

## **Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Malaysian ESL Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the most important challenges that learners face in second language learning is learning vocabulary. Vocabulary has been recognized as crucial to language use in which learners' insufficient knowledge of vocabulary may lead to difficulties in their second language learning. Thus, in learning second language vocabulary, students need to be trained to use appropriate vocabulary learning strategies. This study examined vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) used by Malaysian ESL students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at Universiti Putra Malaysia. It is important to note that this is a population which has been rarely included in any previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies. Based on the aim of this study, it was decided that the best method for this investigation and to better understand the use of VLSs by these students was to adopt qualitative research design. For this purpose, open-ended interviews were conducted individually with eight students at the Faculty of Educational Studies in UPM. The concluded strategies such as learning words through reading, the use of monolingual dictionary, the use of various English language media, and applying new English word in their daily speaking that are related to memory, determination, metacognitive strategies are popular strategies and learners are keen in using them.

*Keywords:* Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs), LLS, ESL

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 14 October 2010

Accepted: 26 May 2011

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Acquiring a second language involves different areas such as motivation, learners' needs, learning environment, learning strategies and language awareness. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore second language learning strategies. Learning in any event strategies are

defined by Chamot and Kupper (1989, p. 9) as “techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember information and skills.”

Learning strategies have been used for thousands of years as mentioned by Oxford (1990) who stated that mnemonic or memory tools were used in the ancient times to facilitate narrators remember their lines. Meanwhile, grammar studies on language learning strategies started in the mid 1960s. Subsequently, the past twenty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of research into second language learning strategies (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

Oxford (1990, p. 8) defines language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.” Meanwhile, specific strategies used by second language learners for the acquisition of new words in the second language are called ‘vocabulary learning strategies’ (Gu, 1994). Language learning strategies (LLSs) are a sub-category of general learning strategies, and vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are considered as a part of language learning strategies (Nation, 2001).

The research to date has tended to focus on vocabulary learning strategies rather than language learning strategies. In fact, several studies have produced taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt & Schmitt 1993; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001; Fan, 2003).

First, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) divided learning vocabulary into remembering a word and learning a new word. Secondly, Gu and Johnson (1996) classified second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as cognitive, metacognitive, memory and activation strategies. Thirdly, Schmitt (1997) improved vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford (1990) by dividing them into determination (i.e. not seeking another person’s expertise) strategies, social (seeking another person’s expertise) and remembering category comprises social, memorization, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Finally, Fan (2003) who refined Gu and Johnson (1996)’s classification, categorized vocabulary learning strategies into a “primary category” which contains dictionary strategies and guessing strategies and the “remembering category” which integrates repetition, association, grouping, analysis and known words strategies.

#### *Classifications of Language Learning Strategies*

There are many and various classifications of language learning strategies. O’Malley *et al.* (1985) declared the use of 24 strategies employed by learners of English as a second language in the United States. They divided these strategies into three main categories, namely, “Metacognitive”, “Cognitive”, and “Socioaffective” strategies. In fact, there is another accepted classification suggested by (Oxford, 1990) who had distinguished between the direct and indirect strategies. She added that direct strategies contain “Memory”, “Cognitive”,

and “Compensation” strategies while indirect strategies include “Metacognitive”, “Affective”, and ‘Social” strategies. Each of these is divided into a number of subscales. Oxford (1990) distinguishes several aspects of learning strategies into the following:(1) relate to communicative competence, (2)let learners become self-directed, (3) increase the role of teachers, (4) are problem-oriented, 5) special behaviours by the learners, (6) include many aspects of the learners as well as the cognitive approach, (7) support learning both directly and indirectly, (8) are not always observable, (9) are teachable, (10) are flexible, and (11) may be influenced by a variety of factors(p.131).

Oxford and Crookall (1989) describe language learning strategies as “learning techniques, actions, learning to learn, problem-solving, or learning skills” (p.37). These researchers came to an end that no matter what learning strategies are called, strategies couldmake learning more efficient and effective and the strategies used by learners could also lead to more proficiency or competence in a second language.

Oxford classified an extensive category of language learning strategies under two super ordinate categories - the Direct and Indirect strategies. Fig. 1 presents Oxford’s (1990) classification of these strategies.

