

## Does Applying Vocabulary Learning Strategies Vary Based on Gender? The Case of Turkish EFL Learners

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### Abstract

This research study aimed at exploring the vocabulary learning strategies of the undergraduate English Language Teaching students at Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus. These research questions posed accordingly: 1. What is the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies? 2. Is there any difference in applying vocabulary learning strategies by male and female students? In order to analyze data and answer research questions, inferential statistics via SPSS (17) deployed. The finding of the study revealed that 24 vocabulary learning strategies out of 44 VLS (including psycholinguistic and metacognitive strategies) are being used infrequently while only 20 vocabulary learning strategies are being applied frequently via learners. However, the frequency mean for the psycholinguistic strategy use, metacognitive strategies as well as the overall frequency mean was slightly higher for the female respondents.

Keywords: gender difference, vocabulary learning strategies, language learning strategies

### 1. 1. Introduction

With the emergence of the concept of language learning strategies (LLS), scholars have attempted to link these strategies with language learning skills believing that each strategy enhances learning of vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. In this regard, it is claimed that most LLS are used for completion vocabulary learning tasks (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Mananaraes, Kupper, & Russo, 1985).

Researches on vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) in EFL context have been searching since the last decade, both in breadth and in depth. Some of the research studies are experimental in nature focusing on specific VLS whereas others are descriptive studies attempting to describe the VLS of EFL male and female learners, and in particular, that of graduates and undergraduates.

Schmitt (1997) remarks, "Vocabulary learning strategies could be any action which affects this rather broadly-defined process" (p. 203). Similarly, Cameron (2001) defines VLS as "actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary" (p. 92). Nation (2001) states that "Vocabulary learning strategies as language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies" (p. 217). Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies can contribute successfully to learning.

The main benefit of LLS, including strategies for vocabulary learning, is that they enable individuals to take more control of their own learning and more responsibility, especially for their studies (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szabo,

2000). Thus, strategies foster “learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction” (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; p. 291). Equipped with a range of different VLS, learners can decide upon how exactly they would like to deal with unknown words. A good knowledge of VLS and the ability to apply them in suitable situations might considerably simplify the learning process of new vocabulary, for instance, independence in selecting which words to study results in better recall of words than when the words are chosen by someone else (Ranalli, 2003). Nation (2001) believes that a large amount of vocabulary could be acquired with the help of VLS, and the strategies prove useful for students of different language levels.

Schmitt (1997) developed taxonomy of VLS based on the LLS taxonomy created by Oxford (1990). There are two main groups of strategies: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies are the strategies which are used in discovering the meaning of a new word whereas consolidating strategies deal with the consolidation of a word once it has been encountered. The former consists of determination strategies and social strategies, whereas the latter includes social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies.

According to Schmitt (1997), determination strategies which are a part of discovery strategies, consists of strategies such as guessing the meaning based on structural knowledge, guessing from first language cognates, guessing from context or using reference material. Social strategies can also function as discovery strategies since learners can help other people in finding out the meaning of a new word (Schmitt, 1997). Consolidating strategies include several different strategy types which are essential in learning a language since input can be seen as a key element in language acquisition. For example, group learning promotes active processing as well as team working abilities, and since there is less instructor intervention, learners have more time for using the language in the classroom.

Schmitt (1997) also maintains that memory strategies, traditionally known as mnemonics, are one type of consolidation strategies. They usually involve relating the word to some previous knowledge. For example, using pictures of the meaning of the word instead of definitions or linking it to some second language words already familiar to learner. Besides, using groups of unrelated words or grouping words according to some categories like synonyms or common themes are examples of memory strategies.

Orthographical or phonological form of a word can be used as a mnemonic strategy. One can study the spelling or pronunciation of a word in order to produce a lasting imprint of the word into memory. Furthermore, using affixes, roots and word classes can prove to be useful in consolidating the word meaning (Schmitt, 1997).

According to Schmitt’s taxonomy, cognitive strategies are similar to memory strategies and they do not focus on manipulative mental processing, rather on repetition and mechanical means to study vocabulary. The traditional and popular examples of these are written and verbal repetitions. Word lists flash cards, and taking notes, as well as using study aids such as language textbooks are also classified as cognitive strategies.

