

A Survey on Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Case of Indonesian EFL University Students

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Abstract-*The present study examined what strategies are more or less common for learning vocabulary among EFL university students at Lampung University in Lampung, Indonesia. According to Schmitt's classification, vocabulary learning strategies for this study are classified as determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. A questionnaire adapted from the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) developed by Schmitt (1997) was administered to 74 EFL students (18 males and 56 females). Moreover, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with ten students who completed the written questionnaire to obtain more information about their beliefs and attitudes dealing with vocabulary learning strategies. The findings indicated that guessing from context and dictionary use strategies were the most popular strategies, while asking the teacher or peers for meaning were rarely used.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary Learning Strategy; Language Learning Strategy; Social Strategies*

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I. Introduction

Language learning strategies have received much attention in the studies that were conducted by Chamot (1987), Cohen (1998) and Oxford (1994). Many research studies (Cohen, 2007; Oxford, 2002; Prichard, 2008) have pointed out that language learning strategies play a very vital role in foreign language learning. Oxford (1994) refers to learning strategies as specific actions, behaviors or techniques students use to improve their progress in comprehending and producing L2. He notes that these strategies can make learning easier, faster, more fun, independent, and efficient. Moreover, Cohen (1998) states that language learning strategies as some techniques including three factors: action, goal, and situation. Consequently, the word strategy indicates some degree of awareness on the part of the learner. If foreign language learners are equipped with strategies such as vocabulary learning strategies, they can be much more successful language learners because vocabulary learning strategies make students autonomous and enable them to take responsibility of their own learning (Oxford, 1994). As Benson (2001) puts it explicit teaching of strategies can help EFL/ESL learners to become more independent learners. Since the late 1970s, there have been many researchers focusing their attention on vocabulary learning strategies as a vital issue among different strategies of language learning. Obviously, learning and using these strategies will lead to vocabulary development of the learners. Additionally, considering vocabulary instruction as a broad area, the teachers become aware of their methodology by obtaining an overall pattern of learners' vocabulary learning strategies.

This research study makes attempt to address the following research questions:

1. What are the most common vocabulary learning strategies used by Indonesian college EFL learners?
2. What are the least common vocabulary learning strategies used by Indonesian college EFL learners?

II. Background

Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Cameron, 2001). Vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language interferes successful communication. Nation (2001) further describes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. Concerning the complexity of this issue, vocabulary learning strategies, as a part of language learning strategies, seem to be very crucial in language learning and consequently being aware of these strategies is important for both teachers and students. Language learning strategies are methods that students employ to enhance their own learning. Strategies are important for language learning because they are a device for active, self-responsible learning. Students take more control of their own learning, which is necessary for developing academic competence.

For the purpose of this study, the taxonomy developed by Schmitt (1997) has been used. Schmitt proposes two aspects of vocabulary learning strategies, they are discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies refer to strategies used to uncover the meaning of the words presented to the learner for the first time while consolidation strategies are applied to help the learner internalize the meaning when he/she encounters the word afterwards. These strategies are subdivided into five categories as determination strategies (DET) referring to individual learning strategies which help learners to discover the meaning of words by themselves without getting any help from their teachers or peers. Social strategies (SOC) which engage learners in interaction with others, memory strategies (MEM) which involve learners in learning the newly-learned word by relating their current or background knowledge with the new word. Cognitive strategies (COG) in which learners are not involved in mental processing rather they are engaged in more mechanical processing, and metacognitive (MET) strategies which are strategies concerning processes such as decision-making, monitoring and evaluating learner's progress.

Some of the following studies have investigated how learners use vocabulary learning strategies. In the study that was done by Gu and Johnson (1996), a long questionnaire was used to specify which strategies Chinese university learners use to learn English vocabulary. After correlating the results with measures of vocabulary size and language proficiency, they found that use of strategies for retention was correlated with higher vocabulary size but not language proficiency. Still, in another survey carried out in Japan by Schmitt (1997) among 600 high school, college and adult learners, the researcher found that the most frequently used strategies were dictionary use, oral and written repetition, word spelling, and contextual guessing, whereas semantic map, the key word method, and first language cognates were used less frequently. There was also some evidence that more proficient learners were inclined to use more complex and meaning-centered strategies than less proficient learners.

