

Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use by Iranian EFL Learners across Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

Given the importance of vocabulary as well as vocabulary learning strategies in the context of ELT, the present study sought to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies employed by Iranian intermediate and advanced learners. Several English language institutes in Yazd cooperated with the researchers by providing them with a list of intermediate to advanced learners. After arrangement with institutes' administrators and getting students' consent to participate in the study, students took a TOEFL and based on the obtained scores, 55 learners were chosen as intermediate and 50 as advanced students. Participants with TOEFL score range of 481-506 were classified as intermediate and those with TOEFL range of 507-600 were classified as advanced students (Phillips, 1991). Next, students completed VOLSI by choosing one of the options (1) never, (2) seldom, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always. The results of statistical analyses revealed that both advanced and intermediate language learners used mental linkages, memory strategies and auditory strategies as the most frequent vocabulary learning strategies respectively. On the other hand, both advanced and intermediate language learners used strategies for self-motivation, strategies involving authentic language, and strategies involving creative activities as the least frequent. It was also found that advanced and intermediate language learners were significantly different from

each other in all categories of vocabulary learning strategies except strategies involving creative activities. Moreover, Iranian language learners with different levels of language proficiency used vocabulary learning strategies with varying frequency of use.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Vocabulary learning strategies, Proficiency level

1. Introduction

The importance of vocabulary in learning a language can hardly be denied. Wilkins (1972) says, “Without grammar little can be conveyed; but without vocabulary nothing can be transferred” (p. 111). Vocabulary knowledge is important because it involves all the words we must know to access our background knowledge, express our ideas and beliefs, communicate successfully, and learn new notions (Rupley, Logan & Nichols, 1999). In addition, Decarrico (2001) points out that “vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition whether it is a second, or a foreign language, even in a learners' mother tongue, there is an incessant learning of new words and new meanings for old words” (p. 285). Furthermore, Celce–Murcia and Rosensweig (1989) approve that vocabulary should be considered as a central element in language teaching from the beginning stages.

Moreover, learning vocabulary is a key factor in achieving a high level of proficiency in the target language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). According to Zu (2009), nowadays researchers and teachers are paying more attention to foreign language vocabulary acquisition, so knowing a large number of words is an indicator of communicative competence and it is one of the important aspects of language learning. Learning and teaching vocabulary is really challenging, so strategies are the best tools for developing vocabulary knowledge. Wenden (1991) states that, “Learning strategies are among different processes that learners use in order to come up with meaningful learning” (p.7). Oxford and Ehrman (1995) define that strategies are “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques used by students to enhance their own learning” (p. 8).

Scholars have advocated the importance of vocabulary in SLA since limited knowledge in vocabulary impedes L2 learners from communicating successfully in the target language (Davis, 1989; Laufer, 1997, O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Stein, 1993; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996). In fact, there are a number of metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies that help students to learn better and attain higher levels of achievement. Vocabulary learning strategies can be considered as a subcategory of learning strategies in second language acquisition.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)

Cameron (2001) defines vocabulary learning strategies as “actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary” (p. 92). Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have received much attention since the late seventies. Learner autonomy can be developed through introducing different VLS to learners which can be used in developing the learning process (Schmitt, 1997). Moreover, Sökmen (1997) states that vocabulary learning strategies are the learners' actions in a way to understand the meaning of a word, learning them and remembering them later. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), training second language learners to use learning strategies concentrates mainly on learning vocabulary. Furthermore, vocabulary learning strategies are used most frequently and are probably the most well-known type of language learning strategies.

Learners usually use VLS such as memorizing, repeating and taking notes on lexical words

Moreover, he notes that “beginners prefer to use ‘shallow’ strategies for vocabulary learning such as memorization and repetition, while advanced learners use ‘deeper’ strategies such as consolidation and determination strategies for learning vocabulary” (p. 132). Schmitt (1997) classified VLS into two main groups of strategies a) Discovery strategies which are used by learners to discover the learning of words and b) Consolidation strategies in which a word is consolidated once it has been encountered. In another classification, Schmitt categorized vocabulary learning strategies into five sub-categories as follows:

