

Low Achievers and Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This is a conceptual paper on low achievers and vocabulary learning strategies. The paper focuses on what vocabulary is, its importance, types of vocabulary learning strategies, low achievers and their vocabulary learning, the importance of explicit teaching of vocabulary learning strategies to low achievers and also studies done on them. Low achievers need to be made aware of the existence of these strategies and employ them in their learning. This is because they have less motivation to learn English as they are weak in this subject. Learners should also be taught on these strategies explicitly so that they are able to be autonomous in their learning. The knowledge on the strategies that they get will be helpful later in the work place as they will encounter various types of vocabulary that are related to their job. The paper ends with the conclusion and recommendations on ways to help low achievers to enhance their vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: *language learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategies, low achievers, explicit vocabulary teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a vital part of a language. In communication, when grammar rules are ignored, messages can still be conveyed. However, without vocabulary, messages are not conveyed. As Wilkins (1972) states, "...while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Therefore, learners need to have good vocabulary skills to help them communicate well. Vocabulary improves reading comprehension and is important to language development. Vocabulary also helps to communicate ideas, to express ideas in writing and it is for occupational success. The importance of vocabulary can be defined as "the words we must know to communicate effectively: words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary)," Neuman and Dwyer (2009). L2 learners need to acquire certain level of vocabulary knowledge to communicate effectively either in written or verbal form. Messages will be conveyed well when correct vocabulary is used. Failing to use correct and appropriate vocabulary may lead to misunderstanding in communication. Thornbury (2002) claims that one's knowledge on a word does not only relate to its dictionary meaning, but it also includes the pragmatic and semantic aspects of the word. In addition, he also mentions that a complete knowledge of a word includes:

- a) its written and spoken form,
- b) its meaning
- c) other words associated with it
- d) its sources
- e) how it is used in different contexts
- f) its frequency
- g) how it is used as a verb, noun, and also as an adverb
- h) its connotations

WHAT LEARNING A WORD MEANS?

Nation (2005) claims effective vocabulary teaching involves what needs to be taught about a word. This refers to the ‘learning burden of a word.’ The following table summarizes what learning burden is.

Table 1: Discovering Learning Burden

Meaning	Form and meaning Concept and referents Associations	Is the word a loan word in the L1? Is there an L1 word with roughly the same meaning? Does the word fit into the same sets as an L1 word of similar meaning?
Form	Spoken word Written form Word parts	Can the learners repeat the word accurately if they hear it? Can the learners write the word correctly if they hear it? Can the learners identify known affixes in the word?
Use	Grammatical functions Collocation Constraints on use	Does the word fit into predictable grammar patterns? Does the word have the same collocations as an L1 word of similar meaning? Does the word have the same restrictions on its use as an L1 word of similar meaning?

Therefore, when one encounters a word, one needs to consider what is involved in knowing a word. As what has been portrayed by Table 1, when learning a word, one should know its meaning, form and use.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

There are four types of vocabulary which include expressive, receptive, meaning (oral) and literate vocabulary (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). Expressive vocabulary refers to words used to express ourselves in our everyday conversation either in written or oral form. Receptive vocabulary on the other hand refers to words that we understand when we read or when we listen to something. Meaning (oral) vocabulary refers to the combination of listening and speaking vocabulary, while literate vocabulary refers to reading and writing.

Successful learners are those who understand 98% of the words they read in any reading passage (Schmitt, Jiang & Grabe, 2011). Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) claim that 95% of threshold is required to understand any text and 98% of threshold is necessary for learners to infer unknown words for adequate comprehension. In addition, learners who are rich in vocabulary tend to be better thinkers and decision makers as they can express themselves better. This is because of the knowledge and experience that they get through reading.

Besides, learners who have good and wide vocabulary are also good communicators. It is important to use the right vocabulary when communicating to ensure effective communication. Speaking inability is the result of deficiency of learners’ vocabulary knowledge (Raja Muhammad, Noor Raha, Muhammad

Shahbaz, Ainol Haryati & Ghulam, 2018). Having the ability to communicate well with wide range of vocabulary, helps learners in facing scholarship or job interviews. Besides, they can also perform in study related activities inside or outside classrooms.

Learners also need to use formal tone when writing as academic writing is different from a casual type of writing. To be able to express ideas well in any academic writing task, learners require a richer vocabulary since they need to include formal words which are not used in their daily conversation. Having rich vocabulary will help learners to be able to choose the appropriate words to write more effectively (Masoumeh Ropstami & Siros, 2017). In the workplace, an employee's vocabulary level is the best single predictor of his/her occupational success. Good communication skills increase employability and opportunities for career advancement (Ting, Ernisa, Chuah, Miseing & Jerome, 2017). This is because employers expect employees who are confident in their verbal and written communication where their messages can be easily understood by others especially their clients. Therefore, learners need to equip themselves with rich vocabulary to perform well in the workplace.

