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The Effect of Proficiency on Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use: A Case of Iranian English Translation Students

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to inspect the relationship between proficiency and overall vocabulary learning strategy use among Iranian English Translation students. At the beginning of the study, the questionnaire (Soodmand Afshar, 2010) was piloted on a group of Iranian English translation students. Drawing upon Soodmand Afshar's (2010), subjects were divided into two groups of high and low proficient learners based on their academic records (GPA), and a translation exam. The results of descriptive statistics and rank-ordering indicated that almost three out of five most and two out of five least frequently used strategies were commonly shared by students of all groups though their rank sometimes varied. The results of t-test also indicated that there were no significant differences between high and low proficient English translation students in the case of overall strategy use.
Keywords: English translation students; language learning strategies; overall strategy use; vocabulary learning strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Research in vocabulary learning has gained much interest within the field of second language acquisition. Since translation and interpretation require accurate and automatic word recognition skills, interpreters would need to be equipped with sufficient vocabulary knowledge to translate and interpret fluently. The role of vocabulary in language learning has attracted more and more attention in the course of time. Hymes (1972) emphasizes vocabulary as one of the requirements of functional language use. Some theories like Schmitt (1997) proposed taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies on the basis of Oxford's study (1990) and some others focused on EFL/ESL learners' use of vocabulary strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies have been overshadowed by investigations of many psychologists, linguists, and language teachers in many studies (Levenston, 1979).

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Needless to say that vocabulary is also one of crucial elements of translation since students' and translators' comprehension of a text depends too much on vocabulary knowledge. There are many studies that have shown the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000). Farahani (2006) investigated the relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge and their lexical inferencing strategy use and success. Her research achievements show that there is a significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the type of lexical inferencing strategy use. In other words, those who had stronger vocabulary knowledge were more successful in inferring the meaning of unknown words.

It goes without saying that a good translation depends on good comprehension of the text and a good comprehension to a large extent depends upon sufficient vocabulary knowledge. The largest reading comprehension problem for L2 learners is found to be insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Huckin, 1993), thus, insufficient vocabulary knowledge will result in flaws in translation.

The relationship between strategy use and success in learning an L2 has been the focus of a number of vocabulary learning studies (e.g., O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Stern, 1975). Chesterfield and Chesterfield (1985) said that beginner students had an inclination to use basic strategies often related to the receptive skills while more mature learners employed strategies requiring interaction or reflection of one's learning.

Ahmed (1989) found that good language learners use a larger number of different VLSs (vocabulary learning strategies) than poor language learners. These studies have been conducted in the hope that the strategies used by successful learners could be imparted to less successful learners to improve their L2 acquisition. According to Abraham & Vann (1987), good language learners are usually identified by the choice of particular strategies not usually employed by less successful learners as well as by the greater number of strategies which they use more frequently than their poor counterparts. In order to bridge the research gap in the case of Iranian English translation students' vocabulary learning strategies, the present study tries to find out what vocabulary learning strategies were used most and least frequently by high proficient and low proficient Iranian English translation students.

The study of Iranian English translation students' vocabulary learning strategies deserves particular attention because of some reasons. First, the importance of lexis for the development of second language learning is the focus of much of the theoretical and pedagogical literature on second language education (Richards 1976; Gass 1989). In this case, English Translation field is selected because vocabulary knowledge is one of the key requirements of translators especially when it comes to simultaneous interpretation. Second, the way the learner has been taught, and the way new words are learnt are influential in reinforcing learner knowledge of and ability to use vocabulary (Faerch, Haastrup & Phillipson 1984), and the learning strategies adopted may "radically affect the way in which [learners] learn new words" (Parry 1991, p. 649).

Third, one of the main aspects of second language learning that can be learnt and expanded by the individual independently is vocabulary knowledge. It "is incremental, potentially limitless, and heavily constrained by the individual's experience" (Swain & Carrol 1987. P. 193). This individual nature of vocabulary learning highlights the importance of learners' strategies. Fourth, the amount of vocabulary an English translation student needs will often be very large, and teachers cannot teach students all the vocabulary they will need. Each student is expected to be responsible for much of his/her own learning. Fifth, the identification of strategies adopted by Iranian English translation students' for vocabulary learning might be crucial in understanding the acquisition of lexis because these strategies "are an important aspect of lexical learning and can contribute to a better understanding of how [Iranian English translation students'] come to learn the lexis of the target language" (Sanaoui 1995, p. 25). This study is also motivated by some other factors. First, to the best of our knowledge, there is no previous study focusing on the use of VLSs by undergraduate Iranian English Translation Students. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to enhance the status of vocabulary learning at the university level among Iranian English Translation students. Second, much of the work on VLSs is based on studies carried out in EFL settings, some other researchers (e.g. O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Reid, 1987) have questioned the possibility of applying the findings of these studies on L2 learners in different learning environments.

