

The Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Sudanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) play a crucial role in vocabulary learning. For ESL or EFL learners, the lack of vocabulary knowledge in the target language may have an effect on the four language skills of EFL. The use of VLSs facilitates learners' vocabulary learning process and helps them to become more self-directed. However, few studies have been conducted on the use of VLSs amongst by Sudanese EFL learners. VLSs used in this pilot study are based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. The main purpose of this study is to explore the vocabulary learning strategies used by Sudanese EFL learners. In addition, it attempts to investigate which vocabulary learning strategy is the most frequently used by Sudanese EFL learners. Data collected via a questionnaire of (VLSs) were adapted from Al-Fuhaid (2004). Findings indicated that Sudanese EFL learners used a medium range of strategies. Discovery strategies were the most frequent strategies of the three demonstrated.

Key words: vocabulary learning, L2 vocabulary, L2 learning, vocabulary learning strategies, English as a foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

Language has been traditionally divided into grammar and vocabulary. For a long time attention was diverted to grammar and it was believed that once certain grammatical rules are learned, learners can acquire as many words as they need in order to communicate. Only a few scholars realized the fallacy of such beliefs. For example, Wilkins (1972, p. 110) believes that vocabulary acquisition can be delayed until a

substantial proportion of lexical items are learned is tenable only when the learner is not likely to have a pressing need to use the language". In fact vocabulary plays an important role in the language learning process and has considered as an integral part of a language. The primary aspect in learning a language is the acquisition of a vocabulary and practice in using it.

According to Decarrico (2001, p. 285) "vocabulary learning is certainly of critical importance to language acquisition, where the language is first, second or foreign". Similarly, Mc Cathy (1990, p. 8) notes that "no matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successful the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way". The most pressing need of people learning another language is vocabulary. In addition, Laufer and Sim (1985) claim that vocabulary has been considered central to the development of language proficiency. When people learn a foreign language, most people have strong feelings towards words. Words are very rewarding objects of study for language learners. The purpose that we learn second language is for communication. When we learn a language, we need to master four language skills. Meanwhile, vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to them. One cannot understand a sentence without knowing what most of the words mean. The lack of vocabulary knowledge affects all the four language skills.

However, most learners identify the acquisition of vocabulary as their greatest source of problems. Therefore, particular attention has been given to the study of vocabulary learning strategies, exploring the specific actions or mental operations taken by individual learners to enhance their own vocabulary learning (O'Mally & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). In this regard, Schmitt (1997) states that learning strategies are the tools that learners use for active, self-directed language learning, and research shows that the conscious use of such strategies is strongly associated with language achievement and proficiency. Therefore learner's actions might have a great effect on their acquisition of language and language achievement depended quite heavily on the individual learner's endeavors (Schmitt, 1997).

Learning vocabulary needs special effort because a large proportion of vocabulary learning goes on outside of the classroom. It is definitely impossible for teachers to introduce all vocabulary items and explain all components of words knowledge in class. Most of the time, students have to count on themselves and manage their own vocabulary learning. Therefore, the more learners can independently engage in their learning and actively employ appropriate strategies; the greatest chance it is for them to become successful in vocabulary learning. Therefore, the primary aim of this pilot study is to enhance the status of vocabulary learning at the university level by investigating the use of VLSs among Sudanese EFL learners.

Sudanese learners at tertiary level are acknowledged to encounter many difficulties when they learn English as foreign language and one of the main problems is that lack of vocabulary knowledge (Ahmed, 1988). In addition, Ahmed (1988) noted that Sudanese EFL learners have a lack of knowledge in using vocabulary learning strategies and they

often face problems of using accurate vocabulary or language items they need to express the target meaning across exposure. In addition, vocabulary learning is not precisely defined in the curriculum in Sudanese universities in spite of the evident limitations of vocabulary knowledge. Moreover the curriculum of English language at tertiary level in Sudanese universities is affected with the arabicization since before 1956; Sudan was a British colony, teachers at that time were English and English language was the medium of instructions. As a result, arabicization led to decline of standards in English. In addition, learners and learning style in Sudan depends heavily on text books as a most important factor that has a great influence on language learning (Alfaki, 2015).