With regards to direct strategies (which are more directly associated with learning and the use of the target language in making good judgment that they require the mental processing of the language), these are the Memory strategies which “[...] store and retrieve new information”; Cognitive strategies which “[...] enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means”, ranging from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarizing and Compensation strategies which “[...] allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge” (Oxford,1990, p. 37). As for the Indirect strategies (which help the learning process internally, i.e. which support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language), there are the Metacognitive strategies which “allow learners to control their own cognition”;

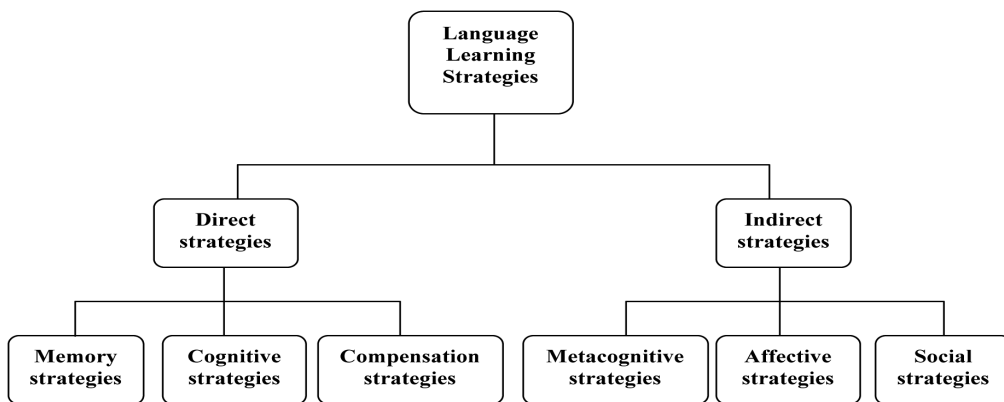


Fig. 1: A summary of Oxford’s (1990) classification of LLS

Affective strategies which “help to regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes”; and Social strategies “help students learn through interaction with others” (Oxford, 1990, p. 135). However, Schmitt (1997) classified vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford’s taxonomy.

### *Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are steps taken by the language learners to acquire new English words. There is a wide range of different vocabulary learning strategies as demonstrated by the classifications of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by different researchers (Stoffer, 1995; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2001). In addition, there is a wide-ranging inventory of vocabulary learning strategies developed by Schmitt (1997). While a variety of definitions of the vocabulary learning strategies have been suggested, this study uses the definition suggested by Schmitt (1997), who defines two main groups of strategies, as follows:

1. Discovery strategies: strategies that are used by learners to discover learning of words;
2. Consolidation strategies: a word is consolidated once it has been encountered.

Schmitt (1997) further categorized vocabulary learning strategies into five sub-categories, namely:

1. Determination strategies: these are individual learning strategies;

2. Social strategies: these are the strategies when learners learn new words through interaction with others;
3. Memory strategies: these are the strategies whereby learners link their learning of new words to mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with the new words;
4. Cognitive strategies: these are the strategies that do not engage learners in mental processing but are more mechanical means.
5. Metacognitive strategies: these are the strategies related to processes involved in monitoring, decision-making, and evaluation of one’s progress.

After viewing these different classifications, the prudent study used Schmitt’s taxonomy as a basis of investigation. It was developed based on Oxford’s (1990) classification of language learning strategies. The classification of strategies perhaps is before the most wide-ranging in vocabulary learning strategy usage. Although Schmitt’s five major strategies maintain their applications in an ESL/EFL environment due to the fact that he established his taxonomy from using Japanese L2 learners. Similarly, the present study used Malaysian second language learners as the subjects of the study. The use of VLSs counts on a number of factors such as proficiency, motivation, and culture (Schmitt, 2000). This is because culture and environment can influence their preferences

for exacting learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000).

However, far too little attention has been paid to vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL undergraduate students in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Hence, the aim of this study was to determine the type of vocabulary learning strategies used by ESL students.

### *Cognitive Theory*

The cognitive orientation describes second language learning as a complex cognitive skill which, similar to other such skills, engages cognitive systems (such as perception, and information processing) to overcome limitations in human mental capacity which may inhibit performance (Ellis, 2000, as cited by Višnja, 2008). One of the important concepts of cognitive theory which influences vocabulary learning strategies is learning strategies. This study was conducted to examine the vocabulary learning strategies which provide understandings of what vocabulary learning strategies are all about.

### *Inter-Relationships between VSL and LLS*

'Language learning strategies' form a sub-class of 'learning strategies' in general, whereas 'vocabulary learning strategies' constitute a sub-class of language learning strategies. There are researchers (Oxford & Scarcellat, 1994; Schmitt, 1997) who have acknowledged that in addressing vocabulary learning strategies, one should not lose sight of their correlation with language learning strategies.

