Exploring the Vocabulary Learning Strategies of EFL learners

Noorizah Mohd. Noor
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
izah@ukm.my

Zaini Amir
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
zainir@ukm.my

Abstract

Research in vocabulary learning and its relationship to reading has gained much interest within the field of investigation in second language acquisition. Since reading requires accurate and automatic word recognition skills, learners would need to be equipped with sufficient vocabulary knowledge to read fluently. Yet, for many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, reading is a 'suffocating slow process'. One reason cited and most often experienced by these learners is their lack of vocabulary knowledge. Due to this limitation, they often give up trying to understand the meaning of the text or skip reading if sentences or an entire paragraph contain a small number of unknown words. These encounters suggest that some learners might not have the knowledge to handle words they do not understand. Although vocabulary knowledge has been recognized as a critical determinant of one's reading ability (Grabe, 1991), yet not much research has been focused on investigating the strategies learners employ to learn vocabulary. This study explores the strategy use of vocabulary learning among a group of EFL learners. A sample of 35 respondents participated in the study. Data collection was carried out through questionnaires. The results revealed that there were distinctive strategy uses to vocabulary learning among the learners. To conclude, the paper will discuss the implications of the findings and some pedagogical considerations for the teaching and learning of vocabulary within an EFL context.

Introduction

The recognition of the role of vocabulary in language learning has continued to grow in recent years. This area of learning was previously neglected due to certain dominant teaching approaches in the 1940's until the 1960's. The theories underlying these approaches such as structural linguistics (Fries, 1945) and generative transformational linguistics (Chomsky, 1957) focused on teaching grammatical and phonological structures as well as emphasized on grammatical rules respectively. Learners were assumed that once they have learned the structural frames and the grammatical rules, they will then be able to fill in the lexical items as needed. The

teaching approach proposed by Hymes (1972) which emphasized communicative competence similarly identified vocabulary as secondary to functional language use.

Within reading in the second language context, various issues have been raised concerning the second language learners' behaviours, attitudes and perceptions to reading at university level. Findings from these studies (Ehram & Oxford, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) have revealed that many students demonstrate considerable informal knowledge and ineffective reading skills and strategies to accommodate the reading demands of the new academic environment. In addition to factors such as lack of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, extrinsic motivation and low interest which have contributed toward the ESL students' problems in reading, there is also the factor of insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Reading fluently requires accurate and automatic word recognition skills, which will enhance comprehension (Grabe, 1991). However, Anderson (1991) asserts that for many second language readers, reading is a 'suffocatingly slow process'. For example, students may experience difficulties in understanding the meaning of the text if sentences or even an entire paragraph contain a small number of unknown words (Alderson, 1984). In most encounters, the students would skip reading the sentence or paragraph. However, this action will aggravate the problem further as the students will not learn the words that they skipped and thus, will fail to understand the text they read. In addition, previous studies (Nation, 1990; Levine et al, 1992; Anderson, 1999) have reported students meticulously referring to a bilingual dictionary for every word that they don't understand. In other contexts, students might give up trying to understand the meaning of the text if sentences or an entire paragraph contain a small number of unknown words (Huckin et al, 1993). These encounters suggest that some learners might not have the knowledge to handle words they do not understand. Although this factor has been recognized as a critical determinant of one's reading ability (Grabe, 1991), yet not much research has been focused on investigating the strategies that learners use to learn vocabulary. Thus examining, the type of strategy employed by these learners may shed light on the problems that students encounter in their reading processes.

Taking up this point, this paper will explore the strategy use of vocabulary learning among 35 EFL learners. The paper will report some preliminary findings of the vocabulary

learning strategies employed by these EFL learners. Hence, the following research questions are postulated: 1) What strategies are used the most by the EFL learners? 2) What strategies are used the least by the EFL learners?

Methodology

The respondents for this preliminary study were 35 post graduate students doing the programme at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). There were 6 female and 29 male respondents of ages that ranged between 25 - 44 years old. These students were enrolled in English Proficiency program which is a requirement course offered by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics.