In another research project, a study conducted by Lo (2007) was used to specify the perceptions of low achieving Chinese EFL students about use of vocabulary learning strategies and its usefulness in a high school located in Hong Kong. The study showed repeatedly spelling the words, taking notes in vocabulary textbooks, repeating and reviewing strategies, and analyzing strategies as the most useful and the most frequently used strategies by students.

Finally, the most recent study found by researcher on vocabulary learning strategies was done by Wu (2008). He explored vocabulary learning strategies used by 10 vocational Chinese ESL learners in a vocational institute located in Hong Kong. Each of these learners was interviewed individually, and their responses were recorded with a tape recorder and transcribed by the researcher. Learners applied the following strategies to identify the meaning of the words: mental rehearsal (e.g. saying the word in the mind before speaking the word), imagery (use of pictures to remember new words), auditory representation (e.g. dividing the sound segments of the word to learn pronunciation), selective attention (e.g. paying attention to keywords in spoken English), checking the dictionary to find out the meaning of words and co-operation (e.g. working with peers). Considering some results of the vocabulary strategy studies, particularly at tertiary level, the results of this study may have a significant contribution to our understanding of these strategies and the way they are applied by Indonesian EFL university students.

III. Method

A. Participants

A total of 74 Indonesian students from Lampung University participated in the study, eighteen postgraduate students of English Department and fifty six undergraduate students majoring in English Education. Twenty one were males and fifty three were females. The age of the students ranged from 19 to 34. The demographic information of participants is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

| Variables | Category | Numbers |
|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Gender | Male | 21 |
| | Female | 53 |
| | Total | 74 |
| Courses | Undergraduate | 56 |
| | Postgraduate | 18 |
| | Total | 74 |

B. Instrument

To identify the vocabulary learning strategies the participants employed, the current study made use of the questionnaire adapted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (see Appendix). All 40 items in the questionnaire were reorganized and classified under 5 different groups of strategies as eleven statements on memory strategies (items1-11), nine statements on determination strategies (item 12-20), six

statements on social strategies (items 21-26), nine statements on cognitive strategies (items 27-35), and five statements on metacognitive strategies (items 36-40) (see Table 2). The frequency of use were measured by 5-point likert-scale from 1(never) to 5(always). Statistical analysis was carried out using The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 17.0). Furthermore, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted to validate the outcomes and also to get familiar to students' attitudes towards vocabulary learning strategies.

TABLE 2 DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CATEGORIES OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

| Strategy Categories | Strategy Items |
|------------------------------|----------------|
| Memory Strategy (MEM) | 1-11 |
| Determination Strategy (DET) | 12-20 |
| Social Strategy (SOC) | 21-26 |
| Cognitive Strategy (COG) | 27-35 |
| Metacognitive Strategy (MET) | 36-40 |

C. Procedure

The questionnaire had a time limit of 20 minutes. It was administered on August 27th, 2018. Before filling out the questionnaire, students were told that their participation was voluntary. They were also asked to answer as honestly as possible. Since all the participants majored in English, the questionnaire was not translated into Indonesian language. The survey was kept anonymous to counteract the tendency of the participants to answer in a way they think the researchers would like. The participants were asked to indicate if they used the particular strategy. Moreover, ten students were selected for interviews as representatives from the same 74 students used for the questionnaire. All interviews were conducted in Indonesia, the first language of the interviewees, to assure their comprehension of the questions.

D. Results

Having analyzed the interview and questionnaire data, the researchers tried to report the findings based on the research questions. To describe the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations of the five categories and their subdivisions are employed. The results of descriptive analysis are presented in Table 3. As the table indicates, determination strategies (M=31.76; SD=5.42) are reported as the most frequently-used of the five vocabulary learning strategies, followed by cognitive strategies (M=26.95; SD=4.16), memory strategies (M=25.5; SD=4.28), metacognitive strategies (M=13.92; SD=3.51), and social strategies (M=10.66; SD=3.73).

