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Investigating the Most and the Least used Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Saudi Undergraduate Learners

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Investigating the Most and the Least used Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Saudi Undergraduate Learners

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Abstract- This paper investigates the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) among Saudi undergraduate learners, in Najran University, Saudi Arabia. It forms part of a larger study investigating the different uses of VLSs and how they are perceived by Saudi learners studying a range of different majors. The sample consisted of 158 male and female students, who were asked to report their uses of the seventy-five VLSs (which were divided into 12 dimensions) using a five-point Likert scale in which 1 represents "never", 2 represents "rarely", 3 represents "sometimes", 4 represents "often", and 5 represents "always". A questionnaire was used for the purpose of collecting the data, which were subsequently computed and analysed using descriptive statistics. This involved calculating the overall means of all dimensions and ranking them in order, as well as giving the mean values for the most and least used VLSs in order. The results indicated that, in certain situations, learners tend to focus more on the meaning of words in L1 than in L2. This is the case, for example, when students use a dictionary to look up the meaning of a new word, when they ask teachers or classmates about the L1 equivalent of an English word, and when they are writing down new L2 words with their L1 translations. The least frequently used strategies were those that require higher order thinking skills, such as "organizing words by meaning group". Moreover, the most frequently used dimension was "reasons for note taking strategies", while the least frequently used dimension was "ways of organizing notes taken".

Keywords: language learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), L1, L2.

I. Introduction

Teachers of languages and linguistics claim that vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of language learning; some even believe that vocabulary is more important than grammar. Wilkins (1972:111) notes that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Cook (1991:37) also states that "grammar provides the overall patterns, vocabulary the material to put in the patterns". Furthermore, Luo (1992, cited in Lessard-Clouston 1996:27) asserts that "vocabulary - words, phrases, idioms, etc. is at the heart of all language usage in the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as culture." These statements all support the vital role played by vocabulary, in both first and second language acquisition, in achieving comprehensible communication. Learners need to build up their vocabulary and expand their repertoires. They are more likely to carry a dictionary with them than a grammatical reference book, and they admit that their main problem is not knowing enough words (Krashen, 1989:440).

In recent years, there has been a greater focus on vocabulary, and on VLSs (VLSs) in particular. Hulstijn (1993) suggests that teachers should not only teach learners certain words, but should also provide them with strategies for expanding their vocabulary knowledge.

As noted earlier, this paper is part of a larger study investigating the different uses of VLSs and how they are perceived by Saudi learners studying a range of different majors. However, it also attempts to determine which VLSs, and which dimensions, are most and least frequently used by Saudi learners.

II. Literatuer Review

a) Vocabulary Knowledge

Miller (1996:5) as cited in (Qian, 2002:21) states that, in order to produce a comprehensible output, learners need to know the following key aspects about a word: "its sound, its own spelling, its own meaning, its own role, its own use, its own history". Nation (2001:27) has summarized what is involved in knowing a word. As can be seen in table 1 below, knowing every aspect of a word might be somewhat tedious for L2 learners.

Table 1 : What is involved in knowing a word (Nation, 2001:27) (Note: R = receptive knowledge, P = productive knowledge)

Form	Spoken	R P	What does the word sound like? How is the word pronounced?
	Written	R P	What does the word look like? How is the word written or spelled?
	Word parts	R P	What parts are recognizable in this word? What word parts are needed to express this meaning?
Meaning	Form and meaning	R P	What meaning does this word form signal? What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	Concepts and referents	R P	What is included in the concept? What items can the concept refer to?
	Associations	R P	What other words does this make us think of? What other words could we use instead of this one?
Use	Grammatical functions	R P	In what patterns does this word occur? In what patterns must we use this word?
	Collocations	R P	What words or types of words occur with this one? What words or types of words must we use with this one?
	Constraints on use	R P	Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word? Where, when, and how often can we use this word?

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It is obvious that learners should know many aspects about a word. Nation (2001:23) pointed out "there are many things to know about any particular word and there are many degrees of knowing…words are not isolated units of language, but fit into many interlocking systems and levels" (ibid:23). However, they do not need to know all of the aspects. Thus, table 2 summarizes those aspects which I believe to be the most important.

Table 2 : Author's views about word knowledge

A- Knowing the collocation of the words
B- Knowing the different aspects of meanings associated with the words.
C- Knowing the formality (register) of the words
D- Knowing all the grammatical rules of the words
E- Knowing the pronunciation of the words

b) Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)

It is better to address LLSs before addressing VLSs, as the former may shed light on the latter. As noted by Segler (2001), the majority of LLSs taxonomies are VLSs, and can therefore be used to learn L2 vocabulary. Thus, "combining the results from general learning strategies research with those from more vocabulary-specific studies allows us to derive a number of tentative general conclusions about vocabulary learning strategies" (Schmitt, 1997:200).

