UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES, VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND READING COMPREHENSION OF EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN IRAN

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BY

REZA KAFIPOUR

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2010

To my dear father,

My loving mother,

My supportive wife, Fatemeh, and

My cute son, Aryan

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chairman: Dr. Nooreen Bt Noordin,

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The current study investigated the relationship among vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension of Iranian undergraduate EFL students. In addition, the study tried to find the contribution of vocabulary learning strategies to vocabulary size and reading comprehension of the students. Fars province was selected according to cluster sampling. Data were collected from all 250 second year undergraduate EFL students. The collection of data was done in two different phases – quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative phase of the study, the data were collected through a vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire adapted from Bennett (2006). A vocabulary size test developed by Nation (2007) and a TOEFL reading comprehension test were also used in the study. Data were also collected through interviews and journal writing in the qualitative phase of the study. Descriptive statistics showed that Iranian undergraduate EFL learners were medium strategy users. All different categories of

vocabulary learning strategies were reported to be used at a medium level. However, the most frequently used strategies consisted of using monolingual dictionary, guessing meaning from context, connecting the word to its synonyms and antonyms, using new words in sentences, studying the sound of a word, using English language media, skipping or passing new words, repeating verbally, and taking note or highlighting. The least frequently used strategies included checking for L1 cognate, writing paraphrase using several new words, using physical action when learning a word, making word lists, studying the word with classmates, interacting with native speakers, and asking the teacher to check one's definition. The students were found to have a vocabulary size of 5564 words. Then, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted to find the relationships between variables. The Pearson correlation showed a positive correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension of the students. A positive correlation was also found between 14 vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size. However, multiple regressions showed that only 9 out of 14 strategies contributed to vocabulary size of the students. These strategies consisted of using physical action when learning a word, interacting with native speakers, taking note or highlighting, studying new words many times, using bilingual dictionary, using English language media, studying the word with classmates, studying the sound of a word, and repeating the word verbally. Pearson correlation also indicated positive correlation existed between 23 vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension. However, 5 out of 23 strategies were found to contribute to reading comprehension of the students. These strategies consisted of taking note or highlighting, using physical action when learning a word, asking the teacher to paraphrase or give synonym of new words,

asking classmates for meaning, and remembering the word using its affixes and roots.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

STRATEGI PEMBELAJARAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA, PENGETAHUAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA DAN KEFAHAMAN MEMBACA BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA ASING OLEH PELAJAR IJAZAH SARJANA MUDA DI IRAN

Oleh

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Pengerusi: Dr. Nooreen Bt Noordin

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Kajian ini telah menyiasat hubungan di antara strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata, pengetahuan perbendaharaan kata dan kefahaman dalam kalangan pelajar ijazah sarjana muda Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing Iran. Seterusnya, kajian ini juga cuba mencari sumbangan strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata ke atas saiz perbendaharaan kata dan pemahaman kefahaman di kalangan pelajar tersebut. Daerah Fars telah dipilh secara persampelan kelompok. Data telah dikumpulkan daripada kesemua 250 pelajar pra-siswazah tahum kedua yang mengikuti Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dalam dua fasa – kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Dalam fasa kuantitatif, data telah dikumpul melalui satu soal selidik strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata yang diadaptasikan daripada Bennet (2006). Satu ujian saiz perbehendaraan kata yang dibangunkan oleh Nation (2007) dan ujian kefahaman bacaan TOEFL juga telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Pengumpulan data juga telah dijalankan melalui temubual dan penulisan jurnal