1) *Determination strategies*: These are a part of discovery strategies that help learners to find the meaning of words by themselves without any assistance from peers. Guessing the meaning of unknown words from context which has been widely encouraged in the last two decades and is in line with the communicative approach is a good example of such strategies (Schmitt, 2000). Guessing from context most commonly refers to inferring a word's meaning from the surrounding words in a written text. The considerable research on textual inferencing shows that it can be a major way of acquiring new vocabulary. Another kind of determination strategy is finding a word's meaning through reference materials, primarily dictionaries (Scholfield, 1997). Even though they are prone to certain shortcomings, bilingual dictionaries seem to be used much more extensively than monolingual dictionaries by L2 language learners (Baxter, 1980). Through guessing strategies, learners use their background knowledge and linguistic clues like grammatical structures of a sentence so as to guess the meaning of a word. Memory strategies are classified to rehearsal and encoding categories. The examples of *rehearsal strategies* are word lists and repetition. Strategies such as association, imagery, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word structure are considered as *encoding strategies*. Activation strategies refer to those strategies through which the learners actually use new words in different contexts.

2) *Social strategies*: Social strategies engage learners in interaction with their peers, which helps them to learn from each other, such as monitoring their classmates and asking their teacher for the meaning of a word (Schmitt, 2000). Social strategies can also function as discovery strategies since the learner can ask help from someone in finding out the meaning of a new word.

3) *Memory strategies*: They are strategies whereby learners link their learning of new words to mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with the new words (Schmitt, 1997). Memory strategies involve learners in learning the new word through mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with the new word (Schmitt, 2000). Memory strategies usually involve relating the word to some previous knowledge, for example, using pictures instead of definitions or linking it to some L2 words already familiar to the learner. Besides, among memory strategies, using unrelated words or grouping the words according to some categories such as synonyms or common themes are mentioned (Schmitt, 1997).

4) *Cognitive strategies*: They are strategies that do not engage learners in mental processing but are more mechanical means (Schmitt, 1997). Cognitive strategies are those strategies which assist a person in achieving a particular goal (e.g., comprehending a text) (Rubin,

2005).

5) *Metacognitive strategies*: Metacognitive strategies refer to processes involving monitoring, decision-making, and evaluation of one's progress (Schmitt, 1997). By using metacognitive strategies, the learner can determine appropriate VLS for learning new words (Schmitt, 2000). Schmitt (1997) states "effective metacognitive strategies are getting maximum exposure to L2, for example, by reading books, watching movies and communicating with native speakers" (p. 216).

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) emphasized the crucial role that metacognition plays in learning by noting that "students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (p. 561). In addition, metacognition has "the potential to empower students to take charge of their own learning and to increase the meaningfulness of their learning" (Amado Gama, 2005, p. 21). It also encourages learners to 'learn what to do when they don't know what to do' (Wade, 1990). Similarly, Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) state that "metacognition or reflecting on one's own thinking and learning is the hallmark of the successful learner" (p. 2). In the metacognitive approach to teaching, the teacher models and provides guided practice in some specific strategies employed by skilled readers. Figure 2.1 shows Schmitt's classification of vocabulary learning strategies.