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Various scholars have given various definitions to vocabulary learning strategies. For example, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define vocabulary learning strategies as "special thoughts or behaviours that individual use to comprehend, learn or retain information." Oxford (1999) refers to vocabulary learning strategies as "...specific actions or behaviours accomplished by students to enhance learning." In addition, Gu (2005) states that vocabulary learning strategies are what learners use or adopt when they are confronted with any learning task. Besides, Rubin (1987) states that vocabulary learning strategies are what learners do in order to learn and to also manage their learning. Schmitt (1997) defines vocabulary learning strategies as the understanding of practices and strategies which are applied by learners in their vocabulary learning. Schmitt further stresses the fact that learners need to utilize the best practices like discovering the meaning of new words, memorizing them and later using them in their written or verbal activities. The strategies learners use will become useful when learners consciously choose the strategies that suit their learning styles. To summarize, vocabulary learning strategies are the learning styles that learners adopt to enhance their learning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

"Vocabulary-learning strategies are a part of language-learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies. In general, the findings of research on vocabulary-learning strategies agree with studies of more general language-learning strategy use" (Nation & Hunston, 2013; Fathiah Syahirah, 2017). In addition, learning styles and learning strategies are interrelated concepts because both are related to ways learners carry out their learning tasks (Dornyei, 2005). According to Reid (1995), learning styles are "...an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills". Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer and Bjork (2009) refer to learning styles as the ideas that learners differ in terms of what methods of instructions are effective to them.

Cohen (1998) defines learning strategies as "...learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner". A more comprehensive definition on learning strategies is from Oxford (1999) where she states that learning strategies are "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language". Vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies (Nation, 2001).

Learners need to acquire correct and suitable strategies in learning vocabulary. Recently, there has been a lot of research on the importance of vocabulary learning strategies. Learners need to be exposed to the different strategies of vocabulary learning. This is because these strategies help learners' English language acquisition (Astika, 2016). Vocabulary learning strategies need to be taught to learners as this helps them with "...the overall sense of proficiency in communication and understanding of content related topics for discussion and response" (Pawlicki, 2017). Time should be spent on exposing vocabulary learning strategies that learners can adopt in their learning as compared to spending time teaching on individual words. Therefore, students are helped to cope with vocabulary especially in reading when they are taught vocabulary learning strategies (Bai, 2018). Besides, multiple learning strategies should be adopted by learners as they are more helpful than an individual strategy in the EFL or ESL context (Letchumanan, Muthusamy, Govindasamy & Atieh, 2016).

TYPES OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

There are different classification systems of vocabulary learning strategies. Gu and Johnson (1996) have classified vocabulary learning strategies into metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation categories. Metacognitive strategies involve selective attention and self-initiation. By using selective attention, learners will know which words are important to them. Self-initiation involves learners' using variety of ways to ensure that vocabulary learning is clear. Cognitive strategies in Gu and Johnson (1996) taxonomy include guessing, using a dictionary and note taking. Memory strategies involve rehearsal (word lists and repetition) and encoding (association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, contextual encoding and word-structure) categories. Activation strategies involve learners' use of new words in different contexts. In addition, Oxford (1999) classifies vocabulary learning strategies as cognitive, memory and compensation strategies. These are known as direct learning strategies. Indirect learning strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Schmitt (2008) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies includes determination (guessing from background knowledge and linguistic clues), social (interaction with other people), memory (words learned can be integrated into existing knowledge), cognitive (involves general mental processing) and metacognitive (manage overall learning process; what needs to be done to achieve learning goals) strategies. Learners tend to employ different strategies when learning vocabulary. In conclusion, vocabulary learning strategies are the steps taken by learners to acquire and retain new English words.

LOW ACHIEVERS AND VOCABULARY LEARNING

Chakrabarty and Saha (2014) define low achievers as learners who fail to achieve certain required grades in their learning. According to them these low achievers are challenging to teach as they have difficulties mastering the productive and receptive skills in second language acquisition. Cheng (2014) outlines low achievers' characteristics as the following:

1. They do not perform well in their school.
2. They are unable to regulate their studies.
3. They have lack of self-discipline and motivation.
4. They have low level of self-efficacy.
5. These learners do not believe that they are able to overcome their learning difficulties.

Rubin (1975) pointed out "it is common knowledge that some people are more successful than others at learning a second language." Therefore, there are some students who fall in the category of low achievers in language learning because of their poor attendance to schools and poor performance in their assessments. They have disruptive behaviour, low self-esteem, family problems and are surrounded by poverty. Besides, the inappropriate curriculum and content of lessons that they encounter everyday may also contribute to the problem (Reis, 2000). This is due to the contents of the curriculum that may be too challenging for these poor learners who do not get enough assistance at home to help them in their learning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPLICIT TEACHING OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES TO LOW ACHIEVERS AND STUDIES DONE ON THEM

Many researchers believe that vocabulary learning strategies should be explicitly taught to learners (Hyso & Tabaku, 2011; Mirzai, 2012; Sökmen, 1997; SiBold, 2011) as they improve vocabulary skills for all learners (Nation, 2005; Wenden, 1986; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009; Tang, 2016). In addition, vocabulary which is known as the foundation of all language skills (Davy, 2014) requires more attention in the classroom because of its complexity (Schmitt, 2008). Explicit instruction of vocabulary also increases students' ability to construct meaning from words and this helps their overall reading comprehension (Pawlicki, 2017). Since vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies (Nation, 2001), the discussion on this paper will focus on these two.

