



## **Vocabulary Learning Strategies from the Bottom-Up: A Grounded Theory**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Lots of studies have tried to test the effect of strategy training on vocabulary development. However, instead of trying to uncover the strategies that learners actually use, they have tried to expose learners to a list of strategies supported by theories. Although these theory-driven studies have provided the field with significant and generalizable findings, they have deprived it from a deep understanding of vocabulary learning strategies. To fill in this gap, this data-driven study aims at conceptualizing learners' vocabulary learning strategies. To uncover learners' knowledge and use of these strategies, the researchers iteratively collected and analyzed data through open-ended interviews. The rigorous coding schemes of grounded theory yielded a set of categories conceptualizing learners' awareness and use of vocabulary learning strategies. Although inspiring, the findings show that learners use a limited number of strategies and this clearly explains lexical deficiency among a great number of Iranian EFL learners. This conceptualization of strategy use has clear implications for policy-makers, practitioners and language learners.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Due to the nature of high-stake university entrance exam in Iran, vocabulary is the most pressing need for students learning English in public high schools of Iran. Upon entrance to the university, this problem becomes more severe since they are expected to read texts in science, technology and medicine in English. To meet the demands of the university entrance exam and university course requirements, they need a high command of vocabulary. In most cases, learners fall short of professors' expectations and cannot fulfil the requirements of the courses because of their limited knowledge of vocabulary. To overcome this problem, learners take a lot of time to develop their vocabulary. However, their efforts seem to be futile since they do not know how to master vocabulary. Taking students' efforts and achievement into account, one can say that vocabulary development is a function of learning strategies rather than haphazard effort; hence, exploring learners' strategies, especially strategies that enable students master vocabulary, is of critical importance.

Moreover, there has been a shift away from teaching towards strategy training. However, unless we explore the strategies that learners follow in developing their lexical competence, shifting away from teaching towards strategy training will be a waste of time. It is true that

some studies have dealt with investigating the use of vocabulary learning strategies by Iranian EFL learners. However, these studies are mainly theory-driven and as such do not present us with a deep knowledge of how learners actually develop their lexical competence. To fill in this gap, this data-driven study seeks to explore EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies.

The study is significant since theorizing students' views and experiences in developing their vocabulary will: (1) improve the knowledge-base of vocabulary learning strategies; (2) help curriculum developers and syllabus designers improve the quality of their textbooks by accommodating learners' views; (3) enable teachers to publicize the empowering strategies and help the learners do away with the limiting strategies; and (4) give voice to the oft-silent group, i.e. language learners, in the process of decision-making.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Vocabulary Strategy Training**

Without adequate knowledge of vocabulary, language learners are generally impeded in their academic activities. Vocabulary knowledge is also instrumental in reading comprehension (Read, 2000; Qian, 2002). It is shown that knowledge of vocabulary is closely related to reading comprehension and Vermeer (2001) suggests it can be used as one of the best estimates of language proficiency at school. The results of a survey of L2 learners by Leki and Carson (1994) have also revealed that university students consider insufficient knowledge of vocabulary items as the most important factor impeding their progress in writing tasks. In short, the mastery of vocabulary plays a key role in the whole process of second language learning and is of critical importance to the learners. Without a solid mastery of vocabulary, listening, reading, translation and writing are all antics in the air.

Despite the importance of vocabulary in SLA, the following three factors contributed to lack of attention to vocabulary: (1) linguists' concern with grammar and phonology; (2) dominant belief in language psychology; and (3) the interest of methodologists (Laufer, 1986). In addition to these reasons, the difficulty of teaching vocabulary and teachers' beliefs and experiences also contribute to the neglect of vocabulary. First, teachers' observations show that the instruction of vocabulary items does not account for the number of words learners need to acquire in order to communicate successfully. Second, some teachers influenced by the incidental vocabulary learning hypothesis proposed by Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985) seem to believe that lexical items are learned when learners are engaged in reading different texts. Third, the tendency of teachers to teach with the same methods and procedures that they were taught has also had a great role in the neglect of vocabulary.

Despite these problems, the status of vocabulary has been enhanced as a result of the development of communicative approaches to language teaching, and methods such as the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Proponents of these methods point out that in the early stages of learning and using a second language, one is better served by vocabulary than grammar. Such views pave the way for the shift away from grammar towards vocabulary.

