



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact factor: 6.078

(Volume 6, Issue 2)

Available online at: www.ijariit.com

The effective vocabulary learning strategies employed by ESL learners in rural setting

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) is formulated to ensure every child acquire the linguistic knowledge and communicative skills adequately to compete in the modernized arena. In the Malaysian context, 21st century learning strategy has been given the utmost importance in the educational system as it is a platform to have students to become proficient users of the second language. However, the lexical knowledge among the Malaysian students is at unsatisfactory level whereby the vocabulary learning strategies has not been prioritized in the learning process. This study is intended to unveil the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies that students can employ to enhance their lexical knowledge. To achieve the aims of the study, a simplified questionnaire was used to retrieve the quantitative data. Approximately 61 pupils from the Chinese vernacular schools in Sungkai, Perak with satisfactory language proficiency from the rural primary schools in Batang Padang District were selected as participation in this study. The findings of the study indicated that vary preferred learning strategies has been employed in learning of vocabulary. The number of students represented by the percentages showed significant increase that portrayed students admit of learning vocabulary. As a conclusion, Nation (2001) emphasized on noticing the words to be learnt would be a preferred strategy simply by jotting the words down in the notebook or word card and constantly repeating the words for deeper understanding of the words.

Keywords— Learning strategies, Linguistic knowledge, Communicative skills, Lexical knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian education system has taken serious measures in revamping the curriculum gradually of which the utmost importance to the second language acquisition to create students who are least operationally competent users of the targeted language. Therefore, comprehending and communicative skills are essential and highly recommendable in the current education system of which in order to compete globally the 21st century as state by (Yuen, 2015).

Acquiring lexical knowledge is a fundamental aspect in language acquisition. Alderson (2005, p.88) concluded that linguistics ability solely relies on adequate vocabulary learnt throughout the process of acquiring the second language. In contrary, vocabulary acquisition is the contributing factor that challenges students' performance in learning of the second language especially in the traditional classroom with limited exposure of the language as stated by (Green&Meara,1995). Literally, every learning process requires sustainable language learning-based strategies to achieve the desired language mastery.

1.1 Research Problem

Primarily, the English Language syllabus has been altered to suit the learners' capability in grasping the language skills that ought to be mastered after schooling years. Kashefien-Naeeni and Maarof (2010) stated that language practitioners were not entirely aware of the effective language learning strategies used the learners. In contrary, learners were pressurized to acquire the linguistic knowledge through the preferred strategy introduced by the language practitioners that might not be applicable for learners who fell under the category of slow learners. The lexical knowledge of the learners in the Malaysian primary schools is tested in Primary School Achievement Test or known as UPSR which falls under the comprehension paper. Consequently, language practitioners failed to incorporate vary learning strategies that could be embedded through language-based practices to further consolidate learners' comprehending skill and vocabulary sizes. Language practitioners noted that most learners' lexical knowledge has been decreasing gradually and resulted to difficulties in expressing their thoughts and poor academic performances as stated by Adam (2013). Vocabulary acquisition through vary learning strategies should be exploited thoroughly to address the issue highlighted as to ensure learners emulate the maximum number of vocabularies. This study is intended to investigate the best practices/vocabulary learning strategy that can be adopted by the learners to become proficient of the second language.

Understandably, learners from the rural setting are only bound to specific hours of English lesson in a week of which contributed to the poor language acquisition amongst the learners thus impacting their perspective on language awareness

1.2 The purpose of the study

The aim of the study is to rectify learners' preference of vocabulary learning strategies that suit their competency in order to acquire lexis. In line with the study, the researcher has formulated two research questions to be addressed.

1.3 Research Question

What is the preferred vocabulary strategy used by the students in the rural school to enrich their vocabulary?