Ellis (2008) defines explicit knowledge as intuitive, procedural, systematically variable, automatic, and thus available for use in fluent unplanned language use. It is not verbalizable. Implicit knowledge on the other hand is conscious, declarative, anomalous, and inconsistent (i.e. it takes a form of fuzzy rules inconsistently applied) and generally accessible through control processing in planned language use. It is verbalizable and like any type of factual knowledge, it is potentially learnable at any age.

Learners may acquire vocabulary through incidental or direct instruction. Incidental vocabulary acquisition happens through learners' conscious or unconscious use of contextual clues when they study on their own during reading and listening tasks. This type of vocabulary acquisition is common among high achievers or proficient learners with strong reading skills. Another type of vocabulary acquisition is through direct instruction or also known as explicit teaching. Low achievers need to be helped with direct instruction since they have poor vocabulary. Direct teaching is known to be more efficient among low achievers who are lack of independent reading and therefore are unable to use contextual clues to infer meaning of words (Hunt & Beglar, 1998). These learners might skip unknown words they encounter, and in the end, they give up in their reading. As a result, their vocabulary knowledge will not be improved.

There are several studies on explicit vocabulary teaching done various types of learners. Kobayashi and Little (2018), in their study of 68 students in Japan to examine the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategy instruction to learn biology terms, found that both students with smaller and larger vocabulary size were satisfied with the explicit teaching of vocabulary. They focused their study on memory strategies that include imagery, association, grouping and the use of affixes. Majority of the respondents in their study claimed that they were satisfied with the instruction they received and found it useful. They would also use the strategies again in the future to help them with their vocabulary learning particularly the affix strategy.

Longhurst (2013) claims that instructors cannot only rely on a genuine form of communicative language teaching (CLT) for learners to achieve higher ability levels. However, focused vocabulary teaching that involves classroom activities is also important. He further claims that explicit teaching is needed to support communicative activities or other tasks as this increases learners' vocabulary acquisition effectively.

In many EFL or L2 classrooms, learners are usually put together regardless of their English language achievement and performance (Kabilan & Raja Ida, 2008). Therefore, low achievers need to be given more attention in their EFL or L2 learning as they need more motivation compared to their friends who are high achievers. Low achievers usually do not read a lot and because of this they have lack of vocabulary and have difficulties expressing themselves in L2. These learners need to be taught in depth on key words so that they will not face difficulties in comprehending texts read (Hanson & Padua, 2014). Low achievers usually employ less language learning strategies as compared to high achievers (Javed & Ali, 2018; Rajak & Rashidah, 2004; Porte, 1988; Vann & Abraham, 1990). In addition, Javed and Ali (2018) in their study on 300 ESL students, discovered that female used more strategies than male. Moreover, Rajak and Rashidah (2004) found that low achievers from the rural schools in Selangor in Malaysia were not aware of the language learning strategies and they were not really interested in English language lessons. Learning strategies should be taught to learners so that they are able to become autonomous in their language learning.

Samperio (2019) in his study on high and low achievers on their language learning strategies found out that both learners use similar types of strategy. However, time they spent to study differ. High achievers spent time in a more effective way. They also monitor their own performance based on the practices done. Boggu and Sundarsingh (2014) employed Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to investigate language learning strategies among low achievers. Their finding shows that low achievers used compensation and memory strategies more frequently. They seldom used cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies. According to Tang (2015), high and low achievers vary in terms of their metacognitive strategy as high achievers are more pro-active towards their usage of metacognitive strategy. As compared to the low achievers, these high achievers were pro-active in regulating their language learning. Tang (2015) further suggested that metacognitive strategy training programme for low achievers would benefit them greatly in order to improve their language learning.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous research done on vocabulary learning strategies, it can be concluded that all EFL or L2 learners employ some strategies in their vocabulary learning. However, high achievers employ more strategies and are wiser in regulating and monitoring their vocabulary learning. Thus, low achievers need to be introduced, guided and trained more on vocabulary learning strategies as to help them comprehend the information that they get in order to survive during their university years and their work place later as English is the global language. Instructors also need to have the required skills in order to arouse learners' awareness in learning English vocabulary. Learners also need to have their own willingness to cooperate otherwise learning will not take place. It is hard to survive in the work place when one is not proficient in English. Further research might include areas of collaborative vocabulary learning strategies and receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge.

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