

## Examining the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies among EFL Learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan

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### Abstract

Vocabulary learning is one of the problems in language learning skills. Tackling such problems is to provide useful and effective strategies for enhancing students' VLSs. Therefore, this study aims to survey vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) utilized among English as a Foreign Language learners (EFL) in Baghlan University of Afghanistan, and to study the high and least frequently used VLSs that contributes to the learners' vocabulary knowledge. This study utilizes a descriptive quantitative research method with 67 EFL learners who participated in the survey questionnaire adopted from Oxford (1990) taxonomy of VLS from different faculties of Baghlan University. The findings indicated that EFL learners preferably utilize VLSs at a medium level, and the highly used vocabulary learning strategies are the social strategies through which they ask the native speakers, teachers, and classmates for the meanings of new words in English language conversation. Determination, cognitive, and memory strategies are respectively followed by the learners. Whereas, metacognitive strategies are the least used strategies among EFL learners, the reason is that they only focus on the materials related to examination; explore anything about the new words for learning, and rarely think of their improvement in vocabulary learning.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Social Strategies, Metacognitive Strategies, EFL Learners.

### 1. Introduction

This study is intended at investigating the highly preferred, and the least frequently utilized vocabulary learning strategies among EFL learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan. Fortunately, there are equal educational opportunities from family and equal learning environment for both male and female university students of Afghanistan particularly while learning any foreign language (Stanikzai, 2020). and English language has become one of the leading languages in world. The English language is also prominent as a foreign language in Afghanistan and the priority is given to those have strong authority of over their spoken and written language. In addition, to be mastered in English language skills, every student has to strive to enrich their vocabulary. As a sub-category of vocabulary has been staged a less significant element while acquiring L2 or foreign language for the last many years (Carter, 2011). Vocabulary a word described as a sound or a group of sounds or its representation in writing or printing that symbolizes and communicates meaning. For enriching vocabulary, it is essential to acquire its register, correlation, collocation, grammatical features, written and spoken forms, and frequency. These features are called word knowledge (Schmitt, 2000: 5). During the past decade, vocabulary importance became apparent, mainly when

Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2001) and others have found that vocabulary learning is essential for successful second or Foreign language usage and plays an

essential role in the formation of complete spoken as well as written texts. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary learning plays a vital role in learning L2 as a foreign language

The taxonomy of the current study is based on Oxford (1990) where the LLSs are classified into direct strategies such as memory, cognitive, and compensation and indirect strategies for instance, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Schmitt extracted VLSs from Oxford's taxonomy of LLS and further categorized them into social strategies that involve collaboration with others, cognitive strategies referring to language use, or change. Metacognitive strategies control the acquiring process and memory strategies entailing the correlation of new words with the first learned words. VLSs are the following discussed below.

There are four options in determination strategies that promote understanding of vocabulary knowledge, for example, to guess from a first or second language related, to guess from context, to use reference materials, to ask someone else. The mentioned options enable. The mentioned options enable students to know the new parts of speech (Oxford, 2003). Furthermore, determination strategies include some techniques which help learners to improve their vocabulary, namely, using a dictionary, guessing from context, analyzing word parts, and constituent elements.

A social strategy is a form of social behavior that includes communication, and communication occurs between and among people. Social strategies help learners to enhance their vocabulary learning, for instance, asking the teacher about the meaning of the unknown word. Such a technique is used among some students because they believe more on their instructors more than their mates, and this is a kind of communication which motivate, encourage, and make learners active (Oxford, 1990).

Memory strategies include repetition, memorizing, and retrieving. Students use linking words, use vocabulary knowledge, word lists, and imitating. In the memory strategy, learners use images to remember the meaning of new words (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 50). In other words, Memory strategies are a set of techniques that are designed to help students to remember, store, and retrieve acquired information.

