

## EXPLORING EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

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### Abstract

This research is aimed at exploring vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL students. This research will try to explore vocabulary strategies used by EFL students in the range between 16 – 18 years old. 15 students with the same ability of English are used as the subject of this research. This is a naturalistic research. The data for this research is collected by using questionnaire. Data were analyzed using simple descriptive percentage calculations. The questionnaire was written in Indonesian which is consisted of 30 statements. Those statements are grouped under 9 categories. Those nine categories are adapted from Gu and Johnson vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, the research questions are: 1) what strategies are used the most by the EFL learners? 2) what strategies are used the least by the EFL learners? The result of this research are the strategies most often used by the EFL learners in this study were memorization (in terms of social strategies) and dictionary strategies, while the least used strategy discovered is note taking strategies.

**Keywords:** vocabulary learning strategies, learning strategies

### Introduction

English as a foreign language becomes a common language in many different fields. Internationalization plays an important role to bring English becomes the first international language spoken in many different countries. No one denies that English as a foreign language is a universal language at the present (Nirattisai and Chiramanee, 2014). As English becomes an international language, it is important for people nowadays to have ability to speak and communicate in English. The importance of the English Language continue to gain the attention of all parties - students, parents, teachers, politicians, educators and academicians in all education institutions. In order to function reasonably well in the second language, learners should at least have 2000 words. Without possessing the minimum thresholds of vocabulary learners will face difficulties in all the four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing (Subon, 2013).

Communication without vocabulary is considered to be meaningless. English proficiency has been found to be closely

related to vocabulary knowledge (Laufer, 1998; Nation and Meara, 2002). Vocabulary is considered as a very essential component of any languages (Waring and Nation, 1997). Lack of vocabulary obstructs learners' language development as a higher language level requires a higher amount of words (Waring and Nation, 1997, Hu and Nation, 2000). Using vocabulary learning strategies is one of effective tools to enhance learners' vocabulary size (Cunningsworth, 1995; Nation, 2001). According to Nation (2001), large vocabulary can be acquired with the help of vocabulary learning strategies and they are useful for learners in all language proficiencies. Cunningsworth (1995) also stated that helping learners develop their vocabulary learning strategies is a powerful approach to help learners acquire large vocabulary repertoire. Davies and Pearse (2000) suggest that vocabulary in communication situations is usually more essential than grammar as it is annoying for language users when they cannot communicate effectively due to the lack of needed vocabulary. The same opinion is proposed by Fauziati (2015) that vocabulary

is central to language and important to typical language learner. Without a sufficient vocabulary, one cannot communicate effectively or express his ideas in both oral and written form. Having a limited vocabulary is also a barrier that precludes learners from learning a foreign language. When they do not know how to enrich their vocabulary, they often lost interest in learning.

Many researchers said that it is important for English as foreign language (EFL) learners to possess good knowledge of vocabulary in order to be able to speak and communicate effectively in English. Having good storage of foreign language is not a simple thing. Vocabulary is a fundamental element of language proficiency and its acquisition is a main factor of effective communicative skills. Developing a rich vocabulary is an essential and continuing challenge for language learners. Language learners need to use strategies to help them acquire new lexical items and to have rich vocabulary. The use of suitable strategies makes a distinction between experienced learners and beginners in many learning areas. It is a necessity for language learners to increase their vocabulary knowledge and to understand words to use them correctly (Rabadi, 2016). Vocabulary learning strategies have been shown to help learners develop their vocabulary knowledge. Thus, it is worthwhile to study vocabulary learning strategies (Nirattisai and Chiramanee, 2014). Studies of the vocabulary learning strategies used by L2 learners have demonstrated that learners differ in the range of strategies they use and in the effectiveness with which they apply those strategies (Gu & Johnson 1996). In addition, to help learners function well in L2, they need to know strategies that may help them acquire L2 vocabulary. Vocabulary learning strategies stem from language learning strategies. Learning strategies refer to what learners do to achieve their learning tasks. These strategies are used by them when they learn grammar, literature, vocabulary and others (Nayan & Krishnasamy, 2015).

