

# **RAISING LEARNERS' AND TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF VOCABULARY STRATEGY LEARNING**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to shed light on the issue of vocabulary strategy learning. As Zimmerman (1997:5) states “vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner.” Celce-Murcia and Rosenweig (1989: 242) state “ ... a good amount of vocabulary-with a minimum of structure – often makes for better reading comprehension and more efficient survival communication than near-perfect structure with an impoverished vocabulary of 100 words or less.” Bearing these assumptions in mind, we first tried to investigate whether our students use any strategies to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

Chastain (1988) states that even if students have the necessary learning skills, they may not achieve up to their capabilities because they resort to unproductive and ineffective strategies for learning the material. According to Brown (1994:124), ‘teaching learners how to learn’ is crucial as we seek to make the language classroom an effective milieu for learning. Since we also aimed at teaching our students to learn how to learn, we tried to raise their awareness of different kinds of strategies they might use by introducing these strategies to them in the class in accordance with the program and the textbook they were using.

To reach the goal of the study, which was to show the effect of strategy training to students’ vocabulary knowledge, two groups of EFL language learners were assigned as study and control group. Only the study group received instruction on vocabulary learning strategies through a 10-week period. The result of the study showed that the instruction of strategies that

students can use has a significant positive effect on the vocabulary learning of our students. Through a vocabulary strategy frequency survey, which was adapted from Oxford, Cohen and Chi, and a taxonomy which was taken from Schmitt (1997), the students' conscious and/or unconscious use of vocabulary learning strategies was investigated. We also aimed at raising the teachers' awareness of vocabulary strategy learning as well as the learners', so we planned feedback sessions with our colleagues in order to share ideas, thoughts, and the outcome of the study we were conducting. In this way, we could find the chance to explore the teachers' perspective and vision towards strategy use and training.

### **Language Learning Strategies**

Several language learning strategies have been made in the literature: According to Cook (1991), a learning strategy is a choice made by the learners while learning or using the second language. O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1) define learning strategies as 'the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information.' Moreover, Ellis (1997) states that learning strategies are the particular approaches or techniques that are used by learners when they attempt to learn an L2. Stern (1992: 261) states that 'the concept of learning strategy is based on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals, that they exercise a choice of procedures, and that they undertake some form of long-term planning.' Rubin (1987:19 cited in Stern, 1992:261) regards strategies as 'what learners do to learn and do to regulate their learning. Wenden (1987:7 cited in Stern, 1992:261) treats strategies as equivalent to what other writers have called 'techniques', 'tactics', 'consciously employed operations', 'learning skills', and so on. The consensus of opinion in the above definitions seems to be that learning strategies are skillfully exploited by the learners to acquire learning in a self-directed manner.

Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are the tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communication ability. Appropriate learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence in many instances (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

Various classifications of learning strategies are found in literature. Oxford (2001) states that major varieties of language learning strategies are: cognitive, mnemonic, metacognitive, compensatory, affective, and social. Learning strategies have also been differentiated into

three categories: (1) Metacognitive Strategies, (2) Cognitive Strategies, (3) Social/affective Strategies (O' Malley and Chamot, 1990).

### **Language Learning Strategy Training**

Students are not always aware of the power of consciously using language learning strategies for making learning quicker, easier, more effective, and even more fun (Nyikos, 1987, cited in Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Skilled and experienced teachers help their students develop an awareness of learning strategies so that they can use a wider range of appropriate strategies because learning to learn has become enormously important.

According to Cohen (2002) strategy training aims to provide learners with the tools to do the following:

- Self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in language learning
- Become aware of what helps them to learn the target language most efficiently
- Develop a broad range of problem-solving skills
- Experiment with familiar and unfamiliar learning strategies
- Make decisions about how to approach a language task
- Monitor and self-evaluate their performance
- Transfer successful strategies to new learning contexts

Studies have shown that the most effective strategy training is explicit: Learners are obviously told that a particular behavior or strategy might be helpful, and they are taught how to use and transfer it to new situations. 'Blind training', in which students are oriented to employ strategies without realization, is found less successful. Research also shows that strategy training is more fruitful when it is woven into regular class activities (Oxford, 2002: 126).

