



Assessing University Students' Self-Reported Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use

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Abstract

Background. Learning vocabulary is a vital component of language learning; without this integral component of language communication becomes hardly meaningful. Thus, students are expected to have rich vocabulary power that enables them to communicate successfully via listening, speaking, reading, and writing; it assists students in expressing a range of meanings in various communicative situations for various purposes. This demands students to learn vocabulary using diverse vocabulary learning strategies that assist them in learning (internalizing, storing, recalling, and using) words properly. However, several students barely manage vocabulary learning tasks and/or use appropriate and diverse vocabulary in English classes.

Objectives. This study attempted to assess students' reported vocabulary learning strategy used at Haramaya University, Ethiopia.

Materials and methods. The study adopted a descriptive case study design. The five-point Likert scale vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire was administered to participants taking Communicative English skills I. To gather relevant data, 155 participants were randomly selected. Out of the 155 students, 151 participants properly filled out the questionnaire. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 24.

Results. The results indicated that determination, metacognitive, memory, cognitive, and social strategies were used, respectively. The results further showed that the great majority of the students were aware that inadequate vocabulary hinders students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

Conclusions. Overall, determination and meta-cognitive strategies were most commonly used, while the social strategies were least commonly used, and the participants were low-vocabulary learning strategy users.

Keywords: vocabulary, vocabulary learning strategy, freshman students.

Introduction

English is one of the most dominant languages all over the world and it is widely used as a language of instruction, trade, technology, politics, religion and communication all over the world. In Ethiopia, it is predominantly used as a medium of instruction at private and public high schools, technical and vocational institutions, colleges, and universities where the students overall command over this vital language plays a critical role in the learners' academic success.

This necessitates students to develop their ability to use English accurately and/or appropriately for different communicative functions in different communicative contexts with appropriate level of accuracy and fluency. This requires students to develop the skills of listening, speaking reading, writing, and gain reasonable knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In developing these macro-skills, students are

expected to have reasonable vocabulary power (knowledge and depth) as all language skills in English heavily rely on vocabulary learning in ESL and EFL contexts (Nation, 2001) and knowledge of vocabulary is "fundamental to all language use" (Schmitt, Cobb, Horst, & Schmitt, 2015).

Thus, vocabulary can be taken as the cornerstone of foreign language learning due to its indispensable role in developing students' proficiency and ultimately improving their communication skills. Besides, an effective formal communication is unthinkable without this vital language component. Concerning its role in effective communication, McCarthy points out that "without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way" ((1990, p. VIII) and neither literature nor language exists without vocabulary (1991). Consequently, a wide range of vocabulary is important because without sufficient vocabulary, individuals are not able to use the structures and functions they have learned for comprehensible communication (Nunan, 1991).

To gain a wide range of vocabulary knowledge, students should recognize and use a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies. The learning strategies refer to “any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners reported using to discover the meaning of a new word, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to expand their knowledge of vocabulary” (Intaraprasert, 2004, p.9) through which a large or rich vocabulary items can be acquired (Nation, 2001), particularly in EFL contexts where students lack exposure and/or learning opportunities for authentic interactions.

The plethora of existing studies have demonstrated that language learning strategies, most of which are used for vocabulary learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) play a considerable role in learning a foreign language (Oxford, 2002; Cohen, 2007) resulting in better learning outcomes (Aziz, 2005; Oxford, 1990). It is also suggested that such learning strategies assist learners learn the target language effectively (Hismanoglu, 2000) and enable learners to take more responsibility in their language learning process (Nation 2001; Schmitt, 2000). The use of vocabulary learning strategies plays an essential role learning language (Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1997; Williams, & Burden, 1997). This requires students to equip themselves with diverse learning strategies that facilitate their independent learning process as vocabulary learning strategies is proven to be useful for students of different language proficiency levels (Nation, 2001).

Research confirmed that making effective use of diverse vocabulary learning strategies plays substantial roles in language learning and development. However, experiential knowledge indicates that several students joining higher education institutions are observed to struggle with learning vocabulary. This could be due to their failure to use vocabulary learning strategies effectively.

In the newly reformed curriculum, freshman students are expected to take communicative English Skills I which is aimed at developing students' receptive skills (reading and listening skills) which necessitate the students to have reasonable vocabulary knowledge for the reason that “no text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text's vocabulary” (Laufer, 1997, p.20) and students inadequate vocabulary knowledge could be is a serious source of difficulty in learning a language in general and understanding texts in particular.

