

Vocabulary Learning Strategies – A Survey of Efl Albanian University Students

KEYWORDS

vocabulary learning strategies, EFL, metacognitive, activation, guessing, linguistic clues, cognitive

Dr. Pavllo CICKO	Doc. Vasilika POJANI	Dr. Benita STAVRE
Fan S. Noli" University, Shëtitorja	Fan S. Noli" University, Shëtitorja	Fan S. Noli" University, Shëtitorja
"Rilindasit", Korçë, Albania	"Rilindasit", Korçë, Albania.	"Rilindasit", Korçë, Albania.

ABSTRACT This paper aims to investigate the English vocabulary learning strategies used by the second and third year university students at "Fan S. Noli" University of Korça, Faculty of Education and Philology, English Language Department. Their vocabulary learning strategies use was identified in order to reveal the most and the least commonly used ones. Fifty respondents were asked to complete an adapted version of the VLS (Vocabulary Learning Strategies) questionnaire suggested by Gu & Johnson (1996). It consisted of two parts; the first part provided data on the proficiency level of the respondents, the techniques, tools and general habits used in identifying the meaning of the new words while reading authentic texts. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of some statements arranged in nine categories with the aim to collect detailed information on beliefs, attitudes and use of the VLS students utilize to acquire English vocabulary.

Introduction

The recent decades have witnessed an increasing attention on lexis and vocabulary learning strategies for both EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students and teachers. Vocabulary learning has been given a new status in the research approaches of learning a foreign language. That is because teacher are more and more aware of the fact that the learners would face difficulties in their attempts to acquire the language if they have insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Thus, they need to recognize and utilize language learning strategies in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular in order to overcome this first step of linguistic acquisition.

Every EFL teacher with some teaching experience would recognize the importance of vocabulary learning in foreign language acquisition. Learners without a considerable vocabulary size (potential size) of lexicon would never be good (speakers and writers) users of English. As stated by McCarthy (1992) "without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way "(p.50). The importance of vocabulary is also well stated by the linguist David Wilkins who advised the students from a recent course book: "If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!" (as cited in Thornbury, 2002, p. 13)

Nation (2000) described the 'learning burden' of a word as the amount of effort that a learner puts in learning the word. According to him, "different words have different learning burdens for learners with different backgrounds and each of the aspects of what it means to know a word, can contribute to its learning burden" (p. 23).

In order to be able to build this extensive vocabulary store, the EFL learners need to be good users of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). (Schmitt, 2000) In this respect the task of the teachers is to help students decrease their learning burdens by providing some organized vocabulary learning strategies for them. "Vocabulary learning strategy is the process, by which vocabulary is obtained, stored, retrieved and used" (as cited in Schmitt & McCarty, 1997, p. 6). Only by their application and consolidation EFL students will minimize difficulties in vocabulary acquisition.

Several studies have been carried out to develop the taxonomy of VLS and a number of researchers have proposed various classifications of them. (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt and Schmitt 1993; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001; Fan, 2003; and Gu, 2003). Thus, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) divided learning vocabulary into remembering a word and learning a new word. Then, GU (2003) classified second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as cognitive, metacognitive, memory and activation strategies. Thirdly, Schmitt (1997) improved vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford (1990) into determination (not seeking another person's expertise) strategies, social (seeking another person's expertise) and though the remembering category comprises social, memorization, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Finally, Fan (2003) who refined Gu's (2003) classification, categorized vocabulary learning strategies into a "primary category", which contains dictionary strategies and guessing strategies as well as, a "remembering category", which integrates repetition, association, grouping, analysis and known words strategies.

In a rather recent study, Marin-Marin (2005) examined the utilization of vocabulary learning strategies by 150 EFL students at the University of Quintana. It was found that guessing the meaning from the context, using the dictionary to check the meaning and silent repetition were the most commonly used strategies; on the other hand keeping notes on electric devices, using electric dictionaries and recording words on audiotapes were the least commonly used strategies. Additionally, Marin-Marin (2005) explored that contextual guessing, dictionary use and silent repetition were utilized frequently by EFL learners at Quintana University. In contrast, electronic note keeping, using electronic dictionary and using vocabulary tape- recording were rarely used.

