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A Comparison of Iranian EAP Students and EFL Majors on the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

The present study set out to investigate vocabulary learning strategies adopted by 173 undergraduate students (89 EAP students and 84 EFL majors studying at Bu-Ali Sina University-Hamedan, Iran). The data collection instrument adopted was a validated Likert-scale structured questionnaire. The results of independent samples t-tests indicated that, overall, the two groups were not significantly different in the choice and use of vocabulary learning strategies. However, running Chi square analyses, significant differences were found in individual strategy use in 7 out of 45 strategies. The implications of the study are discussed in detail in the paper.

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Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategy; EAP students; EFL majors

1. Introduction

Research into language learning strategies began in the 1960s mainly influenced by the developments made in cognitive psychology (Williams and Burden, 1997). The term “strategy” has been defined differently by different researchers. Oxford (1990, p. 8), for instance, defined language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations”. Recently, Griffiths (2008) defined language learning strategies as (mental or physical) “activities

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consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning”. (p. 76). Catalan (2003) defined vocabulary learning strategies as knowledge about the mechanisms (processes, strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students to (a) find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) retain them in long-term memory, (c) recall them at will, and (d) use them in oral or written mode. In the same vein, it was defined as “actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary” (Cameron, 2001, p. 92).

Since 1960, various taxonomies of language learning strategies have been proposed (O'Malley et al. 1985; Oxford 1990; Rubin 1975) and it has primarily followed the theory of cognition (Macaro, 2001). Accordingly, various classifications of vocabulary learning strategies have also been presented. One of the prominent and comprehensive classifications of vocabulary learning strategy has probably been suggested by Schmitt (1997). This taxonomy consists of two groups of strategies: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. The former comprises determination strategies and social strategies; the latter, social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Additionally, Gu and Johnson (1996) enlist second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Metacognitive strategies consist of selective attention and self-initiation strategies. Cognitive strategies entail guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. Memory strategies are classified into rehearsal and encoding categories. Activation strategies include those strategies through which the learners actually use new words in different contexts.

A large number of studies have been conducted on vocabulary acquisition and strategies that learners use to learn new words in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, or in English for specific/academic purposes (ESP/EAP). In a large scale study, Soodmand Afshar (2010) investigated the most and least frequently used vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) adopted by Iranian EFL students and the relationship between gender and strategy use. He found that strategies such as “learning new words by reading books, newspaper, magazine”, etc. in English”, “repeating the word orally several times”, “focusing on the phonological form of the new word”, were among the most frequently used strategies and ‘asking the teacher for an L1 translation ’, ‘drawing a picture of the new word’ were among the least frequently used strategies. In another study, Ahmed (1989) investigated the use of VLSs among English undergraduate students in Sudan. He found that the most frequently used strategies by the respondents were note-taking dictionary strategies. Furthermore, Gu and Johnson (1996) found that Chinese university learners used a variety of metacognitive vocabulary strategies.

Regarding the ESP/EAP context, Akbarian (2010) investigated the relationship between vocabulary size and depth of vocabulary among Iranian EAP learners. He found that vocabulary size and depth might be accounted for by the same factors, especially as the learners’ proficiency increases. In another research, Seddigh and Shokrpur (2012) found that guessing and dictionary strategies were the most frequently used VLSs and social and study preference strategies were the least used ones among medical students at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. Likewise, Bernardo and Gonzales (2009) investigated the use of 53 common VLSs adopted by Baccalaureate students across five disciplines: Liberal Arts and Education, Computer Science and Engineering, Business Education, Hospitality Management, and Allied Medical Science in Philippine university. The results of their study showed statistically significant differences in the use of determination and social VLSs across the disciplines. Furthermore, they found non-significant differences in the employment of memory, cognitive, and meta-cognitive VLSs.

To the best of our knowledge, despite the significance of (vocabulary) learning strategies in Iranian context, little research has seemingly been carried out to compare the Iranian EAP students and EFL majors on the use of vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, to fill the research gap felt, the present study set out to investigate, compare and contrast the patterns of vocabulary learning strategies adopted by EAP students and EFL majors. The following research questions were thus formulated:
1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EAP students and EFL majors in the use of individual vocabulary learning strategies?
2. Overall, is there any significant difference between Iranian EAP students and EFL majors in the choice and use of vocabulary learning strategies?
3. What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by Iranian EFL majors?
4. What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EAP students?

2. Method
2.1. Participants
This study was carried out during the academic year of 2012-2013 at the Faculties of Engineering and Humanities at Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan. 173 male and female undergraduate students (89 EAP students and 84 EFL majors) participated in this study. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35.

