

The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners Rote Learning Strategy Use and Their Level of Proficiency

Samira Hayati Samian

Department of English, University of Isfahan, Iran

Email: Sr.hayati.2006@gmail.com

Mansoor Tavakoli

Department of English, University of Isfahan, Iran

Email: mr.tavakoli14@gmail.com

Abstract—The purpose of this study was to investigate the Iranian EFL learner's rote learning (RL) strategy use among vocabulary learning strategies. It also intended to find out whether the students' level of L2 proficiency would affect the pattern of their rote learning strategy use. To conduct the study, fifty Iranian EFL learners, studying English at the private language institute, were selected to participate in the experiment, and then, they were divided into low and high intermediate levels based on their scores on FCE test. Two instruments were used to collect the needed data, i.e., a vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire, a vocabulary test. The vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire and the vocabulary test were administered in two consecutive weeks and students completed them in the classroom. The results indicated that Iranian EFL learners used rote learning strategies more frequently than other categories of memory strategy. Besides, the results showed that there was some statistically significant difference between high and low-intermediate learners regarding their rote learning strategy use.

Index Terms—Iranian EFL learners, rote learning strategy (RL), level of proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign. Given the difficulties of vocabulary learning in a second or foreign language (L2), along with the obvious necessity of trying to overcome them, one would expect that vocabulary instruction would be at the top of the agenda for language teachers. However, the opposite is often the case. That is, vocabulary is not explicitly taught in most language classes, and students are expected to "pick up" vocabulary on their own without any guidance (Oxford and Crookall, 1989). Many instances of so-called vocabulary instruction involve merely giving students lists of words to memorize or providing limited practice opportunities, with no further assistance to the often overwhelmed learner.

In order to learn a language and specially its lexicon, learners should make well use of language learning strategies. Cohen (1998, p. 4) defines language learning and language use strategies as those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning and use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about the language.

Among language learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategy is one of the most important areas of investigation because of the great importance of vocabulary. However, one of the first problems a foreign language learner encounters is how to learn the enormous number of vocabulary items. The first and easiest strategy people usually use is repeating new vocabulary items until they can remember them. This strategy is called rote learning. Rote learning is learning in "a mechanical way without thought of meaning" (Macquarie Dictionary quoted from Biggs 1997, p.1). Whether positive or negative, it is used by many language learners to learn language and particularly vocabulary items.

The purpose of this study is to investigate rote learning strategy use among the English vocabulary learning strategies used by high-intermediate and low-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Besides, the study examined if there was any relationship between students' rote learning strategy use and their level of L2 proficiency.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner. However, teaching and learning vocabulary were neglected during a long period of time making it the Cinderella amongst all the language components required when learning a language. It was mostly because of certain dominant teaching approaches in the 1940's until the 1960's. The theories underlying these approaches such as structural linguistics (Fries, 1945) and generative transformational linguistics (Chomsky, 1957) focused on teaching grammatical and phonological structures

as well as emphasized on grammatical rules respectively. It was thought that when the learners have learned the structural frames and the grammatical rules, they will then be able to fill in the lexical items as needed. The teaching approach proposed by Hymes (1972) which emphasized communicative competence similarly identified vocabulary as secondary to functional language use. There was not much concern about the role of vocabulary because there was the belief that vocabulary would take care of themselves during language learning (Rojas 2008). However, second language (L2) acquisition depends crucially on the development of a strong vocabulary and calls for helping learners improve the way they go about learning vocabulary have been made on a number of grounds. Sokmen (1997, p. 225) 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". In view of this, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in second language pedagogy and research.

The word *vocabulary* usually connotes word lists, and *vocabulary learning strategies* (VLS) can be considered a subset of general learning strategies in second language acquisition which are receiving more attention since the late 1970s and their investigation has advanced our understanding of the processes learners use to develop their skills in a second or foreign language. Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies can be defined as 'specific plans used by learners to learn foreign or second language vocabulary'. Nation (2001, p.217) maintains that a strategy would need to a) involve choice, that is, there are several strategies to choose from; b) be complex, that is, there are several steps to learn; c) require knowledge and benefit from training; and d) increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use.

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, p. 223).

The biggest benefit obtained from various kinds of learning strategies, including vocabulary learning strategies, is the fact that these strategies enable learners to take more control of their own process of learning so that students can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szabó 2000). Accordingly, these strategies foster "learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction" (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p. 291). When learners are aware of a wide range of various vocabulary learning strategies, they can decide upon how they would like to deal with learning the new vocabulary items. A good knowledge of the strategies and the ability to apply them in suitable situations might considerably simplify the learning process of new vocabulary for students, for instance, independence in selecting which words to study results in better recall of the words than when the words are chosen by someone else. (Ranalli, 2003, p. 9) For Nation (1990; 2001), the most important way to learn vocabulary is learners using strategies independently of a teacher. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (1995), 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. That is, different learners apply different kinds of strategies that work for them, for example, some learners may repeat the new words several times or do different vocabulary exercises to learn the new words. This fact echoes learners' need to develop their knowledge of different kinds of strategies.

