A Study on Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Research Scholars

B. R.Aravind[1]
V. Rajasekaran[2]

Abstract

The present study investigates Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by research scholars at VIT Chennai, Tamil Nadu. A questionnaire adopted from the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) created by Schmitt (1997) was administered to 36 Research scholars (23 males and 13 females). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with ten research scholars who completed the questionnaire to get more reliable information about their approaches with vocabulary learning strategies. The result exposed the subsequent array of strategy used by the Research scholars from the most frequent to the least frequent resembling, cognitive (COG), determination (DET), metacognitive (MET), memory (MEM) and social strategies (SOC). In particular, findings indicated that 'Using new word in sentences', 'Monolingual Dictionary', 'Using English Language Media' are most popular strategies, whereas 'Peg Method' and 'Flashcards' were least used.

Keywords: VLS, cognitive, determination, metacognitive, memory, social strategies.

[1] Research Assist., Vıt Chennai, Arts & Humanities. aravind.abur@gmail.com

[2] Assist. Prof. Dr., Vıt Chennai, School Of Social Sciences And Languages. aravind.br2016@vitstudent.ac.in

1. Introduction

In English Language Teaching, vocabulary teaching and learning is to widen the four important language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing for understanding and production (Nation, 2011). Researchers like Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) are of the view that the acquisition of vocabulary is indispensable for learners to understand and express themselves just by words in spoken and written formats. Hence vocabulary plays a major role in language learning than grammar. Linguistic research argued that vocabulary is more fundamental than grammar and meaning is primarily conveyed through vocabulary (Lewis, 2002; Nation, 2001; Barcroft, 2004; Wilkins, 1972). Though the rules of the language are important to learn a language, it is impossible to use the language effectively and productively without improving the vocabulary. David Wilkins (1972) states that..."While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p 111).

2. Vocabulary

Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary defines vocabulary as "all the words known and used by a particular person". Oxford Dictionary defines vocabulary as "the body of words used in a particular language; the words used in a particular subject or sphere of activity or on a particular occasion; a range of artistic or stylistic forms, techniques, or movements". Collins English Dictionary defines vocabulary as "the aggregate of words in the use or comprehension of a specified person, class, profession; an interrelated group of nonverbal symbols, signs, gestures used for communication or expression in a particular art, skill". According to Hornby (1995: 1331) "vocabulary is the total number of words in a language; vocabulary is a list or collection of words with their meanings". From the above definitions it is undoubtedly evident that in a language, vocabulary has the outstanding role on transferring the communication to share others successfully. Lewis (1993: 89) says "Lexis is the core or heart of language". Hence vocabulary is indisputably the soul of a language.

3. Vocabulary and Research scholars

Learners' vocabulary development is an important aspect of their language development (Linse, 2005). Learning vocabulary is not only essential to students, teachers, and administrators but also the researchers in the fields of different disciplines. There is an urgent need for the researchers to enhance their vocabulary for the detailed study. A rich vocabulary is very much needed to employ in the research texts like publication of articles, the paper presentations and while writing the thesis. Huckin (1995) says that lack of vocabulary knowledge is largest obstacle for readers to overcome. Nowadays countless materials, approaches, methods are being used in vocabulary teaching and learning.

4. Survey of Literature

Research on vocabulary learning strategies has capitulated perceptive outcome. Atsushi Mizumoto, Osamu Takeuchi conducted a study, "Examining the effectiveness of explicit instruction of vocabulary learning strategies with Japanese EFL university students", 2009 with 146 female EFL learners. It was found that strategy training was effective for selection of strategies and it improves their frequency of use.

Mansoor Fahim and Ali Komijani identified relationships on "Critical Thinking Ability, L2 Vocabulary Knowledge, and L2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies", 2010 of 70 (30 males and 40 females) Iranian EFL learners. The result of the investigation revealed that critical thinking ability correlated positively and significantly with vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary learning strategies simultaneously as well.

Falcon Darlo Restrepo Ramos reviewed incidental vocabulary learning under the title, "Incidental Vocabulary Learning in Second Language Acquisition: A Literature Review", 2014.

In the article, Falcon Darlo Restrepo Ramos surveyed the understanding of incidental means and relationship of reading and the promotion of vocabulary learning through strategies and tasks with technology-based methods.

Ahmad Azman Mokhtar, Rafizah Mohd Rawian, Mohamad Fadhili Yahaya, Azaharee Abdullah, Abdul Rashid Mohamed conducted a study, "Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Adult ESL Learners", 2010 with 360 students. Gu and Johnson's (1996) questionnaire was used to gather the data. Results revealed that guessing and dictionary strategies the most and metacognitive regulation, note-taking, rehearsal, encoding and activation strategies were least used.

