

## The benefits of study skills practice in improving EFL university students' vocabulary

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### Abstract

Study Skills are one of the most important modules English as a Foreign Language University students' study for the first two years of their license degree. During this period, students are exposed to a variety of skills that help them study successfully. The practice of these skills and others using many assignments and tasks enables students to benefit from learning and improving vocabulary. This makes also study skills sessions a real opportunity for students to learn new vocabulary, reinforce the existing one, and therefore improve their lexical stock as a whole. The present paper is a case study conducted with ten-year EFL University students and four teachers at the University of Tlemcen (Algeria). It aims to emphasize the importance of study skills practice and its benefits on students' EFL learning in general and vocabulary improvement in particular. To achieve this aim, two questionnaires and classroom observation are used to collect data which are analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The interpreted and discussed results confirm that study skills practice plays a crucial role in students' vocabulary learning and improvement by offering them real occasions to use, learn, and reinforce vocabulary in addition to many other benefits. It is recommended for 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students to practice study skills regularly to improve their vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Benefits; EFL; English as a foreign language; study skills; university; vocabulary.

## 1. Introduction

In foreign language learning, vocabulary is considered one of the most essential aspects a learner should possess. EFL University students are then required to have the necessary vocabulary that enables them to communicate effectively and in different situations. It will, unquestionably, be hard for them to listen, speak, read, and even write EFL appropriately if they lack sufficient vocabulary. The study skills module may represent an ideal setting for students to learn, comprehend, retain, recall, and develop vocabulary items in different ways through the practice of various skills and vocabulary learning strategies.

### 1.1. Literature Review

#### 1.1.1. University study skills: definition and benefits

Many skills are essential for effective learning and academic success as they make studying easy and simple; these are 'study skills': "Effective studying requires a group of techniques or skills that help students to read, use, process, memorize and recall information. The competencies associated with recording, acquiring, organizing, synthesizing, and remembering information are called study skills" (Karem, 2019). These skills according to Sdira (2017) are a very good key for students to learn good competencies of studying to be more successful and more confident to achieve success in all their studies.

Study skills are defined as "competencies in acquiring, recording, organizing, synthesizing, remembering, and using information and ideas" (Harvey, 1995 in Howard et al., 2018). According to Dwarika-Bhagat (2017), "The literature broadly refers to a student's approach to learning or 'study skills/habits' as a student's knowledge and mastery of study strategies, management of time and other resources necessary to meet the demands of the academic curriculum". Rafoth & DeFabo (1990) stated that studying skills function as a procedure including one's planning what he should do, organizing and coding information to achieve a learning goal. Moreover, Steele, (2010), Aquino (2009), and Yu (2011) defined studying skills as the proper use of strategies when accomplishing a certain learning task.

On their part, Komarraju et al., (2009) defined Study skills as methods applied to learning that support students to succeed in schools in a way of passing a test or even getting good grades. Study skills also labeled 'study habits' typically denote in Credé and Kuncel's (2008) viewpoint the degree to which the student engages in regular acts of studying that are characterized by appropriate studying routines (review of material) occurring in an environment that is conducive to studying.

In this respect study skills proved to be beneficial for university students and students without sound study skills are not prepared for college success (Proctor et al., 2006). Thus, for university students to be well-prepared to defeat study constraints at higher education, the acquisition and use of study skills can be helpful. At university, study skills encompass a variety of activities, including: "time –management, setting appropriate goals, selecting an appropriate study environment, employing appropriate note-taking strategies, concentrating, selecting main ideas, self-testing, organization, and managing anxiety" (Tao & Yu 2024; Proctor et al., 2006; Kumar et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Nuthana & Yenagi (2009) and Ali et al., (2022) identified reading and critical thinking in addition to time management, note-taking, and organization as "essential study skills to achieve academic excellence. Purdue & Hattie (1999) added to the already mentioned studying skills in preparing for exams. In short, study skills are good support for university students in their graduation and post-graduation studies.

