

## The vocabulary learning strategy use of Iranian elementary EFL learners

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### Abstract

In order to learn vocabulary efficiently, the utilisation of learning strategies is very important and surely it depends on learners' attempts. The current study aimed at examining the strategies that Iranian elementary English as a foreign language (EFL) learners adopt for learning English vocabulary. To this end, based on the performance of the participants on the Quick Placement Test, the researcher recruited 100 participants through availability sampling. To determine the strategies that the participants employ for learning English vocabulary, Schmitt's taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) questionnaire was administered. The findings of the current study indicated that Iranian elementary EFL students were medium VLS users. The social strategy was found as the most frequently used category of strategies, followed by memory, determination, cognitive and metacognitive strategy.

**Keywords:** Language, learning strategies, vocabulary, Iranian, elementary.

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## 1. Introduction

English is the prevailing language of knowledge, trade, politics, banking, entertainment and the Internet, which makes it the current lingua franca. English is also the language of computing that is why it is a global language. Nowadays, the number of users increases daily, and more and more people are devoting time to studying English as a second/foreign language. Many countries include English in their school syllabus and children are starting to learn English at an early age. People need to be aware of the importance of learning English because it is essential in every part of life. Everyone has his/her own reason to learn English. In fact, the objectives of learning English can be subjective, and this has an effect on the things students want to learn and need to learn.

Foreign language learners may face different challenges during the process of learning a language; one of which is vocabulary learning (VL) (Ghazal, 2007). In fact, learning an additional language had been equivalent with proficiency in its vocabulary items. VL is one of the essential parts in foreign language learning as the meanings of new word items are very often focused on, whether in books or in academic contexts. VL is also central to language teaching and is of higher importance to a language learner. Moreover, vocabulary is very essential in English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary, learners cannot comprehend others or express their own thoughts. Wilkins (1972) wrote that ‘... while without grammar *very little* can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed’. The comprehensive vocabulary knowledge is so worthy and useful.

Siriwan (2007) believes that VL is referred to as learning a collection of words in a language that is used in certain contexts. Also, it is believed that vocabulary knowledge is vital to the four macro skills, such as listening, reading, speaking and writing. Some difficulties in conveying our intended meaning in both speaking and writing might be the result of our vocabulary knowledge deficiency. Nation (2001) further revealed the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as supplementary. He stated that knowledge of vocabulary provides language use and, on the contrary, language use leads to the expansion of vocabulary knowledge. Researchers, such as Laufer (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (1997), Gu (2003), Marion (2008), Nation (2011) and others, have realised that learning vocabulary is essential for using the second language successfully and plays an important role to have complete spoken and written texts. In English as a second language and English as a foreign language (EFL), learning vocabulary items play a vital role in all language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) (Nation, 2011).

Nunan (1991), furthermore, stated that the acquisition of a sufficient vocabulary is absolutely necessary for using the second language successfully because, without sufficient vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions we have learned for comprehensible communication. So, an increase in vocabulary knowledge is required for learning another language, throughout all levels of proficiency.

EFL learners always have difficulties with forgetting the vocabularies they have memorised. In order to suggest solutions to this problem or even present some useful guidelines for both learners and teachers in this regard, many studies have been conducted in the field of VL. EFL learners use a number of strategies to learn new vocabularies without any distinguishing criteria about which strategy to choose and which one to exclude. Siriwan (2007) believes that VL refers to learning a package of subsets of words, as well as learning how to use strategies to cope with unknown or unfamiliar words. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) mean any set of techniques or learning behaviours, which language learners use to comprehend the meaning of a new word, to restore the knowledge of newly learned words and to improve one’s knowledge of vocabulary. In fact, strategies

are important for language learning because they are a device that helps learners to head their learning by themselves. Students take more control of their own learning, which is necessary for developing academic competence. Learners who use appropriate language learning strategies (LLSs) yielded greater proficiency and self-confidence (Oxford, 1990).

