Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Saudi Female EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) applied by ten adult female EFL learners at Taif University, Saudi Arabia. In addition, it explored how the current widespread of internet-assisted tools have influenced vocabulary learning strategies and how participants treat new words after encountering them. The data of this study consists of a mixed-methods approach. First, introspective and retrospective verbal reports of ten English-major learners who met new vocabulary while reading a passage. Secondly, in the interview stage, participants were asked about how the internet and mobile resources affect how they approach new words and their lexical knowledge/size. Furthermore, they were asked if they follow specific strategies to commit new vocabulary to memory. The findings of this research showed that the participants used similar vocabulary learning strategies. During the reading task, the most preferred strategy was guessing the meaning of the words from the context. Consulting a monolingual or bilingual dictionary was the second most used strategy, while the least used strategy was asking the teacher to discover the meaning of the unknown words. Participants in this study reported that they prefer memory strategies over cognitive strategies. Moreover, they said that the accessibility of internet learning tools has contributed to increasing their vocabulary size and lexical knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION
1.1. Background of the Research

 Researchers have investigated the correlation between vocabulary size and second language proficiency (Ibrahim et al., 2016). They found that the higher participants scored on the reading comprehension test, the higher they scored on the vocabulary test. Miralpeix and Muñoz (2018) showed that vocabulary size is substantially linked to writing, subsequently reading and listening. However, there is a modest correlation between vocabulary size and oral fluency. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) learners must acquire thousands of words to communicate successfully with others and develop their

language skills. Moreover, EFL/ESL learners should learn a large vocabulary to achieve native-like or an advanced level. Another factor that adds to the complexity of vocabulary learning is the depth of vocabulary knowledge. EFL/ESL should know that learning vocabulary is not just a form-meaning association. They need to consider other dimensions of word knowledge such as grammatical category, frequency, associations, pronunciation, collocations, and register.

In the 1970s, researchers began to be interested in the action learners take to acquire vocabulary and steered away from the teaching-oriented point of view. Chamot (1987) found that ESL learners use strategies for vocabulary learning more than any other language learning task. EFL/ESL learners sometimes apply strategies sanctioned by their culture, such as rote learning in China. Alshammari (2020) proposed that the rise of e-learning and internet-based mobile tools in Saudi EFL classrooms has contributed to learners' motivation and autonomy to learn new words. Moreover, learners' personalities and beliefs can also affect their VLSs. Gua and Johnson (1996) classified learners into five distinguished types: readers, active strategy users, non-encoders, encoders, and passive strategy users. Gu & Johnson (2003) observed that two successful Chinese EFL learners used a wide range of strategies and perceived vocabulary as an essential aspect that should be considered for language use. Furthermore, they showed significant selective attention and self-inanition.

1.2. Questions of the Study

This study aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by Saudi female EFL learners at Taif University?
2. How do internet tools affect the way EFL learners learn and practice vocabulary?
3. What are the procedures that the participants follow in committing new words to memory?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

For a long time, vocabulary learning was one of the most neglected areas in linguistics. However, second language (L2) learners consider it the most challenging aspect to develop (Meara, 1980). Only in the later part of the twentieth century did theorists begin to encourage teachers to pave the way for L2 learners to adopt their own strategies to learn vocabulary (Graves, 1987; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Lawson & Hogben (1996) stated that repetition strategies such as reading aloud or writing words were the most used VLSs used by students who study Italian as L2, however, they paid little attention to the grammatical and structural features of the terms. Gu & Johnson (1996) correlated between Chinese L2 learners' answers to a questionnaire and their English proficiency test results. The result showed that selective attention, self-initiation, guessing, note-taking, encoding, and dictionary strategies, except "looking up words for comprehension", positively correlated with the test scores. On the other hand, oral repetition negatively correlated with the general proficiency. (Cooper, 1999; Fraser, 1999; Harley & Hart, 2000. Paribakht & Wesche (1999) stated that inferencing was the most used and preferred strategy by L2 learners. Nassaji (2003) observed that intermediate ESL learners were unsuccessful when they attempted to infer the meaning of new words from the context.

2.2. Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Researchers such as Gu and Johnson (1994), Schmitt (1997), Nation (2001) and Gu and Johnson (2003) have all proposed various VLSs taxonomies, which have been used in many

studies to investigate VLSs. Schmitt's taxonomy is considered prominent in the VLSs research area, and has been used in many recent and earlier studies to collect quantitative data because it is comprehensive and straightforward. This research will focus on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs is divided into two main categories: discovery and consolidation strategies.

Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy is inspired by Oxford's (1990) Taxonomy of Language learning strategies (LLs) which classifies learning strategies into five dimensions (determination, memory, social, cognitive, and metacognitive). Nevertheless, Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy divided VLSs into two main categories that are discovery (determination and social) and consideration (social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive). Discover strategies can be defined as when a learner attempts to find the meaning of new words by applying language knowledge, using reference materials, or consulting others. At the same time, consideration strategies can describe a learner's effort to memorize new words after discovering their meanings.

(Şener, 2015) The most used category was determination strategies. However, the least used category was cognitive strategies. Makrami & Al-Awaid (2020) stated that Arab EFL learners preferred and ignored certain VLSs. Guessing the meaning from the context was the most applied strategy. The learners' favourite strategy was guessing the words from prior knowledge. The least preferred strategies were consulting a dictionary, taking notes, and metacognitive and cognitive strategies. Moreover, repeating new words aloud and practicing spelling were unfavored by the respondents.

Gil (2022) used solicited diaries and interviews to explore VLSs used by 100 Saudi intermediate EFL learners for six weeks. The findings showed that determination strategies were the most used, and the least used were metacognitive strategies. Al-Bidawi (2018) researched the most preferred VLSs by Saudi EFL learners. The result showed that social and cognitive strategies were the most used categories.

Elashhab (2019) explored 20 EFL female Saudi learners about their learning vocabulary strategies. All the participants said they use a monolingual dictionary to learn new vocabulary because it includes valuable information such as pronunciation, definitions, example sentences, and parts of speech. Moreover, 15 of the 20 participants claimed they use English-language media (songs, TV shows, movies, and video games) to learn new vocabulary. Shamsan et al. (2021) investigated the preferred VLSs by two groups of learners during online learning due to Covid-19 restrictions. The result showed that non-English major learners reported that inferencing the meaning from the context was their favourite strategy, while English major learners' common strategy was to look up new words in a bilingual dictionary. Only 24% used a monolingual dictionary.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1.Research Participants

A total of ten English major Saudi female EFL learners at Taif University participated in this research. The participants' age ranged from 19-21. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) classification, the participants' proficiency level was found to be B1. All participants were informed beforehand that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study anytime before the data analysis stage. They were also informed that the data collected from them was purely for research purposes for this study and their names and identities would be kept anonymous

3.2. Research Approach

This research study was done using a mixed-methods approach. Ten participants were investigated in two stages, introspectively and retrospectively. Verbal reports of learners were recorded when they were introduced to new vocabulary while reading a passage. The second research stage was the interview stage, where participants were asked how the internet and mobile resources affect how they approach new words and their lexical knowledge. They were also asked if they followed certain strategies to retain new vocabulary in memory.

3.3. Research Approach 1- Think Aloud Protocol

"Think-aloud protocols are verbal reports of the participants' thought processes while doing a language task, specifically reading a text or writing an essay. Moreover, participants can produce retrospective reports right after they complete the task to explore some of the points they reported during the think-aloud"(McKay, 2009). This method was used to collect the data through introspective and retrospective verbal reports. In the retrospective stage, participants were asked to verbalize their thoughts and explain some of the points they mentioned during the think-aloud.

3.4. Research Approach 2- Interviews

Participants were asked to answer two structured questions to understand how they handled vocabulary learning after discovering new words and how internet learning tools assisted vocabulary learning. The two structured questions were

a) How do technology and internet tools affect how EFL learners approach new vocabulary?
b) What strategies do they follow to memorize or retrieve new vocabulary?

3.5. Reading Passage

Since this research concerned with how EFL learners react to new vocabulary, a reading passage (Appendix A) was used which was used by the participants. This particular reading passage has been previously used in three other studies (Akpinar, 2013; Haastrup, 1991; Nassaji, 2003).

3.6.Data Analysis

After verbal reports and interviews were transcribed, categories were created from existing guides (Bohn-Gettler & Olson, 2019; McKay, 2009) and research papers (Gu and Johnson, 2003; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). The participants' responses were transformed into thought units or codes to identify their vocabulary learning strategies. An experienced Saudi EFL instructor at Taif University helped recheck the coded data, and necessary adjustments were made where required.