A number of definitions for LLSs have been proposed, as there is no overall agreement on what constitutes a LLS (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985). This is because researchers define LLS based on their own research interests and foci. Oxford (1990:1) provides the following definition: "[L]earning strategies are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence."

Cook (2001:127) stresses that LLS are choices made by learners of a second language that affect the learning process. According to Chamot (1987:71), "learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area information."

Although researchers have argued about the definition of LLSs, Nation (2001:217) suggests that LLSs should meet the following criteria: they should involve choice, i.e. there should be several strategies to choose from; they should be complex, i.e. there should be several steps to learn; they should require knowledge and practising them should be beneficial to learners; and they should increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use.

Since there are several definitions of LLSs, there are also a number of different taxonomies. A well-known taxonomy of LLSs was proposed by Oxford (1990:14-15), who believes that her classification is more detailed and comprehensive than other LLS taxonomies. Other researchers agree with Oxford's claims and consider that her taxonomy is the most suitable way of classifying LLSs (Ellis, 1994; Schmitt, 1997). Figure 1 shows Oxford's classification of LLSs.

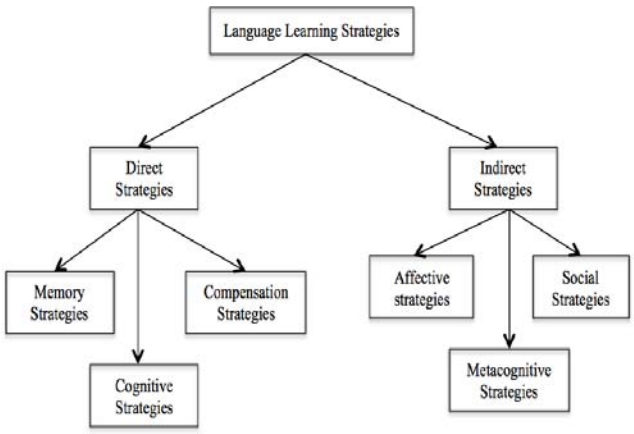


Fig. 1 : Oxford's Classification of language learning strategies

c) Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)

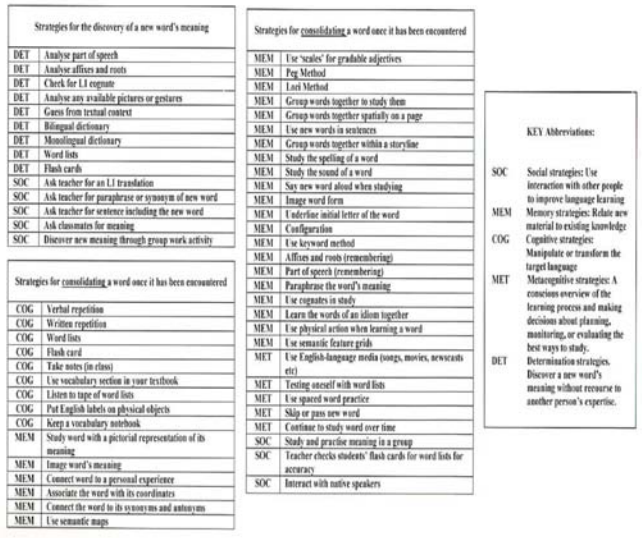
During the last two decades, researchers, teachers, and authors have paid more attention to LLS, particularly in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). As a result, there has been a greater focus on VLSs; this is because they are part of LLSs. This is addressed by Nation (2001:217), who states that "vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies which, in turn, are a part of general learning strategies". It is now clear that VLSs are related to LLS and that, consequently, the definitions and classifications of VLSs will be similar to those of LLSs. VLSs can be defined as:"[K]nowledge about the mechanism (processes, strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students (a) to find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode." (Catalán 2003: 56)

Moreover, VLSs can be taught in the classroom and learners can be taught how to use them effectively. Successful training in VLSs can help learners to build up their repertoire and can also improve their vocabulary retention. Training of this nature would help L2 learners to be more confident in learning new vocabulary outside the classroom.

Since there are strong similarities, and no major distinctions, between LLSs and VLSs, it stands to reason

that researchers would base their VLS taxonomies on the existing LLS taxonomies. For example, Schmitt (1997) developed his taxonomy of VLSs on the basis of Oxford's taxonomy of LLSs h (1990), stating that, "Of the more established systems, the one developed by Oxford (op. cit.), seemed best able to capture and organize the wide variety of: identified" (op.cit:205).