The researchers' observed that several students were struggling with vocabulary learning activities, recognizing the meanings of new words from listening and reading texts. It was also observed that numerous students hardly conducted extemporaneous presentations making use of appropriate language functions and/or expressions. This clearly reveals students' deficiency in their vocabulary power. This classroom phenomenon inspired the researchers to assess students' vocabulary learning strategy which refers to their “knowledge about the mechanisms (processes and strategies) used to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students to (a) find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode” (Catalan, 2003, p.56).

Moreover, recognizing students' vocabulary learning strategies will probably give instructors better opportuni-

ties to assist students to apply vocabulary learning strategies through vocabulary instruction as language learners have to learn how to store, recall, and use new vocabulary items by employing several vocabulary learning strategies (Nation, 1990) to be used in and outside the classroom independently.

In Ethiopia, local studies on university students' vocabulary learning strategy use in general and freshman students in particular still remains limited. This study would likely provide important information on students reported vocabulary learning strategy use. Thus, the current study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

To what extent do the freshman EFL students use diverse vocabulary learning strategies?

Which vocabulary learning strategies do the freshman EFL students least and/or most commonly use?

Materials and methods

Research design

In this study, the descriptive research design is adopted. This research design helps to collect data required to describe an existing phenomenon, situation, in this case, students' reported vocabulary learning strategy use. This research design focuses on gathering, organizing, and describing the data. In this case, the researchers gathered, organized, and described data on students' vocabulary learning strategy use as reported by the participants without intervening their learning strategy use.

Participants of the Study

This study was conducted on freshman students who joined Haramaya University in the academic year 2023/24. All the participants were from the natural science stream. They were assigned to different sections with a minimum class size of forty students on average. The students join higher education institutions with different command over the English language in general and vocabulary power in particular. Currently, all students joining higher education institutions are expected to take Communication English Skills I which predominantly focuses on the receptive skills requiring students to have reasonable vocabulary power.

Sampling Technique

In this study, a simple random sampling technique was used. This sampling technique helps researchers to avoid sampling biases. Besides, all freshman students were assigned to different sections without any predetermined criteria that would likely affect the sample and sampling technique used in this study. Thus, using simple random sampling is credibly appropriate technique for this study.

Data Collection Instrument

To achieve the purpose of this study, quantitative data were collected via a five-point Likert scale questionnaire. The questionnaire was intended to identify the students' reported vocabulary learning strategy use. The tool was adapted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategy

as this vocabulary learning strategy classification has been widely available and proven to be valid and reliable (Catalan, 2003). Besides, several studies investigating ESL/EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies used this instrument (Lai, 2013). Regarding the overall reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha value was calculated using SPSS software version 24 and it was found to be 0.874. This alpha value showed that the items were highly reliable.

Data Analysis Technique

In this study, the quantitative data collected using the vocabulary learning questionnaire was entered into the SPSS 24 version Statistical Package for Social Sciences to compute the required descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics, overall mean and standard deviations were calculated. These statistics were very important to get the required data to answer the basic research questions.

Before collecting data, oral instructions were provided to the participants on the purpose of the study and how to fill the questionnaire. They were also informed that they do have the right not to participate in the study but none of them refused. After confirming their willingness to participate in this study, the questionnaire was administered to one-hundred fifty-five participants. The collected data were entered to the computer software SPSS (Statistic Package for Social Science, Version 24) and analyzed as presented in the result section.

Results and Discussions

Table 1. Comparisons of the self-reported vocabulary learning strategy use

Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used	Mean	Rank	n	SD
Determination strategies	2.7408	1	151	0.74931
Memory strategy use	2.0698	4	151	0.83377
Social strategies	1.8288	5	151	1.21095
Cognitive Strategies	2.2472	3	151	0.82862
Metacognitive Strategies	2.4114	2	151	1.07127

In response to the research first question, the results of this study demonstrated that determination strategies were reported as the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategy (mean=2.7408, and St. Deviation=0.74931) followed by the metacognitive strategies (mean=2.4114, St. Deviations=1.07127) and Cognitive Strategies (mean=2.2472, St. Deviation=0.82862). The cognitive and memory strategies were reported as the fourth (mean= 2.2472, St. Deviations=0.82862) and fifth (mean= 1.8288, St. Deviation=1.21095) categories respectively.