4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Data from the verbal reports and interviews showed that all ten participants applied relatively similar strategies to learn new vocabulary. Participants in this study showed a preference for determination strategies. Schmitt (1997) defined determination strategies as the strategies learners use to discover the meanings of new vocabulary without the assistance of other people. Inferencing the meaning of new words from the context was the most used strategy. Participants mentioned different ways to deduce the meaning from the context, such as exploiting textual cues or the constituent elements of the new lexis and guessing depending on prior knowledge.

The second strategy used was translating the unknown words using a monolingual or a bilingual dictionary. Nine out of ten said if they could not guess the meaning of the new words from the context, they would consult a dictionary to find the meanings of the unknown words. Moreover, 9 out of 10 Participants mentioned they use online dictionaries such as Google Translate or IOS Apple Translate to look up the Arabic equivalents, synonyms, and definitions. 2 out of 10 said they would directly ask the teacher to know the meaning of the target words. According to Schmitt (1997), social strategies involve consulting others who know the meanings of the target words, such as asking a teacher, classmate or native speaker for a paraphrase, definition, synonym or L1 translation.

The participants had different views on keeping lists or notes of the new words. 2 out of 10 believed that it was important to make lists of the new vocabulary to memorize and practice them later on. On the other hand, the rest of the participants were of the idea that there were other ways to practice new words instead of repetition, such as forming sentences using new words to form sentences, learning synonyms, and trying to employ the new words while speaking. Hedge (2000) and Schmitt (1997) highlighted the difference between cognitive and memory strategies. Memory strategies are concerned with mental processes and tricks learners apply to enhance the retention and retrieval of vocabulary. However, cognitive strategies are direct thought processes that enable learners to learn the presented information differently, such as verbal or written repetition, flashcards, taking notes or keeping word lists.

 Moreover, participants said that online and mobile tools had a fundamental impact on their vocabulary repertoire and the overall lexical knowledge. They believed that the accessibility of the learning resources, for example, online dictionary, Podcasts, Wikipedia, songs, TV shows, and YouTube, helped them to increase vocabulary size. Other strategies that helped them learn about vocabulary aspects were synonyms, phonetic transcription, definitions, L1 translation, and example sentences. Hedge (2000) and Schmitt (1997) described metacognitive strategies as when learners plan, control, assess, and think about their own learning. One of the metacognitive strategies is learning new words intentionally from authentic contexts such as books, magazines, and movies. The VLSs used by the subjects of this study are clearly listed in Table 1.

Table (1): *shows the participants' VLSs based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy)*

Strategy	Definition	Type	Participants' responses
Learn the meaning of new words from the context.	Guess the meaning from textual context	Determination	*"Our beliefs waver."* It means to shock or change our beliefs. I understood it from the context.
Use a bilingual or monolingual dictionary.	Consult a dictionary to discover the meanings of the unknown lexis.	Determination	*"Squalor"* I searched for its meaning in an online dictionary.
Analyze affixes, prefixes, and roots.	Analyze the constituent elements of the terms.	Determination	"I analyze the words such as affixes and prefixes to guess the meaning."
Ask the teacher to translate or explain the meaning of the unknown lexis.	Ask others who know the meaning of the unknown words for translation, synonyms, or definition.	Social	"I would ask the teacher about the meaning of the unknown during class."

Use the new words in sentences.	Making a connection between new words and pre-existed knowledge through word association	Memory	"The right way to practice words is by using the new words to from sentences."
Keeping a word list or vocabulary notebook.	Writing a list of the new words.	Cognitive	"I write new words in a notebook."
Learning new words from authentic materials.	Learners consciously learn new words from different language learning resources.	Metacognitive	"I watch TV shows and I listen to podcasts and music to learn new words."

5. DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this research is to investigate VLSs used by Saudi EFL learners. In addition, it explores how online resources have contributed to their vocabulary size and knowledge. Based on the findings, participants preferred the first type of discover strategies (determination strategies). During the reading task, the most used strategy was guessing the meaning from the context, subsequently consulting a monolingual or bilingual dictionary. The results indicated that memory strategies, which belong consolidation category, are the second most used strategies. On the other hand, the least used strategies were cognitive and social. Moreover, all participants admitted that the features and accessibility of online and digital resources helped them develop their lexical knowledge.

