

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS 1st YEAR STUDENTS'
VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AT THE DEPARTMENT
OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE-BATNA 2 UNIVERSITY

مواقف الأساتذة اتجاه استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات لدى طلبة السنة الأولى
بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية - جامعة باتنة 2

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning, in a foreign language, requires special strategies, that have received much attention by scholars, educators, teachers, and even university students. In this regard, the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) has accompanied the shift from the teacher-oriented to the student-centered. This paper discusses such an interesting topic, especially from the teachers' views, opinions, towards first year students—at the department of English, Batna2 university— who, in turn, struggle to comprehend written and oral forms of English language. Thus, "what vocabulary learning strategies are most and least used among 1st year students?". And "to what extent they are aware about them?" is the main problem in this investigation. Furthermore, the paper aims at checking the students' awareness and beliefs about the use of vocabulary learning strategies, identifying the different strategies used, and finding out what strategies are most and least used among them. To answer and achieve the aforementioned questions and aims, we opt for the descriptive design. In addition to one questionnaire that is conducted and administered to a sample of (10 out of 69) teachers through the purposive sampling technique. After analyzing the questionnaire, the results confirm and answer the stated hypothesis and questions. On the light of these results, some pedagogical implications are suggested as future guidelines.

Keywords: Strategies, Vocabulary, Learning, Contextual Guessing, Games, Dictionaries, Translation.

ملخص

إن تعلم مفردات لغة أجنبية يتطلب استراتيجيات خاصة والتي حظيت باهتمام كبير من قبل العلماء والمربين والاساتذة وحتى طلاب الجامعات. وفي هذا الصدد، فإن استخدام استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات قد رافق التحول من التركيز على الاستاذ إلى التركيز على الطالب. يناقش هذا البحث مثل هذا الموضوع المثير للاهتمام من وجهة نظر الأساتذة فيما يخص طلاب السنة الأولى بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة باتنة2 والذين، بدورهم، يحاولون فهم اللغة الإنجليزية في جانبها المكتوب والشفوي. وبالتالي، ما هي استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات الأكثر والأقل استخداما بين طلاب السنة الأولى؟ وإلى أي مدى هم على وعي بها؟ هي المشكلة الرئيسية في هذه الدراسة. وعلاوة على ذلك، فإن هذا البحث يهدف إلى تفحص الوعي والشعور باستخدام استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات، وتحديد الاستراتيجيات المختلفة المستخدمة، ومعرفة الاستراتيجيات الأكثر والأقل استخداماً من بينها. للإجابة عن الأسئلة المطروحة وتحقيق الأهداف المذكورة أعلاه، اخترنا التصميم الوصفي بالإضافة إلى استبيان واحد تم إجراؤه وتوزيعه على عينة (10 من أصل 69) أستاذ من خلال تقنية العينة القصدية. بعد تحليل الاستبيان، أكدت النتائج وأجابت عن الفرضية والأسئلة المثارة سابقاً. وعلى ضوءها، نقترح بعض المضامين البيداغوجية كمبادئ توجيهية في المستقبل..

الكلمات المفتاحية: إستراتيجية، مفردات، التعلم، التخمين السياقي، العاب، قواميس، الترجمة..

Introduction

Nowadays, teaching/learning vocabulary has such an importance in EFL classrooms, and should; therefore, be part of a syllabus and taught on a regular basis. Speaking about the person's vocabulary, means the words s/he knows and is able to use. It is generally accepted that vocabulary is the heart of language learning. As a matter of fact, it is noticed that the most significant problem encountered by EFL students, at at the Department of English Batna2 university, is vocabulary learning. They were limited in their vocabulary use, which has in turn led to frustration in using the four skills (reading, speaking, listening, and writing) when using English language. What impedes most comprehension and production of the language is the vocabulary strategies used by students.

To help them cope with this problem, we may use different techniques such as guessing the meaning from context, word part analysis, using translation, reading and check the meaning of a word in a dictionary, etc. Hence, "what vocabulary learning strategies are most and least used among 1st year students"?. And "to "what extent they are aware about them"?. Thus, throughout this study, we aim at answering the following sub-questions questions: (1) Does students' awareness about language learning correlate with vocabulary learning strategy use? (2) What are the different strategies used in understanding new vocabulary? And (3) What are the most and least used vocabulary learning strategies according to students' perception? On the basis of what is mentioned above we built up the following hypothesis: In learning vocabulary, first year students might use different types of vocabulary learning strategies.

