

## The Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by EFL and EAP Undergraduate University Learners' in the Iraqi Context

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### Abstract

Vocabulary learning is an essential part of foreign or second language learning. This study aims at identifying the most and least common strategies that are used by Iraqi English as a foreign language (EFL) majors and English for academic purposes (EAP) learners. Also, determine the differences that are in EFL and EAP students' vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) use as well as exploring EFL and EAP students' views and difficulties. The study samples were 100 undergraduate learners (50 EAP learners and 50 EFL majors studying at Al-iraqia University, Iraq). There were two methods adopted; a validated Likert-scale questionnaire based on a developed version of Schmitt (1997) and further selected four of them for a follow-up semi-structured interview. The results of the survey indicated that EFL and EAP learners' most common strategy was determination strategy, whereas, the least common strategy was metacognitive. The finding of the independent sample t-test of the five identified categories: metacognitive, determination, cognitive, memory as well as social, indicated that there was no significant difference between EFL and EAP learners' in the frequency of the use of VLS. The results of the interview indicated that the majority of EFL and EAP learners' valued the significance role of VLS.

**Keywords:** EAP learners, EFL learners, vocabulary learning strategies

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## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental factor of language proficiency level and, therefore, has contained high in the language learning studies agenda (Pellicer-Sánchez, 2018). Numerous research studies have shown that VLS plays a crucial role in learning vocabulary as learners face difficulties in learning a foreign language if they have the insufficient vocabulary knowledge (e.g., Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013); Çelik and Toptaş (2010); Hakan, Aydin, and Bulent (2015)). Thus, setting up a store of vocabularies is essential for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Also improving a list of vocabularies that will be employed in their academic demands. Many researchers in the field of EFL have used numerous methods that can assist in learning vocabulary, namely as VLS. For English as a foreign language, many language learners, especially non-English speaking environments exposure to language is very limited. Therefore, one of the most significant challenges for Iraqi EFL learners is the lack of vocabularies that thus contrarily impacts their perception of both productive as well as receptive skills of language (Nation, 1990 as cited in Rashed, 2018). Iraqi EFL students are unaware of the strategies they should use in vocabulary learning. Furthermore, the learners' vocabularies size is limited as well as has no connection with the VLS they using. Accordingly, learners would face challenges in language communication due to a lack of vocabulary (Abid, 2017). Iraqi EFL learners have a difficulty in learning language, especially words and phrases. Hence, the main focus of Iraqi EFL learners and their teachers is to apply effective VLS to facilitate the process as well as to ensure the appropriate fluency levels (Al Hamdany, 2018).

Regarding the field of English for academic purposes, EAP learners encounter many different texts, particularly texts in an academic setting. EAP students also have to construct meaning based on their prior knowledge. Hence, learners need adequate academic vocabulary to pass their examinations and to communicate effectively in class. Therefore, the importance of Vocabulary learning strategies plays an essential role in English for academic purposes situations. Haghi and Pasand (2013) state that EAP learners are required to study as well as comprehend a good deal of written texts in the English language. Therefore, VLS use can aid the English for academic purposes students in dealing with the texts as well as comprehending them.

Despite the significance of VLS, to date, very few studies have been conducted in the field of EAP/ ESP. Wanpen et al. (2013) cite that in the area of EAP/ ESP, vocabulary learning is to be one of the significant aspects for learner attainment in learning academic English. The significance of using useful strategies to help such students by raising learners' awareness of various VLS seems to be an essential subject to both EFL learners and EAP majors. Furthermore, being familiar with different useful VLS is an excellent assistance for EFL learners and EAP majors in dealing with unknown words.

As far as we know, although of the importance of VLS in the Iraqi context, very few studies have been conducted to investigate the Iraqi EAP learners' and EFL students' in terms of using VLS as well as exploring their opinions. Consequently, this study aims to quantitatively and qualitatively identify the vocabulary learning strategies used by EAP and EFL students' as well as exploring their views. The following study questions were thus formulated:

1. What strategies are most and least commonly used by Iraqi EFL learners?

2. What strategies are most and least commonly used by Iraqi EAP learners?
3. Is there any difference between Iraqi EFL and EAP learners in terms of using vocabulary learning strategies? Concerning the third research question, the following hypothesis is developed: "There is no difference between Iraqi EFL and EAP learners' in using vocabulary learning strategies."
4. What are the EFL and EAP learners' views and difficulties in vocabulary learning?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategy Taxonomies