Metacognitive strategies are strategies used by learners to control and assess their learning. Schmitt (1997) stated that metacognitive strategies such as reading books, watching movies, and interacting with native speakers enable learners to get maximum exposure to language. Efficient use of time and knowing when to actively study a new word are also useful metacognitive strategies.

Kudo (1999) developed a VLS taxonomy which was fundamentally based on Schmitt’s taxonomy of VLS. Kudo (1999) combined memory and cognitive strategies into psycholinguistic strategy, metacognitive and social strategies into metacognitive strategy as a result of exploratory factor analyses. For the research purpose, the present study

adopted Kudo's taxonomy of VLS because it is one of the most widely used taxonomy of VLS in research studies.

### *1.1 Research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

Gu and Johnson (1996) aimed to establish the VLS used by Chinese university learners of English and the relationship between their strategies and outcomes in learning English. The results showed that Chinese university learners use a variety of metacognitive vocabulary strategies.

Wen and Johnson (1997) investigated the VLS in their study of the relationship between learner variables and English VLS achievement by means of interview and diary. They found out that students are using psycholinguistic strategies (memory and cognitive) and metacognitive strategies very often.

Wu and wang (1998) study was remarkably comprehensive in investigating VLS used by non-English learners. They found that Chinese learners are active strategy users that are employing a large variety of VLS on both metacognitive and psycholinguistic strategy (Gu & Johnson, 1996).

Zarafshan (2002) examined why Iranian EFL learners don't tend to use metacognitive strategies? Upon investigation, Zarafshan found that curriculum design doesn't promote collaborative and social learning. Opportunities for using metacognitive strategies have not been provided in educational institutions. Furthermore, formal approach is communicative approach, but it is not really practiced. Both learners and teachers are interested in traditional approach in which the teacher is the centre of learning. The teacher provides all materials and students only follow the teachers instructions. Thus, there is no room for learning through discussion and applying social strategies. Descriptive statistics obtained Zarafshan study revealed that more sophisticated strategies including memory and cognitive strategies (psycholinguistic strategy) were most preferred whereas the use of metacognitive and social (metacognitive strategy) were least frequently used. This was congruent with Oxford (1990) belief that adult learners tend to use more sophisticated VLS. In addition, the results were comprehended with Schmitt's findings. strategies such as; learn from word lists and use flashcards were both perceived to be less useful and used less by university students.

Sarani and Kafipour (2008) stated psycholinguistic strategy is the most frequently used strategy for the purpose of retaining new words while current training setting is communicative approach. They stated that the current communicative university training setting which depends relatively little on the requirement to memorize a lot of materials is not followed and practiced correctly by lecturers and students in Iran.

Hamzah, Kafipour, and Abdullah (2009) conducted a research study entitled "vocabulary Learning strategies of Iranian undergraduate EFL students and its relation to their vocabulary size". They found that Iranian EFL learners are medium users of VLS. However, they discussed that it may be due to the study skills course, they pass in the first semester of their studies. According to them, this course makes freshmen familiar with different learning techniques and strategies in order to have a better learning.

Sener (2009) investigated the relationship between VLS and vocabulary size of Turkish EFL students. Şener found that Turkish students use more metacognitive strategies efficiently than psycholinguistic strategy though they were often users of strategies.

Successful learners use VLS for controlling their vocabulary learning. This involves choosing the most appropriate strategy from a range of known options and deciding how to pursue the strategy and when to switch to another strategy. For example, consulting a dictionary could be followed by the use of word cards to establish knowledge of the word. Similarly, O'Melly et al (1985) found that more competent students used a greater variety of VLS and use

them in ways that helped them complete the vocabulary tasks successfully. Less competent students not only had fewer strategies in their repertoires, but also they frequently used strategies that did not lead to successful task completion.

### *1.2 Strategies Favoured by Language Learners*

What strategies elevate the interest of language learners or are most frequently used by them? Asian students adopted “rote memorization strategies,” according to (O’ Malley et al, 1985 & Jimenezp, 2003; p. 225). However, this might not be the case. Gu and Johnson (1996)held a different view that adult Chinese learners used more meaning-oriented strategies than memorization strategy for vocabulary learning.

