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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Vocabulary Learning Strategies Frequently Used by Sudanese EFL Learners at the Tertiary Level to Strengthen their Vocabulary Knowledge**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The study aimed to find out the most frequent Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) that had been used by the Sudanese EFL learners at the Faculty of Education, Alzaiem Alazhari University. A (VLSs) questionnaire was designed and handled to 159 EFL learners in 1<sup>st</sup> year. The questionnaire adopted Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy with slight changes of items. There was a significant agreement among them in using vocabulary learning strategies to expand their vocabulary. Cognitive and memory strategies were the most frequently used, while social was the least used. The study recommended that teachers can help their students to become initiative and take responsibility for their success by providing them with a sense of what vocabulary learning strategies are, to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, teachers should present a wide range of (VLSs) to their students for both a classroom-related setting and self-directed vocabulary learning.

**| KEYWORDS**

EFL learners; vocabulary knowledge; Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs); Taxonomies

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### **1. Introduction**

Vocabulary learning was not an area of interest for educators until the latter decades of the twentieth century as a result of modern intricate relationships between countries; consequently, the need for renewing the traditional methods of teaching is urgent, and the door is opened for innovative approaches and techniques. Now the field has witnessed many changes in to endeavor the best practices and techniques to improve the teaching approaches and amongst them is vocabulary learning strategies. Some scholars (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) point to the learner's responsibility to fulfill his own language learning needs and to become an independent learner. Acquiring the vocabulary of the mother tongue was not an obsession since it happens habitually, but the need for learning foreign languages pinpoints the complex role of vocabulary in a foreign language and how the learner understands the receptive message and responds competently. The 1990s witnessed a change towards the essential role of vocabulary in a foreign language. Hill (2000) believes that vocabulary is most important than grammar in conveying the meaning because the traditional method's main focus was on grammar and translation, neglecting the essential role of vocabulary in learning a foreign language.

Vocabulary knowledge is appreciated as an excellent predictor of language proficiency (Qian 2002; Weir 2004; Alderson 2006), including reading comprehension, oral communication, and writing competently. Moreover, vocabulary was known as a multi-dimensional paradigm; therefore, two major concepts in the knowledge of vocabulary were pinpointed, specifically vocabulary breadth and width. Learning strategies have received substantial attention in the last decades due to the interest in how learners learn the language rather than how the teacher teaches (Bernardo 2009). It is observed that learners utilize conscious steps to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, and employment of new vocabulary items. Different taxonomies of

vocabulary learning strategies (LS) have been suggested (Nation, 2000). However, the most well-known taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategy is Schmitt 1997), who classifies four groups: social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. While Cook and Mayer (1983) group all vocabulary learning strategies in two strategies: determination and consolidation. Learners use determination strategies to determine a word's meaning based on related knowledge, contextual clues, or reference materials by figuring it out and/or asking someone else; they use consolidation strategies to recall the meanings of a word through social, memory, and metacognitive processes. On the other hand, Nation (2013) proposes three types of vocabulary learning strategies: planning, finding information, and establishing knowledge. This classification includes, in his opinion, a wide range of strategies of different complexity.

Vocabulary span (size) has become a challenging task for second or foreign language learners in the field of learning and teaching language. An adequate rich vocabulary gives the foreign language learners the right word/s to use appropriately and also enables them to express their real thoughts, ideas, and feelings; therefore, vocabulary plays an essential role in language competence and uses it communicatively. Nation (1990, p75) believes that it is necessary to recognize how much vocabulary students need to draw on for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, teachers may probe techniques to help their students enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Finally, in dealing with the four basic language skills, a language learner must have sufficient vocabulary.

This study was carried out as a response to the lack of studies on vocabulary learning in Sudan, where the focus is on other issues; neglecting studies that deal with vocabulary. It is expected to answer the following questions:

1. What vocabulary learning strategies do Sudanese EFL learners frequently use to develop their vocabulary knowledge?
2. What are the most and least frequently vocabulary learning strategies used by Sudanese EFL learners?
3. How do vocabulary learning strategies contribute to the vocabulary scope of Sudanese EFL learners?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Words or Vocabulary**