For the past decades, different taxonomies have been offered by several of scholars as well as many strategies have empirically or theoretically been cited for enriching vocabulary store Oxford 1990; Rubin 1975; Macaro 2001 as cited in Afshar et al., (2014). To highlight the VLS classifications chronologically, Stoffer (1995), Gu and Johnson (1996), and Schmitt (1997) have been offered the most significant taxonomies of VLS. For instance, Stoffer (1995) was the earliest one who proposed VLS classification. Stoffer taxonomy included nine categories as follows: a) self-motivation strategies, b) involving authentic language use strategies, c) Memory strategy, d) Strategies used to create mental linkages, e) Strategies involving physical action, f) Strategies involving creative activities, g) Auditory strategies, h) Strategies used to overcome anxiety, and i) Strategies used to organize words. However, Kudo (1999) states that Stoffer's classification was not seemed comprehensive since the lack of detailed statistical data to support the taxonomies. Another noteworthy VLS taxonomy has been offered by Gu and Johnson, 1996. The VLS taxonomy clustered into eight categories as follows: a) activation strategies, b) guessing strategies, c) metacognitive regulation, d) note-taking strategies, e) dictionary strategies, f) memory encoding strategies, g) rehearsal strategies, and h) beliefs about vocabulary learning. A year later, Schmitt (1997) offered a new taxonomy for VLS, which is based on Oxford's language learning strategies (LLS). Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of LLS containing six clusters, such as affective, metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, social as well as memory. The taxonomy devised a comprehensive inventory of individual VLS that includes 58 strategies. For the current study, the general classification of VLS can be categorized according to Schmitt 1997 since it is widely used by many researchers in the field of VLS. Besides, it has categories that are prominent as well as comprehensive taxonomy. The primary classification can be mainly classified into two dimensions: 1) Consolidation Strategies (Con), include methods as well as techniques in retaining a word once it has been encountered, and 2) Discovery Strategies (Dis), which are methods applied when facing new words. Discovery strategies refer to social strategies (SOC) as well as determination (DET), while consolidation strategies consist of cognitive strategies (COG), metacognitive strategies (MET), social strategies, and memory strategies (MEM). The five categories are as follows: 1) social: using interaction with others to enrich the learning process; 2) determination: utilized by students when they encounter a word for the first time; 3) Metacognitive: refer to being aware of monitoring, evaluating as well as planning the learning process; 4) Cognitive: which are transformation as well as manipulation of the second language (L2) by the student; 5) Memory: relating new material to existing knowledge.

However, many VLS field researchers considered Schmitt's taxonomy the most prominent VLS classification due to its several advantages over others. For instance, Catalan (2003) states that Schmitt's taxonomy can be standardized for assessment goals; by utilizing it, the samples'

responses can be easily gathered. Also, it is primarily based on the model of LLS and memory theories. This classification is simple; it can be applied to students of different educational backgrounds. Furthermore, it is productive as well as sensitive to the other related LLS, as well as allows comparing with other researches.

## **2.2 Research into the Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

### **2.2.1 Research on VLS within an EFL context**

Researches on VLS within an EFL setting is still ongoing. In recent times, Behbahani (2016) surveyed university students' knowledge of VLS as well as influential factors in the middle east. The results showed that social as well as metacognitive strategies were the most and the least common VLS. As regards the role of proficiency level and gender level, the t-test, as well as ANOVA findings, showed that gender was a practical aspect. Whereas, proficiency was not an active factor in the preference of learners for using VLS. Females learners preferred metacognitive strategies, but male students preferred detrimental strategies. In an EFL context, Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) investigated EFL university learners, in particular, a more or less common strategy used for vocabulary learning. Administrating a questionnaire as well as interviews, were carried out. The results revealed that the most common strategy used by the learners ordered to the least common one as in the following: determination, cognitive, memory, metacognitive, and social strategy. Other findings showed that dictionary use strategy, as well as guessing from context strategy were the most common strategies. Whereas asking the peers or asking the teacher for meaning were the less common strategies. In another study, Yilmaz (2010) explores the relationship between preferred language gender, self-efficacy beliefs, strategies and proficiency. He was administered a questionnaire to 140 EFL learners. The findings indicated that compensation strategies were the highest rank, whereas affective strategies were the lowest. In a different study, Çelik and Toptaş (2010) surveyed VLS used by Turkish EFL learners, concerning the helpfulness ratings as well as frequencies. The finding of their study showed that the samples' general use of VLS was rather inadequate. Ping et al. (2012) studied self-regulatory for VLS among Chinese EFL students. He attempted to investigate the use of self-regulated VLS and motivational beliefs. The results showed that meta-cognitive strategies, as well as cognitive in-depth processing strategy were rarely applied by the students.