TABLE 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR EACH VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGY (N=74)

| Strategy | Min | Max | M | SD | Rank |
|---------------|-----|-----|-------|------|------|
| Determination | 9 | 45 | 31.76 | 5.42 | 1 |
| Cognitive | 9 | 44 | 26.95 | 4.16 | 2 |
| Memory | 11 | 49 | 25.5 | 4.28 | 3 |
| Metacognitive | 5 | 22 | 13.92 | 3.51 | 4 |
| Social | 6 | 21 | 10.66 | 3.73 | 5 |

When it comes to the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies with respect to individual items, Table 4 shows that the most frequently used strategies spread across the two categories of vocabulary learning strategies, namely determination strategies (DET) and cognitive strategies(COG). The highest mean (M=4.21) was achieved by strategy item 14 “I guess from textual context”. Strategy Item 16 “I consult a monolingual dictionary” reaches the second highest mean of 3.98 followed by verbal repeating (Item 29; M=3.91), analyzing the parts of speech (Item 20; M=3.84), studying the word sound (Item 7; M=3.80), and keeping a vocabulary notebook (Item 34; M=3.78).

TABLE 4 THE MOST FREQUENTLY USED VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

| Rank | Description | Item | Category | Mean | SD |
|------|------------------------------------|------|----------|------|------|
| 1 | I guess from textual context | 14 | DET | 4.21 | 1.00 |
| 2 | I consult a monolingual dictionary | 16 | DET | 3.98 | .93 |
| 3 | I repeat the word verbally | 29 | COG | 3.91 | .98 |
| 4 | I analyze the parts of speech | 20 | DET | 3.84 | .97 |
| 5 | I study the sound of the word | 7 | MEM | 3.80 | 1.03 |
| 6 | I keep a vocabulary notebook | 34 | COG | 3.78 | .93 |

The results shown in Table 5 reveal that skipping or passing the new word (Item 39; M=1.56), asking the teacher for making a sentence (Item 3; M= 1.72), using flash cards (Item 35; M= 1.80), asking the teacher

for L1 translation (Item 21; M=1.83), putting English labels for physical objects (Item 33; M= 1.98), and remembering the initial letter (Item 11, M= 1.99) were determined as the least frequently used strategies.

TABLE 5 THE LEAST FREQUENTLY USED VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

| Rank | Description | Item | Category | Mean | SD |
|------|-------------------------------------------|------|----------|------|------|
| 1 | I skip or pass the new word | 39 | MET | 1.56 | .80 |
| 2 | I ask the teacher for making a sentence | 3 | SOC | 1.72 | 1.02 |
| 3 | I use flashcards | 35 | MET | 1.80 | .83 |
| 4 | I ask the teacher for L1 translation | 21 | SOC | 1.83 | .99 |
| 5 | I put English labels for physical objects | 33 | COG | 1.98 | 1.00 |
| 6 | I remember word's initial letter | 11 | MEM | 1.99 | .93 |

In order to validate the results and elicit specific information of students' attitudes about vocabulary learning strategies, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 students. They were asked to answer the open-ended questions. The results of which are stated below. The question directed to seek "What are the most and the least frequently used strategies of vocabulary learning among Hakim Sabzevari EFL students and why?" Nine out of ten interviewees (N=9; 90%) stated that they use monolingual dictionary to discover the meaning of a new word. They claimed that using monolingual dictionary helps them to learn even more words because every item in the dictionary is explained or illustrated. 80% (N=8) of total ten interviewees pointed out that another most preferred vocabulary learning strategy was guessing from context. They added that this is due to the medium role of foreign language in reading comprehension of their textbooks. They noted that words need to be repeated in order to be studied, and different texts provide a context that helps them figure out the meaning of words they do not know. Consequently, this contextualized learning deepens their understanding of words and they learn which words go together as well. The third most commonly used strategy reported by 60% (N=6) respondents was "I make a list of new words and memorize them". They pointed to the benefits of word lists as they are made by learners themselves based on their needs and their interests. Less than half of students (N=4; 40%) stated that they connect the new word to its synonyms and antonyms to expand the size of their vocabulary. The social strategy "I ask my teacher for L1 translation" was reported to use rarely (N=2; 20%) by the respondents. Similarly, "I ask my classmates for meaning" had the minimum percentage (N=1; 10%) compared to other strategies since they thought learning vocabulary individually can be more helpful than in the group. The responses to the open-ended interview are shown in Table 6.

