

The Association between Vocabulary Learning Strategies
& abulary Size

among Iraqi EFL Postgraduate Students

العلاقة بين استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات وحجم المفردات
بين طلاب الدراسات العليا العراقيين متعلمي اللغة
الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is one of the most difficult problems that foreign language learners experience during the language learning process. There is enough evidence in the literature to demonstrate that vocabulary acquisition has been extremely difficult for Iraqi EFL learners. Their unawareness of the varied ways of learning vocabulary appears to impact their vocabulary growth. This study intends to address these challenges by evaluating the vocabulary acquisition strategies used by Iraqi postgraduate students and how such strategies might impact their vocabulary size, using a correlational research methodology. The participants were asked to complete two instruments: the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) and the Vocabulary Size Test (VST). The answers of the respondents were evaluated using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that the participants made extensive use of VLSs, particularly the memory and determination strategies. Iraqi EFL students appear to regularly rely on their English professors to translate their new English vocabulary into their Arabic equivalents, resulting in a teacher-centered classroom devoid of activities and interactions among students. The findings also indicated that an increase in the usage of cognitive methods is likely to increase the amount of vocabulary among Iraqi postgraduate EFL learners.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Size.

الملخص

يعد تعلم المفردات أحد أصعب المشكلات التي يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الأجنبية أثناء عملية تعلم اللغة. هناك ما يكفي من الأدلة في الأدبيات لإثبات أن اكتساب المفردات كان صعباً للغاية بالنسبة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق. يبدو أن عدم وعيهم بالطرق المتنوعة لتعلم المفردات يؤثر على نمو مفرداتهم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معالجة هذه التحديات من خلال تقييم استراتيجيات اكتساب المفردات التي يستخدمها طلاب الدراسات العليا العراقيون وكيف يمكن أن تؤثر هذه الاستراتيجيات على حجم مفرداتهم باستخدام منهجية البحث الارتباطي. طُلب من المشاركين إكمال أداتين: استبيان استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات (VLSQ) واختبار حجم المفردات (VST). وتم تقييم إجابات أفراد العينة باستخدام الإحصاء الوصفي والاستنتاجي. وكشفت النتائج أن المشاركين استخدموا على نطاق واسع أنظمة VLS، وخاصة استراتيجيات الذاكرة والتصميم. يبدو أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية يعتمدون بانتظام على أساتذتهم في اللغة الإنجليزية لترجمة مفرداتهم الإنجليزية الجديدة إلى نظيراتها العربية، مما يؤدي إلى وجود فصل دراسي يتمحور حول المعلم وخالي من الأنشطة والتفاعلات بين الطلاب. أشارت النتائج أيضاً إلى أن الزيادة في استخدام الأساليب المعرفية من المرجح أن تزيد من كمية المفردات بين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية في الدراسات العليا العراقيين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية، استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات، حجم المفردات.

Introduction

1.1. Statement of the Problem

It is well known that vocabulary knowledge is a central component in language learning, whether it is in an EFL context or an ESL environment (Maghsoudi et al., 2017). Inadequate vocabulary knowledge has been shown to cause a variety of difficulties for language students, including weak reading comprehension abilities and a failure to participate in natural conversation (Khan et al., 2018). The advances in language pedagogy have also made language teaching a more learner-centered one, particularly in the communicative approach which suggests that learners have to be more self-reliant and independent in the process of learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). In this respect, learners need to be taught various strategies to increase their vocabulary and expand their repertoire.

It is known that a considerable lexical resource is crucial for language learning but past studies have reported how vocabulary learning has been very problematic for Iraqi EFL learners (Al-Omairi, 2020, Mahmood, Muhammd, & Arslan 2017). According to Al-Omairi (2020), Iraqi EFL learners have difficulties learning complex words, morphology, and parts of speech, and employing new English terms in the proper context, which may be justified by their limited understanding of the numerous VLS they might use to acquire new English words (Al-Omairi, 2020).