Schmitt (1997) argued that language learners generally used more mechanical strategies, such as memorization and repetition strategies, for vocabulary learning (Fan,2033) .A recent study of Hong Kong learners found that they used only one of the memorization strategies called “analysis strategy,” which involved splitting words into sound units to retain more vocabulary. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of appropriate strategy depends on learner’s background and context.

### *1.3 Gender Differences and Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

Hardly any research has examined sex or gender as a predictor of variation in the knowledge and use of LLS. Nevertheless, Fan (2003) points out that some differences in the use of LLS between male and female learners have been identified. However, research has also provided evidence that LLS may be associated with other individual factors such as types of memory, learning styles, motivation, or even culture.

More research is needed in order to accurately describe the sex differences in VLS use. According to a study by Fan (2003) male and female students normally use the same strategies and are more alike than different. Yet, studies have shown that females often use a wider range of LLS than males. Moreover, females usually employ social strategies which promote communicative competence whereas males do not use social strategies actively. A summary of studies on sex differences also shows that male students use translation strategies more often than female students.

Furthermore, Jimenez (2003)has identified that males and females differ significantly with regard to the number of VLS they use. In addition, female learners use VLS more often to promote their language learning in comparison with male learners. Besides, female learners use more formal rule strategies, input elicitation strategies, rehearsal strategies and planning strategies whereas male learners use more image vocabulary strategies.

Gender and academic field of study are often seen amongst the major factors that influence language learning. However, empirical studies on these two factors have produced inconsistent results. Yongqi (2002) conducted a research on gender, academic field of study, and VLS of Chinese EFL Learners. The study revealed that females reported significantly more use of almost all VLS that were found to be correlated with success in EFL learning.

Male and female learners are challenging to apply various vocabulary learning strategies for learning vocabulary. Although, gender differences in the VLS use is an interesting topic, it has not been studied widely. Despite the fact that males and females are more alike in VLS use than expected, some differences can be identified, and thus the need for this study is evident.

This study was mainly about trying to understand the aspects of one area of language learning that is VLS in order to possibly identify implications for teaching. This was designed to provide baseline data for future research on the VLS of EFL speakers and to provide insights for the EFL classroom. This study aimed to survey male and female students’ VLS use. In order to conduct this study, the research questions posed accordingly:

1. What is the frequency of vocabulary leaning strategies?
2. Is there any difference in applying vocabulary learning strategies by male and female students?

## 2. Method

This is a survey research study since it aims at investigating the frequency of VLS use by male and female students. The study was carried out with the undergraduate students at the Department of ELT of Education Faculty of Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus. 91 female and 34 male students participated in this study. A VLS questionnaire adapted from Kudo (1999) used for conducting this study. Kudo developed and validated this questionnaire after conducting a pilot study with Japanese senior high school students. Further, the internal reliabilities (Cronbach- $\alpha$ ) for the VLS Likert scale questionnaire was (.91). The questionnaire was composed of two VLS each of which was assessed by a number of individual items. The total number of individual items assessing the two VLSs was 44 (see appendix 1). The ranges of the average mean scores used as the criteria for the evaluation of the reports on vocabulary learning strategy use were as follows:

<b>Never:</b>	<b>1.00 – 1.49</b>
<b>Seldom:</b>	<b>1.50 – 2.49</b>
<b>Occasionally:</b>	<b>2.50 – 3.49</b>
<b>Often:</b>	<b>3.50 – 4.49</b>
<b>Usually:</b>	<b>4.50 – 5.49</b>
<b>Always:</b>	<b>5.50 – 6.00</b>

In order to process and analyse data, SPSS (17) utilized. To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) were determined for the participants.

## 3. Result and Discussion

This section aims to present and discuss the results and findings of the current research study. Table 1 presents a summary of the frequently used psycholinguistic strategies. As the table illustrates, only almost half, 14 of 26 psycholinguistic strategies were reportedly frequently operated by the majority of the ELT students, the most frequent one (86.4%) being taking notes in class (item 28) whereas almost (51.2%) of the students noted that they keep a vocabulary book ( item 36).

