

Research on Foreign Languages

Journal of Faculty of

Letters and Humanities

Year 51 No. 206

High School Students' Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies:

A Comparison between Farsi-Speaking and

Armenian-Speaking Language Learners *

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Abstract

The present article intends to investigate the current situation of vocabulary learning strategy use among Iranian Farsi-speaking and Armenian-speaking third grade high school students. It also attempts to examine whether there is a relationship between vocabulary strategy use and proficiency level in English. Two instruments have been used in this research. First, a 56-item vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire was employed to elicit students' strategy use. Then, the Nelson English Language Test was administered to the same students to determine their proficiency level in English. The data obtained from 94 Farsi-Speaking (FS) and 57 Armenian-Speaking (AS) students on the vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire were analyzed and it was revealed that the use of various vocabulary learning strategies is not very widespread among Iranian high school students, both in FS and AS groups. The same results also showed that there are significant differences between Farsi-speaking and Armenian-speaking students. Furthermore, no significant relationship was found between the students' proficiency level and the frequency of their vocabulary learning strategy use.

Key words: Vocabulary; Learning Strategies; Proficiency; Armenian-Speaking; Farsi-Speaking

*- تاریخ وصول: ۸۷/۴/۸ تأیید نهایی: ۸۸/۲/۱۵ -

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1. Introduction

Dealing with vocabulary in language teaching is always a crucial concern for EFL teachers. Despite this fact, vocabulary and vocabulary research have been unduly relegated to a position of secondary importance in the field of SLA and have suffered neglect on the part of the researchers (Laufer, 1989). Even though, after a long period of neglect, vocabulary attracted a renewed attention during the 1980s, the objective for most of the early research on vocabulary was to determine what words to be taught rather than to find out how they are actually learned.

In the early 1980s, following Meara (1980, 1984) and Laufer (1986), who discussed the importance of vocabulary in language learning, the neglect of vocabulary, and the promising areas for vocabulary research, the literature saw a large body of research on vocabulary learning and vocabulary instruction. From the late 1980s, vocabulary has become an area which has drawn researchers' interest within the mainstream of L2 learning (Nation, 1997) and has gained its central and essential status in discussions regarding language learning. Researchers realized that many of the learners' difficulties, both receptive and productive ones, result from an inadequate vocabulary, even when they are at the higher levels of language competence and performance (Laufer, 1986; Nation, 1990). Nevertheless, many foreign language learners believe that vocabulary learning is one of the most problematic areas of language learning, and find the memorization and retrieval of words very difficult. The reason may be that some of the effective and useful techniques for vocabulary learning are still unknown even to the teachers, let alone, the learners, especially those who are at the beginning levels of language learning.

Despite the reemergence of an interest in the area of vocabulary learning, "The processes through which a learner should move in order to learn lexical items are poorly understood" (Wesche & Paribakht 1996, p. 13). Commenting on how learners study vocabulary, Schmitt (2000), indicates that more research is needed on the students' perception of strategies. He suggests that one way for us to advance in Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) is to keep researching and yet ponder upon what strategies learners are actually using and "how effective they believe those strategies are" (p. 217). In his review of current trends in vocabulary teaching, Sokmen (1997) argues for helping learners learn how to acquire vocabulary on their

own, noting that it is “not possible for students to learn all the vocabulary they need in the classroom” (p. 225). O’Dell (1997) asserts that training learners to become more independent is “one of the most useful things which the teacher can do with students during the vocabulary component of a course” (p. 275). By emphasizing the importance of teaching VLSs to the learners, researchers believe students will become more responsible for their own learning. As Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) point out, “We should teach students to learn words from as many different perspectives as possible, encourage them to choose the learning activities which are best for them, and foster independent vocabulary study” (p. 142).

Since Meara’s (1980) call for vocabulary research in applied linguistics, the last decade has seen a rapid development along this line. Most of the research in the field of the language learning strategies (LLSs) has focused on VLSs, in large part because “discrete point tasks (such as learning a word) are both easier to empirically validate than more global tasks (making an invitation politely), and because they are amenable to either classroom or laboratory research techniques” (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1993, p. 27). Segler et al. (2002) also addressing the popularity of VLS research stated that “The importance of VLS in the group of language learning strategies is reflected by the fact that the vast majority of strategies in taxonomies such as Oxford’s are either VLS (all strategies in the memory category), or can be used for vocabulary learning tasks” (p. 411).