1.4 Research Objectives

The objective of the study is to investigate the preferred vocabulary strategy used by the students in the rural school to enrich their vocabulary.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary acquisition is the fundamental of all the language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Schmitt (2000) emphasized that lexical knowledge is the contributing factor to effective communicative competence and further acquisition of the second language. A learner with an inadequate lexical knowledge would definitely have difficulties in conveying his or her thoughts, read, write or comprehending the language. In the second language acquisition, lexical knowledge plays a significant role in receptive and productive skills as well as the social skills. Nation (2001) further explained the relationship between lexical knowledge and the primary uses of the language; lexical knowledge poses by the learners enable them to communicate expressively thus increases the knowledge on unknown vocabulary. Vocabulary is also interrelated to language skill; reading as stated by Matsuoka and Hirsh (2010). Learners with insufficient vocabulary sizes would probably not be good readers. In contrary, having a strong foundation of vocabulary sizes is a key component of reading comprehension by which helps learners to become good language learners who would strive to acquire the second language in order to enhance literacy skills. On the other hand, Mondria and Mondria-De Vries, 1994 stated that visual assisted learning would be a prominent strategy that caters to learners' visual recognition and learnability of lexical item in a wide range of contexts. Nagy, 1997 also stressed on the probability of a learner to master up to 1000 words in a year from written materials. Lexical acquisition amongst ESL should be made in a simplicity and immersed language environment as learners would be held responsible for their learning process thus readiness in expanding lexis size.

2.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies means preferred methods adopted by the learners to retain their lexical knowledge. Nation (1980) most learners' issues in both receptive and productive practice of vocabulary appear to be insufficient learning of lexical knowledge.

Hedge (2000) asserted that acquiring lexical knowledge would be a tactical approach to further enhance the second language acquisition and be able to manipulate the vocabulary learnt extensively in the language-based production. As Hedge (2000) proposed that language practitioners should give emphasis on detailed definition of the unfamiliar vocabulary whereby it is crucial for language practitioners to mould learners to become independent in building up vocabulary sizes thus teaching them the effective strategies to tackle the nuances of the language and vocabulary. In the 21st century classroom, vocabulary learning strategies is incorporated in the teaching and learning process to ensure learners' self-taught autonomously. Harmer (1991) asserted that second language learners should be accustomed to the specifics of the strategies of which suit their learning preferences. On the other hand, Oxford (1990) stressed that self-efficacy possessed by the language learners enable them to strive for betterment in terms language proficiency.

2.3 Categorization of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Eleni G., Stavros K., Athina G., (2009) highlighted that according to Ruutemets (2005) vocabulary learning strategies represent preferred methods used in order to gain the meanings of unknown vocabulary, through memorization techniques, learners can retain them as well as recalling the memorized vocabulary when needed in reading comprehension and utilizing them in language-based production. The phases mentioned above relate to the strategies that can be adopted by learners in vocabulary acquisition namely the discovery and consolidation strategies.

Discovery strategies are employed to explore newer lexical and their meanings as stated by Schmitt N., (2000) Learners' preferences in enriching their vocabulary sizes would be through repetitive strategies that happen to be the most identifiable strategies in the form of memorizing, repetition and note-taking. To get familiarised with newer content words and lexical, learners might have to explore the meanings through peer learning in the classroom whereby learners can work collaboratively in language-based activities and production to acquire the lexical knowledge thus increasing the vocabulary sizes.

Schmitt (2000) stated that consolidation strategies are employed to reinforce and recall a vocabulary that has been introduced. These strategies are namely inference, imagery, active manipulation and key-word techniques which are applicable in vocabulary acquisition of which successful language learners could adopt and suit accordingly to their learning preferences, style and level of proficiency. Schmitt added that learners would acquire the meaning of a new vocabulary simply by the aid of dictionary or through social strategy of which learners can seek for assistance from their peers and teachers to attain the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary. Apart from that, memory strategies have been found as an effective method in remembering and retrieving the prior

lexical knowledge with unfamiliar vocabulary and illustrations as asserted by Levin, (1993), Mastropieri, Scruggs & Fulk, (1990). In continuity to consolidation strategy, metacognitive strategies refer to method that requires planning for learning, thinking about the learning process, thinking about one’s language-based production or comprehension and evaluation the learning process upon completing the task-based learning whereby cognitive strategies imply to specific task-based learning that manipulates the resources in learning process in other words it is a mental strategies to make sense of their learning thus helps to reinforce the lexical knowledge and

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is attempted to investigate upper primary students’ preferred vocabulary learning strategies in second language acquisition especially in acquiring lexical knowledge. It is a quantitative investigation that integrates descriptive and analytical method for data collection and analysis.

