Strategies Used by Jordanian University Students' in Dealing with New Vocabulary in English.

Sana' Ababneh

AL- Balqa'a Applied University, Jordan

sanabneh@yahoo.com

Abstract

In an effort to provide the literature with additional insight on how the learners meet the obstacles of understanding new vocabulary which they face in reading English texts, the present study tried to identify the strategies used by Al-Huson University Collage students' in dealing with new vocabulary in English. Furthermore, the researcher examined the effect of gender and the academic major on the participants choice of the strategies that they tend to use when they meet new vocabulary while they read English texts. The results showed that the participants tend to look up every new vocabulary or try to ask about it as the most frequent strategies. And guessing came next. Skipping came last between the three strategies under study. Both gender and the academic major do not have a significant effect on the participants choice of strategy.

Keywords: Strategies, Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Learning, English as a Foreign language.

1. Introduction

There has been a shift in foreign language teaching from grammar to vocabulary. New Trends in teaching appreciate the role of vocabulary in learning and teaching a foreign language appropriately, since it is a fundamental component of comprehension and is an integral part of literacy and content learning in school today. Moreover, vocabulary is integrated into every content area and is addressed as part of the curriculum which means that the use of vocabulary is part of reading, writing as well as establishing the foundation of effective communication.

(Bowman, 2006:3).

It seems almost impossible to overstate the power of words; they literally have changed and will continue to change the course of the history of the world. Perhaps the greatest tools we can give students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words. Our ability to function in today's complex social and economic worlds is mightily affected by our language skills and word knowledge. **(**Pikulski and Templeton).

In the same vein, one could say that learning a language means learning how to function in that language. Among other things this involves the learning of the vocabulary of the language. But vocabulary is not simply a list of individual words, rather it's a very complicated issue that involves many aspects as Taylor (1990: 1-3) argues that the knowledge of a word exist on various levels, namely, the knowledge of the frequency of the word in the language, the register of the word, the morphology, the semantics, the polysemy, and the knowledge of the equivalent word in L1.

In addition to this Lado (1955) talked about difficulties in vocabulary teaching. He stresses some key issues related to words and he stated that when dealing with vocabulary one should take into consideration three important aspects of words; their form, their meaning and their distribution. Lado (1955) also concluded that different languages differ in their vocabulary in the mean of forms, meaning distribution and classification of words. And these differences may of course lead to vocabulary problems to the learners of that foreign language. So we can conclude that learning vocabulary is at the heart of mastering a foreign language and it needs further attention and a deep look into the ways in which people learn them.

Thus for the learners of a foreign language to succeed in learning the vocabulary of that target language easily, students resort to some strategies that could help them in performing this complicated move from L1 to L2 more easily. Oxford, (1990 : 1) claims that:

" learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and great self – confidence".

Studies in the field of second or foreign language learning cater for analyzing those strategies used by the learners. Macaro (2006) summarized the claims of the scholars who call for the need of the learning strategies in learning a foreign language in the following points: First, it appears that there is a strong relation between success and the strategy use in different aspects of language learning. Second, there are group of differences and individual differences in the use of the learning strategy, for instance sex and culture are good examples in this respect. Moreover, Gu and Johnson (1996) in their effort to analyze the vocabulary learning strategies used by the learners' of a foreign or a second language, categorized them as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies.

In a study conducted at Chinese university that aimed to establish the vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese university learners of English and the relationship between their strategies and outcomes in learning English. Participants reported using a wide variety of vocabulary learning strategies. Such as Self-Initiation and Selective Attention, two metacognitive strategies. Contextual guessing, skillful use of dictionaries, note-taking, paying attention to word formation, contextual encoding, and activation of newly learned words.

Another study held in a Japanese university which aimed to analyze the vocabulary learning strategies used there, it concluded that the students resort to four strategies namely; memory, cognitive, social and metacognitive.

Azadeh Nemati, (2009) concluded that giving strategy awareness can facilitate the learning of the new vocabulary and it could help to store and retrieve new vocabulary items. This is one of her findings from her study that aimed at comparing the impacts of teaching through memory strategies on experimental group comparison to control group, where students were taught the meaning of new vocabulary items through giving synonyms and mini-contexts.

In the same vein, Willerman and Melvin (1979) said that "Students who have been studying a foreign language, even if only for a month or so, have most likely developed conscious or unconscious learning strategies to master the material" (p. 452).

