies with each of the two still further divided into subtypes.

Closely related to the question of what strategies learners frequently use to learn vocabulary is what effect they have on language learning outcomes. One such outcome that has been attracting researchers' attention is language learners' vocabulary size. Many studies highlighted the relation between VLS use and learners' vocabulary size (Cai, 2014; Kırmızı, 2014; Subaşı, 2014), and most of these studies revealed that using VLSs contributes to the learners' overall vocabulary size. Encouraged by the growing body of research investigating the topic of VLSs, this study also attempts to examine how Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners use VLSs to build vocabulary and its relation with their vocabulary size as a learning outcome.

Research Questions

To achieve the goals of the present research, the following research questions are sought to be answered:

- a. What are the most frequent vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners in each stage of the vocabulary learning process?
- b. What is the relationship between Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies and their vocabulary size?

Research Significance

Even though VLSs have been long recognized, research on the general trend of their use by learners within the Saudi context seems fairly limited compared with the global growing interest in this area of research. One concern of the current literature on Saudi EFL learners' use of VLSs is that several studies focused on the investigation of only one or two types of strategies (such as Alasmari, 2006; Alzahrani, 2006; Baniabdelrahman & Al-Shumaimeri, 2014), which may not capture the overall picture of actual strategy use because learners usually tend to use various strategies in combination (Subaşı, 2014). Another concern is that the studies that investigated more comprehensive lists of strategies (e.g., Al-Asmary, 2007; Albogime; 2014; Al-Fuhaid, 2004) were mostly designed to examine the general categories of strategies without taking into consideration the way vocabulary is learned. Therefore, this research is an attempt to contribute to the current literature on VLSs within the Saudi context.

Literature Review

As stated above, the studies investigating the use frequency of VLSs within the Saudi context seem to be very limited despite the global popularity of the topic. One such study was carried out by Albogime (2014). This study investigated the use of VLSs by Saudi female EFL learners from a Saudi university. The focus in this study was to examine VLSs used by the participants to facilitate vocabulary learning in two stages of the VLP: the first being discovering word meaning and information and the second recalling word information and meaning from memory using consolidation strategies. Albogime also focused on the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the surveyed strategies. The data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 25 female students in the foundation year. They were asked to report on their use and evaluation of VLSs. Moreover, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six students to look in more detail at the influence of using strategy groups on assisting their foreign language vocabulary learning. The results showed that, of the social strategies, *studying and practicing meaning in a group* was the most frequently used strategy. All the strategies that involved asking the teacher were not used frequently. Of the determination strategies, *using bilingual dictionaries* was the mostly used, while the least frequently used strategy was *using flash cards*. In terms of the consolidation strategies, the data analysis showed that the participants of this study did not frequently use consolidation and metacognitive strategies of L2 vocabulary learning. As for the cognitive strategies, rote learning strategies, i.e. *verbal and written repetition*, were the most frequently used strategies. Other strategies were used with a medium frequency: The two least frequently used cognitive strategies were *reviewing flash cards* and *putting English labels on physical objects*. *Saying new words aloud when studying* was the mostly used memory strategy, followed by *learning the words of an idiom together* and *studying the sound of a word*. Other memory strategies were used with either a medium or low frequency.

In addition, Javid (2014) investigated the patterns of VLSs Saudi EFL learners used to learn discipline-related vocabulary. He also investigated the differences in VLS use between male and female students. He collected data quantitatively using a questionnaire translated into Arabic. The participants included 82 male and 71 female junior and senior university students. They were randomly selected from the students enrolled in a foreign languages department. The results suggested that the most used type of strategies was determination strategies, followed by memory strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and the least used were social strategies. The study also showed that Saudi EFL learners' most preferable type of strategies was guessing strategies, whereas the least preferable type was note-taking and encoding strategies. However, the results did not reveal any statistically significant differences between males and females in terms of VLS use frequency.