### **2.2.2 Research on VLS within an EAP context**

Regarding the ESP/EAP context, Hashemi and Hadavi (2015) examined the VLS among EFL Iranian medical sciences learners. They have administrated a questionnaire of Gu and Johnson. The results showed that guessing as well as social strategies had the highest obtained frequencies, whereas dictionary strategy, Note-taking, and autonomy were the least used strategies. Adopting a questionnaire, Afshar, Moazzam, and Arbabi (2014) investigated 173 Iranian undergraduate students. The results showed that the two groups were not significantly different in the choice as well as the use of VLS. They found significant differences in individual strategy use in seven out of (45) strategies. Bernardo and Gonzales (2009) studied the use of common VLS by baccalaureate learners of five majors: 1) hospitality management, 2) engineering and computer science, 3) liberal arts and education, 4) allied medical science, and 5) business education in Philippine university. The results indicated that there were significant differences in terms of using the social strategy as well as determination strategy across the five disciplines. Also, their study revealed that there were non-significant differences in utilizing of metacognitive, cognitive as well as memory strategies.

Another study, Mukoroli (2011) investigated vocabulary teaching strategies for the English for academic purposes ESL/EAP classroom. The researcher observed three EAP classrooms across the U.S.A. as well as discussed various effective vocabulary teaching strategies. The results revealed that in the EAP classroom, vocabulary learning strategies greatly helped students in their English language acquisition. A study by Mutalib et al. (2014) explored vocabulary learning strategies among Malaysian TEVT students in German-Malaysian Institute (GMI). Data was collected via a questionnaire as well as an interview. The finding of the research showed that a majority of learners relied on discovery strategies such as asking friends and teachers, referring to dictionaries as well as guessing words. Furthermore, a very limited number of learners were aware of cognitive strategies.

Over the past few years, several investigations have been conducted on VLS and acquisition that learners use to learn new words in EFL or ESP/EAP contexts abroad. Many of these researches investigating VLS use in EFL and EAP at different levels as well as stages. However, very few studies have been adopted in the Iraqi context to identify the most common strategies that are used by EFL majors, and EAP learners as well as determine the differences in EFL and EAP students' vocabulary learning as regards to the strategies use and beliefs.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Instruments and Procedures

Two methods were used, a questionnaire (n=100) as well as a semi-structured interview (n=4). The employed questionnaire was based on Schmitt's 1997 taxonomy, and a replication of a structured questionnaire developed and validated by Rashed on the same area, which included cognitive (COG), metacognitive (MET), determination (DET), social (SOC) and memory (MEM) strategies. The questionnaire consisted of 43 questions, including five open-ended questions. The researcher uses both open answer questions as in (part C) as well as closed response as (part B). The questionnaire was classified into three parts: part (A) included the participants' personal information. Part (B) contained rating statements, which are used to test the samples' employing of vocabulary learning strategies. Whereas, part (C) contained open-ended responses, in which samples were allowed to express their own views as well as describe their difficulties in vocabulary learning. All items were ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) and on a five-point Likert scale rating. The questions included seven "determination strategies," five "social strategies," 17 "memory strategies," six "cognitive strategies" as well as three questions addressing "metacognitive strategies." The reliability and validity of Schmitt's 1997 questionnaire have been examined in many previous studies, which means that the scale had a worthy internal consistency.

Regarding the procedures, the questionnaire was translated to the participants' mother tongue (Arabic) to avoid any language barriers or misapprehensions, especially EAP subjects. The final version of the VLS questionnaire was administered at the class sessions under the teacher instructions. The time was about 30 minutes for the subjects to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was done by 100 EFL learners (n=50) and EAP majors (n=50) in the second semester. Furthermore, for the following-up interview, four out of the one-hundred participants were randomly selected to get extra information as well as clarification and explanation of the VLS questionnaire data.

