Macrothink Institute™

International Journal of Linguistics
ISSN 1948-5425
2020, Vol. 12, No. 2

Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by EFL Learners in the Supportive Studies in Turbah University College

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Received: March 28, 2020 Accepted: April 8, 2020 Published: April 14, 2020

doi:10.5296/ijl.v12i2.16759 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v12i2.16759

Abstract

This study aims at investigating the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) employed by supportive studies students of Turbah University College. The participants were 288 divided almost equally; males were 145 and females were 143. The study conducted in the 1st semester 2019/2020. Data was collected using a questionnaire adapted from Schmitt (1997) taxonomy. Data was analyzed with SPSS program, version 22. The results of this study demonstrated a changeable rate of using strategies in the five categories; determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive. The overall mean score of strategies indicates a medium usage of strategies. Metacognitive and determination strategies were the most and the least used respectively. The results revealed statistically significant differences in the use of VLSs attributed to academic major; Arts students outperformed Science students in such use. The results also showed that female students were more active users of VLSs. However, no statistically significant differences in the use of VLSs attributed to gender factor.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), Second language learners (SLLs), Turbah University College, Saudi EFL students

1. Introduction

For the two decades, many studies in the field of second language (L2) learning and teaching has shifted from pedagogical methods to learner attributes. Along with this new shift in interest, questions about how learners acquire new information and what kind of strategies they employ to understand, learn, or remember the information have become a crucial

concern of researchers in foreign language learning. This move in focus from tutors to learners can be seen in the development of a learner-centered, communicative self-directed, approach, and second language research efforts have increasingly been directed to learning strategies used by L2 learners.

1.1 Problem Statement

English is a worldwide language. With world multipolarization and economic globalization, English is playing more and more important roles in the world. The recent huge development needs more people with high English proficiency. Saudi Arabia has special factors related to the community, which hampered English vocabulary learning. The Saudi community is a mixture of religious tribal community with strong conservative tribal traditions (Alrahaili, 2013). Al-Saraj (2014) pointed out that the tribal traditions hampered the Saudi acceptance of new ways of life; including learning English – despite the increasing need for Saudi individuals to learn this language. English teaching in rural areas like Turbah in Saudi Arabia is quite different from other developed areas. Firstly, Turbah is a remote mountainous area, so educational conditions are comparatively poorer than those in other areas. Secondly, students learn English as a foreign language. Therefore, English teachers encounter many difficulties in teaching English. Most of learners cannot find an effective way to learn English. In fact, tribal cultures interfere with the students' English learning. That is reflected in strategies employed in learning English, especially in English vocabulary leaning. We can assume that these strategies are even more important than the material itself. This study seeks to examine the most and least frequent VLS used by Saudi Learners in a higher education context, and a rural framework. It also seeks to unveil the differences of vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi students regarding their gender and academic major.

1.2 Research Objectives

The present study aims at achieving the following research objectives:

1. To identify the types and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies employed by Saudi EFL learners in the Supportive Studies in Turbah University College.

2. To examine the variance between the students' use of vocabulary learning strategies and two independent variables: gender and academic major.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study aims at giving answers to the following research questions:

1. What types of vocabulary learning strategies do Saudi EFL learners in the supportive studies in Turbah University College use?

2. Do the vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi EFL learners in the supportive studies in Turbah University College vary across gender and academic major?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The research will inspire teachers and learners at the same time to integrate VLS in the language- teaching programs and help students at different stages of learning to create an enjoyable learning atmosphere. The specific learning strategies by supportive studies students will definitely encourage teachers to explore other strategies in vocabulary teaching in classroom. Furthermore, the research will provide other researchers with an important searching point to fulfill more researches in other regions, which in turn will improve vocabulary learning in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the study will be a parallel factor for curriculum designers to provide new exercises, which support vocabulary learning depending on activating vocabulary-learning strategies in curricula.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Language and Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Definitions of learning strategies have been viewed in different ways. Cameron (2001) defined vocabulary learning strategies as "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary"(p. 92). Another common definition of learning strategy is given by Oxford (1990) comprehensively defines "Learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self - directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). Schmitt's (1997) definition of VLS reflects Rubin's (1987) understanding of learning as Rubin (1987) views learning "The process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved, and used" (p. 29). Schmitt (1997) viewed VLSs as "any action which affects this rather broadly-defined process" (p. 203).

