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Unlocking Vocabulary: A study on Students's Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This study examines the vocabulary learning strategies employed by students at SMAN 5 Gorontalo in acquiring English vocabulary, with a particular focus on adjectives such as good, bad, tall, short, beautiful, and ugly. The research investigates the types of strategies used and examines the relationship between these strategies and the students' proficiency levels. A mixed-method approach was applied in the study, whereby quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire based on Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), and qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with four selected students, two of whom were high achievers and two of whom were low achievers. The findings indicate that the participants employed a range of vocabulary learning strategies, with social strategies being the most frequently utilized, followed by compensation strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies. The least utilized strategy was memory. The study also revealed that proficient students employed strategies that required greater effort, such as note-taking, seeking assistance, and seeking clarification, while less proficient students relied more on simpler strategies like code-switching and basic memorization. The findings indicate that the distinction in strategy use may be associated with the students' language proficiency, with more efficient strategy use correlating with elevated proficiency levels. This research emphasizes the significance of recognizing students' strategy preferences in the development of effective vocabulary instruction, particularly in rural contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. Additionally, it highlights the necessity for targeted strategy training to assist less proficient students in adopting more effective learning approaches.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, language proficiency, mixed-method, SILL, English as a foreign language

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Introduction

The crucial role of strategies of language learning adopted by learners in learning second language has been well confirmed in literature. For example, Rubin (in Oxford, et al, 2014) argued that learner strategies have been linked to the success of the learners learning a second language. In addition, the positive relationship between frequent use of strategies and successful learning has been confirmed by a number of scholars (Griffith, 2015). Finally, Griffith's study (2015) suggested that proficient students used many more strategies than less proficient students. Students' learning strategies will affect the whole aspects of their learning. For example, Cottrel and Reinders (2004) claimed that strategies learners use will determine the type and amount of language practice they do, the way they approach in-class tasks and the extent to which they use resources all of which will affect the success of language learning.

A substantial body of literature has confirmed that learners have their own individual ways of learning. For example, Oxford, (1990) and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) argued that individual learner favors certain way of learning language different from his/her peers. Drawing on this, studying learning strategies becomes an important issue in a bid to promote effective language

learning and teaching process. For example Chamot (2005) argued that, by examining the strategies used by second language learners during the language learning process, teachers will be made aware of the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective processes involved in language learning. Furthermore, the analysis of language learning strategies can assist less successful language learners, as they can be taught strategies that have been shown to be effective for those with a higher level of proficiency (Grenfell & Harris in Chamot, 2005).

Learning strategies in language skills or in other aspects of language such as grammar or vocabulary have intensively been analyzed. However, there are still some areas such as how learner's strategies affect learners' vocabulary development in rural area where English as a foreign language like where this study was conducted – which are rarely studied.

It has been generally accepted that vocabulary plays a very important role in language learning. For example Uberman (in Nosidlak, 2013, p. 655) claimed that vocabulary acquisition is crucial to language acquisition. In addition, Harmer (1991) said that vocabulary is the vital organ and the flesh of a language. Also, Nation argued that vocabulary is present in all four strands of language learning.

A number of scholars such as, Zimmerman (1997) argued that vocabulary is very important in a language and to a particular learner. In other words to some extent the range of vocabulary we possess influence much our language performance. In addition, Mckeown and Curtis (Huckin, Haynes, & Coady, 2003) asserted that the importance of vocabulary and literacy skill can be found in many literature of reading and psycholinguistic of L1. Some writers stressed the importance of vocabulary more on comprehension. In similar vein, Nation (1990) asserted that vocabulary is regarded important by both learners and researcher because learners feel that their difficulties in performing language skills is due to the fact that their vocabulary is inadequate. The implication of this assumption on vocabulary on the teaching and learning process is that helping learners acquire language partly means helping them to acquire vocabulary.

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For the last several decades vocabulary position in the language teaching becomes stronger and stronger. The need for vocabulary in language acquisition is acknowledged. However, understanding written English needs more vocabulary than understanding spoken English. For example, in acquiring reading skill the role of vocabulary is indispensable (ohen & Aphek, 1980). Interestingly, some writers such as Schonell, Meddleton and Shaw (Nation 1990) and Kucera & Francis (Nation, 1990) reported that half of the words used to understand written English are needed to understand spoken English. Similarly, Schonell et al. (Nation, 1990) reported that in their investigation of spoken words on Australian workers it was found that less vocabulary used in spoken English than those in written English.

However, small numbers of teachers still regarded vocabulary as secondary to other language elements. Huckin, Haynes and Coady (2002) argued that compared to other issues in second language instruction vocabulary is treated as secondary issue. Taylor (1990) in quite similar vein said that in foreign language teaching context, the issue of vocabulary seems to be forgotten.