The shift towards vocabulary is of no use unless vocabulary learning strategies juxtapose this shift. Vocabulary learning strategies can be considered a subset of general learning strategies in second language acquisition. Sokmen (1997) argues for helping learners learn how to acquire vocabulary on their own, noting that it is "not possible for students to learn all the

vocabulary they need in the classroom” (p. 225).

Brown and Payne (1994) identify five steps in the process of learning vocabulary in a foreign language: (a) having sources for encountering new words, (b) getting a clear image, either visual or auditory or both, of the forms of the new words, (c) learning the meaning of the words, (d) making a strong memory connection between the forms and the meanings of the words, and (e) using the words. Consequently, all vocabulary learning strategies, to a greater or lesser extent, should be related to these five steps (Fan, 2003).

Schmitt (1997, 2000), however, suggests two dimensions of L2 vocabulary learning strategies: discovery and consolidation strategies which distinguish the strategies that learners use to determine the meaning of new words when they first encounter them from the ones they use to consolidate meanings when they encounter the words again. This categorization is based, in part, on Oxford’s (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies and offers a taxonomy that classifies strategies into five groups. According to this classification, strategies are classified as determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive:

- *Determination strategies* help learners to determine the meaning by using dictionaries, guessing the meaning from the context and identifying the parts of speech and constituent elements.
- *Social strategies* can be used to determine the word definitions by asking teachers, classmates and native speakers.
- *Memory strategies* are a large number of strategies that learners apply to recall the vocabulary.
- *Cognitive strategies* deal with mechanical aspects of learning vocabulary and are not related to mental processing (Schmitt, 2000). These strategies include repetition, taking notes, highlighting new words and the like.
- *Metacognitive Strategies* include monitoring, decision-making, and assessment of one's advance. They can also aid learners to specify suitable vocabulary learning strategies for learning new words (Schmitt, 2000).

The breadth and depth of learners' vocabulary depends on their mastery and use of vocabulary learning strategies. Scholars believe that vocabulary learning strategies:

- make learners more independent of the teacher and serve as useful tools that can be used both inside and outside of the class (Oxford and Scarcella, 1994, p. 236).
- add to the acquisition of vocabulary through extensive reading; they lead to increased retention of the new vocabulary and increased availability of these items for active use (Gu and Johnson, 1996, p. 646).
- enable learners to take more control of their own learning so that students can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szabó, 2000).
- foster learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p. 291).
- simplify the learning process of new vocabulary for students (Ranalli, 2003).
- prove useful for students of different language levels (Nation, 2001).

Taking the importance of vocabulary strategy training strategies, scholars highlight the importance of vocabulary strategy training. As learning strategies are “readily teachable” (Oxford & Nyikos 1989, p. 291), the time teachers spend on introducing different ways of vocabulary learning and practicing to students cannot be considered as wasted. Similarly, Cameron (2001) believes that children may not implement vocabulary learning strategies on their own and they should be trained to use the strategies.

Vocabulary strategy training moves learners towards autonomy; hence, teachers should shift away from teaching towards strategy training. A number of linguists have long recognized the importance of learner independence in vocabulary acquisition. Gairns and Redman (1986) believe that students should be more responsible for their learning and pay greater attention to their personal needs. The reason is that after elementary level, it is increasingly difficult for teachers to select vocabulary equally useful to all students; hence, time spent on teaching may be wasted.

Schmitt (2000) sees the need to help learners acquire the strategies necessary to learn words on their own. Oxford and Scarcella (1994) advocate the provision of systematic vocabulary instruction to let learners master specific strategies to acquire words even outside their classes. Along the same lines, Nation (1990; 2001) believes that the most important way to develop vocabulary is to encourage learners to use strategies independently of the teacher and in his recent publication, strategy training is suggested to be part of a vocabulary development program. Thus as Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) suggests, the best teaching plan may be to introduce a variety of learning strategies to students so that they can decide for themselves the ones they prefer. This echoes learners' need to develop their vocabulary learning strategies.

