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

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

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

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May 2010

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

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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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Date: 12 August 2010
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
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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
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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