Ahmed (1989), the pioneering figure in the field of VLSs research, in a study involving 300 Sudanese learners of English found that good learners not only use more vocabulary learning strategies but also rely more on different strategies than did poorer ones. Sanaoui (1995) identified two distinct approaches to vocabulary learning: “structured” and “unstructured”. Learners with a structured approach who independently engaged in a variety of learning activities and practiced target words were shown to be more successful than those who followed an unstructured approach, regardless of level of instruction or type of instruction offered. Kojic-Sabo and Lightbrown (1999) grouped learners according to the vocabulary learning strategy or set of strategies that dominated their approach. Learner independence and time were shown to be associated with the vocabulary learning profiles of the two most successful groups. In the same study it was also shown that EFL learners were more likely to utilize a review strategy than were ESL learners. However, ESL students showed a greater creativity in their selection of reviewing techniques.

Given these facts, the broadly recognized need to focus on vocabulary in language learning, and the predictable benefits of using learning strategies to learn lexical items, it seems logical to suppose that some attention should be paid to VLSs in any language learning program by investigating the ways the learners actually go through to improve their vocabulary. To help students become more independent language learners, language teachers should know and be confident that there exist a number of strategies, which can be included in their existing curricula to improve the overall class performance. Language teachers need to think of ways of exposing 'poorer' learners to the ways that 'good' learners approach lexical learning. That is, making 'poorer' learners more conscious of the need to develop a more independent and structured approach to vocabulary learning, which research has shown to be most associated with success in vocabulary learning. Introducing and having learners practice using a variety of alternative VLSs can be considered an effective way of enabling learners to achieve more effective independent vocabulary learning in the future.

Rivers (1983) states "Vocabulary cannot be taught. It can be presented, explained, included in all kinds of activities, and experienced in all manner of associations ... but ultimately it is learned by the individual" (p.127). It is also believed that students should be given more responsibility for vocabulary learning, and teachers should help them develop special learning techniques (Hulstijn, 1997; Laufer, 1990). So, the most important issue concerning words is the best manner in which to acquire them. Of the kinds of research that can lead to the useful ways of acquiring vocabulary are the ones primarily concerned with VLSs. The reason behind running such studies is to discover different VLSs, to compare their effectiveness, and/or introduce those that are more useful to language learners.

Considering language learning conditions in Iranian high schools, in which students are usually required to memorize long lists of words, which are presented at the end of each unit in their books, there appears to be a need for students to be presented with some useful techniques that can help them learn, retain and recall new vocabulary items more effectively. Although there is not a definitive and clear-cut answer to students' question of "How can we learn vocabulary in an effective way?", some suggestions can be made as to which strategies are more or less effective. Hence, there is a need to look at students'

own learning, so that more effective help can be given in classrooms. Schmitt (1997) calls our attention to this fact. He says that very often researchers, teachers and scholars are concerned with what they believe learners should be doing to enhance vocabulary and forget about what learners are actually doing to improve their vocabulary. Horwitz (as cited in Schmitt, 2000) and Wenden (1987), say that we must consider our learners' feeling towards the various learning strategies. Moreover, introducing and having students practice using a variety of alternative VLSs can be considered an effective way of enabling students to achieve more effective independent vocabulary learning in the future.

The present study, however, aims at investigating whether Iranian FS and AS third grade high school students utilize all strategies classified into four categories (social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive) at the same level. Moreover, it seeks to find out whether there is any significant relationship between Iranian FS and AS students' level of proficiency and their choice of vocabulary learning strategies.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Some 151 Iranian students, 94 FS and 57 AS students acted as the participants in the present study. They were all female students studying in the third year of the high school in Esfahan and Tehran. All of the FS students were studying in a high school in Esfahan, but the AS participants of the present study were enrolled in two different high schools, a high school in Esfahan (20 third graders), and another one in Tehran (37 third graders). Table 1 below summarizes the information about the participants.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

	High schools in Esfahan	High schools in Tehran	Total
	N	N	
FS students	94	–	94
AS students	20	37	57
Total	114	37	151

2.2. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used for collecting data in this study:

- a. The Nelson English Language Test for eliciting the proficiency level of the participants, and
- b. A self-report questionnaire on VLSs to assess the frequency of the use of those strategies.

2.2.1. Nelson English Language Test

A 50-item English Language Test from elementary section of the Nelson English Language Test Series was administered in this research to assess the participants' language proficiency level. The validity of this test was estimated through Adjusted R-Square and it turned out to be $r = .735$, $p < .05$ (See Table 2.).

Table 2. *Validity of Nelson English Language Test*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.735	.686	.266	7.52917	1.642

2.2.3. The VLSs Questionnaire

This questionnaire was adopted from an article by Kudo (1999). Although the items of the questionnaire were basically based on Schmitt's (1997) questionnaire, many other items were also added to it to assess specifically the Iranian high school student's patterns of vocabulary strategy use. In this questionnaire, which was translated into Farsi, the participants were asked to note the frequency of the strategies that they use to learn English language vocabulary. On the basis of Oxford's classification scheme the strategies were divided into four categories: social (7 items), memory (17 items), cognitive (17 items) and metacognitive (15 items). In a study, where subjects were Japanese senior high school students, Kudo (1999) conducted Factor Analysis as a measure to validate the questionnaire and indicated that the originally expected four categories seem to exist.