3.1 Sample

This study was conducted in one of the 78 Chinese vernacular primary schools in Batang Padang, Perak. The researcher employed the non-probability sampling technique as it would allow the researcher to select the respondents based on his judgement prior to respondent’s language competency. The research required an equal number of respondents from the upper primary which comprised of 61 students. Ultimately, the researcher would retrieve a reliable tabulated data in accordance to the objectives of the study. The selection of the respondents was also based on respondents’ prior test scores from the mid-term assessment. Ten respondents from both the lower ranked and higher ranked grades were selected. To be specific, the lower ranked grades would be ‘C’ and ‘D’ whereby the higher ranked grades would be ‘A’ and ‘B’. A total of 61 students were asked to complete the questionnaires that comprises 37 items of which represent statements based on the learning strategies namely discovery and consolidating strategies.

3.2 Instrument

Based on Schmitt’s taxonomy, approximately 37 items were generated to test respondents’ preferences on vocabulary learning strategies. The questionnaire comprises two major strategies that would be employed by the learners to acquire lexical knowledge.

3.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to the students in the upper primary during the English hour. The students were guided to complete the questionnaire of which comprise two major categories of vocabulary learning strategies namely the discovery and consolidation strategies. This questionnaire was adopted based on the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by Schmitt (1997).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The completed questionnaires of all the respondents were analysed with the aid SPSS programme of which computerized data analysis were run to produce descriptive statistics on frequency and percentages that represent the frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by respondents.

4.1 Findings and Discussion

The questionnaires were analysed accordingly to learners’ responses based on the themes/strategies generated to suit learners’ preferred learning style and language fluency. To interpret the findings of which represents learners’ responses based on the questionnaire, strategy statements have been classified in accordance to the vocabulary learning strategies namely discovery and consolidating strategies as asserted by Li & Zhang (2011).

Strategies frequently used by learners in acquiring lexical knowledge.

Table 1 : Metacognitive Strategy

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never
I use English media like songs, movies and newspapers.	4 (6.6%)	42 (68.9%)	15 (24.6%)
I learn words with lists.	1 (1.6%)	28 (45.9%)	32 (52.5%)
I continue to study the new words over time.	4 (6.6%)	47 (77%)	10 (16.4%)
I skip new words.	3 (4.9%)	23 (37.7%)	35 (57.4%)

In table 1, the most favored strategy employed by both higher ranked and lower ranked learners would fall under the category of discovery strategy whereby learners were prone in learning newer lexis over time/periodically. A total of 47respondents (77%) preferred vocabulary learning strategy that would aid them to get grasped of newer lexis through an immersed language learning environment. According to the researcher, most learners preferred this specific strategy to aid them to expand the lexical knowledge thus awaken their interest in learning L2 lexis. Nation claimed that learning through guessing the meanings of word from the context is the most essential strategy of all the other vocabulary learning strategies. He added that the Incidental Learning Theory was aimed to help learners develop lexical knowledge subconsciously while be actively participating in language-based activities, particularly reading and listening. On the other hand, a total of 42(68.9%) respondents believe that visual aids assisted learning helps in expanding their prior knowledge on lexis based on the availability of these resources. As proposed by Oxford,

1990 that self-efficacy possessed by learners enables them to strive for the betterment in relations to language proficiency and lexical knowledge.

Cognitive Strategy

Table 2 : Cognitive Strategy

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never
I label physical objects in English.	2 (3.3%)	29 (47.5%)	30 (49.2%)
I listen to the tapes of vocabulary lists.	1 (1.6%)	27 (44.3%)	33 (54.1%)
I keep vocabulary notebook.	51 (83.6%)	8 (13.1%)	2 (3.3%)

In contrary to the strategy above, a total of 51 respondents (83.6%) preferred a vocabulary learning strategy that consider learners to jot the lexis learnt over time. The jotting process not only strengthens learners’ prior lexical knowledge, recalling the content-word jotted in the notebook. One of the prevailing factors that attributes to learners’ self-improvement and word attack skills. According to the researcher, reciting the word would actually remain in ones mind. and learners may or may not aware of the lexis till they have acquired them. Instead learners who find jotting the word in notebook and learning the word through transition of meanings would probably help them to expand the word sizes and better understanding if they were to use and conjugate in context.