Many colleges and universities have incorporated study skills as a separate module in their departments and the Department of English at the University of Tlemcen is not an exception. Study Skills module is taught to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year EFL students for a time allotment of one hour and a half a week (similar to all English departments across the country). At the university level and for students to survive academically, it is *cine-qua-non* to challenge learning conditions by acquiring the necessary study skills that may help any learner pave his way for academic success:

*Equipped with good study skills, they (students) will perform much more systematically than before, resulting in improved knowledge assimilation and renewed confidence. There are several study skills that university students should acquire not only to fulfill their academic endeavors but also to make their university experience more meaningful and satisfying. (Yong, 2022)*

These skills assist students in the different language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and many other skills of processing, memorizing, planning, and recalling information. It is thus important for every student to bear in mind that skills cannot be learned but exercised and that it is not enough to know and have skills, students must be taught how to understand, practice experience, and transfer them to their different specialties and classes (Magyar et al., 2022). While English as a foreign language has evolved over some time, it has become necessary for students in higher education to have a varied vocabulary and develop good study skills. This is expected to enable them to perform better in their undergraduate studies (Manoj, 2018).

In this view of things and in valuing the importance of study skills in supporting learning, it is worth recalling the many benefits of study skills:

- Study skills improve students' time management, and productivity, how to concentrate and understand your work, and how to make the exam preparation easier to get good marks and be successful. The study skills session teaches students how to take notes to understand more and to learn more vocabulary. It specifically allows them to be more focused during their classes (Sdira, 2017).
- study skills "help students during the learning process to acquire, retain, and produce the new information," (Al-Hilawani, 2016).
- The students who joined study-skill seminars (research techniques, letter writing, time management, and note-taking) showed higher levels of scientific information achievement Stark (2008).
- The effective use of study skills plays an important role in students' academic performance in the learning process. Study skills are important in evaluating students' overall potential and attainment levels (Karem, 2019)
- Study skills have a significant role in improving students' learning, and motivation and decreasing test anxiety.
- If students apply what they are learning, they should see an improvement in their grades, have more time for other responsibilities or leisure activities, feel less stressed about their academic work, feel better about themselves, and perhaps even begin to enjoy learning (Dianna and Van, 2009).

#### 1.1.2. Importance of vocabulary for university students

It is largely agreed among foreign language university teachers that vocabulary is an essential factor in language learning and communication. Vocabulary is the "total number of words we know and can use (Nandy, 1994), and as argued by Pikulski and Templeton (2004), "Perhaps the greatest tool we can give students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words". It must be understood in this context that vocabulary "is an essential component for student success. It assists students in higher education to express themselves fluidly in any academic situation" (Manoj, 2018). On the part of students, it is a reality that "Any learner of a foreign language knows very well that words are essential, and the lack of them leads to difficulties in communication situations" (Maley, 1986). At the same time, learning vocabulary may represent one of the most difficult aspects of learning a language (Meara 1980; Read 2000; Stoffer 1995).

Renewed interest in recent times has been given to the importance of vocabulary learning and improvement in EFL classrooms (Hedge 2000; Read 2000; Kitajima, 2001; Cameron, 2001; Folse, 2011). Crucial is to state that one cannot learn a language without learning vocabulary items of that language, knowing how to adapt them to different situations, and to also expand them. However, it is not easy for all students to learn vocabulary, store different meanings in their memory, and recall them in specific situations. It is necessary, thus, for foreign language learners to know and use different vocabulary learning strategies to cope with vocabulary difficulties and expand their vocabulary: "While English as a foreign language has evolved over some time, it has become necessary for students in higher education to have a varied vocabulary and develop good study skills. This is expected to enable them to perform better in their undergraduate studies (Manoj, 2018).

It is widely acknowledged among scholars (Bowen et al., 1985; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Allen, 1983; Lewis, 1993) that vocabulary plays a vital role in shaping the success or failure of foreign language students as it represents a very important aspect of language learning and communication. A student with a rich, varied vocabulary will automatically perform better than a student who lacks vocabulary. Flower (2000) confirmed this view stating that "Words are the most important things students must learn. Grammar is important, but vocabulary is much more important". This is consistent with (Wilkins, 1972) who affirmed that "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed".

