

D^r Kies Mohamed

Email: kiesmed@yahoo.fr

University of Djillali Liabes, Sidi Bel Abbas

Vocabulary Learning: Strategies and Practical Implications

تعلم المفردات: الاستراتيجيات والآثار العملية

الملخص:

في الآونة الأخيرة قد تلقى تعلم المفردات والتعليم اهتماما كبيرا من اللغويين الذين يعملون في مجال التطوير اللغوية الثانية والأجنبية . وقد ركزت الباحثون بشكل رئيسي على الأهمية الحاسمة من المفردات في التحسن العام المتعلمين. ونتيجة لذلك ، فقد تم وضع تصور استراتيجيات التعلم من أجل مساعدة الطلاب على إثراء خلفياتهم وبالتالي، فإن الهدف من هذا البحث هو تسليط الضوء على بعض منهم، وأساسا لتقييم وتيرتها من الاستخدام بين طلبة الجامعات العام الأول .

كلمات البحث: تعلم المفردات المعجمية ، واستراتيجيات الكفاءة

Abstract

Recently, vocabulary learning and teaching have received a great attention from applied linguists working in the field of second and foreign language development. Researchers have mainly focused on the crucial importance of vocabulary in the learners' overall improvement. Consequently, learning strategies have been conceived in order to help students enrich their lexical background. Thus, the objective of this research is to highlight some of them and mainly to evaluate their frequency of use among first year-university students.

Key Words: lexical competence, vocabulary learning strategies

The Objectives

Presently, teachers have been trying to create and develop the most adequate methods in order to help students to achieve a wide range of competencies, among them the lexical one which can help learners to process and learn words in a more effective way. In fact, a language learner should possess a good deal of words if he really wishes to achieve a global competence in the target language.

The present article, thus, seeks to shed light on some areas concerning vocabulary learning strategies. Indeed, it has as a primary objective to answer the following questions:

What are the kinds of strategies used by First-year university students to learn vocabulary?

Why do students tend to use some strategies rather than others?

Accordingly, this article seeks to unveil the preferences of students as far as the vocabulary learning process is concerned. Trying to understand these learning tendencies represents also a curiosity that deserves to be investigated. In fact, the complexity and the multiplicity of the strategies, recommended by the different theories, can incite some researchers to scrutinize the kind of behaviors adopted by students when they are meant to enrich their vocabulary.

Furthermore, in order to better conduct the present research and obtain a better methodological approach, the following hypotheses have been prepared:

- 1) Students frequently use the vocabulary they have acquired to strengthen their storage and even their retrieval.
- 2) Students usually have recourse to reading and guessing from context to enrich their lexical competence.
- 3) Students use translation, because they are at an initial phase of learning.

Instruments Used

In order to collect insightful and exploitable data which can help to have a clear idea and identify the kind of strategies learners tend to use and try to understand the reasons of their choice, the researcher has conceived two instruments, namely the questionnaire and the proficiency test. These tools have been created, taking into account the strategies proposed by the literature of the field.

The questionnaire comprises three different but interrelated questions. Their objective has been to make learners reveal the kind of learning strategies they frequently use. The first and the second question have as an objective to encourage the student to mention which is the strategy that mostly suits his learning process, and later on, he was invited to justify his choice. The third question tries to incite them to reveal other personal strategies that have not been presented by the researcher.

On the other hand, the second main tool used by the researcher in the process of data collection, i.e. the proficiency test, includes a set of tasks accompanied by two questions. These tasks have been conceived in order to help the teacher identify the kind of strategies the subjects actually use, and the attitudes adopted by them to deal with each task. It is important to mention that each task is closely linked to the kind of strategies that the researcher wanted his students to reveal. Subsequently, another question comes to unveil the reasons that could push them to use one possibility instead of another.