In line with the first hypothesis," Participants use similar strategies to learn new words,", EFL learners in this study applied similar VLSs during the reading task and interviews. They used determination strategies to discover the meaning of the new words; after that, they reported that they preferred memory strategies to remember the new words. The second hypothesis proposed that online and mobile resources influenced how EFL learners approach new vocabulary. This study stated that online resources' accessibility and ubiquity made learning new words easy and instant. Moreover, it increased their knowledge of vocabulary aspects. Ambarwati and Mandasari (2020) found that Cambridge online dictionary influenced students' mastery of pronunciation and vocabulary.

In contrast with the third hypothesis of this research "Participants apply some strategies to commit new words to memory", 8 out of 10 of the subjects do not follow cognitive strategies or repetition strategies; however, they would instead remembering new words they follow memory strategies, which focus on the mental processes and relating to the previous knowledge. Both Memory and cognitive are subcategories of consolidation strategies. According to (Schmitt, 1997), consolidation strategies are used by learners to remember the meanings or other aspects of the words after discovering their meanings.

The result is similar to some previous studies about VLSs. Ali (2020) found that Saudi students preferred to infer the meaning from the context to understand a reading passage. (Al-khresheh & Alruwaili, 2020) studied the most preferred VLSs of 219 Saudi EFL learners. The questionnaire result showed that memory strategies were the most preferred and cognitive strategies were the least used. Gil (2022) found that the determination strategy was the most employed strategy, and the least used strategy was the metacognitive strategy. Nevertheless, the result of this research contradicts the result obtained by (Al-Bidawi, 2018), which found that the first most used were social strategies, and the second most used category was cognitive strategies.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate VLSs used by ten major English students at Taif University and the influence of online resources on their vocabulary learning and knowledge. Two methods have been used in this study: Verbal reports and interviews. The current study findings showed that most students used the determination strategies during the reading task. Participants stated that memory strategies were their preferred VLS after discovering the meaning of the new words. Moreover, participants acknowledged that online resources helped them increase their vocabulary size and knowledge. Further research is needed to investigate EFL learners' metacognitive strategies to learn vocabulary.

6.1.Limitation and Recommendation

One of the limitations of this study is the sample size (ten adult EFL learners), which could have been improved by increasing the sample size. Moreover, there are some flaws in the design of the interview questions. More questions should have been included to investigate how students evaluate their progress in vocabulary and the effectiveness of their VLSs. Further research should consider EFL learners' attitudes toward VLSs and how they monitor, plan, and manage their vocabulary learning process. Furthermore, upcoming studies should investigate how online and mobile resources affect VLSs and overall vocabulary knowledge.

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Appendix A

<u>Health in the Rich World and in the Poor</u>

An American journalist, Dorothy Thompson, criticises the rich world's health programmes in the poor world. She describes her trip to Africa where she got food poisoning and her friend malaria: The town is very dirty. All the people are hot, have dust between their toes and the smell of sewage in their noses. We both fell ill, and at ten o'clock in the morning I got frightened and took my friend to the only private hospital in town, where you have to pay. After being treated by a doctor, we caught the next aeroplane home. Now, I believe that the money of the World Health Organisation (WHO) should be spent on bringing health to all people of

the world and not on expensive doctors and hospitals for the few who can pay. But when we ourselves become ill, our beliefs waver. After we came back to the States we thought a lot about our reaction to this sudden meeting with health care in a poor country. When assessing modern medicine, we often forget that without more money for food and clean water to drink, it is impossible to fight the diseases that are caused by infections. Doctors seem to overlook this fact. They ought to spend much time thinking about why they themselves do not contract some of the serious and infectious diseases that so many of their patients die from. They do not realize that an illness must find a body that is weak either because of stress or hunger. People are killed by the conditions they live under, the lack of food and money and the squalor. Doctors should analyze why people become ill rather than take such a keen interest in the curative effect of medicine. In the rich world many diseases are caused by affluence. The causes of heart diseases, for instance, are far from being mysterious and unfathomable. They are as well-known as the causes of tuberculosis. Other diseases are due to hazards in the natural conditions in which we live. Imagine the typical American worker on his death-bed: every cell permeated with such things as chemicals and radio-active materials. Such symptoms are true signs of an unhealthy world.