Strategy training may be helpful, however, as Williams and Burden (1997) note, if it is more beneficial to help learners develop strategies that are personally relevant to them. It should not be forgotten that different characteristics such as age, sex, motivation, learning style, life experience and cultural background may influence the students' learning (Williams and Burden, 1997).

When we consider vocabulary learning strategies, it seems that many learners do use strategies for learning vocabulary, especially when compared to more integrated tasks

(Schmitt, 1997). According to Schmitt (1997) higher strategy use may be a result of learners' awareness of the importance of the vocabulary.

## **The Study**

### **Participants**

The participants of the study were 33 female and 37 male Turkish EFL students aged 18 to 22 attending the Preparatory School of Foreign Languages of Mersin University, to whom a survey of strategy frequency was given. The same survey was also given to 35 (18 female-17 male) students from ELT department of the same university in order to see if there were any significant differences in the use of vocabulary strategies. Our final participant group was the 30 English instructors (25 female-5 male) of the School of Foreign Languages of Mersin University.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Both the study and control group were given a test at the beginning of the study. Only the study group took training on vocabulary learning strategies through a 10-week period. During this period, students were asked to keep vocabulary notebooks, 10-day word lists were given, and then students were tested with quizzes, word forms; roots and suffixes were emphasized; posters and flashcards were prepared; vocabulary games were played. Both groups were given a post-test. An independent t-test was used to compare the scores.

Both groups were given a survey of strategy frequency at the beginning of the study in order to see whether they use any strategies in vocabulary learning. This survey was also given to the students attending the ELT department wondering if advanced English-level students majoring in English show similarities or differences in the use of strategies for vocabulary learning. Only the study group took the survey once more after the training in order for us to see whether any change occurred in the strategies students prefer to use. As for the survey analysis a five-point survey of strategy frequency was used in the study. In statistical analysis the Type I error probability was taken as 5% and SPSS program (version 11.5) was used in the calculations. A non-independent t-test was conducted to see whether there was a change in our study group's frequency before and after the vocabulary strategy instruction. In addition to non-independent sample t-test, chi-square was conducted to see if there were any significant differences among elementary, pre-intermediate and advanced English level students' responses.

## Results

**Table I** Determining factors of the scores of two tests by the study and control group

group		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pretest	study group	48,2000	8,12331	35
	control group	31,1714	9,83238	35
	Total	39,6857	12,39746	70
posttest	study group	61,8857	12,46117	35
	control group	39,7143	10,63449	35
	Total	50,8000	16,02860	70

**Table II.** Mean and standard deviation of the difference of the scores the students got in two tests in the study and control group

group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Difference of posttest and pretest	study group	35	13,6857	9,80027	1,65655
	control group	35	8,5429	5,33216	,90130

The five-point strategy frequency survey which was given to the study group twice shows that the learners' frequency may change as a result of consciousness raising activities. For example, our study group received training in roots and affixes and it is noticed that item 13 'I remind myself of a word meaning by first thinking of meaningful parts of the word (e.g., the prefix or the suffix)' was responded differently by the learners before and after the instruction. Before the instruction 25.7% of the students chose (4), however, 51.4% of the students chose (4) after the instruction ( $P=0.035$ ). Another example is the item 7: "I learn a new word by listing it along with other words related to it by topic." 14.3% of the students chose (1) before the instruction. After the instruction none of these students chose (1). It was noticed that two of these students chose (3), one of these students chose (4), two of these students chose (5) after the instruction ( $P=0.0001$ ). We may comment favorably, then, that training may be beneficial and may affect the frequency rates of the learners. Behavioral change may be observed after the training.

After the calculations, in the study group a 13.68 point rise was seen as a result of the training, whereas after 10-week training-free instruction in the control group a 8.54 point increase was observed. When the rise in each group was compared, the rise of the study group

in terms of pretest and post-test results was found to be significant compared to the control group ( $P=0.009$ ). With this result we may say that strategy training has a significant positive effect on the increase in scores, which indicates vocabulary growth as well.