Basically, vocabulary acquisition is done through written input and spoken input. Perez et al (2015) reported that Schmidt (2008) and Ellis (1995) and Vidal (2003) reported studies on second language vocabularies through reading context and aural input. In addition, Duquette & Pinchaud stressed that vocabulary has been recently learnt using audio visual media (in Perez et al (2015)). In other words, vocabulary is learnt through reading and listening or the combination of both using e.g., video or movie.

Learning strategies in learning vocabulary

Learning strategies have been viewed from two different perspectives. First, scholars such as Oxford (1990) and Rubin (1987) view them as actions. For example Oxford (1987) view them as specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more efficient and more transferrable to a new situation. Similarly, Rubin (1987) viewed them as what learners do to learn and to regulate their learning. Second, scholar such as Wenden (1987) and Ellis (1995) view strategies as behaviors. For example Ellis (1995) defined learning strategies as a mental or behavioral activity related to some specific stage in the process of language acquisition or language use.

Wenden (1987) proposed six characteristics of language learning strategies. Firstly, language learning strategies refer to specific actions or techniques; they are not features which describes a learner's broad language learning approach. Secondly, some of the language learning strategies are observable; in contrast, others are not observable. Thirdly, language learning strategies are problem oriented, that is, learners use them to respond to a learning need. Fourthly, language learning strategies can contribute directly or indirectly to learning. Fifthly, these language strategies at the beginning are employed consciously and become automatized after being used for a long time. And finally, language learning strategies are amendable.

Kinds of language learning strategies

Oxford (1990) divided language learning strategies into two major divisions which are direct strategies and indirect strategies. The following table of language learning strategies along with their branches is adapted from diagram designed by Oxford (1990, 18-19).

Direct Strategies

Direct strategies consist of memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies

Table: 1 Memory strategies

| Memory strategies | | | |
|--|--|----------------------|---|
| Creating mental linkages | Applying images and sounds | Reviewing well | Employing action |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grouping 2. Associating/Elaborating 3. Placing new words into a context | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using imagery 2. Semantic mapping 3. Using keywords 4. Representing sounds in memory | Structured reviewing | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using physical response or sensation 2. Using mechanical techniques |

Table 2: Cognitive strategies

| Cognitive strategies | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Practicing | Receiving & sending messages | Analyzing & reasoning | Creating structure for input & output |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Repeating 2. Formally practicing with sounds and writing systems 3. Recognizing and using formulas and patterns 4. Recombining 5. Practicing naturalistically | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Getting the idea quickly 2. Using resources for receiving and sending messages | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reasoning deductively 2. Analyzing expressions 3. Analyzing contrastively 4. Translating 5. Transferring | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Taking notes 2. Summarizing 3. Highlighting |

Table 3: Compensation strategies

| Compensation strategies | |
|--|---|
| Guessing intelligently | Overcoming limitations in speaking & writing |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using linguistics clues Using other clues | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Switching to the mother tongue Getting help Using mime or gesture Avoiding communication partially or totally selecting the topic Adjusting or approximating the message Coining words Using circumlocution or synonym |

Indirect strategies

Indirect strategies consist of meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Table 4: Affective strategies

| Affective strategies | | |
|---|--|---|
| Lowering your anxiety | Encouraging yourself | Taking emotional temperature |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Using progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation Using music Using laughter | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Making positive statements Taking risk wisely Rewarding yourself | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Listening to your body Using a checklist Writing a language learning diary Discussing your feeling with someone else |

Table 5: Meta-cognitive strategies

| Affective Strategies | | |
|--|---|--|
| Centering your learning | Arranging & Planning your learning | Evaluating your learning |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Over-viewing and linking with already known material Paying attention Delaying speech production to focus on listening | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Finding about out about language learning Organizing Setting goals and objectives Identifying the purpose of a language task Planning for a language task Seeking practice opportunities | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Self-monitoring Self-evaluating |

Table 6: Social strategies

| Social strategies | | |
|--|---|--|
| Asking questions | Cooperating with others | Empathizing with others |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Asking for clarification or verification Asking for corrections | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperating with peers Cooperating with proficient users of the new language | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Developing cultural understanding Becoming aware of others' thought and feeling |

(Source: Oxford, 1990: 18-21)

There have been abundant researches conducted on strategies used by the learners in learning languages for the last three decades. For example, Stern (1975) conducted a research to find out the characteristics of good learners. He proposed ten characteristics as indicative of effective learners: 1) positive learning strategies; 2) active approach to the learning task; 3) tolerant and outgoing approach to teaching and learning; 4) technical know-how to tackle a language; 5) strategies of experimentation and planning; 6) constant research for meaning; 7) willingness to practice; 8) willingness to use language in real communication; 9) self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use; and 10) development of teaching and learning as a separate reference system and learning to think in it.

