



An investigation of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Fezzan University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by learners of English as foreign (EFL) at Fezzan University, Libya. The study attempted to find out the most frequently used strategies for learning vocabulary of English language. A sample of 24 students majoring in English participated in the study. A questionnaire based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies was used for data collection. The questionnaire investigated five strategy categories; determination, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, and social. The analysis of the study data show that most participants use cognitive and metacognitive strategies. These strategies are: watching English movies, listening to English songs, repeating words aloud, and keeping vocabulary notebooks. Determination strategies, particularly bilingual dictionary use, were also used frequently. Most participants rarely use memory and social strategies such as using semantic maps, flashcards, or engaging in vocabulary-related peer interaction. These results suggest that learners rely on practical and familiar techniques. It also asserts that many effective strategies remain unexplored by the university students. The study concluded that student should be explicitly trained on how to use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies to enhance vocabulary development.

المستخلص

هدفت هذه الورقة الى معرفة استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات التي يستخدمها دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية في جامعة فزان، ليبيا. سعت الدراسة الى معرفة الاستراتيجيات الأكثر استخداما وسط الطلاب. تكونت عينة البحث من 24 طالبا من تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية. استخدم الباحث استبيان استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات وفقا لنموذج اسميث (1997) لجمع البيانات المطلوبة. بحث الاستبيان خمسة أنواع من الاستراتيجيات وهي: إستراتيجيات تحديد معنى المفردات, إستراتيجيات الذاكرة الإستراتيجيات



الاجتماعية، الإستراتيجيات المعرفية، الإستراتيجيات فوق المعرفية. اثبتت الدراسة ان معظم الدارسين يستخدمون الإستراتيجيات المعرفية و الإستراتيجيات فوق المعرفية. تتمثل هذه الاستراتيجيات في مشاهدة الأفلام الإنجليزية والاستماع إلى الأغاني الإنجليزية وتكرار الكلمات بصوت عالٍ والاحتفاظ بدفاتر لتدوين المفردات . كما تم استخدام الاستراتيجية تحديد المعنى وتتمثل في استخدام القاموس ثنائي اللغة بصورة متكررة. من ناحية اخرى اكدت الدراسة ان معظم الدارسين قل ما يستخدمون استراتيجيات الاجتماعية والذاكرة مثل التفاعل مع الزملاء واستخدام الخرائط الدلالية والبطاقات التعليمية. هذه النتائج تشير الي استخدام الدارسين للاستراتيجيات المألوفة . كما تؤكد هذه النتائج ان معظم الاستراتيجيات الفعالة لتعلم المفردات غير مستغلة. خلصت الدراسة الي ضرورة تدريب الطلاب علي استخدام استراتيجيات متنوعة لتعزيز تعلم المفردات.

1. Introduction

The ability to successful mastery of vocabulary is needed to the tertiary level students to strengthen their English knowledge. There is a wide consensus among EFL practitioners on the effectiveness of good vocabulary mastery in successful communication and the significant role that vocabulary plays in language learning progress. Teng (2020) confirm that students who actively use VLSs tend to demonstrate higher vocabulary knowledge and better academic performance. In developing vocabulary knowledge of both first (L1) and second language (L2), students need the right tool. Among these tools are vocabulary learning strategies. Proficiency in vocabulary learning strategies is considered vital to the academic success of FL/L2 learners (Oxford,1990.Alqrani,2018Schmitt,2000 Rastegar and Yamini ,2011). Particular attention has been given to vocabulary learning by language practitioners who have tried to identify the most effective strategies that learners use to acquire new words. However, some learners may not be aware of the various vocabulary learning strategies they might use in order to develop their vocabulary learning Aljdee (2011). In the Libyan tertiary level context, the knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies has been an issue of concern for many researchers, especially those who are specialized in TEFL(Khalifa, 2015). Many students have difficulty in mastering English words. This study is carried out with the intention of finding some empirical evidence to whether the Libyan tertiary level students use effective strategies of vocabulary learning.



2. Factors affecting vocabulary learning strategy choice

Research indicates that learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies is influenced by a combination of **individual** and **social/environmental factors** (Bai's,2018, Teng& Zhang, 2021).

Individual Factors

The way language learner views how language is learned may effect the way they do it Liang (2009) . this view is effected by many factors; including belief, attitude, personal emotion, etc.