These categories turned out to be consistent with Oxford's (1990) classification scheme which served as a basis for Schmitte's taxonomy. In the main part of the questionnaire the students had two tasks. First, they were asked to cross the right columns depending on

how frequently they use the strategies they were presented. Second, the students had a possibility to write down their own ways of learning vocabulary in cases they could not find the particular variant from the table (among the questionnaire items). In order to process and interpret the data obtained from the questionnaire, a 5-point Likert Scale, namely, *never*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *always* was used so that analysis and interpretation of the results can be possible.

The validity of VLSs questionnaire was estimated through Factor Analysis on the basis of four factors: social, memory, metacognitive, and cognitive. This questionnaire based on data obtained from FS students turned out to be valid: $F= 90.05$, $p<.05$ (See Table 3.).

Table 3. *Validity of the VLS Questionnaire (FS students), Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	535.784	3	178.595	90.056	.000
Intercept	33166.254	1	33166.254	16724.034	.000
ITEM	535.784	3	178.595	90.056	.000
Error	10431.365	5260	1.983		
Total	51013.000	5264			
Corrected Total	10967.149	5263			

Using the same procedure, on the basis of the data gathered from AS students the VLS questionnaire turned out to be valid: $F= 28.35$, $p < .05$ (See Table 4.).

Table 4. *Validity of the VLS Questionnaire (AS students), Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	151.199	3	50.400	28.351	.000
Intercept	24505.775	1	24505.775	13785.090	.000
ITEMS	151.199	3	50.400	28.351	.000
Error	5633.536	3169	1.778		
Total	34516.000	3173			
Corrected Total	5784.735	3172			

All in all, the questionnaire seemed to be a valid tool for collecting necessary data from both groups of the students.

3. Procedure

3.1. Collecting Data on VLSs

After receiving official approval from the Education and Training Offices in Tehran and Esfahan, the researchers pre-arranged the time with the teachers of the classes whose students were supposed to participate in the study. In the first phase, in order to elicit information on VLSs the vocabulary learning questionnaire was distributed among the students and it was completed during the regular class time. Despite the fact that the questionnaire had an introductory part, the students were orally informed of some important issues prior to handing out the questionnaire. First of all, they were told that the questionnaire was not a test; thus, there were not any right or wrong answers. Second, the students were strongly advised to make their decisions according to their own personal opinions. Third, the students were asked to answer as honestly as they could and not to consult any of their classmates as they might be learning words completely differently. Fourth, they were urged to give responses according to how **they actually learn** words, not to how **they might be learning** them. And finally, the students were asked to write down any other creative strategies that they use but which were not listed initially in the questionnaire, after finishing responding to the items.

In addition, the students were given detailed instruction on how to complete the questionnaire. They were also free to ask for clarification at any point during filling it in. It took approximately 15-20 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaire in each class. Students were also assured that neither their teacher nor any other person, other than the researcher would have access to their responses, and that their names would not be used in reporting the results. Most of them had no difficulty in understanding the questionnaire. However, items such as "use picture dictionary" and "use scales for gradable adjectives" caused difficulty for some students which the researcher explained through clarifying examples.

3.2. Collecting Data on English Language Proficiency Test

Later, during the coming month after the administration of the questionnaire, the Nelson English Language Test was administered to the same students to determine their overall proficiency level in English. At this time, like the previous phase of the study, test administration was done during regular class time by attending each

class separately. The actual time allotted to answer to the 50 questions on Nelson test was 25 minutes. The total score of the test was 50 (i.e. one score for each correct answer) without assigning negative score to incorrect answers. Although students had no obligation to fill out and hand in the questionnaire and the proficiency test, all of them completed and submitted them to the researchers.

4. Results

As to the first concern of the present study, i.e., Iranian FS and AS third grade high school students' use of vocabulary strategies, the analysis of statistical measures employed revealed that the learners utilized all four categories of strategies (social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive) at the same level. For FS students, however, cognitive strategies received the highest mean ($M = 3.19$) in this study; memory strategies were the most actively used strategies after cognitive ones ($M = 2.79$). The least commonly used strategies that were reported by these students were metacognitive ($M = 2.38$) and social strategies ($M = 2.34$), respectively. Regarding Iranian AS students, too, the analyses indicated that cognitive strategies were the most actively used strategies among this group of students ($M = 3.30$). After cognitive strategies, memory strategies received the highest mean ($M = 2.98$). Contrary to their FS counterparts, AS students utilized social strategies slightly more than metacognitive strategies, scoring the overall mean of (2.79) and (2.77) for social and metacognitive strategies, respectively.