In terms of the relationship between VLS use and learning outcomes, Alqurashi (2013) investigated the correlation between the use of VLSs and vocabulary size of 40 male Saudi undergraduate English language students. The participants were senior students (level eight) from a department of foreign languages in Saudi Arabia. The data were collected using a VLS questionnaire and a Vocabulary Level Test to measure the participants' vocabulary size. The results showed that, in general, the participants used VLSs at a medium level which did not impact their vocabulary size adequately. The study also revealed that the most frequently used strategies were determination strategies followed by social strategies, memory strategies, metacognitive strategies and the least frequent were cognitive strategies. However, of the social strategies only the use of English language media (e.g., songs, movies, the Internet) was used at a high level, whereas the remaining strategies were used at a medium level. In terms of the relationship with the participants' vocabulary size, no statistically significant correlation was found with any of the determination strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies or social strategies. Only memory strategies were found to be significantly correlated with vocabulary size levels including the 2000-word level, the 3000-word level and the academic level. The researcher concluded that this significant correlation indicates that memory strategies are the only VLSs that are being practiced properly by the students.

Methodology

Participants of the Study

In this study, only students enrolled in Level 7 and Level 8, i.e. the final year, of the undergraduate English language program in an English department in a Saudi university were asked to participate. Due to access issues, only female participants were involved. Forty-one female students participated in this study. All of them have studied English for at least seven years with an average of about six hours per week throughout their general schooling. In addition, they have finished an intensive preparatory English language program with an average of eight hours per week for two academic semesters after which they studied English as a main major for four academic semesters.

Research Instruments

This study employed two instruments: a questionnaire and a vocabulary size test. The questionnaire was used to collect the data concerning the participants' use of VLSs. It was adopted from Ma (2009). It consists of eight questions each of which corresponds to one stage of the vocabulary learning process. These questions/stages appear in the same order they would while acquiring a new lexical item. Each one of these questions lists a number of strategies that learners may use in the corresponding stage. The questionnaire in total contains 55 strategies and requires the participants to indicate their frequency of use for each strategy. Ma's strategies can be assigned to four of the general categories of the LLSs identified by Oxford (1990), namely, memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social.

As for the data regarding the participants' vocabulary size, they were collected using a Vocabulary Size Test designed to estimate the total number of word families a testee maintains. It was adopted from Nation and Beglar (2007). It provides a rough estimate of the total number of word families one can recognize while reading. It is a monolingual 100-item multiple-choice test with 5 items from each 1000-word family level (Nation, 2012). Each tested word is presented in a simple non-defining sentence followed by four definitions, and test-takers are required to choose the definition with the closest meaning to the tested word. According to Nation and Beglar (ibid), in order to calculate a learner's total receptive vocabulary size from this test, one point is counted for each correct answer, and then the total score needs to be multiplied by 200.

Data Collection and Procedures

Data collection was carried out during one of the participants' regular class sessions. First, the participants were asked to indicate their academic level to ensure they belonged to the levels targeted in this study. Afterwards, both instruments were administered to the same participants. After data collection was completed, statistical analyses were performed.

Results and Discussion

The Most Frequently Used VLSs

Table 1. *Most Frequently Used VLSs by All Participants in Each Stage of the Vocabulary Learning Process*

Stage	Strategy	Category
One	From the Internet	Metacognitive
	From reading English materials	Metacognitive
	From English songs and movies/ TV programs	Metacognitive
	From English conversations with others	Social
	From textbooks and classroom learning activities	Cognitive
Two	Guessing the meaning from the context	Cognitive
Three	Studying the pronunciation	Cognitive
	Studying the Arabic translation	Cognitive
	Studying the word usage	Cognitive
	Studying the English explanation	Cognitive
Four	No strategies were used with a high frequency	
Five	Listening to the pronunciation of the word	Memory
	Saying the word aloud several times	Cognitive
	Looking at the word several times	Cognitive
	Making a mental image of the word	Memory
Six	No strategies were used with a high frequency	
Seven	Trying to remember where the word was first encountered	Cognitive
Eight	Trying to use new words in speaking and writing	Metacognitive
	Trying to think in English with the new word	Metacognitive

As shown in table 1, the participants in the current study used only 17 strategies with a high frequency out of the 55 strategies listed in the questionnaire. In addition, none of the strategies in Stages Four and Six were used with a high frequency. The minor use of the strategies indicates the learners' negligence of the VLSs. Also, it may suggest that the instructors are not aware of most of them. Cognitive strategies were the type of strategies the participants mostly preferred to use with nine strategies spread across the eight stages of the VLP, while metacognitive strategies ranked as the second most preferable type of strategies with five strategies. This is probably because the former are more "direct" while the latter require skillful training. Memory-related strategies and social strategies were the least utilized as the participants used only two memory strategies and one social strategy. This suggests that learners need more memory training and develop better social skills, which is expected to help them learn more vocabulary.