In fact, there is no existence of autonomous vocabulary learning in Sudan as it is an important aspect of L2 vocabulary learning. Thus, autonomous vocabulary learning needs to be achieved among Sudanese EFL learners. Autonomous vocabulary learning is often the only option left for L2 learners, and this for two reasons; first, L2 vocabulary learning requirements go beyond a standard teacher-led course. Second, the contact between teachers and learners is often weak (Tudor, 1993 cited in Al- Fuhaid, 2004). Therefore, there is a need for autonomous learning of L2 vocabulary in the case of Sudanese EFL university learners because they need to become self-directed in vocabulary learning and need to take some responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, planning and evaluating their progress over time as one of the main features of autonomous learning. Thus, in order to be able to achieve autonomous learning effectively, learners undoubtedly need to be aware of the nature and requirements of learning L2 vocabulary in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have been done in different countries to examine the use of VLSs among ESL and EFL learners. For instance, Kalajahi et al. (2014) carried out a study to examine the vocabulary learning strategies among Malaysian ESL students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at University Putra Malaysia (UPM). Data collected via a set of questionnaire that based from the inventory of vocabulary learning strategies developed by Schmitt (1997). Questionnaire was given out to 50 participants all of whom were undergraduate students at the Faculty of Educational Studies in UPM. The findings indicated that metacognitive strategies were utilized very frequently by participants due to the fact that university students are high order in planning, monitoring in their own learning process. In addition, social strategies were least preferred because most of the curriculum design doesn't promote collaborative and social learning.

In Asian context, Rahimy and Shams (2012) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary test score. Respondents were 64 EFL learners majoring in different fields at English language institute. Data were gathered from oxford placement test (OPT), vocabulary test and vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire (VLSQ). The findings

showed that there was a significant effect of vocabulary learning strategies on intermediate EFL learners' performance in a vocabulary test in which most of the high-score students have often or always applied the strategies given in the questionnaire in order to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

However, few studies have been conducted on the use of VLS used by Sudanese EFL learners. The only available research work in the field of vocabulary learning strategies has been conducted by Ahmed (1988). Ahmed (1988) investigated the VLS used among 300 Sudanese learners of English. Results indicated that good and poor learners had different ways of using strategies. Therefore, the findings which relate to previous research works indicated that students employed different types of strategies to deal with their vocabulary learning and most EFL learners neglect many aspects of using VLSs.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by Sudanese EFL learners?
2. Which one of this vocabulary learning strategy is the most frequently used by Sudanese EFL learner?

METHOD

Participants

The sample of this pilot study consisted of 5 Sudanese EFL in their fourth year of study at Faculty of Education, Khartoum University. Their ages ranged from 20 to 36 years old.

Instrument

This study uses an adapted version of the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire proposed by Al-Fuhaid (2004). The questionnaire was considered appropriate for this study as it was used in the context of Saudi Arabia, where the EFL educational environment is very similar to the Sudanese teaching and learning environment. Therefore, it was convenient and useful to adapt this questionnaire and administer it to Sudanese students. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part elicits details about students' demographic background and personal details such as gender, age, marital status, and the time when they started learning English. The second part consists of 53 items which are divided into three strategies, metacognitive strategies (20 items), discovery strategies (12 items) and consolidation strategies consist of memory strategies (12 items) and cognitive strategies (9 items).

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in one session. The items in the questionnaire were clarified one by one to enable the students to give accurate responses. The researcher encouraged respondents to report what they actually do in respect of strategy use and what they actually believe in respect of rating the usefulness of each

strategy. Respondents reminded repeatedly to answer all of the questionnaire items. Respondents took 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire and handed in their responses. The data from the questionnaire was analyzed using frequency counts and were tabulated and converted into percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed in order to answer the two research questions. The first research question addressed, what are the vocabulary learning strategies used by Sudanese EFL learners? In order to answer this question, three major vocabulary learning strategies (metacognitive, discovery and consolidation) have been investigated in order to examine their use by Sudanese EFL learners. The following table shows respondents' use of metacognitive strategies.

Table 1. Respondents' use of metacognitive strategies

No	Metacognitive Strategies	No of Respondents used this Strategy	%
1	learning words from a published word list	1	20%
2	learning words from published word cards	1	20%
3	trying to learn directly from a dictionary	4	80%
4	Study the English affixation system	3	60%
5	watching TV channels	4	80%
6	listening to radio programs	1	20%
7	reading newspapers	1	20%
8	surfing the internet	4	80%
9	making use of on-screen English Arabic translation	4	80%
10	learning vocabulary through graded reading	1	20%
11	learning vocabulary through controlled reading	1	20%
12	learning vocabulary through free reading	1	20%
13	ignoring some new words	1	20%
14	planning vocabulary revision	1	20%
15	evaluating L2 vocabulary knowledge	1	20%
16	continuing to learn vocabulary over time	3	60%
17	learning about VLS and nature of L2 vocabulary learning	1	20%
18	interacting with native speakers of English	1	20%
19	discussing vocabulary learning problems and requirements with a teacher	1	20%
20	co-operating with classmates to improve vocabulary	4	80%

Table 1 shows that five metacognitive strategies were registered high percentage 80% used by Sudanese EFL learners. These comprise the strategies of trying to learn directly from the dictionary, watching TV channels, surfing the internet, making use of on-screen English Arabic translation and cooperating with classmates to improve L2 vocabulary.

