Vocabulary learning strategies for vocabulary learning in literary texts

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Abstract

Literary texts are made up of lexis which enriches the beauty of scenes described or narrated. This makes them overloaded with vocabulary, sometimes, even daunting learners, particularly foreign language learners. Teachers of literature in an EFL classroom need to consider the difficulty of grasping large amounts of new words. To this end, it is necessary to teach the learners ways of learning vocabulary, by introducing vocabulary learning strategies to aid learners' grasp and retaining. This study aims to describe the application of Vocabulary Learning Strategy (VLS) in an EFL classroom and more precisely with a literary course. In this descriptive paper, a literature review on vocabulary learning strategies will be presented introducing their taxonomies and their importance in an EFL context. In addition, a framework for training learners to use these strategies will be described concerning a short story.

Keywords: literary texts; memory strategies; vocabulary; vocabulary learning strategies.

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1. Introduction:

As part of language learning, vocabulary remains a crucial element that is required to master the skills of any language, be it first, second or foreign, for speakers to receive and produce language and interact with each other. "Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas, and content together ... making comprehension accessible" (Rupley, Logan & Nichols, 1999). Comprehension of literary texts is more complex. It has been argued that they pose "more comprehension difficulties than expository texts. For one thing, all literary forms contain elements that have a symbolic (abstract) as well as a literal (concrete) meaning" (Muller 1978 as cited in Chase & Duffelmeyer 1990, p. 188). Then, to be able to interpret the content of texts that are rich in lexis, learners should have a large amount of vocabulary knowledge which is the best indicator of learners' comprehension, as Masrai (2019, p. 1) reported that "a substantial number of studies have found vocabulary knowledge to be a significant predictor of reading success in L2 learners", thus it plays "a key role in the individual's proficiency in both first and second language" (Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003, p. 7).

In literature, great attention is directed to vocabulary learning by researchers and theorists which allowed the appearance of new approaches, techniques, and strategies in the field of vocabulary teaching (Hatch & Brown 1995). Vocabulary experts agree that adequate reading depends on vocabulary knowledge estimated to be 90 percent of words in a text to understand a text and be able to guess the meaning of the other 10 percent; moreover, they spend less time interpreting texts and more time focusing on the new words (Hirsh, 2003). Then, language learners should enrich their lexical luggage continuously to be able to deal with texts. Literary studies teachers are generally concerned with analyzing texts, stories, novels, and chapters of novels knowing that the texts are full of new and varied lexis that may hinder their students from comprehension. Therefore, to reach this level of knowledge of new words, bearing in mind the incremental nature of vocabulary, is an important objective for both learners and teachers. Teachers, in this case, should care not only about analyzing texts but also about equipping their learners with tools that help them tackle the task of learning lexis easily and successfully. These tools, notably, vocabulary learning strategies respond to the new approach to teaching vocabulary stating that vocabulary learning can be enhanced when the learners' attention is directed consciously to vocabulary items and the strategies used to learn them (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994; Coady & Huckin 1997; Nation, 2001). These strategies help them learn words independently and efficiently.

1.1. Purpose of Study

The present work is a descriptive study, that aims to describe the application of VLS in an EFL classroom and more precisely with a literary course. It attempts to shed light on the role of vocabulary learning strategies to expand students' lexical knowledge to tackle literary texts. To begin with, a theoretical account of the strategies is presented. The question guiding this study is "how do teachers teach EFL learners these strategies as simple as possible so that they become effective users?"

