

Vocabulary Learning Strategies Use and Usefulness by English Majors, at Algiers 2 University

استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات، استخدامها وفائدتها من قبل طلاب قسم اللغة الإنجليزية
في جامعة الجزائر 2

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Abstract:

The present study investigates the vocabulary learning strategies most/least used and perceived useful by 150 undergraduate Algerian students (75 males and 75 females) who are learning English as a foreign language. A lucid consideration is drawn on the approaches adopted while dealing with vocabulary. The instruments administered are questionnaires, think aloud process, classroom observation, vocabulary levels test and a survey. The data is then examined according to three main theories: Schmitt's taxonomy (1997, 2000), Sanaoui's classification (1992, 1995) and Clouston research (1996). The former examines the use and usefulness of vocabulary learning strategies, and the latter pores over learners' approaches to vocabulary.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that determination strategies are the most used and social strategies are perceived as very useful. The study also reveals that few students share a common organized way of dealing with lexis while the majority are conspicuously less systematic in their practices.

Keywords: Algerian context; approaches; undergraduate students; use and usefulness; vocabulary learning strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning is an intricate, ongoing process that begins from childhood and continues throughout life. Mother tongue (L1) is naturally developed at a young age through the exposure and then production of language in an informal effortless way. Later, foreign language learning occurs in a more formal context requiring conscious efforts of learning. In this case study, learners are confronted with new English lexicon, which is increasingly sophisticated. They yearn to extend their English language and enhanced the incorporation of the new framework into their repertoire for a better sustained use. However, managing properly this amount of vocabulary has always been bewildering for EFL learners (Savadkouhi, 2013). Vocabulary acquisition, as challenging as it can be, plays a vital role in the formation of all language skills. Many researchers (Laufer & Nation.1999, Read. 2000, Gu. 2003) agree that vocabulary is one of the most important-if not the most important-components in learning a foreign language.

The present article examined the most/least used and perceived useful vocabulary learning strategies by EFL Algerian undergraduate students, at the English Department of Algiers 2 University. An exploration had additionally stressed on the approaches adopted by EFL learners while dealing with the vocabulary learning task since the unstructured one can turn into a highly tedious and time-consuming process.

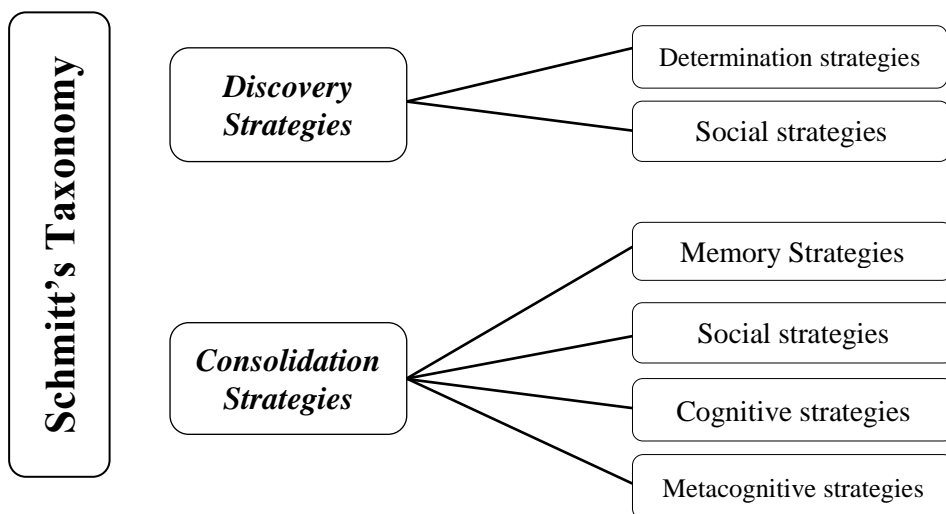
2. Literature Review

One way of tackling a large number of lexis at different language levels is initially through the use of vocabulary learning strategies. They are identified as actions made by learners to help themselves understand the meaning of a word, store it and retrieve it later when needed (Nation, 2001).

