Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Saudi University Students in Pair Work

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ABSTRACT

Although there is robust research on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), little is known about the strategies that learners use in pair work. Therefore, this study examines the VLSs employed by 40 Saudi undergraduate students whilst working in pair tasks. This study also investigates whether there is a relationship between using certain strategies and the type of task undertaken. Two tasks were used: reading comprehension with multiple-choice questions and reading comprehension with 'filling in the gaps'. All the pairs' conversations were audio recorded. The results showed that there were mainly three VLSs used in the pair tasks: "asking for help from the other student", "guessing the meaning from context" and "using a dictionary". Also, there was a statistically significant relationship between the task type and certain strategies including asking for help and guessing the meaning from context strategies.

Key words: Vocabulary, Learning, Strategies, Pair work, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays an important role in learning a new language, and because of this a large number of studies have been conducted to establish the strategies that students use in learning vocabulary. Ultimately, the goal of most of these studies is a deeper understanding of the most used strategies and why they are particularly successful. In addition, and due in part to the fact that distance learning is more widely available using the Internet and other communication tools, there is an increasing number of studies that have investigated the use of vocabulary learning that are specifically focused on the beyond - the - classroom learning environment. It is logical to think that learning how to employ these strategies effectively will help to improve how vocabulary is taught and learned. The process of strategic learning refers to an intentional dynamic technique designed to assist learners in solving learning problems, increasing the speed of learning and creating an environment where the overall process leads to the most successful outcomes (Gu, 2018). Many students find that vocabulary is a challenging undertaking; each language has a formal and an informal vocabulary and the task of learning can, and may well be, never ending. Therefore, learning to use these strategies offers the potential to make learning somewhat easier. It seems that those students who do not have word-learning strategies or sufficient vocabulary in the language they are learning continue to battle through their language learning. This can be very frustrating and often leads to a cycle of continued failure (Khany & Khosravian, 2014).

One of the key attributes of learning vocabulary, which needs to be understood at the outset, is that it requires a multi-faceted approach, including knowledge of the meanings of the words themselves, but also their spelling, pronunciation, their grammatical properties, connotations, morphological options, as well as semantic associates of the words (Ghalebi et al., 2020). Being scaffolded and assisted, English learners can develop vocabulary successfully (Kayi-Aydar, 2018). Learning a language requires social interaction, with appropriate forms of assistance to correct and encourage the learners (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Working alongside other learners provides all involved with opportunities for 'languaging' (Swain et al., 2009). Working in pairs means that learners can deliberate together about their thoughts when faced with linguistic challenges. Philp and Tognini (2009) described interaction as "the use of language for communicative purposes, with a primary focus on meaning rather than accuracy."

Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001) proposed two different taxonomies because of the importance of VLSs. Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy classifies the VLSs into two strategic groups: 'discovery' and 'consolidation'. When looking to obtain the meaning of a new word, a discovery strategy is used. A consolidation strategy is then used to retain new words once their meaning, and the context in which they are used, is understood. In both of these strategies there are 58 individual strategies that are grouped under so-called Main Categories. An example of one of these categories is 'social' strategies, where learners interact with each other in order to learn new words. This may take the form of a student asking a classmate for clarification about a certain word that has been used. Although both Schmitt's (1997) and Nation's

(2001) taxonomies include similar strategies, they differ in the way in which they are classified. Learners might use different vocabulary strategies while working in pairs; they may guess the meaning of the unknown words based on the context in which they are used, or use a dictionary, or request help from others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

There have been many studies conducted in the field of vocabulary, and many of these have examined the strategies employed during the process of learning. For example, Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013), investigated what strategies are more or less common for learning vocabulary among EFL university students in Iran. A questionnaire adapted from the taxonomy of (VLSs) developed by Schmitt (1997) was administered to 74 EFL students (18 males and 56 females). The attitudes and beliefs of students in relation to vocabulary learning strategies was investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews with ten students who completed the written questionnaire. The results suggested that students most often guess the meaning of a word from its use or use a dictionary to look it up. The VLSs of Saudi EFL university students were more recently investigated in a study conducted by Ta'amneh (2021). That questionnaire contained five main categories of questions, with forty-six items overall, and it was completed by 290 students. However, the results were similar; the most frequent strategies employed by the students were using a bilingual dictionary and guessing the meaning of the word from the context of its use.

