VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGY USED BY STUDENTS AT VINH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. This study examined the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by EFL university students at Vinh University. The research involved 213 EFL university students. The study adopted a mixed method, including Schmitt's VLS questionnaire, learners' diary, and interview for data collection. The results indicated that cognitive strategies were the most frequently used, and social strategies in the consolidation stage consolidation were the least. The data from diaries and interviews also showed that there was a lack of organised practice of vocabulary learning among the participants. From the findings, some pedagogical implications were suggested for English vocabulary teaching.

Keywords. vocabulary learning strategies, EFL university students, Vinh University

1.   Introduction

Most learners and teachers understand the importance of vocabulary acquisition. It is generally believed that if language structures make up the skeleton of a language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organ and flesh (Harmer, 1997, p. 53). This is probably why EFL vocabulary teaching has become the focus of a number of studies in EFL teaching and learning for the last thirty years. Although research and books have demonstrated the key role of vocabulary learning, the practice of EFL vocabulary teaching has not been always responsive to such knowledge. With regard to the research of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), Schmitt (1997) provided a very useful overview of the rise in the importance of strategy use in second language learning, noting out that it grew out of an interest in the learners' active role in the learning process. He also mentioned that for vocabulary learning, culture plays an influential role. Learners from different cultures have different opinions about the usefulness of different vocabulary learning strategies. This study is an attempt to find out how Vietnamese learners use VLS to learn English vocabulary. Even though vocabulary is not officially included in any English programs as a separated subject, research has continued.

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Word knowledge

"Words are not isolated units of language but fit into an interlocking system and levels"(Nation, 1990, p. 35). Broadly defined, vocabulary knowledge is the knowledge of words. The master of a word is not only to learn its meaning but also to learn its register, association, collocation, grammatical behaviour, written form, spoken form, and frequency. All of these aspects are called "word knowledge" (Schmitt, 2000, p. 5).

Vocabulary learning strategies and English language learning

The research conducted so far has revealed that many learners employed learning strategies in vocabulary learning more frequently than in other language learning activities (O'Malley et al., 1985). In a longitudinal experiment, Cohen (2011) found that most students simply tried to memorise the words which they do not know. Ahmed (1989) described different types of learners and found that most took notes on vocabulary or wrote notes in the margins of their books. O'Malley et al. (1985) found that repetition was the most commonly mentioned strategy, with strategies requiring more active manipulation of information (imagery, inferencing, Keyword Method) being much less frequent. In Vietnam, few studies were devoted to VLS. Luu (2011) conducted a study among first-year university students about their VLS use autonomously. The results indicated that bilingual dictionaries, asking for L2/L1 translation or repetition, were most frequently used. Nguyen (2014) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies used at high schools in Vietnam. The findings showed that both teachers and students were aware of the importance of VLS in their teaching and learning. However, the frequency of the use differed from each other. In sum, vocabulary learning strategies have attracted the attention from many researchers in the world in general and in Vietnam in particular. However, culture is an important factor to be taken into account when studying learners' vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). Moreover, studies in Vietnam, so far, have been only carried out focusing on high-school students. As for university students, studies were just exploratory on university students' use of VLS. This study is the first one which applied a methodological triangulation to have a deeper understanding on the VLS use by EFL university students in Vietnam.

VLS taxonomies

Scholars have many different ways to classify vocabulary learning strategies. Rubin and Thompson (1994) introduced three main categories of VLSs that have been reported by language learners to be effective. They are direct, mnemonics, and indirect approach. Meanwhile, Lawson and Hogben (1996) classified VLSs based on the information obtained through the *think-aloud* method and interviews. The fifteen strategies in their study were divided into four categories: repetition, word feature analysis, simple elaboration, and complex elaboration. Nation (2001) identified three main categories of strategies – planning, sources, and

processes, each of which covers a subset of strategies. Especially, the current study is inspired from the VLS taxonomy because of its advantages as mentioned by Catalan (2003): this can be standardised for assessment goals and utilised to gather the answer from students easily. The taxonomy was constructed based on the theory of learning strategies as well as on the theories of memory. It is technologically simple, can be applied to learners of different educational backgrounds and target languages, is rich and sensitive to the other relevant learning strategies, and allows comparisons with other studies. Moreover, many researchers adopt this taxonomy in their studies relating to VLS. Akabari & Hosseini (2008), Saengpakdeejit (2014) and Azizi & Zamaniyan (2013) are some to be mentioned, so the validity of the taxonomy is verified.