2. Results
2.1. Definition and Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) as part of language learning strategies are any "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary" (Cameron 2001, p. 92). To be more precise, these strategies are used "(a) to find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in the long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will and (d) to use them in oral or written mode" (Catalan, 2003, p. 56). The advantage gained behind the use of these strategies is two-fold: to improve knowledge and to develop autonomy. Studies on the characteristics of good language learners carried out by Rubin (1975) gave birth to language learning strategies which in turn yielded VLS. It is necessary to make language learners aware of the different strategies to be able to choose the most suitable ones for their learning styles. It is worth noting here that a strategy may work well with a learner and partially or fully fail with another. The reason must be the abilities that some learners have and others lack in the use of the strategies. Vann and Abraham (1990 as cited in Clouston, 1997)

corroborated stating that both good and unsuccessful language learners can be active users of the same strategies but unsuccessful learners lacked the metacognitive strategies that would enable them to achieve the task efficiently.

Various attempts have been made by researchers to classify vocabulary learning strategies used by second or foreign-language learners. Some of these classifications are the taxonomies of Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt (1997), and Nation (2001). They are briefly summarised below.

Gu and Johnson (1996) classified vocabulary learning strategies into four main groups of strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and activation strategies. The metacognitive strategies include selective attention strategies through which the learners identify essential words for comprehension and self-initiation strategies, the learners can then use a variety of means to make the meaning of a word clear. Cognitive strategies comprise three categories: guessing, use of dictionaries, and note-taking strategies. When the learners use guessing strategies, they employ their background knowledge or use linguistic items. The learners then can guess the meaning of the word by dividing it into roots and affixes or by guessing its meaning from its contexts. When the learners use note-taking strategies, they can take the meaning of the word and its collocation. The third group is memory strategies, which include rehearsal strategies using word lists and repetition and encoding strategies such as associating the word or word meaning to imagery, visual or auditory encoding, or using word structure, i.e., words and affixes. Finally, activation strategies consist of those strategies through which the learners use new words in different contexts, for example, they can put the newly learned word in a sentence.

Schmitt (1997) developed a taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies that seem to be elaborate and comprehensive. He classified them into two groups: discovery strategies determining the meaning of new words encountered for the first time and consolidation strategies, those used to enhance the meaning of words encountered again. Through determination strategies, the learners try to find out the meaning of the new words "without making recourse to another person's experience" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 205), they can use reference materials such as dictionaries or guess the meaning of the words from their contexts or structural knowledge of the language. Whereas with determination strategies, learners use social strategies to discover the meaning of new words making recourse to the teacher or the classmate(s) through cooperative group work (Hakem-Benkhenafou, 2015). The latter consists of a set of strategies the learners employ to consolidate their vocabulary. They use, then, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies to consolidate the words encountered. Social strategies are also used to consolidate the meaning of the already encountered words, they consist of the same strategies cited above. Memory strategies, traditionally known as mnemonics, require elaborative mental processing (Schmitt, 1997). They refer to the strategies through which the learners use some imagery or grouping (Schmitt, 2000). Thus, they help the learners to associate a new word with something already familiar to them (Oxford, 2001). Cognitive strategies in Schmitt's taxonomy do not focus "specifically on manipulative mental processing" (1997, p. 215). They include repetition, whether oral or written, and note-taking strategies through mechanical means such as word lists, flashcards, or vocabulary notebooks. Finally, metacognitive strategies are those that enable the learners to plan, observe and assess the best way of learning vocabulary to achieve better results (Schmitt, 1997). Using English-language media is one of the metacognitive strategies through which the learners seek maximum exposure to the foreign language utilizing books, the internet, songs, and films as well as communicating with native speakers. Testing oneself is another strategy which, in turn, helps to evaluate the suitability and/or effectiveness of the vocabulary learning strategies they use (For more information see Appendix A).