 Graves (1987) suggested that, because students actually do most of their learning of new words independently, it makes sense to encourage them "to adopt personal plans to expand their vocabularies over time" (p. 177).

After this elaboration about the fact that learners need to use some strategies that enable them to facilitate the retention and the recognition of the foreign language vocabulary, we hope that the present study will be useful and will add a new stone in the wall of knowledge at this area as it will tackle another dimension by analyzing the strategies used by learners who are non- English major students but students of other different majors such as engineering, vocational education and accounting who need to learn English as most of their courses are taught in English, and unfortunately, English is considered as an obstacle in their way so we will try to explore their strategies and try to help them to be better learners.

2. Significance of the study:

It is well acknowledged that there is a global demand for English language learning because of its dominance in international business, technology, and science.(Ababneh and Al- Momani,2011). So a large number of countries including Jordan try hardly to equip their students with a sufficient command of English so that they could compete with others in the field of work efficiently. Furthermore, English is the language in which many subjects such as medicine, engineering and science are taught by in Jordan. (Carkin,2005:86).

Thus the significance of the present study stems from the fact that students at Jordanian universities suffer from learning their courses in English, therefore they resort to adopting several strategies to ease this mission.

The researcher chose the participants of this study from different majors such as engineering, management information system, accounting, and computer science who need English for different reasons than those of their English language major colleagues, and they are supposed to be less proficient in English than their English majored colleagues, thus its supposed that their strategies could be different from the ones used by English – major students.

3. Hypotheses of the Study

The study investigated the following hypotheses:

1. There are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between students' preference of the learning strategies presented in the questionnaire due to the difference in gender(male or female).

2. There are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between students' preference of the learning strategies presented in the questionnaire due to the difference in their academic major at the university.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants of the study.

The participants of the study were purposefully chosen from the students registered in the second semester of the academic year 2010/ 2011 in English language skills course given at AL –Huson University College. 128 male and female students responded to the statements presented in the questionnaire which was used to fulfill the aims of the present study . The researcher chose to conduct the present study with non-English major students because it is assumed that they are less proficient in English than their English major colleagues.

4.2. Instrument of the study

The researcher adopted Alseweed (2005) questionnaire, which was basically used to examine the overall strategies used by Saudi EFL students in overcoming the new words while reading an English text. Each question was followed by several statements which represent students' strategies in overcoming the new vocabulary: the strategies under study were the following: guessing, appealing for help: using the dictionary and skipping. But for the sake of the present study the researcher only used the first section of the questionnaire that examines the overall strategies without the detailed statements that focus on more details about each of the strategies mentioned earlier.

The researcher did that as they wanted to deal with this issue in more than one perspective as Alseweed did. The researcher wanted to identify the strategies used by Jordanian students, as well as examining the differences between those strategies that could be attributed to the difference in gender, or the academic major.

All the questions of the questionnaire were written in English and the students answered them in the presence of the researcher who explained their meaning in L1 when necessary.

4.3. Data analysis procedures:

The researcher computed the total average mean scores and the standard deviations of the students' answers on each question to find out which strategy do they resort to more than the others. Moreover, students' responses to the questionnaire were analyzed to see if there were any significant differences between their responses that could be due to the difference in the gender or the academic major of the students by using SPSS program. T-test was used to see if there are differences between the students preference of the strategy use that could be due to the difference in gender. On the other hand, ANOVA- test was used to study the effect of the academic major on the preference of the strategy use.

5. Results and Discussion

The aim of this part is to introduce the analysis of the data collected. The first thing that this study aimed at is to explore the strategy type that most of the students resort to when dealing with a new word in English. Table 1 below shows that the students resort to all the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire, but their preference of the strategy use shows that they equally resort to two strategies as the most used ones which are namely: the use of the dictionary and the appeal for assistance from others; asking about its meaning with a mean square of approximately (2.96). This result goes in line with Alseweed's (2000) and Schmitt's (1997) whose study on the Japanese students showed that a bilingual dictionary was the most popular among the other strategies. To explain this result one might say that those students are not proficient in English so they resort to the safest reference that is the dictionary or to others who are more proficient in English. Unfortunately, their strategy preference is not very wise as some scholars in this field like Brown discourages the use of bilingual dictionaries as he says that: "It is unfortunate that such practices rarely help students to internalize the word for later recall and use.". (Brown, 2001: 377).