The term **vocabulary** is the number of words that a person knows; On the other hand, the term "*word*" has a sound, form, or many shades of meaning in spoken or written discourse. Word forms are tangible entities that have vocalized or orthographic representation. Katamba (2005, p. 20) states that the relationship between a lexeme and its word forms is one of realization, representation, or manifestation. Many scholars (Jackson and Amvela, 2000; Read, 2000; Trask, 1995) indicate that 'word' may be easy to perceive, but it is hard to define. Trask (1995, pp.45-51) points out that "there is the difficulty in the definition of the word because words do not have meanings in isolation, but they are related to the meanings of other words in the ways that may be simple or complex". Moreover, "a word, at least, relates to the fields of morphology, semantics, etymology, or lexicology" (Jackson and Amvela 2000, p. 48). Some researchers, such as Jackson and Amvela (2000); Richard et al. (1992); Hornby et al. (1984), assess words and vocabulary for comparison. A word is an "uninterrupted unit of a structure consisting of one or more morphemes which normally occur in the structure of a phrase. The morphemes are the ultimate grammatical constituents, the minimal meaningful units of language", while vocabulary (which is synonymous with 'lexis' or 'lexicon') is viewed as "a collection of words" or "a package of sub-sets of words that are used in particular contexts". Richards et al. (1992) define the term *word* as "the smallest linguistic unit which can occur on its own in speech or writing", but *vocabulary*, as "a set of lexemes which includes single words, compound words and idioms". Also, (Hornby et al., 1984) define *word* as "sound or combination of sounds forming a unit of the grammar or vocabulary of a language", whereas *vocabulary* as "the total number of words which make up a language; and a range of words known to, or used by a person". Further, concerning the definition of word and vocabulary, (Sheeler and Markley 2000) state that a word is "a unit made of sounds or letters that have a meaning", while (Nandy 1994; Sesnan 2001) define vocabulary as "total number of words we know and are able to use".

### **2.2 Nature of Vocabulary**

A person's vocabulary is the words someone knows and can use competently (Nandy 1994, p. 1). Vocabulary is the core of language learning. Rubin and Thompson (1994, p.79) point out, "One cannot speak, understand, read or write a foreign language without knowing a considerable number of words. Therefore, vocabulary learning is the central issue of understanding a foreign language". Moreover, Taylor (1990) states that vocabulary pervades all language activities undertaken by English language learners and teachers, regardless of proficiency level or subject matter. It is normal to say that understanding any language is impossible without knowing words, whether in spoken or written forms (Hill, 2000; Schmitt 2000). Language learners with large and rich vocabulary are believed to expand or enhance their listening, reading, speaking, writing, and thinking capabilities (Smith 1998, p xv). On the other hand, language learners with a limited vocabulary are probably to be limited in the learning progress. That means vocabulary is a key indicator of both one's language learning and one's aptitude to learn a language. Although vocabulary is the sub-skill of

a language, it has a very crucial role in language teaching and learning. According to some scholars' viewpoints of word and vocabulary, that *word* is the smallest meaningful unit of language used for making phrases and sentences that usually represent an object, idea, or action. *Vocabulary* is viewed as "a set of lexemes which includes a single word, compound words, and idioms". That means a word is a form that can occur alone and have meaning or a sound or combination of sounds forming a unit of the grammar or vocabulary of a language, and accordingly act as a part of vocabulary' in a language. Therefore, vocabulary is greater than just only words (Read 2000, p. 20; Richards 2000, p. xi). It concerns not only simple words but also complex and compound words, as well as meaningful units of language.

### **2.3 Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)**

Vocabulary learning strategies are subcategories of language learning strategies, which in turn are a subdivision of general learning strategies (Nation, 2013). Therefore, the definition of vocabulary learning strategies stems from language learning strategies, and many different researchers present varied definitions of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) based on their different points of view such as (Catalan, 2003; Cameron, 2001) define vocabulary learning Strategies as "the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items". Furthermore, Schmidt (1997) defined vocabulary learning strategies as "a knowledge of the mechanisms (strategies of processes) used for vocabulary learning as well as the steps or actions that students take (a) to learn the meaning of unknown words (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to remember well, and (d) to be used in an oral or written situation." Hence, (Intrapraser 2004, p.53) states that vocabulary learning strategies refer to "any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners have reported using to discover the meaning of a new word to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to expand one's knowledge of vocabulary". In other words, vocabulary learning strategies are a set of varied strategies employed at different stages of vocabulary learning that are liable to be taught to improve both L2 vocabulary attainment and use. According to the definitions of the term 'vocabulary learning strategies' above, thus the term 'VLSs' has been used to refer to the purposeful steps, actions, or mental processes that learners employ to facilitate and increase vocabulary learning.