According to Oxford (1990), cognitive strategies include guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries, and note-taking strategies. The subcategories of the practice of strategies are repetition, recognizing patterns, and recombining. Furthermore, Milton (2011), mentioned that cognitive strategies cover repetition, taking notes, using flashcards, and keeping vocabulary notebooks to help learners to improve their vocabulary. Repetition helps learners keep the thing in their short term memory, and use repetition to remember something that is not written down.

Metacognitive strategies are also among vocabulary learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), metacognitive means beyond, besides, or with cognitive. Therefore, metacognitive strategies are such actions which are beyond cognitive and provide ways for learners in coordinating their learning process. Chamot (1990), added that metacognitive strategies also embrace monitoring, decision-making, and assessment. Monitoring is being aware of what one is doing or bringing one's mental process under conscious scrutiny and thus more effective under control. At the same time, decision making entails deciding which word is worth studying and which words are not as well as preserving with the terms learners choose to learn (Schmitt, 2000). Thus, this study aimed to examine, preferably, the most and least used strategies among EFL learners Baghlan University of Afghanistan. Notably, the purpose is the answer to the following questions:

- What is the vocabulary learning strategies used among (EFL) learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan?
- What are the preferred/frequently vocabulary learning strategies used among (EFL) learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan?
- What is the least used vocabulary learning strategies used among (EFL) learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan?

### ***1.1 Empirical Studies on VLSs***

A study carried out by Mutalib, Kadir, Robani, and Majid (2014) on Malaysian TEVT students in German-Malaysian Institute (GMI), they found that most of the students considered vocabulary learning essential. However, they did engage practically engaged themselves in empowering their vocabulary strategies. Alharti in 2014 steered an investigation on EFL learners to explore the role of VLSs in learners' word erosions, and he resulted in the decisive role of VLSs among the participants. He also found that the utility of repetition learning, for example, repeating an English element with its Arabic translation, preceded to grinding their receptive knowledge down. In contrast, notetaking strategies entailing writing English elements with its synonym and definition exposed as a positive indicator of students' focus in their reception and productive vocabulary knowledge.

In addition, a survey on VLSs as a case study on Iranian EFL university learners in by Amirian & Heshmatifar (2013), the resulted indicate that the most frequently used strategies are determination, cognitive, memory and metacognitive and social strategies respectively. Cengizhan (2011) conducted a case study research on

Edirne Anotolian high school students in Turkey, it is resulted that metacognitive cognitive strategies was highly utilized one and cognitive strategies was the least frequent VLSs. Male student preferred metacognitive excessively, and female students preferred the determination strategies remarkably. According to Kaya and Congo (2014) who conducted a study on Congolese English language learner, the findings revealed that the students favored three types of strategies namely, contextual guessing, dictionary (determination) use and pronunciation strategies in number.

A study conducted by Baskin, Iscan, Karagoz, and Birol (2017) on students in Gaziosmanpasa University. It was discovered that the highly utilized VLSs was the determination strategies, the reason for this is that the learners are at A1 level in which they just began learning the language that's they use determination strategies. In line with this, Celik and Toptas (2010) revealed in their study that degree of VLSs was favored by the respondents and the highly and least used strategies were the determination and cognitive strategies respectively. Furthermore, Pookcharoen (2017) investigate that determination strategies including guessing from textual context, monolingual dictionary, and parts of speech analyzation the top five strategy used among the students. According to Omaar (2016) who conducted a research among EFL learner sin Tuareg student in Libaya, he discovered that student were using a vast range of VLSs to associate the meaning of English vocabulary. Furthermore, EFL learners mostly and preferably used determination and social strategies when pursuing English language learning. Maghsoudi, and Golshan, (2017) indicated in their meta-analysis of EFL learners' VLS in Iran. They found that the most often used VLSs was the metacognitive and the least often one was social strategy. A study conducted by Bernardo, Gonzales, and Philippine (2009) on Filipino college on five disciplines, students mostly used determination and social VLSs when learning English language.