Alqarni (2018) conducted a study to investigate the VLSs of first year English language students in Saudi Arabia. The 81 Saudi male students from King Saud University who took part in the study, used three main strategies to learn new words: using the Internet to search for more information about an English word or phrase, guessing the meaning of a word from the context, and following the dialogue in English speaking films with Arabic sub-titles. Another similar study organized by Al-Bidawi (2018) found that different strategies were used by 94 Saudi undergraduate students. They answered a questionnaire and referred to strategies such as "asking friends about the meaning of a word" and "working with their classmates to identify the difficult words and understand their meanings".

Peer Interaction in Language Learning

It is clear from the considerable research conducted in this area, that peer-to-peer interaction plays a key role in language learning. The impact of an interaction strategy on learner engagement was investigated by Dao (2020). The study was designed around previously used training modules that were structured in five stages:

1. Preparation - raising awareness of the existence of collaboration and interaction strategies.
2. Presentation - presenting and analysing the strategies to be deployed.
3. Practice - applying the strategies in an interactive manner.
4. Self-evaluation - self-critical analysis and reflection on how the strategy was used.
5. Expansion - *c*ontinuing to practice the strategies.

Two equal groups were formed from a total of 56 EFL students, with only one group receiving the interaction strategy instruction. The results showed that the group receiving the interaction strategy instruction benefitted from its use. There was a greater generation of ideas, many more instances where the students encouraged each other to talk using the English language and to reflect on the improvements required, and finally, that the group worked together with a more positive attitude. It is interesting to note, however, that the students' use of the strategies was affected by the perceptions of their peers, their own proficiency and the task features themselves. The students did highly appreciate that effective interaction was usefully promoted by the interaction strategy. This outcome is consistent with research conducted by Philp et al. (2014) in this area that concluded interaction with one's peers provides a beneficial context for students when communicating in the second language. It provides a method to receive input, to notice the form and structure of the language, to go back and modify the output, to try different experimental tactics, and overall to increase knowledge of the language. This study highlighted clear benefits of peer-to-peer interaction; however, other studies have identified limitations.

Adams et al. (2011) identified a clear issue with the unfocussed nature of peer-to-peer feedback, which tended to be of low quality when offered infrequently and in an unstructured way. Yoshida, (2013) found that students may revert to their first language which can be a helpful learning tool when they do not have the confidence to talk. Research undertaken by Ahmadian et al. (2014) suggest that when language-learners work together on solving language related problems, their second language development increases because in collaborating together they increase knowledge. Storch and Aldosari (2013) issued a key report after their investigation in the area of peer-to-peer interaction. They examined the nature and success of pair-work in EFL classes at a college in Saudi Arabia. Students in these classes tended to have different abilities and their second language proficiency varied across the groups. The research methodology was to allocate thirty students with similar capabilities into pairs– high/high, low/low and mixed second language proficiency, with 5 pairs of students in each proficiency pairing. They were asked to complete a short composition. The conversations between each pair were audio-recorded and transcribed, and then analysed to understand more about the students' focus on language use and the amount of second language used during the process. The results suggested that the relationship between students in each pairing is of greater significance than the language capability of either individual in each pairing. Hence, the way in which students of mixed abilities were paired in the first place was more dependent on the aim of the learning activity. The results have led to examples of negotiating the meaning in the L1.