2.   Methodology

Participants

The study involved 213 English majored students at the tertiary level. They were following the English course that lasts four years at Vinh University. Their ages varied from 19 to 21. Their English proficiencies were at the intermediate level.

Instruments: *Schmitt* (*1997*)*'s vocabulary learning strategies inventory*

The inventory was distributed to 213 students at the beginning of the study. There were fifty-eight VLSs in the questionnaire, divided into six categories: Metacognitive (MET), Social for discovering new word's meaning (SOC1), Social for consolidating new words (SOC2), Determination (DET), Memory (MEM), and Cognitive (COG) strategies. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first part elicited information about learners' cultural and linguistic background, and the second part, containing 58 items, targeted their selection of vocabulary learning strategies. The students were to record their responses on the same five-point Likert scale (from never: 1 to always: 5). In addition, an open-ended question was added at the end of the questionnaire for students to add more VLS. The VLS questionnaire took about 30–40 minutes to complete. The researcher was present to explain the terms students did not know. The data from the questionnaires were processed using an SPSS software.

Students' diaries

Students were randomly asked to write the diaries after the VLS data had been collected. To restrict the limitation of the open-ended nature of the diary, students were given a chart divided into seven days of the week. Each participant was asked to write down in each section only what he/she did each day in order to work out, memorise, and practise new words. Instructions and examples were included in the chart to let students know what was required. 35 students, 10 in the second year and 25 in the third year of university, were asked to voluntarily write the diaries for a month from November to December 2016.

Pre and post interviews

The pre-interview was conducted face-to-face to gain an overall understanding of students' vocabulary learning and their learning experiences at the lower grades. The post-interview was a follow-up step after the collection of the VLS questionnaires and diaries. The main purpose of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of how EFL university learners used VLSs to learn new words. The semi-structured interview facilitated the researcher to elicit additional data if the initial answers were vague, incomplete, or off-topic. The interviews were performed in English, but whenever required, clarification was made in Vietnamese.

3.   Findings

EFL students' VLS use to discover new words

The results from the quantitative and qualitative data showed that students used a variety of strategies to explore new words. The most favoured strategy was "using bilingual dictionaries" and the least favoured one was 'checking for L1 cognate". The data from the VLS survey indicated that dictionaries still played an indispensable role in students' learning new words' meaning, followed by guessing from the context, and analysing parts of speech. Besides, the strategies which do not have any link to the mother tongue (check for L1 cognate) or too traditional (word list) are not thought of or no longer favoured by university students. Table 1 indicates the results from the VLS questionnaire.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Determination strategies

	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Q6: Bilingual dictionaries	213	**3.95**	1.001
Q1: Analyse parts of speech	213	3.65	1.051
Q5: Guess from the textual context	213	3.62	0.938
Q8: Word lists	213	3.53	1.028
Q7: Monolingual dictionaries	213	3.47	1.196
Q2: Analyse affixes and roots	213	2.93	1.066
Q4: Analyse any available pictures or gestures	213	2.91	1.102
Q9: Flash cards	213	2.89	1.134
Q3: Check for L1 cognate	213	2.61	1.319

As shown in Table 1, the most popular strategy was "bilingual dictionaries" (Q6). The bilingual dictionaries strategy with the mean of 3.95 was used much more extensively than monolinguals (M = 3.47). Surprisingly, "analyse parts of speech" (Q1) strategy was recalled as the second important strategy (M = 3.65) and "guessing from the textual context" (Q5) the third

popular one (M = 3.62). However, the difference of standard deviation of these two strategies, 1.051 for Q1 and 0.938 for Q5, showed that even both Q1 and Q5 had approximately the same mean, Q5 was more homogeneous in term of strategy choosing scores. With regard to word lists (M = 3.53, and their more mobile manifestation – flashcards, even frequently used, if not the only strategy, to learn new words in junior schools, they were not favoured by university students. The least used strategy in this group was "check for L1 cognate" (Q3).

