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**Use and Rankings of Vocabulary Learning
Strategies by Indian EFL Learners**

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Abstract: since by far vocabulary is the most unmanageable part of language, on the other hand, the most important part the present study seeks to shed some light on vocabulary learning strategies. To achieve this goal, the effects of two variables of proficiency and gender on the use of vocabulary learning strategies by a sample group of Indian pre-university learners were studied. The descriptive analysis of the result showed that, first of all, students were not familiar with different ways of vocabulary learning strategies as reported by themselves. Then, both genders use some selected vocabulary leaning strategies more or less in the same rank; while, high proficiency students made use of those strategies of higher frequency. In addition, they also use strategies which according to Depth of Processing Hypothesis are appropriate for deep processing which leads to better retention of vocabulary.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Direct Learning Strategy, Depth of Processing, Gender, High and Low achievers, Proficiency.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary, the building block of language, is essential part of communication without which people cannot have convey their messages properly. In written text or in different face-to-face conversations, or even in class activities, as a miniature of a real life situation, learners often encounter unfamiliar words and phrases that inhibit their language comprehension. Likewise, learners also experience situations where limits in their language competence prevent them from effectively expressing themselves (Williams, 2006).

Vocabulary and language have mutual impact on each other. Vocabulary knowledge enables language use and language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge (Nation 1993). With these cautions in the mind of students, teachers, educators and researchers, the importance of teaching and learning vocabulary is as clear as crystal. But the perplexing point is to identify the best and effective way of teaching and learning vocabulary, since vocabulary acquisition does not happen by itself to a satisfactory degree.

From amongst all the methods of teaching and learning such as intentional, incidental rote learning, repetition, teaching strategies are one of the largest and most well research areas of language education (Williams, 2006) which will be dealt with in the ensuing part. In this study, three main research influences inspired the work:

- 1) Meara's initially note in 1987 (and which has since become something of a cliché) in the field of vocabulary studies, which is now any thing but a neglected area. However, recently there has been a surge of interest to this

- neglected area. (Nation, 1990, 2001; Paribakht and Wesche, 1997; Laufer, 1998).
- 2) The work done by Oxford and her associates in 1990 about vocabulary learning strategies and the paucity of research especially about women or gender differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies. Gender issue loom somewhat larger since in a review of eighty articles, papers and chapters in second language learning strategies conducted by Oxford in the 1980s, she found that only four studies directly looked at gender differences in strategy use (Catalan, 2003). She also brought some more evidence in this regard. According to Catalan (ibid) in her research based on six journals from 1988 up to 1998, she had been able to trace no more than a dozen articles and chapters dealing directly with this issue.
 - 3) The third reason, which is of course the most important one is the condition of low achievers which inspired us to write this article. Responsible language teachers need to think of ways through which they can expose low achievers to the way that good learners or high achievers approach language learning and to a narrower sense lexical learning.

2. Literature Review

'Language learning strategies' form a sub class of 'learning strategies' in general and 'vocabulary learning strategies' constitute a sub class of language learning strategies. The term *language learning strategy* (LLS) has been defined by many researchers. Wenden and Rubin (1987:19) defined learning strategies as "...any sets of operations, steps, plans routines used by learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage and retrieval and use of information. Oxford (1990:8) explained learning strategies as, "*specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations*".

Learning strategy is not a new concept, although researchers have formally discovered and named *language learning strategy* only recently, such strategies have actually been used for thousands of years. As Oxford (1990) exemplified, one well-known strategy is related to the mnemonic or memory devices used in ancient times to help storytellers remember their lines. Considering different definition for VLS, it can best be summed up as particular actions and behaviors that learners consciously make use of to enhance vocabulary language learning.

From the aforementioned definition regarding leaning, it can be concluded that one can extract VLS from the heart of learning strategy and use for teaching vocabulary. Furthermore, the definition includes the word "consciously" which means that these VLS must be teach and learners must be taught how to use these strategies for better retention and recall of taught vocabulary items at will and use them in written or spoken form.