GOOD AND POOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

There are three main approaches to conducting strategy studies related to the concept of the good language learner. The first focuses on the "good language learner (Stem 1975; Papalia & Zampogna 1977; Naiman el al. 1978; Rubin 1975,1981; Reiss 1985; Gillette 1987) in order that a profile of successful learner behaviours, might be identified and subsequently used as the basis for training poor learners, on the assumption that poor learners lack these strategies. These studies of the "good learner" have provided some of the richest insights into the kinds of behaviours associated with successful language learning (Ellis 1994). However, the assumption that the poor learner lacks the good learner's strategies has been criticized (Vann & Abraham 1990) on the grounds that not all poor learners lack all these strategies.

Moreover, some poor students may even be similar to successful learners in their repertoire of strategies, and the difference between the two groups of learners may lie in when and how appropriately a particular strategy is used. In addition, it has been noted (Abraham & Vann 1987) that the limited success of learner training might be due to insufficient information about the strategies adopted by unsuccessful learners.

The second approach is to study the strategies used by 'poor' language learners (Porte 1988; Vann & Abraham 1990), and the third approach is to compare the different strategies used by 'good and 'poor' language learners (Hosenfeld 1977; Wesche 1979; Abraham & Vann 1987; Ahmed 1989). Although differentiating between good and poor

learners by examining their strategies has been criticized (Williams & Burden 1997), some studies (e. g. Ahmed 1989; Gu 1994) were able to demonstrate that it was possible to distinguish students as poor or good language learners according to their strategy use. McGroarty and Oxford (1990) argue that the appropriate learning strategies used by good language learners help to explain their performance and the inappropriate learning strategies used by poor students aid in understanding their frequent failure. In addition, the strategy literature assumes that some of the success in language learning "can be attributed to particular sets of cognitive and metacognitive behaviors which learners engage in" (Rubin 1987, p. 15).

Success, then, can be partly explained by discovering what 'good' learners do that & poor' learners do not. This trend of comparing good and poor learners should, therefore, be continued if we want to arrive at a clearer picture of the effective use of learning strategies. The present study on vocabulary learning strategies is therefore, based on the notion that successful language learners can be differentiated from less successful ones by the strategies they employ to learn vocabulary.

Furthermore, these studies comparing the two groups of learners have demonstrated that successful language learners use a larger quantity and wider variety of strategies than their unsuccessful counterparts. However, many researchers (Ahmed 1989; Green & Oxford 1995) complain that most studies comparing strategy use by different groups have tended to pay attention to overall strategy use or to the use of broad categories rather than to differences in the use of individual strategies. It has also been suggested (Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown 1999) that the quality, rather than the sheer quantity, of strategy use determines success for particular learners in specific situations, and how strategies are used is probably as important as which ones are used (Nisbet & Shucksmith 1986). The secret of successful language learning may, therefore, lie in the appropriate use of strategies in relation to individuals' specific needs in different circumstances. The following quotations illustrate clearly the complexity of strategy use effectiveness: The total number or variety of strategies employed and the frequency with which any given strategy is used are not necessarily indicators of how successful they will be on a language task. Whereas the successful completion of some tasks may require the use of a variety of strategies used repeatedly, the successful completion of others may depend on the use of just a few strategies, each used only once but successfully... the effectiveness of a strategy may depend largely on the characteristics of the given learner, the given language structure(s), the given context, or the interaction of these (Cohen, 1998, p. 12).

The general assumption that effective strategy use involves frequent strategy use is also questionable. It is likely that it is not so much how often learners use strategies as when and with what purpose they use them. It is also likely that strategies will prove most helpful when they are deployed in clusters (Ellis, 1994, p. 559).

Using more varieties of strategies and using them more frequently may not necessarily Guarantee success in language learning, How one uses a strategy may be just as important or even more important to learning than the number of strategies one employs (Gu, 1994, p. 3).