Schmitt's (1997) classification divided VLSs into two main categories: discovery strategies, and consolidation strategies. The former deals with strategies than can be used to find out "initial information about a new word", whereas the latter comprises strategies that can be used by learners to retain the new words once taught or encountered. Figure 2 shows Schmitt's (1990) classification of VLSs (adapted from Tassana-ngam, 2004:85).



Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning

DET	Analyse part of speech
DET	Analyse affixes and roots
DET	Check for L1 cognate
DET	Analyse any available pictures or gestures
DET	Guess from textual context
DET	Bilingual dictionary
DET	Monolingual dictionary
DET	Word lists
DET	Flash cards
SOC	Ask teacher for an L1 translation
SOC	Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word
SOC	Ask teacher for sentence including the new word
SOC	Ask classmates for meaning
SOC	Discover new meaning through group work activity

Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered

COG	Verbal repetition
COG	Written repetition
COG	Word lists
COG	Flash card
COG	Take notes (in class)
COG	Use vocabulary section in your textbook
COG	Listen to tape of word lists
COG	Put English labels on physical objects
COG	Keep a vocabulary notebook
MEM	Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning
MEM	Image word's meaning
MEM	Connect word to a personal experience
MEM	Associate the word with its coordinates
MEM	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms
MEM	Use semantic maps

Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered

MEM	Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives
MEM	Peg Method
MEM	Lazi Method
MEM	Group words together to study them
MEM	Group words together spatially on a page
MEM	Use new words in sentences
MEM	Group words together within a storyline
MEM	Study the spelling of a word
MEM	Study the sound of a word
MEM	Say new word aloud when studying
MEM	Image word form
MEM	Underline initial letter of the word
MEM	Configuration
MEM	Use keyword method
MEM	Affixes and roots (remembering)
MEM	Part of speech (remembering)
MEM	Paraphrase the word's meaning
MEM	Use cognates in study
MEM	Learn the words of an idiom together
MEM	Use physical action when learning a word
MEM	Use semantic feature grids
MET	Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts etc)
MET	Testing oneself with word lists
MET	Use spaced word practice
MET	Skip or pass new word
MET	Continue to study word over time
SOC	Study and practise meaning in a group
SOC	Teacher checks students' flash cards for word lists for accuracy
SOC	Interact with native speakers

KEY Abbreviations:

SOC	Social strategies: Use interaction with other people to improve language learning
MEM	Memory strategies: Relate new material to existing knowledge
COG	Cognitive strategies: Manipulate or transform the target language
MET	Metacognitive strategies: A conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study.
DET	Determination strategies. Discover a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise.

Fig. 2 : Schmitt's (1990) classification of VLSs

III. Methodology

a) Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following initial research questions:

- What are the most and the least frequently used VLSs among Saudi undergraduate students?
- What are the most and the least used frequently used dimensions among Saudi undergraduate students.

b) Participants

A total of 158 male and female participants from different disciplines were chosen from Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The subjects were fairly homogenous, as they were all between 20 and 22 years old and were all in their second year of study. In addition, all of the participants had studied English for seven years at secondary school level, and none of them had previously lived in, or visited, an English speaking country.

c) Instruments

There are many ways of collecting data on VLSs, and the choice of method will depend on a number of factors, such as the research questions, the reliability and validity of the instruments, and time constraints (Cohen, 1998). Hatch and Farhady (1982, cited in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991:10) state that "research is a systematic approach to finding answers to questions". Thus, "individual researchers have a freedom of choice. They are 'free' to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures of research that best meet their needs and purposes" (Creswell, 2003:12). With regard to this paper, the chosen instrument of data collection was the questionnaire. We have adopted Marin's (2005) questionnaire, and we have added some items from McCrostie's (2007) questionnaires, all of which were largely based on the items previously proposed and analysed by Schmitt (1997). Responses to each item of the questionnaire were measured using a type of Likert scale; the possible answers were (1) ever, (2) seldom, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always. On the subject of reliability, Oppenheim (1992:69) says, "Reliability refers to consistency; obtaining the same results again". According to Mueller (1986), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliable results should be .80 or higher. As can be seen in table 3, the Cronbach's alpha for our 75 items was .84, thus indicating that the results of the study were reliable and valid.