Similar study by Rubin (1975) supported that there are seven characteristics of effective learners that broadly classified into the following categories: 1) Willingness and accuracy in guessing; 2) Strong drive to communicate; 3) Willingness to appear foolish; 4) Attention to form; 5) Use of practice opportunities; 6) Monitoring of own and others' speech; and 7) Attention to meaning. Further, another study on the same topic by Naiman et al. (1978) identified five characteristics, namely: The aforementioned characteristics can be further delineated as follows: 1) an active task approach; 2) an understanding of language as a system; 3) an understanding of language as a means of communication; 4) the ability to cope with affective demands; and 5) the monitoring of L2 performance.

These three studies focused on the language learning strategies in general. In others words, the studies were done with no reference to a particular skill in language. In addition to the studies above, there were studies focused on language learning strategies in relation to particular skills. For example, Huan and Naerssen (1987) did a study on strategies on oral skill and found that there were differences between strategies used by the proficient students and those used by less proficient students. So far, as far as the writers are concerned, there is no study on language learning strategies used by students in learning English vocabulary that was conducted in Indonesian setting where English is Foreign language. This research is expected to bridge the gap.

This study is one of the efforts to close the gap. The present study is intended to focus on finding out the most and the less used frequently used vocabulary learning strategies employed by students of Kelas X SMAN 5 Gorontalo in learning vocabulary, as well as figuring out the relationship between certain strategies used.

METHOD

This research uses mixed method paradigm. According to Creswell (2007), a mixed method is defined as a method that emphasizes the collection, analysis, and synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative data within a single study or a series of studies. Its fundamentally, this is the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches which offers a more comprehensive outlook of research problems than either approach alone.

The quantitative analysis was used to analyze the questionnaire by using Likert scale and simple calculation to find out the frequency of a certain strategy used by the participants and the descriptive was used to analyze the result of the interview to find out the pattern general pattern of strategies that the participants used.

The participants of this research are 4 students from the grade X SMAN 5 Gorontalo. The number of the students is 32. Of 32 students the researcher only takes 4 students, that is, 2 students whose English grade are good and 2 students whose English grade is low. To make it have equal gender representative the researcher chose 2 girls and 2 boys. 1 girl is taken from bad students group and the other 1 is taken from good students group. Similarly, 1 boy is taken from less proficient group and two students are taken from proficient students group. By good grades it means grades 8 or above (the range of score used in the school is 0 for very bad up to 10 for excellent) and low grades is grades 5 or below. There are two reasons for selecting this number of participants. Firstly, the aim of this research is to found out the strategies employed by the good students and bad students. Secondly, this number of participant will make it easier for researcher to conduct the study.

The instruments for collecting the data in this study are questionnaire using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990) and interview. The strategies are divided into two categories; direct and indirect strategies. Direct category is divided into

memory strategies consisting of 10 items, cognitive strategies consisting of 14 items, compensation strategies consisting of 2 items, whereas indirect strategy is divided into meta-cognitive strategies consisting of 11 items, affective strategies consisting of 9 items and social strategies consisting of 5 items. However to make it easier the researcher just took some questions that were regarded as most suitable with vocabulary learning.

The participant were asked to rate the statements on Likert scale which are; 1) never true of me, 2) usually not true of me, 3) sometimes true of me, 4) usually true of me, 5) always or almost always true of me. Interview instrument was used to gather information to complete the information gathered through questionnaire. Interview is a semi structured interview.

Prior to administrating the questionnaire, the researcher contacted the school principal to secure permission. After securing written permission the researcher met the English teacher whose teaching hour affected and asked for the permission to use 4 students were chosen from 32 students in grade X as participants to answer questionnaire and being interviewed. Afterward, the researcher helped by the teacher contacted the students to designate the day of administering questionnaire and interview. At the day of collecting the data the writer informed the participants about the purpose of the study. They were ensured that the answer they given would not affect their English marks. The time to fill in the questionnaire was about 20 minute and the interview was 5 minutes for each students.

The data on questionnaire were analyzed by using statistics Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.0 for Windows. The frequency, percentages, and the means will be used to see the tendency of the strategies used by the students. In addition the result of the interview were codified to find out the the major theme in relation to the use of language learning strategies used by the student in learning adjectives of good, bad, tall, short, beautiful, ugly? The scale are: 5 means always or almost true of me, 4 means usually true of me, 3 means somewhat true of me, 2 means usually not true of me, and 1 means never or almost never true of me.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Interview was conducted on the participants to complete the data gathered from questionnaire. Student 1 who is a boy was the proficient students his English mark was usually above 8 in the scale of 1 to 10. Student 1 could be regarded as favoring cooperative learning. When asked if he ask for help from peer or more proficient users when found difficult words he said he frequently did it. Student 1 always did codes switching to mother tongue when found difficult words. When asked if he took notes on words he did not know he said that he frequently did it. But student 1 did not treat himself after having long or tiring learning. He never group difficult words he found into similar group to assist him understanding them either.