Following these two comes guessing the meaning of the word from knowing what part of speech it is. i.e., contextual guessing. This strategy could be very useful when the learners do not know the meaning of the word immediately, so using such strategy may" pay off' to put it in Browns words. (Brown, 2001: 310).

 On the other hand, the least used strategy is skipping with a mean of (1.80). This finding is consistent with Alseweed (1996, 2000, 2005). This consistency might be due to the common ground between this study and Alseweed's ones as both the participants are EFL Arab learners who are not proficient in English. As the participants of the present study are non-English major students, and they suffer when they take English courses due to their lack of knowledge of English in general, and they seek to have help when dealing with English texts. Using this strategy is a sign that the learner is good and can manage to comprehend the English text. Since it is well acknowledged that good readers can skip all the unnecessary words to get the gist of a text. (Brown,2001: 308). But unfortunately, it seems that our participants are poor readers, and they do not use skipping wisely. After this strategy comes the strategy that deals with breaking the word into parts such as suffixes, prefixes, and looking for the root with a mean of (1.87). This low mean is clearly explainable because it really shows the poor

level of proficiency in L2 of the participants as such strategy requires satisfactory knowledge in English and our participants are not that good especially that they are non-English major students.

*See *(Table 1)*

Now we will discuss the first hypothesis of the study which claims that: there are no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between students' preference of the learning strategies presented in the questionnaire due to the difference in gender (male or female). To test this hypothesis the researcher did a T-test for equality between the mean scores of the students' responses according to their gender. (see Table 2).

*See *(Table* 2)

No significant differences were found between the responses of the students that could be attributed to the difference in gender as we can observe from the results obtained in (Table 2) since the t- value was -.515 with degrees of freedom that equal 126, and the significant value was .608 which is bigger than the value of ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

The second hypothesis of this study was: there are no statistically significant differences at

($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between students' preference of the learning strategies presented in the questionnaire due to the difference in their academic major at the university. To investigate this hypothesis, the researcher computed the mean scores and the standard deviations of the students' responses to the questionnaire and to see if there are any significant differences between their strategy preference according to the difference of the academic major, the researcher did a test of covariance between their responses. Table 3 below shows the results.

*See *(Table 3)*

Again the Anova- test proves that there are no significant differences between students' preference on the use of the strategies that could be attributed to the difference in their academic major. This result might be justified by the fact that all the students are weak and poor achievers in English. This also shows that all the students share a common limited background in English. (Ababneh and Al-Momani, 2011).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study can be summarized in the following points. First, all the students tend to use all types of strategies presented in the study. But they resorted mainly to the use of the dictionary and to seeking for help from others. This fact is a clear evidence on the weakness of the participants in English. This finding goes in line with many studies such as Hogben and Lawson (1993) who found that high –school Italian students did not use complex vocabulary learning strategies. On the other hand, the least used strategy was skipping. This is also concluded by Schmitt(1997: 205) who found that Japanese students did not tend to use the strategy of skipping. These facts show how poor are the participants in English. Second, gender does not have a significant effect on the students' preference of the strategy that they would resort to when they face a new vocabulary in L2. Third, the academic major at the university does not have any significant influence on the strategies used by the participants. Since all the students are non- English major students and they only care for learning the English courses that they have to study at the university as obligatory courses.

Based on the above conclusions , the researcher suggested a number of recommendations. First of all, instructors should reconsider the value of teaching vocabulary since it is no more a matter of recalling a list of words, rather it's a mission that requires analysis as Brown (2001:310) encouraged the learners to use different techniques such as looking for prefixes, suffixes, roots,..etc). Moreover, instructors should encourage learners to develop certain personal strategies that could help them overcome the problems of learning the new words in L2. Graves (1987) suggested that, because students actually do most of their learning of new words independently, it makes sense to encourage them "to adopt personal plans to expand their vocabularies over time" (p. 177). And Nehta in her research about the effective methods of teaching vocabulary concludes that "a language teacher should be innovative and proficient in the application of methodologies pertaining to teaching vocabulary items in a classroom situation".

Finally, it is recommended to repeat this study using a larger sample to ensure the validity of the conclusions that we came to in this study. A larger sample that includes students from all the universities in Jordan would be more representative. A comparative study that compares between the strategies used in English new vocabulary as opposed to Arabic ones is probably worth to be carried out for a future research.