1. Review of Literature

1.1 Vocabulary Definition(s)

Many researchers and scholars interested in the individuals' speaking, reading, writing, and even understanding any language. A view that meets Rubin and Thompson (1994) pointed out, "One cannot speak, understand, read or write a foreign language without knowing a lot of words. Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies is at the heart of mastering a foreign language. Lewis (1993, p.125) who argued that "vocabulary should be at the center of language teaching because language consists of "grammaticalized lexis not lexicalized grammar." Foreign language learners need to learn and expand their vocabulary."

In defining vocabulary, Hatch and Brown (1995, p.1) claimed that vocabulary is a list or a set of words for a particular language that individual speakers of a language might use. It is as a stock of words used by a person, a class or a profession. It means, vocabulary is all words of a particular language, which is understood and used by the speaker of the language.

Vocabulary has an association with the meaning. Hornby (1995) stated that "vocabulary is a list of words with their meaning". It means vocabulary is the skill of recognizing words and their meaning. From the definition above, it can be concluded that vocabulary is all words with their meaning that usually used by speakers of a particular language.

1.2 Types of Vocabulary

According to many researchers such as Arnaud and Savignon, 1997; Nation, 2001; Kennedy, 2003, we can distinguish four kinds of vocabulary in a text: high frequency vocabulary, academic vocabulary, technical vocabulary and low frequency vocabulary.

1.3 Strategy Definition(s)

Strategies are seen as helpful tools that students adapt for solving learning problems. According to Brown (1987) "strategies are those specific 'attacks' that we make in a given problem" (p.89). This statement closely matches Gagné's (1965, p.2) point of view, since he viewed strategies as "specific methods of approaching a problem or a task mode of operating for achieving a particular end".

In the same line of thoughts, Macaro (2004, p.2) defined the term strategy as a mental process with a cognitive perspective, arguing that: "Strategies are not simply knowledge but contain a mental action that can be described. It is almost self-evident, that the action component of a strategy ought to be describable by someone, especially a teacher or researcher".

Therefore, it can be said that consciousness, purpose or goal-orientation are essential parts in any definition of strategy. Nevertheless, Ellis (1994) asserted that the concept of strategy is vague, fuzzy and not easy to tie down. He proposed another general definition of strategy combining both mental and behavioral activities, "... a strategy consisted of mental or behavioral activity related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use" (p.529).

1.4 Learning Strategy

In describing learning strategies, Wenden and Rubin (1987) claimed that they are "any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the students to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information" (p.19). It is argued by (Richards & Platt,1992) that "learning strategies are intentional behavior and thoughts that learners make use during learning in order to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information" (p.209). Learning strategies are also illustrated by (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p.1).

Hence, learning strategies were seen as special ways of processing information that improve comprehension, learning, or retention of the information. Whereas prior descriptions of learning strategies paid more attention to products of learning and behaviors reflecting unobservable cognitive processes, definitions eventually provided clearer understanding of what learners think and do during language learning.

Furthermore, Oxford (1990) went further to say that "students who utilize effective strategy will be able to learn independently or autonomously". She claimed that "learning strategies ... contribute to the development of the language system, where the student constructs and affects learning directly students who use effective strategies are better able to work outside the classroom by themselves, once the teacher is not around to direct them or provide them with input"(p.09).

1.5 Language Learning Strategies Definition and Classification

As for its definition, the term language learning strategy has been defined by many researchers and it has been widely recognized in the field of language acquisition due to the extensive research of Oxford (1990).

She is one of the pioneers in the field of language learning strategies. She

viewed language learning strategies as behaviors or actions, which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable.

As for its classification, O' Malley (1985) divided language learning strategies into three main categories: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies and Socio-affective Strategies. In the same line of thoughts, Oxford presented her unique taxonomy in 1990, she was fully aware that the understanding of LLS was in its infancy at that time and she herself proposed that it should be tested through both practical classroom use and through research (p.16). For this reason, she invented not only LLS taxonomy, but also a questionnaire called Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that was designed to help researchers gather information on actual language learning and to help students understand their own learning.