Age

Age is considered vital factor in vocabulary learning strategies. Younger learners tend to rely more on specific learning asks to use strategies. However, adult learners can use strategies neatly. Adult learning strategies are rather complicated than children Ellis(1994) . Pawlak, 2021 also asserts that older learners are more capable of regulating their learning processes.

Among the individual factors, motivation is considered to be very significant vocabulary learning. The motivation determines how much attention the learners would pay on learning and how much sense of accomplishment it will take. Marttinen, Marika(2008) states that ESL students with high motivation are more successful in their language study and employ a wider range of VLSs than those with low motivation.

Personal Differences

variations a among students form a unique personality of any individual. It determines The individual interests and needs. Each character has the tendency of using some learning strategies.

Gender

Gender is considered to have vital part in learning language including vocabulary learning strategies. It is considered that male learners and female learners use different vocabulary learning strategies. Research has reported that Female learners use more social strategies and more frequently than male learners. Girls are considered to be better than boys in



using strategies such as note taking and advanced preparation Liang (2009). Seffar (2014) adds that most of the studies show greater use of vocabulary strategies by girls.

Social Environment

Research shows that Students' motivation seems to have a positive correlation with their VLS Boonkongsaen(2012). the surrounding social environment is considered important influencing source of vocabulary strategy choice. This will be bound to affect the learners' use of learning strategies indirectly.

With regard to the various number of strategies employed by language learners and the affecting factors of vocabulary learning strategies use, teachers need to examine the most useful strategies for any setting. Its very vital raise the awareness of learners in using vocabulary learning strategies for more successful mastery of vocabulary.

Classification of vocabulary learning strategies

Research has revealed various vocabulary learning strategies taxonomies and classifications. Many researchers have grouped these strategies into different categories based according to their results. The most comprehensive and famous one, and consequently has been widely used in many studies is Schmitt's (1997) vocabulary learning strategy. This strategy contains five categories; social strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies determination strategies, and memory strategies. Social strategies involve interacting with other people to enhance language learning process. Cognitive strategies include repetition, word lists and flash cards to reinforce vocabulary learning. Metacognitive strategies deal with conscious planning, monitoring and predicting of the learning process by having an overview of it. In determination strategies the learner analyzes the unknown word, its constituent elements, its surrounding context, checks its L1 cognate, or consults the dictionary to determine meaning.. Memory strategies are manipulated by learners to recall vocabulary like using images of the word meaning or form, connecting the word to its synonym or antonym, paying attention to the word spelling or pronunciation, memorizing affixes and roots, and learning the word part of speech. Nation (1999) views the sources of information about a word from the contexts in which



it occurs, for example in a reading text. The context can be a source of information for the various aspects of what is involved in knowing a word; its written form, its spoken form, its word parts, its meaning, what it refers to, its grammar, its collocations, and constraints on its use. Similarly, the learning process of retrieval can be used to establish the written form of the word, its spoken form, its word parts and so on. Recently also some studies also stress the role of digital vocabulary strategies, such as using mobile applications, spaced repetition systems, and online dictionaries (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Lei & Reynolds, 2022). These strategies are increasingly relevant for university students in modern learning environments.

3. Literature review

As there is a great concern in finding out what strategies applied by students when they are learning vocabulary, several research has been carried out in different English language teaching contexts.

Faqih and Amirian (2015) inspected the relationship between proficiency and overall vocabulary learning strategy use among Iranian English Translation students. The results of descriptive statistics and rank-ordering indicated that almost three out of five most and two out of five least frequently used strategies were commonly shared by students of all groups though their rank sometimes varied. The results also indicated that there were no significant differences between high and low proficient English translation students in the case of overall strategy use.

Alqarni (2018) Conducted a study with 29 Saudi students majoring in English to reveal of the impact of a short training on vocabulary learning strategies. The study at raising of the participants' awareness of a wide range of VLSs and consequently to encourage and motivate them to utilize these strategies in their vocabulary learning. The results showed an awareness-raising impact as reflected in the increase use of VLSs following the training. The increase was in all five strategy categories with statistically significant differences in three categories; Determination, Memory, and Cognitive strategies. The participants reported that they benefited a lot from the training and they not only increased their exploitation of the strategies in this course



but this training led them to utilize these strategies in other courses, such as reading and grammar.