2.2. Materials and instruments
The instrument used for data collection purposes was a structured questionnaire developed and validated by Soodmand Afshar, Ketabi and Tavakoli (2010) for the Iranian context. The questionnaire includes 45 statements on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me) and draws mainly on Oxford (1990), Schmitt and Schmitt (1993), and Gu and Johnson (1996). Also, using Chronbach’s Alpha consistency, the reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be 0.88.

2.3. Procedures
In this study, the following procedures were pursued:
First, the questionnaire was translated into Persian in order to make the items easier and more usable for the participants specially EAP subjects. Then, using pilot testing and factor analysis, the questionnaire was found to have an acceptable validity rate. The final version of the questionnaire was administered at the end of the class sessions. Before administrating the instrument, the purposes and the importance of the study were clarified to the participants and the full descriptive instructions regarding the procedures of administration were provided. On the average, it took about 20 minutes for the participants to complete the questionnaire. Tables 1 and 2 indicate the results of Cronbach’s Alpha reliability and factor analysis for the questionnaire respectively.

3. Data analysis
The collected data were analyzed using SPSS, version 19. Chi-square analyses were run to estimate the participants’ responses to each of the 45 statements of the questionnaire. Also, an Independent Samples t-test was run to compare the mean reported frequency of overall strategy use by EAP students and EFL majors. Additionally,
frequency analysis was employed to determine the most and least frequently used strategies by EFL majors and EAP students.

4. Results and discussion

The first research question dealt with whether there were any significant differences between EAP students and EFL majors in the use of individual vocabulary learning strategies. Table 3 below indicates the results of Chi Square analysis for individual strategy use by EAP students and EFL majors.

| Number of the Strategy | Name of the strategy                                                                 | Percent EFL majors | Percent EAP students | Pearson Chi-Square Analysis
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1                      | ‘I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary’.         | 48% Agree          | 36% Agree            | .004                        |
| 2                      | ‘I use a monolingual English dictionary’.                                           | 57% Agree          | 35% Agree            | .000                        |
| 3                      | ‘I ask my teacher for an L1 translation’.                                          | 31% No suggestion  | 46% Agree            | .000                        |
| 7                      | ‘I check prefixes, suffixes and word roots to discover the meaning of unknown words’. | 57% Agree          | 36% Agree            | .045                        |
| 16                     | ‘I memorize word lists (i.e. lists of words in English with their Persian equivalents)’. | 30% No suggestion  | 40% Agree            | .009                        |
| 35                     | ‘I use vocabulary section or glosses in my textbook to learn the new words’.        | 38% Agree          | 42% Agree            | .027                        |
| 44                     | ‘I draw a picture of the new word’.                                                | 42% Agree          | 32 Completely disagree | .018                      |
As is evident from Table 3, significant differences were found in individual strategy use in 7 out of 45 strategies listed in Table 3. EAP students’ significantly frequent use of bilingual dictionaries could plausibly be explained by the fact that EAP students, because of their insufficient proficiency level, are probably not able to understand the meanings of the defining words and other related information in monolingual dictionaries and they thus make recourse to bilingual dictionaries more. On the other hand, because EFL majors have better command of English language and monolingual dictionaries provide a more detailed definition of the lexical system, they might have preferred and used monolingual dictionaries more.

EFL learners’ more frequent use of the strategy of ‘checking prefixes, suffixes and word roots to discover the meaning of unknown words’ could be explained by hypothesizing that EFL learners are probably more strategy conscious and have had more exposure to strategies and strategy training. With regard to “asking my teacher for an L1 translation” strategy, Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) also reported ‘asking my teacher for L1 translation’ as a social strategy was used rarely by EFL university students.

EAP students’ significantly more frequent use of ‘memorizing word lists’ strategy could be probably justified by the premise that they usually do not have a good command of English language and thus have to resort to memorization. Supporting this finding, Mehrpour (2008) found that rote memorization of new EFL words in lists (i.e. an English word with its L1 meaning) could work better than sentence-making practice, especially for Iranian learners of English at low levels of proficiency. A plausible, though not an empirically well-supported explanation for the last individual strategy use, seems to be the point that this strategy is a seemingly shallow strategy preferred, perhaps mostly and used by children and beginning-level learners (Soodmand Afshar, 2010).

The second research question aimed at investigating the differences between EAP students and EFL majors’ overall strategy use. The results of an independent samples t-test indicated that, overall, the two groups were not significantly different in the choice and use of vocabulary learning strategies. Table 4 below represents the results in this regard.

| Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | t-test for Equality of Means |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| F           | Sig. | T     | df | Sig.(2-tailed) | Mean differences | Std.Error Difference |
| Equal variances assumed | 1.540 | .216 | .086 | 171 | .931 | .25575 | 2.96831 |
| Equal variances not assumed | 5 | .086 | 170.918 | .931 | .25575 | 2.96142 |

As Table 4 indicates, the two groups are not significantly different in the choice and use of vocabulary learning strategies.

