

## EXAMINATION OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION OF KADUNA STATE UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

*The paper surveys the strategies used by undergraduate students of faculty of education Kaduna State University Kaduna, Nigeria. The purpose of the study is to investigate how frequently the students employ Schmitt's (1997) vocabulary learning strategies to acquire new words in English language. The study uses Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies which are: Determination, Social, Cognitive, memory and Metacognitive strategies. Sixty (60) students were randomly selected out of the total population of one hundred and twenty (120) students. For this purpose, a questionnaire containing fifteen items selected from Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) was administered to the participants. The instrument was used to reveal how frequently the students arrive at the meaning of new words. With regard to strategy categories, the results revealed that the students employ Memory strategies more frequently while they employ Metacognitive strategies less frequently. The findings of this study will be advantageous to language teachers to improve effective vocabulary teaching techniques and curriculum designers to provide learners with preferable vocabulary learning strategies suitable to the learners' needs and aspiration.*

**Keywords:** Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), undergraduate students, determination strategies, social strategies, cognitive strategies, memory strategies, metacognitive strategies

### Introduction

English is one of the essential foreign languages taught in Nigerian institutions of learning. Proficiency in English language is highly desirable and imperative in Nigerian system of education. As an international language, Nigerians are expected to have vast knowledge of the language making it possible for them to have free exchange of information with international community. Ali & Anwar (2021) believed that English language should be considered as an important international language this may bring possibilities for students to give more attention and their interest to English language. This means that Nigerian students need practically English language rather than only for fulfilling the academic demand.

The first and foremost crucial element in the process of learning a language is words. A second language learner learns and acquires new words everyday using different strategies planned or unplanned. Namaziandost (2019) argued that people learn vocabulary before they start communication in the natural cycle of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a first or a second language, so learners must have the vocabulary to convey or understand the meaning of the ideas. Vocabulary is the basic material to build language which plays a fundamental role in communication. No matter how well the students learn grammar or master the sounds of English language, no meaningful communication can take place without expressing a wide range of vocabulary in a meaningful way. Thornburry (2002:13) believed that without grammar very little can be

conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. This means that vocabulary is the component of language for people to deliver their minds, ideas or desires. By having sufficient stock of words, they can communicate very well and effectively.

According to Marion (2008), vocabulary learning strategies are specific techniques utilised by English language learners for the acquisition of new words in a second language. These learners use these steps to gain and understand new English words. In the process of learning a second language, learning and understanding a new vocabulary comes at the beginning of the process and represents the basis for second language acquisition. McCarthy (1990:50) said, “without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way.” These strategies explain fully how new vocabularies can be learnt and retained.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objective of this study is to investigate how frequently the students of faculty of education Kaduna State University employed Schmitt’s (1997) vocabulary learning strategies to acquire new words in English language. It explores vocabulary learning strategies used by the students as well as the most and least vocabulary learning strategies used by the students. The present study about vocabulary learning strategies is the first of its nature to be conducted in this faculty. Hence, this study might present a first step towards understanding and recognising this issue for the interest of teachers and learners.

### **Research Questions**

How frequently the students of English language Education employed Schmitt (1997) vocabulary learning strategies in learning English new words?

### **Literature Review**

Acquisition of words in a language learning is crucial for effective communication in a second language learning and it is considered as a significant element in the formation of correct spoken and written texts. Vocabulary plays an important role in language teaching and learning without which learners will not be able to develop other skills successfully. Since knowledge of vocabulary is the raw material for all thoughts, ideas and feelings to be expressed and conveyed through the medium of language. As cited in Parvareshbar and Ghoorchaei (2016) “If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh”. Vocabulary refers to the words one must know to communicate effectively: words in speaking and writing (productive vocabulary) and words in listening and reading (receptive vocabulary)” (Neuman & Dwyer 2009).

However, vocabulary is considered very important in all four English language skills since it is one of the key elements in second language acquisition essential for all stages of English language learning (Gardner, 2013). Emphasising this view, Blachowicz and Fisher (2005) argued that vocabulary knowledge affects both reading performance and students’ ability to participate effectively in both social and academic classroom interactions. Nwokolo (2020) believed that vocabulary knowledge is an essential consideration especially for learners of English for specific purpose such as undergraduates and workers. Vocabulary is the first element that should be master before

the learners going to other elements of language learning. It is believed that when the learners have mastered vocabulary, they would be able to produce many sentences in both spoken and written language without much difficulties. However, when they lack vocabulary, they will find difficulty in delivering their thought and opinion effectively. Any error in vocabulary can break communication as Abu Hassan and Arifin (2017) believed that vocabulary errors are the most severe; they often lead to semantic interference resulting in miscommunication. Similarly, when the second language learners are able to acquired vocabulary effectively and have a good individual store of lexis, they will be more self-confident in both productive and receptive vocabulary.