1. 2. Aims

The study aims to identify the VLSs used by EFL learners of Iraqi secondary schools and to estimate their vocabulary size. It also examines the relationship between participants'

VLSs and vocabulary size to determine which VLS is effective in increasing participants' lexical resources. These objectives are formulated as in the following:

1. To identify the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by Iraqi EFL secondary school students
2. To measure the level of vocabulary size for Iraqi EFL secondary school students
3. To examine the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size of Iraqi EFL secondary school students

1.3. Hypothesis

In order to achieve the aims of the study, there are three research questions. They are the following:

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by Iraqi EFL secondary school students?
2. What is the level of vocabulary size for Iraqi EFL secondary school students?
3. What is the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size of Iraqi EFL secondary school students?

1.4. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the study of VLS and vocabulary size among EFL learners. The participants are exclusively Iraqi secondary school students who are recruited from Iraqi schools in Iraq. They are public schools and execute the syllabus designed by the Ministry of Education in Iraq. The study used an instrument for vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) that was specifically developed for investigations among primary and secondary school students (Takac, 2008). This

questionnaire follows the taxonomy of Schmitt, and aims to identify four VLSs among secondary school students: (a) memory strategies, (b) cognitive strategies, (c) metacognitive strategies, and (d) determination strategies

1.5 Significance of the Study

University students were the focus of most past studies (Hamdany, 2018; Mahmood & Arslan, 2017), particularly in Iraqi studies, and thus the scarcity of information about how secondary school students learn new English vocabulary makes the demand for the present study critical in EFL research. It also aims to provide insight into the types of difficulties secondary school students have when acquiring the English language, as well as if there are corrective treatments that can help them conquer such difficulties. This research, in particular, can support educators in gaining insights into the types of learning techniques that students employ, allowing them to make an educated decision regarding various teaching approaches that might enhance their students' knowledge of English vocabulary.

The current study's results could indicate that the respondents are unfamiliar with a broad spectrum of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). If this is correct, the study may provide students with insights into different strategies they can use to enhance their vocabulary development, as well as highlight the need for teachers to employ various learning techniques that align with their students' learning styles.

1.6. Methodology

1.6.1 The Design of the Study

The study will adopt a quantitative research approach with a correlational research design. According to Creswell (2009), investigators use this design to measure the degree of association between two or more variables. This design is consistent with the principal objective of the study. The present study aims to examine the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) of the Iraqi EFL postgraduate students and vocabulary size. The participants' memory learning strategy, cognitive learning strategy, metacognitive learning strategy, and determination learning strategy are independent variables of the study. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire will be used to measure the study's independent variables. The participant's vocabulary size will be measured using a Vocabulary Size Test as the dependent variable. The test is originally designed to measure learners' written receptive vocabulary size in the English language to estimate if the learner has enough vocabulary to efficiently perform a task (Beglar & Nation, 2007). The participants' level of proficiency will also be controlled to maintain homogeneity. The study aims to investigate the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable to assess which VLS contributes more to the student's vocabulary size.

Table 3.1: Research Design

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Control variable
Mmemory learning strategy		
Ccognitive learning strategy	Vocabulary size	Proficiency level
Metacognitive learning strategy		
Determination learning strategy		

1.6.2 Data Collection

The questionnaire, designed to measure the independent variables of the study, will be distributed via a link to Iraqi EFL postgraduate students at the Islamic University of Lebanon. This method is expected to yield more transparent and reliable results.

1.6.3 The population and sample

The targeted population of the study is the Iraqi EFL postgraduate students at The Islamic University of Lebanon. All the participants have common characteristics that they are all studying English as a foreign language and they do not speak English anywhere else but in their classroom. The study will use a purposive sampling method because the participants will be predetermined by conditions in which the participants have to meet certain participation criteria (Creswell, 2009): The participants have common criteria that are:

1. same academic year.
2. same educational background.
3. same ethnic background.

For controlling the proficiency level, the study administered the Oxford Placement Test (Part A) by Allan (2004). Further details will be given in later sections.

1.6.4 Research Instruments

The research employs three tools, explained below.

1.7. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire

Takac created this questionnaire in 2008, using Schmitt's taxonomy as a guide. The questionnaire has 27 items. The items on the questionnaire are put into four main groups:

cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and determination. Each strategy to learn words is explained below.