Rogulj and Čizmić(2018) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies used by medical students in Croatia .The results indicate that medical students use a core inventory of VLS, whereby showing preference for the category of self-initiated vocabulary learning (SI-IVL) . A very small correlation was found between formal vocabulary learning (FVL) strategies and controlled-productive type of vocabulary knowledge. Findings also revealed that female students used SI-IVL and FVL strategies significantly more often than their male counterparts and that there were no statistically significant differences in the mean VLS use by English language proficiency. The results of this study imply the need for teacher training aimed at developing specific skills for providing their students with explicit instruction in VLS use.

Asgari and Mustaph (2010) used an open-ended interview to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by Malaysian ESL students . The concluded strategies such as the learning a word through reading , the use of monolingual dictionary, the use of various English language media, and applying new English word in their daily conversation where are related to memory, determination, meta-cognitive strategies respectively are popular strategies and the learners are keen in using them.

Besthia (2018) examined the common strategies for learning vocabulary among Indonesian EFL, using structured interview and a questionnaire . He indicated that guessing from context and dictionary use strategies were the most popular strategies, while asking the teacher or peers for meaning were rarely used.

A close appreciation of these studies shows that the knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies is necessary for successful vocabulary learning proficiency. Different researchers have provided different ranges of vocabulary learning strategy awareness and use among learners according to their contexts. This implies that the lack of vocabulary strategy knowledge could be a pedagogical problem. Since the knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies is very essential,



there is a need for further research in this area. This research is an attempt to investigate this issue in the Lybian EFL context.

4. Methodology

Statement of the problem

Vocabulary mastery is considered vital for both L2 or FL learners. However, based my personal teaching experience, vocabulary proficiency appears to be challenging for EFL learners. Many learners feel that they cannot effectively master English words. Among many variables, lack of vocabulary learning strategies knowledge is claimed to be a factor which may lead to their weak proficiency in vocabulary knowledge. This lends credence to investigate the vocabulary learning strategy use of Liyan EFL learners.

The study objectives

This study aims to:

- examine the vocabulary learning strategy use of tertiary level students.
- investigate the types of vocabulary learning strategies employed by Fezzan university students.

The study question

The following research question was put forward:

What are the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among EFL learners at Fezzan University?

Significance of the study

The knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies is considered to be significance factor in foreign language learning and teaching. Research in these factors is of a great value for successful language teaching. This study investigates the vocabulary learning strategies used by Fezzan university students. The results of this study would give insights into successful language learning and teaching.



Participants

The participants of this study were twenty-four Libyan students majoring in English as a Foreign Language at the Faculty Education , University of Fezzan, Libya.. Most of them were in their twenties (20-23 years), so they reflect the actual age of most tertiary level students.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection tool used in this study is vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire which was adapted based on Schmitt (1997)'s taxonomy . It consists of 35 statements divided into 5 categories: determination, social , memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. The students were asked to rate each strategy on a four rating scale in term of their frequency of use ranging from (never) to 5 (always).

Data Collection Procedures

A questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies was developed to assess the participants' proficiency in strategy use. The questionnaire was administered during regular class time and was distributed and collected within the class time. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were provided with an explanation of the study's purpose. The questionnaire was reviewed and validated for content and appropriateness. Finally, the collected data were prepared for further analysis and discussion.

5. Data analysis and discussion

This study explores the types of vocabulary learning strategies employed by EFL learners at Fezzan University. Data were collected through a questionnaire designed to measure the frequency of strategy use among participants. The questionnaire was used to identify the most frequently used, sometimes used, rarely used and never used vocabulary learning strategies. The study investigated five main categories of strategies: determination, strategies, metacognitive strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies and social strategies. A four-point Likert scale was used with the following options: *Always, Sometimes, Seldom, and Never*.



The scale responses were labeled as follows:

Always = Mostly used

Sometimes = Sometimes used

Seldom = Rarely used

Never = Never used

The study results are presented in the tables below, which show the frequencies(fre.) and percentages(per.) of each strategy's usage.