Several research studies have investigated the use and usefulness of vocabulary learning strategies among learners such as Ahmed (1989), Anderson (2003), AlQahtani (2005), Almela (2006). One of the pioneer researchers in that arena is Schmitt (1997, 2000). His taxonomy is the most elaborated and extensive classification of vocabulary learning strategies to date. His claim asserts it “as a dynamic working inventory which suggests the major strategies” (Schmitt, 1997, p. 204). Essentially, it illustrates each individual vocabulary learning strategy.

Schmitt categorises vocabulary learning strategies into two major phases, ‘*discovering new word meanings*’ and ‘*consolidating new word forms and meanings*’. The first phase is used to obtain initial information and find out the meaning of unknown words, the second one helps learners memorize the words that has been taught or encountered. The two phases embed five categories as can be seen in figure 1.

Fig.1. Schmitt’s taxonomy (1997)



Determination strategies (DET) are used while discovering the meaning of a new word without resorting to others' help. Social strategies (SOC) occur during interaction with other people, either amongst students or teachers. SOC category is cited under both discovery and consolidating. Memory strategies (MEM) "*approaches which related new materials to existing knowledge*" (Schmitt, 1997, p.205), words are retained by association with background knowledge through various forms of imagery, or grouping. Cognitive strategies (COG), based on Oxford (1990) are defined as strategies that "*exhibit the common function of manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner*" (p. 43). Metacognitive strategies (MET), on the other hand, are seen as a conscious synopsis of the learning process that make decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study. All the aforementioned categories underpin an array of 58 strategies. It is noteworthy to state that some strategies appear under more than one category. For instance, word list and flash card share the value of both determination strategies and cognitive strategies. Both strategies have flexible characteristics and assist learners to discover the meaning of a new word and memorize it once taught or encountered.

Sanaoui's Research (1992, 1995) is the second predominant theory opted for leveraging the various approaches (study habits for learning new words) and mnemonic procedures (practices to facilitate the retention) learners employ to facilitate their lexical learning. She manifestly illustrates the link between vocabulary learning strategies and the success in acquiring and retaining vocabulary items. Her findings concludes that students ostensibly fell into two groups: the ones with a "structured" approach organize their vocabulary learning task contrary to those with an "unstructured" approach who make minimal efforts with no clear routines or intentions (Sanaoui, 1995, p.17). The two identified approaches differ along five major dimensions that are earnestly featured in the table below:

Table 1. Structured Vs Unstructured Approach

<i>Structured Approach</i>	<i>Unstructured Approach</i>
<i>Opportunities for learning vocabulary</i>	
Self-created	reliance on course
Independent study	minimal independent study
<i>Range of self-initiated activities</i>	
Extensive	restricted
<i>Records of lexical items</i>	
Extensive (tend to be systematic)	minimal (tend to be ad hoc)
<i>Review of lexical items</i>	
Extensive	little or no review
<i>Practice of lexical items</i>	
Self-created opportunities in and outside classroom	Reliance on course

Source: Sanaoui, 1992, p.72

On the basis of Sanaoui’s exploratory research, Lessard Clouston (1996) subsequently established an amalgamating third approach labelled “semi-structured” allowing a middle stance between the two extremes. In so doing, students display mostly structured characteristics but do not meet all five criteria.

3. Methodology

Vocabulary learning is still construed as a laborious task that hinders EFL students’ learning as learning any foreign language entails knowing its morphology, phonology, syntax and discourse as well as its vocabulary (Grauberg, 1997, p.2). Therefore, the main objective of this exploratory qualitative study is to provide a more comprehensive insight into the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) that Algerian EFL undergraduate students use and appraise useful within the university based boundaries or in real world. Substantially, much can be learned from a thorough investigation on learners’

endeavour in understanding, acquiring, storing and recalling new word-stock.

The approaches adopted while dealing with the vocabulary learning process is also elicited at the end of the research. Hence, three questions are addressed:

Q₁. What are the most and least used VLS by undergraduate EFL Algerian students at the English department, University of Algiers 2?

Q₂. What are the most and least perceived useful VLS by undergraduate EFL Algerian students at the English department, University of Algiers 2?

Q₃. Which vocabulary learning approach do undergraduate Algerian students adopt?