Memory strategy entails correlation of grasped words in some proudly acquired knowledge, some form of imagery, or making group (Huong, 2018). Yazdi and Kafipour (2014) carried out to investigate the real utility of VLSs among Iranian EFL learner. It was revealed that the frequently used VLSs was the memory strategies, and the least was the cognitive strategies among the participants with a high direct preference, simple strategies requiring the leas mental struggles. Furthermore, Nematollahi, Behjat, and Kargar (2017) established a meta-analysis of 30 research papers on the usefulness of VLSs for EFL learners was used in which the cognitive strategy was ranked in second level by the respondents. Çelik & Toptas, (2010), in their research, indicated that the cognitive strategies were the least frequently used strategy by the learners.

Safian, N. H., Malakar, S., & Kalajahi, S. A. R. (2014) resulted in their research that the most utilized VLSs was the metacognitive strategies by the TESL undergraduate students at Universiti Putra Malaysia. They further discussed, this might be because university learner can be well in planning, monitoring their learning process, and might greater reader. Nacera, A. Algeria (2010) indicated that the most utilized VLSs was the metacognitive strategies, in which students usually uses higher vocabulary size for instance, using English in various ways and summarizing.

## 2. Research Methodology

This research is based on descriptive quantitative research design to explore the most and least frequent used vocabulary learning strategy among EFL learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan. 67 EFL learners were conveniently sampled from various faculties in Baghlan University of Afghanistan. The questionnaire was distributed among 67 respondents via Google Form which was based on Oxford (1990) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies with .82 Cronbach Alpha which is considered as a high reliability. The questionnaire comprises 28-item with a 5-type scale, ranging from 5 always, 4 often, 3 sometimes, 2 rarely, and 1 never. In addition, the level of frequency is considered high if the mean score is above 3.5 and is considered low if the mean score is below 2.4 while the score ranging between the two means is seen as at medium level (Schmitt, 1997; Oxford, 1990). The collected data is descriptively analyzed using Social Sciences Package Software (SPSS) and data is interpreted and described through tables, mean, standard deviation, and percentage.

## 3. Findings/ Discussion

This study aims at exploring the highly and least frequently utilized VLSs among EFL learners at Baghlan University of Afghanistan. The data gathered from questionnaire about the demographic information of the current study. Based on Table 1 most of the participants are male 89 (88.1%) and 8 of them are female equal to (11.9%) and table 1 indicates that most of the respondents are aging from 16-24 (62%), followed by 25-30 (22%), while 22 (12%) of them are above 30 years old.

Table 1. Gender and Age

Category	Frequency	Percent
Male	59	88.1
Female	8	11.9
Total	67	100.0
Age		
16-24	15	62.4
25-30	30	22.8
Above 31	22	12.8
Total	67	100.0

### 3.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategy by the Participants

According to Oxford (1990), VLSs are sub-classified into five main categories: social, determination, cognitive, memory, and metacognitive strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies have gained popularity among many researchers who have attempted to define and classify VLSs which are specific thoughts and behaviors that students utilize them to understand, learn or grab information (O'Malley & Chamot (1990), p. 1; Oxford (1990, p. 11).

Table 2. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Strategies	N	Mean	Frequency	Category
Social Strategy	67	3.36	67.2%	Medium
Determination Strategy	67	2.89	57.8%	Medium
Cognitive Strategy	67	2.82	56.4%	Medium
Memory Strategy	67	2.60	52.0%	Medium
Metacognitive Strategy	67	2.58	51.6%	Medium

As it can be seen in the table above that the overall used vocabulary learning strategies among EFL learners in Baghlan University is depicted as medium level. The highly preferred VLSs is the social strategy among the learners with a highest mean 3.36 (67.2%), followed by determination strategies with a mean 2.89 (57.8%). In line with this finding, Bernardo and Gonzales (2009) revealed that learners displayed a significant variation in their process of acquiring English vocabulary across all disciplines. It emerged that Philippine learners demonstrate an overall preference for determination and social VLSs. Whereas, the least used vocabulary learning strategies is the metacognitive with a mean 2.58 (51.6%), which resembles a research conducted by Kaya (2014), he resulted that the least frequent used strategies by Congolese learners as the meta-cognitive strategies. Besides, The Turkish used the determination strategies most frequently and the cognitive strategies were the least frequently employed strategies by them (Çelik & Toptas, 2010). Their findings regarding the least employed strategy are consistent with Cengizhan's (2011) research; he also found the cognitive strategies to be the least frequently used in the Turkish context

