

20 Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Grade 7

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1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is vocabulary learning strategies - the various techniques that learners use in order to remember new words. After a period in which vocabulary was not given much attention by researchers compared to grammar, in recent years there has been renewed interest in how foreign language learners acquire, remember and use new words. Here I examine such issues with reference to Grade 7 learners in Oman.

2 VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

2.1 Vocabulary Knowledge

There are many different elements involved in knowing a word and these are discussed in detail in Nation (2001) and Cameron (2001). Knowing a word involves knowing its form, meaning, and use. It also involves both receptive and productive knowledge. Other types of vocabulary knowledge are pragmatic knowledge (knowing when to use a word), collocational knowledge (knowing which other words a word is used with), phonological knowledge (pronunciation) and orthographic knowledge (spelling). There is thus much to learn about any word and for this reason learners need to encounter words many times in order to develop a full understanding of them. Learners also need to develop strategies which will enable them to remember and recall vocabulary knowledge.

2.2 Learning Strategies

Learning strategies have been defined as "... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, in Hismanoglu, 2005). Learning strategies have been classified in different ways (see Hismanoglu, 2005) but a common way of doing this is in terms of metacognitive, cognitive and social learning strategies.

Metacognitive strategies “help learners to plan and monitor their learning” and help them to “become more independent and personalise their learning by allowing them to take control over the learning process” (Reinders, 2004: 32). These strategies involve planning and thinking about learning, setting goals, self-management and self-evaluation of learning.

Cognitive strategies are defined by Hedge (1993: 93) as “thought processes” which are used directly in learning. These strategies involve note-taking, repetition, grouping, translating, using key words, summarizing and analyzing.

Social strategies, according to Cook (1991) and Schmitt (2000), involve interaction with other people in order to improve language learning. Examples of such strategies are asking questions and cooperating with others.

2.3 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Several studies have examined vocabulary learning strategies. One of the best known is the study of the good language learner (Naiman et al., 1978). In fact, most research of this kind seems to have involved good learners. Exceptions are Schmitt (2000), who compared good learners with poor learners, and Porte (1988), who focused on the strategies poor learners use to deal with new vocabulary. In this latter study, the researcher found that weak learners used several vocabulary learning strategies

which were similar to those found in studies of the good language learner, including overt and covert use of repetition in vocabulary learning, the writing out of translation equivalents in order to aid learning, and the use of dictionaries to discover meaning (p. 168).

In this study I will examine the vocabulary learning strategies of learners with a range of abilities.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Question

As noted earlier, the purpose of this study was to learn about the vocabulary learning strategies used by Grade 7 learners. I had one specific research question, which was: What learning strategies do good learners, average learners and weak learners in Grade 7 use to learn vocabulary?

3.2 Data Collection

To address this question, I collected data through questionnaires and interviews.

3.2.1 Questionnaire

Questionnaires are an efficient way of collecting large quantities of information (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). To investigate vocabulary learning strategies I thus designed a questionnaire and administered it to two Grade 7 classes (70 learners in total, 12-13 years old). I piloted the questionnaires with three Grade 8 learners first and changed some of the questions to make them clearer in response to their feedback. The questionnaire was in Arabic and contained closed questions

only to make it easier to complete and to improve the reliability of the analysis. Sixty-nine questionnaires were completed and of these I randomly chose 35 to focus on in my analysis. These 35 consisted of 10 good learners, 11 average learners, and 14 weak learners (I referred to learners' assessment profiles in assigning them to one of these three groups).

3.2.2 Interview

I selected six learners (two good, two average, and two weak) and carried out semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995) with them. The purpose of the interview was to ask about their vocabulary learning strategies. I prepared questions in advance (see the Appendix) but also added further questions depending on the responses the learners gave. Each learner was interviewed individually and in Arabic. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Questionnaire Data

I discuss the responses to the questionnaire under four headings which relate to different types of vocabulary learning strategies: (a) planning and organizing; (b) memorizing vocabulary; (c) using vocabulary; and (d) learning spelling.

4.1.1 Planning and Organizing

Two questionnaire items related to how learners planned and organized their vocabulary learning; one asked if they kept a portfolio (see the chapter by Al-Ghafri in this volume); the second asked whether, if they had a portfolio, they had a section in it for recording words. Twenty learners said they kept a portfolio; 11 said they had a section in it for vocabulary. Figure 1 breaks down these results according to the three ability groups.

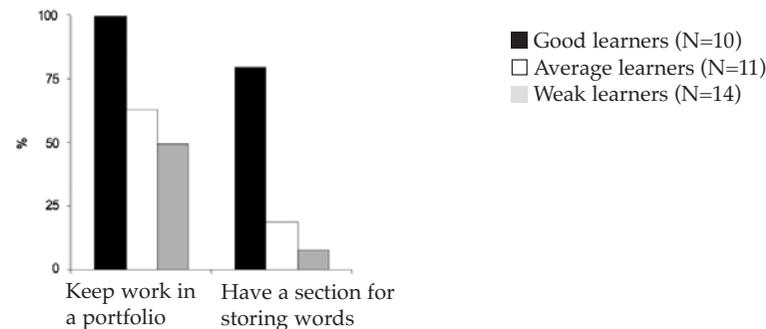


Figure 1: Planning and organizing vocabulary learning

It can be seen from the figure that all good learners said they have a portfolio to keep their work in, but only 80% of them said they have a section for recording words. Only half of the weak learners said they have a portfolio and few of them had a section in it for recording words.