Besides, most of the diarists considered the bilingual dictionary as the first aid to find new word meanings. For example, k2_1 wrote:

1. Monday: – *words learnt*: *resolve, inherently, constrained, adversity, achievement, confront, embody, version, pursue, access, ultimately, vision, primary, allocate.*

– used the Oxford dictionary to learn the transcription and listened to the pronunciation, the meaning in English, and then using the FLAT dictionary to check Vietnamese meaning(…).

EFL students' VLS use to memorise new words

The strategies used to memorise new words belong to three groups, including cognitive strategies, memory strategies, and social strategies 2. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of mnemonic strategies

Type of strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cognitive strategies	213	**3.5**	0.6148
Memory strategies	213	3.1	0.5281
Social strategies 2	213	3.0	0.8088

As shown in Table 2, students tended to usually use cognitive strategies to keep new words in mind (M = 3.5). However, three of four most frequently used strategies belong to memory strategies, and they are "studying the spelling of a word", "studying the sound of the word" and "saying the new word aloud when studying" with the means of 4.09, 4.09, 4.02, respectively. The strategies in memory and social 2 groups were sometimes favoured by students with the mean of 3.1 and 3.0.

These findings were consistent with those from the diaries and interviews, where students declared to use a combination of strategies to keep new words in mind. Five most popular strategies used to memorise words from those two data sources included "use new words in sentences", "study the sound of the new word", "connect words to its synonyms and antonyms", "verbal repetition", and "learn the new words of an idiom together". The keyword method was sometimes used interestingly. For example, to memorise the new word "embody", she wrote: *"Em liên tưởng đến một cô Em có BODY nóng bỏng, sexy mà được làm đại diện cho công ty lớn"* (*I imagine about a girl (cô Em) with a sexy Body who becomes a representative for a big company*)

and then she drew the picture of that girl next to the word. Strategies which did not involve any relationship between words such as Peg, Loci, using Cognates were not preferred by tertiary learners.

EFL students' VLS use to practise new words

With respect to VLS used to evaluate and practise a new word's knowledge, students especially liked to put all newly learnt words in a paragraph or in a story. K2_8 wrote in her diary the following: "*After a week, I decided to summarise all the words that I have learned throughout a paragraph… When I write a paragraph, I'll become more creative and active when thinking of those words, combining them perfectly and creating for myself a good paragraph.*"

Moreover, the post-interview question "How do you practise new words?" provided interesting answers from students. It seems that besides making up a paragraph or some kind of stories, web-based practice tests, such as memrise.com or quizzlet.com, were more or less made use. I_12 said, "I used to use a messaging app to learn new words and phrasal verbs. Once I surfed Facebook, one page posted this, then I found it quite interesting, convenient and effective. I applied for this app. Whenever I sent a message, I received new words. I wrote the words down in my vocabulary notebook." The findings from pre-interviews showed that even though students were aware of learning the vocabulary and some seem creative in their practice using new words, only 22% of diarists declared their regular practice or self-evaluation for vocabulary learning.

Discussion and pedagogical implications

The study was set out to determine VLS reported to use by EFL university students. To develop a new word's knowledge, it was found that dictionaries were the most favoured among tertiary students. This higher use frequency for the bilingual dictionaries (especially electronic versions) than that for the monolingual ones is understandable as the participants could find it easier and faster to understand the meaning of the given words. The follow-up interviews revealed that some students usually used a monolingual dictionary to find out a word's features such as pronunciation, meanings, and examples of its use before having a check in the bilingual one. Besides, the analysis indicated that a greater percentage of the Vietnamese students in this study were aware of the sound of English words. Among the five strategies, three are related to the word's sound. This could be explained by the complexity of English word pronunciation. Consequently, the use of dictionary was probably the most useful strategy, as well as it always approaches words in context. Good learners' dictionaries give lots of information about words, not just how to spell them and what they mean. The dictionary also gives pronunciation scripts, and a really good dictionary gives some indications of how common or how rare a word is based on a corpus, and whether the word belongs to a special register such as technical language, newspaper language, or informal spoken language. Setting

learners' tasks to find particular information in a dictionary helps them to use dictionaries more effectively, as well as increases their awareness of the importance of things like register and word-stress, and also which words are frequent and therefore important to learn. As is well known, guessing the meaning of new words or analysing parts of speech of these words is common among university students when dictionaries are not available (in the exams, for example). In fact, guessing from contexts is believed to be especially helpful to students with high proficiency (Sokmen, 1997). That is why teaching the guessing skill is very important.