In order to bridge the research gap in the case of Iranian English translation students' vocabulary learning strategies, the present study tries to, find out what vocabulary learning strategies were used most and least frequently by high proficient and low proficient Iranian English translation students. So, the following research questions are addressed:

- What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by English translation students?
- What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by High proficient English translation students?
- What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by Low proficient English translation students?
- Does Proficiency affect English translation students' vocabulary learning strategy use?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 100 Iranian English translation students chosen based on purposive sampling, from University of Isfahan and Sheikh Bahaei University. In order to follow purposes of the study, participants were categorized into 2 groups of High proficient (33 students) and Low proficient (33 students) English translation students (in procedure it is explained how they have been divided in this way).

Materials

Two instruments were used in order to elicit data from students' performance:

1- A Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) developed by Soodmand Afshar (2010).

2- House's (1977) Translation Quality Assessment Model (used in order to measure students' translation quality).

Procedure

A Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) developed by Soodmand Afshar (2010) was used in this study. In order to guarantee the validity of the questionnaire, the following steps have been taken:

At the beginning of the study, the questionnaire was piloted on a group of 20 Iranian English translation students, who were asked to describe and write down other strategies (the strategies that students use but have not been included in questionnaire) that they usually employ for learning vocabulary of English as a foreign language. The purpose behind this was to make sure strategies adopted by Iranian English translation students, which were not in the questionnaire, are not missing from the VLSQ of the study. We found no statements or strategies obtaining a mean below 1.5 (if an strategy obtains a low mean, it can be inferred that this strategy is not referable to the population under investigation or is vague for them, so it must be removed or adjusted); We also found no new strategy suggested by students to be added to the questionnaire (because the last question of the questionnaire was offering students the possibility of writing down their own ways of learning vocabulary in the case they didn't find them in questionnaire), so no strategies were omitted from the original and no strategy was added to it.

Drawing upon Soodmand Afshar's (2010) we divided the subjects into groups of high and low proficient learners based on their academic records, specifically their total GPAs in the semesters they had already passed were obtained from the registrar's office at both universities. Since 12 is the minimum point below which the students are considered conditional or narrow fail in Iranian Higher Educational System, the students whose total GPAs were below 12 out of 20 were considered as low proficient group, those whose scores fell between 12 and 15 were put in the average group and those whose GPAs were above 15 (15.1 to 20), were placed in high proficient group. Then, a translation exam was administered to the subjects; students were asked to translate some texts and then their ability in translation was measured based on House's (1977) Translation Quality Assessment Model. Using Pearson correlation coefficient, the scores obtained from this exam were correlated with the students' GPAs. Fortunately, the reliability index of 0.701 indicated the acceptability of the division criterion for placing the students into high and low proficient groups. Thus, based on what was mentioned above, 33 students were eventually placed in the high proficient group and 33 students in the low proficient group and the rest 34 in the average group, with only the first two groups being the focus of the study.

After dividing the students into different groups based on requirements of the research, they were asked to complete the VLSQ. The questionnaire was administered to all the participants of the study by the researcher and they were informed of the following points before beginning to complete:

1. The questionnaires is not a test, thus, there are no right or wrong answers. So, the participants were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible.

2. They were required to make their decisions based on their real opinions.

3. The researcher remained in class and gave them detailed instructions on how the VLSQ was to be filled in.

4. The participants were informed that there was no time limit for completing the questionnaires. However, it took about 20 minutes for them to complete the VLSQ.

5- Participants were required to answer the questioner without asking their peers for help.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS version 15.5, the quantitative data analysis was carried out including means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages which were calculated to reflect the participants' responses to 45 strategies listed in VLSQ. T-test was also used to compare the overall strategy use by different groups of English translation students.

RESULTS

Statistical Analysis of Data

Tables 1 and 2 below indicate the results of the first research question:

What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by English translation students?

