

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CONTROL AND THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS OF STUDENTS IN VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

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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 study aims to examine the role of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) in acquiring a foreign language, and how they are being employed by English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners at a Jordanian private university. For this, the present chapter has been divided into different sections. The study begins with the background information on the importance of VLSs, and the issues related to the educational system in Jordan, leading towards the problem statement. Then the research objectives are explained, and the main research questions are introduced. The significance of the study, the scope of research and its limitations follow. Finally, the operational definition of the main variables undertaken in this study is provided, and the organization of study is outlined.

Background of the Study

The importance of vocabulary in effective communication is indisputable 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 from teaching and teachers to understanding the process of learning vocabulary (Al-Khasawneh, 2012). Teachers have come to realize the importance of learning, and are gradually setting aims for learners to become independent and autonomous to make them self-sufficient (Forbes, 2018). Autonomy is boosted by the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) (Boonkongsaen & Intaraprasert, 2014).

With regard to the recent shift of the learning process, numerous studies have been conducted since the 1980s (Mollaali & Sadeghi, 2018). The studies resulted in the conclusion that students struggle in the face of acquiring a new language due to a limited amount of words in receiving and producing language. Consequently, students ‘gradually lose motivation and confidence in learning a second language’ (Cook, 2016), and the whole learning process is negatively affected.

Many factors are recognized to be playing a role in improving the learners 'autonomy and success in their vocabulary learning processes such as gender, language proficiency, previous vocabulary learning strategies instruction, and academic major' (Hassanzadeh & Marefat, 2014). Apart from these variables, other factors affecting the use of vocabulary learning strategies are the years of study, age, learning style, motivation, previous language learning experience, course level, and languages studied (Gu, 2002). However, previous studies conducted on the factors affecting the use of vocabulary learning strategies arrived at inconsistent and inconclusive results (Fontecha & Gallego, 2012).

Problem Statement

Learning a second language includes acquiring four main skills; all of them are needed to become an effective communicator. Another crucial factor is the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language (Oakhill et al., 2015). The second language learners recognize the importance of vocabulary especially when they are faced with difficulties when speaking or listening due to a limited amount of words (Alqahtani, 2015; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014). Although vocabulary is the main component of any text, which helps students understand words used in that context (Wenying, 2009), it is at the same time the biggest obstacle for most learners. In view of this, the question of how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently or how it can best be taught is currently receiving attention in the second language pedagogy and research. On this issue, experts still agree to disagree.

It has been recognized that it is the learners' lack of reading that causes the weakness in acquiring new vocabularies in the second language. ESL learners can simplify the process of learning through reading English books on different topics and concepts; it provides them with new keywords, and widens their knowledge, and improves their linguistic and academic levels (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). However, looking at the Jordanian experience, nowadays teachers still use the old traditional methods to teach English, which does not improve the

learners' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, the learning process could be made easier by applying the VLS in their teaching methodologies.

Although many studies about the VLS used by native language learners have been conducted in recent years, little attention has been given to EFL (Forbes, 2018). In the Jordanian educational context, English is a foreign language. It is very important for Jordanian students to master English as it is mandatory to get admission to the university. Some researchers have found that English language students in Jordan are poor in the language (e.g Rababah, 2016), which worries them.

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 students with vocabulary learning. In the studies of learning strategies, the researcher focuses on the students themselves. Although EFL instructors make a considerable effort in shifting the focus from teaching to learning, the classroom environment cannot be easily changed from teacher-centered to students-centered (Mokhtar, 2002). Only in a few cases, they succeeded in creating a student-centered classroom environment where they often use the methods and materials developed with the learning needs of native speakers of English in mind. Training students on how to learn is an essential factor. Therefore, the researcher will use the strategies-based instruction (SBI) as a learner-centered approach in teaching (Cohen, 2014), which is in line with the present study interest.

Learners need to be taught different VLSs as they all improve their reading capabilities and help them to cope with learning unfamiliar and unknown words successfully. Among the various VLSs, there are the memory and cognitive strategies which are an effective way of improving reading comprehension. Therefore, the present study uses memory and cognitive strategies in training sessions to enhance the learning autonomy of the Ajloun National University students.

Vocabulary learning strategies have always been an appealing topic to teachers and learners alike, especially in the past two decades as depicted in many research publications, articles, and books (Alqahtani, 2015). Most of them used survey research design (e.g., Fan, 2003), and some established VLS similarities and differences among learners (Gu, 2005). Nevertheless, to test the role of VLSs training sessions in student reading comprehension, this study will use a quasi-experimental research design.

To study the effects of such a teaching methodology on student's functioning, it is necessary to test this approach in a natural setting. Kessler & Vesterlund (2015) suggested that experiments that are carried out in the natural setting have certain advantages over the laboratory ones as the experiments in the laboratory are conducted in artificial conditions which will produce unnatural behavior, and they also lack control over ecological validity. Therefore, the experiment will be conducted in a natural setting, in line with the aim of their study, which is to enhance the reading comprehension of Jordanian students through training sessions in which cognitive and memory strategies will be used by SSBI. It will help the researcher to find out the students 'functioning', which is their reading comprehension.