### **2.4 Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

So far, several vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) classifications have been introduced by many researchers, such as Nation (2013). Cook (2001) identified two main categories for understanding vocabulary, which include strategies for getting meaning and strategies for acquiring words. Language learners can get the meaning of vocabulary items by guessing the meaning from context, using a dictionary, making deductions from the word form, and linking vocabulary items to cognates. Nation (2013; 2005) provided a taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, which can be grouped into the three main categories that include planning for finding information and creating knowledge. The Planning category is divided into four subcategories. The Sources category was combined to create seven subcategories, and the Processes category consists of three sub-categories. They could be assumed that vocabulary learning strategies proposed by Nation (2013; 2005) involve both cognitive and metacognitive strategies since both include a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). The (VLSs which identified by Hedge (2000) were categorized under two main categories, i.e., Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies. Cognitive strategies deal with strategies for using the vocabulary and for understanding how vocabulary works. Catalan (2003) argues that the classification compiled by Schmidt (1997) has many convenient advantages to be "standardized as a test to effortlessly collect answers from students". Besides, it is based on the theory of learning strategies as well as theories of memory and technically simple" and easy for coding sorting and managing of the data calculating programs" Furthermore, it can be used with learners of different ages, educational backgrounds, and target language.

Schmitt (1997) adopted the taxonomies established by Oxford (1990), i.e., social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, then he added a new category, which includes those strategies used to discover the meaning of new words without referring to others 'determination strategies'. He (ibid.) states that metacognitive strategies are a conscious overview of the learning process to make decisions for planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study". Unlike the formerly stated strategies, metacognitive strategies involve indirect management of lexical acquisition. Yet they seem to be very important because they included all taxonomies. In this light, Schmitt emphasizes exposure to the TL by all possible means (books, movies, and Internet) and that they should involve in communicative events with native speakers. Many EFL scholars should also be checking if the process of lexical acquisition works properly and if the learning strategies used meet their requirements. Several EFL scholars (Algarni, 2018; Alharbi & Ibrahim; Ali, 2020; Jafari & Kafipour, 2013; Kassem, 2010) conducted studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs), confirming their major role in expanding vocabulary knowledge. Also, they agreed to recommend that learners should be aware of how to study FL vocabulary and the time allocated for that because turning the responsibility to the learner will encourage him to improve his skills and help him practice his vocabulary knowledge effectively.'

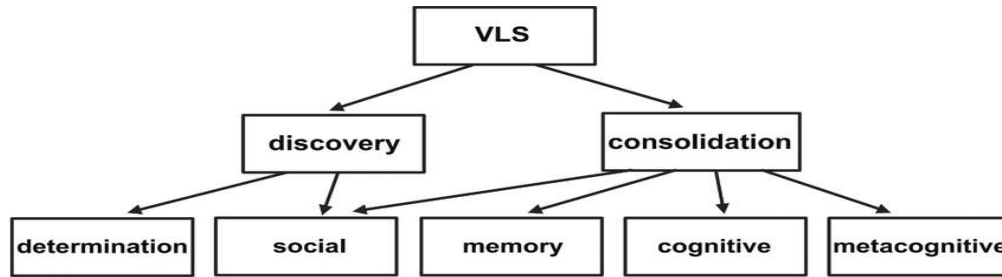


Figure 1: Graphical Overview of Schmitt's (1997) TaxonomyMethodology

This study was designed to obtain quantitative data about the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) and vocabulary knowledge span and how do (VLSs) contribute to the vocabulary knowledge expansion by the Sudanese EFL learners at the tertiary level. The questionnaire had adopted Schmitt 1997 model with slight modification to collect the intended data via a descriptive method. The sample investigated was 159 homogeneous. The 159 participants who responded to the questionnaire were both male and female students enrolled at the 1<sup>st</sup> level of the English Language department, faculty of education, Alzaiem Alazhari University in the academic year 2018-2019. They were homogeneous in their admission grades, and their age's range 17 to 19. Their responses were statically calculated to find the frequencies and their ratios.