Mania Nosratinia, Mojgan Abbasi, Alireza Zaker published a research paper on "Promoting Second Language Learners' Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Can Autonomy and Critical Thinking Make a Contribution?" in the year 2017 with 100 undergraduate EFL learners. Three questionnaires were given to estimate their critical thinking, autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies and analyzed by Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. Findings showed the significant relationships between autonomy and critical thinking, critical thinking and vocabulary learning strategies and autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies. In addition, stepwise method revealed autonomy is the best predictor of vocabulary learning strategies.

In the year 2015 Surina Nayan and Hariharan N. Krishnasamy conducted a study on vocabulary learning strategies under the title, "A Preliminary Study on Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by the Students from the Faculty of Accountancy" with 52 participants. Data collected from the questionnaire it showed that L2 learners preferred to communicate, read books, listen to songs and daily routine activities as strategies to acquire vocabulary.

Julie Bytheway's "A Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games", 2015 gave a new perspective to vocabulary learning. The qualitative case study revealed 15 vocabulary learning strategies like noticing frequency, recognizing knowledge gap, selecting words for attention, equating images and actions to word, giving and receiving explanations and feedback, observing players, using words to learn words, reading in-game information, and using Google to learn vocabulary autonomously while playing games.

Maki Naeimi and Thomas Chow Voon Foo conducted a study on "Vocabulary Acquisition through Direct and Indirect Learning Strategies", 2015 with 60 students. Direct (Structured reviewing, Using mechanical techniques) and indirect learning strategies (Organizing, Discussing feelings with someone else) were experimented on two groups respectively. The outcome of the study showed that direct learning strategies advanced the higher achievement of vocabulary acquisition and storage than indirect learning strategies.

Reem Ibrahim Rabadi investigated a study on "Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by Undergraduate EFL Jordanian Students", 2016 with 110 students. The study showed that memory strategies were the most frequently employed by them and metacognitive strategies were the least frequently used strategies among them. In addition, the study revealed that the variation of Jordanian participants' choice of vocabulary learning strategies were medium strategy users.

Seyyed Mohammad Reza Amirian and Zahra Heshmatifar conducted a study on "A Survey on Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Case of Iranian EFL University Students", 2013 with 74 students. The result showed that determination strategies were frequently used by the students. Guessing from context and dictionary usage are most popular strategies for the Iranian learners to acquire vocabulary.

The present study is an attempt to scrutinize the type of vocabulary learning strategies used by Research Scholars in VIT, Chennai. Similar and different aspects of these studies were studied on Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing to different learners, this research is focusing

particularly on Research Scholars strategies on learning the English vocabulary. They are already in the field of research on various disciplines; certainly stock of vocabulary is required for their academic progress. So, this research is on the researchers' vocabulary learning strategies.

5. Statement of the Problem

Learners have difficulty with vocabulary learning related to breadth of vocabulary knowledge and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Learners have the problem of remembering the words at the need of the moment (while writing a research documents, speaking in conferences) might encounter difficulties. The problem that Research Scholars face, they fail to employ the right strategies to use to learn and recall. This research is to identify the appropriate vocabulary learning strategies that Research Scholars will become more familiar with and they have persistence to use the vocabulary learning strategies. Content area vocabulary words often become barriers to the comprehension of concept mastery. Research Scholars especially struggle with academic vocabulary and as a result, they struggle with ineffective research writings. In a effort to explore an effective vocabulary strategies, this study was conducted to aware their knowledge on vocabulary and its strategies to use.

6. Aim of the Study

 ➢ To document the research scholars' vocabulary learning strategies.

7. Objectives of the Study

 ➢ To identify most and least frequently used strategies.

 ➢ To rank research scholars vocabulary learning strategies.

8. Limitations of the Study

 • The English Language Proficiency of the Research Scholars was not taken into consideration when the study was conducted.

 • The participants' gender and age factor were not considered in the investigation.

9. Research Questions

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by Research Scholars studying Ph.D., in VIT Chennai Campus?

