

# THE EFFECT OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES IN IRANIAN ENGLISH CLASSES

**Hossein Aslanabadi**

*Yerevan State University*

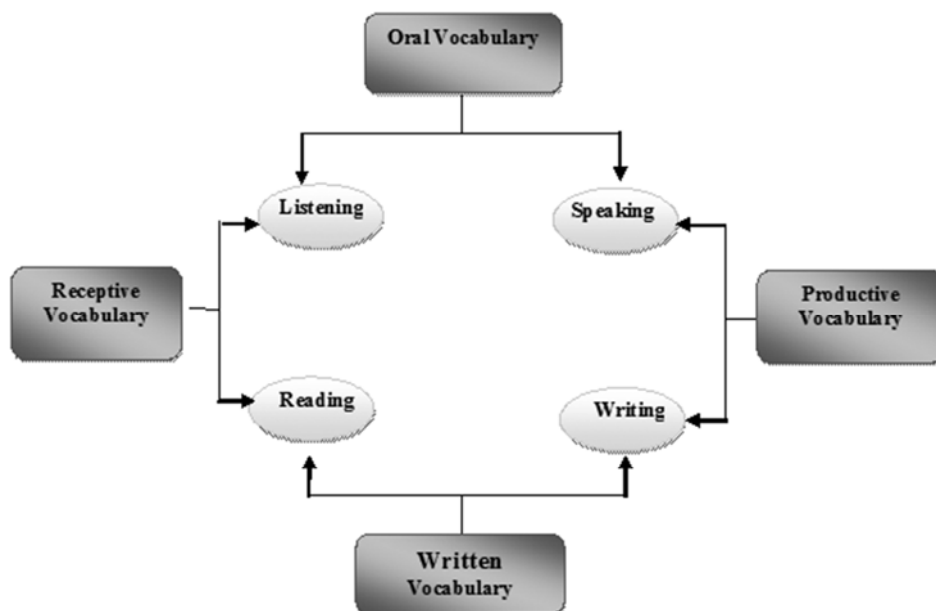
Vocabulary has always been a language area about which students usually complain and claim that it impedes language learning. The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether using the context for guessing the meaning of new vocabulary can solve this problem. To do so the researchers assigned two experimental groups at Goal Language Institute, and gave them a pre-test to make sure that they were homogeneous. In the first group we used guessing the meaning of new vocabulary from context and in the other group we used the traditional method of using a dictionary for vocabulary learning. At the end of the instruction period each group was given the same post-test to determine the amount of their progress in learning and remembering the new vocabulary. This study aims at investigating the impact of the use of short stories on vocabulary instruction through making a comparison between the two basic vocabulary learning strategies, dictionary use and contextual guessing.

**Key words:** contextual guessing, dictionary use, short story, vocabulary, learning strategies.

## **Types of Vocabulary**

It is helpful to distinguish between expressive and receptive vocabulary. A word is in your receptive vocabulary when you understand it when others use it. A word is in your expressive vocabulary when you think to use it. Well over half of the average adult's vocabulary is receptive. The following figure offers an overview of these main types of vocabulary. (Bard, Robertson & Sorace 1996).

## Types of Vocabulary



### The Classification of Learning Vocabulary

A complete inventory of VLS will be conducive to pertinent studies in this area. However, just as Skehan (1989) argues, the field of learner strategies is still in an early stage of development. His remark is particularly applicable to VLS in that a comprehensive list or taxonomy of strategies in this specific area is not present (Schmitt 1997). In order to address this gap, Schmitt (1997) attempted to propose as exhaustive a list of VLS as possible and classify them based on one of the current descriptive systems. He primarily referred to Oxford's (1990) classification scheme and adopted four strategy groups: Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive, which seemed best able to illustrate the wide variety of VLS. Social strategies involve learners using interaction with other people to facilitate their learning. Memory strategies consist of those approaches helping relate new materials to existing knowledge system. Skills which require "manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (Oxford 1990:43) fall into the Cognitive strategies. Lastly, Metacognitive strategies "involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best way to study" (Schmitt 1997:205).

Since Oxford's system deals with LLS in general and, thus, seems not to be able to cover certain specific strategies used in vocabulary learning, Schmitt created a new category for those strategies learners employ when discovering the meaning of a new word without consulting other people, namely Determination Strategies. In addition, a helpful distinction suggested by Cook and Mayer (1983) and Nation (1990) was incorporated into Schmitt's classification scheme.