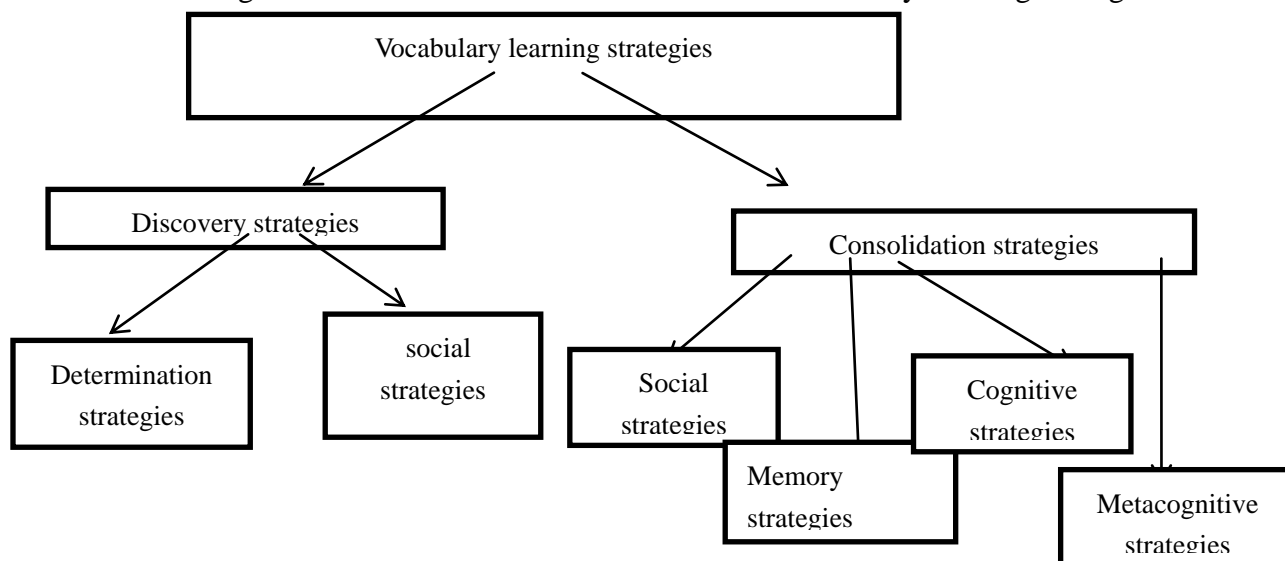


Figure 1. Schmitt's classification of vocabulary learning strategies

According to Gu and Johnson (1996), second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies are divided to metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Metacognitive strategies contain selective attention and self-initiation strategies. Cognitive strategies in Gu and Johnson's taxonomy contain guessing strategies, use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies.

2.1.1 Cohen's (1990) classification system

One of the earliest classification systems for vocabulary learning strategies is provided by Cohen (1990). Cohen's classification system consists of three different groups: (a) strategies

for retention of words, (b) vocabulary learning strategies and (c) strategies for practicing words.

1. Strategies for retention of words which include advanced versions of some types of association techniques identified in Cohen and Aphek (1981).

- Attending to the meaning of a part or several parts of the word.
- Noting the structure of part or all of the word.
- Placing the word in the topic group to which it belongs.
- Visualizing the word in isolation or in a written context.
- Linking the word to the situation in which it appeared.
- Creating a mental image of the word.
- Associating some physical sensation with the word.
- Associating the word with a keyword.

Cohen (1990) points out that these associations “are not definitive lists of all possible types of associations. Rather it is intended to be suggestive of some of the more popular approaches to generating association” (p. 26). Vocabulary learning strategies comprise three strategies such as:

- Word analysis
- Learning of cognates
- Using a dictionary

2.1.2 Brown and Payne's (1994) classification system

Brown and Payne's (1994, cited in Hatch & Brown, 1995) classification system includes five groups of strategies which they call “five essential steps” and they claim that students need all steps so as to have a full knowledge of the words they want to learn. As can be noticed in Figure 2.2 below, these steps constitute a sequential order of vocabulary learning processes.

