English Vocabulary Learning Strategies by EFL Learners at University of Sulaimani: A Case Study

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Abstract: Researchers in the area of EFL learning have tried to put the way(s) by which EFL learners learn English vocabulary into some frames and present them as strategies. One can find various strategies that both teachers and/or learners are following for teaching/learning the vocabulary of a foreign language. It might be argued that these strategies are a little prescriptive or impractical. Therefore, various studies could be done on the ‘real’ strategies that EFL learners adapt in different places for learning English vocabulary.

Kurdish EFL learners, similar to all other EFL learners around the world, may have their own particular way(s) to learn a new English word. As a region which is located in the North of Iraq and being part of the developing countries, there is no rigorous analysis to study the way(s) that Kurdish learners follow for learning English vocabulary. That is why the aim of this paper is to present the way(s) that Kurdish EFL learners follow to learn English vocabulary and compare them with the current vocabulary learning strategies.

The strategy for data collection followed in this paper is a ‘case study’. This is to give a realistic picture of the current situation with regard to learning vocabulary. The data collection tool is a ‘questionnaire’ distributed to collect sufficient data from approximately sixty EFL learners at University of Sulaimani. The hypothesis in this study is that there might be differences between the current available strategies for learning vocabulary and the reality of EFL vocabulary learning in Kurdistan.

This paper falls into three major sections. The first section gives an introduction to the meaning of vocabulary and its difference(s) with ‘lexeme’ and ‘lemma’. The second section covers the current available vocabulary learning strategies that are followed around the world. The last section analyzes the way(s) that Kurdish EFL learners use for learning English vocabulary.

Finally, the validity of the hypothesis is tested in the conclusion and the references are documented.

Keywords: Learning Strategies, Kurdish Learners, English Vocabulary.

1. DEFINITIONS OF VOCABULARY, LEXEME AND LEMMA

1.1. Vocabulary

Vocabulary is considered to be a significant part of a language, especially in the process of learning a foreign language because the more vocabulary one knows the more capacities s/he has for uttering the phrases, clauses and sentences.

Lessard-Clouston, (2013, 9) argues that vocabulary can be defined as ‘the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do.’ Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2012) defines vocabulary as ‘the body of words used in a particular language’. Whereas According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2008), vocabulary is ‘all the words which exist in a particular language or subject’.

It is worth mentioning that all the parts of speech in English are considered as vocabulary. For instance, the words ‘nation, national, and nationality’ are different parts of speech as well as different vocabulary. Not only single words, but readymade chunks and phrases are considered as vocabulary as well as in ‘look for, stand up, and put off’.
Research has shown that accidental learning of vocabulary seems to be more effective than the intentional way. Krashen (1985), for instance, argues that the best way to learn vocabulary is ‘reading for pleasure’. He believes that reading is one of the best ways to enhance vocabulary. However, one should bear in mind that the difficulties learners face in reading is that they should know approximately 95% of the words surrounding a particular vocabulary (Luker, 1992, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Lightbown (2000) believes that there are other effective ways for attaining vocabulary such as having a note book, using dictionary and revision of a vocabulary list.

1.2. Lemma

Crystal (1997: 70) defines lemma as a ‘dictionary headword’. Similarly, Kennedy (1998: 70) treats lemmas and headwords alike. Furthermore, Francis & Kuˇcera (1982:70) define lemma as ‘a set of lexical forms having the same stem and belonging to the same major word class, differing only in inflection and / or spelling’.

The previous definitions define Lemma as a ‘dictionary headword’; it means that all the head words in a dictionary are lemmas and the lemma of a noun should be in a singular form.

Examples of lemma

| Alligator | butterfly | apple | artichoke |

If we make the above words plural, they are no longer lemmas as lemmas should be in singular forms. Moreover, when a word takes inflectional suffixes, it will be changed to ‘lexeme’ such as ‘apples, runs, running, ran’.

1.3. Lexeme

Lyons (1995) states that lexeme ‘is a unit of the lexicon’. Moreover, lexeme is ‘a basic lexical unit of a language consisting of one word or several words, the elements of which do not separately convey the meaning of the whole’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2012). Furthermore, Merriam -Webster Dictionary (2007) defines lexeme as ‘a meaningful linguistic unit that is an item in the vocabulary of a language’.