The descriptive statistics of all four aforementioned groups of strategies are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics*

	FS	AS
COG.	3.19	3.30
MEM.	2.79	2.98
MET.	2.38	2.77
SOC.	2.34	2.79

As it is evident, none of these categories received an overall mean above 3.5 which was the cut-off point in this study, adopted from Oxford' (1990) work.

As the final part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to add any other ways of learning vocabulary they used other than the items mentioned in the questionnaire. Only 10 students out of 151, about 6.6%, wrote their own variants for learning new vocabulary items. On the one hand, a number of variants were suggested which actually were related to some items in the questionnaire and on the other hand, the students provided some variants that were not originally present in the questionnaire.

In order to see whether there is any significant difference between the VLSs used by Iranian FS third grade high school students and their AS counterparts, a t-test was run. The result revealed that ($t=1.808$, $p<.05$) the difference between FS students' pattern of VLS use and their AS counterparts is statistically significant (See Table 6).

**Table 6. T-test
Paired Samples Test**

Sig. (2-tailed)	df	t	Paired Differences				Mean	
			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		Std. Error Mean	Std. Deviation		
			Upper	Lower				
.076	56	1.808	5.95327	-.30415	1.56183	11.79153	2.82456	Armenian Pair - speaking 1

The quadratic regression model was applied to the data obtained from VLS questionnaire and proficiency test to see whether there is any meaningful relationship between FS third grade high school students' level of English language proficiency and their choice of VLSs. The result obtained from this analysis $r = .444$ (See Table 7) at significant level of .497 showed that there is no significant relationship between FS students' level of proficiency and their choice of VLSs.

Table 7. The Relationship of VLS Use of FS Students and Their Proficiency Level, Model Summary and Parameter Estimates

Parameter Estimates			Model Summary					Equation
b2	b1	Constant	Sig.	Df2	df1	F	R Square	
-.001	.444	-3.987	.497	91	2	.705	.015	Quadratic

The same statistical procedure was applied to the data obtained from AS third grade high school students to see whether there is a meaningful relationship between their level of English language proficiency and VLS choice. The result obtained from this analysis $r = .348$ at significant level of $.462$ (See Table 8) also showed that there is no significant relationship between AS students' level of proficiency and their choice of VLSs.

Table 8. *The Relationship of VLS Use of AS Students and Their Proficiency Level, Model Summary and Parameter Estimates*

Parameter Estimates			Model Summary					Equation
b2	b1	Constant	Sig.	df2	df1	F	R Square	
-.001	.348	3.648	.462	54	2	.784	.028	Quadratic

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of the study was to map the current situation as regards Iranian FS and AS students' preferences in relation to VLSs. The results obtained from the VLS questionnaire showed that the use of various VLSs is not very widespread among the students. A limited use of VLSs has also been shown by Kudo's research (1999). It seems that, despite the few students who might actively use a number of VLSs, the average student is not very keen on exploiting the strategies. This could be due to several reasons. First and foremost, it is quite possible that the students are just not aware of the wide choice of strategies available. The lack of knowledge of the strategies on the students' part might have prevented students to employ the strategies actively. In fact, some students, though very few, wrote comments on the last page of the questionnaire or simply said to the researchers that they did not know there were so many strategies for learning vocabulary, and said that they had actually found some suitable ways for learning vocabulary in this study. Second, the students might have already discovered a small set of strategies to use actively discarding the rest. Third, as Cohen (1998) states the students apply certain strategies to the point that these actions become habitual, unconscious, automatic, and no longer recognizable as strategies and virtually

impossible to report. Nevertheless, low reported strategy use is not always a sign of ineffective learning.

Moreover, high-frequency use of strategies reported does not guarantee that the learning is successful. The important issue is that students should be exposed to as many strategies as possible so that they can choose the ones that are more suitable for them based on their learning styles, aptitudes, personality types, motivation, etc. in order to facilitate and improve their language learning. However, it should be noted again that using more varieties of strategies and using them more frequently might not necessarily guarantee success in language learning. How one uses a strategy may be just as important, or even more important, to learning than the number of strategies one employs.

Nation (2001) deserves to be agreed with, as strategy training has been proved to be very useful in broadening students' knowledge of the strategies. In addition to raising students' awareness of the different ways of managing their vocabulary studies, they should be informed about the possible best ways of exploiting the strategies. They can also be trained to make wise choices between the strategies on different learning occasions, specially in the case of less successful students. There is no doubt that teachers have an important role to play in training the strategy use of students. They are the ones to offer possibilities for students to learn about and practice the strategies.

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