Memory Strategy

Table 3 : Memory Strategy

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never
I group the words by types. (noun, verb, adjective)	1 (1.6%)	40 (65.6%)	20 (32.8%)
I visualize the new words in my mind.	12 (19.7%)	33 (54.1%)	16 (26.2%)
I write the words on cards.	1 (1.6%)	16 (26.2%)	44 (72.1%)
I use the new words in sentences.	9 (14.8%)	43 (70.5%)	9 (14.8%)

Table 3 demonstrate, the most prioritized strategy employed by the learners would be, writing the lexis on cards. The strategy not only reinforce learners’ memorization of content-word, be able to utilize these lexes in context. A total of 44 respondents (72.1%) learners chose to write the lexis on card of which consolidates learners’ lexical knowledge. As asserted by Nation, 2000: 297, that a learner jot the foreign word a side of a small card and its translation(L1) on the other. Vocabulary size is closely correlated to general English proficiency. So, memorization of the lexis would probably be useful when it is clustered with other main strategies. Mondria and Mondria-De Vries, 1994 stated that memorizing words with the aid of flashcards would be rather effective than learning from lists/glossary. In line with the statement, flashcards or cards allow leaners to retrieve and reinforce words learnt periodically. Likewise, a total of 43 respondents (70.5%) chose to use the new lexis in sentence construction. Namely, lower proficiency learners would accustom to phonological learning strategy to acquire low frequency lexis whereby the high proficiency learners would be opting for sematic extension.

Determination Strategy

Table 4: Determination Strategy

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never
I guess the meaning of new word from textual context.	8 (13.1%)	18 (29.5%)	35 (57.4%)
I use English dictionary to find the meaning of the new word.	16 (26.2%)	22 (36.1%)	23 (37.7%)
I use bilingual dictionary to find the meaning of the new word.	14 (23%)	45 (73.8%)	2 (3.3%)
I study the parts of speech of the new word.	6 (20%)	10 (33.3%)	11 (36.7%)
I study the affixes and the roots of the new word.	2 (3.3%)	36 (59%)	23 (37.7%)

In table 4, a total of 45(73.8%) respondents both representing the higher ranked and lower ranked preferred using bilingual dictionary to acquire the meanings of unfamiliar lexis. Learners with a moderate level of proficiency rather obtain the translated version of the content-word in L1 for easy access and quick compared to the monolingual dictionary whereby the content-words are comprehended in-depth for better understanding and usage in context. According to Nation 2001:27, knowing a new vocabulary involves knowing the word form and its meaning as well as usage of lexis learnt in context. Fraser, 1999 also studied how L2 learners used three lexical processing strategies like inferencing from context, looking up for meanings and ignoring unfamiliar words. She found that consulting dictionaries would probably be the most effective strategy in increasing vocabulary size. (new lexis).

Table 5 : Social Strategy

Questions	Always	Sometimes	Never
I ask my peers for meaning of the new word.	20 (32.8%)	40 (65.6%)	1 (1.6%)
I ask my teacher to translate in L1.	16 (26.2%)	26 (42.6%)	19 (31.1%)
I ask my teacher to construct a sentence using the new word.	7 (11.5%)	22 (36.1%)	32 (52.5%)
I learn and practice the new word in group-based activities.	4 (6.6%)	48 (78.7%)	9 (14.8%)

In table 5, social strategy falls under the category of discovery strategy whereby a total of 48 respondents (78.7%) would rather acquire the lexis through collaborative group-based-activities. Learners' could be seen keen to learn the content-of unfamiliar lexis and not forgetting increasing the lexis size. Learning vocabulary that emphasize on sources for instance would aid learners to get grasped of the preferable lexis that might be handy when comes to writing or speaking. Learners may want to analyze the parts of speech for example the stems of the word and checking for their meaning through the contextualize clues would be the righteous technique to be applied during the process of collaborative based-activities. By doing so, learners could communicate with their peers to pick up more lexis and their meanings as communicative skills are one of the most prevailing factors to enhance learners' competency level and the righteous way to get them practice conveying what they have learnt.

4.2 Discovery Strategies

Based on Table 1, the most frequently preferred learning strategies that reveal learners' experience in vocabulary acquisition. Discovery strategies were found to be the most preferred strategies employed by the learners to acquire lexical knowledge. As stated by Schmitt (2000) discovery strategies would be the most tended strategy to explore the newer vocabulary and their definitions. The result of the study showed that learners preferred using bilingual dictionary (73.8%) to define the unknown words in L1 translation. However, finding the attractiveness use of the bilingual dictionary among the learners would not be useful source of enhancing the vocabulary sizes which was debated by Brown (2000, p.377). Social interaction and collaborative group-based activities (78.7%) were found to be one of the prioritised strategies that learners inquire for the meanings of the vocabulary. To get familiarised with the content-word and new vocabulary, experience learners who possess moderate level of proficiency rather interact with his or her peers to attain the meanings of unknown vocabulary as shown in the table, portray the self-efficacy of the learners to acquire the desired mastery of the language and vocabulary sizes.