2. What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among the Research Scholars in VIT Chennai Campus?

10. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Learning through strategies in language has become the trend years back. Especially in learning vocabulary, many language learners took steps to acquire a new word and also to remember the learned word in future. For this reason strategies were formulated to learn and retrieve vocabulary in language learning. Schmitt (1997) developed taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford's (1990) social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive categories. Schmitt classifies vocabulary learning strategies into two types:

 ❖ Discovery strategies

 ❖ Consolidation strategies

Discovery strategies are further divided into two categories: Determination strategies and Social strategies. The former will guess the meaning of the particular word from its context and structural knowledge. The latter will know the word by other people who already knows the word. In the same way, consolidation strategies are divided into memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Memory strategies involve the learners to use their

previous knowledge to retain. Cognitive strategies are like memory strategies which include mechanical means for learning vocabulary. Metacognitive strategies used by learners to manage and assess their individual learning process.

11. Research Methodology

The quantitative research methodology was used in this study. Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) (1997) was chosen to identify the vocabulary learning strategies of the research scholars. All 56 items in the questionnaire were divided into 5 groups of strategies as nine statements on determination strategies (items 1-9), eight statements on social strategies (items 10-17), twenty-five statements on memory strategies (items 18-42), nine statements on cognitive strategies (items 43-51), and five statements on metacognitive strategies (items 52-56) (see Table 1). The questionnaire data was collected through online source of Google Forms 2017. The rating scale for the frequency of use of the vocabulary strategies as: Helpful, Not Helpful, Not Used but Helpful and Not Aware respectively.

Table 1

Classification of The Items in the Questionaire

Strategy	Items
Determination Strategies (DET)	1-9
Social Strategies (SOC)	10-17
Memory Strategies (MEM)	18-42
Cognitive Strategies (COG)	43-51
Metacognitive Strategies (MET)	52-56

12. Sample and Sample size

The current study conducted with the help of 36 research scholars who were randomly selected on various disciplines. The research scholars were selected from VIT, Chennai as the sample of the study. The samples comprised 23 (63.9%) male research scholars and 13 (36.1%) female research scholars ranging from 24 to 42 years old. The proficiency level of the research scholars ranges from intermediate to advanced level. In the sample, 18 (50%) were first generation graduates and remaining 18 (50%) were second generation graduates is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Description of Samples

Category	Number
Male	23
Female	13
Total	36

13. Findings of the study

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics For Each Vocabulary Learning Strategy

Strategy	Maximum	Minimum	M	SD	Rank
Cognitive	32	19	26.77	5.30	1
Determination	32	17	25.55	4.92	2
Metacognitive	33	13	24.4	7.73	3
Memory	35	8	24.44	6.38	4
Social	30	13	23.87	5.16	5

After investigating the resulting data, the researchers attempted to report the findings based on the objectives. The results of descriptive analysis of mean and SD are presented in Table 3. As the table indicates, Cognitive strategies (M = 26.77; SD = 5.30) are accounted as the most frequently used of the five vocabulary strategies, followed by Determination strategies (M = 25.55; SD = 4.92), Metacognitive strategies (M = 24.4; SD = 7.73), Memory strategies (M = 24.44; SD = 6.38), and Social strategies (M = 23.87; SD = 5.16).

Chart – 1

Mean And Average For Each Vocabulary Learning Strategy
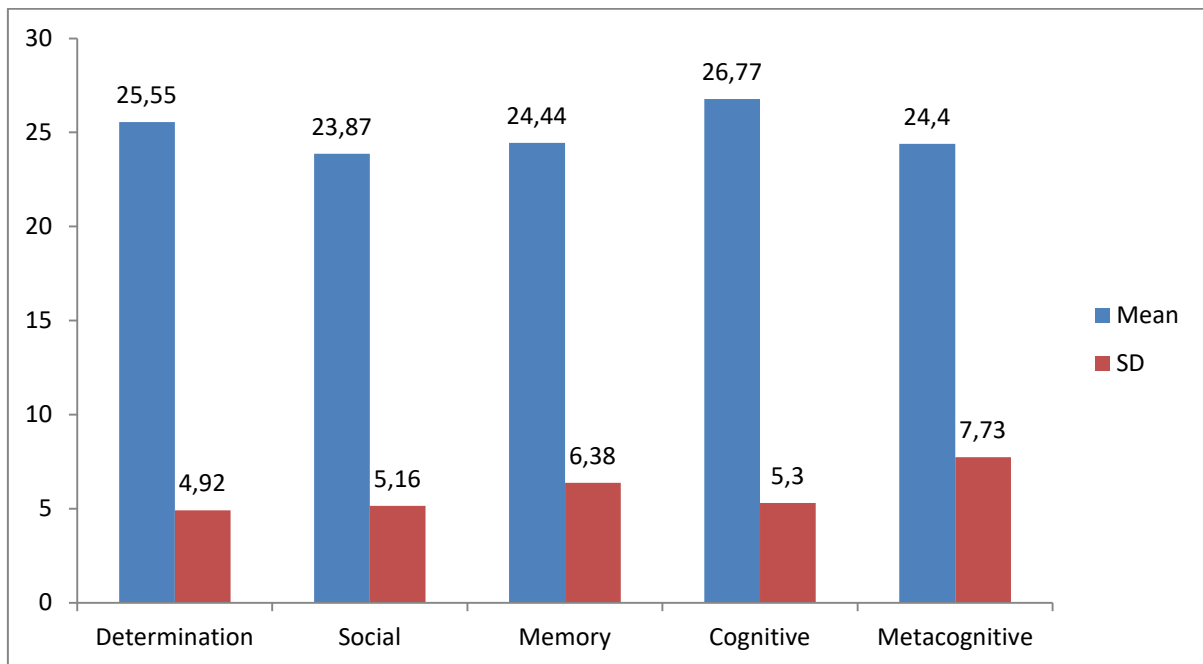
The above chart shows the key findings of the study. The result is that among the five categories of vocabulary learning strategies based on Schmitt's taxonomy, cognitive strategies is the most frequently used strategies followed by determination strategies. Metacognitive strategies is the third most frequently used strategy, memory strategy and social strategy are at the fourth and final place respectively.