Table (1) Determination strategies

No.	Items	Never used		rarely used		Sometimes used		Mostly used	
		Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.
1	I use an English–Arabic dictionary to discover the meaning of new words.	3	12.5 %	0	0%	10	41.7 %	11	45.8 %
2	I use an Arabic–English dictionary to discover the meaning of new words.	4	16.7 %	2	8.3%	6	25%	12	50%
3	I use an English–English dictionary to find the meaning of new words.	6	25%	7	29.2	6	25%	5	20.8
4	I guess the meaning of new words by identifying their word class (noun, verb, adjective, etc.).	3	12.5 %	4	16.7 %	10	41.7 %	7	29.2
5	I guess the meaning by analyzing the structure of words (prefixes and suffixes to discover the meaning of new words.	6	25%	7	29.2	5	20.8	6	25%

This table (1) shows that students mostly use bilingual dictionaries to find the meanings of new words. 45.8% mostly use English–Arabic dictionaries and 50% mostly use Arabic–English dictionaries. Such a strong preference indicates that learners depend mainly on their L1 when dealing with new words. In contrast, English–English dictionaries are only used by 20.8%, with 25% never use at all. This finding suggest that learners lack the confidence in using monolingual dictionaries. Guessing the meanings of new words according to word class is moderately popular among learners, with 41.7% sometimes using it. Word structure analysis strategy (prefixes and suffixes) is less frequently used with only 25% mostly use it and only 25% never use it. These



results indicate that students rely on translation, so they need to be explicitly trained on how to understand English texts on their own.

Table(2) **Memory Strategies**

No.	Items	Never used		rarely used		sometimes used		Mostly used	
		Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.
1	I categorize new words according to their synonyms and antonyms.	3	12.5 %	5	20.8	13	54.2	3	12.5 %
2	I group new words in relation to similar pronunciation and spelling.	3	12.5 %	8	33.3	6	25%	7	29.2
3	I group new words together to learn new vocabulary.	2	8.3%	4	16.7 %	12	50%	6	25%
4	I connect pictures to the meanings of new words.	2	8.3%	9	37.5	5	20.8	8	33.4
5	I observe the parts of speech of the new vocabulary items.	3	12.5 %	4	16.7 %	8	33.3	9	37.5
6	I analyze the structure of words (prefixes and suffixes) to determine their meanings	6	25%	6	25%	7	29.2	5	20.8
7	I use new vocabulary items in sentences repeatedly.	5	20.8	2	8.3%	10	41.7 %	7	29.2
8	I use semantic maps to learn new words.	11	45.8 %	5	20.8	3	12.5 %	5	20.9

The table (2) indicates that memory strategies were moderately used. The grouping of new words by synonyms and antonyms strategy is mostly common among learners (54.2% sometimes used). Students frequently use new vocabulary in sentences (41.7% sometimes, 29.2% mostly). The strategy of observing the part of speech of new words also used mostly by 37.5% of participants. The least used strategies is semantic mapping (45.8% never used) .

Table (3) Cognitive strategies

No.	items	Never used		Rarely used		Sometimes used		Mostly used	
		Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.
1	I reinforce new words by writing them in different sentences multiple times.	1	4.2%	7	29.2	6	25%	10	41.6 %
2	I repeat new words aloud with their meanings to learn them.	1	4.2%	0	0%	12	50%	11	45.8 %
3	I review past English lessons and take notes to help learn new vocabulary.	2	8.3%	3	12.5 %	12	50%	7	29.2
4	I practice new words aloud in lexical sets.	1	4.2%	7	29.2	7	29.2	9	37.4
5	I keep a vocabulary notebook with meanings and example sentences.	0	0%	2	8.3%	10	41.7 %	12	50%
6	I listen to vocabulary CDs to learn new words.	7	29.2	5	20.8	7	29.2	5	20.8
7	I create flashcards with new words and their meanings to help me learn them.	11	45.8 %	4	16.7 %	4	16.7 %	5	20.8

According to this table (3) learners mostly use cognitive strategies . The most common technique among them is keeping a vocabulary notebook (50% mostly using it). Repeating new words aloud is mostly used by 45.8% of the learners, while writing them in different sentences is used by 41.6% of them . Strategies such as using vocabulary CDs and creating flashcards were less common with 29.2% and 45.8% never using them. This indicates that participants are unfamiliar with or never been exposed to practice them.