Research into language learning strategies began in the mid 1960. Thereafter, many scholars have classified LLS (Wenden and Rubin 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997, etc.). However most of these attempts to classify language learning strategies reflect more or less the same categorization such as cognitive, metacognitive, social, memory, etc.

One issue of great importance is the identification and description of other variables that influence the use of VLS such as proficiency level, age, gender, motivation, identification and the frequency of use, etc. can be done through different methods such as interview, think-aloud, diaries and journals, and self report. Although self-report may be inaccurate if the learner does not report truthfully, it is still the only way to identify learner's mental processing (Chamot, 2004).

Regarding the relationship between variables such as level of proficiency and gender, which is the main concern of this article, different researchers have done some work and obtained controversial results. While some studies found that females use more strategies than males (Catalan, 2003) other researchers get the opposite result (Wharton, 2000) and still some others found no difference in strategy use among genders (Wafa, 2003). From an instructional perspective then, we do not know with certainty whether female or male students are most in need of language learning strategies (Chamot, 2004).

Although the relationship between gender and strategy selection is blurred, the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and students' proficiency level is clearer. It is claimed that high achievers student have their own style of learning. They can orchestrate strategy use and also take control of the number and range of frequencies. (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

The Goal of This Study

Hence, this study intends to shed some light on the issue of the relationship between gender and proficiency on the range and type of VLS by some ESL, pre-university learners. To achieve this goal the following research questions were formulated:

- 1- What are VLS that are most frequently used by Indian pre-university learners?
- 2- Do males and females differ regarding the use of VLS?
- 3- Which VLS are used by high proficiency learners more and how often?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A total number of 60 pre-university male and female students with a variety of L1 background (e.g., Urdu, Hindi, Kannada) from a Muslim co-educational school in Mysore, India, took part in this investigation. English was the medium of instruction in that school and their age ranged from 16 to 18.

3.2 Instrument of the Study

In order to do this investigation, the researcher made use of 2 different instruments as follows:

- 1- An already standard proficiency test (Nelson series 4000 B) to divide the participants into high and low proficiency groups. The reliability of test was estimated through KR-21 appeared to be 0.67.

2- A self report questionnaire regarding the use of some direct vocabulary learning strategies in the form of Likert scale. The present researcher adopted and adapted this questionnaire. That is, some of those questions were gathered and modified when necessary from previous strategy inventory language learning (SILL) and some others were devised by the researcher.

Since this study is based on Oxford (1990) direct language learning strategies, the questions were also related to those selected strategies. It was not intended to include all the direct strategies mentioned by Oxford for different reasons. First, some of those strategies were not related to vocabulary. Second some others such as translation or cognate needed that the researcher know a variety of languages which was impossible, and the third one, some others were excluded because they were not feasible for administration or it was believed that they were well-known and as a result are the most frequently used strategies which students use such as using different types of dictionaries. In this sense, the questions in self-report questionnaire were limited to these strategies: grouping, placing new words into context, using imagery, analyzing expressions, highlighting, using linguistic and other clues. Cronbach alpha was used to estimate the reliability (0.80).

3.3 Procedure

Nelson proficiency test and the self-report questionnaire were given to the students on the spot during their regular English class at the end of the year of 2007 by the researcher. The subjects were informed that their participation is completely voluntary and they will not receive any gifts or prizes, but the whole class took part in this study eagerly. Even some students were fond of keeping posted of the results. It took a whole class time to answer the questions and their teacher kindly allowed the students to complete their task. The students were assured that their information would remain confidential.

4. Analysis and Discussion

After gathering the data, they were put into descriptive statistical analysis to answer the research questions.

Research question 1

Regarding the first research question about the use of these strategies by the learners without considering the gender, the following table reveals the results.