In spite of some slight changes, the taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies have become the focus of many research studies. Their recognition and application is a vital instrument in the hands of the EFL learners to acquire good knowledge on vocabulary in particular and on English language in general. Therefore, "without some knowledge of that vocabulary, neither language production nor language comprehension would be possible" (Anglein, Miller & Wakefield, 1993, p.2).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by EFL University students of Korça,

English Language Program and to find out the most commonly applied ones in the process of new words learning and language acquisition.

Method

Sixty second and third-year undergraduate students from "Fan S. Noli" University, Faculty of Education and Philology were involved in this research. The respondents were attending courses of English Teaching Study Program, Bachelor Degree (First Level Studies) in the academic year 2012 - 2013. 38 of them were females and 12 were males and their age ranged from 19 to 21. According to their English proficiency, 24 students were studying in the upper-intermediate level while 26 in the advanced level or proficiency. To achieve results as accurate and reliable as possible from this study, the students were advised to take into consideration the way they learn the new words they encounter in the authentic texts and passages of the respective course books (CAE RE-SULT (2008) and Gold Proficiency (2001). This meant to set equal standards of criteria evaluation, since they learned the new words they encountered daily in the course books they were studying during their intensive reading English classes.

Procedure
Table 1. Description of participants

Variables	Category	number
Variables	Female	38
Gender		
	Male	12
	Total	50
Ctudy program	II - year students	24
Study program – English Teaching	III - rd year stu- dents	26
	Total	50

To identify the vocabulary learning strategies the participants employed, this study made use of an adapted version of the vocabulary strategy questionnaire proposed by Gu & Johnson (1996). The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part contained eight questions which were compiled to provide information on the proficiency level of the respondents, the techniques, tools and habits (never, rarely, occasionally & often) used in identifying the meaning of the new words while reading and comprehending a passage with some unknown words. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of nine categories such as beliefs about learning, metacognitive regulation, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note-taking strategies, memory strategies, activation strategies, sources and anxiety with some sub-statements each to collect information on preferred VLS students employed to acquire English vocabulary. The subjects responded using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

The questionnaire was administered on June 24th, 2013. Students' participation was voluntary. The questionnaire was compiled in English as they were all EFL learners of the upper- intermediate and advanced level. The survey was kept anonymous to encourage students answer the questionnaire as honestly as possible. The data were calculated in percentage.

Findings
Table 2: The frequency students do each of the following actions in order to help themselves learn new words and phrases in English

C	Never		Rarely		Occasionally		Often	
Statement	S	%	S	%	S	%	S	%
imagine or draw a picture of the object/idea the word represents.	3	6 %	17	34%	12	24%	18	36%
group words that are similar or are related in some way.	0	0%	16	32%	24	48%	10	20%
I hold or point to an object that the English word represents while thinking or saying the word.	7	14%	17	34%	13	26%	13	26%
think of an English word that looks or sounds like the Alba- nian word, and I think about how the meanings are related.	3	6%	17	34%	16	32%	14	28%
look for structural rules (prefixes, suffixes, roots, etc.) that give clues to the word's meaning.	0	0%	7	14%	12	24%	31	62%
I think of an English word that sounds like the Albanian word and I get a picture in my mind to link the meanings of the English and Albanian words.	4	8%	22	44%	14	28%	10	20%
I review new words with a classmate.	13	26%	12	24%	14	28%	11	22%
I test myself to see if I have learned the words.	0	0%	12	24%	10	20%	28	56%

Having analyzed the first part questionnaire data which had to do with a general and descriptive analysis of the techniques, tools and habits used in identifying the meaning of new words, it resulted that most of the research subjects (36%) do often think or draw a picture of the object the new word represents but also a considerable number of them (32%) rarely use this technique. The instruments of grouping or relating the similar words and pointing to an object the

English word stands for, seems to be rarely used. The most frequently used approach (62%) is looking for the structural means which help the students find clues for the new word meaning. As for the techniques the students use to remember new words, the data revealed that they never or rarely (50%) reviewed the new words with their friends but they often (56%) did test their memorization.