2.2 Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Language learning comprises various aspects, vocabulary Knowledge is an essential component of it. Therefore, researchers undertook searching about the used strategies in vocabulary learning for a long time. Researchers classified VLSs into various classifications. For instance, Fan (2003) believes there are stages in each category of vocabulary learning to know a word:"1) facing with the word, 2) getting an image of the word in mind, 3) learning the meaning, 4) making a strong connection between form and meaning, 5) using the word". While Catalan (2003) has illustrated VLSs as" the mechanism 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) retain them on long term memory,(c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode"(Catalan, 2003: 56). Schmitt (1997) is one of the most popular taxonomies among learners and researchers in VLSs. It is advisable for many reasons. First, it is an inclusive categorization dependent on Nation's (1990) and Oxford's (1990) taxonomies. Second, it has many advantages are not comparable with other taxonomies (Catalan, 2003). Schmitt classified vocabulary learning strategies into two categories; discovering strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies stand for learner's ability to decide a meaning of vocabulary when he/she face it. Ii includes two subdivisions: determination strategies and social strategies. The second classification is consolidation, which refers to

learner's ability to consolidate it when he/she see it again. It includes other subdivisions: memory, cognitive and metacognitive.

2.3 Previous Studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Researchers varied in their choosing of learners' background and the individual factors, which affect their choosing of strategies. Therefore, in this part, the researcher will present researchers' results about the used vocabulary learning strategies. Kobayashi and Little (2020) investigated the role of VLS training and the gender effect on using VLSs. The participants were 109 Japanese EFL bioscience majors. They completed a questionnaire on vocabulary learning behavior before and after receiving explicit VLS training for 11 weeks. The results showed that VLS training was effective in enhancing the participants' use of metacognitive strategies, writing rehearsal and grouping strategies. Gender had an observable role in the overall use of strategies. Al-Omairi (2020) conducted a study about the most and the least preferable VLSs among Iraqi EFL and EAP learners. The study sample included 100 undergraduate learners divided equally; 50 EAP learners and 50 EFL learners. The researcher used a questionnaire and a follow-up interview for collecting data. The results showed that determination and metacognitive strategies were the most and the least used strategies respectively. Students were good users of VLSs.

Alqarni (2017) explored VLSs in his study on Saudi male students in first year of translation department at King Saud University. The author adopted Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs. The results showed that learners used all strategies in different rates; metacognitive strategies were the highest; social, determination, cognitive, and memory strategies came respectively. Lee and Heinz (2016) conducted a study on 20 students studying in Interpretation and Translation College in Korea to clarify the effective and ineffective English language strategies. The results showed that metacognitive and cognitive are the most effective strategies; while, memory strategies were not effective. Because learners are autonomous, they are attracted to metacognitive strategies. In the same field, Behbahani (2016) carried out a research on Eastern Mediterranean University learners to identify the most and the least used strategies. The results showed that learners used metacognitive and social strategies at the highest and lowest level respectively. It is also worthy noticing that gender is a crucial factor of choosing a strategy. Fatima and Pathan (2016) examined VLSs employed by the undergraduate students at two universities in Pakistan (SBKWU, UOB). The authors depended on a questionnaire consisting of 45 items on four strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and activation strategies. Regulation strategy and activation strategy emerged as the most influential source of learning new English words.