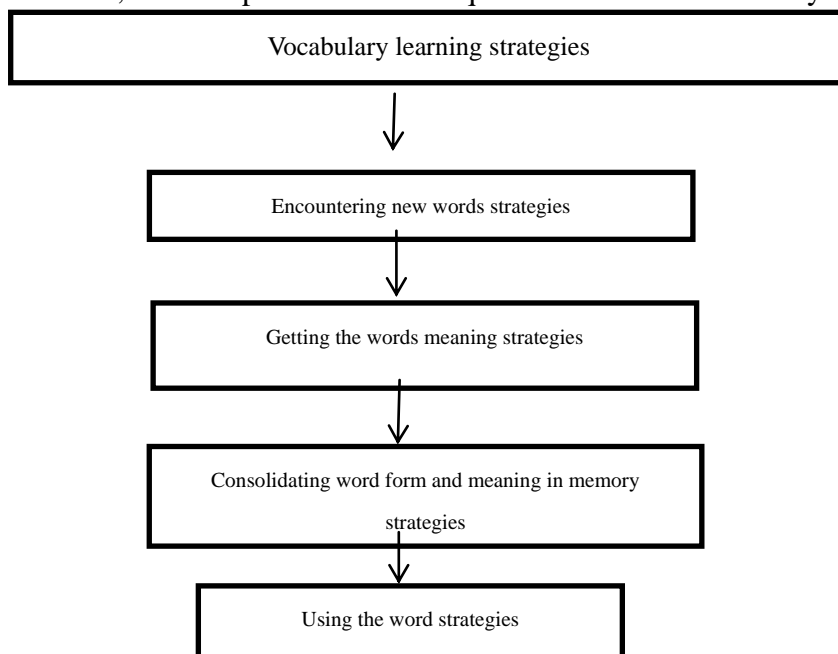


Figure 2. Brown and Payne's classification of vocabulary learning strategies

Given the importance of vocabulary as well as vocabulary learning strategies in the context of ELT, the present study sought to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian intermediate and advanced learners. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What vocabulary learning strategies are used most and least frequently by Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
- 2) What vocabulary learning strategies are used most and least frequently by Iranian EFL advanced learners?
- 3) Are there any significant differences between different categories of vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian intermediate and advanced learners?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants of the study included 105 foreign language learners selected from foreign language institutes in Yazd. They were selected based on their availability and were screened to be divided into groups of intermediate and advanced learners using TOEFL. After administering the TOEFL, 55 students fell into intermediate level and 50 students fell into advanced level. With respect to gender, participants of the study included 70 female and 35 male students with age range of 16 to 31.

3.2 Instruments

In order to measure vocabulary strategy use of the participants of the study, Vocabulary Learning Strategies Inventory (VOLSI) developed by Stoffer (1995) was used. The inventory included statements about vocabulary learning. Responses to each item of the inventory were measured on Likert-scale type including (1) never, (2) seldom, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always. The questionnaire has been used extensively by many researchers and has proved to be a reliable and valid instrument. Stoffer (1995) measured the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's Alpha and reported it as 0.85 which was a high index of reliability. He also sought the construct validity of the inventory through factor analyzing and it was found that the inventory contained 9 factors as follows:

Table 1. Factor numbers, Factor Titles, Factor Loadings, and Percent of Variance of the VOLSI

Factor Title	Factor Loading	Percent of Variance
Strategies Involving Authentic Language	3.727493	7.23
Strategies Used for Self-Motivation	3.709167	7.19
Strategies Used to Organize Words	3.414812	6.62
Strategies Used to Create Mental Linkages	3.290976	6.38
Memory Strategies	3.243576	6.29

Strategies Involving Creative Activities	3.204843	6.21
Strategies Used for Word Analysis	2.472183	4.79
Self-Regulating Strategies	2.223520	4.31
Auditory Strategies	2.047460	3.97

Note: Adapted from “University Foreign Language, Students’ choice of vocabulary learning strategies as related to individual difference variables Procedure” by I. Stoffer' (1995) PhD diss., University of Alabama.

3.3 Procedure

After contacting foreign language institutes in Yazd, the researcher found some of the foreign language institutes which were will to cooperate with the research to carry out the research. Institutes provided the researcher with a list of intermediate to advanced learners studying English. Through arrangement with institutes’ administrators and getting students’ consent to participate in the study, students took a TOEFL, and based on the obtained scores, 55 students were selected as intermediate and 50 students were chosen as advanced students. Participants with TOEFL score range of 481-506 were classified as intermediate and those with TOEFL score range of 507-600 were classified as advanced students (Phillips, 1991). Next, students were instructed on how to complete the VOLSI and subsequently they completed VOLSI by choosing one of the options (1) never, (2) seldom, (3) sometimes, (4) often, and (5) always that best described their use of vocabulary learning strategies. After collecting data on the vocabulary learning strategies of the participants of the study, the researcher fed the data into SPSS for analysis. Data analysis was carried out through performing descriptive statistics and Mann Whitney U test. Before embarking on choosing appropriate statistical test, it deemed necessary to test the normality of the data which was estimated through employing Kolmogorov Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality. Due to the fact the data were not normal, non-parametric test of Mann Whitney U was employed to explore the differences between advanced and intermediate language learners in terms of vocabulary learning strategy use.