Beliefs about vocabulary learning Table 3: Words should be memorized

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongl Disagre	•
The best way to remember words is to memorize word lists	5	10%	19	38%	15	30%	9	18%	2	4%
Repetition is the best way to remember words	33	66%	15	30%	2	4%	0	0 %	0	0%
It is only necessary to remember one dictionary definition	3	6 %	7	14%	18	36%	18	36%	4	8%
I can acquire a large vocabulary by memory of individual words	7	14%	18	36%	10	20%	13	26%	2	4%

Table 3 illustrates the ways students use to memorize vocabulary and it was found out that 52 % of the subjects were either unsure or disagreed with the word list memorization. 66% of them strongly believed that the best way to remember new words was to repeat them but remembering only

one dictionary definition was not considered as a necessity by 76 % of the research subjects (36% unsure + 40 % disagree) although half of them (14% + 36%) were of the opinion that a large vocabulary acquisition was achieved by memorizing individual words.

Table 4: Words should be acquired in context

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagre	ee	5 Strongly Disagree	
I can identify the meaning of most words through reading	19	38%	28	56%	1	2%	2	4%	0	0%
I can expand my vocabulary through reading a lot	31	62%	14	28%	5	10%	0	0%	0	0%
Guessing words in context is one of the best ways to learn vocabulary	26	52%	13	26%	7	14%	4	8%	0	0%

In analyzing the role reading and context play in vocabulary learning, the results of Table 4 showed that almost all research subjects (96%) did accept that context is the best way in identifying the meaning of the new words and 78% of them considered reading as the most effective way to expand the vocabulary bulk. However, 14% of the subjects were not sure of the guessing strategy as one of the best ways to learn vocabulary.

Table 5: Words should be studied and put to use:

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagre			
I revise the new words I have learned	15	30%	32	64%	3	6%	0	0%	0	0%		
I use the words that I have learned	26	52%	22	44%	2	4%	0	0%	0	0%		
When I learned the word I pay close attention to its new usage and new meaning	25	50%	17	34%	5	10%	3	6%	1	2%		
When I have learned the word, I will recall the meaning to help me understand the context	22	44%	24	48%	4	8%	0	0%	0	0%		

Regarding the importance of the new words use, Table 5 displayed that as soon as the new word was learned, 94% - 96% of the respondents revised and tried to use it by recalling the new meaning or usage. This finding emphasizes once more the essential role revision and usage of new words have in vocabulary learning. But an average of 7-8 % of the students seemed not to pay attention to the usage and the new meaning of the learned word, lacking, therefore, the practice and the willingness to extend their vocabulary, a characteristic of the poor learners.

Table 6: Metacognitive Regulation Self- initiation strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strong Disagre	,
I think about my progress in vocabulary learning	9	18%	28	56%	12	24%	1	2%	0	0%
I try to find out all I can about the new words I learn	8	16%	36	72%	5	10%	1	2%	0	0%
I only focus on things that are related to examinations	1	2%	10	20%	9	18%	25	50%	5	10%

Metacognitive regulation is known as the strategy which deals with learning through natural exposure. Self-initiation is one of the two metacognitive regulation sub-strategies which means that students decide by themselves what other materials to read besides the textbooks in order to expand their vocabulary. The data of Table 6 showed that most of research subjects (74%) are aware of the importance vocabu-

lary knowledge had in their progress and almost all of them (88%) tried to find out more about the new word but this was not done for the examination purposes (60%). However, there were still a considerable number of respondents (40%) whose study of new words was conditioned by examination results.

Table 7: Selective attention

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree	2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		e
I know which words are important for me to learn	16	32%	17	34%	9	18%	5	10%	3	6%
I look up words that I'm interested in	19	38%	22	44%	2	4%	7	14%	0	0%
I make a note of words that seem important to me	18	36%	25	50%	5	10%	2	4%	0	0%
I know what cues I should use in guessing the meaning of a particular word	9	18%	26	52%	14	28%	1	2%	0	0%

Selective attention as the second sub-strategy of metacognitive regulation means having a sense of which words should be looked up in the dictionary and whose meanings can be guessed. 82% of the respondents consulted a dictionary to find out the meaning of the new words and 86% of them used note taking technique for important words and 70% of

them did know what cues to use in guessing the meaning of the word. On the other hand, 28% of the students were not sure of the tools used on new word meaning guessing. Nevertheless, the overall findings of this strategy showed that they made an attempt to increase their knowledge on vocabulary.