### **Empirical Studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Some scholars have investigated the learners' choice of strategies and its effect on vocabulary development and other aspects of language development. What follows is a summary

and a synthesis of the empirical findings related to strategy use and preference:

- EFL students prefer extensive use of dictionary, metacognitive, note taking, rehearsal, encoding, and activation strategies (Gu & Johnson, 1996).
- Dictionary strategies and repetitions were used more by Japanese learners while imagery and semantic grouping strategies were used fewer by these learners (Schmitt, 1997).
- A higher number of vocabulary learning strategies were correlated with vocabulary size compared with reading comprehension (Gu, 1999).
- Vocabulary learning strategies have a direct effect on vocabulary size of the students while they mostly had an indirect effect on their reading comprehension (Curtis, 1987).
- Vocabulary learning strategies had a closer relationship with vocabulary size than other variables like reading comprehension (Cusen, 2005).
- A large number of vocabulary learning strategies are helpful at all steps of vocabulary learning and can be used to an extensive range of vocabulary (Nation, 2001).
- Explicit metacognitive strategy training has a significant positive effect on the vocabulary learning of EFL students (Eslami Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003).
- Advanced learners with a professional interest in the study of English seem to use almost all types of strategies from Oxford analytical framework (Cusen, 2005).
- Cognitive strategies are used more frequently than metacognitive strategies (Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2006).
- Repeatedly spelling the words, taking notes in vocabulary textbooks, repeating and reviewing strategies, and analyzing strategies are the most useful and the most frequently used strategies by students (Lo, 2007).
- Vocabulary learning strategies contribute to vocabulary size of the learners (Kafipour, 2009).

Although the foregoing studies shed some light on the efficacy of vocabulary learning strategies, they are quantitative in nature and as such do not present the field with a deep understanding of learners' vocabulary learning strategies; therefore, the field is in urgent need of qualitative, data-driven studies which: (1) explore students' perceptions of these strategies; (2) and give some voice to the oft-silent group in the language education systems in EFL contexts.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims at exploring learners' perspectives on vocabulary learning strategies and theorizing their views and experiences. In line with the principles of grounded theory, the study started with the general question, "What strategies do you use in developing your vocabulary?" Subsequent questions emerged in the iterative process of data collection and analysis. It is worth noting that the questions which emerge after initial analysis are not separate questions. Rather they aim at clarifying participants' response to the general research question.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Theoretical Sampling and Participants**

The study took place in Sabzevar, a major city in Khorasan Razavi Province. Four females and six males participated in the study. Morse (1994, p. 228) defines the good participant as the “one who has the knowledge and experience the researcher requires, has the ability to reflect, is articulate, has the time to be interviewed, and is willing to participate in the study”. Thus instead of statistical sampling which starts with a representative sample of participants, theoretical sampling works by selecting subsequent subjects based on the information which has emerged from the data already coded (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 166). Sampling began by interviewing five participants who provided early information related to vocabulary learning strategies. This information was then analyzed to identify provisional explanatory concepts and categories. These concepts and categories were then enriched, modified and verified by five other learners who showed interest in the research area. The participants were assured that their statements would be reported under fictitious names, and they would remain anonymous up to the end of this study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants were informed about the topic and objective of the study to help the researcher elicit theoretically-relevant concepts. The question was asked in as non-directive a manner as possible to meet the study's principal aim of learning about the interviewees' perceptions. The interviews were conducted in Persian to help the interviewees feel free to talk about their perceptions with the researcher. Interviews were held until theoretical saturation was reached. These interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The average interview length was 45 minutes. Since the study was data-first, the researcher started codifying without predetermined ideas or a preconceived model. To ensure this, literature review followed data collection and analysis rather than preceding it as is common in quantitative studies. In effect, the researcher entered the field to discover the main concerns and views of participants about vocabulary learning strategies through open-ended interviews.

Throughout the open coding, memos were written as a way to sketch and note the participant's ideas, reflections, and concepts in parallel to data collection and open coding. To begin coding, as transcripts became available, they were read two or three times. Similarities and differences of the data were considered, thus producing a coding frame to be applied to all the data. This coding frame was used for the transcripts, and as new codes emerged, it was modified and the transcripts were re-read according to the new structure. Then, during a process of comparison these individual codes were compared, and were collated to form meaningful categories. Finally, through a process of selective coding, a core category that pulls all concepts and categories together was selected. As for the credibility of the findings, following Yin (2003), the final version of emerged concepts and categories were validated through member checking.

## **FINDINGS**

Having collected and analyzed research data related to vocabulary learning strategies, the researchers came up with seven categories describing the specific procedures that learners use to internalize the vocabulary: (a) resourcing, (b) creating structure, (c) grouping, (d) repeating, (e) contextualizing, (f) using images, sounds and actions and (g) using dictionaries. What follows is the elaboration of the forgoing categories.