Table 2 presents a summary of the infrequently used psycholinguistic strategies. As the table illustrates, the remaining 12 of 26 psycholinguistic strategies were reportedly infrequently employed by the undergraduate students, the least infrequent one being putting English labels on physical object (item 9). In contrast, using mind map technique for learning vocabulary purpose happen rarely in which it was the most frequent one, with (52.0%) (item 31).

It is evident that approximately half of the psycholinguistic strategies are being deployed frequently and infrequently. Although learner could make use of psycholinguistic strategies to some extent as opposed to metacognitive strategies, the number of psycholinguistic strategies that they applied was inconsistent with the other finding in the literature (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Wu & Wang, 1998; Zarafshan, 2002; Sener, 2009). The findings are partially in line with Hamzah et al (2009) finding as they are medium users of strategies. However, there might be several reasons to hinder the learners to use psycholinguistic strategies. First and foremost, the education system might have trained them to be a moderate user of psycholinguistic strategies. Another cause can be curriculum design that cannot promote psycholinguistic strategies, or it can somewhat but fails to consider learning styles or students' needs.

Table 3 presents a summary of the frequently used metacognitive strategies. As the table illustrates, only one third, 6 of 18 metacognitive strategies were reportedly frequently used by the majority of the undergraduate students, the most frequent one (83.2%) being using English language internet (item 15) while learning by group work in class (item 13) was the least frequent metacognitive strategies (54.4%).

Table 4 presents a summary of the infrequently used metacognitive strategies. As the table illustrates, most, 12 of 18 metacognitive strategies were reportedly infrequently operated by the respondents, the least frequent one being using spaced word practice (item 17) whereas reading an English newspaper (item 14) was the infrequent metacognitive strategies. As can be seen, two third of the metacognitive strategies were being employed infrequently.

The finding of this study regarding application of metacognitive strategies is not in line with Gu and Johnson (1996) finding, however. It was put forward that Chinese learners are applying variety of strategies considerably, yet Turkish learners at this study fail to do. The chief reasons could be those ones stated above with respect to psycholinguistic strategies. Generally speaking, 24 out of 44 VLS are being used infrequently while only 20 strategies are being applied frequently via learners. Basically, it cannot be claimed that these learners are making use of VLS extensively. Table 5 presents the results of the analysis of the ELT students' responses on VLS frequency of use in terms of gender. As the table illustrates, both the female and male students reportedly operated the strategies frequently, the lack of significant difference also supported by the small standard deviations. However, the frequency mean for the psycholinguistic strategy use, metacognitive strategies as well as the overall frequency mean was slightly higher for the female respondents. This finding was at some variance with that of Jimenez (2003) and Yongqi (2002) in that they found that males and females differ significantly regarding VLS use, with female learners being reportedly more frequent users of VLS.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The main purpose of the study was to map the current situation regarding English Language Teaching (ELT) students' VLS use. The finding of the study showed that psycholinguistic strategies, in general, outweigh metacognitive strategies. Half of the psycholinguistic strategies were employed frequently and another half was used infrequently. With respect to metacognitive strategies, almost two third of strategies was utilized infrequently. Twenty four vocabulary learning strategies out of 44 VLS (including psycholinguistic and metacognitive strategies) are being used infrequently while only 20 vocabulary learning strategies are being applied frequently via learners. However, the frequency mean for the psycholinguistic strategy use, metacognitive strategies as well as the overall frequency mean was slightly higher for the female respondents.

In order to amend VLS use, strategy training has been proved to be very useful in broadening students' strategic knowledge. The goal of strategy training is to promote learner autonomy. In order to achieve this goal, teachers require knowledge of comprehensive strategy repertoire to train their student both for instructional context and independent study.

It is recommended that future research should take into consideration qualitative data collection to triangulate the data. It may show whether the students reported responses in the questionnaire are consistent with what they actually do. To achieve this purpose qualitative data collection technique such as journal writing, diaries, and classroom observations might be undertaken.