In particular and due to the dominance of vocabulary over grammar and many other skills in language learning, it becomes a priority at the level of higher education that language learners make tremendous effort in learning vocabulary (Miller and Gildea, 1987; Nation, 1990; Mahdi et al., 2023) and that explicit teaching of different vocabulary learning strategies is indispensable to help students become more independent language users (Cameron, 2001). We suggest in this respect that the study skills module represents an adequate and effective setting that aids them in learning, recalling, retaining, comprehending, and improving vocabulary.

### *1.1.3. The benefits of study skills on vocabulary improvement*

Well-grounded in theory is that vocabulary improvement leads to language improvement (Al Saif, 2011; Folse, 2011; Martinez, 2014; Manoj, 2018) and that a student with poor vocabulary is certainly a poor language user: "A student's vocabulary will reflect his experience of the language...Obviously, the more a student hears, speaks, reads and writes English, the more opportunity he has to increase his vocabulary" (Yorkey, 1970). In this particular context, it has been claimed that complete knowledge and possession of vocabulary in a foreign language accommodates the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing (Martinez, 2014). These language skills and other academic study skills are more frequently used and practiced in the study skills classroom which represents a serious occasion for vocabulary to improve: "Vocabulary development mechanisms strengthened through study skill techniques can have a positive effect on the academic performance of students (Manoj, 2018).

To improve vocabulary, university students can benefit from study skills by engaging positively in the different tasks and assignments in which they come across a wide range of words, some to be learned and others to be reinforced and these exercises are especially geared towards the practice of some vocabulary learning strategies: "Several psychologists find study skills to be the most important contributing factor in students' performance at the university level .... study skills support is a very important aspect to consider in helping students attain success and bear the challenges they face in the academic situation" (Karem, 2019).

Moreover, being involved in a set of activities that seek to develop skills of different types mainly intellect skills (that include analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and problem-solving) or transferable skills (communication (oral and written), teamwork, research skills). These skills can be developed "through study skills support" (Durkin and Main, 2002). In practicing these skills, University students are also working on vocabulary improvement, they can simultaneously learn new words, associate meanings to different situations and thus expand their vocabulary.

As is the case in many universities worldwide, specialized teachers generally contribute to the elaboration of course books or programs to be followed by teachers and students and that cover particular contents to be dealt with intensively. At the University of Tlemcen, particularly in the Department of English, the study skills syllabus was designed to meet the needs and expectations of 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL students and it aimed mainly at acquainting students with essential skills and techniques needed for academic success and equipping them with necessary vocabulary learning strategies that enable them to use the English language comfortably. The purpose of the designed program according to study skills teachers is to develop students' good attitudes and positive habits towards studying and to help them practice and experience various types of assignments that are intended to improve their skills for EFL learning in all the subjects they are studying.

The first-year Study skills syllabus, therefore, offers students training and practice in the main vocabulary learning strategies of word stems, guessing meaning from context, and extensive reading. These strategies as referred to by Intaraprasert (2004) are "techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners 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". Tasks and classroom activities are particularly designed to meet students' needs in the area of vocabulary learning and improvement. All in all, study skills at the university remain an extravagant activity which if practiced regularly and with attention will get its benefits on students' language learning in general and vocabulary improvement in particular. The teaching staff is thus called upon to ensure that study skills practice is sufficient and efficient for students to attain the required benefits.

### **1.2. Purpose of study**

The present research work is a small-scale case study that aims to highlight the importance and main benefits of study skills practice in improving EFL University students' vocabulary. It seeks to answer the following Research Questions (RQ):

**RQ1:** Does study skills practice improve 1<sup>st</sup> EFL University students' vocabulary?

**RQ2:** How do 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students benefit from study skills practice in improving their vocabulary?

In an attempt to answer these questions, the following Hypotheses (**HP**) are put forward:

**HP1:** Study skills practice can help to improve 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students' vocabulary because the module itself aims at teaching/learning a set of skills and techniques that are crucial for study success at the university and 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL students are required in the study skills session to practice a variety of assignments and tasks in which they use vocabulary repeatedly, encounter new vocabulary and reinforce the already learned vocabulary.