### **Discovery Strategies**

Discovery strategies include several determination strategies and social strategies. A learner may discover the meaning of a new word through guessing from the context, guessing from an L1 cognate, using reference materials (mainly a dictionary), or asking someone else (e.g. their teacher or classmates). There is a natural sense that almost all of the strategies applied to discovery activities could be used as consolidation strategies at the later stage of vocabulary learning (Schmitt 1997).

### **Guessing Through Context**

Nation (2001:232) maintains that "incidental learning via guessing from context is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning". Over the past two decades, this strategy has been greatly promoted since it seems to "fit in more comfortably with the communicative approach than other, more discrete, Discovery Strategies" (Schmitt 1997:209). Context tends to be more interpreted as simply textual context. Nevertheless, some other important sources of information such as knowledge of the subject, or of the conceptual structure of the topic should also be taken into account when guessing. In Liu and Nation's (1985, cited Nation 2001) study, it is found that a minimum requirement for the guessing to happen is 95% of the running words, already familiar to the learner.

### **Dictionary Use**

Reference materials, primarily a dictionary, can be used as a receptive or a productive skill in language learning. However, since we likely have insufficient time to consult a dictionary during the process of speaking and listening, more look-up work happens during reading and writing. A common situation is that, for example, when a learner meets an unknown word in the text and fails to infer the meaning through context, they might be advised to consult a dictionary. Looking up a word in a dictionary is "far from performing a purely mechanical operation" (Scholfield 1982:185); instead, a proficient dictionary user "is often required to formulate and pursue several hypotheses and make use of prior knowledge of

various sorts, especially information derived from context” (Scholfield 1982:185). Except for locating the unknown word in the alphabetic list, which seems to be the skill most dealt with in respect of training dictionary use, other important facets involving effective dictionary use receive little attention (Scholfield 1982). Since many lexical items in a language have more than one meaning, learners should be instructed how to reduce multiple options by elimination. Scanning all of the definitions in the entry, before deciding which is the one that fits, is a good idea proposed by Underhill (1980). After choosing a seemingly reasonable sense from the definitions in the entry, a user then needs to “understand the definition and integrate it into the context where the unknown word was met” (Scholfield 1982:190). The most sophisticated parts involving dictionary use arise when none of the senses in the entry seems to fit the context or more than one fit. In these situations, a user may need to infer a meaning that comes from the senses in the entry or “seek further contextual clues in the source text to disambiguate” (Scholfield 1982:193).

### **Statement of Problem**

Iranian language learners, like all foreign language learners throughout the world suffer greatly from not efficiently communicating because of their limited knowledge of vocabulary. It seems that this is because of not utilizing working vocabulary teaching strategies by language teachers. Lack of research in the area of vocabulary learning strategies is because of having no comprehensive list of such strategies. This taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies includes two main groups: strategies for the discovery of the meaning of a new word, and strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

Research Question (RQ): Is there any significant difference between using a dictionary and guessing vocabulary on English learners?

Hypothesis (H): There is significant difference between using a dictionary and guessing vocabulary on English language learners.

### **Context of the Study**

The study was conducted at one English institute in Tabriz. In the selected institute, EFL courses consisted of 20 sessions and learners attended for two 90-minute sessions a week. 30 children (13 boys and 17 girls) were randomly selected

out of about 70 students (boys and girls) in that institute; one group was selected to apply the method of guessing, and the other – the dictionary method. Both groups used the short story “Animal Farm” by Gorge Orwell (2010). These two groups were instructed by the same EFL teacher. All the students who participated in the study had some prior experience with dictionary use.

### **Materials**

A Vocabulary Level Test, An Authentic Achievement Test as Pre-test, An Authentic Achievement Test as Post-test, A Questionnaire, and A Short Story titled “Animal Farm” by Gorge Orwell were used as materials. Vocabulary Level Test was used to determine the vocabulary competence levels of the participants and grouped them into two groups as students with 2000 words. It also helped us form two groups on equal terms; an even distribution was obtained as guess and dictionary group. Authentic Achievement Test consisting of 50 multiple choice vocabulary questions used to measure how many of the words the participants knew and this test was applied as the posttest with very slight changes. The participants were asked to write the words in the blank part with the appropriate synonym or antonym printed on a piece of paper. Learners have enough experience about these kinds of multiple questions or matching questions.

### **Procedures**

The researcher selected one institute (Goal). After receiving the authorities’ cooperation at the institute, the researcher started research which lasted about three months to accomplish.

The intermediate students at Goal Institute were considered as our experimental groups who received the short story for treatments. In this research, we did not have any control group. We had two experimental groups as objects of treatment. One group guessed difficult vocabulary from the context and the other group used dictionary for learning difficult words.