### 3.2 Social Strategies

Social strategies are the set of approaches are used to enable learners as active participants in class through interaction with others and sharing of knowledge they have. Table 3 describes the utilization of social strategies used by the respondents when vocabulary learning.

Table 3. Social Strategies

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
I ask a native speaker for the meaning of a new word	67	3.91	1.20	High
I ask my classmate for the meaning of	67	3.14	1.11	Medium

a new word.				
I ask my teacher for the meaning of a new word.	67	3.04	1.22	Medium

The above table shows that the statement “I ask a native speaker for the meaning of a new word.” is the most highly used social strategy among the EFL learners with a mean of 3.91 and standard deviation 1.20, while the respondents ask their classmates for the meaning of a new word with a mean of 3.14 and standard deviation 1.11. The statement “I ask my teacher for the meaning of a new word.” is the least used social strategy among the EFL learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan. In fact, Afghanistan is a traditional country and people tend to be communicative with their relatives, peers, classmates and teachers that’s why they prefer to use social strategies in excessive range. In line with this, a study by Omaar, (2016) found that the participants used a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies to consolidate the meanings of English vocabulary, however, determination and social strategies were among the most preferred ones. Moreover, in the findings of Baskin, Iscan, Karagoz, & Birol, (2017) indicated that students know much about some new words when working in group.

### 3.3 Determination Strategies

Determination Strategies provide to get knowledge of a new term from in four stages; 1. guessing from an L1/FL cognate. 2. Guessing from context, next, to use reference materials, finally, asking someone else. Learners are enabled to understand the parts of speech of the word, which help process of guessing (Oxford, 2003). The Table 4 indicates the usage of determination strategies by the respondents.

Table 4. Determination Strategies

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
I look in the dictionary for collocation patterns.	67	3.44	1.13	Medium
I look in the dictionary for grammatical patterns of the word.	67	3.29	1.08	Medium
I use the dictionary to find the appropriate usage (example sentence) of the word.	67	3.17	1.02	Medium
I use the dictionary to find out the pronunciation of the word	67	3.05	1.01	Medium
I analyze the word structure (prefix, root and suffix) when guessing the meaning of the word.	67	3.02	1.04	Medium
I look at the part of speech of the new word (to guess the meaning of the new word).	67	2.91	1.05	Medium
I use a bilingual dictionary.	67	2.91	.99	Medium
I guess the meaning and then look at the dictionary (when I meet new words in reading).	67	2.43	.98	Medium
I use the dictionary to find only the meaning of the word.	67	2.38	.73	Low
I use an English dictionary.	67	2.29	.85	Low

For determination strategies, the most of the students look in the dictionary for collocation patterns with a mean of 3.44 and 1.13 standard deviation, and look in the dictionary for grammatical patterns of terms with I look in the dictionary for grammatical patterns of the word is the secondly used determination strategy among the students. Furthermore, they utilize a dictionary with a low mean of 2.29 and 0.85 standard deviations? Also, learners use the dictionary to find out the pronunciation of the word with a medium mean of 3.05 and 1.01 standard deviations. In comparison, they use a bilingual dictionary with a mean of 2.91 and 0.99 standard deviations. Some students look at the part of speech of the new word (to guess the meaning of the original term) with a mean of 2.91 and 1.05 standard deviation, and they use a dictionary to find the appropriate usage (example sentence) of the word with a mean 3.17 and 1.04 standard deviation.