**HP2:** It is possible for 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students to benefit from the study skills module in learning and improving vocabulary by being taught some vocabulary learning strategies (words' stems, guessing meaning from context, extensive reading, using a dictionary...etc) that help them learn, recall, comprehend, retain and expand vocabulary. Also, by being exposed to a wide variety of vocabulary assignments that are particularly designed to assist them in developing successful techniques for learning and retaining new vocabulary such as word lists, flashcards, vocabulary games, taking and making notes, reading and writing short to long compositions, using dictionaries, summarizing texts and memorizing words...etc.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

Participants in the study were ten-year EFL students and four teachers from the Department of English at Abou Bakr-Belkaid University of Tlemcen (Algeria). The informants in this study were chosen randomly. The 10 students (females and males) were aged between 18 and 22 years old. They have been learning EFL for seven years (in Middle and Secondary School) and are supposed to be aware of the value of English in their studies. The rationale for selecting this sample is that it is the first time that they study and practice university study skills and are exposed to new vocabulary that is different from the one they learned at Secondary school and are supposed to improve it. The 4 teachers were full-time teachers who hold Ph.D. in Didactics and their experience in teaching study skills modules ranged from 6 to 14 years. They taught EFL to different levels (License, Master, and Doctorate students) and are completely aware of the importance of vocabulary learning /improvement for university students and the benefits of study skills in this area of language learning.

### **2.2. Data collection instruments**

This research has adopted the case study method because it allows the researcher to investigate data in depth and within a particular context. It helps also to achieve a clear understanding of the research phenomenon descriptively. The case study research technique is defined by Yin (1984) as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and when multiple sources of evidence are used". Dul and Hak (2007) provided a detailed definition of case study research technique as follows:

*A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the object of study and context are not evident. It copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to be covered in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (Dul and Hak, 2007, cited in Yin, 2003).*

After deciding about the case study method and selecting the sample of the study, it crucial is to opt for specific research instruments to be exploited in the data collection phase of the research. It is thoroughly essential to bear in mind that whatever the research tools used in gathering data, these tools must serve the objectives of the study and that: "research instruments are simply devices for obtaining information relevant to your research project" (Birmingham & Wilkinson 2003). In essence, the case study technique was adopted in the present study to gather rich, varied, and reliable data to be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In investigating the benefits of study skills practice on students' vocabulary improvement the researcher used two questionnaires (one for teachers and one for students) and classroom observation. Because the suitability of



the instruments has a huge impact on the validity and reliability of any research study, many details about the research tools used in this research are presented in what follows:

### 2.2.1. Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were designed and addressed to both informants, i.e., the 10 students and 4 teachers. The questionnaire was selected for the main reason that it yields reliable data in a short period. A questionnaire is according to Brown (2001) "any written instrument that presents respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to reach either by writing out their answers or selecting them among existing answers".

A structured questionnaire that comprised 12 questions of different types was distributed to the students during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of the academic year (after having studied study skills for about three months). Diverse open and closed-ended questions were used in students' questionnaires mainly because this research instrument: 'enables the investigator to collect quantitative and qualitative data using open/closed questions' (Patton, 2002). During the study skills lecture, the informants who were chosen randomly were asked to answer the questionnaire to collect information about their attitudes toward the study skills module and its benefits on their language learning in general and vocabulary improvement in particular.

Teachers' questionnaire on its part comprises 14 questions of different types to elicit from the informant's data related to their opinions about the benefits of study skills practice in improving students' vocabulary as well as the different techniques and vocabulary learning strategies taught during the study skills lectures. It sought also to know teachers' recommendations and suggestions in the same area of study skills and vocabulary improvement.

### 2.2.2. Classroom observation

As a research instrument, classroom observation is frequently used in information acquisition to collect data about what happens in teaching/learning-specific contexts under controlled or non-controlled conditions. This tool describes "the practice of sitting in another teacher's class to observe, learn, and reflect. Classroom observation is also defined as a method of evaluating and recording specific information about what is going on within a classroom" (Shanjida, et al., 2018).