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are intuitively appealing to teachers and learners. It has also become a popular research topic among researchers in the last two decades (Gu, 2009). The research that has been done by Noor and Amir (2009) also showed that there are different strategies used by EFL learners to learn vocabulary. The findings of the data showed that the strategies most often used by the EFL learners in this study were memorization (in terms of mental images), dictionary strategies and linguistic clues. However, the least used strategy discovered is note taking strategies. The implications of these findings suggest that EFL learners would need to engage more strategies to enhance their learning and memory of the vocabulary. Although the subjects in this study were discovered to have knowledge of certain strategies, yet they failed to practice what they have learned. It is important to make students aware that learning does not only involve having knowledge of a particular strategy (competence), but rather it will become enhanced when we make use of that knowledge (performance).

Zarrin and Khan (2014) on their study to 46 students of undergraduates Aligarh Muslim University in India explains that memory strategies were most used by them. In the other side, meta-cognitive strategies were the least strategies that were used. They adopted Schmitt taxonomy in their study. In their research, they gave suggestion that the EFL learners need to be trained on vocabulary learning strategies. They also suggested that effective vocabulary teaching and learning should be included in their learning process. Both previous findings investigated vocabulary learning strategies used in University. The subjects are EFL adult learners. It is presumably important to explore vocabulary learning strategies used by young learners. This research will try to explore vocabulary strategies used by EFL students in the range between 16 – 20 years old. It reported some findings of the vocabulary strategies employed by 15 students. Thus, the research

questions are: 1) What strategies are used the most by the EFL learners? 2) What strategies are used the least by the EFL learners?

### **Methodology**

Questionnaire is the most efficient method which is frequently used to identify learner's learning strategy. This instrument has been used extensively to collect data of mostly foreign language learners (Fauziati, 2015). This study used an adapted version which is proposed by Gu and Johnson (1996). The questionnaire was written in Indonesian which is consisted of 30 statements. Those statements are grouped under 9 categories: 1) Beliefs about vocabulary learning, 2) Metacognitive Regulation, 3) Guessing Strategies, 4) Dictionary Strategies, 5) Note-taking Strategies, 6) Memory Strategies, 7) Activation Strategies, 8) Source, and 9) Anxiety and Motivation. The subjects responded using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4).

### **Findings and Discussion**

The data showed that the EFL learners believe memorization (100%) and repetition (86%) to be one of the ways to learn vocabulary. All learners (100%) believe memorization is the best ways to learn vocabulary. While 86% of learners agree that repetition is a good way to learn vocabulary. Besides, most learners also agree that reading can improve their vocabulary. At the same time, they would also employ the strategy of guessing based on the context the word if located. This finding might indicate that the student could identify with the strategy of using contextual clues to guess the meaning of the word. In terms of self-reflection strategies, these subjects responded positively to thinking about their progress in vocabulary learning (87%). It was also discovered that when it came to examinations, 73% responded that they would not just focus on things that were related to exams. On the other hand, there was still a number (27%) who responded otherwise. This finding could imply that

students are still very influenced by examinations.

The data showed that a majority of the students (87%) used their background knowledge such as experiences and common sense in guessing the meaning of the words. About 67% of the students mentioned that they would not skip unknown words unnecessarily while reading. Although they would not skip the words they don't understand, they didn't try to guess the meaning of the words by using their prior knowledge about the topic. Dictionary is one of the popular media for students to identify or look for the meaning of the word. Instead of using monolingual dictionaries, learners tend to use bilingual dictionaries. Approximately students (86%) mentioned that they referred to the English-Indonesian dictionary. There were several purposes of using the dictionary. The highest score came from using the dictionary to find the appropriate usages of the word (87%).