Most of the literature which has been studied provides a similar point of view and highlights the importance of having VLSs. It does not mean that the strategies are only limited to the learners, it is equally important to the teachers as it is to the learners. Having knowledge about the different types of choices in VLSs will help teachers, researchers and curriculum developers to design appropriate materials for classroom purposes. VLSs are intuitively appealing to teachers and learners. It has also become a popular research topic among researchers in the last two decades (Young, 1999). When language learners face a new word, they usually recognise it, but might not be able to use it later on. After a while, when they use the word in their produced utterances, it becomes their active vocabulary (Baker & Westrup, 2000, as cited in Siriwan, 2007). All learners use VLSs, but most of them do not know which strategies they are applying or even they do not aware of strategies at all. Language learners need a great deal of effort in order to learn new words when they occur and to be successful and independent learners (Miller & Gildea, 1987; Nation, 1990 as cited in Siriwan, 2007). Some researchers (e.g., Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 1997) are involved in classifying VLS.

### **1.1. Conceptual framework**

#### **1.1.1. VLSs**

Needless to say, vocabulary is a vital part of language learning and teaching. In this regard, VLSs research has increased in the last 20 years. Laufer (1999) pointed out that language acquisition cannot take place without learning and mastery of words or vocabulary. In order to learn vocabulary efficiently, the utilisation of learning strategies is very important and surely it depends on learners' attempts. So, researchers have mentioned a large number of VLSs used by the learners.

According to Nation (2001), VLSs are a subset of LLSs that have been focused on, since the late 1970s. Also, he stated that vocabulary strategy is a special instructional tool and way of going about directly or clearly as well as the independent word-learning skills required to learn words independently. In addition, Nation (2001) pointed out that VLSs make learners more responsible for their own learning. He believes that a large number of vocabularies can be acquired by utilising VLSs. Some of the following studies have investigated how learners use VLSs.

Many scholars and researchers have attempted to define and proposed various classifications of VLSs (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford 1990; Schmitt, 1997, 2000; Takač & Singleton, 2008). For example, O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1), define VLSs as 'special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to comprehend, learn or retain information', while Takac and Singleton (2008, p. 52) refers to them as 'specific strategies utilised in the isolated task of learning vocabulary in the target language'. In other words, VLSs are techniques that contribute to learning a second language as well as learning a foreign language. Regarding the importance of learning strategies and a large range of VLSs utilisation by second-language and foreign-language learners, some researchers have pointed out that there is a mutual relationship between successful VL and using a high range of strategies by learners (Gu & Johnson, 1996). Looking at the above discussion, one may conclude that VLSs make an important subclass of LLSs, whose taxonomy remains widely discussed among the researchers in applied linguistics and VL research.

### **1.1.2. Schmitt's taxonomy**

A number of researchers (Chamot, 1998; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 2000) have proposed various classifications of VLSs. However, for the purpose of this study, the taxonomy developed by Schmitt (1997) has been used. Schmitt's taxonomy classifies VLSs into two main types of strategy: discovery and consolidation strategies.

Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs is based on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of LLSs which groups LLSs into social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive categories. Schmitt, however, criticises Oxford's taxonomy for deficiency of a category that proportionally describes the type of strategy that a learner may use in order to improvise the meaning of new words without seeking help from someone else. So, he introduces a category which he calls 'determination strategies'. In addition, Schmitt notes that Oxford's taxonomy includes some strategies (e.g., interacting with native speakers) that can be classified under more than one category depending on the varying purposes for which the strategy may be used in different situations. Moreover, Schmitt questions the categorising of some strategies as either memory or cognitive strategies, especially since the purpose of both categories is to help word recall through some form of language use.

In order to solve this problem, Schmitt makes use of Purpura's (1994) classification of storing and memory strategies into six types as follows: (a) repeating, (b) using mechanical means, (c) associating, (d) linking with previous knowledge, (e) using imagery and (f) summarising. In his taxonomy, Schmitt considers the strategies that are most similar to types (a) and (b) as cognitive strategies because they involve a lesser amount of mental manipulation than the strategies that are most similar to types (c), (d) and (e) which can be categorised as memory strategies. These strategies involve either arranging mental information together or transforming it in order to make it more memorable.