In addition, two strategies occupy a middle position in terms of frequency and registered 60% used by respondents. These comprise the strategies of continuing to learn vocabulary over time and study the English affixation system. However, thirteen metacognitive strategies registered 20% used by respondents. These comprise the strategies of learning words from a published word list, learning words from published

word cards, listening to radio programs, reading newspapers, learning about VLS and nature of L2 vocabulary learning, using graded readers, controlled reading, using free reading, ignoring some new words, planning vocabulary revision, evaluating L2 vocabulary knowledge, interacting with native speakers and discussing vocabulary requirements and problems.

These results match the results of several studies which have been conducted in the domain of the use of VLSs, such as (Al-Khasawneh, 2013; Al-Fuhaid 2004; Schmitt 1997). All these studies showed that metacognitive strategies were the least frequency used strategies. Sudanese EFL learners too used metacognitive strategies least frequently. This result could indicate that Sudanese EFL learners lack familiarity with metacognitive strategies and this could explain a weakness in their approach to language learning. The following table shows respondents' use of discovery strategies.

Table 2. Respondents' use of discovery strategies

No	Discovery Strategies	No of Respondents used this Strategy	%
1	using English-Arabic dictionaries	4	80%
2	using English-English dictionaries	4	80%
3	using Arabic- English dictionaries	3	60%
4	using electronic dictionaries	4	80%
5	using vocabulary sections or glossaries	3	60%
6	using instant on-screen computer translation	1	20%
7	using the Microsoft Word thesaurus feature	1	20%
8	using guessing strategies	4	80%
9	analyzing affix and roots	4	80%
10	seeking help from a teacher	1	20%
11	asking your classmate about a meaning of new words	4	80%
12	discovering meanings of new words through group work	4	80%

The above table shows that seven discovery strategies registered high percentage 80% used by Sudanese EFL learners. These strategies are; using English-Arabic dictionaries, using English-English dictionaries, using electronic dictionaries, analysing affix and roots, contextual guessing, asking your classmate about a meaning of new words and discovering meanings of new words through group work. In addition, strategies of using vocabulary sections or glossaries and using Arabic- English dictionaries registered a middle position in terms of frequency and registered 60% used by respondents. However, three discovery strategies registered 20% used by respondents. These comprise the strategies of using instant on-screen computer translation, using the Microsoft Word thesaurus feature and seeking help from a teacher.

The results of this study seem to match with those of Al-akloby's (2001), Schmitt's (1997) and Intaraprasert's (2004) in that students utilized discovery strategies most frequently, specifically used dictionaries in order to understand the meaning of unknown words.

The following table shows respondents' use of consolidation strategies.

Table 3. Respondents' use of consolidation strategies

No	Consolidation Strategies	No of Respondents used this Strategy	%
1	using pictures/imagery (mem)	1	20%
2	using the keyword method (mem)	1	20%
3	using semantic feature grids (mem)	3	60%
4	using semantic maps (mem)	1	20%
5	using scales for gradable words (mem)	1	20%
6	learning multi-word units (mem)	4	80%
7	noting a new word (or new words) into a sentence or a phrase (mem)	3	60%
8	studying the spelling of new words (mem)	4	80%
9	studying the pronunciation of new words (mem)	4	80%
10	connecting a word to a personal experience (mem)	3	60%
11	connecting a new word to its synonyms or antonyms (mem)	1	20%
12	associating the new word with its coordinates (mem)	1	20%
13	verbal repetition (cog)	3	60%
14	written repetition (cog)	4	80%
15	repeated listening to a tape-recorded story (cog)	1	20%
16	repeated listening to a tape-recorded word list (cog)	1	20%
17	repeated listening to other tape-recorded material (cog)	1	20%
18	taking vocabulary notes (cog)	4	80%
19	designing a word list (cog)	1	20%
20	designing flash cards (cog)	1	20%
21	using revision materials	3	60%

Table 3 shows that consolidation strategies consist of memory strategies and cognitive strategies. Regarding the use of memory strategies by Sudanese EFL respondents, three strategies were registered high percentage 80% used by respondents. These strategies are learning multi-word units, studying the spelling of new words and studying the pronunciation of new words. In addition, three strategies registered a middle position in terms of frequency and registered 60% used by respondents. These strategies are, using semantic feature grids, noting a new word into a sentence or a phrase and connecting a word to a personal experience. However, six memory strategies registered 20% used by respondents. These comprise the strategies of using pictures/imagery, using the keyword method, using semantic maps, using scales for gradable words, connecting a new word to its synonyms or antonyms and associating the new word with its coordinates.

Whereas, the use of cognitive strategies indicated that, two strategies were registered high percentage 80% used by respondents. These strategies are written repetition and taking vocabulary notes strategies. In addition, two strategies registered a middle position in terms of frequency and registered 60% used by respondents. These strategies were verbal repetition and using revision materials. However, five cognitive strategies registered 20% used by respondents. These comprise the strategies of repeated listening to a tape-recorded story, repeated listening to a tape-recorded word list, repeated listening to other tape-recorded material, designing a word list and designing flash cards.