4. Results

The first research question dealt with most and least frequent vocabulary learning strategies by Iranian intermediate foreign language learners. Results of descriptive analysis revealed that the most frequently used strategies among intermediate language learners were strategies used to create mental linkages with mean score of 2.72. The next frequently used vocabulary learning strategies were memory strategies with a mean score of 2.54. On the other hand, the least frequently used strategies were the strategy used for self-motivation with a mean score of 1.43 followed by strategies involving authentic language with a mean score of 1.72. Table 1 shows the list of categories of vocabulary learning strategies used by intermediate language learners in descending order by means.

Table 2. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Intermediate Language Learners in a Descending Order by Means

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Strategies Used to Create Mental Linkages	55	1.00	5.00	2.7273	1.12964
Memory Strategies	55	1.00	5.00	2.5455	1.25931
Auditory Strategies	55	1.00	5.00	2.4000	.93492
Strategies Used to Organize Words	55	1.00	5.00	2.2364	.94209
Self-Regulating Strategies	55	1.00	5.00	2.2000	.96992
Strategies Used for Word Analysis	55	1.00	5.00	1.9818	.93276
Strategies Involving Creative Activities	55	1.00	5.00	1.7818	.93672
Strategies Involving Authentic Language	55	1.00	4.00	1.7273	.84885
Strategies Used for Self-Motivation	55	1.00	4.00	1.4364	.68755

Interestingly, descriptive analysis showed that most frequently used strategies by advanced students were strategies used to create mental linkages with mean score of 3.70 followed by memory strategies with mean score of 3.58. Similar to intermediate language learners, the least frequently used strategies were strategies used for self-motivation with a mean score of 1.94 followed by strategies involving authentic language with mean score of 1.96. Table 2 shows the list of categories of vocabulary learning strategies used by advanced language learners in descending order by means.

Table 3. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Advanced Language Learners in a Descending Order by Means

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Strategies Used to Create Mental Linkages	50	1.00	5.00	3.7000	1.07381
Memory Strategies	50	1.00	5.00	3.5800	1.14446
Auditory Strategies	50	1.00	5.00	2.9800	1.03982
Self-Regulating Strategies	50	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.03510
Strategies Used to Organize Words	50	1.00	5.00	2.8600	.98995
Strategies Used for Word Analysis	50	1.00	5.00	2.7000	.88641

Strategies Involving Creative Activities	50	1.00	5.00	2.2200	1.09339
Strategies Involving Authentic Language	50	1.00	4.00	1.9600	.96806
Strategies Used for Self-Motivation	50	1.00	5.00	1.9400	.99816

A close look at Tables 1 and 2 clearly shows that although the first three and the last three vocabulary strategies used by intermediate and advanced students were the same, mean scores for these vocabulary strategies across advanced and intermediate language learners were not the same. For instance, in advanced group, the strategies used to create mental linkages had a mean score of 3.70 while such strategies had a mean score of 2.72. This means that the frequency of vocabulary strategies used by advanced and intermediate language learners was not the same. To further probe the differences between advanced and intermediate language learners, Mann Whitney U test was utilized. This statistical test was used due to the fact that the normality test proved that mean scores of vocabulary strategies were not normally distributed both in advanced and intermediate groups. Table 3 shows the results of Kolmogorov Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk test of normality.

Table 4. Results of Tests of Normality on the Components of Vocabulary Learning Strategies for both Advanced and Intermediate Language Learners

	Proficiency	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Strategies Involving Authentic Language	Intermediate	.313	55	.000	.773	55	.000
	Advanced	.279	50	.000	.798	50	.000
Strategies Used for Self-Motivation	Intermediate	.392	55	.000	.659	55	.000
	Advanced	.267	50	.000	.809	50	.000
Strategies Used to Organize Words	Intermediate	.209	55	.000	.865	55	.000
	Advanced	.248	50	.000	.851	50	.000
Strategies Used to Create Mental Linkages	Intermediate	.231	55	.000	.894	55	.000
	Advanced	.243	50	.000	.854	50	.000
Memory Strategies	Intermediate	.163	55	.001	.892	55	.000
	Advanced	.234	50	.000	.867	50	.000
Strategies Involving Creative Activities	Intermediate	.289	55	.000	.781	55	.000
	Advanced	.220	50	.000	.870	50	.000
Strategies Used for Word Analysis	Intermediate	.217	55	.000	.835	55	.000
	Advanced	.245	50	.000	.863	50	.000
Self-Regulating Strategies	Intermediate	.218	55	.000	.854	55	.000
	Advanced	.248	50	.000	.849	50	.000

As seen in Table 3, all significant values in Kolmogorov Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were 0.00 which is smaller than confidence interval of 0.05. This indicates that data were not normally distributed, violating one of the assumption of parametric statistics and therefore Mann Whitney U test was used to explore the statistical differences between advanced and intermediate language learners in terms of vocabulary strategy use. Table 4 displays the statistics related to Mann Whitney U test.