Later, Nation (2001) proposed another taxonomy dividing the strategies into three general classes of planning, source, and processes, each class is divided into a subset of key strategies. He refers to the strategies by which the learners choose what, when, and how often to focus attention on the vocabulary item as a planning category. The sub-strategies in this category are choosing words, choosing aspects of word knowledge, and choosing strategies, in addition to planning repetition. The

sources category involves getting information about the word. This information may include all the aspects involved in knowing a word. This can be done by analyzing the word itself using the context it occurs in, consulting a reference source such as a dictionary, and using parallels, i.e., connections with other languages like L1 and L2 (Hakem-Benkhenafou, 2015). The last category, which is processed, includes establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving, and generation strategies. To Nation (2001), noticing involves seeing the word to be learned. Strategies at this level include putting the word in a word list or a vocabulary notebook or a flash card and orally or visually repeating the word. He argues that these are useful steps resulting in the deeper processing of words. Retrieving strategies involve recalling the items already encountered. It contains recalling knowledge in the same way it was stored. Generating strategies include word analysis, semantic mapping, and using scales and grids. They include as well rule-driven generation, such as creating context, collocations, and sentences containing the new word.

What can be noticed from the three taxonomies is that there are some similarities in the strategies but there are differences in their categorization and labeling. But most importantly, they refer to a wide range of applicable vocabulary learning strategies that may help the learners tackle the task of vocabulary learning easily, effectively, and autonomously.

It is quite sure that learners use some of these strategies unconsciously without knowing that this is the appropriate way of learning words. If they are made aware of this skill in possession, the task of learning becomes easier for them because not only do they uncover the way of learning vocabulary but they also feel equipped with tools to help them tackle the task successfully. The following section will shed light on the importance of teaching vocabulary learning strategies to foreign language learners.

2.2. Purpose Behind Teaching the Strategies

As has already been mentioned, it is useful to teach learners strategies to learn vocabulary rather than to teach them only vocabulary; in so doing they take responsibility for their learning and find themselves active and self-directed toward involvement in language learning (Oxford, 1990) and vocabulary learning in particular. Thus, if the learners acquire skills that "initiate, guide and control the search for information and later on its processing and storage" (Wegner et al. 2013, p. 137), more benefits will be gained in language learning in general. Most learning takes place outside the classroom setting and particularly literary texts which need more preparation for vocabulary learning, comprehension, the analysis of ideas, and their interpretation. So, teaching learners how to use VLS seems useful and necessary so that they can continue learning what they have already started in the classroom in terms of memorizing the already studied words and/or learning new ones. Besides, they can face the challenge of learning autonomously and bear the burden of learning amounts of foreign language lexis.

It is agreed that language learners have already in hand VLS from L1 and L2 learning (Clouston, 1997), but they may seem unconscious of what they know. So, learning about these strategies gives them more confidence to continue learning; they empower their knowledge of the already acquired strategies and they can learn new ones and get more familiarity with them. Thus, they develop a metacognitive knowledge of strategies and they choose from the wide range of existing strategies and adopt the ones that best suit their age and learning styles. These two factors seem to affect the selection of learning strategies. While studying the use of VLS in different age groups, Schmitt (1997) reported that simpler strategies are used by younger learners, however, adult learners use strategies requiring deeper mental processing, such as imaging words' meaning. Brown et al. (1983, as cited in O'Malley & Chamot 1990, p. 150) state that younger learners use rehearsal entailing rote repetition and adult learners use rehearsal as well but with "active, systematic, elaborative procedures". Then, the choice of a strategy may be influenced by the age of the user. As for the learning style which is "the expression of personality specifically in learning situation" (Schmeck, 1988 as cited in Cohen 1988, p. 15), learners may prefer the use of a strategy rather than another as they feel more comfortable with

their choice. Five learning styles contrasts are identified by Oxford (1993); for instance, extroverts enjoy a wide range of social interaction tasks like debates, discussion, and asking classmates, whereas introverts appreciate independent learning. Global learners prefer guessing meaning whereas analytic tend to focus on details like dividing the word into roots and affixes. The other pair is sensors who tend to use memorization strategy besides repetition, contrary to intuitors who do not appreciate repetition. From what has been cited, it can be stated that the teaching of the various strategies is crucial as it helps the learners find their 'comfort zone (to use Oxford's term) and consequently can help them improve their lexical luggage and independence and raise their confidence.