3.1 Participants

The subjects chosen for carrying out this research study comprise 150 undergraduate EFL Algerian students from different levels (1st, 2nd, and 3rd year) at the English department of Abou Alkacem Saàd Allah University, in Algiers. The participants range in age from 17 to 24 who might come from different cities and secondary schools but share the same academic instructions. Their streams differ from literary to scientific. Their first and second languages are respectively Arabic and French. For an analogous inquiry, the sample includes 50 juniors, 50 sophomores and 50 seniors of mixed abilities who have been learning English for at least six years. The students are trained throughout a three years program to accomplish their License degree (B.A). The first academic year features 13 modules in English, 12 in their second year, and eight in their third year.

The students are selected following the probability sampling and mainly because undergraduate understudies undergo university accommodations with no preceding experience in handling the huge range of new items and little L1 interference.

Moreover, nine EFL teachers from the Department of English of Algiers 2 were kindly requested to fill in a questionnaire for an upgraded lenient examination to crosscut the key concepts they have encountered during their preceding courses.

3.2 Instruments and Procedures

Multiple instruments are utilized for the data collection to strengthen the outcomes credibility and generate a better scope with abundant data analysis interpretations. The combination of questionnaires for teachers and students, think aloud process, classroom observation, vocabulary levels test, and vocabulary survey provide a more detailed, accurate, and contextualized acumens of qualitative data and valid the quantitative one.

3.2.1 Questionnaires

A questionnaire is the first step administered in this study for being amenable to analysis and a good way to access learner's opinion. Two questionnaires are premediated to students as well as teachers. The questions asked are carefully orchestrated to provide general information and attitude towards vocabulary learning and teaching process.

The students' questionnaire consists of ten controlled questions with multiple suggested responses that are randomly handed to 150 undergraduate learners. Teachers' questionnaire, on the other hand, is made up of eight open-ended and close-ended questions randomly dispensed to ten teachers. The questions mainly tackle teachers'

attitude towards teaching vocabulary learning strategies in general and their opinion about students' vocabulary level in particular.

In order to insure an enhanced insight into the participants' answers, a think aloud process deemed necessary to validate the obtained results.

3.2.2 Think aloud protocol

Thinking aloud is an empirical measuring technique where users verbally explain their actions as they perform a task. It is widely obtrusive for its relative ease of appliance (*Scott D. Wood, 2010*). Whereas observing what the participants do is helpful, hearing from them about the interaction experience, motives, rationale, and perceptions of problems while learning is utterly more revealing (*Hartson & Pyla, 2019*). In the present inquest, learners are asked to express themselves when filling out the questionnaire, test and survey to divulge what tickle, frustrate, or confound them.

3.2.3 Classroom observation

Observation is considered as a traditional method of data collection in which the situation of interest is watched and the relevant facts, actions and behaviours are noted (*Lake, 2011*). The students' interaction was observed during regular classes by attending 12 hours of various modules in November 2016, eight in January 2017 and 11 in April 2018 with freshman, sophomore and junior students. The principal objective is to identify and assess any alteration learners do when encountering familiar or non-familiar words.

3.2.4 Vocabulary level test

A test is a means of trial intended to measure one's ability and knowledge in a given area (*Seliger & Shohamy, 1989*). Nation (2001) standardized vocabulary levels test is modelled since it assesses learners' vocabulary knowledge at several frequency levels (1,000; 2,000 and 3,000 level). However, the 1,000 level had to be excluded

as it is advocated for beginners while the targeted audience are intermediate to upper-intermediate. The selected vocabulary in the 2,000 and 3,000 is in terms of occurrence during classes and students' familiarities. The test consists of ten questions of six words each, three of which has to be matched to its definitions. It was carried out twice as students proclaimed the heaviness and workload attributed to fill it the first.

3.2.5 Vocabulary survey

The survey is largely based on two clear and extensive works, Schmitt's taxonomy (1997) which is already mentioned in the review of literature and Fan research (2003). The latter presents learners with a list of 60 vocabulary learning strategies and asks them to answer the following questions:

- 1) How frequently do you use the strategy stated?
- 2) To what extent do you think the strategy is or may be useful to you?