It is important to mention that the data collection phase lasted two months that have served to discover, through the students' performances and the information provided when answering the different empirical questions, very important and insightful learning clues. It is also judicial to highlight the importance of the fact that all the strategies presented to the

students have been clearly presented to the students, in order to either identify them as a recourse already used, or to help them to discover learning elements that can be of a certain pedagogical importance.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

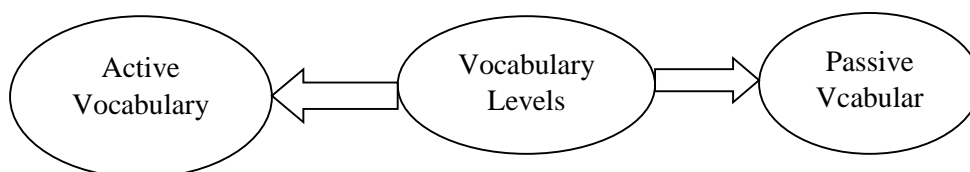
Research on the field has always put forward the fact that learners should rely on an important deal of words that can lead to a positive language development, where a student is able to use his lexical competence to improve his communicative one. This lexical autonomy is essential when dealing with the different linguistic situations that anyone can face. Developing the different lexical aspects can be of a neat pedagogical importance.

Furthermore, when it comes to the different kinds of vocabulary internalized by learners, two distinctions can be mentioned, namely the Passive vocabulary and the Active one, as it is explained below:

Words that are internalized and can be readily produced are said to be in the student's active vocabulary. Words that could not be readily produced but could be understood are said to be in their receptive (passive) vocabulary. (Sidsel, 1989, 64)

Accordingly, the active use of vocabulary takes place when a learner tries to use the word, whose meaning fits the appropriate lexical need, whether in an oral or written context. On the other hand, Receptive vocabulary refers to the words that can be recognized at a receptive level, either in the context of speaking or listening and that, however, cannot be effectively used.

Furthermore, researches show that there is a gradual transition from the receptive vocabulary to the productive one. It can be achieved through a daily revision, practice and exposure to the target items, already learnt. And both vocabulary levels can be enriched thanks to the ability of a learner to use the different vocabulary learning strategies.



Vocabulary Levels

In normal conditions, the vocabulary learning process undertaken by a learner should include three interrelated steps, namely presentation, comprehension and production. He should firstly discover the word and its meaning then understands it and finally be able to produce it in different linguistic and communicative contexts.

The last step, the productive one, is meant to be the culmination of a linguistic and mental process developed by a learner. It also represents the phase where he makes use of all the elements acquired so far, and where he is supposed to develop to the maximum his active vocabulary, as it is explained below:

Items which were negotiated or used have a greater chance of being learned than items in the textual input which were not used. (Newton, 1995, p107)

Thus, the steps, mentioned above, reflect the main elements that can be mastered in order to complete a successful learning process. Their achievement can be possible by taking into account some priorities that can improve the overall acquisition process.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

A new trend in the field of L2 and Foreign language acquisition has started to emphasize the use of some strategies as a way to solve problems as far as language and more particularly vocabulary learning is concerned. Strategies are recommended to be used to cope with hindrances, which emerge during the process of language development. They are known to improve the quality of language learning as it is put forward in the following:

Learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning more easier, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. (Oxford, 1990, p80)

Being able to rely on a set of keenly selected strategies can help the learner to improve his lexical competence and, by the way, develop his mastery of the target language. He, in fact, can make use of them in order to facilitate his adaptation to new lexical contexts.

Guessing from Context

One important factor which is particularly related and somewhat a part of the reading process is guessing from context and how to use the contextual clues, i.e. those lexical, semantic, and morphological indicators that lead us to deduce the meaning of unknown words. Researchers have found out that it is tremendously useful to acquire vocabulary being guessed from context, which is far from more useful than to learn new words in their isolated form, as it is illustrated below:

It is impossible to teach learners all the words they need to know and so it is important to teach them guessing strategies that will enable them to tackle unknown words and to lose their reliance on dictionaries. (Carter and McCarthy, 1991, p 42)

Thus, finding the part of speech of the unknown word, analyzing its immediate context are some of the vocabulary learning strategies that have proved to be of very high importance. (Clark and Nation, 1980)

Lexical and Semantic Sets

Creating intelligent lexical sets, which include words that share the same semantic features, and that belong to the same lexical environment, can also be very useful linguistically speaking. Students are encouraged to try to establish links between different words that belong to the same mental spheres, making easier their understanding, storage, and eventually their retrieval for productive purposes.

Besides, one of the elements that can guarantee a better usage of these sets can be the technique of Brainstorming. This latter helps the learner to better find and later on store words that can be linked according to their common lexical features.

The Use of Dictionaries

The use of dictionaries had been for a long time neglected by researchers and methodologists. They had been putting forward the argument that the use of a dictionary can do harm to the learner's learning process. They had serious doubts about the way words are learnt in isolation.