A considerable number of researchers (e.g. Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997) have asserted that VLS forms a sub-class of the framework for language learning strategies and for this reason, it is applicable to a wide variety of language learning (LL) tasks, sighting from the more remote ones (such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar) to integrative tasks like reading comprehension and oral communication.

A few studies, including the one by Schmitt (1997), have manifested that LLS are not inherently 'good' for various factors; for example, the contexts in which the strategies are used, the frequency of use, the combination with other strategies, language portability, background knowledge, the texts, target language, LL proficiency level, and language characteristics.

The importance and popularity of vocabulary learning strategies in the group of language learning strategies in terms of their actual use is reflected by the fact that the vast majority of language learning strategies listed in taxonomies such as in Oxford's (1990), are either vocabulary learning strategies (all the strategies in the memory category), or can be used for vocabulary learning tasks. In spite of this, research into language learning strategies tend to neglect vocabulary learning strategies and prefer to focus on language learning as a whole. Vocabulary learning strategies, however, are one of the most significant current discussions in language learning strategies, which will be explained in following section.

In learning any language, vocabulary is the focal point of acquisition. As put forward by McCarthy (1992), “without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way” (p.50). Vocabulary has been gradually recognized as crucial to language use in which insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the learners led to difficulties in second language learning.

Meanwhile, Nation (2000) describes the ‘learning burden’ of a word as the amount of effort that a learner puts in learning the word. According to him, “different words have different learning burdens for learners with different backgrounds and each of the aspects of what it means to know a word can contribute to its learning burden” (p. 23). Thus, in the case of learning the vocabulary in the second language, students need to be educated with vocabulary learning strategies. They are mostly persuaded to use basic vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). However, teachers may help to decrease students’ learning burdens by providing some organized vocabulary learning strategies for them.

This research investigated the application of vocabulary learning strategies by undergraduate ESL students (sophomore) majoring in teaching English as a second language at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia). Thus, with a small sample size and the nature of the study (qualitative study) caution must be applied, as the results of this research may not be generalized to other ESL students at UPM.

The present study also attempted to explore the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) experiences in process by undergraduate ESL students at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Thus, this study aimed to answer the following question: “What are the vocabulary learning strategies actively employed by undergraduate ESL students in learning the English language?”

## **METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by Malaysian ESL students at university level. The aim of this study was to investigate the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) by ESL students and also the methods that they applied to learn new words in English.

It was decided that the best method for this investigation so as to better understand the use of VLSs by these students was to adopt the qualitative research design. Cresswell (1994) identified qualitative research as an investigative method for understanding a phenomenon based on separate methodological traditions of inquiry that elicit human conditions or social problem. In addition, the researcher is the main instrument of data analysis. Personally, the researcher is interested in this topic because she has been taught in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context, where it was very difficult to gain access to teaching and learning materials of the English language.



The data collection method suggests that in a certain sense, this study could also be seen as a phenomenological study utilizing the descriptive approach, as the number of the participants involved was rather small and that the data were collected from open questions. However, according to (Creswell, 2007), “phenomenologist focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (p.56). In phenomenology, the investigator tries to discover and comprehend a phenomenon and understand the meaning of a concept. One of the concepts in this study is the ESL learners’ choice of vocabulary learning strategies that are considerable as more meaningful, enjoyable, faster and practical to learn new English words.

Nonetheless, the phenomenology qualitative study design allows an understanding and an identification of the phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation (Lester, 1999). In addition, phenomenology research provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by a number of individuals (Creswell, 2007).

The study was conducted in Universiti Putra Malaysia. The university is located in Selangor and was formally established in 1931. It is ranked among the best universities by The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) produced annually in Malaysia. More focus was centred on the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Department of Language and Humanities Education.

Merriam (1988) explained that interview is one of the major sources to

obtain qualitative data from the subjects. Hence, interview is one of the most popular means to investigate, research and inquire data from a phenomenon. In this study, interviews were conducted individually with eight students (three males and five females) between August 25<sup>th</sup> and October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, at the Faculty of Educational Studies in UPM to gain a deep understanding of the subjects’ varied backgrounds in their vocabulary learning, and the strategies that they used to learn new words in English.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that ESL learners in UPM are not aware of most of the vocabulary strategies mentioned in the present study. On the other hand, they were found to have usually used vocabulary learning strategies on either a medium or a low frequency. The common and specific strategies used by participants are discussed in the following sections.