Schmitt's taxonomy is also based on a distinction between vocabulary activities suggested by Cook and Mayer (1983) and Nation (1990). They divided vocabulary activities into (a) the initial discovery of a word's meaning and (b) remembering that word once it has been introduced (Schmitt, 1997). Schmitt labels the strategies that serve the first function 'discovery strategies' and those that serve the second 'consolidating strategies'. They are divided into four main categories: social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

### **1.2. Related research**

Hornby (1995) states that vocabulary is the total number of words in a language; also, he defines vocabulary as a list of words with their intended meanings in different contexts. Ur (1998) states that vocabulary can be defined as the words we teach in a foreign language. VL is one of the most important parts of acquiring a new language and plays a great role in improving one's language knowledge (Cameron, 2001). Also, Harmon, Wood and Keser (2009) as well as Linse and Nunan (2005) stated that learners' vocabulary development leads to their language development. Although researchers have connived at vocabulary for a long time after a while, they have increasingly been turning their attention to vocabulary (e.g., Bejoint, 1992; Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Huckin, 1995; Nation, 1990; Read, 1997; Schmitt, 1997, 2000).

Huckin (1995) indicates that vocabulary deficiency is the main and most important problem that second-language readers may encounter while reading a second language. In production, when we want to express a new word, we should have enough storage of words to express and convey our intended meaning. When students travel, they do not carry grammar books; they carry dictionaries (Lewis, 1993).

VLS is the subdivision of different types of LLSs (Cohen & Macaro, 2007), and it has been considered by a large number of researchers all over the world (Fan, 2003; Nakamura, 2002; Wanpen, Sonkoontod & Nonkukhetkhong, 2013). This is due to the fact that having sufficient knowledge of vocabulary is one of the necessities for every learner in the process of learning another language and, therefore, students have paid attention to it (Nyikos & Fan, 2007). Such a condition is mainly correct for EFL situations, e.g., in Iran, where exposure to the English language in everyday life is greatly restricted, learning of vocabulary is not common practice. Hence, the significance of VLSs has been given priority together with the strategies connected to the four other skills necessary in an EFL situation, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (Takeuchi, 2003).

### **1.3. Objective of the study**

The researcher strongly felt that there is a gap in the literature that needs to be investigated. In this connection, the current study intended to identify the VLSs adopted by Iranian elementary EFL learners for learning English vocabulary. In this phase, Schmitt's (1997) VLSs questionnaire will be employed. To achieve the goal of this study, the following research question is posed:

RQ: What strategies are adopted by Iranian elementary EFL learners for learning English vocabulary?

Needless to say, the research question is descriptive, so no hypothesis is formulated for it.

## **2. Methods and Materials**

### **2.1. Participants**

In fact, proficiency level may influence the anxiety level of EFL learners as well as the strategies they use to learn English vocabulary. As a result, to control the variable of proficiency level, only elementary EFL learners were selected for the current study. This was carried out through the administration of the Quick Placement Test (QPT) (Appendix). The researcher personally attended four classes of two high schools in Kazeroun and administered the tests to them. In fact, the researcher did not have access to all Iranian EFL learners; as a result, she recruited the participants through convenient sampling. In other words, only those participants who were appropriate and available for this study were selected. The sample included 100 females and the age of participants was 17–18 years old. Also, all these four classes had the same English teacher.

### **2.2. Data collection instrument**

To answer the research question of the study, two instruments were employed, namely QPT and the VLSs questionnaire by Schmitt (1997). QPT is a flexible test of English language proficiency developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL (2007) to give teachers a reliable and time-saving method of finding a student's level of English. It is quick and easy to administer and is ideal for placement testing and examination screening. All students who take the paper and pen version should complete Part One. Part Two should only be completed by those students who have scored more than a predetermined score in Part One.