4.1.2 Strategies for Memorizing Vocabulary

Table 2 gives the number of learners who said they used a particular strategy to memorize vocabulary. Overall, grouping words (e.g. alphabetically or by topic) was the strategy that was mentioned most often, followed by repeating the word and translating. Using words in games and puzzles was the strategy mentioned least often.

In terms of the ability groups, grouping words was the most common strategy for good and average learners, while repeating words was mentioned most often by weak learners. Translation was used more by good and average learners than by weak learners. No weak learners said they memorized vocabulary by making connections between new words and those they already knew.

Table 3: Influences on teachers' beliefs about using the L1

Strategies	Good Learners (N=10)	Average Learners (N=11)	Weak Learners (N=14)	Total (N=35)	Total %
Grouping words	10	9	7	26	74
Relating words to physical actions	3	5	2	10	29
Elaborating (relating old information to new information)	5	6	0	11	31
Relating words to visual concepts in memory	4	2	6	12	34
Using finger method to list words	7	6	2	15	43
Relating words to familiar words in Arabic	2	3	5	10	29
Repeating the words	6	7	8	21	60
Translating	9	8	4	21	60
Using words in games and puzzles	0	1	2	3	9
Writing the word in a sentence	7	3	2	12	34

4.1.3 Strategies for Using Vocabulary

Another set of items on the questionnaire elicited information about the strategies learners utilized in learning to use vocabulary. The results are presented in Table 2, which shows how many learners said they used particular strategies.

Table 2: Strategies for using vocabulary

Strategies	Good Learners (N=10)	Average Learners (N=11)	Weak Learners (N=14)	Total (N=35)	Total %
Focusing on correct spelling	6	6	3	15	43
Using words in different contexts	6	4	1	11	31
Saying correct pronunciation	9	4	3	16	46
Using words to communicate with others	8	6	1	15	43

Overall, the strategy most learners said they used was pronouncing the words correctly (for spoken use), followed by focusing on the correct spelling (for written use) and consciously using new words to communicate with others. Good and average learners said they used the strategies in Table 2 more than weak learners.

4.1.4 Strategies for Learning Spelling

The final group of strategies from the questionnaire I will comment on here relates to learning spelling. Figure 2 shows the distribution of these across the three ability groups.

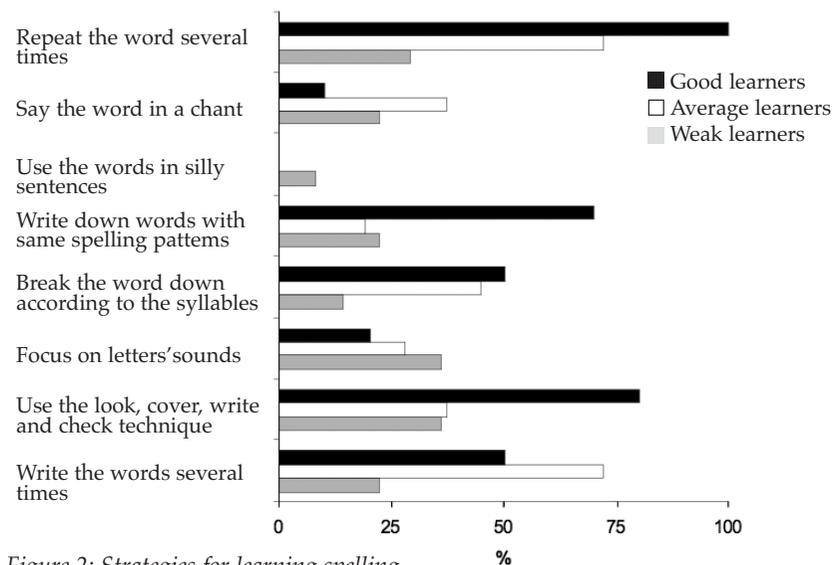


Figure 2: Strategies for learning spelling

Good learners said they used four of the eight strategies listed here more than the other learners; repeating the word several times was the strategy they said they used most (this was actually the strategy most used overall), followed by the look,

cover, write and check technique. Repeating and writing the word were the strategies used most by average learners, while for the weak learners the strategies most commonly mentioned were focusing on the sounds of letters in a word and the look, cover, write and check technique. Weak learners were the only ones who said they used silly sentences (e.g. tongue twisters) to help them learn the spelling of vocabulary.

4.2 Interview Data

Here I report on the interviews I conducted with six learners. I analyzed their responses according to the classification of learning strategies discussed earlier - metacognitive, cognitive and social.

4.2.1 Metacognitive Strategies

Planning and organizing: All learners except learner B said they plan for their learning. They said they have portfolios to keep their papers in. Learners A, C, D and F explained that they often add words to their portfolios, but learners B and E had special notebooks for recording vocabulary.