The definitions emphasize that lexeme is a unit of meaning which can be more than one word, or it is a word with all its inflectional suffixes. Examples such as ‘runs’, ‘ran’ and ‘running’ are the different forms of the same lemma ‘run’.

Apparently, the distinction between Lemma and lexeme appears from the previous explanations of both; Lemma is a headword in a dictionary, while Lexeme is a headword with all its inflectional suffixes. For example, the verb ‘go’ is a lemma, while the same word with its inflectional suffixes is considered as lexemes.

2. CURRENT VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AROUND THE WORLD

2.1. Introduction

Learning the meaning of new words in second language learning requires some specific approaches or plans for the learners to follow. Based on research, there are some of approaches which are called ‘vocabulary learning strategies’ (VLS) which is regarded as part of the strategies for language learning.

2.2. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

If language learning strategies is defined as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, effective, and transferable to new situations.” (Oxford, 1990: 8), VLS can be what learners constitute to discover the meaning of the words they first encounter, keep them in their memory and use them when they need (Catalan 2003, cited in: Ruutmets, 2005).

One can say that there are some gaps in the investigations done in this area until a survey by Schimtt (1997). Schimtt tried to add a comprehensive list of strategies to what has been already classified. ‘Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive’ are four groups of strategies which are adopted by him. Apart from these strategies, he argues that there is another one for learning vocabulary which is ‘Determination strategy’. Thus, the taxonomy of VLS based on what Schimtt
adopted and added is divided into two parts. The first part is ‘new word meaning discovery’ and the second part is ‘consolidating a word once it has been encountered’ (Yu-Ling, 2005). The first part can be subdivided into determination strategies and social ones, while the second part may include social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

The discovery strategies contain many determinations and social strategies. In those strategies, the learner guesses the meaning of a new word. For the guessing process, learners sometimes depend on the context or on their first language. Using dictionary or asking someone else, the teacher, for example, can also be helpful to know the meaning of the new word in the foreign language (Yu-Ling, 2005).

Guessing from the context was regarded to be the best strategy due the incidental learning that happens. Nation (2001:232) goes further to say that the importance of all sources of vocabulary learning is through guessing from the context which is the incidental learning of vocabulary. Meara (1994) adds to what Nation believes by claiming that incidental learning occurs as a result of learning something else, and the more the learners engaged in language activities (such as reading, listening), the more they learn the meaning of new words.

Moreover, context is regarded as the source of clues that the learners might able to guess the meaning of the new words and learn them. Nation (2001: 243-245) claims that the process of learning vocabulary dependant on guessing from the context is very efficient as the analysis of twenty studies shows that 50% of the unknown words are learnt from guessing in the context, in which the unknown words make up only 03% of the running words.

Another strategy within the discovery strategies is the use of dictionary as a reference to learn the meaning of the unknown vocabulary. However, consulting the dictionary cannot be very useful while speaking or listening due to the lack of time during those two processes (Yu-Ling, 2005). In this strategy, learners are looking up the unknown words that they encounter from the context. However, this process should be with careful attention due to two reasons. First, there might be different definitions or meanings for only one word. In this case the learners have to search for the most suitable word. Second, careful attention leads to retention (Prichard, 2008).

As discussed earlier in this section, consolidating strategies is also adopted by Schimtt to include many strategies that are thought to be used by learners in trying to learn new vocabulary. Memorization is one of the consolidating strategies in which learners are involving in finding the connection between the new words and the previously learned words (Schimtt, 1997).Schimtt (1997) claims that the efforts learners make to find that linkage requires a mental process which may lead to retention.

The repetition of the words orally can be regarded as a ‘cognitive strategy’ that learners may use while learning new words (Schimtt, 1997). It is claimed that the cognitive strategies include any mechanical process that the learners may use for learning new vocabulary, such as taking notes, using images, recombination, auditory representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration, transfer, inferences, flash cards and word lists (Gamper, 2008:9).