Table 4

Top Six Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among Research Scholars

Statement	Item	Category	Respondents	Ranks
Use new word in sentences	30	MEM	35 (97.2%)	1
Study the spelling of the word	31	MEM	34 (94.4%)	2
Use English Language Media	52	MET	33 (91.7%)	3
Use English to English dictionary	7	DET	32 (88.9%)	4
Verbal repetition	43	COG	32 (88.9%)	4
Take notes in class	47	COG	32 (88.9%)	4

The most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies with reference to items in the strategies, Table 4 shows the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies. The highest number of research scholars 35 (97.2%) used strategy item 30 'Use new word in sentences'. Strategy item 31 'Study the spelling of the word' attains the second highest number of responses:34 (94.4%), followed by strategy item 52 'Use English Language Media(Songs/newspaper/newscasts etc.)' with 33 (91.7%), strategy item 7 'Use English to

English dictionary' has 32 (88.9%). Strategy item 43 'Verbal repetition' gets32 (88.9%) and strategy item 47 'Take notes in class'obtains32 (88.9%).

From the responses of the research scholars it is evident that they attempt to 'Use new word in sentences' strategy most frequently. They apply new English words in their productive and receptive process as a main strategy to learn vocabulary. Using new words in the sentence, research scholars were expanding their vocabulary boundaries. They can experience the improvement through the practice of finding and using the new English word in the sentence. Another important finding of memory strategy to store new word is 'Study the spelling of the word'. This strategy helps the research scholars to learn how to create sentences and paragraphs by remembering the spelling learnt. 'Study the spelling of the word' teaches to spell well and enable to read and write fluently. The strategy 'Use English Language Media' is also one among the most frequently used strategies. Popularity and accessibility of the language media relates the research scholars to use this strategy particularly. This also proves the highly developed technology is acting as a defining force for vocabulary learning. 'Use English to English dictionary' is commonly used and popular strategy. Research scholars were very keen in using English dictionary. Monolingual dictionary helps them for detailed guidance on grammar, parts of speech, pronunciation, usage and examples on various perspectives. 'Verbal repetition' strategy affects subconscious mind of the research scholars and it recalls from cognitive process of learning. The articulation in cognitive domain is highly possible to remember the words to learn the vocabulary. 'Take notes in class' is categorized under cognitive strategies. The strategy is being practiced from the starting period of learning, still research scholars believes to register the word in the mind. This helps to consolidate the words for the learning outcome.

Table 5

Top Six Least Frequently Used Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Statement	Item	Category	Respondents	Ranks
Relating word to unrelated items-Peg method	25	MEM	8 (22.2%)	1
Teacher checks students' flashcards or word lists for accuracy.	17	SOC	13 (36.1%)	2
Skip or pass new word	55	MET	13 (36.1%)	2
Use scales for gradable adjectives	24	MEM	14 (38.9%)	4
Group words spatially on a page	28	MEM	17 (47.2%)	5
Flash cards	9	DET	17 (47.2%)	5

The results shown in Table 5 reveals the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies. Strategy item 25 'Relating word to unrelated items (Peg method)'records8 (22.2%) responses with least frequently used strategy in the list. 13 (36.1%)research scholars say strategy item 17 'Teacher checks students' flashcards or word lists for accuracy' reaches the second least frequently used strategy. Strategy item 55 'Skip or pass new word' is appears with again 13 (36.1%) responses. Strategy item 24 'Use scales for gradable adjectives' gets14 (38.9%), strategy items 28 and 9 'Group words spatially on a page' and 'Flash cards' respectively score17 (47.2%).