This study used an adapted version of the vocabulary strategy questionnaire proposed by Gu & Johnson (1996). The questionnaire, written bilingually in Malay and English consisted of two parts. The first part contained nine questions which collected background information such as English proficiency and habits of reading. The second part consisted of 48 statements grouped under 9 categories: 1) Beliefs about vocabulary learning, 2) Metacognitive regulation, 3) Guessing Strategies, 4) Dictionary Strategies, 5) Note-taking Strategies, 6) Memory Strategies, 7) Activation strategies 8) sources, and 9) Anxiety and Motivation (Table 1). The subjects responded using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

The questionnaire was distributed to the students in class. The researcher remained in the classroom while the subjects answered the questionnaire to respond to any queries that the subjects may have in regards to the questionnaire. Upon completion, the researcher collected all answered questionnaires.

Data of the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics where frequency counts were tabulated and converted to percentages.

Findings of the Study

Table 1: Beliefs about vocabulary learning

a) Words should be memorized

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
The best way to remember words is to memorize word lists	7	20%	16	46%	7	20%	3	9%	2	6%
Repetition is the best way to remember words	10	29%	11	30%	10	29%	3	9%	1	3%
It is only necessary to remember one dictionary definition	2	6%	9	26%	11	30%	7	20%	6	17%
I can acquire a large vocabulary by memory of individual words	3	9%	12	34%	14	40%	6	17%	0	%

The data revealed that the EFL learners believe memorization (66%) and repetition (59%) to be one of the ways to learn vocabulary. On the other hand, approximately 32% responded that it would be necessary to know or remember more than one definition of a word.

Table 1b: Words should be acquired in context: bottom up

(Words should be acquired in context: bottom up)

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I can identify the meaning of most words through reading	9	26%	14	40%	7	20%	2	6%	3	9%
I can expand my vocabulary through reading a lot	14	40%	13	37%	5	14%	1	3%	1	3%

	1		2		3		4		5	
Guessing words in context is one of the best ways to learn vocabulary	6	17%	15	43%	8	23%	5	14%	1	3%

The subjects could identify the use of contextual clues as a strategy toward understanding the meaning of words that is when they approach any reading material. At the same time, they would also employ the strategy of guessing based on the context the word if located. However, there were still quite a number (20%) who were not sure of identifying the meaning through reading. This finding might indicate that the student could identify with the strategy of using contextual clues to guess the meaning of the word, but were unsure as to how to employ the strategy!

Table 1c: Words should be studied and put to use: top down

 (Words should be studied and put to use: top down)

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I revise the new words I have learned	5	14%	20	57%	7	20%	2	6%	1	3%
I use the words that I have learned	9	26%	18	51%	2	6%	4	11%	2	6%
When I learned the word I pay close attention to its new usage and new meaning	6	17%	14	40%	7	20%	6	17%	2	6%
When I have learned the word, I will recall the meaning to help me understand the context	10	29%	16	46%	4	11%	2	6%	3	9%

The subjects reported that they put to use the words that they have learned (77%). One reason for doing so could be because they did not only look at the meaning of the word but also at how the word was used (57%). This response given was opposite to what poor learners would often do whereby they would go to the extent of keeping vocabulary journals or vocabulary notebooks,

but they hardly go beyond the extent of noting the words in the notebook. In other words, the learners lack practice of the new words that they have learned.

Table 2: Metacognition Regulation

    a) **Self initiation strategies**

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I think about my progress in vocabulary learning	5	14%	14	40%	14	40%	2	6%	0	0%
I try to find out all I can about the new words I learn	5	14%	19	54%	6	17%	4	11%	1	3%
I only focus on thing that are related to examinations	0	0%	6	17%	13	37%	9	26%	7	20%

In terms of self initiation strategies, these subjects responded positively to thinking about their progress in vocabulary learning (54%) as well as demonstrating initiation to find out' about the new words that they have learned (68%). But there seem to be some (14%) who are not concerned about finding more than they should on a particular word. It was also discovered that when it came to examinations, 46% responded that they would not just focus on things that were related to exams. On the other hand, there was still a number (17%) who responded otherwise. This finding could imply that students are still very influenced by examinations.