There have also been attempts to develop taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies. Schmitt (1997) collected 58 of them from a variety of sources, including student questionnaires, literature reviews of vocabulary references and textbooks, and introspection. He then organized these using categories inspired by Oxford's inventory of general language learning strategies (1990), with some modifications. He proposed five strategy groups for learning vocabulary, including two major components: (a) Discovery Strategies, which are used to determine the initial meanings of words when learners first encounter them, such as Determination Strategies (DET) and Social Strategies (SOC). (b) Consolidation Strategies, which are used to consolidate the meanings when learners come across the words again. This category includes: Memory Strategies (MEM), Cognitive Strategies (COG), and Metacognitive Strategies (MET).

A number of significant research studies have investigated how learners use vocabulary learning strategies. Some of these have attempted to determine which strategies learners use and which they consider helpful.

In another study, Kudo (1999) investigated the frequency use of vocabulary learning strategies by three hundred and twenty-five Japanese senior high school students. His findings indicated that participants did not actively use VLS, nor did they know about so many strategies for learning vocabulary.

As to domestic studies on vocabulary learning strategies, Lu (2002) explored the effects of instruction of the selected vocabulary learning strategies for junior high school students of different levels of English proficiency. The results showed that the subjects of different English proficiency indeed benefited from the instruction of vocabulary learning strategies. She also advised that English teachers were encouraged to integrate the vocabulary learning strategy training into their syllabus so as to facilitate the learners' L2 learning.

Gu's (2003) detailed case studies on the VLS of two successful Chinese EFL students (who were not English majors) used reading tasks, think-aloud protocols, and interviews in order to document their observed use of VLS. Building on their preferred learning styles (auditory and visual), Gu's participants were highly motivated and employed a range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and approaches in their EFL vocabulary learning. Gu (2003) concluded that the combination of these strategies and approaches created a 'vocabulary-learning art' in which each participant exhibited

“...the flexible and skillful analysis, choice, deployment, execution, and orchestration of all strategies at their disposal in accordance with their own preferred style of learning” (p. 99).

Hamzah et al. (2009) investigated the undergraduate Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and its relation to the learners' vocabulary size. The findings of this study revealed that Iranian EFL learners are medium strategy users. Although all five categories of vocabulary learning strategies were reported, all of them had been used at a medium level. In addition, Iranian EFL learners revealed more interest in discovering the meaning of new words – determination strategy- rather than other categories of strategies which are mostly used to retain the meaning of new words. Among the strategies used to retain the meaning of new word, memory strategies were used more frequently than social strategies.

In some studies, rote learning has been regarded as one of vocabulary learning strategies since it is used by many language learners. For example, Hong Kong students learned meaningfully, then memorized the result to cope with examination requirements (Tang 1991). Generally, beliefs about RL can be divided into two broad categories of negative and positive. Negative beliefs focus on practical aspects while positive beliefs are based on explanation of its values. In some cultures, RL is considered as a preference and an effective way of getting basic and fundamental knowledge in the initial stages of language learning. The positive beliefs about RL also suggest that RL does not necessarily have to be meaningless repetition: it may help consolidate knowledge and deepen understanding. Written and verbal repetition, repeatedly writing or saying a word over and over again, are common strategies in many parts of the world. They are so entrenched that students often resist giving them up to try other ones (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990).

III. THE PRESENT STUDY

Having reviewed previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies and rote learning, this study was conducted in an EFL context, Iran, to address the following questions:

1. Do Iranian EFL learners use rote learning strategies more than other memory strategies?
2. Is there any relationship between rote learning strategy use and Iranian learners' language proficiency?

IV. METHOD

A. Participants

The population from which the participants were selected included the EFL learners who were enrolled in a language institute in Isfahan. To divide the participants into high and low intermediate levels, first the FCE was given to them, and then based on their scores fifty students were selected. As a result, twenty five high-intermediate level students (11 female and 14 male) and twenty five low- intermediate level students (16 female and 9 male) participated in this study. The participants were all informed that the study was for research purposes only and they were assured that their identities would be kept anonymous.

B. Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study: FCE test, a vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire and a vocabulary test. The reason for the use of FCE test was twofold: first to select the intended participants, and second to divide them into low and high-intermediate levels. Students were asked to circle the numbers of the Likert scale in the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire and answer the questions of the vocabulary test.

C. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in two consecutive weeks. In the first week, the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire was distributed and the students were asked to read the statements carefully and complete the questionnaire in the class. The vocabulary test was distributed in the second week and the students did without consulting the dictionary. Again it was explained for the students that the test results would have no influence upon their final marks.

D. Data Analysis Procedure

In order to analyze the data, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 10.00 was used to calculate. First, to organize and summarize the students' responses in the questionnaire descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were calculated to indicate the students' use of rote learning strategies. Next, the high- intermediate and low-intermediate students' scores in the vocabulary test were analyzed and the means and standard deviations were calculated. Finally, chi-square analysis was also done to see whether any significant difference existed between the high- proficient and low- proficient learners regarding their rote learning strategy use.

V. RESULTS

The vocabulary learning questionnaire focused on different categories of memory strategies (rote learning; creating mental linkages; applying images and sounds and reviewing well) in vocabulary learning. To answer the first research question, the mean and standard deviation of all students' responses were calculated irrespective of their proficiency

group. To do this, the responses, i.e., Strongly agree (5points), Agree (4points), No opinion (3points), Disagree (2points), and Strongly disagree (1point), for each category of statements were directly fed into SPSS. The results of the descriptive analysis of the responses suggest that Iranian EFL learners use rote learning strategies more than other sub-categories of memory strategies for vocabulary learning. Table 4-1 presents the descriptive statistics of students' answers in descending order by their mean values.

TABLE 4-1.
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE RESPONSES OF ALL STUDENTS IN VOCABULARY LEARNING QUESTIONNAIRE

Strategy category	Rank	Mean	SD
Rote learning strategy	1	3.98	.87
Reviewing well	2	3.21	.94
Creating mental linkages	3	2.87	1.1
Applying images and sounds	4	2.11	.91
Total		3.42	1.09

As it is illustrated in the Table above, rote learning strategies had the top rank among all categories of memory strategies, $M=3.98$, followed by reviewing well $M=3.21$, creating mental linkages $M=2.87$, and finally applying images and sounds $M=2.11$. The percentage of each of these strategy categories is shown in the pie chart below:

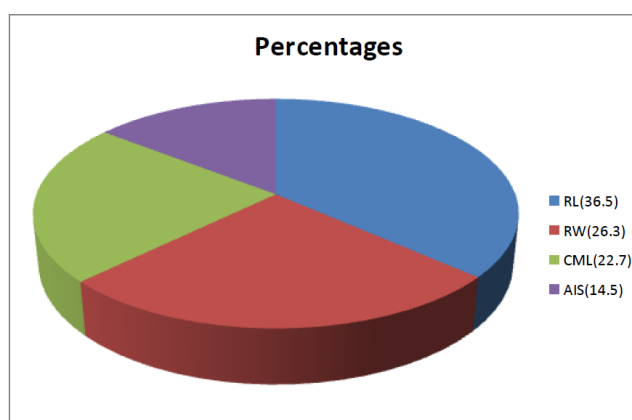


Figure 4.1. Percentages of usage of the 4 memory strategies

As it is obvious in the figure above, rote learning has the highest percentage among all the memory strategy categories.

The students' vocabulary tests were corrected and scored. All of the students' scores were fed into SPSS and the descriptive statistics of them were calculated. Tables 4-2 and 4-3 show the results:

TABLE 4-2.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF HIGH-INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS' TEST SCORES

Number	30
Mean	22.2
Median	20
Mode	19
Std. Deviation	4.9
Range	13
Minimum	14
Maximum	27

TABLE 4-3.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF LOW-INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS' TEST SCORES

Number	30
Mean	18
Median	14
Mode	12
Std. Deviation	7.4
Range	14
Minimum	11
Maximum	25

In order to investigate any relationships between rote learning strategy use and the students' language proficiency, chi-square was calculated. Table-2 shows its results:

TABLE 4-2.
CHI-SQUARE TEST

	Category	
Chi-Square(a)	11.286	
df	4	
Asymp. Sig.	.023	

The probability value, $p = .023$ and it is less than $.05$, therefore, the result is significant. According to the results, there was some statistically significant difference in rote learning strategy use of high- intermediate and low-intermediate students.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a result of data analysis, a number of findings emerged that will be delineated and discussed in this section. A descriptive analysis of the responses of the subjects of both proficiency groups to the statements of the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire to elicit the respondents' opinions about memory strategies in EFL vocabulary learning suggests that Iranian EFL learners think that of all the memory strategies for vocabulary learning, RL strategies were preferable. The mean of the RL strategy is the highest of the 4 MSs categories ($M = 3.98$), followed by reviewing well ($M = 3.21$); creating mental linkages ($M = 2.87$); and applying images and sounds ($M = 2.11$). This finding is consistent with that of Li's study (2004). In that study, the Chinese learners preferred rote learning strategies to other categories of memory strategies and believed it is the most helpful strategy in vocabulary learning. According to Li (2004) the learners' preference for rote learning may be attributed to such factors like 'Chinese educational/cultural background, EFL environment, traditional habit, national situation/examination demand, Chinese linguistic background/the way of learning mother tongue, and failure to try out "best" strategies.