Learners are requested to select their responses from five-point scales. The available answers are: *never*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, *often*, *very often* for the first question and *not useful*, *not sure it is useful*, *quite useful*, *very useful*, and *extremely useful* for the second one. Besides being straightforward, the survey offers a reasonable variety of responses.

4. Results and Discussion

The questionnaires' primary results featured that despite the fact that 84% of the students has chosen to study English, they still feel insecure and not at ease with that language. The participants reported that their rare participation is mainly due to their lack of vocabulary and disquieting about making mistakes. The teachers' responses emphasize that the majority of the students' vocabulary level is weak.

However, it is conspicuous to summit that 90% of the students relate their English proficiency to their personal efforts. This response is not denied by teachers, since 73% of them have reported that they do not teach strategies that ought to help students enlarge their vocabulary repertoire. Only 27% of teachers do teach strategies implicitly through context. Accordingly, Algerian undergraduate students receive no explicit instructions and are primarily responsible for their vocabulary learning process.

Regarding the think aloud protocol, the participants deliberately disclosed that they experience substantial difficulties with vocabulary as they consider it a handicap that hinders their learning. Dismally, they occasionally ought to show their reactions through facial expressions (smile or nod their head for agreement/disagreement) rather than using words. These outcomes are finer presented in fig.5.

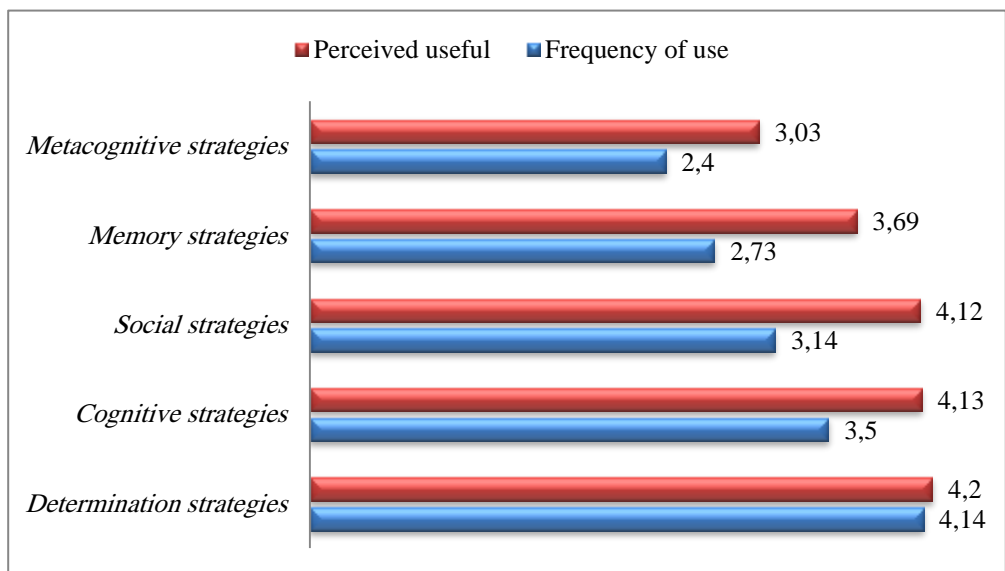
The initial analyses are consistent with what was noticed during classroom observation. Students' vocabulary is poorly organized in terms of sentence structure and use of words. The majority could barely formulate coherent sentences and claim they are pressured by the inclusion of that bulk of new lexicon. Ironically, plurality of learners prefer remaining silent during classes rather than facing that daunting task while the same few take part and interact with teachers.

Further, the vocabulary learning strategies test and survey revealed that learners have the tendency to follow a mechanical process when encountering words for the first time. They try to determine the word's meaning on their own first, and only if they do not succeed they looked for classmates' or teachers' help as demonstrated in fig.2, fig.3, and fig.4. Students no longer wait for teachers' directions or instructions to decode or acquire new vocabulary items, as they find out other strategies that encourage and impulse their vocabulary learning process.

The most used category of vocabulary learning strategies is **determination strategies**. It received the highest mean score of 4.14 in the discovery group. This category is also perceived as the most useful with a mean score of 4.20. In consolidation strategies group, **Cognitive strategies** category scored the highest mean score of 3.5. It is also regarded as the most useful (4.13).