Meta-cognitive strategies are thought to be planning and monitoring along with evaluating the learning process. Moreover, advance organizers, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, functional planning, self-monitoring, delayed production; self-evaluation can be included in the meta-cognitive strategies (Gamper, 2008: 8).

One can notice that Schimtt places social strategies in both ‘determination’ and ‘consolidating’ strategies. Social strategies are assumed to be such activities that require the learners to be engaged in actual interaction with others to practice their knowledge (Schimtt, 1997).

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Introduction

This section of the paper is devoted to analyze the collected data from a questionnaire. The respondents’ views on learning vocabulary and/or new words were taken into consideration in order to answer the paper’s main aims.

3.2. Data Analysis

The first question in the questionnaire asks whether learning vocabulary is important or not. Interestingly, the results show that all participants believe that learning vocabulary is essential for
learning a new language. This idea concurs with Wilkins (1972: cited in Lessard-Cluosten 2013) who argues that ‘. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.’

Concerning the skill(s) which learners think that they need new words for, based on the collected data, the vast majority of respondents choose the ‘speaking’ skill. ‘Writing’ skill comes in the second place in the rate of 18%. Hall (2000) asserts that the exact message will not be delivered without knowing the vocabulary, whether in the spoken or the written forms. It is worth mentioning that ‘listening’ skill was the least which needs more vocabulary. Fig (1) shows the percentage that the respondents give on the skills.

The major purpose of learning vocabulary may vary among the learners of a new language. Many papers investigate the purposes. Lewis (1993, p. iii) claims that language learners may not be able to take part in conversations if they do not know the meaning of major words which are addressed to them. This idea is also affirmed by McCarthy (1990, p. ix) who points out that ‘no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful ways.’ The result of the questionnaire in this regard is that 45% of the respondents refer to the major purpose of learning a new word as the key ‘to be able to speak better’. Moreover, for 36% of them, the aim is ‘to understand and a sentence they listen to’ as well as for ‘translation’. It should not be forgotten that achieving university success was picked by only 10% of the respondents. The rest of the purposes are shown in fig (2).

Research has shown that learning new vocabulary is not an easy task due to the fact that it is not only the word which one needs to learn, but also learners need to know about the style, register, dialect, collocation , polysemy ,spelling and pronunciation (Taylor: 1990). The result of the questionnaire also shows that it is not easy to learn a new vocabulary as 57% of respondents
believe that it is difficult. However, nearly the other half of them thought that it is not a difficult task.

![Survey Results](Fig3)

The respondents are also asked about the solution for the difficulty they face, and they referred to ‘repeating the word many times’ until it becomes familiar. This solution is preferred by 28% of the respondents out of four other solutions. Interestingly, ‘none of the choices’ was picked by considerably a huge number of respondents.

![Survey Results](Fig4)

Concerning the strategies that the participants use for learning new vocabulary, 46% of the respondents prefer ‘watching movies’ rather than the other ways. This way might be more...
enjoyable and easy for them as strategies could be any method that the learners may use to make learning easier (Oxford: 1990). 36% of the participants prefer listening to English for learning new vocabulary. The participants also are asked whether they guess the meaning of new words from the context or look up the dictionary. The result was that half of them depend on the context which is what Schmitt (1997) refers to as discovery strategy. Nation (2001) asserts that guessing from the context is very important as it is the accidental learning.

The other half of the respondents prefer to look up the dictionary when encountering the new vocabulary. However, using the dictionary is not always a good choice as learners may have an access to dictionaries while conversing with others. The following charts show the exact percentages of the above explanation.

![Chart showing percentages of preferred strategies for learning new vocabulary.](chart)

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data analysis in the previous section, one can reach the following conclusions:

- Learning vocabulary is important for learning English language.
- Vocabulary is essential for ‘speaking’ more than other language skills.
- More than half of the respondents believe that learning vocabulary is a difficult task. Therefore, they face this challenge by repeating the new word until they learn it.
- Major sources for learning vocabulary are ‘watching movies’ and ‘listening to English’.
- In case of not knowing a word most of them either guesses the meaning from the context or look the word up in the dictionary.

It seems that most of Kurdish EFL learners follow the same strategies that are there for vocabulary learning. However, they might not be really aware of the existence of those strategies.

REFERENCES

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