Alhaisoni (2012) investigated the most desired VLSs and gender factor among Saudi EFL learners at Hail University. He employed Oxford's (1990) strategy inventory of language learning. The results showed that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were the most used ones among learners; whereas, memory and affective strategies were the least used ones. Gender's effect was so limited without statistical significant. Al-Khasawneh (2012) also investigated the most used vocabulary learning strategies among learners at Jordanian University of Sciences and Technology. He prepared a questionnaire of fifty-nine items

adopting Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs. The results showed that determination strategies were the most used ones; while, metacognitive strategies were the least applied strategies among learners. Asgari and Mustapha (2011) investigated the most preferable vocabulary strategies among Malaysian learners at Putra University. They adopted Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs. The results showed that learners prefer using strategies that are related to memory, determination and metacognitive strategies such as using monolingual dictionary, the use of various English language media and applying new words in daily conversation; while, cognitive strategies were not mentioned by students such as using flash cards, putting English labels of words on physical items and writing down English words with meaning. By these results, the author goes in opposite side of other authors.

3. Research Methodology

This section focuses on explaining the purpose, population, and the instruments which were used to achieve the main target of this research

3.1 Research Design

The applied method of extracting results was through quantitative method. The quantitative method was chosen because the targeted sphere is so numerous. In fact, questionnaires are relatively popular means of collecting data.

3.2 Population and Sample

The participants of this study are 145 male and 143 female students. They were all students of supportive studies courses; their academic major was either Science or Art. The learners' ages were between 18-23 years old. The research was conducted in 1st semester 2019/2020.

3.3 Research Instrument

The researcher used a questionnaire to collect data from participants. The used questionnaire is adopted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs. It includes 59 questions about the strategies of vocabulary learning. There are five main categories; determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive. A five-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always) was used to measure the frequency of use of the vocabulary learning strategies.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Before collecting the data of this study, the researcher thanked teachers and participants for their assistance. The researcher used Google form questionnaire to facilitate the process for students to answer anywhere and to avoid interrupting their input sessions at university. Google form link was sent to teachers who sent it also to students' group via WhatsApp application. Another reason for using Google form questionnaire is to simplify distribution and response in female student's campus. The questionnaire is expected to be finished in 15-20 minutes; participants were given longer time to answer.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by the means of Statistical Package of Social Sciences, Version 22. Means and standard deviations were used to answer the first research question concerning the types and frequencies of VLSs. In addition, Independent Samples T-Test was used to examine the significant difference in the use of VLSs and academic major and gender.

4. Results and Discussion

Statistical analysis provided us about the preferable strategies among Saudi EFL learners. This section provides answers the first research question; what types of vocabulary learning strategies do EFL learners in the supportive studies in Turbah University College use?

Table 1. Overall strategy use

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
Overall	288	1.00	5.00	3.4403	.92566	
Valid N (listwise)	288					Medium

As Table 1 manifested, the descriptive analysis for overall strategy use shows that the participants were medium frequent users (M=3.44, SD= .92).

Table 2. Students use of VLSs in the five categories

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	level
Metacognitive	288	1.00	5.00	3.4771	1.12024	Medium
Cognitive	288	1.00	5.00	3.4471	1.10258	Medium
Memory	288	1.00	5.00	3.4396	.98093	Medium
Social	288	1.00	5.00	3.4368	.99879	Medium
Determination	288	1.00	5.00	3.4186	.90022	Medium
Valid N (listwise)	288					

As seen in Table 2, the descriptive statistics showed that participants had a medium use of vocabulary learning strategies. All five-strategy categories were used at a medium degree. High or low range of strategy use was not found among the five categories of vocabulary strategy in this study. The table presents the use of VLSs reported by students in the five categories; Determination Strategies (M 3.41, SD=.900), Social Strategies (M=3.43, SD=.99), Memory Strategies (M=3.43, SD= .98), Cognitive Strategies (M=3.44, SD= 1.10), and Metacognitive Strategies (M=3.47, SD= 1.12).

Table 3. Top five employed strategies by all participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Guess meaning from textual context	288	1	5	4.06	1.173	High
Verbal repetition	288	1	5	3.90	1.233	High
Written repetition	288	1	5	3.78	1.249	High
Analyze through available pictures or gestures	288	1	5	3.77	1.222	High
Check for L1 cognate	288	1	5	3.75	1.201	High

Table 3 showed that the top five strategies have high frequency rate. Three of the highest used strategies represent determination category; while the other two strategies belong to cognitive category. "Guess meaning from textual context" had the highest mean score (M= 4.06, Std =1.17). On the other hand, "Check for L1 cognate" occupies the fifth rank (M=3.75, Std =1.20).