dalam fasa kualitatif kajian. Statistik deskriptif menunjukkan bahawa pelajar pra-siswazah Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing dari Iran adalah pengguna strategi sederhana. Kesemua kategori pembelajaran strategi perbendaharaan kata yang berlainan dilaporkan digunakan pada tahap sederhana. Bagaimanapun, strategi-strategi yang paling kerap digunakan terdiri daripada penggunaan kamus satu bahasa (*monolingual*), meneka makna perkataan daripada konteks, menghubung kait perkataan dengan sinonim dan antonim, menggunakan perkataan baharu dalam ayat-ayat, mengkaji bunyi sesuatu perkataan, menggunakan media dalam bahasa Inggeris, melangkau perkataan-perkataan baharu, mengulang secara lisan, dan membuat catatan atau menyerlahkannya. Antara startegi yang paling kurang digunakan adalah membuat kaitan dengan Bahasa Ibunda, menulis parafrasa menggunakan beberapa perkataan lain, menggunakan aksi fizikal semasa mempelajari perkataan baharu, mempelajari perkataan bersama-sama dengan rakan kelas, berinteraksi dengan pentutur bahasa pertama, dan mendapatkan guru untuk menyemak definisi yang dibuat. Para pelajar didapati mempunyai saiz perbendaharaan kata sebanyak 5564 perkataan. Korelasi Produk Momen Pearson telah dijalankan untuk mengenal pasti hubungan antara pembolehubah. Korelasi Pearson menunjukkan hubungan positif di antara saiz perbendaharaan kata dan pemahaman bacaan pelajar-tersebut. Turut didapati ada hubungan yang positif antara 14 strtaegi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata dengan saiz perbendaharaan kata. Bagaimanapun, analisis Regresi Berbilang menunjukkan bahawa hanya 9 daripada 14 strategi menyumbang kepada saiz perbendaharaan kata pelajar. Strategi-strategi tersebut adalah menggunakan aksi fizikal semasa mempelajari sesuatu perkataan, berinteraksi dengan pentutur bahasa pertama, membuat catatan atau menyerlahkannya, mempelajari perkataan baharu acap kali, menggunakan kamus dwibahasa, menggunakan media bahasa Inggeris,

mempelajari perkataan bersama-sama dengan rakan kelas, mengkaji bunyi sesuatu perkataan, dan mengulang perkataan secara lisan. Korelasi Pearson juga menunjukkan korelasi positif wujud antara 23 strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata dan pemahaman bacaan. Bagaimanapun, 5 daripada 23 strategi didapati menyumbang kepada pemahaman bacaan para pelajar tersebut. Strategi-strategi ini terdiri daripada membuat catatan atau menyerlahkannya, menggunakan aksi fizikal semasa mempelajari sesuatu perkataan, mendapatkan bantuan guru untuk memparafrasa atau memberi sinonim perkataan baharu, bertanya makna perkataan pada rakan sekelas, dan mengingati perkataan menngunakan imbuhan dan kata dasar.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 21st of May 2010 to conduct the final examination of Reza Kafipour on his thesis entitled "**Vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary knowledge, and EFL reading comprehension of undergraduate students in Iran**" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P. U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

_____

REZA KAFIPOUR

May 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
ABSTRACT		III
ABSTRAK		VI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		IX
APPROVAL		X
DECLARATION		XII
LIST OF TABLES		XV
LIST OF APPENDICES		XVII
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS		XVIII
CHAPTER		
1	**INTRODUCTION**	
	1.1 Background	1
	1.2 Problem Statement	3
	1.3 Objective of the Study	6
	1.4 Research Questions	7
	1.5 Significance of the Study	8
	1.6 Limitation of the Study	14
	1.7 Operational Definition	15
	1.7.1 Vocabulary	15
	1.7.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies	16
	1.7.3 Vocabulary Knowledge	16
	1.7.4 EFL Learners	17
	1.7.5 Reading Comprehension	17
2	**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**	
	2.1 Introduction	18
	2.2 Word Definition	18
	2.3 Acquire a Word	19
	2.4 Vocabulary Knowledge	21
	2.4.1 Receptive Vs. Productive Knowledge	21
	2.4.2 Vocabulary Threshold	23
	2.5 Incidental or Intentional Vocabulary Learning	25
	2.6 Role of Context in Vocabulary Learning	26
	2.7 Vocabulary Learning Strategies	27
	2.7.1 Importance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	30
	2.7.2 Previous Studies in the field and taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	32
	2.7.3 Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	55
	2.8 Theories of the Study	62
	2.8.1 Dual Coding Theory	62
	2.8.2 Schema Theory	64
	2.9 Conceptual Framework	66
3	**METHODOLOGY**	
	3.1 Introduction	75