**3. Results and Discussion**

The Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) that involve in this study are 1/the Determination, 2/the Social (Discovery), 3/the Social (Consolidation), 4/the Memory, 5/the Cognitive, and 6/the Metacognitive. The collected data were tabulated, analyzed, and discussed. The responses were calculated, and the results of the data were presented in the following tables; arranged by descending order by ranks they attained:

**Table 1: The Mean, SD, Percentage and Rank of participants' responses Cognitive Strategies**

Strategies	N	Mean	SD	%	Rank
Cognitive	159	3.18	1.22	63.3	1
Valid N (list-wise)	159				

Table (1) above explores the (Mean, SD, percentages, and rank) of the frequencies of the **"Cognitive Strategies"** items. (Mean = 3.18). The subcategories items (*verbal, written repetition, and taking notes*) statements achieved the highest frequency among the rest of the other items of the **cognitive strategies**. There were 63.3% of the respondents who preferred mostly to use **Cognitive Strategies** in learning vocabulary it assigned **rank 1**. The finding showed that EFL Sudanese learners use **Cognitive strategies** always. They agreed that they **always** use the mentioned items for learning new words. The findings revealed there was a general tendency among the respondents for these subcategories within **"Cognitive Strategies"**. They were found to be the favorite ones for the respondents to reinforce their vocabulary knowledge. According to Nation (2001), there are some ways to draw attention to the use of words by quickly showing the grammatical pattern the word fits into it, consequently this technique supports the concept of "cognitive Strategies" used to expand and consolidate the vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, making a mental connection between the orthographic form and the sound of the words will consolidate the vocabulary knowledge and help to be retrieved. Cognitive learning strategies raise a learner's capacity to learn effectively and apply it in new situations for better retention.

**Table 2: The Mean, SD Percentage and Rank of participants' responses Memory Strategies**

Strategies	N	Mean	SD	%	Rank
Memory	159	2.99	1.24	59.8	2
Valid N (list-wise)	159				

Table 2 above illustrates the (Mean, SD, percentages, and rank) of the frequencies of the **Memory Strategies**. The **Memory Strategies** that involved the higher-order thinking skills assigned **rank 2** and obtained (% **59.8**) of the respondents who agreed to its usage in vocabulary learning. This indicates that the majority of the respondents had ticked the (always option) and (often option) on behalf of the items within **Memory Strategies**. Learners use this strategy to expand and consolidate their vocabulary knowledge and to develop a pattern that connects new lexis with more familiar information. They always employ their mental image for the new word to help them memorize the new words later. The participants agreed to the use of memory strategies because creating a mental image of vocabulary facilitates the process of learning vocabulary effectively. **Memory** strategies relate to techniques that learners use to link vocabulary items to long-term retention; besides, they positively influence memory performance, as they help organize new information or focus on meaning and its different practices.

**Table 3: The Mean, SD Percentage and Rank of participants' responses Metacognitive Strategies**

Strategies	N	Mean	SD	%	Rank
<b>Metacognitive</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.91</b>	<b>1.30</b>	<b>58.2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Valid N (list-wise)</b>	<b>159</b>				

Based on Table 3, the Mean, SD Percentage & Rank of participants' on "**Metacognitive Strategies**" noticed that there is a high agreement for these categories items with general overall (Mean = 2.91) which placed it in the 3<sup>rd</sup> rank. This indicates that the majority of the respondents have picked (*often / always*) alternatively as choices in the questionnaire for the benefit of the Metacognitive Strategies items. Metacognitive strategies empower students to think about their way of learning process support them to control their learning strategies. It also improves the personal ability for self-regulation and managing one's motivation for learning. The census of this strategy got (% 58.2) of the respondents who agreed to the utilization of metacognitive strategies, which were supported by listening, presentation or conversation to develop and reinforce their vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, meta-cognitive items are concerned with the processes learners employ to analyze, assess and improve the outcome of their vocabulary learning. Metacognition helps EFL to develop self-awareness skills that become important as they progress. Further, it can help them to take control of their learning and encourage them to realize how to learn effectively. It seems that these strategies help EFL Sudanese learners to develop self-awareness skills that will become important as they progress.