4.3 Consolidation Strategies

The most frequently employed strategies to consolidate learners' lexical knowledge would be the cognitive approach of which learners have found it effective in vocabulary acquisition. Preferably learners would employ strategies that cater for their innate abilities of language as well as their learning styles. As shown in table, learner' response on cognitive strategy; studying (83.1%) has proven to aid learners to increase the vocabulary sizes gradually as learners could recall the learnt content-word and vocabulary. A total of 47 respondents (77%) chose the meta-cognitive strategy that employ a strategy of which learners study the lexis over time. Repeatedly writing the gained vocabulary would probably be the preferred strategy that learners employ in enhancement of prior knowledge on vocabulary. To sum up Schmitt (2000) reaffirmed that consolidation strategies does improve learners' vocabulary sizes by reinforcing and recalling back the vocabulary introduced. And according to Nagy, 1997 a low proficiency learner can learn to recognize up 1000 lexis in a year from a written material. Learners' lexical acquisition can be expanded through various comprehensible input if they are exposed to an immersed language environment and contexts.

Consequently, learners; perception on vocabulary learning could be seen as more learnt and inborn. Learners would probably retain the learnt lexis in order to enhance their linguistic competence and performance as well. Going through the lexis occasionally does strengthen their metacognitive abilities of which aid learners to regulate their behavior to optimize learning as shown in the table; 67% agreed that they favoured this strategy for its exceptional result as it enhanced their vocabulary sizes periodically.

5. LIMITATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, learners of the second language were not familiarized with the vary vocabulary learning strategies that would literally aid learners' language learning efficiency and vocabulary sizes as well. As a good language learner, he or she should probably employ proper strategies that suit his or her innate ability of language and finally would lead to accurate language acquisition. Another prevailing aspect that contributes to poor vocabulary acquisition would be learners' behaviourism. According to Sewell (2003) the interest in language learning strategies especially in acquiring lexical knowledge, learners' understanding and desire to become a good language learner of which would emphasises the traits of language learner in the process of learning. Thus, to meet the standards of language acquisition, learners ought to adopt the characteristics of good language learners towards successful learning.

In Malaysian schools, vocabulary is not taught explicitly. Language practitioners might not be well-equipped with the vary strategies of learning language. This study is intended to educate language practitioners of classified strategies to be utilized to further improvise language learners' competency and lexical knowledge without making any radical changes.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, here are the following recommendations that could embed the current trends in teaching language and strategies to be utilized in enhancing learners' prior lexical knowledge towards successful acquisition.

- Language practitioners should adhere to the best practises in language learning and strategies that they should adopt in educating the newer generation on language awareness and becoming competent users of the targeted language as well be able to compete locally or in the nationalized regions.
- Learners should also give the utmost importance in adopting proper language learning strategies that could be oriented in enhancement of communicative competency.
- Lexical knowledge assessment should be implemented to test learners' knowledge on the content and vocabulary sizes in accordance to the strategies employed in vocabulary acquisition of which reflects on their proper practises that facilitated in knowledge enhancement and the ability to understand difficult content-word and vocabulary as well.
- Classroom based assessment should be improvised not only focusing on the language skills that one must acquire in order to be a competent user of the targeted language, geared towards learners' preferred learning strategy in language acquisition in general thus consolidating learners' prior knowledge and word

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to assess learners' preferred vocabulary learning strategies of which learners employed in vocabulary acquisition. Apart from that, this study provides adequate information and understanding of the types of strategies learners adopt to further enhance their prior lexical knowledge. Ghani (2003) asserted that learners should be encouraged to learn and adopt vary language learning strategies especially in vocabulary acquisition as it is believed that learners would probably know the suitability of the language learning strategies to be employed in learning language. In this study, the concept of vocabulary learning strategies reflected the notion of a good language learner who happened to employ the appropriate vocabulary learning strategies that lead to accurate acquisition. Thus language practitioners should be upskilled or undergo intensified professionalism training that incorporates language training and development in order for language practitioners acquire the newest strategies/ methodologies in teaching ESL.

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