3.2 Research Design 75
3.3 Location of the Study 77
3.4 Population and Sampling 77
3.5 Instrumentation and Scoring 78
3.5.1 Questionnaire 79
3.5.2 Tests 83
3.5.3 Journal 95
3.5.4 Interview 97
3.6 Pilot Study 100
3.7 Validity of Instruments 109
3.7.1 VLSQ 109
3.7.2 VST 110
3.7.3 TOEFL Reading Comprehension Test 111
3.8 Reliability of Instruments 111
3.8.1 VLSQ 112
3.8.2 VST 112
3.8.3 TOEFL Reading Comprehension Test 113
3.9 Data Collection Procedure 113
3.10 Data Analysis 116
3.10.1 Quantitative Phase of the Study 116
3.10.2 Qualitative Phase of the Study 118

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Introduction 122
4.2 Demographic Information 122
4.3 Quantitative Phase of Study 122
4.3.1 Descriptive Statistics Results 123
4.3.2 Correlation Results 130
4.3.3 Multiple Regressions Results 134
4.4 Qualitative Phase of Study 141
4.4.1 Discussion on Qualitative Results 172
4.4.2 Conclusion 195
4.5 Final Discussion 200
4.5.1 Discussion for Research Question One 201
4.5.2 Discussion for Research Question Two 204
4.5.3 Discussion for Research Question Three 207
4.5.4 Discussion for Research Question Four 219
4.5.5 Discussion for Research Question Five, Six, and Seven 221

5 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS
5.1 Introduction 229
5.2 Summary of the Major Findings 230
5.3 Implications 236
5.4 Suggestions for Further Studies 244

BIBLIOGRAPHY 249
APPENDICES 265
BIODATA OF STUDENT 319

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
2.1	Different Components of Word	20
3.1	Strategy Grouping According to the Six Strategy Types	83
4.1	Rank Order of the Favored Strategy	123
4.2	Descriptive Statistics for Determination Strategies in VLSQ	124
4.3	Descriptive Statistics for Memory Strategies in VLSQ	126
4.4	Descriptive Statistics for Metacognitive Strategies in VLSQ	127
4.5	Descriptive Statistics for Cognitive Strategies in VLSQ	128
4.6	Descriptive Statistics for Social Strategies in VLSQ	129
4.7	Correlation Among 41 Independent Variables (Vocabulary Learning Strategies) and Two Dependent Variables (Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension)	131
4.8	Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Vocabulary Learning Strategies Which Influence EFL Learners' Vocabulary Size	135
4.9	Regression ANOVA Table	138
4.10	Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Vocabulary Learning Strategies Which Influence EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension	139
4.11	Regression ANOVA Table	141
4.12	Summary of Number and Types of Strategies (Major Categories) Reported by Individual Learners	173
4.13	Summary of Frequency of Use and Type of Strategies (Major Categories) Reported by Individual Learners	174
4.14	Summary of Determination Strategies' Report	176
4.15	Summary of Determination Strategies' Frequency of Use	177
4.16	Summary of Social Strategies' Report	178
4.17	Summary of Social Strategies' Frequency of Use	180
4.18	Summary of Memory Strategies' Report	182

4.19	Summary of Memory Strategies' Frequency of Use	184
4.20	Summary of Cognitive Strategies' Report	187
4.21	Summary of Cognitive Strategies' Frequency of Use	189
4.22	Summary of Verbal Repetition Strategies' Report	190
4.23	Summary of Verbal Repetition Strategies' Frequency of Use	190
4.24	Summary of Metacognitive Strategies' Report	191
4.25	Summary of Metacognitive Strategies' Frequency of Use	192
4.26	Summary of English Language Media Strategies' Report	194
4.27	Summary of English Language Media Strategies' Frequency of Use	195
4.28	Strategies Based on the Number of Respondents Reporting	196
4.29	Strategies Based on Their Frequency of Use	199