It should be noted that the EFL university students in this study rarely asked teachers for L1 translation or giving explanations of new words. The finding indicated that the teacher's role in the student's search for a word's meaning is minimised. This phenomenon can be explained by e-dictionary availability in students' mobile phones. Moreover, from the post-interviews, it was found that if none of them could find out a new word's meaning, they would ask their friends for help before asking their teachers. One pedagogical implication could be to include more interactive group/pair work activities to enhance vocabulary learning through teamwork and peer group learning.

There was also a higher use frequency for memory strategies that required them to connect new vocabulary to related words, such as synonyms, antonyms, and coordinates. Nation (2008) indicated that both teachers and learners often think that learning related words together is a good idea. The literature, however, shows that such learning is not a good idea and makes the learning task more difficult. For example, Corpus studies (Kennedy, 2005) have shown that using opposites and synonyms as guides to the usage of words is risky. However, if the related word is a known word, then this will make learning the new form and meaning much easier (Nation, 2008). Looking for related words involves looking at different entries. Looking for related words helps vocabulary learning because it relates unknown words to known words and draws attention to word parts.

The study finding showed the keyword technique to be a very effective strategy. In the large majority of keyword studies, the keyword technique improves learning by at least 20 percent or more in comparison with learning a word in context (Brown and Perry, 1991). However, there were only a few diarists in this study reporting their use of this method, and they did not know how to name it correctly. The implication for language teaching, in this case, might include the teachers' introduction of the method and assign homework for each student to create the way by themselves to describe their new words chosen.

There was a similarity between the VLS survey and the diaries' findings of less frequently used memory strategies. They are strategies that link words together without sense relationships, such as Loci Method and Peg Method, which are believed to help the students remember twice as many words as rote memorisation (Paivio and Derochers, 1979; Bower,

1973); or strategies that relate to word orthography, such as configuration and underlined initial letter of the word. One implication can be drawn from here is to raise the awareness among EFL learners to see whether these strategies work well or not. More research needs to be carried out to find out the effectiveness if it exists.

With respect to practising strategies used by the students, the data from diaries showed that the students usually practised the word use by working in groups. Some participants wrote down their practice of speaking new words with foreigners. Others wrote a paragraph or made up a certain kind of story where all the new words were included. These strategies, as diarists mentioned, could give them a deeper understanding of the word's knowledge and transfer these words from a short-term memory to a long-term memory. It is suggested that the EFL university students' practice is usually receptive and intentional. This can be explained by the lack of exposure time to English speaking people inside as well as outside university. One pedagogical implication for vocabulary teaching is to create activities or situations after each lesson for students to have a chance to use the new words they have learned in the lessons. These activities might be in the form of writing or speaking tasks.

4.   Conclusions

The data from students' diaries and pre- and post-interviews were consistent with the findings from the quantitative analysis. The main findings from the methodological triangulation of the current study can be concluded as follows:

Dictionaries, especially bilingual dictionaries, were the main reference to learn new words among EFL university students. The word sound strategy tended to attract the Vietnamese EFL university learners in the current study, so they studied it in different ways. Putting new words in sentences and connecting words to their relatives were popular strategies among participants to memorise new words. Testing and practicing strategies were not systematically employed by the participants in this study. Moreover, their practice was usually receptive. Some strategies that are believed to be useful to learn vocabulary were ignored by students, such as Keyword Method, Loci Method, Peg Method.

From the results, several pedagogical implications for vocabulary teaching and learning were put forward. First, training students to use dictionaries, as well as recommending good ones, is beneficial for students' vocabulary learning. Second, EFL instructors needed to include practising and testing strategies in their vocabulary teaching to help learners to evaluate, plan and organise their vocabulary learning in a more effective manner. Third, teachers should introduce some new strategies and do some research to see if there is a positive impact on students' vocabulary learning.

Even though the results of this study could bring about a deeper understanding of EFL university students' VLS use to language teachers in order to design more effective vocabulary tasks, it did not appear to be conclusive. Therefore, carrying out more elaborate studies with much larger population should be necessary.

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