- Cognitive strategy (COG): This means making a list of new words to use in the future.
- Metacognitive strategy (MET): involves planning, controlling, and self-assessing the learning process.
- Memory strategy (MEM): This is when people use what they already know and what they've done to remember words.
- Determination strategy (DET): It means that students use their resources to figure out what new words mean, like figuring it out from the context or using a dictionary.
- The original version of this questionnaire included a three-point scale where 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, and 3 meant = always. The use of a three-point scale was proposed as a more appropriate method of obtaining reliable results. This questionnaire has a total Cronbach's alpha of 0.83.

7.1 Vocabulary Size Test

This test was used to find out how well the participants who took it understood English vocabulary compared to their peers. It was first made to test students' written English vocabulary size to see if they had enough words to complete certain tasks. This test has 14-word families that range from very common to not very common. Beglar and Nation (2007) stated that words that are used between 1000 and 2000 times are high-frequency words, words that are used between 3000 and 9000 times are mid-frequency words and words that are used 10,000 times or more are low-frequency words.

Each word family has ten questions that test how well you know ten words. Students have to read every word on the test

and mark the definition that comes closest to the question's keyword. In the following example from the 1000-word level, the word "pub" is used:

- PUB: They a. a place where people go to drink and talk
b. a place that takes care of money.
c. a big building with lots of shops.
d. d. swimming building went to the pub.

7.2 Oxford Placement Test

This study used the Oxford Placement Test (Part A) for Allan (2004). It is a general test made to reveal subtle distinctions in skill (see Appendix C). There are forty questions on the test. Students' vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension skills are all tested by these questions. The test has a maximum of 40 points. One point will be given for each correct answer. Students who do better on this placement test are assumed to have higher levels of competence, while students who do less are assumed to have lower of proficiency.

7.3 Data Collection Procedure

The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to the participants, who were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and be used solely for research purposes. This was to encourage honesty in their answers. The participants were told about the three instruments: the VLSs, vocabulary size, and Oxford placement test, which were used to control for proficiency level.

For the first instrument, VLSs, the participants were told to read each statement and then circle the answer that best described how they learned new English words. In the second instrument, the vocabulary size test, the participants who filled it out were told to circle the answer that best fits the question's keyword.

In the last part of the Oxford Placement Test, they had to read the English test and circle the right answer for each question. Those who took part were told that doing so was free and up to them and that they could stop at any time. It would take about 45 minutes to complete the tasks,

7.4 Data Analysis

TIBM SPSS was used to analyse all of the VLS and vocabulary size survey responses (Version 26). The statistical methods that were used to answer each of the study's research

Table 3.2: Data Analysis Methods

	Research Question	Method of Analysis
RQ1.	What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among Iraqi postgraduate EFL learners?	Descriptive statistics
RQ2.	What is the level of vocabulary size among Iraqi postgraduate EFL learners?	Descriptive statistics
RQ3.	What is the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size among Iraqi postgraduate EFL learners?	Multiple regression

The table below shows the descriptive statistics that will be used to examine the prevalence and distribution of different types of VLSs among Iraqi students (RQ1). Participants' vocabulary sizes will also be assessed using descriptive statistics (RQ2). Vocabulary size among students will serve as the dependent variable, and the four different kinds of VLSs will serve as the independent variables in this study's inferential statistics utilizing multiple regression analysis (RQ3).

Results and Findings

8.1 Results and Findings of the Study

This section presents the results and findings of the study. The results are reported according to the three research questions stated in Chapter 1.

8.1.1 Most and Least Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Iraqi EFL learners

The study aimed to determine the most and least frequent VLSs that Iraqi EFL postgraduate students employ in learning new English words. To answer this question, the study examined four types of vocabulary learning strategies