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix		Page
A	Structured and Unstructured Approach to Vocabulary Learning by Snaoui	266
B	Classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Gu and Johnson	267
C	Classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Lawson and Hogben	268
D	Vocabulary Learning Strategies Taxonomies by Schmitt	269
E	Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Nation	270
F	Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ)	271
F-1	Revised Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ)	274
G	Journal Letter for Pilot Study	278
G-1	Revised Journal Letter	280
H	Vocabulary Size Test	282
I	TOEFL Reading Comprehension Test	300
J	Vocabulary Learning Strategies Interview Guide	309
K	Sample Notes Taken from Learner's Interview	310
L	Sample Notes Taken from Learner's Journal	311
M	A Sample Interview with one of the Respondents	312
N	Permission Letter from TOEFL Organization	315
P	Sample Journal Written by one of the Respondents	318

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
BNC	British National Corpus
CPA	Communicative Pre-reading Activities
DCT	Dual Coding Theory
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as Second Language
ETR	Experience-Text-Relationship
EVST	Eurocentres Vocabulary Size Test
FL	Foreign Language
FSL	French as a Second Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ITA	International Teaching Assistant
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LEA	Language Experience Approach
PReP	Pre-Reading Plane
PVLT	Productive vocabulary Levels Test
SL	Second Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SLVA	Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Science
SSR	Sustained Silent Reading
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language

UWL	University Word List
VKS	Vocabulary Knowledge Scale
VLS	Vocabulary Learning Strategies
VLSQ	Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire
VLT	Vocabulary Levels Test
VOLSI	Vocabulary Learning Strategy Inventory
VST	Vocabulary Size Test

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Vocabulary acquisition used to be a neglected aspect of language learning. In recent years, however, interest in this area has grown enormously. Teachers, publishers and researchers are paying more attention to this aspect of language learning. Language teachers and researchers have been keen in searching for effective approaches to enhance vocabulary acquisition. Acquisition is defined as more than familiarity with the form and meaning, but also the ability to use a vocabulary item in a given context (Nation 2001; Read 2000).

Nowadays, efforts to help learners to enhance and improve their method of vocabulary learning have been made in different ways. Sokmen (1997:225) talks about helping students learn how to learn vocabulary independently, noting it is "not possible for students to learn all the vocabulary they need in the classroom". Cunningsworth (1995: 38) considers helping students to build and develop their own vocabulary learning strategies as "a powerful approach". This approach can be depended on "sensitization to the systems of vocabulary, encouragement of sound dictionary skills and reflection on effective learning techniques". Regarding significance of vocabulary learning strategies, it is quite useful to identify what vocabulary learning strategies are and how they contribute to the learners' vocabulary, and what strategies text book developers should include in the books.

It should be mentioned that second language (L2) acquisition depends crucially on the development of a strong vocabulary. In the second language acquisition (SLA) sub-discipline known as second language vocabulary acquisition (SLVA), researchers have focused their attention on the need for second language learners to optimize their vocabulary knowledge (Singleton, 1999; Schmitt, 2000). Vocabulary learning strategies are even more important than language learning strategies in second language (L2) learning (Ahmed, 1989; Schmitt, 1997; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999) with the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition and its emphases on enormous exposure to the language. In order to develop an ever-improving capability to learn and use English effectively, learners need to develop appropriate strategies for lifelong learning.

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are a part of language learning strategies which are receiving more attention since the late 1970s and their investigation has advanced our understanding of the processes learners use to develop their skills in a second or foreign language. Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. Cohen (1998) highlights the conscious choice factor is important to language learning strategy concept because the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from those processes that are not strategy. Instead of simply describing learning strategies as what strategies the learners prefer or what the learners like, which relates more to learner characteristics and learning style, language learning strategy is regarded as specific actions taken by learners consciously for the purpose of learning a language. Indeed, Nation (2001, p.217) has taken this conscious choice factor into account

when defining vocabulary learning strategies. A strategy would need to a) involve choice, that is, there are several strategies to choose from; b) be complex, that is, there are several steps to learn; c) require knowledge and benefit from training; and d) increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use.

