

Developing EFL Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies in

Northwestern Libya

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Abstract

Lexical knowledge constitutes a fundamental component of language proficiency, facilitating both comprehension and expression. While grammatical competence is essential, vocabulary acquisition represents a primary challenge in foreign language learning, with lexical mastery being a stronger predictor of overall proficiency than grammatical knowledge alone. This study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) employed by EFL students in Northwestern Libya and identify challenges encountered during lexical acquisition. Employing a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate unanimous agreement among participants regarding the utility of VLS. Common strategies include dictionary consultation (focusing on pronunciation, meaning, and part of speech) and memorization techniques. Students also reported utilizing compensatory strategies such as paraphrasing or gesturing when encountering lexical gaps. However, challenges persist, notably in mastering pronunciation and orthography. This research offers pedagogical implications for enhancing professional development in EFL instruction.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses a critical aspect of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL): the examination of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) among Libyan EFL learners in Northwestern Libya, with implications for professional development. Lexical competence is widely acknowledged as central to language acquisition and pedagogy. As Wilkins (1972, p. 111) asserts, "without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" Chomsky (1989) further posits that language acquisition fundamentally involves the determination of lexical features. This study seeks to address a gap in the extant literature by investigating how learners effectively utilize VLS for professional growth.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Observations indicate that many Libyan EFL students exhibit deficiencies in strategic learning approaches, detrimentally impacting their communicative competence in English. Vermeer (1992) emphasizes the practical significance of vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, this research aims to address this issue by exploring avenues for developing effective vocabulary learning strategies.

1.2. Aims of the Study

This study seeks to:

- Identify the VLS utilized by Libyan EFL learners.
- Investigate challenges faced by students during vocabulary acquisition.

1.3. Research Questions

Q1: What vocabulary learning strategies are employed by Libyan EFL learners in Northwestern Libya?

Q2: What challenges do students encounter when acquiring new English vocabulary?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of vocabulary acquisition in non-native English contexts. It underscores vocabulary's pivotal role as the core of language learning and teaching. It goes further in exploring learners' vocabulary knowledge, and proceeds to investigate the relationship between their' vocabulary learning strategies and their vocabulary knowledge within a technologically constrained environment. Focusing specifically on Libyan students, it examines whether their context yields typical or divergent strategic behaviors compared to other settings. It further explores the relationship between learners' VLS and their lexical knowledge, emphasizing the enhancement of strategic development. The findings hold potential utility for both learners and educators by providing insights to overcome learning difficulties.

2. Literature Review

Research classifies VLS into five primary categories (Schmitt, 1997). The discovery category encompasses determination and social strategies, while consolidation includes social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Although Oxford's (1990) taxonomy provides a useful framework, Schmitt (1997, p. 205) critiques its inability to adequately categorize "vocabulary-specific strategies," particularly those used upon initial

word encounter. Schmitt thus proposes a distinct 'determination strategies' category. His taxonomy comprises:

1.1 Learners' Knowledge of Vocabulary

Learners are successfully seeking to learn the words that enable them to express their needs. Neuman and Dwyer (2009) argued that in order to learn a word, a learner is required to encounter a word many times before he/she knows it very well and be ready to use it; therefore, it becomes a part of his language reservoir (vocabulary bank). They suggested that the same process should be followed in classroom teaching later on. Hence, they conclude that unless children speak their language, it will be difficult for them to develop reading and writing. But before all of that they are required to identify and use some vocabulary first.

Furthermore, it is known that in foreign language contexts, vocabulary knowledge is measured by the number of words learners know (Nation, 2001). It is also misleading to think that being able to know a word can guarantee using it appropriately (Li, 2023). However, many language learners can easily identify a word but still unable to say it. This indicates the difference between knowing a word and using it. Moreover, the literature shows that there are two types of vocabulary knowledge: receptive and productive (Read, 2004)). The first type represents the words a learner hears or reads. The second type stands for the words that a learner remembers and uses whether in speech or writing. Read, then, believed that it is practical to specify receptive and productive vocabulary when teaching English as a foreign language.

2.2. Learning Vocabulary Strategies

Vocabulary is a bridge to learn the other language skills and components. Its mastery can affect the mastery of a language itself (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). It might be concluded that without words there would be no communication which brings the existence of a language under (Alfadil, 2020). Therefore, Vocabulary learning strategies should be reviewed.

2.1. Determination Strategies

These involve "discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise" (Schmitt, 2000, p. 205), including guessing from L1, context, or linguistic knowledge, or consulting reference materials.