### 3.2 Participants

This study was carried out during the academic year of 2019-2020 at the faculties of Humanities (EFL major) and Engineering (EAP learners) at Al-iraqia University. The participants in this study were 100 female and male undergraduate students (50 EFL majors and 50 EAP learners). The age of the samples ranged from 18 to 35.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Mixed design research of data collection was administrated to describe and explore the current setting of strategy use as well as views. The questionnaire and interview data obtained were used for answering the study questions. The findings were coded under two categories; (a) 'quantitative data analysis' (b) 'qualitative data analysis.' The results from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS version 24 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The students' responses were input into SPSS software in terms of frequency (F), standard deviation (SD), mean (M) as well as percentages (%). Frequency analysis and percentages were used to determine the most common and least common utilized strategies. The thirty-eight items in the survey were grouped into five categories based on (Schmitt, 1997). The statements of the questionnaire were presented in the same way as employed by Schmitt 1997 in a jumbled order for gaining more reliable answers.

The collected data of interviews have illustrated the views on the significance of VLS, difficulties of vocabulary learning, training for vocabulary learning as well as any other ways of learning strategies.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Quantitative data analysis

The first study question aimed at investigating the most and least common vocabulary learning strategies used by Iraqi EFL learners. With regard to, Table 1 shows the frequency of the five most common and least common strategies used by Iraqi EFL students in vocabulary learning.

Table 1. *The most and least common VLS used by EFL learners*

Major Strategies	Rank	The most common used strategies	Frequency	The least common used strategies	Frequency
Determination	1	5. I try to guess from textual context.	88%	1. I try to analyse affixes and roots (e.g. <i>un-predict-able</i> )	46%
Memory	2	24. I repeat a word (aloud or whisper to myself, in my mind, or by spelling it)	84%	13. I draw a picture of the new word.	62%
Cognitive	3	22. I write a word repeatedly.	79%	26. I try to tape or listen to tapes of new words.	39%
Metacognitive	4	30. I use English-language media (e.g. <i>songs, movies, newscasts, etc.</i> )	70%	28. I skip or ignore the unknown word.	67%
Social	5	11. I ask the meaning of an unknown word from my classmates.	56%	10. I ask teacher for a sentence including the new word.	39%

Table 1 indicates that EFL learners used strategies such as determination strategy (88%) “I try to guess from textual context,” memory strategy (84%) “I repeat a word (aloud or whisper to myself, in my mind, or by spelling it),” cognitive strategy (79%) “I write a word repeatedly” metacognitive strategy (70%) “I use English-language media (e.g., songs, movies, newscasts, etc.)” and social strategy (56%) “I ask the meaning of an unknown word from my classmates” were most commonly. Furthermore, learners adopted strategies like determination (46%) “I try to analyze affixes and roots (e.g., un-predict-able)”, memory strategy (62%) “I draw a picture of the new word,” cognitive strategy (39%) “I try to tape or listen to tapes of new words” metacognitive strategy (67%) “I skip or ignore the unknown word” and social strategy (39%) “I ask teacher for a sentence including the new word.” were less commonly. Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) concluded that determination strategies as guessing from context were the most frequent strategies, which is in good agreement with the results of the present study.

The second research question dedicated to investigate the five most and least commonly used VLS by EAP learners. In this concern, Table 2 shows the frequency of the five most and least commonly strategies used by Iraqi EAP majors in vocabulary learning.

Table 2. *The most and least common VLS used by EAP learners*

Major Strategies	Rank	The most common used strategies	Frequency	The least common used strategies	Frequency
Determination	1	5. I try to guess from textual context.	82%	2. I try to analyze affixes and roots (e.g. un-predict-able)	51%
Memory	2	24. I repeat a word (aloud or whisper to myself, in my mind, or by spelling it)	80%	13. I draw a picture of the new word.	60%
Cognitive	3	23. I act out or mime the new word	56%	29. I use the vocabulary section or glossaries in my textbook.	55%
Metacognitive	4	31. I continue to study word over time (i.e. revise it several times during the day)	41%	28. I skip or ignore the unknown word.	70%
Social	5	11. I ask the meaning of an unknown word from my classmates.	30%	10. I ask teacher for a sentence including the new word.	65%