Table (4) **Metacognitive strategies**

No.	Items	Never used		Rarely used		Sometimes used		Always used	
		Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.
1	I improve my vocabulary by listening to English songs.	0	0%	4	16.7 %	6	25%	14	58.3
2	I learn new words by watching English-speaking movies with subtitles.	3	12.5 %	1	4.2%	5	20.8	15	62.5
3	I learn new vocabulary from everyday sources such as advertisements, signs, and notices.	4	16.7 %	3	12.5 %	9	37.5	8	33.3
4	I learn new words by reading articles from magazines, newspapers, and brochures.	2	8.3%	8	33.3	8	33.4	6	25%
5	I test my vocabulary knowledge using word lists.	3	12.5 %	9	37.5	10	41.7 %	2	8.3%
6	I learn new words by listening to English radio programs.	6	25%	6	25%	5	20.8	7	29.2
7	I relate newly learned words to previously learned ones.	6	25%	2	8.3%	7	29.2	9	37.5

The table (4) shows that watching English movies with subtitles (62.5% mostly used) and listening to English songs (58.3%) were the most popular strategies. This reflects learners' preference for authentic language learning. Reading materials such as newspapers or brochures were less commonly used (only 25% mostly used). Learning from real-world materials (e.g., signs and ads) and relating new words to previously learned ones were used inconsistently. Using word lists for testing vocabulary had low use, with only 8.3% mostly using them and 37.5% rarely using them. These results suggest that students' metacognitive strategies may need more development.



Table (5) **Social strategies**

No.	Items	Never used		Rarely used		Sometimes used		Mostly used	
		Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.	Fre.	Per.
1	I ask my English instructors for Arabic translations of new words.	4	16.7 %	7	29.2	8	33.3	5	20.8
2	I practice using new vocabulary by communicating in English with my instructors.	2	8.3%	5	20.8	7	29.2	10	41.7 %
3	I ask my instructors for synonyms or explanations of new words.	3	12.5 %	5	20.8	12	50%	4	16.7 %
4	I look for additional English vocabulary through the Internet.	2	8.3%	5	20.8	8	33.3	9	37.6
5	I discuss new vocabulary in English with my classmates to expand my knowledge.	8	33.3	4	16.7 %	7	29.2	5	20.8
6	I communicate with native speakers through various media to improve my vocabulary.	9	37.5	6	25%	5	20.8	4	16.7 %
7	I play English word games (e.g. Crossword puzzles) with others to learn new vocabulary	10	41.7 %	4	16.7 %	4	16.7 %	6	25%

The table (5) states that the social strategies were most used compared to other types among participants. The table indicates that communicating in English with instructors is the most used (41.7% mostly used), while searching for vocabulary online is mostly used by 37.6%. Majority of the strategies in this domain were not used that much by the participants. For example, 33.3% of them never discussed vocabulary with peers. 37.5% of the participants never communicated with native speakers. This result proves the limited use of social interaction for language learning. Playing word games to improve vocabulary was rarely used, as 41.7% of the participant never used this strategy. The overall low use of interactive strategies may be due to limited opportunities for English interaction, or lack of awareness of the effectiveness of social learning.

6. Conclusion



This study investigated the vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL learners at Fezzan University. The results indicate that university students use different strategies to learn new words in English, but some strategies are more common than others.

The students mostly relied on metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Many students responded that they improve their vocabulary by watching English movies and listening to English songs. These results indicate that students enjoy learning from real-life sources. In order to lean improve vocabulary, Students commonly repeat new words aloud, write them in sentences, and write them in vocabulary notebooks. Such practices are considered important to English learners which may help them remember words and use them perfectly.

Bilingual dictionaries are also commonly used to find the meanings of new words in English. It is reported that they did not use English–English dictionaries that much. This indicates that some students depend on their own language to understand new vocabulary.

Memory and social strategies were less used. For example, only few students used semantic maps, flashcards, or played word games to learn words. Many students also rarely communicate with native speakers or discuss new words with peers. These results proves that some students may not be aware of the usefulness of these important strategies.

Students at Fezzan University use very helpful strategies to learn vocabulary that are both effective and fun. In spite of that, they need to be introduced to more effective strategies that they are not familiar with. Teachers should help students become more aware of different ways to learn vocabulary and encourage them to try strategies like English–English dictionaries, group learning, and word games. Using a wide range of strategies can improve their vocabulary and become more independent language learners.

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