**TABLE 6 THE MOST AND THE LEAST-REPORTED VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES
N=10**

| Strategy Description | Rank | Category | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------|------|----------|------------|
| I use a monolingual dictionary | 1 | DET | 90% |
| I guess the meaning from context | 2 | DET | 80% |
| I make a list of words and memorize the | 3 | COG | 60% |
| I connect the words to the synonyms/antonyms | 4 | MEM | 40% |
| I ask my teacher for L1 strategy | 5 | SOC | 20% |
| I ask my classmates for meaning | 6 | SOC | 10% |

E. Discussion

The major findings of the present study is that among the five vocabulary learning strategies based on Schmitt's taxonomy, Determination Strategies were reported as the most frequently-used strategies, followed by Cognitive Strategies as the second most frequently-used strategies, Memory Strategies as the third most frequently-used strategies, Metacognitive Strategies as the fourth most frequently-used strategies, and Social Strategies were the least frequently used strategies. Thus, "asking teacher's L1 translation" and "asking the classmates for meaning" were ranked at the bottom of Table 6. This result seemed to be consistent with the results from Arjomand and Sharififar's (2011) study with Iranian EFL freshman students who used social strategies least frequently. The most plausible explanation for this issue is that the nature of vocabulary learning is considered as an individual or asocial process. Therefore, students resist asking others' assistance for the meaning of new words. This finding also aligns with the findings of a study done by Kafipour (2006) who emphasized that learning in an EFL environment was a major reason why social strategies were not widely used, that is, in an EFL environment there is no need to negotiate the meaning of the word in communication situations. He further explained that what seems to be essential is the active engagement of participants in different learning contexts, such as classroom activities. Another weakness is due to educational system in Iran which is known as teacher-oriented. Teachers are in front of the classroom and provide all knowledge students need. Teachers provided the information through lecturing and the students should just listen and take note. Such teaching procedure did not have any place for group work or discussion in classroom.

Findings of the present study also revealed that guessing from context (M=4.21) and dictionary strategies (M=3.98), as the most preferred ones, were employed by 80% and 90% of the respondents, respectively and were considered as two top strategies (see Table 4 and Table 6). This finding of the current study echoes the results of Marin-Marín (2005) that some proficient learners used more guessing from context and dictionary strategies than any other type. Similarly, this result is in agreement with the other studies on guessing the meanings from the context raised by Gu and Johnson (1996), and Schmitt (1997). Data analysis also revealed that memory strategies are the third frequently used strategies. This finding was unlike the findings of Kafipour's (2010) study who found memory strategies as the most frequently used strategies by Iranian EFL undergraduate students. The reason is likely due to the postgraduate students as more successful learners who tend to employ a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies rather than just memorization and rote learning. This view is in line with Schmitt's (1997) claim that there is some evidence that more advanced learners tended to use more complex and meaning-focused strategies than less advanced learners

F. Conclusion

This study investigated the most and least frequently used strategies of vocabulary learning strategies by college EFL students at Lampung University, Indonesia. The major finding of this research was that determination strategies such as guessing from context and consulting a dictionary were the most popular strategies, whereas social strategies were the least popular. The findings of this study also revealed that the majority of students did not use certain vocabulary learning strategies such as semantic maps and discovering meaning through group work activity. Actually, it seems that not many students are familiar with these strategies. Therefore, the present study suggests that it is vitally important for students to be trained on vocabulary learning strategies. Similarly, Nation (2001) maintains that there is enough evidence that explicit instruction of strategies can improve learners' strategic knowledge. Furthermore, strategy training leads to learner autonomy. It helps them to become aware of their own preferences and habits and feel responsible for own learning. Even though the findings of this study can enlighten language teachers and offer them a deeper understanding as to how to design more effective vocabulary learning tasks to better fit Indonesian college EFL learners at different levels, it does not seem to be conclusive and carrying out more elaborate studies with much larger population seems to be necessary.

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