Table 1. The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies by English Translation Students in General

Rank	Number of strategy	Strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	2	I use a monolingual English dictionary	3.75	0.87	100
2	42	I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc in English	3.75	0.93	98
3	6	I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context	3.67	0.97	97
4	1	I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.52	1.07	100
5	29	I make an image of the word's meaning	3.5	0.89	97

Table 2. The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies by English Translation Students in General

Rank	Number of strategy	Strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	1.95	0.99	100
2	44	I draw a picture of the new word	1.97	1.13	100
3	11	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is used	2	1.05	100
4	13	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech, an example sentence in which the word is used and other grammatically related words	2	0.88	100
5	4	I ask my teacher for an English sentence including the new word	2.2	1.05	100
	33	I use physical actions when learning a new word	2.2	0.96	97

Tables 3 and 4 below indicate the results of the second research question:

What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by high proficient English translation students?

Table 3. The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies by High Proficient English Translation Students

Rank	Number of strategy	Strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	1	I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.85	1.15	33
2	2	I use a monolingual English dictionary	3.82	1.08	32
3	42	I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines,	3.80	1.11	33

		etc in English			
4	21	I associate the new word to others which are related to it and are located in the same area of meaning. (e.g., Furniture: table, chair, bed).	3.75	1.05	31
5	24	I use new words in sentences through speaking.	3.65	1.16	31

Table 4. The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies by High Proficient English Translation Students

Rank	Number of strategy	Strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	38	I make up (coin) new words if I don't know the right ones in English	1.65	1.09	32
2	9	In my vocabulary notebook, I write down just the word and its definition/ synonym.	1.75	1.13	33
3	12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj.,adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	1.90	0.98	31
4	14	I analyze part of speech of the new word.	1.92	0.98	33
5	4	I ask my teacher for an English sentence including the new word	1.95	1.02	33

Tables 5 and 6 below indicate the results of the third research question:

What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by low proficient English translation students?

Table 5. The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies by Low proficient English Translation Students

Rank	Number of strategy	Strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	16	I memorize word lists (i.e. lists of words in English with their Persian equivalents)	3.80	1.14	33
2	42	I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines,	3.70	1.05	33

		etc in English			
3	5	I ask classmates for meaning.	3.40	1.12	33
4	1	I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.20	0.98	31
5	41	I learn new words by listening to live English media like BBC, VOA, etc, and by watching English TVchannels and movies word	3.17	1.09	32

Table 6. The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies by Low Proficient English Translation Students

Rank	Number of strategy	Strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	13	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech, an example sentence in which the word is used and other grammatically related words	1.75	0.95	32
2	12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	2	0.95	33
3	31	I paraphrase the new word's meaning	2.2	1.11	33
4	3	I ask my teacher for an L1 translation	2.10	0.98	32
5	9	In my vocabulary notebook, I write down just the word and its definition/ synonym	2.12	1.02	33

Table 7 below indicates the results of the forth research question:

Does proficiency affects English translation students' vocabulary learning strategy use?

Table 7. T-test comparing High and Low Proficient Students' Overall Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use

Groups	Mean	SD	N	t	df	p
H.P	2.92	0.2912	50	1.03	64	0.723
L.P	2.85	0.2866	50			

Details of Table 7 cries that there is no statistically significant difference between high and low proficient English translation students in using vocabulary learning strategies (df = 98, t= 1.03,P= 0.723> 0.05). There were three most frequently used strategies almost common in all Tables. These strategies include, *I use a monolingual English dictionary , I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context , I learn new words by reading books, newspapers and magazines in English.* We have two least frequently used strategies commonly shared by all Tables these strategies include*, I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech and an example sentence in which the word is used, I use physical actions when learning a new word.*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on findings of Table 1, it is observed that one of the most frequently used strategies by all English Translation Students was learning new words through using monolingual dictionaries. Other most frequently used strategy commonly shared by all English Translation Students was *I learn new words by reading books, newspapers and magazines in English*. According to Soodmand Afshar (2010), the fact that learning vocabulary through extensive reading is one of the most frequently used strategies even by poor learners seems to lend support to Nation's (2001) assertion that "control of the reading can be a major factor in vocabulary development for both native and non-native speakers" (p. 144). The other strategy most frequently used by all English Translation Students was *I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context*. This result is in line with Ahmed's (1989) findings; he found that his subjects used guessing strategies very frequently to discover the meanings of new words.

The forth most frequently used strategy commonly shared by all English Translation Students was *I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary*, this observation is disconfirmed by Tomaszczyk (1979) who found that the use of bilingual dictionaries by second language learners generally diminishes and the use of monolingual ones increases while knowledge of the target language improve.