The third research question sought to find the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EFL majors. Table 5 shows the five most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EFL majors.

Table 5. The five most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EFL majors
The five most frequently used strategies

| Rank | The five most frequently used strategies                                                                 | frequency | The five least frequently used strategies                                      | frequency |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1    | ‘I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context’ | 63%       | ‘I make up (coin) new words if I don’t know the right ones in English’          | 25%       |
| 2    | ‘I use a monolingual English dictionary’                                                                    | 57%       | ‘I use physical actions when learning a new word’                               | 25%       |
| 3    | ‘I check prefixes, suffixes and word roots to discover the meaning of unknown words’                      | 57%       | ‘I ask my teacher for an L1 translation’                                       | 27%       |
| 4    | ‘I connect the new word to a personal experience’                                                          | 54%       | ‘I skip or pass the new word’                                                   | 36%       |
| 5    | ‘I connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms’                                                          | 52%       | ‘I draw a picture of the new word’                                              | 40%       |

As is evident from Table 5 while such strategies as ‘guessing the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context’, ‘using a monolingual English dictionary’, ‘checking prefixes, suffixes and word roots to discover the meaning of unknown words’, ‘connecting the new word to a personal experience’, and ‘connecting the word to its synonyms and antonyms’ were used significantly more frequently by EFL majors, strategies like ‘drawing a picture of the new word’, ‘skipping or passing the new word’, ‘asking my teacher for an L1 translation’, ‘using physical actions when learning a new word’, and ‘making up (coining) new words if I don't know the right ones in English’ were used significantly less frequently by them.

In support of this finding, Soodmand Afshar (2010) argued that EFL learners’ more frequent use of ‘guessing the meaning of a new word using background knowledge’ might plausibly indicate that EFL students make use of any available contextual and grammatical cues, one aspect of which is analyzing part of speech of the unknown words to comprehend their meaning. Concerning monolingual dictionary use strategy, Ahmed (1989) found that successful learners made full use of monolingual dictionaries. The main reason why monolingual dictionaries might be related to success is that monolingual dictionaries provide a more detailed overview of the lexical system of a foreign language and contain much more information about each word (Nation, 2001).

In agreement with the findings of the study as indicated in Table 5, Soodmand Afshar (2010) also found ‘connecting the word to its synonym and antonym’ as one of the most frequently used strategies and ‘skipping a difficult new word, when they do not practically have any other alternatives at their disposal’ as one of the least frequently used strategies by Iranian EFL majors.

The fourth research question aimed at investigating the five most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EAP students. Table 6 indicates the five most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EAP students.

Table 6. The five most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by EAP students

| Rank | The five most frequently used strategies                                                                 | frequency | The five least frequently used strategies                                      | frequency |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1    | ‘I repeat the new word orally several times’                                                            | 50%       | ‘I write down the word, its definition/synonym and an example sentence in which the word is used’ | 24%       |
| 2    | ‘I study the spelling of the new word and I write new English words’                                   | 46%       | ‘I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, | 24%       |
several times’ adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used’.

3 ‘I ask my teacher for an L1 translation’ 46% ‘I use physical actions when learning a new word’.

4 ‘I use new words in sentences through speaking’.

44% ‘I draw a picture of the new word’.

5 ‘I connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms’.

43% ‘I skip or pass the new word’.

44% ‘I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used’, and ‘writing down the word, its definition/synonym and an example sentence in which the word is used’ least frequently. In line with the findings in Table 6, Hamzah, Kafipour and Abdullah (2009) found that one of the most frequently used vocabulary strategies by Iranian undergraduate EFL students was ‘studying new words many times’. In the same vein, Schmitt (1997) revealed that verbal repetition and written repetition were the most frequently used strategies by Japanese students. Corroborating the findings of the study, Catalan (2003) also found that one of the most frequently used strategies by Spanish-speaking students was asking their teacher for an L1 translation. Similarly, Kameli and Bin Mostapha (2012) found that ESL Students in Malaysia used new English words in their daily conversation.

5. Conclusion and implications of the study

Although significant differences were found in the use of six individual strategies as discussed previously, the two groups (EAP students and EFL majors) were not significantly different in the frequency of the use of vocabulary learning strategies revealing the fact that both groups especially the former (i.e. EAP students) are in need of strategy training. This finding implies that both material developers and EAP as well as EFL teachers should make students conscious of various vocabulary learning strategies. Further, the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by the two groups were specified, some of which were commonly shared by both groups revealing the fact that certain vocabulary learning strategies might be quite popular with all types of learners while some others might not be so.

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