Nation (2001) presented useful ways to investigate vocabulary activities in text books. He emphasized on the significance of direct teaching of various vocabulary learning strategies in order to increase the students' knowledge toward vocabulary and also encourage them to utilize them actively. Therefore, text books should consist of different types of vocabulary learning strategies to enable the learners to enhance their receptive and productive vocabulary skills.

1.2 Problem Statement

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills; speaking, writing, listening and reading, which lead to effective communication. One crucial factor is the amount of vocabulary one possesses as vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language (McCarthy, 2001). Vocabulary, however, is the biggest problem for most learners. In view of this, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in second language pedagogy and research. But it is still a contentious issue how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently or how it can best be taught.

The importance of vocabulary learning strategies specifically in the field of foreign /second language learning should be examined seriously. Although a lot of studies

have been conducted in recent years about the vocabulary learning strategies used by native language learners, little attention has been given to EFL. Moreover, most of the studies done so far focus on general language learning strategies. Not enough attention has been paid to vocabulary learning strategies as the most important part of communication and the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and variables such as learning styles, aptitude, attitude, personality types, and vocabulary size especially in Iran. Moreover, a clear guideline on how vocabulary is learned effectively is still lacking. Few studies have been done on vocabulary in the Iranian context. It shows that vocabulary as an important part of language learning has been neglected so far. One of the few studies found on vocabulary was related to Akbari's (2008) research. It is more on vocabulary teaching rather than vocabulary learning strategies.

In addition, nowadays, many teachers are struggling to change their teaching style from old methods like grammar translation method to new methods such as communicative approach. This is the reason why the study of teaching strategies is very popular among teachers (Oxford, 1997). However, few studies tried to investigate learning strategies instead of teaching strategies. In the studies of learning strategies, the researcher focuses on the students themselves. In spite of the efforts made by EFL instructors, text book writers, and curriculum designers in most Asian countries, the classroom environment cannot be changed from teacher-centered to students-centered one (Schmitt, 1997). It is only in a few cases that they succeed in making a student-centered classroom environment where they often use methods and materials that have been developed with the learning needs of native speakers of English in mind. In many cases, neither students nor teachers are aware that

difficulty in learning class material, high frustration levels, and even failure may not rest solely in the material itself.

Vocabulary is generally given little emphasis in the university curriculum in Asian countries (Fan, 2003). The situation is the same in Iran as an Asian country. Generally, the emphasis on English teaching in universities in Asian countries is on the four language skills. Vocabulary teaching in many classrooms is largely incidental (Fan, 2003; Catalan, 2003). This means that when a particular word or phrase appears difficult for the students, they are told the definitions. Occasionally, this may be supplemented with the collocations of the target words or information about how the words are used, for example, whether they are used to express negative emotions or whether the word is used in formal situations etc. More often, however, finding out about new vocabulary items is left to the discretion of the students, and they are encouraged to turn to dictionaries to look up for meanings of words (Catalan, 2003). Catalan continues that vocabulary learning is, therefore, largely ad hoc and very dependent on the efforts of the teachers and students. This ad hoc approach to vocabulary learning may lead to a general inadequacy in vocabulary knowledge among Asian university students. As Fan (2003) states this inadequacy has been repeatedly pointed out by the researchers and lecturers as one of the factors in the unsatisfactory performance of students in their exams. He continues that the inadequacy in lexical knowledge may hinder students' proficiency development and affect their performances in public exams. It is high time for teachers to look into ways to enhance vocabulary knowledge in university students.

Another problem in vocabulary learning as pointed out by Laufer (2003) is related to this point that many of learners have a habit of matching English words with their