Nevertheless, current trends are stating some positive effects of the use of such tools. They assert that dictionaries, mainly monolingual ones which provide illustrative sentences, can be a valuable source of information and an important tool of revision inside and mainly outside the classroom, as it is explained below:

When a student of Hispanic origin in the USA wanted to check the meaning of stuff, when reading a twentieth century novel, he checked not only the meaning but the spelling, pronunciation and examples too. (Summer, 1991, p114)

Dictionaries can sometimes develop learners' laziness and force him to restrict the use of the word to the found illustration. However, they can be a useful and accurate source of meaning mainly for foreign language learners, who live in an environment that lacks the presence of native speakers.

Translation

This strategy, like the use of dictionaries, has also been marginalized by researchers and teachers, who viewed it as an obstacle towards students' ability to acquire a language in a natural way. Nevertheless, other research works have proved that having recourse to translation can be considered as a valuable means to convey the meaning of words, as it is illustrated below:

Most learners find it useful to make a conscious effort to link words between languages in this way, and in the early stages of learning it is inevitable that they will do so. (Gairns and Redman, 1990, p30)

Accordingly, translation can be very practical at the moment of developing a learner's lexical competence, since it can help teachers to save time, mainly when dealing with an obsolete or an unimportant word. However, it is important to notice that there are many considerations to take into account when using it, since its overuse can hinder the natural development of the language. In addition some cognates can be sometimes deceptive, such as in the case of "False Friends", or false cognates.

Word lists

Word lists represent an old method created by the proponents of the "Vocabulary Control Movement". They were interested in formulating a number of lists which would include the best, the more useful, and the most frequent words.

This movement witnessed the creation of two major lists, namely the Basic English List created by Ogden and Richard in 1930, and the General Service List which was produced by West in 1953. These lists were created to have as an objective to guarantee a greater autonomy in writing and reading as it is clarified below:

Basic English is English made simple by limiting the number of words to 850 and by cutting down the rules, for using them to the smallest number for the clear statement of ideas. (Richard, 1943, p20)

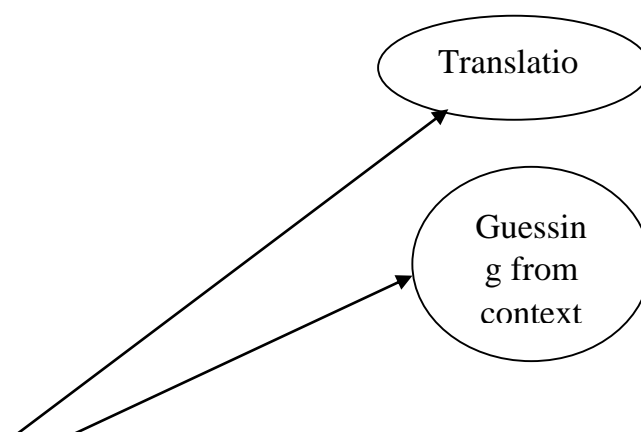
However, subsequent studies have suggested that it is better to rely on the learner's capacity to infer and guess from context. Researchers argue that learning words in their isolated form would do harm to the natural development of the student's vocabulary.

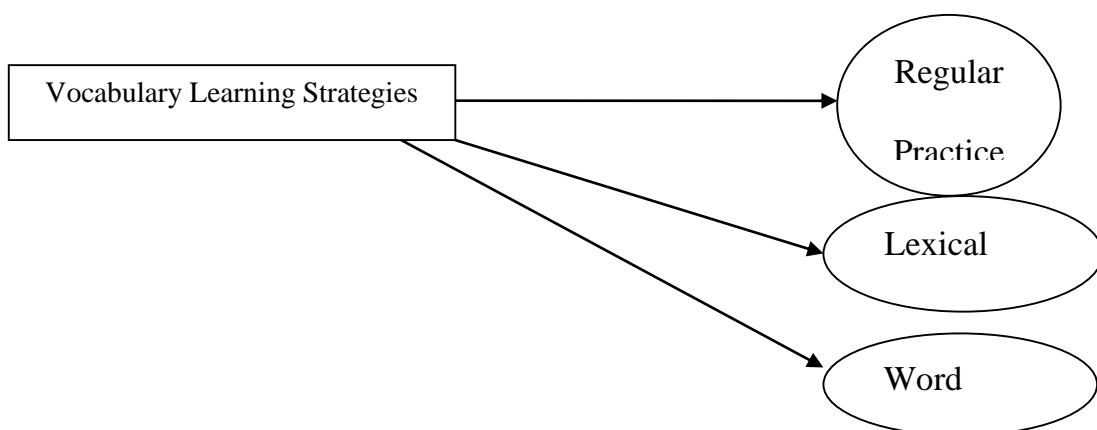
In general, in spite of the fact that it is compulsory for a learner to rely on his guessing strategies and on his ability to create semantic associations between words, other researchers argue that word lists can contribute to some extent to improving learners' lexical autonomy, if the mentioned words are used intelligently and in their natural contexts.