## Resourcing

The results show that learners use different resources and reference materials to learn how English vocabulary is used contextually. They not only use printed materials such as textbooks, story books, newspapers and magazines, but they also take advantage of advances in technology in our increasingly multimedia world to expand their English vocabulary. In other words, they improve their vocabulary through watching audiovisual materials, listening to aural /audio materials and/ or doing computer-based activities. The analysis shows that watching videos not only helps the learners to realize and learn the new words directly within a context but may also motivate them to learn more new words. Supporting this issue, participant E stated:

*Considering the effect of media on English vocabulary learning, I think that watching films, especially those containing subtitles is the most useful. Watching films helps me to enlarge my vocabulary knowledge. For example, considering the situation in which the words are used, I can distinguish formal words from slang ones. I also take notes of new idioms and phrases that I encounter in films to collect them and memorize later. While watching films, it happens to me that some words seem familiar to me, because I have probably seen or heard them previously. However, I cannot remember their meanings. In such cases, since I'm eager to know their meanings, I look up those words and try to memorize them.*

The learners also listened to different aural texts such as news reports on the radio, taped dialogues or short passages, music, etc, to improve their English vocabulary knowledge. Along the same lines, participant I explained how useful this strategy is in learning new words:

*While listening to a song, not only do I learn some new words, but also I become familiar with collocations and structures in which those new words are used. This, at least, enables me to distinguish correct structures from wrong ones. Also, when I encounter those new words elsewhere, to remember their meanings, I try to memorize part of lyric and consequently, I can remember words more easily.*

In recent years, the use of technological aids, especially those related to computers, has increasingly become a common feature of second language learning. Participant H explains how he takes advantage of this medium of communication to learn English vocabulary:

*Web-based activities are known in today's society and all of us are in contact with them. I myself spend about two or three hours surfing the internet every day. It's not good to waste this time without any learning; hence, while reading different English texts presented by the users in facebook, I extract the words, phrases and idioms that seem new or interesting to me and then try to memorize them. This helps me learn some more new words.*

The results also revealed that the feedback provided through interactive learning in the web helps the learners to promote their vocabulary knowledge. Participant J's comments better elucidate this point:

*I use chat-room to communicate with native speakers. In communicating through chat room, most of the words are used in contracted form. Hence, I believe it cannot be good for vocabulary learning. But it helps us become aware of our mistakes through interaction with the audience. For example, while chatting, I used the sentence "His face became red" to represent the concept of "shyness" and the American user corrected me. Afterwards, I learned that I should say "turn red" instead of "become red".*

Playing electronic games and computer – based activities are also effective in learning English words. On this issue, participant C points out:

*The learners interested in playing such games can learn some new words. For example, I myself learned the word ghost in a game when I was a middle school student and after this period of time, I recall this word and its synonyms well.*

Analysis also shows that learners read story books to learn or practice new vocabulary, though textbooks are the major resources for them. Supporting this theme, participant D explains how reading helps her to expand her vocabulary knowledge:

*Every night I read some pages of one of my favorite story books and I enjoy it. While reading, I encounter some new words and I look them up because I'm eager to understand the meaning of the sentences and get the story. Moreover, I try to memorize them and in the meantime I learn some new words.*

Similarly, the results show that English magazines and newspapers are not as usual as story books and textbooks among written resources used by the learners. The participants' comments clarify the reasons behind that. Supporting this issue, participant C comments:

*The learners who don't read Persian newspapers will not read English ones. Furthermore, watching TV programs is more interesting and less time-consuming than reading newspapers and magazines.*

### **Creating Structure**

Analysis reveals that the learners usually create a structure of the new words they are going to memorize. They employ different techniques such as taking notes, preparing word lists, marking and using vocabulary cards for creating structure for the new words. Nunan (2001) in his typology of strategies defines *taking notes* as “writing down the important information in a text in your own words” (p. 183). Considering vocabulary, the learners’ notes may contain the equivalent, definition, example, synonym, idiom, etc for the new words. Participant H's comments better explains this theme:

*To learn the meaning of a new word, I write down its definition in my own words*



*without considering its dictionary definition. I mean that I define and explain the meaning of the new words in English and I write those explanations and hereby I try to memorize their meanings. Moreover, at the same time I think of Persian equivalents of the words too.*