In contrast, the least used category is **metacognitive strategies** with the lowest mean score of 2.4. However, it is considered as the third useful category (4.12). **Memory strategies** group, on the other hand, is viewed as the least useful with a mean score of 3.03. The figure below illustrates the most and least used/useful categories of vocabulary learning strategies.

Fig.2. Most/least VLS categories used/ perceived useful

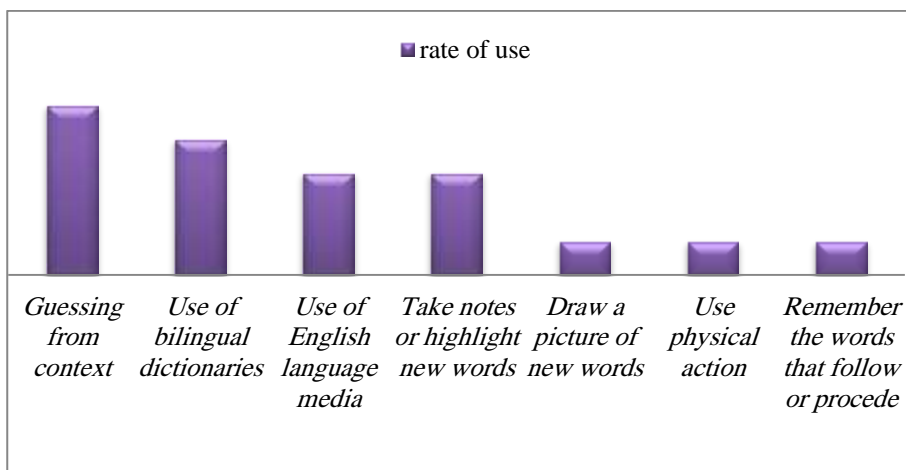


The two most frequent vocabulary learning strategies that students use when encountering new words are guessing from the context (A4) and use of Arabic/French-English dictionary (A5) with the highest mean score of 4.81 and 4.78. Interestingly, the participants reported that they favour guessing over dictionaries because it does not interrupt the flow of their ideas and show a better function of

words by being in context. They rushed into using (A5) whenever (A4) fails to decode the meaning of new words. The use of bilingual dictionaries is more utilitarian and much clearer than the monolingual ones. It provides a translation or explanation usually in their native language (Arabic) or a language they are familiar with (French). The strategies of taking notes or highlighting new words in class (D5) and using English language media (E1) received the third highest rating as being *very often* used. Nowadays, students are more likely open to English language channels, radios, movies by having an easy access to multiple devices such as smartphones, computers with an unlimited broadband internet service.

In contrast, the strategies of drawing a picture of the word to help remember it (C1), remembering the words that follow or precede the new word (C4) and using physical action when learning a word (C17) are the least used and perceived useful strategies as well with a mean score of 1.01.

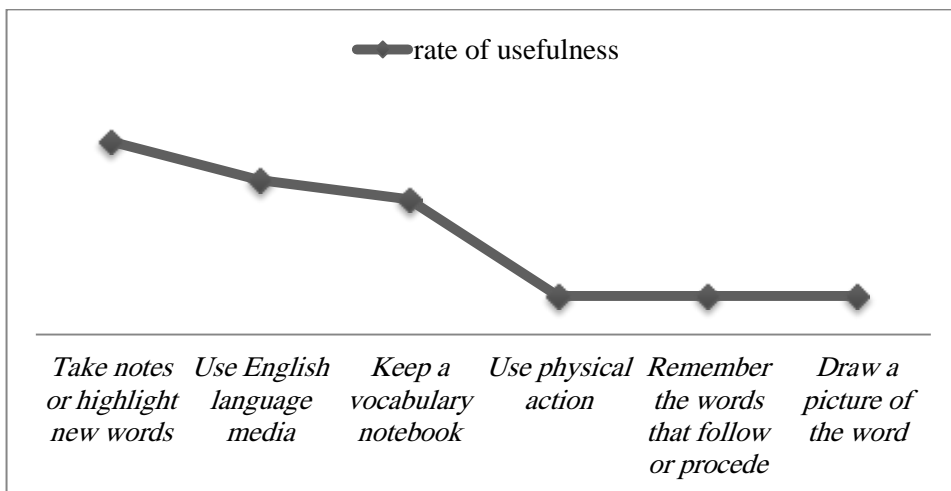
Fig.3. The most and least used VLS



Concerning the strategies perceived as useful, it turned out that ardent students advocate taking notes or highlighting new words in class (D5), using English language media (E1), keeping a vocabulary notebook (D7) as being extremely helpful with a mean score of 4.89/4.78. D5 and D7 not only help them recall facts and ideas that they ought to have forgotten, but gain a cavernous understanding with