The Relationship between VLSs Use and Vocabulary Size

Table 2. *Strategies Correlated with the Participants' Vocabulary Size at a Significant Level*

Strategy	Correlation at a Significant Level
Discovering words from lists of vocabulary arranged alphabetically	Negative
From lists of vocabulary arranged semantically	Negative
Consulting a monolingual dictionary	Positive
Consulting a bilingual dictionary	Negative
Studying the English explanation	Positive
Studying the Arabic translation	Negative
Writing the information on paper	Negative
Making vocabulary cards	Negative
Organizing the information in a vocabulary notebook	Negative
Using the vocabulary section in the textbook	Negative
Copying the word out several times	Negative
Memorizing bilingual lists	Negative
Practicing words by acting them out	Negative
Grouping and organizing words in a meaningful way	Negative
Drawing pictures to illustrate the meaning of the word	Negative
Going over words periodically	Negative

As shown in table 2, two individual strategies, namely *consulting monolingual dictionaries* and *studying the English explanation* were found to be positively correlated with the participants' vocabulary size, while strategies that involve the use of Arabic, e.g.

consulting a bilingual dictionary and *studying the Arabic explanation*, negatively affected the learners' vocabulary size. This finding suggests that students should be encouraged to make use of the strategies that provide an opportunity for them to be more immersed in English and should be taught how to use them properly. In addition, instructors should draw their students' attention to how strategies that involve the use of their native language can hinder their vocabulary learning.

On the other hand, 14 strategies were found to have a negative correlation with vocabulary size. Ideally, most of these strategies should help EFL learners improve and expand their vocabulary. This contradiction can probably be attributed to the learners' negligence of VLSs and how to use them properly, which is probably a result of instructors' unawareness of the importance of VLSs. Even though research on vocabulary learning strategies began more than three decades ago, some Saudi EFL teachers are still not very knowledgeable about the different strategies that can facilitate vocabulary teaching and learning. The negative impact of these strategies can also be linked to the traditional EFL teaching methods practiced in Saudi Arabia. Albousaif (2011) maintained that many studies that investigated English language teaching in Saudi Arabia believed that long-standing customary methods of EFL teaching practiced in Saudi schools are inadequate to build the learners' EFL vocabulary.

Conclusion

The current study examined the use of VLSs by 41 Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners in each stage of the vocabulary learning process and its relationship with their vocabulary size. Based on the findings of this study, it is crucial for language learners and teachers in Saudi Arabia to understand the significance of and learn more about VLSs and how they can improve the process of vocabulary learning. The Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners in the present study reported a medium frequency on the use of 28 strategies and a low frequency on the use of 10 strategies, as opposed to only 17 strategies that were used with a high frequency. Therefore, language teachers in Saudi Arabia need to introduce more VLSs to their students and train them on how to use those strategies properly, especially the ones that are positively correlated with vocabulary size. However, learners as well as teachers should also be aware that the importance lies in using vocabulary learning strategies properly and effectively according to the task at hand, rather than just using them randomly. Both learners and teachers need to understand that learning strategies are not necessarily always helpful but depend on the context of their use.

Limitations

It is likely that any research has its own limitations. In this study, the sample size is seen to be relatively small. A total number of 41 Saudi female undergraduate EFL learners participated in this study. It was not possible to get more participants as participation was voluntary and large number of candidates did not wish to be involved.

Another limitation of the current study is related to the research instruments. Because the frequency of use questionnaire is a self-report instrument, one cannot be certain whether the participants in real-life learning settings actually use the strategies they reported with the frequency they indicated.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study attempted to answer the research questions stated above using a questionnaire and a vocabulary size test. However, in order to gain a better understanding of Saudi EFL learners' use of VLS, future researchers may also consider using additional data collection tools, such as observation, semi-structured interviews and Think-Aloud Protocols (TAP). Employing qualitative data collection methods along with quantitative methods would guarantee to some extent that the participants' self-reported assessment does not contradict with their actual use and could provide more in-depth insights into these phenomena. It is also recommended to use other forms of vocabulary size tests in order to examine the relationship between the use of VLSs and EFL learners' vocabulary size. Moreover, future researchers may consider investigating the relationship between EFL learners' use of VLSs and other variables, such as gender and language proficiency.

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