Sometimes the learners take notes of new words and information provided by the teachers to understand the the meaning and use of unknown words. Supporting this issue, participant B states:

*In the classroom, I try to take notes of every new word represented by my teacher and also I write the Persian meanings or equivalents of those words and then I make a list of them to study and memorize later. To prepare word lists, I write English words in one column and their Persian equivalents in another column on a sheet of paper. Making such lists gives me the possibility of asking myself not only the Persian equivalents of the words, but also their English version. I mean that while studying those words, I can cover the English words and ask myself the Persian equivalent of them or cover Persian equivalents to ask myself their English equivalents.*

Analysis reveals that some learners prefer to use or prepare *vocabulary cards* (flash cards) to aid themselves in vocabulary learning. On this issue, participant D stated:

*I use the vocabulary cards for learning the words that are difficult to memorize or need more practice to stick in my mind. To prepare such cards, I use yellow papers, because the yellow color attracts the attention and is very helpful in memorization. I write the words on one side of the cards and the related definitions or synonyms on the back of them. Moreover, I add the Persian equivalents for the words with a pencil to remove them later and focus on English meaning.*

The other usual way of creating structure for the new words among the learners is *marking*. They underline, use a highlighting pen, etc to mark the important words within a text. Clearly, marking the words attracts the learners' attentions and helps them in better memorization. Along the same lines, participant G presents her experiences as follows:

*While studying a textbook, I underline the new and important words in each page. As soon as I open my book, those underlined words are more noticeable and attract my attention, so their meanings rush into my mind quickly. This is a useful way for learning the more important words.*

Analysis interestingly shows that marking can help the learners not only to focus on important words but also to recognize those words. Participant F better explained this issue:

*When I look up a new word, I put a sign beside that word in my dictionary to mark that word. Each time that I refer to that word in the dictionary, I add a new mark. So, for me, the number of the signs for each word shows the number of my searching for that specific word. Hereby, I recognize the more frequent words and also I conclude that I haven't learned those words well; therefore I pay more*

*attention to such words and memorize their meanings.*

## **Grouping**

Classifying or putting things that are similar together in groups is a memory-related strategy used by the learners to create mental linkage. "Classifying helps learners because it is easier to memorize items that are grouped together in meaningful ways than trying to remember isolated items" (Nunan, 2001, p. 185). Supporting this issue, participant C states:

*In Oxford Word Skill book, the words related to a specific topic are introduced in each unit and this is helpful. For example, one unit is about court in which we learn that the word sentence means: "state that somebody is to have a certain punishment". If we don't know its other related words, we will forget its meaning easily and soon. But learning these words by relating them to each other helps us to remember their meanings more easily.*

It should be noted that vocabulary items can be grouped based on not only meaning-association but also sound-association. If items are linked with each other through meaning- or sound association, you will get better results. Along the same lines, participant B similarly confirms that learning the words related to a topic or a central idea in groups is useful and at the same time he believes that putting the words with similar pronunciations in groups is also effective in better learning of them:

*In my opinion, Oxford Word Skill is a good book. Because each unit of this book is about a special topic and we become familiar with the words related to those topics and they stick in our minds. When the words with similar pronunciations like snicker and sneaker, west and vest or blame and claim are introduced together, this helps us to remember their meanings more easily, because in this way, we can compare those words with each other while memorizing them and consequently we will be able to remember them better.*

Sometimes instead of using materials introducing the words in groups, the learners themselves classify the new words on the basis of a common area to be memorized more easily. Considering this technique, participant A explains:

*While I'm reading a list of different word items, I myself categorize them into different groups to memorize them more easily. For example, I separate words related to sports from those related to animals or foods and then memorize each group in order to prevent from confusing.*

## **Repeating**

Analysis shows that learners use *repetition* strategy to memorize and practice the newly learned words. Repetition is described in O' Malley and Chamot's (1990) table of learning strategies as "imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal" (p. 582). Results reveal that this technique is not limited to word items, but it is also used in

memorizing longer pieces of language such as phrases, idioms, sentences and etc. Moreover, learners practice to learn not only the meaning but also the pronunciation of the words by repetition. Participant E's explanations better illustrates this theme:

*I watch English language films. Clearly, while watching them, I hear different sentences presented by native speakers and at the same time, I try to repeat the sentences or phrases several times to memorize them. Because repetition enables me to learn those sentences with correct intonation and later use them in my speaking.*