1.6 Vocabulary Learning Strategies Definition and Classification

Vocabulary learning strategies are part of language learning strategies which, in turn, are part of general learning strategies (Nation 2001, p. 217). In other words, vocabulary learning strategies can be the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items. The fact that is confirmed by Intaraprasert (2004, p. 9) who defined vocabulary learning strategies as “any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners reported using in order to discover the meaning of a new word, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to expand their knowledge of vocabulary.” In order to learn and enlarge vocabulary size, language learners need to deal with a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies and every language learners have their own way for learning vocabulary.

In classifying learning strategies, scholars have different ways of classifying language learning strategies (Intaraprasert 2004, p.10). These classification systems give a crucial contribution to the knowledge of vocabulary strategies, which have been identified in different contexts by different scholars, among them the classifications of Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt (2000), Nation (2001), etc.

1.7 Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

There are several strategies to learn vocabulary that are provided by many research among them Baxter, 1980; Scholfield, 1982; Knight, 1994; O'Malley, (1985); Nation and Coady, 1988; Gairns and Redman, 1990; Krashen, 1986, etc.

However, only four strategies have been selected as the most commonly used among EFL students; they are translation, guessing through context, use of dictionaries, and reading. Each of the following strategy fits a specific role, and it differs according to students' style and task.

2. Methods and Procedures

2.1 Method

A descriptive design is chosen to meet the aims, to answer the questions set previously, and to achieve a broader understanding of the use of VLS among 1st year students at the department of English, Batna 2 University, Algeria. In addition to the identification of key issues and key variables in strategy use.

In this regard, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) defined methods as "range of approaches used in educational research to gather data, which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction." (p.44). Similarly, Burns and Grove (2001, p.248) stated that "descriptive design helps to identify the problem in a current practice with a view to improve outcomes".

Hence the purpose of descriptive research is to explore the real life situation and to provide information of the elements as they occur. Also, it describes a current situation and develops appropriate guidelines for future use in order to achieve better results out the teaching pedagogy.

2.2 Population/Sample/Sampling Technique

In order to obtain the necessary data regarding VLS among first year students at the department of English, Batna2 University, the study involved sixty-nine full-time teachers (69), all of them are teaching at the department of English.

Thus, dealing with the whole population of teachers (69) would be too energy consuming, which is supported by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) who claimed that: "fact such as expense, time, accessibility frequently prevent researchers from gaining information from the whole population" (p.100). Therefore, they often need to be able to obtain data from a smaller group or subset of the total population in such a way that the knowledge gained is representative of the total population under study. This procedure is known as a sample; which included the teachers' sample (10 out of 69) using the purposive sampling technique, for we need only teachers who are currently teaching first year; and they will provide us with a valuable information.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

Questionnaires are most commonly used instrument, among many other types of research tools, for collecting data in any research. They are extremely flexible and can be used to gather information on almost any topic from a larger or smaller group of subjects and most importantly with less efforts and in precise times. Such characteristics of questionnaires and

other factors made us decide to adopt this instrument as a main tool for collecting data.

Accordingly, through these questions, the researcher aims at gathering information about the subjects' opinions, attitudes, interests and background. In which we paid our attention to ensure that individual questions are appropriate, precise, and unbiased. We combined "Yes/No" questions, "Multiple Choice" questions, and "Open-ended" questions within the same questionnaire. Before administering the teachers' questionnaire, we have piloted it; the fact that is supported by Cohen, Manino and Morrison (2007) who claimed that "...pilot has several functions principally, to increase the reliability, validity, and the practicability of the questionnaire" (p.341). And by following Wallace's check list, 2000, p.133): (1) Were the instructions clear and easy to follow?, (2) Were the questions clear?, (3) How long does the questionnaire take to complete?, and (4) Do our informants find any of the questions: (embarrassing, irrelevant, patronising, and irritating). So, in order to collect the needed data, we used one questionnaire for teachers (10 out of 69).

3. Results and Discussion

In analyzing the teachers' questionnaire, we take into consideration the type of questions: "Yes/No" questions were analyzed in Table1 and the "Multiple choice" questions in Tables 2,3,4, and 5. The last type is the "Open-ended" questions, however, were analyzed after, without focussing on their numerical order in the questionnaire.