Zhou and Wang (2021) conducted a study amongst Chinese-speaking students of the English language. They sat out to discover how different forms of interaction (video, peer-to-peer and input text) encourage language acquisition. The study deployed different tasks of varying interactional intensity to understand more about how students both aligned with the tasks they were given and how that impacted their vocabulary learning results. Two studies were undertaken, as follows:

Study 1 – three groups of second language students, who were performing summary, continuation or paraphrasing activities, were asked to learn and use a collection of target words. The results clearly showed that the interactional intensity helped the students to align with the tasks and improved their knowledge of the language.

Study 2 - three groups of second language students were given a continuation task whilst working with peers with lower language capability (LL Group), with higher language capability (HL Group) and with a combination of low capability peers and video (LLM Group). The results conclusively demonstrated that working alongside peers of higher language capability produced a positive outcome in terms of alignment magnitude and that introducing video had only a limited impact. These findings have led to more emphasis on researching 'interaction–alignment–learning' strategies and has provided a new perspective when considering vocabulary acquisition.

Research Questions

When considering the research outlined in the previous section, it is clear that the main research tool when examining vocabulary learning, is the questionnaire. Also, the research on peer interaction in EFL/ESL classes focused mainly on the benefits of peer interaction and the function of L1: however, these studies did not explore how learners exactly dealt with the unknown words in terms of VLSs Therefore, the current study poses the following questions:

1. What are the VLSs that are used by Saudi university students during their pair tasks?
2. Is there a relationship between using certain learning strategies and the type of task being undertaken?

METHODOLOGY

Setting

The study was conducted amongst undergraduate students at King Saud University. For all students the English course is compulsory in order to complete a Preparatory Year and each student must gain a grade of B+ or higher before they can be accepted onto the English undergraduate programme. The course focusses on the four skills required to gain fluency in the language – listening, speaking, reading and writing. There are additional courses on applied and theoretical linguistics and on the methods used for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The course tends to use the traditional centralised teacher and textbook approach to teaching English, as is commonly found in Saudi Arabia. Each class often contains a large number of students.

Participants

The participants in the study included 40 Saudi male undergraduate students, who were studying at King Saud University. Each of these students was assigned randomly into pairs, resulting in 20 pairs of students. The students were all studying English as their major subject and were preparing to teach English themselves after finishing three years of study. The method employed by the university was to maximise the use of English and minimise the use of their mother-tongue, Arabic. All the students had started learning English in their primary education classes from the age of 10 years.

Tasks

A target list of 20 words was chosen for the two selected tasks, and before the first task was administered each of the participants was tested to ensure the target words were new. Each of the 20 words was selected for their low frequency usage. The methodology used for the tasks to be completed was from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) reading comprehension exams; firstly, with multiple choice questions (871 words) and secondly filling the gaps (888 words). The conversations between each pair were audio recorded.

Procedure

Initially the study participants were given an overview of the tests to be completed and then they were randomly selected and assigned into pairs – 20 pairing groups altogether. The students worked on one of the tasks each week, for two weeks and the data (including the audio recordings) were collected during the final 30 minutes of each class.

In the first week the students were given task 1, which was a reading and comprehension task. The students were required to read a passage and then answer multiple-choice questions about what they had read. The unknown words were printed in bold. The following week the students were asked to work on task 2; another reading and comprehension task, but this time filling in the missing words from a list of words in a box immediately above the passage. The students were given complete freedom to use any method they chose to search for the meaning of the unknown words. This included looking up the word in a dictionary, usually on their mobile phones.

Transcription of Data and Analysis

The purpose of the study was to understand more about the strategies that the students use to discover the meaning of the new vocabulary. All the audio recordings that were taken from the study pairs during the study were fully transcribed, which provided the researcher valuable insight into the way in which new words and concepts were reached. Having fully transcribed the pairs' discussions, these transcriptions were then repeatedly listened to and revised, which provided the a much clearer understanding of the way in which the

learning was taking place. The reliability of the data analysis was further enhanced by taking a thematic approach to the coding. The transcripts were read several times during the initial stages of the analysis, which highlighted the way in which the students handled the words they did not know and the strategies they used to subsequently understand their meaning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the results after examining the data and the transcripts of the pairs' conversations during each test, the Saudi English language students who participated in the study used three main strategies to find the meanings of the new vocabulary in the multiple-choice and missing words tests. These strategies were:
1. Using a dictionary – looking up the meaning of the word and then clarifying the context in which the word was used.
2. Guessing the meaning – usually by trying to understand the context in which the word was being used and establishing a logical choice for the missing word.
3. Asking for support – from the other student in the pairing in anticipation that they might themselves know the meaning of the word.