The results show that repetition may also be in written form rather than oral practice. Participant A better explains this theme:

*One of my techniques for vocabulary learning is writing new words down. I mean, learning the words that are difficult for me to learn. I can not memorize their meanings by oral repetition. I write them down several times so that they stick in my mind. However, this is different from my practicing the spelling of the word items.*

### **Contextualizing**

Analysis clearly shows that using or placing the words or phrases in a clear context is also a helpful way of expanding the learners' vocabulary. The participants in this study indicated that producing a meaningful language sequence, whether written or spoken, including the newly introduced items is an important factor in their vocabulary learning. Supporting this theme, participant G states:

*I used to read word for word and I tried to memorize their equivalents, but this semester our teacher asks us to write a story with the new words introduced in each unit of our book and we do so. By writing such stories, when I encounter those words anywhere, I remember my created stories and the context in which I have used them and this helps me keep them in my mind well and remember their meanings well.*

Doing different exercises of the textbooks is another way of contextualizing words. This strategy provides an opportunity for internalizing the new vocabulary. Participant E's comments confirm this strategy:

*In my opinion, doing the exercises of the textbooks is a good way of learning the word items within a context for which you should know "part of speech" of the words as well. Sometimes, I list the new words that I learn or encounter each session in the classroom and I try to use them by producing a piece of speech for myself. This helps me internalize new words.*

Analysis showed that *translating a text* as a way of using words in context has a positive effect on vocabulary learning. Along the same lines, having experienced this

technique, participant D explains:

*I have to translate different texts from English to Persian in my job. So, while translating a text with a specific topic, I encounter the words and phrases related to that topic and I learn some of them. Furthermore, to learn difficult words better, I make some sentences or write short passages containing them. In this way, I memorize them easily.*

### **Employing Images, Sounds and Actions**

As another useful strategy, learners try to relate new words to their visual concept in their memory. Visual concepts can be created through observing objects or pictures. Representing an example, participant B better elucidates this strategy:

*If I observe or hear the word accuse, first it may seem similar to the word occur. However, to remember its meaning, I remember the picture of a court in our book and its meaning rushes into my mind well because I have encountered and learned this word within that picture. But if I learn these two words in different texts without any picture, I may forget them easily. So, pictures can be very helpful in memorizing and recalling words.*

Analysis also shows that sometimes observing objects themselves can be more effective than observing the related pictures. Referring to an example, participant C confirms this issue:

*To pass one of our English courses at the university, we had to memorize a lot of technical expressions related to engine structure and it was difficult. However, I memorized them, but I forgot them after passing the exam. After a while I became familiar with them practically in my job. In other words, I observed the engine itself and I learned the names of different parts of it. So it helped me to memorize them deeply. So in my opinion, this way is very important for vocabulary learning.*

Analysis shows that instead of using pictures, learners themselves may draw the picture or create an image of a word or phrase in their minds to improve memorizing and recalling. Supporting this point, participant F indicates:

*To learn the words that are difficult for me to memorize, I try to draw their pictures. For example, I have used this technique to learn the names of different bones in my "Anatomy" course. Moreover, one of our teachers taught us to create an image of the words in our minds to memorize them well. For example, I have learned the word "abandon" in this way in the classroom and I remember its meaning easily. To me, this technique is very helpful.*

Sometimes, learners may remember a new word by using the sound system rather than employing images or observing. Identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new word is one of the ways of using sound system. Referring

to an example, participant G better explains this theme:

*Sometimes I make some signs for myself to learn some new words. When a new word in English is similar to a word in Farsi, I take advantage of this similarity to memorize that word. In other words, I use this similarity to relate them to each other and this helps me to recall the Persian equivalent of the English word more quickly.*

The results clearly reveal that sometimes instead of formally practicing sounds and writing system, the learners use physical response or sensation to practice vocabulary. Needless to say, using this memory-related strategy helps them to remember those words more easily. Participant A's statements better elucidate this point:

*To learn some words and idioms, I make use of my hands to realize their meanings better. I mean that I try to act them out. Compared to theoretical practicing, this technique helps me to memorize and remember those specific words better. For example, I have learned the idiom 'give a black eye' in this way. To memorize its meaning, I acted it out and this has helped me remember it much easier, because I remember my action when I encounter it.*