The fifth most frequently used strategy commonly shared by all English Translation Students was *I make an image of the word's meaning.* Use of this technique appears to be consistent with what has been reported in vocabulary strategy research done by Cohen & Aphek (1980) and Ahmed (1989).

The least frequently used strategies common among all English Translation Students were *I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used, and I use physical actions when learning a new word*. The result of our study about the least frequent strategy used by English translation students which was *writing down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech, an example in which the word is used* corresponds with findings of Gu and Johnson (1996), saying that Note-

taking strategies are usually least frequently used strategy by learners. The other least frequently used strategy common among the three groups was *using physical actions when learning a new word*. According to Soodmand Afshar (2010), this finding could be well supported by that of Qingquan, Chatupote and Teo (2008) who found that this strategy was used only seldom by both successful and unsuccessful learners indicating lack of flexibility of use of this strategy for learning too many words.

The findings of Tables (3 to 6) show that high proficient students in comparison to low proficient students have more focus on using a monolingual English dictionary; this finding is aligned with observations of Tomaszczyk (1979) who found that the group of less advanced students used the bilingual dictionary much more than the monolingual one, whereas the group of advanced students made greater use of monolingual dictionaries. The findings of these tables also emphasizes learning new words by associating it to other already existing words more frequently in high proficient learners than low proficient students; these findings are in correspondence with findings of Ahmed (1989) that high proficient learners are more able to relate new words to old ones. On the other hand, the findings of Tables (3 to 6) show that high proficient learners use more dictionary information (both bilingual and monolingual) than the low proficient ones; the finding that the successful learners use more dictionary information than the less successful ones is in line with that of Ahmed (1988) that low proficient learners use less dictionary information than high proficient learners. Another difference is that high proficient learners use new words in new sentences more than low proficient learners. However, low proficient learners relied heavily on LI -based strategies, such as asking about Persian equivalents for new words. The result of the study also indicated that high proficient learners seemed to move gradually from LI -based strategies to more L2-based strategies. Evidence provided by Kroll and Curley (1988) supports this conclusion. They suggest that in the initial stages of learning, new words are strongly linked to their LI equivalents, and a shift to L2 occurs after some time.

The findings of Tables (3 to 6) show that both high proficient students & low proficient students have the same weak point of neglecting note taking as one of important strategies for boosting vocabulary. It is against the achievements of Soodmand Afshar's (2010), in which taking notes of the new words in class was the fourth most frequently used strategy by both all learners and high proficient learners, but it did not feature among the five most frequently used strategies by low proficient learners. Another similarity of these two groups is that none of them believe in learning vocabulary through asking teacher.

The implications of these findings suggest that English Translation Students would need to engage more in practicing Physical actions and Note-taking Strategies to enhance their learning and memory of the vocabulary, since it is among least frequent strategy used by learners.

The results of T-test (Table 7) showed that there were no statistically significant differences between high proficient and low proficient English translation students' overall strategy use.

The present study tried to fulfill the aim of giving valuable information (about learning and teaching vocabulary) to students and even to teachers. So, they can bring this information into attention when learning and teaching vocabulary. Teachers should take into consideration the needs of two groups when teaching them various strategies of vocabulary learning. In order to act as an autonomous and successful learner, English translation students should put emphasis on mastering vocabulary learning strategies, especially on the strategies that are commonly used by high proficient English translation students. In broader sense, learners should use vocabulary learning strategies that lead to an efficient way of word boosting. Low proficient students can use the findings of these studies to have an appropriate change in right direction toward more useful vocabulary learning strategies that are the strategies used by expert learners.

The findings and recommendations of this study should not be generalized without taking into consideration the facts that the questionnaire data is based on self-report and cannot prevent students from pretending and students' age was not also controlled; participants of study should have been from similar age group (in order to control its effect on students' strategy use). Younger learners are more likely to attain fluency and native like pronunciation through communicative practice strategies (Oxford and Ehrman, 1995).

Research on the effect of cultural background on English Translation students' vocabulary learning strategy use is one of recommended topics for further study since researchers like Haung and Van Naerrsen (1987), Politzer (1983) found that learners from different cultures use different types of strategies at different levels of frequency and that learners from different cultures prefer some strategies over others. This study's another suggestion for further study is the study of the effect of Age on English Translation students' vocabulary learning strategy use; Schmitt's (1997) study shows that Japanese learners' use of and attitudes towards some VLSs change as they grow older.

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