Table 4. The least five employed strategies by participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Teacher checks students flash cards or word lists for accuracy	288	1	5	3.08	1.465	Medium
Affixes and roots (remembering)	288	1	5	3.07	1.394	Medium
Put English labels on physical objects	288	1	5	3.06	1.513	Medium
Flash cards	288	1	5	3.02	1.398	Medium
Word lists	288	1	5	2.94	1.398	Medium
Valid N (listwise)	277					

The Table 4 demonstrates the variety in using the least five strategies. The least five used strategies represent social, memory, cognitive and determination strategies. The statistical results demonstrate that students do not have undesirable category." Flash cards" and "Word lists" occupy the least using strategies (M=3.02, Std =1.39; M=2.94, Std= 1.39).

4.1 Results of Second Research Question

This section provides answers the second question; do the vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi EFL learners in the supportive studies in Turbah University College vary across gender and academic major?

Table 5. The variance of overall strategy use and gender

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Male	145	3.4149	1.08830	.219	.640
Female	143	3.4660	.72759		
Total	288	3.4403	.92566		

As we have seen in Table 5, the results showed no statistically significant differences in the use of VLSs according to gender. The table shows that females were more frequent users of VLSs compared to their male counterparts. The mean scores for males and females (M=3.41& M=3.46) respectively.

Table 6. The variance of overall strategy use and academic major

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Science	127	3.2321	.78375	11.927	.001
Arts	161	3.6045	.99584		
Total	288	3.4403	.92566		

The Table 6 shows the variance according to academic stream. The mean scores of vocabulary learning strategies demonstrate that Arts students were more frequent users than Science users. The mean score of Science stream (M= 3.23, Std= .78); while, the mean score of Arts stream (M =3.60, Std= .99). The results showed statistically significant differences between both groups attributed to academic major. (Sig=.001).

Table 7. Variation in use of VLSs in the five categories according to gender

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Determination	Male	145	3.4192	1.06805		
	Female	143	3.4180	.69363	.000	.992
	Total	288	3.4186	.90022		
Social	Male	145	3.4147	1.16048		
	Female	143	3.4592	.80595	.143	.706
	Total	288	3.4368	.99879		
Memory	Male	145	3.3995	1.13674		
	Female	143	3.4801	.79443	.485	.487
	Total	288	3.4396	.98093		
Cognitive	Male	145	3.4215	1.23039		
	Female	143	3.4732	.95942	.158	.691
	Total	288	3.4471	1.10258		
Metacognitive	Male	145	3.4814	1.24242		
	Female	143	3.4727	.98540	.004	.948
	Total	288	3.4771	1.12024		

As seen in Table 7, the statistical analysis shows The Mean scores of using VLSs according to category. The results show the frequency between male and female learners in each

category. No significant statistical differences were found between males and females in each category. The all five categories had medium frequency of mean scores. Determination category showed a slight difference of mean score between males and females; the mean score of males (M=3.41, Std= 1.06) while females (M=3.41, Std= .69). Social category showed a difference in mean scores between males and females; for males (M=3.41, Std= 1.16) while for females (3.45, Std =.80). Memory strategies also vary in mean scores in according to gender; males (M= 3.39, Std= 1.13) and females (M=3.48, Std=.79). Cognitive category also showed slight variation according to gender. Males (M=3.42, Std =1.23) while females (M=3.47, Std= .95). The final category; Metacognitive strategies showed almost the same mean scores for both. Males (M=3.48, Std= 1.24) and females (M=3.47 and Std= .98).