Thus, the strategies mentioned above have been created to solve some problems when learning vocabulary. They may have, if used in an efficient way, a positive effect on language learning, especially vocabulary acquisition.

There are some strategies that encourage dealing with words in isolation such as translation, the use of dictionaries, and word lists. Others recommend working out the meaning of the word and processing the language in a mental way, such as guessing from context and an active use of the acquired words.

It is important to mention that teachers should be encouraged to make their students aware of the existence of these strategies. They have another mission which consists in detecting the frequency of their use.





Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Interpretation of Results

It is crucial to notice that some difficulties have emerged related to the process of data collection and to the objectiveness of the subjects' responses. Indeed, identifying the learner's psycholinguistic process is impossible. For instance, the researcher could not use an observation guide since the mental lexicon cannot be observed.

Thus, the researcher exclusively relied on learners' responses provided by the proficiency test activities, cross-checked by the two questions mentioned above to confirm their choice and the actual use of a given strategy. In addition, the way the subjects tackled the activity was also analyzed and was helpful in finding out the chosen strategy. It was possible, thus, to infer whether the student used a given strategy or not. For example, if they succeeded to group words in the right way, i.e. according to their lexical and semantic features and similarities, it would be inferred that they had really used lexical sets as an adequate strategy.

Another problem emerged during the data collection phase. It was related to the fact that different activities were used in isolation. Thus, different conclusions were obtained, instead of a more and conclusive one. This problem was solved by calculating the average of the percentages of each strategy used by learners in the five activities, wherein the highest percentage would reveal the mostly used strategy.

Results obtained from both the questionnaire and the proficiency test revealed that translation is the strategy mostly used by students who rely on it using cognates and linking words from the target language to the mother tongue. This fact can confirm the theory put forward by Gairns and Redman who affirm that at an initial stage, it is often the case that learners link words from the target language to others from their native one. This can be due to their lack of both linguistic and lexical competence. This fact is supported by the subjects' comments with reference to the strategy they use. They mentioned that they generally do not understand the meaning of the word, so they have recourse to a word by word strategy.

On the other hand, both instruments demonstrated that first-year students can also make use of other strategies. Indeed, the research hypothesis which suggested that learners can use

other strategies to enrich their vocabulary has been confirmed. Although, in the majority of cases, results have shown that translation is their priority when trying to learn a new word, the same results also revealed that other strategies, once well explained to them, can be used to solve some lexical problems. They tend to use them whenever a particular task requires its use. For example, they believe that they should rely on their internalized lexical sets to strengthen the retrieval of words. Others believe that they should use guessing strategies in order to make use of its inferring aspect, able to provide clues for decoding effectively new words. Finally, a daily revision and practice foster a better retention of the target items.

Strategy/ activity	Translation	Revision	Reading and Guessing	Lexical Sets	Word Lists
Activity one	81.81%	18%	18	0%	9%
Activity Two	18.18%	9%	0	90%	0%
Activity Three	90%	0%	36.36	27%	0%
Activity Four	27%	90%	54	0%	0%
Activity Five	0%	27%	45	36%	0%
Average	43%	29%	30%	30.79%	1.80%

Percentage of The Strategies Used in all the Activities

Conclusion

The present article tried to shed light on some issues concerning vocabulary learning strategies. Many insightful clues have been obtained, and can give a more clear idea about how learners should behave when trying to develop one central element of language learning, which is vocabulary. The results of this study revealed, in general, that students do not hesitate to use translation as a primary option, being a possibility that can reduce difficulties encountered by learners at an initial stage of learning. More interestingly, the same research can attest the use of other strategies that show that learners may, progressively, need to use alternative strategies that can be developed as soon as they attain a certain ability to cope intelligently with learning difficulties.