Also, to identify the VLSs the participants employed, the current study made use of the questionnaire adapted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs. All 41 items in the questionnaire were reorganised and classified under 5 different groups of strategies as 11 statements on memory strategies (items 1–11), 9 statements on determination strategies (item 12–20), 6 statements on social strategies (items 21–26), 9 statements on cognitive strategies (items 27–35) and 5 statements on

metacognitive strategies (items 36–41). The frequency of use was measured by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

### 2.3. Data collection procedure

First, the researcher asked several TEFL experts in Kazeroun, Fars, Iran, for their cooperation. The nature and objectives of the study were explained to them. Then, the VLSs questionnaire was translated by two experts into Persian and its validity was checked through back translation. Next, the piloting phase was conducted on 25 students – with similar characteristics to those of the target population – to check the reliability of the questionnaires. Then, through convenient sampling, about 100 Iranian elementary EFL learners were recruited for this study. Then, the researcher administered the QPT and VLSs questionnaire in separate sessions. They were encoded numerically, and the researcher assured the participants that answers will be used anonymously.

### 2.4. Analysis

Having collected the questionnaires, the researcher fed the data into SPSS software for analysis.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics of the overall VLS use related to VLSQ

According to Oxford's (1990) scoring system, score 1–2.4 showed low VLS use, 2.4–3.5 showed medium VLS use and 3.5–5 showed high VLS use. So, based on Table 1 and Oxford's (1990) scoring system, the respondents of the present study were found to be medium VLS users with a mean score of 3.01 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.42 for overall VLS use. The descriptive statistics related to the participants' reported utilisation of VLSs, measured by the VLS questionnaire, are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the overall VLSs**

Mean	SD	Minute	Max
3.01	0.42	2.26	4.14

### 3.2. Rank order of the reported VLSs

As depicted in Table 2, social strategies ( $M = 3.32$ ) were determined as the most frequently used VLSs by the respondents, followed by memory ( $M = 3.05$ ), determination ( $M = 2.98$ ) and cognitive strategies ( $M = 2.92$ ). Furthermore, the metacognitive strategy was determined as the least frequently used VLS with a mean score of 2.84. Also, as mentioned in the previous section, Oxford's (1990) scoring system was used to determine high, medium and low VLS users. Based on this scoring system, the mean score for overall VLSs use and each category of strategies was calculated. The results showed that all categories of VLSs were used at the medium level which showed the learners were somehow familiar with all these VLSs.

**Table 2. Rank order of the reported strategies**

Strategy	Mean	SD	Rank	Strategy use
Social strategy	3.32	0.56	1	Medium
Memory strategy	3.05	0.45	2	Medium
Determination strategy	2.98	58	3	Medium
Cognitive strategy	2.92	0.62	4	Medium
Metacognitive strategy	2.84	0.53	5	Medium

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the research question number one showed that Iranian elementary EFL students were medium VLS users with an overall strategy mean score of 3.01. It can be concluded that the use of various VLSs was not very common among students. The results of the current study are congruent with the results of Sarani and Kafipour (2008) and Kafipour (2010). According to their findings, medium use of strategies by Iranian students was due to their slight awareness of the VLSs.

The social strategy was found as the most frequently used category of strategies with a mean score of 3.32. This can be because English VL tended not to be conducted as an individual process. Thus, when students were faced with new words, they prefer to seek other's help. The findings are different from the researches carried out by Liao (2002) and Sahbazian (2004).

Memory strategy was found as the second frequently used strategy. The results were the same as the research carried out by Sahbazian (2004). She explored VLSs of 934 Turkish EFL students through interview and questionnaire; the students were studying at different universities in Istanbul. The findings showed that the situation in Iran and Turkey seemed to be the same. Sahbazian (2004) pointed out that VL for most Turkish learners followed a more traditional rote memorisation pattern that involved many mnemonic techniques.