References

Ababneh, Sana & Mufadi Al- Momani. (2011). The Effect of a Vocational Instructional Program on Vocational Students' English Language Proficiency. *International Journal of Vocational Education and Training, Vol.* 19, (pp.53-66).

Alseweed,M.A. (1996).   A Study of ESL Reading Strategies and their Applications. Un published Master Dissertation. Department of Language and Linguistics, University of Essex.

Alseweed,M.A. (2000). The Effect of Proficiency and Training on the Word-solving Strategies of Arab EFL Readers. Un published Doctoral Dissertation. Department of Language and Linguistics, University of Essex.

Alseweed,M.A. (2005). Overcoming Unknown Words. *Journal of Education &Psychological   Sciences, Vol.*6.(1)

Bowman, A. Tanya. (2006). Methods of Teaching Vocabulary to Students with Learning Disabilities: What were the findings of the National Reading Panel and What are the Current Trends. Retrieved January, 29, 2012, from http://www. wm.edu/education/599/06 projects/bowman.pdf.

Brown, H Douglas. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy (2nd ed).* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Carkin, Susan. (2005)." English for Academic Purposes" In Eli Hinkel (ed). *A Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning.* Lawrence Elbaum Associates,Inc. New Jersey. P.86.

Graves, M. F. (1987). The roles of instruction in fostering vocabulary development. In M. G. McKeown & M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 165-184). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Gu, Y., & Johnson, R. K. (1996). Vocabulary learning strategies and language learning outcomes. *Language Learning 46* (4), pp.(643 – 79)

Hogben, D., & Lawson, M. J. (1993, November). *Elaborated keyword strategies for foreign language vocabulary acquisition.* Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education. Fremantle, Western Australia.

Kudo, Yoshimitsu. (nd.) L2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Retrieved January, 20, 2012, from http://nflrc. Hawaii.edu/NetWorks/NW14.pdf.

Macaro, Ernesto. (2006). Strategies for Language Learning and for Language Use: Revising the Theoretical Framework. *The Modern Language Journal,* 90(iii).

Mehta, Kumar Naveen **.** (2009). Vocabulary Teaching: Effective Methodologies The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XV, No. 3. http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Mehta-Vocabulary.html.

Nemati , Azadeh .(2009). Memory Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Long-term Retention. International Journal of Vocational and Technical Education Vol.1 (2), pp. 014-024.

Oxford, L. Rebbeca. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What every teacher should know.* Heinle & Heinle Publishers. Boston, Massachusetts.

Pikulski, John J. and Templeton Shane.(nd.) Teaching and Developing Vocabulary: Key to Long-Term Reading Success. Current Research in Reading/ Language Art. Retreived from http://www.eduplace.com/marketing/nc/pdf.

Robert Lado. (1955). Patterns of difficulty in vocabulary. *International Journal Language Learning,* 6, p.23-41.

Schmitt,N. (1997). Vocabulary Learning Strategies. In Schmitt, & MMcCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary: description, acquisition, and pedagogy*. (pp.199- 227). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Linda. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. London: Prentice Hall.

Willerman, B., & Melvin, B. (1979). Reservations about the keyword mnemonic. *Canadian Modern Language Review,* 35,443-453.

Table 1: Students' Means of their overall use of the strategies Presented in the Questionnaire

Strategies	Mean
To understand the meaning of unknown word, I work it out.	2.40
To understand the meaning of unknown word, I look it up.	2.96
To understand the meaning of unknown word, I ignore it.	1.80
To understand the meaning of unknown word, I break it into parts.	1.87
To understand the meaning of unknown word, I try to know its parts of speech	2.74
To understand the meaning of unknown word, I ask about its meaning.	2.96

Always = 4, Frequently = 3, Sometimes = 2, Seldom = 1, Never = 0

Table 2: Mean Scores and T-test of students' use of the Strategies Presented in the Questionnaire According to their Gender

Strategies	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-detailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error difference	95% Confidence Interval of the difference		
								Lower	Upper	
	.478	.491	-.515	126	.608	-.0454	.08817	-.2198	.12911	
			-.516	125	.607	-.0454	.08794	-.2194	.12866	

Table 3: Results of the Anova Analysis of the Means of the students' use of the Strategies Presented in the Questionnaire According to their Academic Major

Source of variance	df	Sum of squares	Mean squares	F	Significance
Between groups	4	.258	.065	.255	.906
Within groups	123	31.122	.253		
Total	127	31.380			