The survey enabled us to see our learners' strengths and weaknesses about vocabulary learning. Most of the learners indicated that they face problems when they memorize the words. Most of them stated that if they don't see or use the words in a sentence they can forget it easily, especially multi-part words. This may give us a clue that the majority of our learners are visual learners. As they pointed out, when they see the word they can learn it better, for example flashcards, pictures, and posters may be of help to our learners to retain the word. Some of our learners remarked that they make associations with other words, i.e. Turkish meaning, a formerly learned word, or a place.

When the instructors' responses to our survey were taken into account it was found that %90 of the teachers think that strategy instruction is important, rating the skills that need strategy instruction most as writing, vocabulary and reading the highest. 24 teachers out of 30 indicated that they conduct informal class observations to understand the learners' vocabulary learning strategies.

22 teachers out of 30 have a negative attitude towards the course-book in terms of providing enough space for vocabulary learning strategies, and finally they are willing to conduct "Action Research" within their classrooms to provide strategy instruction and to know their learners better.

## **Conclusion**

As for the conclusion of the study;

- Strategy training makes a difference
- Strategy training enables students to see their strengths and weaknesses
- Students become more aware of their strategies which they used unconsciously before the training
- The frequency strategy use may change due to the strategy instruction
- There is not a significant change in the frequency of strategies according to the level of English (elementary, pre-intermediate, advanced)

- Teachers think that strategy instruction is important, and they are willing to conduct “Action Research” within their classrooms
- Supplementary material with strategy instruction is well advised by the teachers.

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## Appendix 1

### SURVEY OF STRATEGY FREQUENCY (An adaptation from Oxford, Cohen and Chi)

1. Age:
2. Sex: Male ( ) Female ( )
3. How long have you been studying English? \_\_\_\_\_ years, \_\_\_\_\_ months.
4. What do you think your strengths and weaknesses in your vocabulary learning are?  
Strengths:  
  
Weaknesses:
5. How important is it for you to have a rich vocabulary? Why?  
Very important ( ) Important ( ) Not so important ( )  
Please, state your opinion:

### READ EACH STATEMENT AND MARK THE RESPONSE (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) THAT TELL YOU HOW TRUE THE STATEMENT IS FOR YOU

- (1) Never or almost never true for me
- (2) Generally not true for me
- (3) Somewhat true for me
- (4) Generally true for me
- (5) Always or almost always true for me

#### When I memorize new words:

1. I pay attention to the structure of part of the word or all of it.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
2. I analyze words to identify the meaning of a part or several parts of them.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
3. I group the words according to the part of speech (e.g., nouns, verbs).  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
4. I associate the sound of the new word with the sound of a familiar word.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
5. I use rhyming to remember new words.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
6. I make a mental image of new words whose meaning can be expressed.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
7. I learn a new word by listing it along with other words related to it by topic.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
8. I write the new word in a meaningful sentence.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5
9. I practise new action verbs by acting them out.  
( ) 1            ( ) 2            ( ) 3            ( ) 4            ( ) 5

10. I have a system for using flash cards to learn new words.

1             2             3             4             5

**When I review vocabulary:**

11. I go over new words at first to make sure I know them.

1             2             3             4             5

12. I go back periodically to refresh my memory of words I learned earlier.

1             2             3             4             5

**When I try to recall vocabulary:**

13. I remind myself of a word meaning by first thinking of meaningful parts of the word (e.g., the prefix or the suffix).

1             2             3             4             5

14. I make an effort to remember the situation where I heard or saw the word, and if written, I remember the page or sign it was written on.

1             2             3             4             5

15. I visualize the spelling of the new word in my mind.

1             2             3             4             5

**When I use new vocabulary:**

16. I use words just learned in order to see if they work for me.

1             2             3             4             5

17. I use familiar words in different combinations to make new sentences.

1             2             3             4             5

18. I make a real effort to use idiomatic expressions in English.

1             2             3             4             5