4.2.2 Cognitive Strategies

Grouping method: Good and average learners reported using this method to memorize words. Ways of grouping words were alphabetically, by topics and by grammar. For instance, learner A explained that "I sort them according to grammar, nouns, verbs or adjectives". Neither of the weak learners interviewed referred to this strategy.

Guessing intelligently: Again, the good and average learners referred to this strategy but the weak learners did not. One good learner said she guessed using words in the context and pictures; one average learner also said that in working out the meaning of a new word "first, I look at the pictures next to it".

Repeating: Only good learners mentioned this strategy. With reference to learning spelling, learner A, for example, said "I write the word several times".

Placing new words into a context: Only learner A mentioned this method of using new vocabulary as a way of learning it.

Translating: All learners except learner F said they use the dictionary to find the meaning of the words in Arabic.

Applying images and sounds: Good and average learners mentioned this strategy for remembering vocabulary. Learner C, for example, said that she "matches the word with pictures".

Employing action: Only learners A and C mentioned physical actions as a strategy to memorize words. Learner C, for example, said they she tries to "match the word with actions".

Practising: Good learners said they write the words several times when they practise spelling. Learners A, C and E use the 'look, cover, write and check' technique.

Using key words: Only one average learner mentioned this technique, which involves finding Arabic words which help the learner remember the English word.

4.2.3 *Social Strategies*

Asking for clarification: Nearly all the learners said they use this method, but in different ways. They said they asked the teacher to repeat what she has said or to explain things for them. They also said they asked members of their group to give the meaning of unknown words.

Cooperating with others: Learners A, D, E and F said they like working with others, but learners B and C preferred to work individually.

5 DISCUSSION

Here I draw on my quantitative and qualitative findings to comment on the vocabulary learning strategies used by the good, average and weak learners in this study.

It appears that good language learners focused their attention on both form and meaning when learning a new word. They said they used metacognitive strategies such as planning and organizing their work. Also, they reported using cognitive strategies such as guessing the meaning from the context, practising the word on their own in different ways, and using other strategies for memorizing and using new words such as grouping, translating, key words, imagery, writing words in different contexts, elaborating and repeating. Finally, they used social strategies such as practising in oral group and pair activities and trying to use English with others.

Average language learners also focused on meaning and form in learning new words. They said they used metacognitive strategies to plan and organize their work. Also, they mentioned different types of cognitive strategies such as grouping, physical actions, elaborating, repeating, translating, using key words and guessing the meaning from the context. Moreover, they used social strategies in order to work with others and ask for clarification.

Weak learners reported using a smaller range of strategies than the good and average learners; a smaller proportion of weak learners, too, said they used vocabulary learning strategies compared to the other two groups. Some of the weak language learners' strategies differed from those good language learners used. For example, to get the meaning of a word, they said they asked the teacher or their friends for the meaning in Arabic. However, some of the weak learners did focus their attention on the form and meaning in order to learn vocabulary. In terms of cognitive strategies, they reported that they learned vocabulary by using grouping, imagery, familiar words in Arabic and words in games. Finally, they also used social strategies by working with their friends in their groups and asking for clarification. In line with Porte (1998), then, this study shows that weak learners may use some strategies similar to those used by good learners.

6 CONCLUSION

While the results of this study highlight some differences in the vocabulary learning strategies of good, average and weak learners, they did not identify any major differences in the groups; fewer weak learners than the other groups reported using strategies to learn vocabulary, and the range of strategies used by weak learners was also smaller, but these results are not surprising. The results of the study may have been influenced by the small number of learners involved, and so one recommendation I would make is for larger questionnaire studies of this issue to be conducted.

Despite the lack of very conclusive findings here, though, the study has been valuable in deepening my understanding of vocabulary learning strategies and of which of these my learners use. As a result of this study I now feel confident that I can move on to think about how to encourage my learners, irrespective of their ability, to learn about and use a wider range of strategies for learning English vocabulary. Another personal benefit of this study has been that it has given me experience of doing classroom research, and the experience will enable me to continue exploring teaching and learning processes in my classroom in future.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you like learning new words in English? Why?
2. Which do you prefer to learn, easy and simple words or the difficult ones?
3. Do you have a portfolio to keep your work in?
4. Is there a section for storing words?
5. Do you add words in it?
6. How often do you add words?
7. What strategy do you use to sort words? Give an example.
8. When you want to use a word, what information do you focus on?
9. What strategies do you use to learn new words? Can you explain?
10. What reading strategies do you use when you read a text and you find some new words in it?
11. While you are reading a story, what helps you to understand the meaning?
12. What do you do if the teacher says something you don't understand in English?
13. What strategies do you use to memorize the new words?
14. What strategy do you use when you learn spelling?
15. Do you like working individually, in pairs or in groups? Why?
16. Do you watch or listen to English programmes? Give an example.
17. Do you read any English books? Give an example.
18. Do you use the language outside the class?
19. Do you use any strategies that help you to learn better?