Students 2 who is also a boy are a less proficient student whose mark ranged between '4 to 6'. When asked if he asked other help when found difficult words he said he did it. When asked if use mother tongue to help him understand difficult words he said no. Asked if he usually took notes on difficult words he said he did not. Asked if listen to music or did other relaxation after learning he said never. Asked if he grouped similar words to help him understand the words he said no.

Students 3 who is a girl was a less proficient students. Her English marks ranges between 4 to 6. Asked if she asked for other help when find difficult words she said yes. Asked if she used mother tongue when finding difficult words she said no. Asked if she took notes on difficult words she found she said no. When asked if she reward himself after learning she said no. She was also reported not grouping the similar words to help her understand them.

Meanwhile, student 4 who is also a girl was a proficient student. Her English mark ranged between 8 to 9. Asked if she asked for other help when found difficult words she said no. When asked if she used mother tongue to help her understanding difficult words she said yes. When asked if she took notes on difficult words she found she said yes. Asked if she like to relax such as listening to music after learning she said no. Asked if she grouped the difficult words to help her understand them she answered no.

It was found that two proficient students used different kind of the strategies from the other two less proficient students. It was found that the proficient students used strategies that need or

involves great effort, good motivation and thinking. Included in these categories were, using physical response take notes, asking for clarification and correction and ask help from other.

Discussion

The data analysis above shows that the learning strategies used by the students varied. However, as it was identified they used all the learning strategies. If we rank the use of the strategies we can find that social strategy comes first. Comprehension strategies comes second. Cognitive strategies comes third. Metacognitive strategie comes fourth. Affective strategies comes fifth, and memory strategy comes last.

It was clear the students were dependent learner. This showed by the fact that the majority of students surveyed favored of using asking for correction and clarification. It meant that the learner needed more comprehensible others in their learning activities. The finding that they also tended to cooperate with proficient user cement the fact that they were cooperate.

Code switching was also frequently used by the students. This happened in the absence of more knowledgeable others. In the presence of more knowledgeable others in this case the teacher, the students like to ask for corrections. Some of the students like to highlight the difficult words, but this was only done by the proficient students who, as a matter of fact, like reading books.

It was a bit surprising that most of students surveyed like to practice by seeking the opportunities or created it. As it is expected this was only done by the proficient students. The students also knew how to treat themselves after learning. It was found that most of them like listening to music or cracking jokes.

Memory strategies, as it was found was rarely used. Only minority of students tended to use it. It is surprising to find that memory strategy was almost never used by participant. Probably many will presume that this is the most frequent strategy used by the learner because it sounds the easiest and the most natural one. However the specific strategies in this category seems to fit advanced and proficient learner for example strategy of grouping, associating/elaborating, placing new words into a context.

Similarly, the data gathered from questionnaire supported the findings in questionnaire. For example they were independent on more proficient user in their vocabulary learning. This was shown by their responses to the interview question. In addition, as found from their answer to interview question, they also used code switching. It was also found that the student find some relaxation to ease the tiredness in learning. Taking note, translating to mother tongue, listen to music and asking help from other were all the major theme found in students responses..

In terms of the relationship between the strategies used and the level of proficiency, there were differences between proficient students and less proficient students. It was found that proficient students tended to use the strategies that needed or involved great effort or deeper thinking.

CONCLUSION

This study was done to find out two things which are the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies employed by students of Pulubala Vocational School and the relationship between certain strategies used with proficiency level. The following are the summary of key findings:

- a. The strategies in learning adjectives denoting the description of good, bad, tall, short, beautiful, ugly; and used by the students in SMK Pulubala varied.
- b. The strategies used, if ranked from the most frequently used to the least frequently used are social strategy comes first, compensation strategy comes second, cognitive strategy comes third, meta-cognitive strategy comes fourth, affective strategy comes fifth and memory strategy comes last.
- c. The specific strategies the students used were
 - 1) asking for help from peer or more proficient users.
 - 2) codes switching to mother tongue
 - 3) taking notes
 - 4) listening to music or doing other relaxation after learning

- d. In terms of the relationship between the strategies used and the level of proficiency the proficient students tended to use strategies that need or involve deeper thinking and great effort. Further, there are also indication of some pedagogical implications of this current study. First, the teacher should encourage the students to use variety of language learning strategies to help them learn vocabulary especially adjectives denoting the description of good, bad, tall, short, beautiful, ugly; and Secondly, the teacher should encourage the students to use self-report language learning strategy so that it will be easier for the teacher to supervise students learning and their achievement.

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