In this study, the determination strategies and metacognitive strategies were the top-rated (first and second) vocabulary learning strategies. The results of this study were similar to Manuel's study (2017) which showed determination strategies are the first top-rated and/or most commonly used vocabulary learning strategies. In contrast to this, Wharton's (2000) study revealed that memory strategies were most frequently used followed by determination and social strategies whereas the cognitive and metacognitive strategies were reported as the least frequently used vocabulary learning

strategies. These incongruencies could be due to contextual factors affecting students' preferences to use different learning strategies.

Determination strategies are strongly linked with the discovery of a new word, notably, its meaning; these are the strategies learners apply when they are faced with new words (Schmitt, 1997). The determination strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience" (p. 205). Under this category, guessing the meaning of words from textual context and using dictionaries (English-L1 and English-English or bilingual and monolingual dictionaries) were the highly preferred vocabulary learning strategies. The results are similar to other studies that guessing the meaning of words from context is a highly preferred vocabulary learning strategy and some local studies also showed that students use guessing strategy from context using contextual clues to infer the meanings of new words (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997). This technique, guessing from textual context may be a "major way" to learn new vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000, p.209), without others' assistance.

The metacognitive strategies were the second most commonly reported learning strategies, but this is the first most commonly used vocabulary learning strategy in other studies conducted in EFL contexts (Behbahani, 2016). These strategies involve monitoring, decision-making and assessing one's progress and they help students to specify appropriate vocabulary learning strategies for learning new words (Schmitt, 2000). As to O'Malley and Chamot, (1990, p.44), metacognitive strategies are the "higher order executive skills," that involves prioritizing, self-management, setting goals, planning, and objectives. The results of this study were congruent with other studies that showed the metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies were the most preferred learning strategies among the study participants (Cengizhan, 2011; Behbahani, 2016). Similarly, Tajedin's (2001) study also revealed that metacognitive strategies were more frequently used by Iranian EFL students. Under this category, continuing to study the word over time, using the important words inside and/or outside the classrooms, and making practices in doing vocabulary exercises were the most commonly used metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies.

The results showed that the cognitive and memory strategies were ranked as third and the memory strategies were ranked fourth, reflecting that they the strategies were less frequently used. The memory strategies involve mental techniques like imagining the situation in which the word might be used like grouping them into parts of speech as nouns and verbs, and into synonyms and antonyms (Oxford, 1990) whereas cognitive strategies involve analyzing, writing, or summarizing (Oxford, 1990) and "enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means (p.37).

The social strategies are found to be the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategy. This indicates students' failure to learn vocabulary through social strategies that involve asking questions, asking for correction of mistakes, studying with classmates, and learning while helping classmates, which all help learners to communicate and cooperate in the target language (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). The social strategies are found to be the least reported vocabulary learning strategy. This indicates students' failure to learn

vocabulary through various forms of interactions, including asking questions, asking for correction of mistakes, studying with classmates, and learning while helping classmates, which all help learners to communicate and cooperate in the target language (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). This finding is congruent with other studies that revealed that the social strategies were not widely used and least reported learning strategies in different EFL contexts (Arjomand & Shariffar, 2011; Behbahani, 2016; Kafipour, 2006). This could be because students get minimal exposure to the language outside the classroom in different communicative situations. Students making minimal use of social learning strategies involving diverse interactions in diverse interactive situations likely miss practical language learning opportunities, not de-contextualized learning.

Table 2. Overall mean score for self-reported strategy use (total mean)

participants (n)	mean	SD	the reported level of strategy use
151	2.4114	1.07127	Low

In attempting to find out whether the participants' learning strategy use is high, average, or low, Oxford's (1990) scoring system was used. Referring to this scoring system, 3.5 - 5.0 shows high, 2.5 - 3.49 medium (moderate) and 1.0 - 2.49 low strategy use respectively. Based on this scoring system, the data presented in Table 2, confirmed that the participants reported learning strategy use was approximately 2.4. This figure indicates that the students were low-strategy users. This implies that participants hardly used diversified vocabulary learning strategies may be due to a lack of clear awareness about the learning strategies. This can be one of the underlying reasons why several students were observed struggling to deal with classroom tasks or activities related to vocabulary.

