

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AND READING COMPREHENSION

Husam Ibrahim Mohammad Alqudah¹
Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi²

^{1,2}Faculty of Languages & Communication, University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia.
E-mail: ¹husamalqudah@yahoo.com, ²mnazrix@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Vocabulary learning strategies enhance reading comprehension, which is considered as an essential part of English language learning as without grammar, very little can be conveyed; Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. The literature of vocabulary learning has highlighted the importance of using vocabulary learning strategies as they help students in their English Learning process. However, few studies have been conducted to offer more insights into the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by EFL learners. Hence, the researchers are concentrating on understanding the process of learning vocabulary, making students self-sufficient in learning. Therefore, the present study investigates the role of VLS in reading comprehension.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Reading Comprehension, English as a Foreign Language*

Introduction

Overview

This article concentrates on the role of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) that are being employed by English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners such as Jordan. It provides the background information of the study whereby it sheds light on why VLSs are so important, as well as on the issues related to the English language status and the educational system in Jordan. Vocabulary is considered as an important part of language especially when a person is trying to communicate in second or foreign language. For example Alqahtani (2015) stated that without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. The previous statement stresses upon the importance of vocabulary in “effective communication as it plays a significant role in conveying meanings and expressing ideas.

Vocabulary is affected by the number of words known by a person in a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) (Meara, 2002; Meara & Nation, 2013).

The recent trends have witnessed a gradual shift in the interest of researchers in understanding the process of learning vocabulary rather than in teaching and teachers (Al-Khasawneh, 2012) as teachers have emphasized the importance of learning and have set aims for learners to independent and autonomous to make them self-sufficient (Forbes, 2018). Autonomy is enhanced by the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) (Boonkongsaen & Intaraprasert, 2014).

Since 1980s, numerous studies have been conducted with regard to the recent shift of the learning process (Mollaali & Sadeghi, 2018). To summarize their findings, students struggle in communication because the amount of words they are able to use in receiving and producing language is considerably limited. In return, their learning process is negatively affected 'as they gradually lose motivation and confidence in learning a second language' (Cook, 2016).

The factors playing a role in enhancing students' 'autonomy and success in their vocabulary learning processes' are manifold, 'such as gender, language proficiency, previous vocabulary learning strategies instruction, and academic major'. In addition, the years of study, age, learning style, motivation, previous language learning experience, course level, and languages studied (Gu, 2002) must also be taken into consideration when researching the learning process. Previous studies on the same topic, on the other hand, have shown inconsistent and inconclusive results (Fontecha & Gallego, 2012). No wonder the readers have been left with doubts and in confusion especially in the context of EFL (Fontecha & Gallego, 2012). Moreover, most of the studies were conducted in western countries. Hence, there is a dearth of literature on VLS and reading comprehension in the present study context.

Research Methodology

The inconsistent and lack of past studies in the context proves the importance given to this topic. Considering the nature of our research, the literature review method was considered "the most appropriate for the present study. Such a method will not only enable the authors to understand the main themes recurrent in recent literature, but also facilitate the direction of research by determining what needs to be done on the practical side" (Galalae, 2013, p. 265). To find out the relationship between VLS and reading comprehension the present used the combination of the following key words "(1) vocabulary learning strategies, (2) reading comprehension, (3) English as a Foreign Language, (4) undergraduate students. Running an initial search using these key words yielded a result of over 21,700 references. Therefore, the literature was limited based on the objective of the present study. Moreover, only those articles were included that were written in English language and who were published in last 10 years.

The researcher identified the themes based on the study objectives. All the selected articles were scanned by reading thoroughly their abstracts that helped the researcher to further eliminated those publications who do not address the problem similar to the present study. This left the researcher with 12 published articles for content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, all of which lead to effective communication. One crucial factor is

the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the most important part of the meaning of any language (Oakhill et al., 2015). Vocabulary, however, is the biggest problem for most learners. In view of this, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in the second language pedagogy and research. But how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently or how it can best be taught is still a contentious issue. And although a lot of studies have been conducted in recent years about the VLS used by native language learners, little attention has been given to EFL learners.

Language teaching and learning has been found to be an essential pattern that is looked at as a means of communication as it is a source of many functions such as acquiring knowledge and skills, expressing thoughts and, sending and receiving messages effectively (Galalae, 2013). The processing of English learning is very crucial for Jordanian students since, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) at both the school level and in institutions of higher education, that makes it difficult to master. Learning English is a difficult process and it requires a lot of time as it is not their mother tongue. Furthermore, it is difficult to master as in Jordan, the modern teachers still use the old traditional ways of teaching English, which negatively affects the learners' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, applying the VLS in their teaching methodologies could make the learning process easier.