In acquiring vocabularies, learners employ different strategies, techniques and approach which they feel it can boost their stock of words more effectively. According to Cameron (2001) vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items. A more elaborated Schmitt (1997) defined VLS as the “knowledge about the mechanisms used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students to find out the meaning of unknown words, to retain them in long-term memory, to recall them at will, and to use them in oral or written mode” this definition sees VLS as a process of learning and understanding new words that can be stored for further uses. Rabadi (2016) defined VLS as the intended mental strategies that language learners employ to enhance vocabulary learning and retrieve easily new words. The strategies have long been supported by many scholars to facilitate learning and help enhance learners’ vocabulary knowledge (e.g. Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000).

Vocabulary plays a very important role in English language learning, as it is the main component of language proficiency, which offers the basis for learners’ performance in the use of language. Discovering the ways students used to learn vocabulary could help English language teachers develop their vocabulary teaching and enhance their students’ language achievement accordingly.

Many local and international studies have been conducted to investigate how learners use different strategies to acquire new words. For instance, Parvareshbar and Ghoorchaei (2016), opined that English language learners in Pakistan employed incidental vocabulary acquisition (IVA) when learning new words. They believed that IVA is very effective method for learning English language vocabularies.

Grave (2006) suggested that English language learners should keep notebooks which they will be keeping unfamiliar or newly discovered words for future use. He further suggested a framework for successful vocabulary programmes that facilitates effective teaching. This programme consists of four parts to develop robust vocabularies. They are: providing rich and varied language experiences, teaching individual vocabulary, teaching word-learning strategies, and fostering word consciousness. These strategies can effectively promote the learners' vocabulary by creating a language rich environment which boosts vocabulary acquisition. However, this strategy which encourages learners to memorise new words, should be discouraged. According to Decarrico (2001), words should not be learned through memorization or separately without comprehending. This is because the words learned in this manner lead to overlooking of lexical features. It means that the learners only learn how to use the words in one specific form, but they do not get to know how the words are used in various contexts with some different shades of meanings in real life situations.

## **Taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies**

Learning is a permanent change which occurs as a result of experience and increase the potential of improved performance and future learning. Different vocabulary learning strategies have been identified by different scholars. For instance, (Hameed & Anwar, 2018) classified vocabulary learning strategies into two main groups, namely, strategies which participate straight to learning and those which participate secondarily to learning. Ismael et al. (2021), identified three categories of strategies which they named cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective.

However, Gu and Johnson (1996) had grouped eight categories of vocabulary learning strategies: Beliefs about vocabulary learning; Metacognitive regulation; Guessing strategies; Dictionary strategies; Note-taking strategies; Memory strategies; Memory strategies (encoding); and Activation strategies.

The VLSs classification according to Cook (2001) are of two major categories: getting meaning and acquiring words. Getting meaning strategies include guessing meaning from situation or context, using a dictionary, making deductions from the word-form, and linking lexical items to cognates. While acquiring word strategies include repetition and rote learning, organizing words in the minds of learners, and linking lexical items to existing knowledge.

Nation (2001) classified vocabulary learning strategies in three main categories which are planning, sources, and processes. He posits that learning new words is a matter of cumulative process through which word meanings are enriched and extended as the learners encounter them several times.

Schmitt's (1997) identified two main types of VLSs: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies include determination strategies and social strategies while consolidation strategies encompass social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. For the purpose of this study, the classification of VLSs by Schmitt was adopted because of its advantages. According to Akbari and Tahririan (2009) "Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy seems to be the most exhaustive and has the advantage of being organized around an established scheme of vocabulary learning strategies." The strategies are as follow:

1. **Determination strategies:** They are individual learning strategies where English language students depend on themselves to identify the meaning of unknown words and use them in the following strategies; analysing affixes and roots of the unknown word, checking for an L1 cognate, analysing any available pictures or gestures to solve the meaning of the unknown words, guessing the meaning of a new word from textual context, using bilingual dictionaries to find out the meaning of the new vocabulary, using monolingual dictionaries, and using the word lists (Almutair 2020).
2. **Social Strategies:** These strategies occur when the students try to seek help from social surroundings, such as asking their teacher for an L1 translation, asking the teacher for a paraphrase or a synonym of the unknown word, asking the teacher for a sentence including the unknown word, and asking classmates for the meaning. This is what Schmitt (1997) called learning new words through interaction with others.