the act of writing things down using their own styles. E1 appealed to be both visual (talk shows, movies) and auditory (music, radio) which is primarily used for communicative purposes. It is identified as an entertaining, and educating strategy that students corroborated due to its direct connection to the real world.

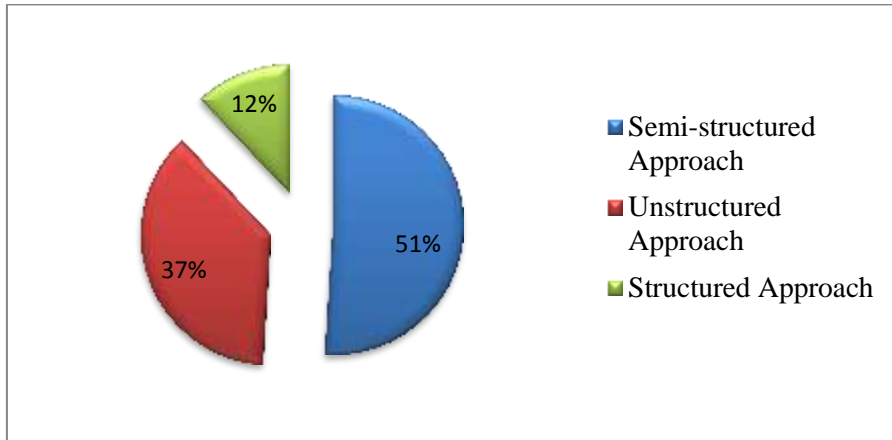
Fig.4. The most and least useful VLS



Regarding the approaches adopted, the majority of students are significantly characterized as poor learners by using the *unstructured* (37%) and *semi-structured* (51%) approach. According to classroom observation and think aloud protocol, the first category disclose that they never review what they studied or make efforts acquiring new words. Conversely, the second one created opportunity to enlarge their repertoire but is not profuse and withstood L₁ interference.

Wistfully, only 12% are contrived as good learners by accurately managing their vocabulary learning and spending rigorous time practicing. One can easily understand their thoughts and attitudes.

Fig.5. Students' vocabulary approaches



The findings gathered from this profound analysis display that Algerian EFL undergraduate students make medium use of vocabulary learning strategies, only few knew how to manage their vocabulary learning task. As suggested by Schmitt (1997), learners should be exposed to a variety of strategies first so that they can resort to it anywhere anytime soon. The sooner they are accustomed to strategies, the more chances will have to extend their vocabulary range. Teachers should focus on learner-centred approach, select suitable teaching materials and bring some changes to the traditional approach and contribute best to the learning process. The major concern should be learners' successful final achievement.

Creating a pleasant learning atmosphere should also be promoted by implementing technology supplies. It can be said that computers and the Internet are an extraordinary resource that has changed the face of information. It raises students' motivation by being fashionable and can be noticed through learners' numerous hours surfing on it (Crabbe, 1993). Games use is suitable as well to break routines and motivate students by keeping them interested and even pushes shy learners to participate.

5. Conclusion

This paper unveils, to a certain extent, facts about the use and usefulness of the vocabulary learning process by Algerian EFL undergraduate students and outlines learners' approaches. The results demonstrates that though students perceive vocabulary learning strategies as very useful, they do not resort to these strategies that often and only minority display higher motivation with a more effective structured approach. Nonetheless, this research has got some limitations. It is mainly about understanding one aspect of language learning area which is vocabulary learning with a limited proportion of undergraduate EFL learners. Other instruments, such as interviews, could have provided more perception on what learners truly do.

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