Table 3 : The Reliability Coefficient of the VLSQ

Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
.84	75

d) Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed to participants after completion of a consent form. To compensate for the Hawthorne effect (i.e. the observer effect), participants were asked to report their actual usage of the various VLSs, not what they thought would please the researcher. The questionnaire took between 25 and 30 minutes to complete.

Once the data had been collected, the SPSS (version 21) statistical software was used to analyse the quantitative data. Seventy-five strategies, which comprise the dependent variables, were entered in 75 columns. The SPSS software was then used to analyse the VLSQ replies of each informant. Data analysis methods such as means and standard deviations were used. For example, the mean frequency for each VLS item (75 items) was calculated in order to identify the overall patterns of strategies across 12 dimensions, without taking any variables into consideration. The mean results for the 75 strategies were then averaged in order to produce scores for each of the 12 dimensions

in the study. The aim of this was to identify the dimensions, which were the most and the least frequently used by our participants, regardless of any variables, when using VLSs.

IV. Results and Discussion

a) Frequency of VLS use across all dimensions

This section deals with the overall strategy employed by Saudi undergraduate learners. As can be seen in table 4, the most frequently used strategy among learners, with a mean score of 4.58, was "checking the Arabic meaning of new words by using a dictionary", and the second most frequently used strategy related to the type of dictionary used – using a mobile phone had a mean score of 4.42. The third most commonly used strategy, with a mean score of 4.33, was "asking a teacher or friends about its equivalent Arabic meaning".

Looking at the four dimensions (i.e. VLSD4, VLSD3, VLSD2 and VLSD5), it seems that it is obvious that learners will use L1. This is because learners' native language plays an important role in their comprehension of the target language. Using L1 makes the learning process much easier for them. Moreover, checking the meaning by using L1 is probably preferable to the learners because many English words change their meaning according to the context in which they are used. For example, the word "play" has a different meaning when used in the phrase "play music" than in "I saw a play in a theatre". Therefore, the use of L1 was second most dominant strategy, after strategies that are related VLSD8, which deals with reasons for noting vocabulary.

Table 4 : The ten most frequently used VLSs

Rank	VLSs	N	Dimensions	Mean	SD
1	I look up the unknown word by using a dictionary and check its Arabic meaning.	158	VLSD4	4.5823	0.84624
2	I use a smartphone dictionary application to check the meaning of unknown words.	155	VLSD3	4.4258	0.99315
3	I ask teachers and friends about its Arabic equivalent.	158	VLSD2	4.3354	1.00071
4	I select a word for note taking if I see that the word is useful to me.	158	VLSD8	4.3228	0.84664
5	I select a word for note taking if I see that the word is important in that it is needed when speaking or writing.	158	VLSD8	4.2278	0.99616
6	I select a word for note taking if I see that the word is unknown and thus new to me.	158	VLSD8	4.1709	1.16309
7	I select a word for note taking if I see that the word is important in that it recurs frequently in the text where I encountered it.	158	VLSD8	4.0380	0.96358
8	I use an electronic dictionary such as Atlas to check the meaning of unknown words.	158	VLSD3	3.9241	1.24432
9	I select a word for note taking if I see that the word is important in that the teacher said so.	158	VLSD8	3.8354	1.11081
10	I write down the English word with its Arabic translation.	158	VLSD5	3.8227	1.13721

Note: VLSD3 = Types of dictionary used; VLSD4 = Information taken from dictionaries; VLSD5 = Types of information noted VLSD6 = Locations of vocabulary note taking strategy and VLSD7 = Ways of organizing words noted.

Among Saudi undergraduate learners, the least frequently used strategy, with a mean score of 1.56, was keeping notes on wall charts (see table 5). Interestingly, all dimensions, except VLSD3 and VLSD4, were related to vocabulary note-taking strategies, suggesting that the majority of the least frequently used strategies were those relating to taking notes. Of those less frequently used strategies, four (i.e. "organizing the word by their grammar category", "organizing the words in alphabetical order", "organize the words into families with the same stem" and "organize the words by their meaning group") were from VLSD7 ("ways of organizing words noted").

It is understandable why the mean score for keeping notes on cards was so low (1.5): notes on cards are easily lost and are hard to keep tidy. Moreover, making notes on cards is not practical, as it requires learners to write notes on both sides of the card; this is time consuming and is not very effective. Therefore, learners disregard this type of strategy. With regard to ways of organizing notes, learners knew that organizing words would require a significant amount of effort and a high level of mental process. For example, "organizing words by their meaning groups", which received a mean score of 1.8 (close to "never" in our Likert scale), requires a certain degree of mental manipulation. In fact, all of the least frequently employed strategies from VLSD7 require a high level of mental manipulation. Another example is the strategy of "organizing words in alphabetical order". Once again, this involves the use of higher-level mental processes.