These results are shown in Tables 1 and 2:

The results in Tables 1 and 2 show that the most frequent strategy used by the students to discover the meaning of a new word that they had not previously come across was by using a dictionary. Guessing the meaning of a word was the second most popular strategy, and the least used was asking the other student for their help with the meaning of the word. These results clearly show that the students preferred to use a resource that would lead them to the direct, unequivocal meaning of a word that they did not know, rather than a guess or another student's knowledge might lead them to a wrong answer. So, most students used their mobile phones to look up the words.

There are a number of potential factors that would lead students to their dictionaries; firstly, that the words were completely unknown to them and therefore difficult to guess. Second, that as the students were presented with a number of unknown words, and had limited time to find, or guess, their meaning, using the dictionary was the fastest strategy to reach the meaning. The students also tended not to talk about the other strategies that were evidently available, for example, guessing the meaning of the word based on the structure and context of the sentence in which it is included. One potential reason for not using the strategies is that the students were somewhat unfamiliar with them.

The following are some of the excerpts demonstrating how students used these strategies working in their pairing groups:

A: Gales? Read the sentence
B: Atlantic storms, <u>gales</u> and rain. It was during one such storm in the winter of 1850…

Table 1. Task 1

Pair	Asking for help from the other student		Guessing the meaning from context		Using dictionary	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	7	12.96	12	7.5	4	2.16
2	4	7.40	9	5.62	8	4.87
3	7	12.96	7	4.37	12	7.31
4	1	1.85	7	4.37	7	4.26
5	4	7.40	14	8.75	7	4.26
6	2	3.74	6	3.75	7	4.26
7	3	5.55	9	5.62	9	5.48
8	2	3.74	12	7.5	9	5.48
9	7	12.96	12	7.5	7	4.26
10	5	9.25	4	2.5	12	7.31
11	2	3.74	9	5.62	9	5.48
12	2	3.74	10	6.25	8	4.87
13	2	3.74	7	4.37	8	4.87
14	2	3.74	8	5.0	8	4.87
15	0	0	3	1.87	4	2.43
16	0	0	9	5.62	2	1.21
17	1	1.85	5	3.12	5	3.0
18	1	1.85	8	5.0	17	10.36
19	1	1.85	7	4.37	3	1.82
20	1	1.85	2	1.25	18	10.97
Total	54	100%	160	100%	164	100%

Table 2. Task 2

Pair	Asking for help from the other student		Guessing the meaning from context		Using dictionary	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	0	0	6	5.60	9	5.62
2	3	11.11	9	8.10	10	6.25
3	0	0	1	0.93	12	7.5
4	1	3.70	4	3.73	6	3.75
5	0	0	4	3.73	4	2.5
6	0	0	4	3.73	4	2.5
7	0	0	0	0	9	5.62
8	1	3.70	5	4.67	14	8.75
9	0	0	16	14.95	6	3.75
10	1	3.70	3	2.80	7	4.37
11	1	3.70	7	6.54	8	5.0
12	3	11.11	6	5.60	11	6.87
13	2	7.40	7	6.54	6	3.75
14	3	11.11	5	4.67	8	5.0
15	0	0	2	1.86	11	6.87
16	1	3.70	5	4.67	7	4.37
17	3	11.11	4	3.73	7	4.37
18	4	14.81	8	7.47	9	5.62
19	1	3.70	2	1.86	4	2.5
20	3	11.11	9	8.41	8	5.0
Total	27	100%	107	100%	160	100%

B: May be kind of storms (in Arabic)? Can you check the meaning of gales on your phone?