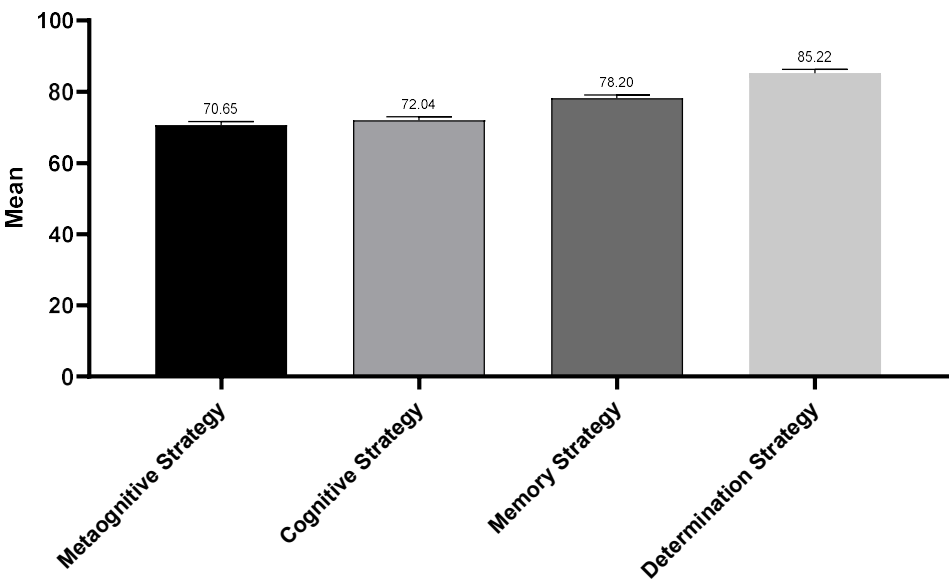


Figure 4.1 Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The descriptive statistic of the analysis demonstrates that the subjects tend to rely more on the determination strategies to learn new English words.

8.1.2 Vocabulary Size among Iraqi EFL Learners

This section addresses research question two, which concerns the English vocabulary size of Iraqi EFL postgraduate students.

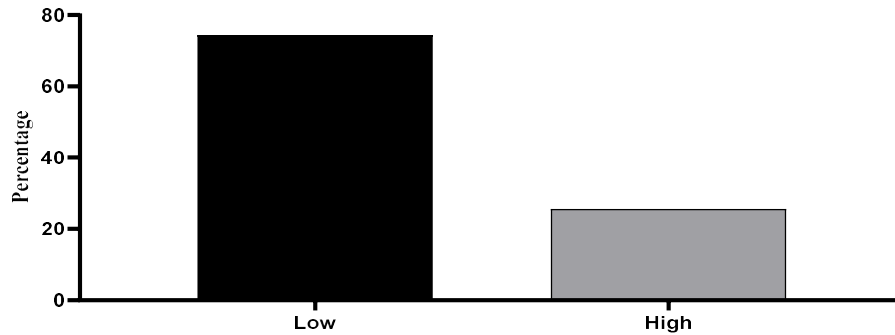


Figure 4.2: Frequency of the Level of Vocabulary Size

Figure 4.2 shows that the majority of Iraqi school EFL learners (74.4%) had a low vocabulary size score (<20) and only a small percentage of learners (25.6 %) had a score of more than 20 (high vocabulary size).

8.1.3 The relationship between four VLSs and participants' vocabulary size

The study investigated the relationship between four VLSs and participants' vocabulary size. The study conducted a regression analysis to assess the relationship between participants' VLSs and vocabulary size.

Table 4.3: Results of multiple regression analysis between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size

Predictor	t	β	Sig
(Constant)	-.025		.980
Cognitive	2.639	.283	.009
Metacognitive	.918	.098	.361

Memory	-.926	-.089	.357
Determination	.749	.069	.455

$R^2 = .12$; F-test = 3.938 (p < .05)

Table 4.3 shows a summary of the results obtained from the multiple linear regression analysis.

Conclusion and Recommendations

9.1 Conclusion

Iraqi EFL learners seem to frequently rely on their English teachers to translate their new English words into their Arabic equivalents, thus making the classroom very teacher-centered and lacking activities and interactions among students. Teachers may benefit from encouragement to implement new teaching techniques that foster student interaction and conversation, allowing students to learn new English words more effectively and in a natural context.

9.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Since the respondents of this study were high strategy users of VLSs, it would be interesting in future research to see how teachers teach English vocabulary, and how they help students cope with learning, using, and memorizing new words. Using qualitative data collection to triangulate the data could reveal whether the respondents' answers in the written questionnaire are similar to what they learn in their classroom. To attain this aim, a qualitative data collection method and classroom observation should be employed. As will be given in the limitations of the study, purposive sampling may also not

provide reliable insights into how students use vocabulary learning. Future research should focus on students with different proficiency levels through which results can be more representative of the students, and thus more generalizable.

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