**Table 4: The Mean, SD Percentage and Rank of participants' responses Determination Strategies**

Strategies	N	Mean	SD	%	Rank
<b>Determination</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.87</b>	<b>1.26</b>	<b>57.4</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Valid N (list-wise)</b>	<b>159</b>				

Table 4 above shows the descriptive statistics (mean, SD, Percentages, and Rank) for **Determination Strategies**, and the study illustrates that there was an adequate agreement of responses to attain rank 4 with a ratio of 57.4%. According to the above-mentioned findings, the use of determination strategies was highly employed for learning new words and reinforcing vocabulary knowledge. It is found that EFL Sudanese learners tend to use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries or guess the meaning from context to find the meaning of new vocabulary. Also, they tend to often analyze the words into affixes or break them into sound segments to learn the meaning of the unfamiliar words. **Determination** Strategies uses steps to pinpoint or consolidate vocabulary items through contextual cues or dictionary use, among others. So far, these Determination Strategies were appreciated by EFL learners to guess and discover the meaning of the new words from context, structural knowledge, and reference material.

**Table 5: The Mean, SD Percentage and Rank of participants' responses Consolidation Strategies**

Strategies	N	Mean	SD	%	Rank
<b>Social/Consolidation</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.79</b>	<b>1.33</b>	<b>55.8</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Valid N (list-wise)</b>	<b>159</b>				

Table 5 above explains that there is a low agreement for the social strategies (**consolidation strategies**) in comparison to the above-mentioned strategies with a general overall percentage (%55.8) and Mean: 2.79). The overall trend was often and sometimes choices. The study results revealed that the use of vocabulary consolidation strategies received **rank 5** among the other strategies. The EFL learners approved that they learn words when studying the culture of English-speaking countries to enhance their vocabulary knowledge; besides the other items such as referring to their colleague or they work in groups to consolidate their awareness of the vocabulary. Likewise, the EFL learners turn to friends, teachers, or Internet-based assemblies to help define the meaning of a word, but unfortunately, Social Strategies were rated low for the lack of web-based learning in the Sudanese universities. It is a necessity to heighten the role of social strategies in learning new words when reading the culture and literature of English-speaking countries, which is considered in the top range of learning new vocabulary items.

**Table 6: The Mean, SD Percentage and Rank of participants’ responses Discovery Strategies**

Strategies	N	Mean	SD	%	Rank
Social/Discovery	159	2.73	1.21	54.6	6
Valid N (list-wise)	159				

Table 6 explains that the social strategies (**Discovery Strategies**) attained an overall percentage (%**54.6**) and Mean: 2.73), which indicates that the majority of the respondents have chosen sometimes and rarely for the Discovery strategies items. Despite the belief in the vigorous role of group work in learning and consolidating the new vocabulary within teamwork activities, EFL Sudanese learners had a rare use for it. The findings of the study indicate that this strategy received the least frequency among the other strategies, and it was assigned **rank 6**. This shabby attitude towards this category may attribute to the influence they inherited from the recent general school system, which may impulse students to mobilize their efforts on cognitive and memory strategies. Finally, there was no statically significant difference between males and femes in the mean scores were found.

**4. Conclusion**

The outcome of this study, despite its limitations, delivers new evidence of the benefits of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) for EFL students to develop and enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Analysis of its quantitative data indicates that EFL Sudanese learners of the first year who are accustomed to using cognitive, memory, and metacognitive strategies to improve their vocabulary knowledge are assigned the highest ranks in contrast with other strategies. The present investigation made some significant contributions to the field of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), and it has also offered the perspective of vocabulary learning strategies exclusively employed by EFL Sudanese learners at the tertiary level. As the findings of this study revealed that EFL learners were unaware of language-learning strategies in general because they lacked sufficient opportunities to practice their English language outside the class. Consequently, teachers can help their students to become empowered learners and to take some responsibility for their success by providing them with a sense of what strategies of learning areas and how they can develop their learning strategies to serve to achieve proficiency goals. As mentioned, EFL learners should be familiar with different techniques to learn the English language vocabulary on their own inside and outside the classroom. The ultimate goal the learner should become an independent and autonomous language learner. As the findings of this study showed that the participants did not utilize VLSs properly, teachers should raise their learner’s awareness of the crucial role that the learning strategies play in learning a foreign language in general and vocabulary knowledge in particular, a mini-seminar about VLSs could be held for students especially at the beginning of every new semester. This will be of great help to them to become aware of their learning strategies to expand and consolidate their vocabulary competency. Learners should be responsible for their learning strategies because every learner knows strengths and weaknesses and relies on the strategies that work better with him. Once these have been recognized, the learner can make a plan focusing on the areas that are needed to increase the speed of learning and build the skills required. EFL learners should take a systematic approach to vocabulary practise and be encouraged to learn new vocabulary daily in an attractive authentic context.

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