2.2. Social Strategies

Used for consolidation, these involve group learning and practice. Dansereau (1988) highlights benefits such as enhanced information processing, motivation, promotion of teamwork, and increased target language use due to reduced teacher intervention. Learners may also request teacher verification of vocabulary lists, though this occurs infrequently outside class settings (Schmitt, 1997), aligning with findings of generally limited strategy use (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

2.3. Memory Strategies (Mnemonics)

These link new lexical items to prior knowledge through imagery or grouping (Schmitt, 2000, p. 135). Integrating new knowledge with existing schemata facilitates long-term retention, consistent with Depth of Processing Theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975). Schmitt's taxonomy details 26 memory strategies, including:

Pictures/Imagery:

Creating mental images of word meanings, proven more effective than rote repetition (Steingart & Clock, 1979, cited in Schmitt, 1997), especially for cognates.

Related Words:

Linking new words to known vocabulary via coordination (e.g., dog–cat), synonymy (e.g., beautiful–gorgeous), antonymy (e.g., hot–cold), or gradable adjective scales (e.g., huge–big–medium–small).

Orthographical/Phonological Form:

Explicitly studying spelling or pronunciation, or creating mental images of form (Nation, 2001 terms this 'noticing').

Keyword Method:

Associating an L2 word with a phonetically similar L1 word/image (e.g., English 'farmer' linked to Arabic *far mar* - 'a mouse passed by').

Other Strategies:

Paraphrasing (serving teaching, communication, and memory functions), learning idiom components holistically, and using new words in self-generated sentences.

2.4. Cognitive Strategies

These involve "direct manipulation or transformation of learning materials" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 8). Common examples include verbal/written repetition and maintaining

vocabulary notebooks/lists for review. Laufer (1997) notes that L2 learners' reliance on lists diminishes as proficiency increases, enabling learning through exposure.

2.5. Metacognitive Strategies

This fifth category (Schmitt, 1997) involves "thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring comprehension or production, and self-evaluation" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 8). These strategies are crucial; learners lacking direction in planning, monitoring, or reviewing progress are disadvantaged (Khamees, 2022). Utilizing diverse L2 media sources (TV, radio, print, digital) maximizes exposure and vocabulary development.

2.6. Previous Studies

Schmitt's (1997) survey of 600 Japanese EFL learners revealed prevalent strategies: bilingual dictionary use (85%), contextual guessing (74%), and peer consultation (73%) for discovery; verbal/written repetition (76%), spelling study (74%), oral repetition (69%), note-taking (64%), sound study (60%), and list use (54%) for consolidation. Infrequently used strategies included L1 cognate checking (11%) and teacher verification of flashcards (3%). Learners rated bilingual dictionaries, monolingual dictionaries, teacher paraphrasing/synonym requests, contextual guessing, and picture/gesture analysis as most helpful for discovery. Written and verbal repetition were deemed most helpful for consolidation.

Sanaoui's (1995) longitudinal study distinguished between learners employing structured approaches (maintaining organized notebooks, regular review, seeking practice opportunities) and those using unstructured approaches (relying solely on course materials, neglecting lists, lacking planning). Structured learners demonstrated greater control and effectiveness, highlighting the importance of metacognitive strategies. Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy, central to this study, builds upon Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Nation (2001) classifies VLS into Planning, Sources, and Processes.

Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) to investigate VLS. They thought that learning vocabulary is a complicated process. It requires that the learner has to be able to pronounce and spell a word when he/she uses it in speaking or writing activities Moreover, they studied a wide range of strategies, including how students used both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, how students practiced using new words, how students could use media to acquire and practice using vocabulary, how teachers and classmates could be used as informants, and what students did to memorize words.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews was employed. This approach facilitates in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Interviews were conducted with five Libyan EFL students in *Northwestern Libya* [Note: Corrected from "northeast" to align with title]. Interviews were selected to obtain rich qualitative data. Cannell and Khan (1968, cited in Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 271) define an interview as "a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information." Interviews serve as primary data sources, tools for hypothesis examination, and complements to other methods (Cohen et al., 2000).

Interview reliability and validity depend on factors like interviewer skill and recording accuracy (Sax, 1979). Validity was ensured by aligning questions directly with research objectives. A pilot test refined the interview protocol. All five interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and meticulously planned to elicit comprehensive responses reflecting the research questions. The data gained was analysed by Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflexive approach, emphasizing researcher subjectivity and contextual interpretation—particularly suitable for small-scale exploratory studies in under-researched settings (Byrne, 2022).