Table 8: Guessing Strategies - Use background knowledge

Statement	1		2		3		4		5	
	Strong	ly Agree	Agree		Unsure		Disagre	e	Strongly Disagree	!
skip words I don't understand	10	20%	17	34%	5	10%	10	20%	8	16%
use my experience and common sense to guess	19	38%	28	56%	3	6%	0	0%	0	0%
guess the meaning and then look at the dictionary (when I meet new words n reading)	25	50%	19	38%	4	8%	1	2%	1	2%
l use alternative clues and try again if l fail to guess the meaning of a word.	12	24%	22	44%	11	22%	5	10%	0	0%

When it comes to the guessing strategies, the results in Table 8 show that more than a half of the respondents (54%) skipped the new word they did not understand, while a majority of the respondents (94%) did make use of their prior knowledge and experience to guess the meaning of the word and then confirmed its meaning by looking it up at the dictionary (88%). As for the use of the alternative clues, it

was found that a considerable number of the subjects (68%) tried to use alternative clues (when they failed to guess the meaning of a new word) although there were some (32%) who were unaware of the employment of other alternative clues. This should be a point of concern for teachers, in order to help their students fill this knowledge gap in the use of strategies.

Table 9: Using linguistic clues

Statement	1 Strong	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		, e
I make use of my knowledge of the topic to guess the meaning of word	11	22%	35	70%	2	4%	2	4%	0	0%
I look at the part of speech of the new word (to guess the meaning of the new word)	17	34%	28	56%	4	8%	1	2%	0	0%
I analyze the word structure (prefix, root and suffix) when guessing the meaning of the word)	21	42%	22	44%	5	10%	2	4%	0	0%

By analyzing the linguistic clues the respondents used, it came out that this strategy was extensively used. They made use of the knowledge of the topic (92%) and of the word

function and structure (90% - 86%) to guess the meaning of the new word.

Table 10: Dictionary Strategies

Statement	1 Strongl	Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		_	5 Strongly Disagre	•
I use an English dictionary	40	80%	10	20%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
I use a bilingual dictionary	14	28%	28	56%	3	6%	5	10%	0	0%
I use the dictionary to find out the pronunciation of the word	21	42%	21	42%	4	8%	2	4%	2	4%
I use the dictionary to find only the meaning of the word	5	10%	14	28%	10	20%	20	40%	1	2%
I look in the dictionary for the grammatical patterns of the word	10	20%	27	54%	7	14%	6	12%	0	0%
I look in the dictionary for collocation patterns	9	18%	30	60%	11	22%	0	0%	0	0%
I use the dictionary to find the appropriate usage (example sentence) of the word.	22	44%	25	50%	3	6%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 10 revealed the frequent use of the dictionary strategy by the students. Having analyzed the results, it was found out that all of them used a dictionary (100%), mostly a bilingual one (84%) to learn the pronunciation (83%), grammatical forms (74%) and collocations (78%) of the new word. The least preferred sub-strategy was using the dictionary to find

only the meaning of the unknown word (38%) while the most preferred one was using the dictionary to comprehend the exact meaning of the word in the example sentence (94%), which shows again the fact that upper-intermediate and proficient students tend to look for safer vocabulary strategies which would increase their proficient use of the language.

Table 11: Note Taking Strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagre	
I have a vocabulary note book to list down new word	15	30%	23	46%	5	10%	7	14%	0	0%
I write down the English word and Albanian translation of the word	16	32%	20	40%	6	12%	8	16%	0	0%
I only take note the meaning of the word	5	10%	24	48%	11	22%	10	20%	0	0%
I take note of the usages of the word (example sentences, part of speech, etc.)	8	16%	31	62%	8	16%	3	6%	1	2%
I take note of the synonym or antonym of the word	7	14%	30	60%	9	18%	3	6%	1	2%

By analyzing the above data, it was found that the note-taking strategies were differently employed by the research subjects. A considerable number declared that they kept a vocabulary notebook (76%) but the reasons for keeping it seemed to be different. The most frequent sub-strategy was note-taking of the usages of the new word (78%), followed by the note-taking of the synonyms and antonym (74%), of the Albanian translation (72%) and the least frequent substrategy was found to be the note-taking to learn the meaning of the word (58%). It was interesting to note that 42% of

the students were either unsure or did disagree with the note taking for only the meaning of the word. This implies that note taking was considered as an essential technique in vocabulary learning. However, the percentage of the students who did not write the word translation (28%), did not keep a notebook or write down its synonyms and antonyms (24%) and did not take down notes for the new word usages (22%) explains the unawareness of a quarter of the respondents of the importance the note taking has for the independent learning of the vocabulary.

