

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY IN INTERMEDIATE AND ELEMENTARY EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: Regarded as the building block of language, vocabulary has been considered as the main language component in language learning and teaching. Accordingly, strategies for vocabulary learning have been the cornerstone of a lot of studies. Studies, however, on the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and learner autonomy is few. The purpose of this study is to compare the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and learner autonomy in intermediate and elementary levels. So doing, a couple of instruments including the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), Language Learning Strategies Questionnaire, and Learners' autonomy questionnaire were given to 85 female language learners. The data analysis of the results revealed that there is a significant difference between vocabulary learning strategies used by intermediate and elementary learners.

Key words: Learner autonomy, Vocabulary learning strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Recently there have been a great number of studies on vocabulary learning strategies. Most research so far has shown a significant relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and learning results (e.g., Fan, 2003; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Kojic -Sabo & Light brown, 1999) or by investigating and starting strategy similarities and differences among learners with different levels of success (Gu, 1994, 2003; Moir & Nation, 2002) Few studies have been done on the relationships between learner's vocabulary learning strategies and learner autonomy. So enhancing learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is a must for the great impact that is causes on learning process. Vocabulary is regarded as one of the major problems L2 learners encountered in rising language proficiency, it is thus vital that learners expand a sense of autonomy in learning lexical items. On the other hand, these are individuals who learn language not groups of learner (Gu, 2003). While learning lexical items, a high-quality language learner will use learning situations, and at times create them if needed. At this point, it should be distinguished between "learning the meanings of specific words" and "learning strategies to become independent word learners" (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000).

A central characteristic of autonomy is that autonomous learning does not mean teacher less learning. In learning lexical items, autonomous learners may build up and do well in a teacher-oriented class. In other words, Learner autonomy does not take out teachers' role and their control over what occurs in the language learning process. On the other hand when practicing language vocabulary strategies through explicit and implicit ones, a number of learners unsurprisingly fight against to become autonomous" (Victori, 2004)

Courtright and Wesolek (2001) reported that learners understand the vital role vocabulary acquisition in all aspects of their language learning, but not many have truly pay attention to what it means to learn a vocabulary item. In today evolving world, learners should react to these changes by improving autonomous learning strategies generally and principally autonomous learning of vocabulary items.

All in all, it is thought that Iranian EFL learners should take a more central role in assuming autonomy. They should be responsible for their own learning also respect instrumental responsibility of the instructor. In order to have and introduce lifetime learners and to have holistic and well-informed workforce for future, the learners should be provided with the situations to take the center stage in the

learning process. This can be done through the development of an explicit vocabulary learning program, which is basically absent in training and exposing learners to the distinguished vocabulary learning strategies, encouraging the reading habit among them such as using online resources and creating an encouraging learning environment supporting autonomous learning of vocabulary items. In point of fact, learning lexical items is considered as the core activities that help learners use them to relate to the different language skills.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As mentioned before, the purpose of this study is to see whether there is a significant difference between the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and learner autonomy between elementary and intermediate language learners. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

1. Are there any significant differences between vocabulary learning strategies used by intermediate and elementary learners?

Participants: 85 female language learners at Giti and Shokouh English language institute in Gorgan were the participants of this study. The proficiency levels of the participants were identified using "Oxford Placement Test".

Procedure: OPT and a couple of questionnaires were employed in this study. Language learning strategies were identified through self report. Although self report may be inaccurate if the learners do not report truthfully, it is still the only way to identify learner's mental processing; learning strategies are for the most part unobservable, though some may be associated with an observable behavior. For example, a learner could use selective attention (unobservable) to focus on the main ideas while listening to a newscast and could then decide to take notes (observable) in order to remember the information. In almost all learning context, the only way to find out whether student are using learning strategies while engaged in a language task is to ask them (Chamot, 2004).

Instruments: Given the purpose of the study, a number of instruments were deployed for data collection as follows:

1. Oxford Placement Test (OPT): At the outset of study, OPT was given to participants to

ensure that they were homogeneous with respect to their proficiency in language skills as a whole. The questions of the mentioned test were taken from 'Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations.

The OPT was administered to categorize participants into the higher and lower levels of English proficiency. OPT consists of 60 multiple-choice items. Students who could answer 1 to 10 questions correctly were classified in elementary level and Students who could answer 21 to 30 items correctly were classified in intermediate level. By using this test, it was proved that language proficiency level of the participant was intermediate or elementary. Allotted time to answer the questions was 30 minutes.

Table 1. Oxford Placement Test Scoring Scale

Score	Language Proficiency level
1-10	Elementary
11-20	Pre-intermediate
21-30	Intermediate
31-40	Upper-intermediate
41-60	Advance

2. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ):

VLSQ, taken from Gu and Johnson (1996) and Tahmasebi (1999), was employed to determine students' self-reported vocabulary learning strategy use. The questionnaire was subject to a pilot study to check the reliability and validity as it was a new context.

3. Learners' Autonomy Questionnaire:

Designed by Dafei (2007), LAQ includes 21 items (5 point Likert-scale questionnaire) and also was subject to pilot study in order to check reliability and validity.

SPSS 16 was used to analyze the data and to examine the research question.

Data Analysis of Hypothesis: To test this hypothesis, the ANOVA test was used. ANOVA is a collection of statistical models to check out the groups and their related functions (e.g. variance in a group or multiple groups) deals. In this method, the variance obtained from a random variable divided into smaller components that are sources of variance. In its simplest form, the ANOVA statistical test provides the equality of the means that proves different groups, and the student t test results are generalized to more than two groups. Analysis of variance shown in the following table:

RESULTS

Table 2. Output Analysis of Variance

	The sum of squares	degree	Mean of squares	F amount	Meaningful
In group	41.863	557	0.734	2.263	0.011
Out of group	8.764	227	0.325	-	-
Total	50.628	884	-	-	-

According to the ANOVA output in table 2, it is shown that Sig is 0.011 that is less than 0.05 that shows meaningful differences in the elementary

and intermediate level in vocabulary learning strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study provide several implications for practice in regard to language learning and teaching, and serious consideration of differences strategies in the Iranian educational system. Teaching English has been one of the important issues in Iran. So, English has been a compulsory subject in the Iranian educational system. Therefore in present study implications can be for the teachers and learners, and even for materials preparations experts. The choice and performance of the suitable vocabulary learning strategies can have a noticeable effect in earning of foreign language vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is considered as one of the important factors in language learning. Furthermore, vocabulary language learning is the basis for learning each language, not only in class, but also in society communication by using language, so it should be mentioned that

language learning can be depend on vocabulary learning. Once learners happen to autonomous in vocabulary learning, they have acquired a enduring learning skill and a habit of independent thinking and learning which will benefit them long after leaving the formal setting of education.

In this study, the researcher focused on female intermediate and elementary level students. Other studies can focus on both male and female on lower or upper levels. In this research, the researcher used standard questionnaires to get conclusion. In other studies, the researchers can focus on other kinds of questionnaires; Due to researcher's interest to vocabulary knowledge, she investigated check vocabulary knowledge through using different vocabulary learning strategies, but other studies can focus on different language skills (i.e. listening, reading comprehension, etc.). A larger group of participants might have strengthened the findings discussed here even further. While

dependence on number crunching alone is not advisable, future studies might well consider a larger participant pool from several institutions throughout the Gorgan.

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