3. Memory strategies: They are strategies, whereby learners link their learning of new words to mental processing by associating their existing or background knowledge with the new words. These strategies deal with the connection of the new word to be memorized with pre-existing knowledge using the help of imagery or grouping for better retrieval of the word; moreover, physical actions can also be used to help recall the words. One of the merits of these strategies as posited by Schmitt (2000) it consists of mental processing which enhance long-term vocabulary retention.
4. Cognitive strategies: they are strategies that do not engage learners in mental processing but is more mechanical means. According to Hedge (2000), learners use a range of cognitive strategies in order to learn words such as using keywords, making associations and learning words in group. He defines cognitive as a mental operation concerned with working on new words in order to understand, categorize, and store them in a mental lexicon.
5. Metacognitive strategies: These are strategies related to processes involved in monitoring, decision-making, and evaluation of one's progress. The strategies are used by students to control and evaluate their own learning, by having an overview of the learning process. Hedge (2000) stated that metacognitive strategies consist of planning, thinking about learning, monitoring and evaluating oneself.

The present study investigated how often the students of Kaduna State University employ Schmitt (1997) vocabulary learning strategies in learning new words.

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The population of the study consisted of 120 students currently studying bachelor degrees in English Education at the faculty of education. The total number sixty (60) undergraduate students were randomly selected for the study. Out of the participants, 34 were female students (56.6%) and 26 were male students (34.3 %) with an average age range from 22 to 26. The participants are in their second and third year of four -year-programme.

### **Instrument**

The instrument for the study is Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) by Schmitt (1997). The VLSQ was utilized to expose the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies used by the participants. and to reveal the overall use of vocabulary learning strategy employed by the participants' choice of vocabulary learning strategies. Nevertheless, adaptations were made to the VLSQ to be relevant to the participants' learning environment and competence level. The written questionnaire was composed of two sections. The first section took account of personal information of the participants, while the second section was 15-item questionnaire to record the participants' responses on their vocabulary learning strategies. They were asked to rate their frequency of usage of the VLS according to a scale of four choices of modified Likert-scale questionnaire for each question. The scales are: never, seldom, sometimes, and always. The questions cut across the five sub-classes of categories of (VLS) which are Determination, Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive.

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## Procedure

In order to attain the aim of the study, the following procedures were followed accordingly. The questionnaires were administered to the participants under the control of the researcher. All the participants were instructed orally on the questionnaire before proceeding on with the test. What the participants were required to do had also boldly indicated on the first page of the questionnaire to avoid any error.

## Findings and Discussion

To answer the research question, the data obtained were analyzed using percentage. The only research question is: How frequently the students employed vocabulary learning strategies in learning English vocabulary?

The participants were asked to indicate how often they use determination strategy in learning new words. The table below shows their response.

**Table 1: Determination strategy employed by participants**

| Statement  | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Always | Total |
|--|-------|--------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Look up the meaning of unknown word using a dictionary.                          | 12    | 21     | 18        | 09     | 60    |
| check the meaning of unknown words from the glossary at the end of the textbook, | 04    | 08     | 28        | 20     | 60    |
| Guess the meaning from context to discover the meaning of new words.             | 03    | 07     | 09        | 41     | 60    |

The participants were asked to indicate how they determine the meaning of unknown words. In responding to the statement 1. where students were asked to indicate how they arrive at the meaning of unknown words. 21 respondents (35%) indicated that they seldom use a dictionary for unknown words. Statement 2. asked the respondents how frequently they check the meaning of new words from the glossary of the textbook. 28 respondents (47%) indicated that they use this medium sometimes. In response to statement 3. where they were asked to indicate the frequency of guessing the meaning of new words, 41 respondents (68%) confirmed that they always guess the meaning from the context.

It is obvious that the frequency level of strategy used in the Determination Strategies implied the usage of dictionaries; participants use dictionary find the meanings of new vocabulary items. This is quite true to English language learners, wherein dictionaries are the vital resource for obtaining information about lexis items (Ali & Anwar, 2022). Moreover, the learners are advised to refer to dictionaries to find and learn new lexical items as Hayati and Fattahzadh (2006) suggested. Miyanaga (2006) added that using a dictionary helps language learners to be more independent in learning a language as they can find proper explanation of new vocabulary items in sentences without relying on teachers' explanations. The glossary at the end of the textbook has vital roles to play in learning new words. Unlike dictionary, the glossary helps in learning new words along

with the context used. This will give a learner better explanation of the words learnt along with its context.