2.3. A Vocabulary Learning Strategies Framework

Two opposing opinions can be held in vocabulary learning on whether to teach vocabulary explicitly or implicitly. It is stated that vocabulary learning can be enhanced when learners' attention is consciously directed to vocabulary items and strategies to learn them; Cohen (1998) found that explicitly teaching strategies and raising them to the level of conscious awareness can be efficient for language learners. Along the same line, Sanaoui (1995) concluded that learners who had a structured learning approach were more successful in retaining vocabulary items than learners who had an unstructured approach. From the cited results, it was thought to embark on teaching VLS explicitly to ensure that EFL learners with different abilities and learning styles can grasp and use them.

The following part presents a description of the introduction of VLS throughout a course for second-year EFL students at the department of English, University of Tlemcen (Algeria). These students are adult males and females aged between 19 and 23 years old coming from different streams (background), being literary or scientific; they have different learning styles. They were trained to use the strategies to deal with literary texts as they study literature in a separate module. A short story was selected for training, The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry. To do so, several steps were followed in training them:

- First, they were made conscious of the importance of vocabulary to be able to understand and interpret any text in general, and a literary text in particular. This was done by clarifying the fact that having rich knowledge of words allows guessing the meaning of new words, a better understanding of a passage, and saving time to be consumed on the analysis of ideas. They can, then, understand the desired message from the writer.
- Second, they were made aware of the strategies they already know from first and second language learning. They were asked about the ways they used to learn words in Arabic (the mother tongue) and French (L2) which can be used to learn English words. In so doing they feel more self-confident and able to cope with new ones and get more familiarity with them.
- Third, they were taught explicitly in two sessions several Schmitt's (1997) VLS with examples, they were provided with handouts at the beginning of the first session. The aim was to help the students develop their metacognitive knowledge of strategies and widen the range of strategies they could use in different situations.
- Fourth, they were trained to use the various strategies with a selected number of words (some examples are presented below). Thus, they were helped to know the strategies and recognize the situations where the appropriate strategy can be used via illustrations. The thing that allows them to select strategies that best suit their learning style and age.
- Fifth, their consciousness of evaluating their progress in vocabulary development and strategy use was raised by checking whether the learned lexis is retained or not. In this way, they can take control of their learning.

These were the steps that were followed in training the students and here are some examples of strategy use. It is worthwhile noting that the focus was on determination strategies to find out the meaning of new words (with a focus on the use of dictionaries) and memory strategies to consolidate the meaning of words (see 2). There was more emphasis on memory strategies because of the age of students as Schmitt (1997) reported that older learners use strategies that require deeper mental

processing like the strategy of imaging a word's meaning. Moreover, the more effort is exerted when manipulating information, the better it is retained and remembered (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Some strategies are cited below with some words picked up from the selected passage, they were chosen on purpose to train the students to use the strategies. They used mainly monolingual dictionaries to find out the meaning of words.

The use of cognates is a strategy to discover the meaning of unknown words. But it can work when the learners know the words in L2 (French being the second language in Algeria). So, words such as 'mendicancy', 'vestibule', 'prosperity' and 'modest' have the same meaning as 'un mendiant', 'un vestibule', 'une prospérité' and 'modeste' respectively. Learners who knew the words in French found it easy to retain the form and the meaning of words in English whereas those who did not know the words, learned them in both languages; this can be considered as a gain as they enrich their lexicon in both languages. However, false cognates may mislead the learners because the words seem to have the same meaning but they are, in fact, different. The word 'bulldoze' is an example. When students read "...by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man ...", they thought automatically of 'un bulldozer' which is a powerful vehicle as it is known in French. But the meaning used in the passage was different, the thing that led them to confusion at the beginning but to learn another meaning at the end.