Table 2b: Selective attention

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I know which words are important for me to learn	4	11%	18	51%	9	26%	4	11%	0	%

	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I look up words that I'm interested in	12	34%	11	30%	5	14%	5	14%	2	6%
I make a note of words that seem important to me	8	23%	14	40%	9	26%	1	3%	3	9%
I know what cues I should use in guessing the meaning of a particular word	3	9%	17	48%	13	37%	1	3%	1	3%

The data above revealed that the students can identify which words are relevant for them to know. In most cases, these words would refer to terms in relation to their course work (extrinsic motive). In addition, they also focused on other words which were of interest to them – not so much related to their course work, but for them to know more about the vocabulary (intrinsic motive). Furthermore, there was also some initiative to note down these words for further reference. This showed tremendous effort to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

Table 3: Guessing Strategies

a) **Use background knowledge**

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I skip words I don't understand	2	6%	7	20%	8	23%	10	29%	8	23%
I use my experience and common sense to guess	4	11%	16	46%	7	20%	8	23%	0	%
I guess the meaning and then look at the dictionary (when I meet new words in reading)	9	26%	15	43%	10	29%	0	%	1	3%
I use alternative clues and try again if I fail to guess the meaning of a word.	5	14%	12	34%	13	37%	4	11%	1	3%

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The data above showed that a majority of the students (57%) used their background knowledge such as experiences and common sense in guessing the meaning of the words. About fifty-two percent of the students mentioned that they would not skip unknown words unnecessarily while reading but rather would attempt to guess the meaning of these words (69%). Furthermore, if they have failed to guess using a particular strategy, then they would attempt at it again by employing other strategies in guessing the meaning of the word (48%).

Table 3b: Using linguistic clues

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I make use of my knowledge of the topic to guess the meaning of word	6	17%	25	71%	2	6%	1	3%	1	3%
I look at the part of speech of the new word (to guess the meaning of the new word)	8	23%	20	57%	6	17%	1	3%	0	0%
I analyze the word structure (prefix, root and suffix) when guessing the meaning of the word)	3	9%	12	34%	15	43%	3	9%	2	6%

In terms of linguistic cues, a majority of the students (80%) employed their knowledge of the word structure in deciphering the meaning of the words. However approximately 20% was not confident of using such strategy. This finding could indicate that there were some learners who were unsure as to the use of this strategy in learning vocabulary.

Table 4: Dictionary Strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I use an English dictionary	15	43%	11	30%	6	17%	3	%	0	0%
I use a bilingual dictionary	8	23%	15	43%	7	20%	4	11%	1	3%
I use the dictionary to find out the pronunciation of the word	6	17%	12	34%	9	26%	3	9%	5	14%
I use the dictionary to find only the meaning of the word	5	14%	14	40%	5	14%	9	26%	2	6%
I look in the dictionary for the grammatical patterns of the word	3	9%	7	20%	6	17%	13	37%	6	17%
I look in the dictionary for collocation patterns	3	9%	10	29%	16	46%	6	17%	0	0%
I use the dictionary to find the appropriate usage (example sentence) of the word.	3	9%	20	57%	6	17%	3	9%	3	9%

One of the ways that students do to identify the meaning of the word is through dictionaries. The data revealed that 73% claimed to use an English dictionary. At the same time approximately students (66%) mentioned that they also referred to the English-Arabic/Malay dictionary. There were several purposes of using the dictionary. The highest score came from using the dictionary to find usages of the word in context (23 students), followed by finding meaning of the word (19 students), pronunciation of word (18 students) and the least is looking at grammatical patterns of the word (10 students). It was interesting to note that 46% or 16 students responded that they are not sure on how to use the dictionary to look for collocation patterns. Once more, the finding showed that the learners were unsure of what collocation is about.

Table 5: Note Taking Strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I have a vocabulary note book to list down new word	8	23%	12	34%	6	17%	8	23%	1	3%
I write down the English word and Arabic/Malay translation of the word	4	11%	14	40%	4	11%	7	20%	7	20%
I only take note the meaning of the word	2	6%	13	37%	8	23%	9	26%	2	6%
I take note of the usages of the word (example sentences, part of speech, etc.)	6	17%	14	40%	14	40%	0	0%	1	3%
I take note of the synonym or antonym of the word	5	14%	5	14%	14	40%	8	23%	3	9%

There were various note taking strategies employed by the students. Approximately 20 students reported that they had a vocabulary notebook in contrast to 15 students who mentioned that they did not keep one. The most common citation was the writing of the unknown English word and its Arabic/Malay translation (18 students). In addition, they also listed the usages of the word (20 students) and meaning of the word (15 students). It was interesting to note that only 10 students reported to note the synonym or antonym of the word as compared to 25 students who mentioned that they did not do so. This data could imply that the students were unaware of the impact of note taking or keeping a vocabulary note book for vocabulary enhancement purposes. Moreover, the strategies that they employed such as writing the English words and translations as well as noting the meaning of words are insufficient for enhancement and memory of words. These subjects would need to engage in other note taking strategies to help them develop their vocabulary knowledge.