Table1 below includes seven "Yes/No" questions, where the participants have to tick only one answer that have been justified with clear explanations for each choice (see Appendix A) Here are the seven questions listed and displayed below in Table1:

Table1

Teachers' answers for "Yes/No" questions

Questions	Yes	%	No	%
Q1	03	30	07	70
Q2	10	100	00	00
Q3	04	40	06	60
Q4	03	30	07	70
Q5	02	20	08	80
Q6	06	60	04	40
Q7	07	70	03	30

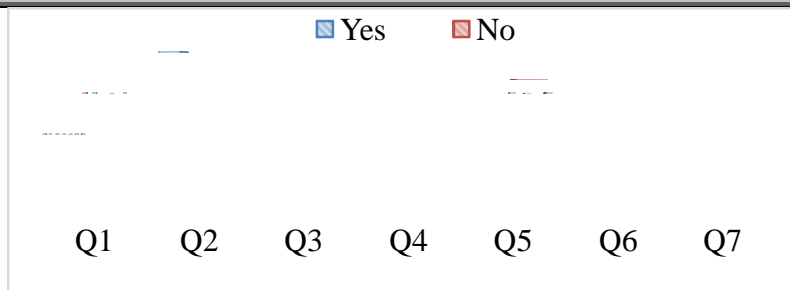


Figure 1. Teachers' Answers' Percentage for "Yes/No" Questions

For Q1, as it is revealed in Table1, only a small number of teachers admitted that it is their job to motivate students, while the majority justified their answers by saying that students' psychological situations are not the same, so each one must find his/her own way to be motivated. This implies that teachers have not enough time to identify each student's style and strategy in learning.

As for Q2, all teachers declared that it is important to provide them with new items in each course. This may determine that the lack of students' vocabulary is not the teachers' responsibility. As well as showing the importance that teachers give to the teaching of vocabulary, considering it as an important component of their teaching of EFL.

In Q3, the majority of the teachers said that they do not explain all the unknown words. This means that they explain the words they think are important for the understanding of the text. These words are generally content words that are considered as key words by the teachers.

In addition to motivation and explanation of new items, Q4 revealed that most teachers stated that they do not use any strategy. But some of them, however; said that teaching foreign language goes along with vocabulary strategies. They mentioned the following strategies: Checking monolingual dictionaries, guessing from the context, word part analysis.

Among the strategies that are used by teachers, Table1 showed that almost of teachers in Q5 said that they ignore using games when teaching vocabulary, because they are not part of the syllabus, and they have no much time to use them. The opposite side which answered "Yes" are few. For them games help students practice their English and acquire vocabulary, stimulate their thinking, and improve their familiarity with new words.

In Q6, almost of the teachers asked their learners to use a notebook. This seemed to imply that the use of the notebook is obligatory. The remaining teachers, however; the use of a notebook is not obligatory and it is up to students whether to use it or not.

The teachers confirmed through their answers, in Q7, that the use of the notebook is really taken into consideration since almost of them said they check them, this implies the importance of using the notebook as a strategy. Hence, according to them, the most used technique is translation. This technique is also used in combination with other techniques like "drawing", "writing synonyms/opposites", "using definitions" and "putting words in sentences". These results showed that the learners often use more than one technique to record unknown words in their notebook.

As for the "Multiple Choice" questions, the participants are asked to select only one answer from the choices offered as a list, which they are recapitulated in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 below; and the "Open-ended", where full answers are required.

Q8: How do you find the student's vocabulary level?

Table 2

Students' vocabulary level according to teachers

Options	Participants	%
a. Good	01	10
b. Average	03	30
c. Weak	06	60
Total	10	100

Q9: How do you introduce new vocabulary items to your learners?

Table 3

Introducing new vocabulary items

Options	Participants	%
a. Give the word with its meaning in L1	00	00
b. Give the word with its meaning in L2	01	10
c. Let the student guess its meaning themselves	06	60
d. Give the word and its synonyms	01	10
e. Others	02	20
Total	10	100

Q10: According to you, which of the following vocabulary learning strategies are the most used among students?