### **Using Dictionaries**

Needless to say, dictionaries are the most important and reliable reference for the learners to learn English vocabulary. Analysis shows that the learners use dictionaries not only to look up the new words, but also to expand their vocabulary knowledge. Bilingual dictionaries have been found to result in vocabulary learning. Supporting this theme, comparing monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, participant H comments:

*Whereas bilingual dictionaries usually provide just an L1 synonym, monolingual dictionaries like Oxford include L2 definitions, L2 sentence examples, synonyms, antonyms and even pictures. So they result in better comprehension of the new words.*

The results reveal that most of the learners prefer to use monolingual or bilingualized dictionaries rather than bilingual ones. One rationale behind this is that the learners take advantage of incidental learning through using those dictionaries. Considering this point, participant F explains her experiences:

*While searching for a new word in a monolingual dictionary, I see some other words such as previous and the next ones incidentally and I have a look at them and read their explanations quickly and this is good. So from this point of view, I believe that traditional dictionaries are better than electronic ones.*

Considering different dictionaries, participant B who believes that bilingual dictionaries are better than monolingual ones, explains his view in this way:

*While using an "English to English" dictionary, sometimes I can't identify to which Persian equivalent a word exactly refers, though I understand the meaning and explanations provided for that word. So I myself prefer to use "English to Persian" dictionaries. They help me become familiar with different equivalents provided for English words that have more than one Persian equivalent. For example, looking up the word 'treat' which has several different meanings in a bilingual dictionary enables me to choose the best equivalent, i.e., the one that has the best meaning fitting the text.*

In addition, analysis showed that some learners use Electronic dictionaries to expand their vocabulary knowledge. Electronic dictionaries with multimedia annotations offer a further option for teachers and learners (Hunt & Beglar, 1998). Hulstijn, Hollander, and Gredanus (1996) suggest that, because computerized entries are easier to use than traditional dictionaries, students will be more likely to use them. Participant E's comments better explains this issue:

*To look up new words, especially when I have limited time, I use an electronic dictionary such as Babylon or Longman. Because they are perfect; they provide examples, phrases and two versions of pronunciation for new words.*

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis shows that prior to interviews, Iranian EFL learners had no knowledge of learning strategies because strategy training has no place in our language education system. The dialogical process of interview, however, gave them a chance to reflect upon their experience of vocabulary learning and verbalize their experience. More often than not these verbalizations and conceptualizations of vocabulary learning experience have an edge over theory-driven findings since they provide the readers with a deep understanding of how learners learn vocabulary rather than top-down prescriptions by a group of scholars which appear in the form of questionnaires to be administered and tested through quantitative modes of enquiry.

Epistemologically, vocabulary learning strategies should be developed from the bottom-up, i.e., they should be a conceptualization of learners' views and experiences rather than from the top-down, i.e., developed by educationalists and imposed on classroom practice through the applied science model of teacher education. Thus the findings of this study add to the knowledge-base of vocabulary learning strategies since they present the field with a deep understanding of what actually happens in the process of lexical development, which complements generalizable strategies which result from quantitative studies. Moreover, as the results clearly show, Iranian EFL learners use a limited number of strategies; hence, their lexical incompetence can be related to their limited knowledge and use of vocabulary learning strategies. Finally, as the results clearly show, the strategies learners know and use have been developed by the learners themselves. In other words, strategy training is largely ignored in language education in Iran. The categories and conceptualizations which reflect learners' views and experiences on vocabulary learning strategies have implications for:

- Curriculum developers and syllabus designers since accommodating learners' views in developing language teaching materials and textbooks will improve the quality of materials;
- Educators since they can add students's views to the knowledge-base of language teacher education and present the language teacher learners with a deeper understanding of what what actually happens in the process of vocabulary learning;
- Practitioners since the findings enables them to understand how English language learners learn vocabulary before the embark the task of teaching vocabulary;
- Education system, especially language education system to include vocabulary strategy training as part and parcel of teaching vocabulary since prior to interviews students' had no specific knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies but in the dialogical process of the interviews they acknowledged the importance of strategies in developing their lexical competence.

To sum up, most Iranian EFL learners find vocabulary learning a daunting experience. The reason is that they have a limited knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies. In other words, learners' lexical deficiency is related to their strategy deficiency. To cure this educational ill, practioners, educators, and policy makers should take strategy training as part and parcel of language education. Not only does this endeavor improve learners' lexical competence, but it also moves them towards learner autonomy.

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