Table 5 : The ten least frequently used VLSs

Rank	VLSs	N	Dimensions	Mean	SD
75	Keep notes on wall charts, posters or small pieces of paper that I stick somewhere at home.	158	VLSD6	1.5127	0.93575
74	Keep notes on cards.	158	VLSD6	1.5633	0.82503
73	Write down a note about the source I got it from.	157	VLSD5	1.5987	0.93274
72	Organize the words by their grammatical category	158	VLSD7	1.6899	0.97027
71	Organize the words in alphabetical order.	158	VLSD7	1.7025	1.00006
70	I organize words in families with the same stem.	158	VLSD7	1.7848	1.00535
69	In a paper English-English dictionary.	158	VLSD3	1.7975	1.11023
68	Looking for examples.	158	VLSD4	1.8671	1.08319
67	Organize the words by their meaning groups.	158	VLSD7	1.8924	1.03188
66	Write English word down with the other related words of the same family.	158	VLSD5	1.9367	1.17122

Note: VLSD3 = Types of dictionary used; VLSD4 = Information taken from dictionaries; VLSD5 = Types of information noted VLSD6 = Locations of vocabulary note taking strategy and VLSD7 = Ways of organizing words noted.

b) Frequency of VLS use by dimensions

Table 6 shows which dimensions are most and least frequently used by our informants. Interestingly,

this table reflects our earlier findings on the most and least frequently used VLSs across dimensions (see table 4 and table 5), that is, "reasons for vocabulary note taking" (i.e. VNSD8) (mean 3.73). As found earlier, four strategies relating to (VLSD7) were among the ten least frequently used VLSs. Therefore, we can say that, amongst our participants, the least frequently used dimension was "ways of organizing words noted" (i.e. VLSD7), with a mean score of 2.22.

Participants demonstrated a high level of interest in word-selection criteria; this could be attributed to the fact that the informants focused more on note-taking than on any other category. Their non-use of ways of organizing words when taking notes was probably caused by the abundance of different ways available – this leads note-takers to neglect many of them. Moreover, it could be because such strategies require higher order mental processes

Table 6 : The most and least frequently used dimensions

Rank	VLSs		N	Mean	SD
1	VLSD8	Reasons for vocabulary note-taking	158	**3.7346**	0.54823
2	VLSD9	Methods of repetition	158	3.4620	0.82503
3	VLSD12	Practicing/consolidation strategies	158	3.1440	0.79773
4	VLSD3	Type of dictionary used	158	3.1389	0.64538
5	VLSD2	Asking strategies	158	2.9852	0.52381
6	VLSD10	Information used when repeating new words	158	2.9541	0.75547
7	VLSD1	Guessing strategies	158	2.8080	0.53971
8	VLSD4	Information taken from dictionaries	158	2.7434	0.56560
9	VLSD11	Association strategies	158	2.7061	0.76248
10	VLSD6	Locations of vocabulary NTS	158	2.5298	0.55605
11	VLSD5	Types of word and non-word information noted	158	2.3510	0.49747
12	VLSD7	Ways of organizing words noted	158	**2.2233**	0.50151

V. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the VLSs that are the most and least frequently used by Saudi undergraduate learners. The study was conducted on one hundred and fifty-eight Saudi university students in Saudi Arabia. Data analysis, including mean frequency, was applied in order to determine the overall use of VLSs across dimensions and by dimensions.

The findings for the first research question (what are the most and the least frequently used VLSs among Saudi undergraduate students?) reveals that Saudi learners prefer to use their native language (Arabic) when they encounter new words, suggesting that using L1 is a dominant choice. These strategies were "checking the Arabic meaning of new words by using a dictionary" and "asking a teacher or friends about its equivalent Arabic meaning". Note-taking strategies, on the other hand, were the least frequently used, particularly VLSD 7 "ways of organizing words noted". This suggests that learners are unlikely to favour strategies that require the use of higher-level cognitive processes.

The findings for the second research question (what are the most and the least frequently used dimensions among Saudi undergraduate students?) indicate that learners prefer to note down a lot of new words, but they do not tend to organize them according to their grammatical function, in alphabetical orders, or according to their meaning.

Learners should be given more encouragement to use L2 rather than L1. For example, it would be better if they checked the English meaning of new L2 words, rather than checking what they mean in Arabic. This strategy would build their repertoire, since the English definition in the dictionary would give them more detailed information about the target word.

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