Likewise, a study carried out by Nematollahi, Behjat, and Kargar (2017), the result of their study showed that the determination strategy is the most favored and used strategy. According to the survey results of Baskin, Iscan, Karagoz, and Birol (2017), most of the learners highly used determination strategies at the beginning of their studies. There are specific activities, namely guessing the meaning of words from a textual context, using the bilingual or monolingual dictionary, listing words, the utility of vocabulary cards, analyzing the suffixes or words, and roots. The use of a bilingual dictionary was at the front level, and at this stage, students act nervously and study autonomously. Amirian, and Heshmatifar (2013) revealed that guessing from context and using a dictionary were the most commonly used strategies.

### 3.4 Cognitive Strategies

Students use cognitive strategies to learn repetition, organization of new language, summarizing meaning, guessing meaning from context, using imagery for memorization in a successful manner. The following table discloses the usage of cognitive strategies:

Table 5. Cognitive Strategies

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
I skip words that I don't understand	67	3.32	1.09	Medium
I have a vocabulary note book to list down new words.	67	3.05	1.28	Medium
I take note of the synonym or antonym of the word.	67	3.04	1.03	Medium
To remember a word, I analyze the word by breaking It into different parts (prefix, root, suffix).	67	2.89	1.08	Medium
I use alternative clues and try again if I fail to guess the meaning of a word.	67	2.82	.95	Medium
I write down the English word and (Pashto /Dari) translation of the word.	67	2.82	1.15	Medium
I only take note of the meaning of the word.	67	2.71	1.17	Medium
I make use of my knowledge of the topic to guess the meaning of word	67	2.37	.88	Low
I use my experience and common sense to guess the meaning of the word.	67	2.32	.82	Low

The table reveals that among the cognitive strategies the statement "I skip words that I don't understand." has the highest usage among the respondents with a mean 3.32 and 1.09 standard deviation followed by the statement "I have a vocabulary note book to list down new words." with a mean 3.05 and 1.28 standard deviation while the respondent use their experience and common sense to guess the meaning of the word with a low mean of 2.32 and 0.82 standard deviation. similarly, , the respondents revealed they take note of the synonym or antonym of the word with a mean of 3.04 and 1.03 standard deviation while the statement "I use alternative clues and try again if I fail to guess the meaning of a word." With a mean of 2.82 and 0.95 standard deviation, followed by the statement "I write down the English word and (Pashto /Dari) translation of the word.' with the same mean 2.82 and 1.15 standard deviation with a little difference. According to Fatima and Pathan, (2016), that

the most influential source of learning vocabulary are the cognitive regulations and activation strategies. Furthermore, this study was conducted among 180 undergraduate learners who answered 45 items close-ended items on four broad vocabulary learning strategies. Similarly, Arjomand and Sharififar (2011) made effort to explore the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and gender among Iranian EFL learners. They concluded that cognitive strategy was the most commonly used strategy, while social strategy was the least frequently used one. However, Safi, and Kumar (2019) asserted that human as a social animal always required social support. They need love satisfaction, sympathy and pleasure Furthermore, Fan (2003) also studied 1067 college students in Hong Kong and recognized that they did not make use of key word technique and management strategy while they utilized dictionary and contextual guessing strategies.

### 3.5 Memory Strategies

The best way to for students where they can practice their vocabulary knowledge is to utilize the memory strategies. The learners need to be trained on how to use and apply the mentioned strategies in the process of learning. Memory strategies are set of techniques that are designed to help students to remember, store and retrieve acquired information. The following table indicates the usage of memory strategies among the respondents.

Table 6. Memory Strategies

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
To remember a word, I repeat it aloud to myself.	67	2.77	1.26	Medium
To remember a word, I write it repeatedly.	67	2.61	1.02	Medium
I create a mental image of the new word to help me to remember the word	67	2.43	.94	Medium

The above table reveals that most use cognitive strategies. They skip words that they do not understand with a high mean of mean 3.32 and 1.09 standard deviation, followed by the statement that they have a notebook of vocabulary to list down new words with a mean of 3.05 and 1.28 standard deviation. Whereas, students use their experience and common sense to guess the meaning of the word with a low mean of 2.32 and 0.82 standard deviations. Similarly, they take notes of synonyms and antonyms of the terms with a mean of 3.04 and 1.03 standard deviations. At the same time, they use alternative clues and repeatedly to understand the meaning of words with a mean of 2.82 and 0.95 standard deviations.