Grouping words and studying them is another strategy that was illustrated. Words such as 'sob', 'sniffle', and 'sniff' can be combined because of the link between their meanings. So 'to cry noisily', and 'to breath air in through your nose noisily because you are crying or have a cold' are connected to 'sorrow'. Students can also use acronyms (to use Oxford's 1990 strategy) and thus they can learn the group of words SSS standing for 'sob', 'sniffle', and 'sniff'.

Students can also study vocabulary with pictorial representation of its meaning. The words 'whirl' and 'fob' are words that can be represented by drawing for instance. The teacher drew a man of (Turkish) whirl dance on the board and immediately they thought of spinning. The same thing was done for the 'fob', so a chain was drawn on the board so that they can link the word to the drawing of the teacher on the board. And they can as well draw the same thing on their word lists.

The keyword method is a strategy that allows the learners to create a link between the meaning of the foreign word and another word in L1 or L2 which may have something in common other than the meaning. So, the word 'pier' may be linked to 'un pied' or 'un pillier' to make the meaning of a supporting structure adjacent since 'un pied which means a foot' supports the body, and 'un pillier which means a pillar' supports a roof. The students can also connect the word to its synonyms as a strategy, so 'pier' and 'pillar' are synonyms and can be linked to 'un pillier' in French to make the pair 'pillar and pillier'.

Here are just examples of the strategies which were introduced with practical examples (even though some words were of high frequency, they were ignored by some students). Retention cannot be completely ensured if the students are not exposed to these words. So, they have to make effort to process word meaning in their minds.

3. Conclusion

This paper tackled the use of vocabulary learning strategies to study words in literary texts. It presented an overview of these strategies and the role they play in vocabulary learning in a foreign language context and mainly, the EFL context. These strategies are used to deal with vocabulary learning in any skill but it seems to be necessary for literary texts characterized by the richness of their lexis. The use of VLS allows the learners to learn vocabulary items inside or outside the classroom setting. It enables them to cope confidently with the task of learning new words and consolidating them in need. By practice, they can develop their metacognitive knowledge of strategies in terms of using the appropriate strategy in the appropriate situation. Besides, from the wide range of strategies, they adopt the ones that suit best their learning styles and age. Most importantly, they can expand their word knowledge and become autonomous learners with the condition of willingness and

motivation on their part because the task may be difficult and tedious at the same time but it is certainly conducive to vocabulary learning.

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Appendix (A): Schmitt's Taxonomy (1997:207-8)

1. Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning

- **Determination strategies**

    Analyze part of speech

    Analyze roots and affixes

    Check for L1 cognate

    Analyze any available pictures or gestures

    Guess from the contextual context

    Bilingual dictionary

    Monolingual dictionary

    Word lists

    Flash cards

- **Social strategies**

    Ask teacher for an L1 translation

    Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word

    Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word

    Ask classmates for meaning

    Discover new meaning through group work activity

2. Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered

- **Social strategies**

    Study and practise meaning in a group

    Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy

    Interact with native speakers

- **Memory strategies**

  Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning

  Image word's meaning

  Connect word to a personal experience

  Associate the word with its coordinates

  Connect the word with its synonyms and antonyms

  Use semantic maps

  Use scales for gradable adjectives

  Peg method

  Loci method

  Group words together to study them

  Group words together partially on a page

  Study the spelling of a word

  Study the sound of a word

  Say the word aloud when studying

  Image word form

  Underline initial letter of the word

  EM Configuration

  Use keyword method

  Affixes and roots (remembering)

  Part of speech (remembering)

  Paraphrase the word's meaning

  Use cognates in study

  Learn the words of an idiom together

  Use physical action when learning a word

  Use semantic feature grid

- **Cognitive strategies**

  Verbal repetition

  Written repetition

  Word lists

  Flash cards

  Take notes in class

  Use the vocabulary section in your textbook

  Listen to tape of word lists

  Put English labels on physical objects

  Keep a vocabulary notebook

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- **Metacognitive strategies**

  Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.)

  Testing oneself with word tests

  Use spaced word practice

  Skip or pass a word

  Continue to study words over time