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## Appendix 1 VLS Items

Psycholinguistic VLS (26 items)	Metacognitive VLS (18 items)
1 Paraphrase the word's meaning by yourself	4 Use an English-language TV program
2 Listen to tape of word lists	6 Ask your teacher for a paraphrase
3 Guess from textual context in reading	8 Ask your teacher for a synonym
5 Associate the word with its coordinates (e.g. "cat" -"dog", both animals)	10 Use an English-language video
7 Learn words written on commercial products	11 Use English-language songs
9 Put English labels on physical objects	12 Ask your teacher to check your word lists for accuracy
16 Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms	13 Learn by group work in class
20 Do written repetition	14 Read an English-language newspaper
22 Use a new word in sentences	15 Use English-language internet
24 Connect a word to already known words	17 Use spaced word practice
26 Learn the words of an idiom together	18 Test with other people
27 Use the vocabulary section in your textbook	19 Ask your teacher for a sentence including the new word
28 Take notes in class	21 Learn by pair work in class
29 Use a thesaurus	23 Study and practice meaning in a group outside of class
30 Memorize the meaning of affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and roots	25 Ask your classmates for Turkish translation
31 Use mind maps	33 Ask other people for Turkish translation
32 Use a picture dictionary	39 Listen to an English-language radio program
34 Take notes outside of class	41 Ask your teacher for Turkish translation
35 Group related words	
36 Keep a vocabulary notebook	
37 Imagine word's meaning	
38 Connect word to a personal experience	
40 Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives (e.g. big, bigger, biggest)	
42 Use loanwords in study	
43 Use a bilingual dictionary (English-Turkish or Turkish-English)	
44 Do verbal repetition	



**Table 1: Frequently Used Psycholinguistic Strategies**

No	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	From Often to Always (%)
28	Take notes in class	86.4
3	Guess from textual context in reading	82.4
24	Connect a word to already known words	72.8
37	Imagine word's meaning	72.0
38	Connect word to a personal experience	72.0
22	Use a new word in sentences	67.2
43	Use a bilingual dictionary (English-Turkish or Turkish-English)	66.4
5	Associate the word with its coordinates (e.g. "cat" -"dog")	62.4
44	Do verbal repetition	62.4
1	Paraphrase the word's meaning by yourself	59.2
16	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms	59.2
27	Use the vocabulary section in your textbook	54.4
30	Memorize the meaning of affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and roots	51.2
36	Keep a vocabulary notebook	51.2

**Table 2: Infrequently Used Psycholinguistic Strategies**

No	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	From Never to Occasionally (%)
31	Use mind maps	52.0
40	Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives (e.g. big, bigger, biggest)	52.8
7	Learn words written on commercial products	53.6
20	Do written repetition	55.2
35	Group related words	58.4
29	Use a thesaurus	60.8
34	Take notes outside of class	64.0
26	Learn the words of an idiom together	68.0
32	Use a picture dictionary	68.8
2	Listen to tape of word lists	69.6
42	Use loanwords in study	70.4
9	Put English labels on physical objects	72.0

**Table 3: Frequently Used Metacognitive Strategies**

No	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	From Often to Always (%)
15	Use English-language internet	83.2
11	Use English-language songs	72.8
4	Use an English-language TV program	68.8
39	Listen to an English-language radio program	56.8
10	Use an English-language video	54.4
13	Learn by group work in class	54.4

**Table 4: Infrequently Used Metacognitive Strategies**

No	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	From Never to Occasionally (%)
14	Read an English-language newspaper	51.2
21	Learn by pair work in class	51.2
25	Ask your classmates for Turkish translation	53.6
33	Ask other people for Turkish translation	57.6
6	Ask your teacher for a paraphrase	60.0
8	Ask your teacher for a synonym	61.6
12	Ask your teacher to check your word lists for accuracy	62.4
19	Ask your teacher for a sentence including the new word	63.2
18	Test with other people	64.0
23	Study and practice meaning in a group outside of class	64.8
41	Ask your teacher for Turkish translation	66.4
17	Use spaced word practice	68.8

**Table 5: Gender Difference in the VLS Use**

		N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Male	Psycholinguistic Strategy	34	2	5	3.53	.707
	Metacognitive Strategy	34	2	5	3.52	.709
	VLS Questionnaire	34	2	5	3.52	.651
Female	Psycholinguistic Strategy	91	2	6	3.73	.717
	Metacognitive Strategy	91	2	5	3.57	.732
	VLS Questionnaire		2	5	3.65	.669

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