This aspect has to do with learning new words through interaction with others. The respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they employ this strategy in learning and mastering English vocabulary. The table below shows students response:

**Table 2: Social Strategies Employed by the Participants**

| Statement  | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Always | Total |
|--|-------|--------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Asking a teacher for an L1translation of new lexical items.  | 57    | 2      | 1         | 0      | 60    |
| Communicating with teachers of English to ask for a synonym or antonyms of a new word.                   | 9     | 10     | 25        | 16     | 60    |
| Asking or discussing in English with classmates to know and expand the meaning of a new vocabulary item. | 3     | 6      | 29        | 22     | 60    |

In response to questions on social strategies used by the respondents, statement 4. asked the respondents how often they ask their teachers to translate the new word into their L1. Fifty seven (57) respondents (95%) confirmed that they never ask teachers for translation of the new words into their L1. On responding to statement 5., 25 respondents (24%) affirmed that they communicate with their English teachers to ask for synonyms or antonyms of unknown words through oral conversations. Statement 6. asked the respondents the frequency of their discussing or asking their colleagues about the meaning of words. 29 respondents (48%) said that they ask their sometimes classmates.

These strategies are used inside the classrooms indicating that the participants' learning methods are quiet dependent on the teachers of the language and their co-learners. Language learners need to learn lexical items in isolation as well as in context. These employed strategies by the participants will help them to achieve their learning purposes. This kind of vocabulary learning is direct or explicit vocabulary learning as Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) refer to it. This vocabulary learning strategy is considered a conscious learning; language learners through the meaning of words in isolation or in context learn vocabulary. As for the role of language teachers, they can help language learners use the direct or explicit vocabulary learning by providing them with paired translation equivalents and synonyms of the words.

This aspect deals with the connection of the new words with pre-existing knowledge using the help of imagery or grouping for better retrieval of the word. The respondents were asked to indicate how often they employ this strategy in learning and retaining new words. The table below shows their responses:

**Table 3: Memory strategy employed by the participants**

| Statements   | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Always | Total |
|--|-------|--------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Categorize new words according to their synonyms and antonyms. | 15    | 8      | 17        | 20     | 60    |
| Grouping new words together to learn new vocabulary.           | 2     | 5      | 22        | 30     | 60    |
| Connecting pictures to the meanings of new words.              | 48    | 10     | 2         | 0      | 60    |

Table 3 presents the types and frequency of memory strategies the students employed in order to boost their vocabulary span. In response to statement 7. Twenty (20) students (33%) confirmed that they always categorise new words according to their synonyms or antonyms while eight (8) respondents (13%) said they seldom do that. In Statement 8. the respondents were asked how frequently they group new words together to learn new words. Thirty-one (31) respondents (50%) said they always do this while only two (2) respondents (3%) said they never do this. Responding to statement 9. which asked the students to show how frequently they connect pictures to label the meaning of new words, 48 respondents (80%) indicated that they never connect pictures with words.

These are essentially good ways of learning new lexical items. Memory strategies include mental techniques to imagine the situation in which the word might be used as grouping them into parts of speech as nouns and verbs, and into synonyms and antonyms. Similarly, Nwokolo (2020) believed that knowing the meaning word parts and its roots can boost the learners' vocabulary learning. So, learners can break a long words or compound word into its parts for easy understanding of the words.

Nation (2005) and Nwokolo (2020) itemise some strategies of understanding new words, these are: word meaning, word use, word form and word origin. Word meaning refers to the concept of the word, what it refers to, which words can be associated with. While word usage knowledge includes the grammatical aspects of the word such as parts of speech, word's collocation. Word form knowledge includes the knowledge of word's parts, spelling, and sound. This list of word knowledge can be achieved by using Memory strategies.

This strategy deals with the use of some mechanics that help learners to learn new words. These include using keywords, making associations and learning words in group. The respondents were asked to indicate how often they use this strategy in learning the meaning of new words. The table below presents the response of the participants:

**Table 4: Cognitive strategy employed by participants**

| Statement  | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Always | Total |
|--|-------|--------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Using a new lexical item by writing it repeatedly in sentences.  | 5     | 10     | 26        | 19     | 60    |
| Keeping a notebook for a vocabulary list with meanings and examples to learn the new vocabulary items. | 35    | 11     | 9         | 5      | 60    |
| Associating new vocabulary items with physical objects to learn the lexical items.                     | 45    | 9      | 4         | 2      | 60    |

Statement 10. asked students to indicate how frequently they repeatedly write new words in sentences. 26 respondents (43%) confirmed that they do so sometimes while only five students said that they never write new words in sentences. In response to statement 11. Thirty-five (35) respondents (50%) indicated that they keep a notebook for vocabulary list with meaning and examples. Responding to statement 12. out of the total participants, 35 respondents (58%) indicated that they never associate new vocabulary items with physical object to learn the new words.