Table 12: Memory/ Repetition Strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
To remember a word, I repeat it aloud to myself	14	28%	24	48%	4	8%	7	14%	1	2%
To remember a word, I write it repeatedly	14	28%	15	30%	8	16%	11	22%	2	4%
I create a mental image of the new word to help me remember it	17	34%	26	52%	4	8%	2	4%	1	2%
To remember a word, I analyze the word by breaking it into different parts (prefix, root, suffix)	16	32%	22	44%	7	14%	5	10%	0	0%

Rehearsal is another important strategy which enhances vocabulary learning. The findings of Table 6 showed that a majority of respondents employed the repetition strategy to memorize and learn the word but 76% of them did prefer oral repetition than the written one (58%). Also a good num-

ber of students (86%) referred to mental image creation as a fruitful way to remember a new word. However, the data showed there were a good percentage of the respondents (24%) who could find it difficult to break word into parts in order to remember it.

Table 13: Activation Strategies

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I make use of the words I learned in speaking and writing	26	52%	22	44%	2	4%	0	0%	0	0%
I make use of the words I learned in every-day situations	12	24%	31	62%	6	12%	1	2%	0	0%

As for the activation strategies, the results of Table 13 showed that students seemed to practice new words by interacting with other people, i.e. in speaking and writing (88%). Its importance has been emphasized by many linguists among

them Ellis (1995) according to whom second language learners need to experience communication problems and be provided with opportunities to negotiate solutions to them, in order to be able to acquire a new language.

Table 14: Sources

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I learn new words only in my class from my teacher	3	6%	3	6%	4	8%	28	56%	12	24%
I learn new words from reading English materials (e.g. newspaper, novels, etc.)	16	32%	24	48%	9	18%	1	2%	0	0%

The main source of reference for the subjects was considered to be reading of the English materials (80%) compared to the teacher as a source of new vocabulary which was supported

by a very small number of students, only 6 out of 50. These figures showed that students can become better learners when they make use of other resources besides their teacher.

Table 15: Anxiety

Statement	1 Strongly Agree		2 Agree		3 Unsure		4 Disagree		5 Strongly Disagree	
I feel anxious about reading in English	0	0%	16	32%	7	14%	18	36%	9	18%
I skip words I don't understand when I read in English	3	6%	14	28%	9	18%	14	28%	10	20%
I do not know how to learn vocabulary	0	0%	1	2%	2	4%	21	42%	26	52%

Although a considerable percentage of respondents felt anxious about reading in English (46% agreed or unsure), they still believed that they did know how to learn vocabulary (94%).

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, we would draw some results which help us elicit the attitude of the EFL Albanian university students about the use of the vocabulary learning strategies. The strategies most often used were dictionary strategies, repetition and memorization and guessing strategies among which experience and common sense are widely used. The frequency with which the VLS were used, showed that students were aware of the importance of the new words acquisition in order to increase their English speaking and writing proficiency. While the least employed strategies were found to be note taking strategies and the use of some background knowledge such as alternative clues. It may be interpreted as a growing tendency of the learners toward their linguistic self-confidence, which leads them to a greater approach to memorization rather than note-taking and written repletion.

As for the sources the respondents made use of to learn new words, it resulted that more attention should be given to authentic material reading though, they knew that new words learning could not be achieved only by the teachers in their English language classes. The findings also revealed that many students did not use or were unsure which strategies to use. Therefore the teachers should train them on vocabulary learning strategies in order to prepare them to become independent learners. The fact that the number of the learners who needed further information in this respect, was enough to show that teachers of lower levels of the TEFL should provide space in their daily teaching plans for the introduction of the vocabulary learning strategies.

This study is believed to have provided some information on the knowledge and use of the vocabulary learning strategies by Albanian students of EFL. Although there might be different factors that affect vocabulary learning strategies, their use and acquisition still remains vital for the students' performance and language enhancement.

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