Based on the above table, it is found that EAP learners used strategies such as determination strategy (82%) “I try to guess from textual context,” memory strategy (80%) “I repeat a word (aloud or whisper to myself, in my mind, or by spelling it),” cognitive strategy (56%) “I act out or mime the new word” metacognitive strategy (41%) “I continue to study word over time (i.e., revise it several times during the day)” and social strategy (30%) “I ask the meaning of an unknown word from my classmates” were most commonly. On the other hand, the least commonly used vocabulary learning strategies are determination strategy (51%) “I try to analyze affixes and roots (e.g., un-predict-able)”, memory strategy (60%) “I draw a picture of the new word,” cognitive strategy (55%) “I use the vocabulary section or glossaries in my textbook” metacognitive strategy (70%) “I skip or ignore the unknown word” and social strategy (65%) “I ask teacher for a sentence including the new word.” The present finding also support Afshar et al. (2014) study which concluded that EAP learners used most frequent strategies such as “repeating the new word orally several times,” “studying the spelling of the new word and writing new English words several times,” “using new words in sentences through speaking”. Another study

agreed with the literature regarding VLS Noor & Amir (2009) that found guessing meaning was the most favorite strategy by EAP learners.

Considering the third question, the difference between Iraqi EFL and EAP learners in terms of using vocabulary learning strategies. Table 3, shows the results of the independent sample t-test.

Table 3. The results of independent sample T-test

Samples	Mean	S.d	d.f.	t	P	Significance level
EFL	5.70	12.7	98	1.49	0.17	p<0.5
EAP	5.33	12.1	98	1.49	0.17	

As it is shown in table 3, there is no statistically significant difference between EAP learners as well as EFL majors in terms of using vocabulary learning strategies ( $t=1.49$ ,  $df=98$ ;  $p=0.17>0.05$ ).

#### 4.2 Qualitative data analysis

The fourth study question dedicated to explore the EFL and EAP learners' views and difficulties in vocabulary learning. Based on the interview of the EFL learners, the samples reported that highly valued the role of vocabulary learning in the process of foreign language acquisition. Some learners said that they use other ways of learning vocabulary such as social media, learning vocabularies by communicating with native English speaker, using google translate to learn new words, using mobile phone apps and they acting the new words. Also, they wish their instructors to help them with vocabulary learning. With regard to the learners' difficulties, they explained that they were unaware of using various strategies. Moreover, they said that most of their difficulties were in learning complex words, the pronunciation of difficult words, in particular, long words. The majority complained that they had poor memory strategies. Some reported that they had difficulties in choosing the best way to learn vocabulary.

Moving to the EAP learners' views, the majority of the participants' referred to the significance of vocabulary learning in learning a foreign language. Subjects' mentioned that they use other ways of learning vocabularies, such as video games and mobile phone apps. Most of the interviewed subjects stated that they had problems in learning vocabulary as well as seldom practiced words outside class. Some participants' blamed their low level in vocabulary due to poor background. Others said that they had difficulties in the pronunciation of words. Furthermore, EAP students said that they had not got any training, and they required vocabulary learning strategies training.

## 5. Conclusions

In this investigation, the aim was to identify the most and least common strategies that were used by Iraqi EFL majors and EAP learners as well as to determine the differences in EFL and EAP learners' vocabulary learning strategies use. Also, exploring EFL and EAP students' views as well as difficulties encountered in vocabulary learning. The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study, with regard to the first question, the results indicated that EFL learners most common strategy were determination strategy such as "I try to guess from textual context." Whereas, the least common adopted strategy was metacognitive like "I skip or ignore the unknown word." Considering the second question, it was found that EAP learners used strategies such as determination strategy "I try to guess from textual context" was the most common strategy. While the least commonly used vocabulary learning strategy was metacognitive strategy like "I skip or ignore the unknown word." Moving to the third question, the results of the independent sample t-test indicated that there was no significant difference between EFL and EAP learners' in the frequency of the use of vocabulary learning strategies. This finding showed that the majority of learners lack the various vocabulary learning strategies, and they required vocabulary learning strategies training. Turning to the fourth question, the results of the interview indicated that the majority of EFL and EAP learners' valued the significance role of vocabulary learning strategies. They had difficulties in vocabulary learning such as complex words, the pronunciation of difficult words, in particular, long words as well as poor memory strategies and difficulties in choosing the best way to learn vocabulary.

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