Table 5. Results of Mann Whitney U Test on Vocabulary Learning Strategies Between Advanced and Intermediate Language Learners

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. (2-tailed)	Sig.
Strategies Involving Authentic Language	1202.000	2742.000	-1.196	.232	
Strategies Used for Self-Motivation	987.500	2527.500	-2.762	.006	
Strategies Used to Organize Words	946.000	2486.000	-2.894	.004	
Strategies Used to Create Mental Linkages	737.000	2277.000	-4.229	.000	
Memory Strategies	773.000	2313.000	-3.975	.000	
Strategies Involving Creative Activities	1053.500	2593.500	-2.180	.029	
Strategies Used for Word Analysis	806.500	2346.500	-3.836	.000	
Self-Regulating Strategies	886.000	2426.000	-3.300	.001	
Auditory Strategies	989.000	2529.000	-2.607	.009	

Based on the obtained results, it was found that except for strategies involving authentic language, there were significant differences between advanced and intermediate language learners in all categories of vocabulary learning strategies. T value for strategies involving authentic language was 1.19 with significant value of 0.23 which was taken as a sign of non-significant difference. Comparing the mean score of strategy categories it was clearly found that advance student had higher mean scores in all categories of vocabulary learning strategies. In other words, advanced students were more frequent users of vocabulary learning strategies.

5. Conclusion

The study attempted to find the most and least frequent vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian advanced and intermediate language learners. The difference between advanced and intermediate language learners in terms of vocabulary learning strategy use was also sought. Statistical analysis revealed that both advanced and intermediate language learners used the strategies to create mental linkages, memory strategies and auditory strategies as the

most frequent vocabulary learning strategies in the order mentioned. On the other hand, both advanced and intermediate language learners used strategies for self-motivation, strategies involving authentic language, and strategies involving creative activities, as the least frequent strategies in the order mentioned. It was also found that advanced and intermediate language learners were significantly different from each other in all categories of vocabulary learning strategies except strategies involving creative activities.

The present study showed that advanced and intermediate Iranian foreign language learners used all vocabulary learning strategies except strategies used to create mental linkages differently. This is in line with studies done by Nemati (2008), Chang Tsai and Chang (2009), Celik and Toptas (2010). They all found significant relationships between the frequency of use of vocabulary learning strategies and language proficiency. In other words, learners across various levels of language proficiency use vocabulary learning strategies with different frequencies. In the present study, both advanced and intermediate language learners used the strategies to create mental linkages with no significant difference in the frequency of use. This implies that this category of strategy is considered a dominant and viable vocabulary learning strategy for Iranian foreign language learners. Contrary to the findings of present study, Doczi (2011) and Mongkol (2008) found that language learners with lower language proficiency used vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than those with higher language proficiency levels. This can be taken as sign of influence of contextual factors on strategy use. For instance, Laufer and Paribakht (1998) discovered that vocabulary knowledge varies between foreign and second language contexts, and staying beyond two years in the target language environment has an effect on the gap between passive and active vocabulary.

Due to the fact that the first three most frequent vocabulary strategies were the same strategies used by advanced and intermediate language learners, it is concluded that Iranian language learners have the same priority in selecting vocabulary learning strategies and the only difference was the matter of frequency as it was in studies by Nemati (2008), Chang Tsai and Chang (2009), Celik and Toptas (2010). What is concluded from all the obtained results is that strategies used to create mental linkages are the most frequently used vocabulary strategies by Iranian language learners regardless of language proficiency level. Moreover, Iranian language learners with different levels of language proficiency used vocabulary learning strategies with varying frequency of use.

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