However, the results of this study were in contrast with other studies conducted in EFL contexts (Asgari and Ghazali, 2011; Haryati et al., 2016; Hendrawaty, 2015; Suborn, 2013) whose findings showed that the participants were moderate vocabulary learning strategy users. Nation (1990) suggests that language learners have to learn, store, and use new vocabulary via different vocabulary learning strategies, but the participants' low vocabulary learning strategy use reveals that the students are less familiar with the wide range of vocabulary learning strategies that promote independent learning while promoting better learning outcomes. The findings may further show that the participants' low level of language learning strategy use could be one of the underlying reasons for students struggling with their learning language in general and vocabulary learning in particular. This might have also hindered students' language learning process as vocabulary learning strategies students use noticeably affect their vocabulary learning outcomes (Oxford, 1990; Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1997).

In response to the students' awareness about the role of vocabulary in developing students listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, the great majority of the respondents reported that vocabulary is essential in using language and inadequate vocabulary does affect students' language learning outcomes. This is in agreement with the contemporary

literature. Results from open-ended items revealed that using vocabulary is inescapable in communicating via listening, speaking, reading, and writing despite the students' low strategy use. The study further showed several students expressed their agreement that they do struggle in learning English in general and learning vocabulary in particular and these students much preferred using a dictionary.

Conclusion

The current study was aimed at assessing EFL students' vocabulary learning strategy use and to what extent students use diverse vocabulary learning strategies. The study focused on freshman students at Haramaya University, Ethiopia. The results showed that determination strategies and metacognitive strategies were top-rated and most commonly used vocabulary learning strategies followed by memory strategies whereas the social strategies, preceded by cognitive strategies, were the least frequently used strategies. Overall, the study concluded that the students were low vocabulary learning strategy users. This might likely hinder students' language learning skills due to the noticeable role that vocabulary plays in learning a foreign language.

The study suggested that students should be given vocabulary learning strategies to enable them to become autonomous users of learning strategies that promote their language learning processes. This study focused only on freshman students, so future comparative studies could be conducted with different participants from different fields of study. This likely provides a more comprehensive research outcome. Using a single data gathering instrument might not be adequate to reveal unforeseen constraints, so future studies may use different data gathering tools.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Оцінка стратегії самостійного використання словникового запасу студентами

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Авторський вклад: А – дизайн дослідження; В – збір даних; С – статаналіз; D – підготовка рукопису; E – збір коштів

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Історія питання. Вивчення словникового запасу, безумовно, є життєво важливим компонентом вивчення мови і без цього невід'ємного компонента мовне спілкування стає навряд чи значущим. Таким чином, від учнів очікується багатий словниковий запас, який дозволяє їм успішно спілкуватися за допомогою аудіювання, говоріння, читання та письма; Він допомагає учням виражати діапазон значень у різних комунікативних ситуаціях для різних цілей. Це вимагає від учнів вивчення словникового запасу, використовуючи різноманітні стратегії вивчення словника, які допомагають їм правильно вивчати (засвоювати, зберігати, згадувати та використовувати) слова. Однак деякі учні ледве справляються із завданнями з вивчення лексики та/або використовують відповідну та різноманітну лексику на уроках англійської мови.

Мета дослідження. У цьому дослідженні була зроблена спроба оцінити стратегію вивчення словникового запасу студентів, яка використовується в Університеті Харамайя, Ефіопія.

Матеріали і методи. У дослідженні був прийнятий описовий дизайн кейс-стаді. Опитувальник стратегії вивчення словникового запасу за п'ятибальною шкалою Лайкерта був проведений для учасників, які вивчали комунікативні навички англійської мови I. Для збору актуальних даних 155 учасників були обрані випадковим чином. Зі 155 студентів 151 учасник правильно заповнив анкету. Дані були проаналізовані за допомогою версії SPSS 24.

Результати. Результати показали, що використовувалися детермінація, метакогнітивні, пам'ятні, когнітивні та соціальні стратегії відповідно. Результати також показали, що переважна більшість учнів усвідомлювала, що недостатній словниковий запас перешкоджає навичкам аудіювання, говоріння, читання та письма студентів.

Висновки. В цілому, детермінація і метакогнітивні стратегії використовувалися частіше, в той час як соціальні стратегії використовувалися найрідше, а учасники були користувачами стратегії навчання з низьким словниковим запасом.

Ключові слова: словниковий запас, стратегія вивчення лексики, студенти-першокурсники

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