There were many ways of note taking strategies employed by the students. Approximately 10 students claimed that they had a vocabulary notebook in contrast to 7 students who mentioned that they did not have one. The most common ways to take note of vocabulary was the writing of the unknown English word and its Indonesian translation (11 students). This data could imply that the students were unaware of the impact of note taking or keeping a vocabulary note book for vocabulary enhancement purposes. Moreover, the strategies that they employed such as writing the English words and translations as well as noting the meaning of words are insufficient for enhancement and memory of words. In terms of memory strategies, the students were discovered to employ the strategy of oral repetition and creating mental images most often (13 students). It was interesting to note that about 11 students also employed the strategy of written repetition of a word. In relation with mental image, most of them (13 students) would remember words well if they imagine it with some images. Most of the students agree that they often use

memory strategy to learn vocabulary. In terms of anxiety toward learning the English language, the findings showed that 80% of the subjects felt anxious about reading English text. This indicated that the English language is not widely used in their studies. About 9 students just skip the words that they don't understand. However, 9 students responded that they still do not know how to learn vocabulary. In terms of activation strategies, most students (66%) responded that they would employ the new words that they have learned in their speech and writing. This finding showed that these learners have confidence and put in effort in using the words.

From the result of the data, it shows that the most strategy used by the learners is memorizing. The learners tend to remember vocabulary by memorizing and repeat the words. In terms of memory strategies, the students were discovered to employ the strategy of oral repetition and creating mental images most often (13 students). It is supported with theory of oral strategy to learn vocabulary. Oral story telling helps students acquire vocabulary with or without teachers' explanation of words meaning (Elley, 1989). Besides, most learners also agree that reading can improve their vocabulary. They would also employ the strategy of guessing based on the context the word if located. This finding might indicate that the student could identify with the strategy of using contextual clues to guess the meaning of the word. This result is in line with the statement proposed by Nayan & Krishnasamy (2015) that learners find contextual clues useful when they try to find meanings of words from reading texts. 42.30% find it very useful and 3.85% think that it is slightly useful. It can be concluded that learners find this strategy helpful to help them further comprehend any passage read.

In terms of anxiety toward learning the English language, the findings showed that 80% of the subjects felt anxious about reading English text. This indicated that the English language is not widely used in their studies. Vocabulary development

emphasizes that students seek purpose in learning. Thus purposeful learning in vocabulary development means that students perceive reasons for achieving good vocabulary knowledge. As educators and teachers, we need to understand that learners develop their vocabulary learning over a period of time. Knowing a lot of words does not guarantee that the learner is able to read efficiently (Noor & Amir, 2009). There are some students that still do not know how to learn vocabulary. Teachers should realize how and what important vocabulary learning strategies are and encourage learners to apply them in vocabulary learning. Students themselves need to be informed of the benefits of vocabulary learning strategies, to know their limitation in using vocabulary learning strategies, and to take more responsibility for their own vocabulary learning. The use of vocabulary learning strategies can lead students to large vocabulary size (Nirattisai and Chiramanee, 2014).

87% of the students responded that they would employ the new words learned in everyday situations. This finding showed that these learners have confidence and put in effort in using the words. It is also considered as social strategy. It supports the statement from Asgari & Mustapha (2011) that one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study was that the respondents applied new English words in their daily speaking. It can be considered as a social strategy. They practice new words among friends in the class, ask questions in the classrooms, and interact with native speakers. A possible explanation for this might be that these students benefitted from the receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary learning in second language. Using social strategies are rather popular; this data also revealed that social strategies are frequently used by subjects of this study.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the findings of the data showed that the strategies most often used by the EFL learners in this study were

memorization (in terms of social strategies), reading, and dictionary strategies. However, the least used strategy discovered is note taking strategies. EFL learners still feel anxious about reading in English. The reason of this point is because they have lack vocabulary knowledge. The implications of these findings suggest that EFL learners would need to engage more strategies to enhance their learning and memory of the vocabulary. Although the subjects in this study were discovered to have knowledge of certain strategies, yet they failed to practice what they have learned. It is important to make students aware that learning does not only involve having knowledge of a particular strategy (competence), but rather it will become enhanced when we make use of that knowledge (performance). Besides, Teachers should realize how and what important vocabulary learning strategies are and encourage learners to apply them in vocabulary learning. As educators and teachers, we need to understand that learners develop their vocabulary learning over a period of time. Students themselves need to be informed of the benefits of vocabulary learning strategies, to know their limitation in using vocabulary learning strategies, and to take more responsibility for their own vocabulary learning. The use of vocabulary learning strategies can lead students to large vocabulary size.

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