Moreover, students write down English words with Pashto/Dari translation of the words with mean 2.82 and 1.15 standard deviations with a little difference. According to Fatima and Pathan, (2016) that the most influential source of learning vocabulary are the cognitive regulations and activation strategies. Furthermore, this study was conducted among 180 undergraduate learners who answered 45 items of close-ended items on four broad vocabulary learning strategies. Similarly, these findings resemble the results of research conducted by Arjomand and Sharififar (2011), they concluded that student's highly used cognitive and social policies, respectively.

Furthermore, a study carried out on 1067 college students in Hong Kong by Fan in (2003) found that the students did not use keywords techniques and management strategy; instead, they used dictionary and contextual guessing strategies.

### 3.6 Metacognitive Strategies

The best way to for students where they can practice their vocabulary knowledge is to utilize memory strategies. The learners need training on the utility to apply the mentioned strategies in the process of learning. Memory strategies are a group of techniques that help learners to retain, store, and recover acquired information. The following table indicates the usage of memory strategies among the respondents.

Table 7. Metacognitive Strategies

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
I only focus on things that are related to examination	67	3.22	1.32	Medium
I try to find out all I can about the new words I learn	67	2.28	.91	Medium
I think about my progress in vocabulary learning.	67	2.23	.88	Medium

The table above indicates that students use metacognitive strategies least frequently in this study. Students only focus on things that are related to their examinations with a mean of 3.22 plus 1.32 standard deviations. They rarely think about their progress in vocabulary learning with a mean 2.23 and 0.88 standard deviations. In support of this, Vo & Jaturapitakkul (2016) resulted that students used metacognitive strategies with the least frequency when learning English as a foreign language. Rabadi (2016), Al-Khasawneh (2012), and Doczi (2011) reported that metacognitive strategies were the least frequently used among five strategy categories. Metacognitive strategies may see less use because learners have limited exposure to the target language outside class, so they might not learn it consciously. Another reason for the relative neglect of this strategy is that students tend to rely too much on their instructor in class since they might trust the instructor as a native speaker and as the only person with whom they can often interact in the target language (Vo & Jaturapitakkul2016).

#### 4. Conclusion

This study was aimed to examine the VLSs among EFL learners in Baghlan University of Afghanistan. Based on the major findings of this study EFL learners are acquiring vocabulary learning strategies moderately in in Baghlan University. Initially, the highly used VLSs were the social strategies in which learners strive to ask native speakers, teachers, and classmates for the meanings of new words in English language conversation. Furthermore, determination strategies were used at the second level among students, in which they use dictionaries to find out the meanings of collocation patterns, followed by cognitive, and memory strategies. Whereas the metacognitive strategy was the least frequently used strategy among EFL learners in Baghlan University, this is due to their focus on the materials related to examination; explore anything about the new words for learning, and rarely think of their improvement in vocabulary learning. This study also provides a piece of extensive information and awareness to curriculum designers, policymakers, and particularly to the instructors to take positive steps in revising their methodologies of teaching in enhancing students' vocabulary learning strategies.

#### 5. Limitation of the Research

This study was based on the quantitative descriptive design through using questionnaire. But, future studies can conduct both qualitative i.e. to collect in-depth data from the respondents about each category of vocabulary learning strategies which are excessively or moderately used among the learners.

#### 6. Suggestion

Vocabulary Learning Strategies is an interesting area of study, both in theory as well as practice. Many scholars proposed many strategies for enriching learners' vocabulary sub skill and should be keenly taught through using fruitful and efficient methodologies. This study was a small scale research bounded to very limited numbers of participants, and context. The future research cans broad the horizon of their research context to more number of universities and students whether it is school levels or university level.

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