It seems that the two factors 'educational background and failure to try out "best" strategies' may be the probable reasons for Iranian EFL learners' adherence to rote learning strategies. The educational system in Iran and our course books guide the learners toward rote learning strategies. Moreover, Iranian learners show reluctance to trying new strategies and strategy training.

The use of different types and numbers of strategies may also depend on the learner and setting in which learning occurs and the language task to be completed, suggesting a need for more studies on different learners in different settings. Overall, the results of the first research question supported Politzer and McGroarty's (1985) and O'Malley and Chamots' studies (1990) who found that students from Asian backgrounds prefer rote learning and language rules as opposed to more communicative strategies.

The quantitative results of the second research question, being in line with most studies found in the literature today (e.g Ahmed, 1989; Dehghan and Yamini, 2005; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Kung, 2004; Lawson & Hogben, 1996; Li, 2004; Sanaoui, 1995; Sung, 2006; Wang, 2004), showed a significant difference between the two proficiency groups in regards to their vocabulary learning strategy use especially their rote learning strategy use. The number of rote learning strategies used by the subjects of the two groups makes it evident that the high-intermediate subjects did not differ in the number of strategies they used in comparison to the low-intermediate subjects; however, the subjects of these two proficiency groups differed in the way they combined the strategies while learning the vocabularies. Thus, the results obtained from the high-intermediate and low-intermediate students' questionnaire showed that the high-proficient subjects considered rote learning strategies as one of the ways for learning vocabulary and combined it with other strategies, whereas low- proficient subjects regarded rote learning strategies as the best and the most fundamental strategy and tried to rely on it to a large extent. The least frequently used strategy was applying images and sounds for both groups of subjects.

The aforementioned data provided a general insight into the overall vocabulary learning strategy use of high-intermediate and low-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. It was found that for students of these two groups rote learning strategies were the first priority while dealing with vocabulary. It was observed that reviewing well was the students' second priority and it may mean that if rote learning strategies did not work well in learning the new vocabulary items, the students may resort to these kinds of strategies that are very close to rote learning strategies in practice.

The findings in this study have suggested some implications which might be considered for future research, and which are of significance to educators and policymakers as well as to teachers and researchers. First and foremost, the results could imply the need for classroom pedagogy to explicitly integrate vocabulary learning strategies instruction for different proficiency level students and students are supposed to be introduced the importance of vocabulary learning strategies in the process of language learning. Since vocabulary learning strategies help students use the target language actively, it is very critical for students to comprehend the values of using strategies in vocabulary learning.

Second, it is very urgent for teachers to realize that not all strategies are suitable for all learners due to individual differences. Take gender, language competence and majors for instance. Male and female students may have different preferences for strategy use; students at different competence levels may employ diverse vocabulary learning strategies; students from different majors or schools may favor different strategy use. Thus, if teachers have a better understanding of their students' preference of strategy choices, they may try to instruct them how to select a few strategies besides their own.

Limitations are an integral part of all research studies and this study is not an exception in this regard. Based on the limitations of the study, the following recommendations were made for further research.

First, in order to obtain different types of vocabulary learning strategy use, and to make the study more representative, further researches involving participants of different grades, genders, majors, and universities in other areas should be conducted.

Next, in addition to the impact of English proficiency on vocabulary learning strategy use, the effects of other affective factors such as attitudes, motivation, learning style, tolerance of ambiguity, and anxiety on vocabulary learning can be investigated in the further research.

Finally, other instruments to assess strategy use can be adopted for further relevant studies, such as interviews, directed diaries and classroom observations, which contribute to qualitative research. Moreover, adopting various instruments to gather data help decrease the possible bias in the data collection.

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Samira Hayati Samian has an MA in TEFL. She has been teaching English courses for six years at several institutes. She has already published three articles and presented her papers in three conferences. Her research interests are: reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, and foreign language teaching and learning.

Mansoor Tavakoli has a Ph.D in applied linguistics. He has been teaching TEFL courses for seventeen years at the University of Isfahan. His research interests are: language assessment, second language acquisition, and language teaching methodology. He has also published several articles in these areas.