4. Data Analysis

This section deals with the analysis of the results obtained from the students' interviews. . Gairns and Redman, S. (1995, p 27) argued that "data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned". There are different analysis theories the researchers may use to analyze the qualitative data. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, yielding eight primary themes: The thematic analysis theory was used because the process of analyzing the interview data was aimed to be much more mechanical with the analysis being left until the data has been collected. The transcribed data obtained from the interviews were coded, by the researcher systematically worked through each transcript assigning codes to specific characteristics within the text. The researcher has a list of main codes after reading through each transcript and let the categories emerge from the data. The main codes are analyzed below:

Perceived Utility of VLS:

All participants affirmed the value of VLS for enhancing vocabulary knowledge and ease of learning. (e.g., "All the strategies are important... it is very helpful to the learners" - Student 2).

Training in VLS:

The data revealed that there are only three participants reported receiving training, primarily on bilingual dictionary use. Two reported no formal training, relying on self-developed strategies like list-making and translation (e.g., "I use my own strategies... making a list... repeating them" - Student 3).

Focus on Pronunciation, Spelling, and Meaning:

Four participants prioritized seeking clarification on pronunciation, spelling, and meaning directly from speakers, especially familiar ones (e.g., *"I usually ask about pronunciation and the meaning"* - Student 3).

Dictionary Consultation:

All participants consulted dictionaries primarily for meaning, pronunciation, and part of speech information (e.g., "I try to know the meaning, parts of speech and pronunciation"- Student 2).

Memorization Strategies:

The analysed data showed that all reported strategies centered on writing meanings, repetition (verbal/written), and contextualization (e.g., "I write the meaning... put it in a sentence" - Student 5; "I repeat it verbally... review my lists" - Student 3). The students seemed to have different levels of understanding and preferences and different reasons to justify their practice when they learn English vocabulary.

Strategies for Unknown Words:

Responses included ignoring the word (if contextually non-essential), requesting repetition, or asking for substitution/simplification (e.g., "If the context is clear... I ignore it. If... depends on the word, I ask for explanation" - Student 2). This means that the students become aware of their roles to be active from the early stages of the unit. They are then able to tailor their vocabulary, their activities and their thinking toward the vocabulary item.

Strategies for Lexical Gaps:

The findings of the study showed that there are three participants reported using simpler synonyms; two reported paraphrasing or gesturing (e.g., "I use gestures or paraphrasing"- Student 2; "I try to use a synonym... or body language" - Student 1). The students in this case seemed to have suffered from insufficient time during teaching English vocabulary.

Challenges in Vocabulary Learning:

Key difficulties identified were mastering pronunciation (especially polysyllabic words) and spelling accuracy (e.g., "Problems with long words... difficult to pronounce... write without spelling mistakes" - Student 1; "My problem is with spelling... need to write it more than once" - Student 5). This indicates that the student suffered from the lack of background knowledge and how to use the appropriate strategies to be used related to learning English vocabulary.

1.6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals that Libyan EFL learners employ a variety of VLS, though overall strategy utilization appears moderate. This finding is in line with Laufer (1997) who notes that L2 learners' reliance on lists diminishes as proficiency increases, enabling learning through exposure. Variation exists among individuals. A significant finding is the relationship between learners' existing vocabulary knowledge and their strategic repertoire; a broader lexical base enables the use of more complex strategies (e.g., contextual guessing, monolingual dictionary use, media exploitation), which subsequently foster incidental learning and further lexical development.

Students with limited vocabulary may benefit most from direct learning methods (e.g., word lists, vocabulary games). Instructors should therefore prioritize intentional vocabulary instruction through dedicated courses (e.g., morphology, reading comprehension) to help students build a foundational lexical repertoire. Given the observed variation in strategy preference, teachers should also raise awareness of diverse VLS to cater to individual learner differences. Meara (1993) advocates for textbooks incorporating multi-method vocabulary approaches and encourages learner autonomy in strategy selection.

The study confirms persistent challenges, particularly in mastering pronunciation and orthography. Finally, pedagogical focus should be directed towards VLS demonstrably

correlated with vocabulary knowledge growth. As Nation (2001) suggests, strategy training is recommended for Libyan EFL learners to promote efficient and effective vocabulary acquisition across receptive and productive domains. Therefore, teachers should consider a better way in teaching vocabulary to improve the students “ability in vocabulary mastery. The teacher also should apply interesting methods to develop the students’ ability, use the interesting materials like storytelling, games, etc. that will not make the students bored.

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