Also, the determination strategy was found as the third frequently used strategy that stood in the middle of the other four categories of strategies. Thus, it was less frequently used than social and memory strategies but more frequently used than cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The results were the same as the research carried out by Gu and Johnson (1996) and Sahbazian (2004). In her research, students mostly preferred to use determination and memory strategies to get the meaning. Conversely, the results of the current study are different from the research carried out by Bennett (2006). He investigated VLSs of the students through the questionnaire. In his research, the metacognitive strategy stood in the middle of other categories of strategies, while in this study determination strategy stood in the middle of other categories of strategies. However, the results of the current study are unlike the research carried out by Law Bik Yuk (2003). He investigated the VLSs of 80 Chinese EFL students through interviews, a survey and think-aloud tasks.

#### 5. Conclusion

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies are the last strategies in the current study. Such a position of cognitive and metacognitive strategies showed that the least of the learners were taking control of their own learning. This is the same as the results of most studies on Iranian learners' learning strategies. Such studies showed that Iranian learners mostly preferred simple and direct strategies.

In this study, the metacognitive strategy was chosen as one of the most frequently used strategies. Also, the cognitive strategy is a positive predictor of general proficiency; so, the reason that cognitive strategy was used less frequently by Iranian elementary EFL students could be that their level of general English proficiency was almost low.

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## Appendix

### Vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire by Schmitt (1997)

When I find a new English word that I don't know, I...	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
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A 1	Check new word's form (e.g., find its verb, noun, adj., adv. etc.)					
A2	Look for any word parts that I know (impossible, possible, possibility, possibly etc.)					
A3	Check if the word is also a Persian word (e.g., Caravan)					
A4	Use any pictures or gestures (body language) to help me guess the meaning					
A5	Guess its meaning from the context					
A6	Use a Persian-English dictionary					
A7	Use an English-English dictionary					
B1	Ask the teacher to give me the definition or a sentence					
B2	Ask my classmates for the meaning					
B3	Study the word with my classmates					
B4	Ask the teacher to check my definition					
B5	Talk with native speakers					
C1	Draw a picture of the word to help remember it					
C2	Make a mental image (imaginary image) of the word's meaning					
C3	Connect the word to a personal experience					
C4	Remember the words that follow or precede the new word					
C5	Connect the word to other words with similar or opposite meanings					
C6	Remember the words in scales (always, often, sometimes or never). If it is used more, I spend more time to remember it					
C7	Group words together to study them					
C8	Use new words in sentences					
C9	Write paragraphs using several new words					
C10	Study the spelling of a word					
C11	Study the sound of a word					
C12	Say the new words aloud when I first meet them					
C13	Make a mental image of the word's form (e.g., if the word is a noun, I make a mental image different from its verb form)					
C14	Remember the word using its part (im-, un-, -able, -ful, -ment, ex-)					
C15	Remember the word using its word form (verb, noun or adjective)					
C16	Make my own definition for the word					
C17	Use physical action when learning a word					
	<b>When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I...</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Seldom</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always</b>
D1	Repeat the words aloud many times					
D2	Write the words many times					
D3	Make lists of new words					
D4	Use flashcards to record new words					

- D5 Take notes or highlight new words in class
- D6 Put English labels on physical objects
- D7 Keep a vocabulary notebook
- E1 Use English-language media (songs, movies or the Internet)
- E2 Test myself with word tests
- E3 Study new words many times
- E4 Skip or pass new words
- E5 Pay attention to English words when someone is speaking English.