### *Common Strategies Used*

Schmitt’s (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies was utilized in categorizing the vocabulary learning strategies demonstrated by the data obtained in the current study. The findings of the study showed that Malaysian ESL students used determination, cognitive, social and metacognitive, which are the most common strategies comprehensively employed by the participants of the present investigation. All the students used at least one of the most popular strategies, such as using monolingual dictionary, guessing from

textual contexts, and learning through English language media.

The strategies which require the use of reliable materials and tools are also among the highly used group, e.g. reading English language texts, using English-language media, and watching TV. Most of the strategies mentioned by the subjects in this study require only low level of mental processing. The subjects seemed to rely on the strategies which mostly require rehearsal and meaning determination without any type of deep processing. The strategies which were mentioned by the participants are listed according to their categories and are further explained in the next section.

#### *Learning New Words through Reading*

The first common strategy used by participants was guessing from the textual context which is under the determination category. In determination strategy, one guesses from textual contexts such as “*I was reading story books and I learnt new words from there.*” All the interviewees mentioned that they learned new words through reading newspapers, text books, and novels. For instance, Jamal said, “*I used to reading newspaper every day*”.

A possible explanation for this finding is that in the Malaysian education system, the teachers use the same teaching method such as using English newspapers to improve and assist the learning of new vocabulary in most of the English language classrooms. The finding is consistent with the study of Haggan (1990) who found the use of newspapers a successful method in EFL

classes. However, an acceptable explanation for using this particular strategy, which is also true for the current study, has been provided by Oxford and Scarcellat (1994) as “by far the most useful strategy is guessing from various given contexts” (p.237).

#### *Use of Dictionary*

Another common strategy is using a monolingual dictionary (E.g. English to English dictionary) which is under the category of determination strategies, and this was mentioned by five subjects as one of the common strategies they use. This habit, however, was not a common strategy among the participants at the primary level of this study. Only one student mentioned the use of the dictionary as his first option to find out meanings of the new words because his parents did not facilitate him. “*My parents didn't help me to learn new words. So I had to refer to dictionary*”. The popularity of this strategy was expected simply because the use of a monolingual dictionary is a common practice among second language learners. The dictionary gives detailed guidance on pronunciation, grammar, and usage with explanations written in a controlled, simplified vocabulary. Other than that, dictionaries also provide examples of words used in various contexts (Carter, 1987).

Monolingual dictionaries were designed for native users but publishers later developed this type of dictionaries for L2 students as well (Oxford & Scarcellat, 1994). An explanation for the common use of a monolingual dictionary among these



students in UPM is that the new curriculum in Malaysia is focusing on independent learners. Moreover, this method is widely performed in the English language classes in Malaysia. This finding is in agreement with the finding of Noor and Amir (2009) who have shown the commonly used dictionary strategies among Malaysian students.

In addition in Malaysian classrooms, the teachers encourage the students to refer to their dictionary most of the time, and the students are expected to learn new words on their own. Another reason that can be accounted for the result is related to the process of learning language, i.e. as the participants become mature, the more advanced they become. This advocates Ahmad's study (1989) on poor and good language learners among ESL students in Khartoum.

In other words, the use of monolingual dictionary in this study is consistent with the study of Ahmad (1989). An explanation that he presented, which is also true for the subjects of the present study, is that more successful learners at the upper proficiency levels have moved on from using bilingual dictionaries to using monolingual ones, in which they make use of some of the information in such dictionaries beyond merely just the definitions.

#### *Applying New English Words in Their Daily Speaking*

A more significant finding obtained in this study was that the respondents applied new English words in their daily speaking. It can be considered as a social strategy.

This means they practice new words with friends in the university (as mentioned by five subjects), ask questions in the classrooms (two subjects), and interact with native speakers (one subject). A possible explanation for this is probably these students benefitted from the receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary learning in second language.

These findings are consistent with those of Nation (2001) and Webb (2005) who found the receptive and productive roles of vocabulary learning in second language. Moreover, Monderia and Wiersma (2004) explain the receptive vocabulary learning as learning the meaning of a second language word to target language, and productive vocabulary learning makes the learner able to translate a word from L1 to L2. Another possible explanation was identified by Webb (2005) who indicated that the greater part of vocabulary is learned receptively through reading or listening and production through writing and speaking.