Table 1: Strategies Used by the Whole Sample (Males and Females)

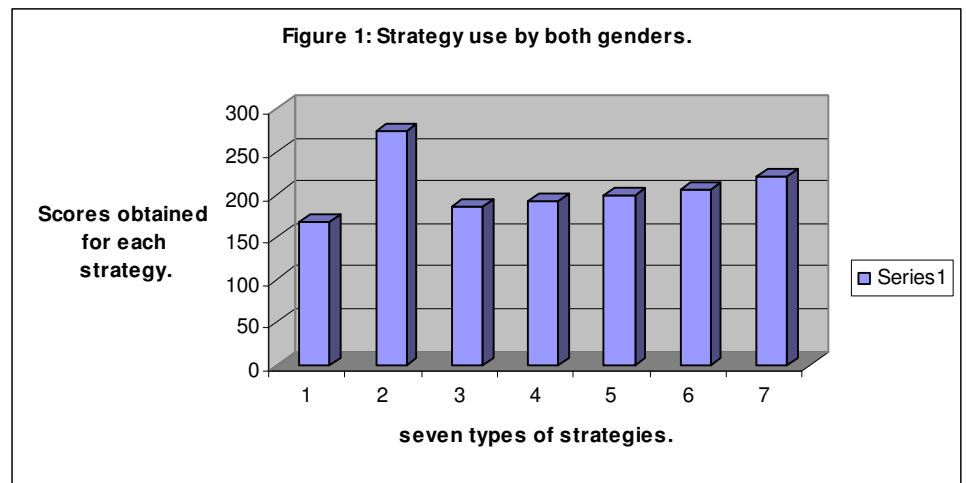
Rank	strategy	mean	percentage
1	placing new words into context	4.56	91.33
2	using non- linguistic clues for guessing	3.68	73.66
3	using linguistic clues for guessing	3.43	68.66
4	highlighting	3.37	66
5	analyzing expressions	3.24	64
6	using imagery	3.08	61.66
7	grouping	2.71	56

All the above mentioned sub-strategies are from memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, which in Oxford's taxonomy (1990) is called direct strategies as the word by itself

shows they are directly involved the target language and requires mental processing .The first group is memory strategy which includes grouping, placing new words into contexts and using imagery. Figure 1 shows the bar graph of using seven strategies by whole sample. In this figure 1- 7 are the following strategies respectably, grouping, placing new words into context, using imagery, analyzing expressions, highlighting and using linguistic and non linguistic clues for guessing.

Figure 1: Strategies Used by Both Genders

Memory strategies, sometimes called mnemonics, are powerful mental tools, which aid



memory in two different ways of storing and retrieving learnt vocabulary items. As Table 1 and Figure 1 show students are just familiar more with one type of memory strategy, namely placing new words into contexts, which gets the highest rank, while the other two memory strategies i.e. using imagery and grouping get the lowest rank. This shows that students are not familiar with different types of memory strategies.

Since learning vocabulary is by far the most unmanageable component in the learning of any language, by leaning different varieties of memory strategies, learners can cope with the difficulty of vocabulary and they can store more new vocabulary and retrieve them when needed. By grouping related items into meaningful units either mentally or even in writing, which leads to reducing the number of discrete elements students make the words easier to remember.

Another less known memory strategy which learners report that they do not use often is using imagery. In this method learners can relate new vocabulary in memory by means of visual imagery either in the mind or in actual drawing. The image can be a picture of an object or a set of locations for remembering a sequence of words or expressions (loci method), or a mental representation of the letters of a word. Oxford (1990:40) brought four reasons why linking verbal with visual is useful to language leaning:

First, the mind's storage capacity for visual information exceeds its capacity for verbal material. Second, the most efficiently packaged chunks of information are transferred to

longterm memory through visual images. Third, visual images may be the most potent device to aid recall of verbal material. Fourth, a large proportion of learners have a preference for visual learning.

Of course, there are some more strategies for those who benefit from aural, kinesthetic or tactile learning style preferences, which were not included in this study.

Although memory strategies can be powerful contributors to language learning, some other researchers show that students rarely report using these strategies. So the result of this part is in line with Nyikos and Oxford (1987), Reiss (1985).