These strategies for vocabulary development include repetition, analysing, writing, and summarizing. According to Weaver and Cohen (cited in Ali and Anwar 2022) classify repetition as one of the six strategies for vocabulary acquisition. these strategies “enable learners to understand and produce new language through different means”.

This strategy deals with one’s planning on how to acquire new words. The respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of their own efforts in learning new words. The table below indicates the response of the participants:

**Table 5: Metacognitive strategies employed by participants**

| Statements  | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Always |
|---|-------|--------|-----------|--------|
| Expanding the knowledge of lexical items by listening to English songs.                 | 4     | 6      | 14        | 36     |
| Learning new words by watching English-speaking movies with subtitles.                  | 3     | 5      | 20        | 32     |
| Studying new vocabulary items from advertisements, written signs, written notices, etc. | 3     | 8      | 30        | 19     |

In this aspect of metacognitive strategies that the students used to learn new vocabularies, three statements presented to the respondents. Statements 13, asked the participants how frequently they increase the level of their vocabulary through listening to the English songs on radio, mobile phone etc. Thirty-six (36) respondents (60%) confirmed that they always employ this strategy in learning new lexical items.in responding to statement 14. The highest number of the respondents which is thirty-two (32) ((53%) indicated that they always learn new words through watching movies with subtitles. Statements 15. wanted to know the frequency of using adverts, signs and notice in learning new words. 30 respondents (50%) said that they sometimes apply this strategy.

It has been observed that Metacognitive strategies affect positively vocabulary learning of EFL learners (Rasekh & Ranjbry, 2003). Language learners according to Hedge (2000) are involved in regulating language-learning process as they take control of their learning without the interference of a language teacher. They will be involved in planning for learning, setting goals, deciding on and employing learning strategies, and assessing the usefulness of strategy use and learning. They will make themselves self-directed learners as they employ various VLSs which will help them to facilitate vocabulary learning effectively and pleasantly.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the findings it is noticed that students do not always check up the meaning of the unknown words by using dictionaries. They even prefer to check the glossary at the end of the textbook they read if available. Using dictionary always when reading, slow reading speed and affect comprehension. The best way to arrive at the meaning of new words is by using context clues. Nwokolo (2020) suggests that Nigerian students can achieve best in learning English vocabulary by utilising context clues in deciphering the meaning of unfamiliar words. Looking up the meaning of the unknown word by referring to the glossary at the end of the textbook also helps. This is because only context meaning is provided at the glossary. In this regards, EFL teachers should focus on training their EFL students on how to make their learner arrive at the meaning of unknown words by checking its meaning at the glossary, if it is available.

On social strategy, it has been discovered that majority of the students used social factors and sought help from others to get the meaning of unknown words. When you take item 4 and 5 as examples, you will discover that there are still some students at this level that ask their language teacher for L1 translation or communicating with their teachers in English language to ask for synonyms or antonyms of the unknown words. Even though, the number of those who do this is insignificant, it still shows that there are few that depend on their language facilitator to arrive at the meaning. Students should be encouraged to use determination strategies and to be self-dependent when looking for the meaning of new words.

It is discovered that there are a number of strategies the students of English use to learn and improve their vocabulary. Some of them are seeking an opportunity to practice using new words in speaking and writing, exposing themselves to the language regularly through extensive reading and listening to radio programmes, watching movies with English sub-title consulting a good dictionary for more necessary information about specific words, keeping vocabulary notebooks, and asking help from teachers and friends. The findings will help the language instructors, language learners, and curriculum designers as they are informative regarding the preferable vocabulary learning strategies used by undergraduate students of the faculty of education Kaduna state university. Hence, English teachers can emphasize more on vocabulary learning strategies by drawing the attention of the language learners to these strategies. Moreover, English instructors can arrange and offer applicable situations and activities in their classes to make language learners use these neglected vocabulary learning strategies. As for curriculum designers, they can adapt different language exercises in English language pedagogical books and make them suitable for language learners to deal with unfamiliar lexical item regarding remembering the word, its meaning or spelling, etc.

Since this descriptive study was just conducted on a group of students from the same institution, similar study can be done in other institutions of learning so that more comprehensive and effective ways of learning new words can be achieved. It would have been better if further researches with Schmitt (1997) VLS had been done as experimental research to ascertain the impact of the strategies using a larger sample size. Also, more studies should be carried out to consider the effects of Schmitt VLS on students' vocabulary acquisition.

Further researches should be conducted on the students at other educational establishments so that the teacher would be able to employ the programme as an alternative way for teaching and learning English language effectively.

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