#### *Use of Media*

Another important finding of this investigation shows that the use of English language media (songs, movies, internet, computer games, TV programs, etc.) is also among the strategies with the highest frequency by the students, as indicated in the following:

*"I learn new vocabulary through reading and watching television"*(Jim)

*"I learn new words through watching television especially American movies. ... I remember that I learnt some words through games"*(Jasmine)

*"...And through watching English language movies, with Malay subtitles"* (Jamal)

Besides, using materials which involve authentic language use is also listed among the frequently strategies used. A possible explanation is that the popularity of this metacognitive strategy may be related to the accessibility of the materials. Moreover, authentic materials are good in terms of learning new words in context. As mentioned in the literature review, strategies involving authentic language use are demonstrated by (Stoffer, 1995). This category was the first of Stoffer's (1995) classification and later Schmitt (1997) included this particular strategy in his taxonomy as a sub-category of metacognitive strategies. This result may be explained by the fact that the highly developed technology is becoming an important part of vocabulary learning and second language learning process.

### *Social Strategies*

It is interesting to note that in all eight subjects of this study, none described learning words with the help of others. The participants only shared their problems with others when they could not find any other sources to learn those unknown words from. These results are similar to the results of

the study by Schmitt (1997) who showed that using social strategies is rather popular. Moreover, the data also revealed that social strategies are frequently used by the subjects of this study.

### *Individual Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Subjects*

Meanwhile, other strategies used by the subjects of this study to understand the meaning of the new words were using flash card, *"I used the flash card"* (Sarah), underlining the words, *"I underline that word firstly I want to understand the meaning of the word"*(Jasmine), and using word lists, *"...and provide the word list"* (Rose).

Word list and flash cards are included in the sub-category of the cognitive strategies. This finding is consistent with Schmitt and McCarthy's study (1997) which showed learning words from lists is only the primary stage, whereby there should be further contact to the words with other VLSs. One reason for this is that many studies have shown that the act of forgetting a word occurs immediately after its initial encounter (Seibert, 1927). For this reason, word list is an easy way to remember new words. This was also explained by Oxford and Scarcellat (1994) as, "rote memorization of word lists is popular in some cultures from which the L2 students come from, particularly the Asian cultures" (p.239).

The special strategy that Jim applied to learn new words was imaging word meaning. According to Schmitt (1997), this

strategy is under the category of memory strategy. It is difficult to explain this result, but it may be related to the way that Jim had been instructed in his drama class, i.e. his teacher encouraged him to imagine the meaning of words. In addition, he used to read pictorial low level story books and instead of referring to any other resources, he imaged those words based on the pictures presented in the books. *“When I was young I read low level story books that’s big pictures and big words I read those words and imagine those words by see the relevant pictures.”*

Another special strategy used by Jasmine was watching Asian (Japanese, Korean, and Chinese) shows to learn the words of those languages where by the words were translated into the English language. However, this result has not been previously described. A possible explanation for this is probably that her enjoyment of learning new vocabulary and learning the two languages’ words of the language simultaneously.

In brief, the results of the study have shown that ESL students who are learning the English language in their native country are using vocabulary strategies which are mostly direct and simple that involves low level mental or unconscious processing. They are largely memory and meaning determination strategies which may involve reading of English materials, the use of dictionaries, and engaging the other English medium media and written texts.

## CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has discovered that the ESL students perceive vocabulary as a branch of language learning. Strategies such as learning a word through reading, monolingual dictionary, English-language media, and applying new English word in their daily speaking are related to memory, determination, metacognitive strategies respectively and are popular strategies and the learners are keen in using them. On the other hand, strategies which require cognitively deeper processing, such as putting English labels on physical objects, listening to tapes of word lists and writing down the new words and their meanings on cards were not mentioned by the participants of this study.

Based on the results, some implications can be observed. First of all, an advantage of this study is that it will increase the public awareness on the importance of vocabulary learning strategies in second language learning and teaching. Oxford *et al.* (1990) mentioned that “vocabulary is not explicitly taught in most language classes” (p. 9).

The results of the current study can help language teachers to improve their teaching methods. Second, teachers who are interested in their students’ performance in learning the English vocabulary can introduce the vocabulary learning strategies and techniques to their students by designing useful tasks and giving relevant assignments. Based on the interviews conducted, most of the students were unfortunately not aware of

the existence of numerous strategies used to learn words other than using dictionaries and rote memorization.

Future studies on vocabulary learning strategies can be carried out from two viewpoints; first, studies on the individuals' differences of language learners from the primary to university level can be conducted through qualitative and quantitative approaches. Next, studying the effects of culture, home environment, peer groups, effective teaching methods and classroom atmosphere on vocabulary learning strategies may probably be very helpful to get a better understanding of the relevant strategies.

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