On the other hand based on Depth of processing hypothesis, which was proposed by Craik and Lockhart (1972) the deeper the processing of information or leaning a new word, the better it will be remembered, hence how well information is remembered is not a function of how long or when a person is exposed to that information, but instead it depends on the nature of cognitive processed that are employed to process that information. In this theory, levels of a pyramid can describe the level of processing.

The bottom level represents preliminary shallow processing, while the top level represents deep processing. For example, information that involves strong visual images or many associations with existing knowledge will be processed at a deeper level. This is an important concept because regarding vocabulary it illustrates the fact that simple rehearsal practice will not facilitate long term recall which is the aim of study, however strategies such as using imagery or grouping needs deeper level of processing which promote long-term recall.

Hence, teachers strive is needed to make students familiar with different types of strategies that leads to deeper processing and ultimately to long term retention.

As Table1 illustrates, using linguistic and non-linguistic clues for guessing ranked 2 and 3 which is something reasonable and shows that students use compensation strategies to understand the meaning of new vocabulary despite knowledge gap. Compensation strategies are a special case of the way people typically process new information and has a wide variety of usage not only among learners, but also among native speakers when they do not know a new words or when the meaning is hidden between the lines. This point that students use guessing strategy is consistent with other researchers (Shiwu, 2005).

Here, it is worth mentioning that in guessing there are some influential elements such as texts by itself, its difficulty and learners' skill, which is a critical factor in guessing. According to Nation (2001) from an optimistic view point if some learners can guess large number of words correctly, then potentially most learners can if the develop the skill. Here, it can also be concluded that, teachers must train learners to make educated guesses rather than grabbing the dog-eared dictionary and trying to look up every unfamiliar word. Different dictionaries such as monolingual and bilingual or in the arena of technology electronic dictionaries must be used as a last resort.

Highlighting and analyzing expressions, which are in 4th and 5th rank, are subparts of cognitive strategies. According to oxford (1990) some cognitive strategies (such as highlighting in this study) are typically found to be the most popular strategies with language learners. But, regarding analyzing expressions teachers must familiarize the students with

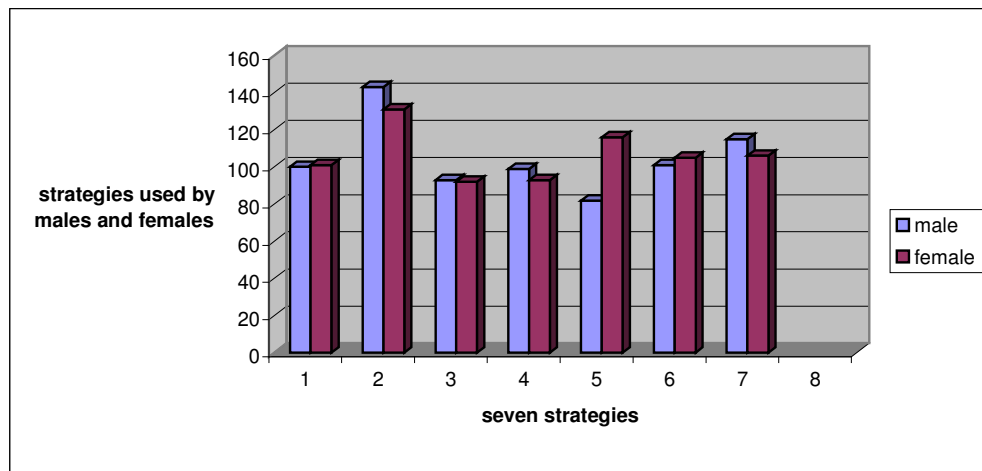
prefixes, suffixes and roots and how to analyze the words more since this process is extremely valuable.

Research question 2

The second hypothesis of this article deals with language learning strategy and gender, in other words, in this study this question was raised: is there any significant difference regarding the use of these strategies between men and women?