In order to examine the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary through short story at first we introduced the short story, and the first group attempted guessing the new word from the context. The other group for understanding the new words used Oxford Intermediate Vocabulary. Within the 20 sessions of training the researcher tried to apply these two methods for vocabulary learning and observe the students’ reaction and to see whether they increased their vocabulary count during the 10-week instruction or not.

The results obtained in the two experimental groups are as follows:

<b>Vocabulary</b>				
<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>St. Deviation</b>	<b>St. Error Mean</b>
Guessing from context	20	15.53	3.74956	0.68457
Using Dictionary	20	13.47	2.83294	0.51722

As can be seen there are some differences between the two groups in vocabulary learning feature; that is, the mean for the guessing group is 15.53 which is significantly higher than that of the dictionary group which is 13.47. The difference in the mean scores of the two groups is 2.06. So, it is obvious that the learners in the guessing group got rather higher scores than the learners in the dictionary group. This means that the use of short story in the language teaching affected the learners' vocabulary learning at intermediate level more than the ordinary method of teaching foreign languages in Iranian institutes.

### **Analyzing Tasks for Pedagogical Purposes**

ELT Learners in Iran are required to utilize the lifetime vocabularies that are relevant for the assigned tasks. So the result of this study can help teachers and trainers in teaching the foreign language vocabulary and fixing it in their minds. According to Rico, Agudo & Curado (2007), providing language learners with different quantity of vocabulary and word effects can be seen in the performance of language learners. The findings of the research may be added to the theory of SLA, language testing, syllabus design, vocabulary learning, teaching and material development. Vocabulary strongly relates to reading comprehension, intelligence, and general ability. As students learn to read, they must also learn to decode print. But they also must have a vocabulary base (word knowledge) in order to make sense of what they decode.

## Conclusion

The problem of vocabulary acquisition by the schoolchildren learning English has always been one of the most difficult areas of foreign language learning.

On the basis of the research we came to the following conclusions:

a) the selection of the vocabulary for each grade should be based on the proper scientific principles of vocabulary selection;

b) while presenting the vocabulary we should work out the effective strategies for conveying the meaning of words to our schoolchildren;

c) the productive way of vocabulary acquisition is, perhaps, guessing the meaning of words from the context as the context is the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning;

d) as the enrichment of the pupils' vocabulary is closely related to the learners' general intelligence, so we strongly recommend pupils of different levels to read much to widen the horizon of their general ability and mental outlook.

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## **Անգլերենի բառապաշարի ուսուցման արդյունավետությունը Իրանի դպրոցներում**

Օտար լեզու ուսումնասիրելիս աշակերտները գրեթե միշտ բողոքում են սովյալ լեզվի բառապաշարից՝ պնդելով, որ այն դժվարացնում է լեզու սովորելու գործընթացը: Սույն ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է պարզել՝ արդյոք նոր բառերի նշանակությունը համատեքստում կռահելը կլուծի խնդիրը: Այդ նպատակով հետազոտողները լեզվի նպատակային ուսուցման “Goal Language Institute” կենտրոնի ուսանողներից կազմեցին երկու փորձնական խմբեր և նրանց տվեցին նախնական թեստեր՝ ընտրելու գիտելիքի միևնույն մակարդակն ունեցողներ աշակերտների: Մի խմբում կիրառվեց նոր բառերի իմաստը ըստ համատեքստի կռահելու մեթոդը, իսկ մյուսում՝ բառապաշարը բառարանով սովորելու ավանդական մեթոդը: Փորձնական դասարնթացից հետո խմբերին նորից հանձնարարվեցին միանման թեստեր՝ պարզելու նրանց առաջընթացը, ինչպես նաև նոր բառապաշարի յուրացումը: Սույն ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է պարզել բառապաշարի ուսուցման վրա կարճ պատմվածքների կիրառման ազդեցությունը՝ գուգահեռներ անցկացնելով բառապաշարը բառարանով սովորելու և ըստ համատեքստի կռահելու մեթոդների միջև: Բանալի բառեր, ըստ համատեքստի կռահում, բառարանի կիրառում, կարճ պատմվածքներ, բառապաշարի ուսուցանում:

## **Стратегия обучения словарю на уроках английского языка в школах Ирана**

В статье рассматривается проблема обучения английскому словарю в средних школах Ирана. Владение лексикой каждого урока учебника представляет собой сложный процесс в силу большого различия культур, языковой системы и существующей системы упражнений. С целью выявления наиболее эффективных путей введения новой лексики было проведено экспериментальное обучение целенаправленное на определение наиболее эффективного результата овладения новой лексикой. В результате было установлено, что изучение лексики в контексте наиболее эффективный путь овладения и сохранения лексики в памяти.