Table 4

Most used VLS among students

Options	Participants	%
a. Use of monolingual dictionaries	03	30
b. Use of bilingual dictionaries	04	40
c. Reading and guessing from the context	02	20
d. Asking others	01	10
Total	10	100

Q11: Do you consider teaching vocabulary through crossword puzzles as:

Table 5

Crossword puzzles value

Options	Participants	%
a. An educational strategy	00	00
b. An entertaining	00	00
c. Both	10	100
d. A waste of time	00	00
Total	10	100

For vocabulary teaching in the classroom, the teachers' answers vary from one to another as far as the students' vocabulary level is concerned (Q8). In this regard, the majority of teachers claimed that their students struggle to comprehend written and oral forms of English language. However, some of them stated that learners have enough vocabulary. Only one teacher recognized the good level of the students' vocabulary. This indicated that the students are not aware about the importance of vocabulary, the results also may prove that students neglect the use of vocabulary strategies.

Accordingly, the teachers' used different ways to introduce new vocabulary items among them (Q9): introducing them within the context of the course, providing a new word expecting from them to give its synonym, and explaining a word by giving its meaning in L2. Others suggested alternative ways, such as activities like quizzes, matching, gap filling, pictures and discussions.

Thus, concerning the teachers' views about vocabulary learning strategies (Q10), they have mentioned some activities in the following statements: *“Reading/ listening/ songs/ short stories/ poems/ mnemonic activities, dividing the class into groups and make them compete to solve puzzles, crosswords, naming animals, places, people, and the missing word, MCQ, matching, discussion, and word splash”*. Through the points mentioned above, it is noticed that the teachers suggested ideal activities, however; they rarely apply them.

What is noticed by the teachers (10) that the most frequent vocabulary learning strategies used by the students are two main ones: bilingual and monolingual dictionaries and contextual guessing, which implies that the students have the tendency to use translation (Q11).

In short, the majority of teachers have offered one interesting suggestion; they call for the creation of a new module concerning vocabulary learning at Batna 2 university as well as the avoidance of L1 by emphasizing on the use of monolingual dictionaries (Oxford dictionaries) and guessing from the context, they also asserted reading short stories outside classroom.

Finally, the findings indicated that the teachers noticed the students' weak vocabulary level, despite, some of them have a tendency to use dictionaries and guessing from the context. Also, the majority of the teachers, despite the fact that they know vocabulary strategies, they rarely apply them and this is due to the lack of time. The results also showed that the teachers present new words in lessons, however; they use only a very limited number of strategies. The most used strategies are introducing words within a context and giving examples, letting students guess the meaning by their own, using different activities such as matching, and gap filling, this means that the teachers try as much as possible to avoid L1.

Conclusion

Vocabulary learning has been one of the significant issues of ongoing discussion. Today's language teachers and researchers are aware of the palpable role of vocabulary in different pedagogical tasks. There is no doubt that virtually all second/foreign language teachers and learners realized the fact that learning a second/foreign language involves the learning of a large number of words, but how to accomplish this task is often of considerable concern to them. How vocabulary is learned and what the most efficient strategies are to promote effective teaching and learning have been worthwhile cornerstones in the field of second language learning. On the whole, they all place emphasis upon the fact that the mastery of vocabulary is an essential component of second/foreign language.

This paper illustrates, to a certain extent, facts about the awareness and beliefs of first year students' vocabulary learning strategies at the department of English of Batna 2 University. It has raised some important issues: It outlines the different vocabulary learning strategies and the most/least used among them. Furthermore, it promotes students' awareness about the existence of several vocabulary learning strategies. In addition, it encourages them to implement some of the aforementioned strategies too. Besides, it provides a better understanding of the acquisition procedure, which can be used as a guideline for introducing vocabulary teaching techniques. Hence, the pedagogical implications that could be derived from this investigation are:

1. The importance of exposing students to the vocabulary learning strategies varieties. As it is supported by Schmitt (1997) that vocabulary learning strategies instruction may play an important part of any course. It prepares learners to deal with and learn words that might be encountered and dealt with when necessary.
2. Creating vocabulary learning as a new module, if not at least embedding explicit vocabulary strategy instruction into regular courses would not only raise students' autonomy, but also make

them more aware of the language/vocabulary learning resources available to them (Cohen, 1998).

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Appendix A

- Q1 Do you think that it is the teachers' job to motivate students?
- Q2 Do you present new words in every lesson?
- Q3 Do you explain all the unknown words in a text?
- Q4 Do you apply strategies that help your students enlarge their vocabulary repertoire?
- Q5 Do you use vocabulary games in class?
- Q6 Do you ask your learners to use a notebook?
- Q7 Do you have a look at their notebooks?