Gender is considered as a variable like age, L1 background, culture, proficiency, aptitude and attitude, which affect language use. Different theories were proposed regarding language and gender such as deficit, dominance and difference theory, and a lot of ideas regarding the way man and woman use language separately and in mixed interactions were posed. By the same token, different books were written in this area such as language and masculinity (Johnson and Meinhof, 1997) and the feminist critique of language (Cameron, 1998).

Figure 2: Comparisons of Strategies use by Males and Females.



The result of this study showed no significant difference between gender and strategy use. Figure 2 above and the following Tables also reveal this point. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation strategy used by genders differently.

Table 2: Summary of Mean Results for Strategies Used.

gender	Mean	SD
male	10.8	2.80
female	9.31	2.49
total	10.03	2.69

A short glance at the two other tables (Table 3 and Table 4) reveals that men and woman use these strategies to a great extent in the same rank. Highlighting is the only strategy, which ranked 7 for males but ranked 2 for females. This, difference of use may be justified by

different style of learning through individuals and genders. Further more the results of T-test for all these strategies were not significant.

Table 3: Strategies Used by Males.

Rank	Strategy used by male	mean	percentage
1	placing new words into context	4.6	95.33
2	using non- linguistic clues for guessing	3.7	76.66
3	using linguistic clues for guessing	3.6	67.33
4	grouping	3.1	66.66
5	analyzing expressions	3.5	66
6	imagery	3.5	62
7	highlighting	3.2	54.66

Table 4: Strategies Used by Females.

Rank	Strategy used by female	mean	percentage
1	placing new word into context	4.5	87.33
2	highlighting	3.4	77.33
3	using non-linguistic clues for guessing	3.5	70.66
4	using linguistic clues for guessing	3.3	70
5	grouping	2.4	67.33
6	analyzing expressions	2.9	62
7	imagery	2.8	61.33

Research question 3

Although gender is a debatable issue with different viewpoints, the effect of proficiency in the use of strategy is far clearer. Regarding the effect of proficiency on the selection and frequency use of vocabulary learning strategies nearly all the researchers reiterated that high proficiency students have their own style of learning that suit them. They pay considerable attention to expanding their language, and develop and awareness of language in different ways. Rubin (1975) was probably among the first researchers who brought the idea of successful language learners. He suggested that good l2 learners are willing and accurate guessers, have strong drive to communicate, are often uninhibited, are willing to make mistakes and.... This is also true for using strategies. They can orchestrate these strategies and use them in the appropriate time.

In this study to make a difference between high and low proficiency student, an already standardized test (Nelson) was used. To choose the participants half standard deviations above and below the mean score were excluded (mean= 10, SD= 2.7) the rest of the students above and below mean were considered as high and low proficiency students. Their scores compared and contrasted with their self-report responses. Differences between high and low achievers in this study have been found in the range and type of strategies used. Although, both groups reported that they use these strategies it was illustrated that high proficiency students use these strategies more frequently (always, usually) in comparison to low proficiency students (sometimes). Furthermore, it was also found that high achievers use strategies which are relevant to deep processing such as imagery and grouping. The findings are consistent with others (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

5. Summary and Implications

This study aims at finding the impact of gender and proficiency on the selection and use of some direct strategies which were proposed by Oxford (1990). To achieve this goal an already standard proficiency test and a self report questionnaire concerning the selected strategies were administered at the same time. The samples of this research were 60 pre-university students from a co-educated school in Mysore, India. The results of descriptive analysis indicated that both males and females do not differ significantly on the use of these strategies.

Considering proficiency and strategy use, it was also revealed that high proficiency students use these strategies more in comparison to low proficient students. Further more it was illustrated that generally students are not familiar with different varieties of memory strategies, which are of good help for retrieving and remembering of vocabulary items. So, teachers' strive is needed to help students and familiarize them both with varieties of strategies lead to deep processing of information and to apply them with high frequency. By getting the way good language learners learn and process vocabulary, educators and policy makers can help low achievers. Since the aim of teaching is changing the behavior, this must be done in every possible way and only by helping low achievers to improve one can claim that s/he has done a great job in the process of learning and teaching.

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