The second research question asked which one of these vocabulary learning strategies is the most frequently used by Sudanese EFL learners. The following table shows the percentages of metacognitive strategies most frequently used by respondents.

Table 4. Respondents' most frequently used of metacognitive strategies

No	Metacognitive Strategy	Most frequently used	%
3	trying to learn directly from the dictionary	4	80%
5	watching TV channels	4	80%
8	surfing the internet	4	80%
9	making use of on-screen English Arabic translation	4	80%
20	cooperating with classmates to improve L2 vocabulary.	4	80%

The above table shows that there are five metacognitive strategies most frequently used by respondents. These strategies are trying to learn directly from the dictionary, watching TV channels, surfing the internet, making use of on-screen English Arabic translation and cooperating with classmates to improve L2 vocabulary. The rarely use of metacognitive strategies indicated that Sudanese EFL learners lack knowledge of metacognitive strategies and this could demonstrate a lack of vocabulary knowledge in their approach to language learning.

The following table shows the percentages of discovery strategies most frequently used by respondents.

Table 5. Respondents' most frequently used of discovery strategies

No	Discovery Strategy	Most frequently used	%
1	using English-Arabic dictionaries	4	80%
2	using English-English dictionaries	4	80%
4	using electronic dictionaries	4	80%
8	contextual guessing	4	80%
9	analyzing affix and roots	4	80%
11	asking your classmate about a meaning of new words	4	80%
12	discovering meanings of new words through group work	4	80%

According to the table of respondents' use of discovery strategies, there are seven strategies are the most frequency used by respondents; using English-Arabic dictionaries, using English-English dictionaries, using electronic dictionaries, analysing affix and roots, contextual guessing, asking your classmate about a meaning of new words and discovering meanings of new words through group work. The results showed that discovery strategies were the most frequency used strategies among all types of strategies.

The following table shows the percentages of consolidation strategies most frequently used by respondents.

Table 6. Respondents' most frequently used of consolidation strategies

No	Consolidation Strategy	Most frequently used	%
6	learning multi-word units, studying (mem)	4	80%
8	studying the spelling of new words (mem)	4	80%
9	studying the pronunciation of new words (mem)	4	80%
14	written repetition (cog)	4	80%
18	taking vocabulary notes strategies (cog)	4	80%

According to the table, consolidation strategies consist of memory strategies and cognitive strategies. Regarding the frequency used among memory strategies, there are three strategies were the most frequency used by respondents; learning multi-word units, studying the spelling of new words and studying the pronunciation of new words. Whereas, the results o of cognitive strategies indicated that, two strategies were the most frequency used by respondents. These strategies are written repetition and taking vocabulary notes strategies. The scarcely use of consolidation strategies indicated that Sudanese EFL learners require training in memory and cognitive strategies.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the results obtained from this study, it may be concluded that the Sudanese EFL learners used varying range of vocabulary learning strategies. Discovery strategies were the most frequency used by respondents. However, metacognitive and consolidation strategies were the less frequency used by respondents. The results indicated that Sudanese EFL learners require training in vocabulary knowledge in terms of how they can extend their size of vocabulary and how they can keep remember new items for long time. In addition, they need training in vocabulary learning strategies in order to become self-directed in vocabulary learning.

The study is basically limited to the use of vocabulary learning strategies with respect to the Sudanese EFL learners. Thus, the study would not be generalized to other domain of study or subject matter. The study is also limited to population of Sudanese EFL learners taking the English language as major course at university level, therefore, the results could not be generalized to other population even if they are Sudanese EFL learners at university level because of the different setting and different environment.

With regard to suggestion for future research, the current study confines itself to the context of Khartoum region in general and Khartoum University in particular. Similar studies need to be conducted within other learners in different contexts in order to compare their results and findings to those of the current study. In addition, VLSS investigated in this study are comprehensive set. However, a number of these strategies need to be investigated with more investigation with respect to their effective use, factors affecting their use and also their effect on learning outcomes.

Pedagogical implications are based on the findings of the questioner and the researcher observations. The strategies that require long-term dedication such as planning revision, continuing to learn L2 vocabulary and evaluating L2 vocabulary knowledge and note-taking strategies, registered low frequency indexes. This may suggest that lack

of knowledge, lack of training and lack of motivation. Therefore, these constraints need to be considered by EFL syllabus designers by developing a strategy training program in order to train learners in these strategies. This is to raise their awareness of the nature of L2 vocabulary learning in terms of learner needs, gradual stages of learning and learning requirements. In addition, it is also necessary for teachers to make learners aware of effective planning and continuous evaluation of their vocabulary knowledge.

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