The least frequently used strategy by the research scholars is 'Relating word to unrelated items – Peg Method'. This particular strategy generates dilemma in remembering the possible associations to the peg word in the group. In order to remember the words, the learner wants to memorize a set of peg images already. An added important reason for the least score is due to lack of exposure of the method. To prove the point, 14 (38.9%) research scholars reports, 'Not Aware' of the technique in the questionnaire. In the social strategies 'Teacher checks students' flashcards or word lists for accuracy' is the second least frequently used strategy. The role of a teacher is however not present for the research scholars to check the flashcards, yet 13 (36.1%) believe teacher checking the accuracy of the word list is essential for the learner to learn the

word properly and appropriately. Thirdly, 'Skip or Pass new word' in metacognitive strategies is used least frequently. Surprisingly, 13 (36.1%) research scholars skip new words in learning process. Since skipping saves time, they do not have persistence to go back and read the entire passage for inclusive understanding of a word. 14 (38.9%) strongly disagree with skipping the new word and it is not helpful in vocabulary learning. As a researcher, mastery over vocabulary is very much indispensable in the productive work. Words cannot be skipped or passed without knowing the meaning in the academic understanding. 'Use scales for gradable adjectives' and 'Group words spatially on a page' in the memory strategies category are also used least frequently in learning vocabulary. 'Use scales for gradable adjectives' is puzzling and complicated for research scholars to comprehend the meaning of the word when it changes to other levels in the grade. Another strategy in the memory category, 'Group words spatially on a page' scores the same least frequently used strategy along with 'Use scales for gradable adjectives'. Research scholars' focus more on theoretical frameworks and conceptual thinking as a result they find it tricky to overlap with spatial words on a page easily. Structural level of thinking is not merging with vocabulary learning. 'Flashcards' in determination strategies is the least popular strategy. Advancement in teaching and learning process, using flashcards became an outdated technique and it contains only insufficient detail to learn new word. Especially to determine new word, the choice of learning strategies varies according to preferences.

Table 6

The Most and The Least-Reported Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Statement of the Strategy	Item	Rank	Category	Percentage
Use English to English dictionary	7	1	DET	100%
Use English Language Media	52	2	MET	80%
Take notes in class	47	3	COG	60%
Skip or pass new word	55	4	MET	30%
Use Peg Method	25	5	MEM	10%

To certify the end results and bring forth specific information of research scholars attitudes about vocabulary learning strategies, research scholars were asked open-ended questions in the form of a semi-structured interview. The results are mentioned above. The questions posed to the research scholars was what are the most and the least frequently used strategies of vocabulary learning and why? Ten out of ten interviewees (N=100%) stated that they use English to English dictionary strategy to discover the meaning of a new word. They declared that as a researcher the dictionary facilitates them to gain knowledge and know the reliable meaning and it explains and illustrates clearly than any other sources. 80% (N=8) interviewees pointed out that using English language media is another most favorable way of learning vocabulary. They added that they learn vocabulary from songs, videos, and newscast. Accordingly, this deepens their critical thinking and understanding of words and fastens their formal learning. The third most frequently employed strategy reported by 60% (N=6) respondents was 'Take notes in class'. They pointed the benefits of taking notes as they are mostly learn things by themselves. 30% (N=3) of the research scholars stated that they skip or pass a new word. Only 10% (N=1) reported to use the memory strategy Peg method.

14. Conclusion

This study investigated popular strategies for vocabulary learning employed by research scholars at VIT Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The major findings of this study is that strategies such as using new word in the sentence, taking notes in class, studying the spelling of a word, verbal repetition and mainly using dictionary are the most popular strategies. On the other hand strategies like Peg Method, flash cards using scales of gradable adjectives are the least popular. The result also reveals that the majority of Research scholars do not use certain vocabulary learning strategies such as 'Analyzing parts of speech', 'Loci-method', 'Continue to study

overtime'. Interestingly, many research scholars are not familiar with these vocabulary learning strategies.

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