Table 6: Memory/ Repetition Strategies

Statement	1 **Strongly Agree**		2 **Agree**		3 **Unsure**		4 **Disagree**		5 **Strongly Disagree**	
To remember a word, I repeat it aloud to myself	**11**	30%	**13**	37%	**7**	20%	**1**	3%	**3**	9%
To remember a word, I write it repeatedly	**8**	23%	**17**	49%	**7**	20%	**2**	6%	**2**	6%
I create a mental image of the new word to help me remember the word	**8**	23%	**19**	54%	**5**	14%	**3**	9%	**0**	0%
To remember a word, I analyze the word by breaking it into different parts (prefix, root, suffix)	**3**	9%	**11**	30%	**13**	37%	**6**	17%	**3**	9%

In terms of memory strategies, the students were discovered to employ the strategy of oral repetition and creating mental images (mnemonic) most often (27students). It was interesting to note that about 25 students also employed the strategy of written repetition of a word whereas 24 students repeated the word aloud to aid in memory of the word. However students seemed to have problems in analyzing words by breaking them into parts (63%). The data could imply that the students encounter difficulties in identifying the root word as well as separating the root word from the affixes.

Table 7: Activation Strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I make use of the words I learned in speaking and writing	10	29%	18	51%	5	14%	1	3%	1	3%
I make use of the words I learned in everyday situations	12	34%	12	34%	9	26%	2	6%	0	0%

In terms of activation strategies, most students (80%) responded that they would employ the new words that they have learned in their speech and writing. While 68% of the students responded that they would employ the new words learned in everyday situations. This finding showed that these learners have confidence and put in effort in using the words.

Table 8: Sources

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I learn new words only in my class from my teacher	1	3%	2	6%	3	9%	21	60%	7	20%
I learn new words from reading English materials (e.g. newspaper, novels, etc.)	13	37%	15	43%	4	11%	1	3%	2	6%

The data above reveal that the main source of reference for new vocabulary comes from reading English materials (80%) as compared to only 3 students who acquire new words from their teachers in class.

Table 9: Anxiety

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I feel anxious about reading in English	9	26%	12	34%	9	26%	4	11%	1	3%
I skip words I don't understand when I read in English	2	6%	7	20%	15	43%	8	23%	3	9%
I do not know how to learn vocabulary	2	6%	11	30%	8	23%	8	23%	6	17%

In terms of anxiety toward learning the English language, the findings showed that 60% of the subjects felt anxious. This indicated that the English language is not widely used in their studies. However, 21 students responded that they still do not know how to learn vocabulary.

Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of the data showed that the strategies most often used by the EFL learners in this study were memorization (in terms of mental images), dictionary strategies and linguistic clues. However, the least used strategy discovered is note taking strategies. The implications of these findings suggest that EFL learners would need to engage more strategies to enhance their learning and memory of the vocabulary. Although the subjects in this study were discovered to have knowledge of certain strategies, yet they failed to practice what they have learned. It is important to make students aware that learning does not only involve having knowledge of a particular strategy (competence), but rather it will become enhanced when we make use of that knowledge (performance).

Ediger (1999) holds to the idea that developing students' vocabulary knowledge should be a major goal in each academic discipline. Vocabulary development emphasizes that students seek purpose in learning. Thus purposeful learning in vocabulary development means that students perceive reasons for achieving good vocabulary knowledge. As educators and teachers, we need to understand that learners develop their vocabulary learning over a period of time.

Knowing a lot of words does not guarantee that the learner is able to read efficiently. Anderson (2004) suggests that there should be a steady study of vocabulary within a reading improvement program. Through this exposure, learners will be able to improve and develop their knowledge of words as well as how they work.

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