Strategies are thoughts and actions that individuals use to accomplish a learning goal (Yenkimaleki & Vincent, 2016). Considering the important role being played by VLS, the researcher is trying to test the role of VLS in an EFL university setting by providing them with vocabulary learning. Nowadays, many teachers struggle to change their teaching style from the old methods like grammar translation to the new methods such as a communicative approach. For this reason, the study of teaching strategies is so popular among teachers (Oxford, 2016), while so few studies are dedicated to learning strategies focusing on the students themselves. In most Middle Eastern countries, text book writers and curriculum designers have difficulties changing the environment from teacher-centered to student-centered, despite all the efforts made by EFL instructors. Teachers play an essential role in the learning process of students (Luan & Bakar, 2008) as good methods of teaching would help the students to memorize and use words and vocabularies from another (Teng, 2015). Other than, teachers the factors that play an essential role in learning English language are summarized below.

The results of the past literature found that duration plays a significant effect on language learning such as Cahyono & Widiati (2015) believes that vocabulary learning is a skill that can be acquired through the time of learning *the* language. Moreover, he claims that learners even of a foreign language would know the correct use of word with the passage of time. Past researchers have highlighted various methods that can help the researchers to learn the language such as classification (Chamot, 2004). Classifying the words into different fields would help the student as each field of knowledge has its own technical terms, and by classifying the words within those fields would be easier for the learner to learn.

Pemberton (2003) proposed in his study that the best way of teaching or learning vocabulary is using it in a sentence. Language learners need to define the words first, then to use them in spoken and written sentences. Similarly, Zhang & Yin (2009) described the best ways of learning vocabulary is to translate the words into the mother tongue. It will help the learner to memorize the word. It was proved by his study as those students who used the translation method (i.e. to translate it to their mother tongue) responded to the questions correctly more than those who used methods like synonyms and definitions. He believes that using the

method of translation will help the learners to translate the word back in to their mother tongue and they will be able to get the exact meaning of the new vocabulary as because the word already exists in their mother tongue.

Vocabulary is the integral part of language learning as the more you know, understand, and speak the language the more you will be able to learn (Macaro, 2006). Learning a vocabulary requires various strategies as they accelerate learning and help language learners to handle the problems in using language (Al-Bidawi, 2018; Takač, 2008). Oxford (2001) highlighted the fact that LLS play an important role in the production and comprehension of language learners whereas VLS are considered as LLS. If foreign language learners are equipped with VLS, their vocabulary learning will help them to improve the process of language learning (Rabadi, & Al-Muhaissen, 2018).

O'Malley and Chamot (1995) describe vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) as “special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to comprehend, learn or retain information” (p.1). Likewise, Cameron (2001, p. 92) defines VLSs as “the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items”. While Takač (2008, p. 52) refers to them as “specific strategies utilized in the isolated task of learning vocabulary in the target language”. Catalán's (2003) definition is more detailed, VLSs are defined as “knowledge about the mechanisms (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” (p. 56).

There are various strategies of vocabulary learning such as memory strategies (Nile, 2007). Griffiths (2015) indicates that although memory strategies can be powerful contributors to language learning, however, students rarely report using these strategies (p. 40) as it requires deep processing level (i.e. contextual encoding and word structure). Furthermore, associating a word to some field of study would enable the learner to use and understand vocabularies in different texts of the same topic, or field. Regarding English texts, vocabulary learners must adopt and understand new vocabularies in the English texts (Scott, Nagy, & Flinspach, 2008) which will help the learner to form sentences and use them in both written and spoken texts.

Vocabulary learning is a matter of good memory (Wallace, 2006). Having a good memory is an important matter that holds variations, and differences between learner's memories can help in memorizing new words and using them correctly. As the human brain has the capability to perform new words that are saved and practice in it.

Moreover, practicing a language increase the ability to understand as those texts that are practiced and reread several times in English language would help the students to gradually improve their language. Conroy (2010) suggested that using dictionaries will help them understand the text fully. He thinks that understanding the new lexemes of the text is the half understanding of the text. Therefore, using dictionaries while reading and understanding is really very helpful. Furthermore, by defining the new words and relating them to the studied texts, students can connect the ideas of the text together, and write down its main ideas. Students also need to perform all that they have learnt through using vocabularies.

Significance

This research investigates the effectiveness of vocabulary strategies in helping EFL students to improve their reading comprehension with a special focus on non-native students of Jordan. It will significantly contribute to the existing literature of reading comprehension specifically in the field of ESL in Jordan, thus paving the way for more research to be conducted in the future. The findings would enhance an effective and efficient understanding among English teachers and curriculum developers on the strategies required for improving the reading skills, which can be useful for Jordanian EFL learners.

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