Table 8. Variation in use of VLSs in the five categories according to academic major

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Determination	Science	127	3.2616	.77279		
	Arts	161	3.5424	.97384	7.056	.008
	Total	288	3.4186	.90022		
Social	Science	127	3.2012	.88406		
	Arts	161	3.6226	1.04650	13.171	.000
	Total	288	3.4368	.99879		
Memory	Science	127	3.2356	.84699		
	Arts	161	3.6005	1.04975	10.136	.002
	Total	288	3.4396	.98093		
Cognitive	Science	127	3.2248	.98245		
	Arts	161	3.6225	1.16205	9.509	.002
	Total	288	3.4471	1.10258		
Metacognitive	Science	127	3.2220	1.02112		
	Arts	161	3.6783	1.15654	12.236	.001
	Total	288	3.4771	1.12024		

As seen in Table 8, determination category showed significant differences in mean score between Science and Arts learners. Science learners scored a medium degree of mean score (M=3.26, Std= .77); while Arts learners had a high mean score (M=3.54, Std= .97). There was statistically significant differences (Sig=008). Social category demonstrated an obvious variation of mean score. Science stream students had medium mean score frequency (M=3.20, Std= .88); while, Arts stream students scored high degree of mean score frequency (M=3.62, Std= 1.04). There are an obvious statistical significance (Sig=.00). Memory category also showed variance in mean scores between high and medium. Science stream students had medium degree of mean score (M=3.23, Std= .84); while, Arts stream students had high mean score (M=3.60, Std= 1.04). Significant differences were found (Sig=.002). Cognitive category had clear different frequencies of mean scores. Science learners had medium frequency of mean score (M=3.22, Std= .98); while, Arts learners had high degree of mean score (M=3.62, Std= 1.16). There is also crucial statistical difference (Sig= .002). Metacognitive category also had different frequencies of mean scores. Science students had

medium mean score (M= 3.22, Std= 1.02). On the other hand, Arts learners had high mean score (M= 3.67, Std= 1.15). Statistically significant difference is found (Sig=.001).

Many researchers investigated vocabulary learning to reach the applied learning strategies among learners. Researchers varied in their choosing of learners' background and the individual factors, which affect their choosing of strategies. Therefore, in this part, the researcher will present researchers' results about the used vocabulary learning strategies. Behbahani (2016) agreed with this study that metacognitive strategies occupied the highest rate. Behbahani (2016) did not support the results of this study about gender effect. Alhaisoni (2012) is also in harmony with this study about that no significant differences between male and female learners. Asgari and Mustapha (2011) and Al-Khasawneh (2012) disagreed with the results of this study. The results of their studies showed that determination strategies were the most preferable; while, metacognitive strategies occupied the lowest rank. Alqarni (2017) reached similar results of this study. Metacognitive strategies occupied the highest rate. Wharton (2000) also went with the results of this study about the gender factor; no significant differences between male and female learners are available. He did not notice a clear difference between male and female learners. Researchers' interests in the relation between academic major and VLSs have risen. Many researchers agreed that there is a crucial relation between academic major and VLSs. Gu (2002) supported the results of this study about the effective role of academic major. Siriwan (2007) also agreed with this study about the crucial role of academic major. Puagsang and Intharaksa (2017) used a questionnaire and an individual semi-structured interview to survey 242 first year vocational students from three majors engineering, accounting, and hotel and tourism from five vocational colleges in Krabi province, Thailand. He noticed that academic major plays an effective role of choosing vocabulary-learning strategies.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the use of VLSs among Saudi EFL Learners at Turbah University College. The results showed that learners tended to use the five categories in medium rate with frequent mean scores. Metacognitive had the most frequent mean score (M=3.47). On the other hand, determination represented the least frequent mean score. Gender was an effective factor in choosing VLSs in some previous studies, It does not have a remarkable significance in this study (Sig=.640). On the contrary, academic major showed a clear significance (Sig=.001). Arts learners were more frequent users comparing with Science learners (Science=3.23; Arts= 3.60).

In summary, knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies, that this study presents, could be beneficial for both learners and students. When learners are aware of these strategies, they become more motivated to learn and take part in the learning process more actively. Moreover, learners using these strategies feel secure and take their own responsibility for learning. In addition to these, this study gives opportunity to foreign language teachers to realize their learners' feelings, needs, and interests when learning vocabulary. Eventually, by means of these findings, various vocabulary learning activities could be organized to teach

vocabulary effectively. As for pedagogical implication, with the help of these strategies, learners acquire and memorize new vocabulary items in an easier and more effective way.

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