One of the main components of observation is to know what to observe. A checklist for what to look for during the process of classroom observation can help the observer. In the present study, the researcher focused mainly on the following items during classroom observation that took part in the study skills classroom during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of the academic year 2022- 2023:

- Study skills lectures (Contents)
- Lesson plan used by study skills teachers
- Teacher –students' interaction during the lecture than during practice (When students started doing their in-class assignments)
- Students' vocabulary at the beginning of the semester
- Vocabulary learning strategies taught/learned in the study skills classroom
- Students' vocabulary improvement at the end of the semester
- Students' attitudes toward the study skills module
- Students' readiness to practice study skills in class
- Students' involvement in the lecture
- The benefits of study skills on students' language learning in general and vocabulary in particular.

From numerous types of observation (natural, controlled, overt, covert...etc), the researcher selected natural observation to be used as a tool of data collection that serves the main objective of the present research. i.e., the benefits of study skills practice in improving 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students' vocabulary. This type of observation is based on observing naturally occurring behaviors in a normal/natural context with no intervention. The researcher actually, observed teachers and students during the study skills lecture without any interference from the researcher or any other intruders.

## 3. Results

Data gathered from the two questionnaires and classroom observation were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively and interpreted separately for the sake of hypothesis validation and also to illuminate the area of the benefits of study skills practice in improving students' vocabulary.

The results showed that students have positive attitudes toward the study skills module, something that was apparent in their active engagement and motivation during the study skills sessions. Their participation in the different sequences of the lesson and their enthusiasm and willingness during practice confirmed that they like the study skills module and that they feel comfortable during class time as emphasized by Ebadi & Azizimajid (2023) on the importance of role-playing in learning English. Obtained findings also proved that 1<sup>st</sup>-year students benefited from study skills practice in improving their vocabulary mainly because the majority of them learned many new words during study skills practice and reinforced their existing vocabulary.

In addition, the nature of the module itself and the rich contents of the lectures strongly influenced students' vocabulary and language improvement from study skills practice. The learning and practice of many skills and techniques in which students implemented known vocabulary repeatedly, encountered new vocabulary, and reinforced the already learned vocabulary make students benefit from study skills practice. Thus, the first hypothesis was validated: yes, study skills practice improves 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students' vocabulary (questionnaires' results).

The obtained findings also demonstrated that students benefited from study skills practice in improving their vocabulary in different ways due to the diversity of skills and techniques they learned and practiced in the study skills session. Classroom research analysis revealed that study skills modules assist students in improving vocabulary because it exposes them to a wide variety of language and vocabulary learning strategies that are particularly taught to help them retain and expand their vocabulary. In addition, through practice and participation in language and vocabulary tasks such as word lists, flashcards, vocabulary games, taking and making notes, reading and writing short to long compositions, using dictionaries, summarizing texts, and memorizing words students improve their vocabulary. The second hypothesis is therefore validated.

#### 4. Conclusion

Last but not least, findings from teachers' and students' questionnaires as well as classroom observation validated the researcher's hypotheses and asserted that 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL University students benefit from study skills practice in improving their vocabulary through exposure to diverse vocabulary learning strategies and practice of many tasks and activities that help them build, learn and reinforce vocabulary. One limitation of this study concerns generalizability. This research represents a small-scale case study carried out with a restricted number of teachers and students and its results cannot be applied to broader groups or situations, i.e., it has no generalizability claims. Thus, further research is needed to test the findings of this study in various settings.

Using study skills to enhance university students' learning and improve their vocabulary has not been widely surveyed. The work at hand is an attempt to present evidence for the tremendous benefits study skills practice may have on students' vocabulary development. Results of the current study revealed that 1<sup>st</sup> year EFL students are aware of the importance of study skills in learning and reinforcing vocabulary and that the study skills classroom represents an ideal and adequate setting where they can benefit from skills learning and vocabulary improvement. It is worth mentioning at this level that teacher's enthusiasm and students' involvement are crucial because the benefits can only be achieved if supporting teaching/learning conditions are present.

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