پرسشنامه ی استراتژی های یادگیری لغت (اشمیت 1997)

وقتی با لغت انگلیسی جدیدی مواجه می شوم که معنی آن را نمی دانم....	هیچوقت	به ندرت	بعضی اوقات	اغلب اوقات	همیشه
A1 اشکال لغت جدید را بررسی می کنم. (مثلا فعل، اسم، صفت و قید آن را پیدا می کنم.)					
A2 اجزای آشنای لغت را جستجو می کنم. (impossible, possible, possibility, possibly etc.)					
A3 بررسی می کنم که آیا آن لغت در زبان فارسی هم وجود دارد. (مثلا کلمه ی caravan)					
A4 از هرگونه تصویر یا اشاره (زبان بدن) استفاده می کنم تا معنی لغت را حدس بزنم.					
A5 با توجه به متن معنی لغت را حدس می زنم.					
A6 از فرهنگ لغت انگلیسی-فارسی استفاده می کنم.					
A7 از فرهنگ لغت انگلیسی - انگلیسی استفاده می کنم.					
B1 از معلم می خواهم تا معنی لغت را به من بگوید یا آن لغت را در جمله ای بکار ببرد.					
B2 از همکلاسی هایم معنی لغت را می پرسم.					
B3 با همکلاسی هایم لغت جدید را مطالعه می کنم.					
B4 از معلم می خواهم تا معنی که برای لغت نوشته ام را بررسی کند.					
B5 با کسانی که زبان مادریشان انگلیسی است صحبت می کنم.					
C1 از آن لغت تصویری ترسیم میکنم تا در به یادآوردن آن به من کمک کند.					
C2 از معنی آن لغت تصویری ذهنی (تصویری خیالی) می سازم.					
C3 بین آن لغت و تجربه ی شخصی خودم ارتباطی برقرار می کنم.					
C4 لغات قبل و بعد آن لغت جدید را به یاد می آورم.					

- C5 آن لغت را به دیگر لغات هم معنی و متضادش ربط می دهم.
- C6 کلمه را در مقیاس \*همیشه، اغلب اوقات، بعضی اوقات، هیچ وقت\* به یاد می آورم. اگر از کلمه بیشتر استفاده می شود، زمان بیشتری برای به خاطر سپردن آن صرف می کنم.
- C7 برای مطالعه ی لغات آن ها را گروه بندی می کنم.
- C8 لغات جدید را در جمله بکار می برم.
- C9 با استفاده از چند لغت جدید پاراگراف نویسی می کنم.
- C10 املا ی آن لغت را مطالعه می کنم.
- C11 صدای کلمه را مطالعه می کنم.
- C12 نخستین بار که با لغات جدید مواجه می شوم آن ها را با صدای بلند ادا می کنم.
- C13 یک تصویر ذهنی از شکل آن لغت می سازم. (مثلا اگر لغت "اسم" است تصویر ذهنی متفاوتی نسبت به شکل "فعل" آن د ر ذهنم ترسیم می کنم.)
- C14 آن لغت را با استفاده از اجزایش به یاد می آورم (-im, un-, -able, -ful, -ment, ex-)
- C15 آن لغت را با استفاده از شکلش به یاد می آورم.
- C16 تعریف مختص خودم را برای آن لغت می سازم.
- C17 هنگام یادگیری یک لغت از حرکت فیزیکی استفاده می کنم.

وقتی می خواهم لغات جدید را به یاد بیاورم و کلمه ی خودم را بسازم....

- D1 چندین بار کلمات جدید را با صدای بلند تکرار می کنم.
- D2 چندین بار کلمات را می نویسم.
- D3 لیستی از کلمات جدید می سازم.
- D4 برای ثبت کلمات جدید از فلش کارت استفاده می کنم.
- D5 یادداشت برداری می کنم یا کلمات جدید را در کلاس هایلایت می کنم.
- D6 بر روی اشیا برچسب انگلیسی می گذارم.
- D7 یک دفترچه ی یادداشت لغت درست می کنم.
- E1 از رسانه های انگلیسی زبان استفاده می کنم. (ترانه ها، فیلم ها، اینترنت)
- E2 با آزمون های لغت خودم را می سنجم.

E3 چندین بار لغات جدید را مطالعه می‌کنم.

E4 لغات جدید را حذف یا از آن‌ها رد می‌شوم.

E5 وقتی کسی انگلیسی صحبت می‌کند به

لغات آن توجه می‌کنم.

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