To sum up, the present research attempts to study VLSs and its effect on student reading comprehension in a quasi-experimental A-B-A design where two classrooms were assigned as the experimental and control groups in a Jordanian private university.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is formulated as follows:

To identify the difference between the control and the experimental groups of students in vocabulary learning strategies. In order to achieve this objective, quasi-experiment research design was conducted on 30 participants to teach students VLS. The study found differences in groups in terms of the use of VLS based on the research background. The study sample was divided into two groups: the control one and the experimental one. The experimental group received training. Cunningsworth (1995, p. 38) regards helping learners to develop their own VLS as “a powerful approach.” It can be based on sensitization to the systems of vocabulary, encouragement of sound dictionary skills and reflection on effective learning techniques. Better reading skills require developing strong vocabulary which can be achieved by the acquisition of vocabulary learning as it will help the students to optimize their vocabulary knowledge (Singleton, 1999; Schmitt, 2000). The present study results show that the students of the experimental group performed better than those in the control group thanks to vocabulary learning.

The results of the experimental group are also consistent with the previous studies on the strategy training of other language skills such as reading comprehension. They highlighted the benefits of using these strategies such as providing awareness to the learners, which makes them efficient and comfortable in usage. Therefore, the language teacher should introduce these strategies and monitor them by giving them different tasks to evaluate their VLS skills (Chamot and O'Malley, 1987). VLS are methods employed by learners to make them independent and enhance their learning through the use of these strategies. The results of VLS are significant as they help learners to become autonomous, independent, and self-directional, while taking responsibility for their own language learning.

The results of this study are consistent with the schema theory which shows the relationship between reading comprehension and VLS and with the previous studies which highlighted the importance of VLS in making the learning process easier for learners. Moreover, through VLS students can access a large amount of vocabulary (Nation, 2001) as these are readily teachable. In the present study, the students incorporated VLS in the form of a phenomenon known as ‘accommodation,’ cognitivist theory term whereby students improve their reading comprehension through accepting the use of VLS and changing their traditional way of learning. The importance of these strategies can be found through the work of Nation (2001) according to whom the most important way to learn vocabulary is using strategies; and according to Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) the best teaching plans may prove to be introducing a variety of learning strategies to learners.

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 differences between the control and the experimental groups on VLS, 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.

This kind of research usually includes a comparison of two or more groups. The group or groups that receive treatment are called experimental groups, and the one that receives no treatment is called a control group.

The purpose of control in experimental research is to arrange a situation in which the effects of independent variable can be easily investigated (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2005)

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 eliminate 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 be an essential patterns that are look at as a mean of communication as it 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 plays 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 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 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 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 vocabularies 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.

Scope of the Study

This study aims to investigate the various vocabulary learning strategies employed by university students in Jordan. It does not cover any other language skills such as listening, writing, or speaking. The two categories of VLSs proposed by Oxford are used as the criteria in the present research. These strategies are memory and cognitive strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The variables of the present study are embedded in the cognitive, constructivist and Socio-cultural theories as these theories are considered the most appropriate and relevant to the study.

Cognitivism Theory

The term cognition refers to a thinking process that includes memory, forgetting, and elaborating. Cognitive theories emphasize the conceptualization of students' learning processes and address the possible issues regarding how the information is received, organized, stored, and retrieved by the mind of a learner in the process of learning. The phenomenon is unobservable and happening inside the head. Piaget, who is cognitivist, identified two processes in the cognitive development, namely assimilation and accommodation (Collins & Deek, 2014).

Assimilation is the process whereby a learner uses and incorporates new knowledge into his existing knowledge. There is a state of inconsistency between the existing knowledge and the new knowledge. On the other hand, it gives rise to accommodation. Accommodation is the process of changing the cognitive schema after a new experience. The existing schema (knowledge) does not work and needs to be changed in order to deal with a new object or situation.

Assimilation and accommodation typically work in parallel in the process of learning. The learner must maintain equilibrium, i.e. a state of balance between the two cognitions. However, if the learner fails to manage the balance between the two cognitions, he/she will

face the problem of cognitive dissonance which is a state of disequilibrium (Ormrod, 2003). Equilibration is the force which drives balance in the learning process. Once the new information is acquired through the process of assimilation, the new schema will continue until the next time we need to make an adjustment to it.”

Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is a school of thought that is concerned with explaining how knowledge is being produced and how students learn in the world. Constructivism proposes that learning is acquired when connections are made between the personal experience of students and new experience with modification to becoming learning. In constructivism students are core matter whereas the teacher just acts as a facilitator. Learning requires an active participation of the student, and the knowledge arises out of a shared process of inquiry, interpretation, and creation.

Constructivism in education views learning as centered on the active learner participation within the teaching-learning process. Constructivism is the greatest contribution to education that may have happened through the shift in emphasis from knowledge as a product to knowing as a process. This legacy of constructivism will likely prove to be a lasting and meaningful shift in the structure of schooling.

Definition of the Terms

The following terms will be used throughout this study. They are defined in order to clarify how they are used in the present research. They are listed in alphabetical order for quick reference.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

The language being learned is not that which is spoken in the community in which it is being learned (Cohen, 2014) (e.g. learning English in Jordan).

English as a Second Language (ESL)

This term refers to where the language being learned is that which is spoken in the community in which it is being learned (Cohen, 2014).

Styles and Strategies-Based Language Instruction (SSBI)

Is a learner-focused approach to language teaching that explicitly combines styles and strategy instructional activities with everyday classroom language instruction (Dörnyei, 2014)

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)

The 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 (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014).

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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