A: OK .... Yes, it means storms (in Arabic).   [Pair 3]

This is an example where Student A was unsure about the meaning of the word "gales" and asked Student B to guess it. Student B was successful in guessing the meaning of the word but then asked Student A to confirm that their guess was indeed correct. Having looked up the word in the dictionary Student A confirmed the meaning.

Another example follows a similar pattern, in which Student A did not know the meaning of the word "mound". He asked Student B if he knew the meaning. Student A then reverted to the dictionary, by asking his fellow student to look it up for them:

A: The houses were partly built into a <u>mound</u> of waste material. Do you know the meaning of mound?
B: No, I look for the meaning in the dictionary. [Pair 5]

A: The word "spew out"... it is a short word. let's translate it first.
B: Let's first read the question.
A: Translate it and then we will answer the question.
                                                        [Pair 12]

A: Let's see the second word.
B: Which one?
A: Astringent... I will check its meaning on my mobile phone.
B: OK   [Pair 15]

It is evident from the next example transcript that more than one strategy can be employed at the same time. Here, Student A asked Student B if he knew the meaning of the word "skewed". Student B said he did not know the meaning but then tried to guess the meaning. However, Student B also recognised that his guess may be wrong and invited Student A to refer to their dictionary:

A: Do you know this word "skewed"?
B: No. read the sentence. may be "distort"... see the dictionary
A: OK   [Pair 19]

The findings in this study, where randomly selected students worked in pairs to find out the meaning of the new vocabulary they did not have previously come across, were broadly similar to the results of previous research that explored VLSs using questionnaires. Alqarni's (2018) study concluded that guessing the meaning from context is one of the top learning strategies, and his results are consistent with what was found in this study. Al-Bidawi (2018) also found that learners tend to use social strategies, and that is a consistent theme through this study. Ta'amneh's (2021) study showed that guessing the meaning of a word from the context in which it is used and using an Arabic/English dictionary are used most often by learners.

The consistency in the findings between these studies and the current research illustrates the importance of these three strategies. In particular, the students may use more than one strategy when trying to discover the meaning of a new word;

Table 3. Sum of (task1 & task2)

	N	sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
help1	20	54	2.70	2.250
guess1	20	160	8.00	3.129
dict1	20	164	8.20	4.112
help2	20	27	1.35	1.348
guess2	20	107	5.35	3.528
dict2	20	160	8.00	2.714

which tends to suggest that social interaction plays an important role in learning. This agrees with previous research that asserts the role of interaction in pair work (e.g., Storch & Aldosari, 2013; Ahmadian et al., 2014; Kayi-Aydar, 2018).

In addition, there is a statistically significant relationship between the type of task and the use of strategies such as, guessing the meaning from context and asking for help from the fellow student as shown in Table 3.

On the other hand, the use of the dictionary was not found to be statistically significant. The findings revealed that the students used the dictionary 164 times in Task 1 and 160 times in Task 2, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. "Guessing the meaning from context" was used 160 times in Task 1 and 107 times in Task 2. The final strategy of asking for the other student's help was considerably lower - 54 times in Task 1 and only 27 times in Task 2. It can be suggested that students' use of different strategies might be to some extent influenced by the type of task they work on. This is consistent with other research (e.g., Zhou & Wang, 2021) that highlights the role of the type of task in learning vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

The use of questionnaires and interviews to research VLSs, has been extensively investigated. This study recruited 42 Saudi male undergraduate students, who were randomly paired together to understand the meaning of 20 new words. It was concluded that the students used three strategies to find out the meaning of the unknown words: using a dictionary, asking for help from the fellow paired student and guessing the meaning from context. The relationships between the type of task being undertaken and the use of certain strategies, including asking for help and guessing the meaning from the context were also statistically significant. These findings highlighted the importance of these strategies in learning vocabulary and the need to help students to use them effectively.

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