Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by the High- Proficiency Learners

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning strategies played a significant role in EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. All language learners use their own chosen vocabulary learning strategies; however, appropriateness in selecting strategies can lead them to success. The objectives of the study were to explore the vocabulary learning strategies used by high-proficiency language learners of the Department of English at Jagannath University, Bangladesh, and to describe the reasons behind choosing these strategies. A mixed-methods approach was used. Thirteen high achiever undergraduate students of the Department of English, Jagannath University, Bangladesh, participated in this research. An adaptation of Schmitt's (1997) questionnaire, learners' scores, and interviews were used as instruments to collect data. The result showed that the Cognitive (Consolidation) Strategy Category no. 25: "I repeat the word to myself" was the high achievers' most frequently used strategy. The next preferred strategies were Determination (Discovery) Strategies Category no. 4: "I guess the meaning from the context" and Category no. 5: "I use an English-Bangla dictionary." The Memory (Condensation) Strategy Category no. 17: "I connect the word to a personal experience", Cognitive (Condensation) Strategy Category no. 29: "I take notes about the new words", and Determination (Discovery) Strategy Category no. 6: "I use an English dictionary" were in the third position. These strategies ensured their spontaneous learning and aided them in becoming autonomous learners. The findings of this study will contribute to learners, teachers, and researchers.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning strategies play a significant role in EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. According to Schmitt (1997) One approach of facilitating vocabulary learning that has attracted increasing attention is vocabulary learning strategies (Rahman & Weda, 2019; Andini et al., 2022). All language learners use their own chosen vocabulary learning strategies; however, appropriateness in selecting strategies can lead them to success (Prihandoko et al., 2022; Hasnia et al., 2022). Insufficient expertise in vocabulary may lead EFL learners to anxiety. Consequently, they hesitate to proceed, and these situations seem to them as delving into an ocean of uncertainty. On the other hand, successful learners' preferences make them adept users in vocabulary learning and vocabulary deployment (Rahman et al., 2019; Prihandoko et al., 2022).

In case of vocabulary acquisition, good language learners apply a few techniques (Carter & McCarthy, 2014). In "What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us", Rubin (1975) defined the term "good language learner": "The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser (45) … has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from a communication (46) … is often not inhibited … He may practice pronouncing words or making up sentences. He initiates conversations with the teacher or fellow students in the target language. He is willing to repeat … [he] monitors his own and the speech of others … [he] attends to meaning (47)". A high achiever learner knows the strategies to achieve success in the academic sector and strives accordingly.

Schmitt's taxonomy (1997) classified vocabulary learning strategies as Discovery and Consolidation Strategies. When the learners find a word for the first time, they resort to a few strategies to determine the meaning of the word. These are Discovery Strategies (Determination and Social Strategies). When they encounter a new word, they determine strategies. These are Determination Strategies. When learners seek the help of others to find out the meaning of a new word, they are termed as Social (Discovery) Strategies. When they find the same word again, they use several

Consolidation Strategies (i.e., Cognitive, Metacognitive, Memory, and Social). Cognitive Strategies are related to learners' knowledge but are not related to their mental process. Metacognitive Strategies control and evaluate the learning procedures of the learners. When learners find out the meaning of a word by interacting with others, these are called Social (Consolidation) Strategies. Memory Strategies deal with learners' ability to relate the word to remember its meaning by using past knowledge. The mental process is an important factor here. Memory strategies "involve relating the word to be retained with some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery, or grouping" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 211).

The study of Gu and Johnson (1996) showed that successful language learners are oriented to use vocabulary learning strategies extensively. Brown and Payne (1994, as cited in Hatch & Brown, 1995, p. 373) maintained that there are five steps for vocabulary acquisition: "(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 (5) using the words". Moreover, Gu (2018) argued that "The appropriate choice and deployment of strategies can make a big difference in determining if vocabulary learning becomes an efficient or inefficient, and even pleasant or frustrating experience". The successful learners learnt words in context and consulted the dictionary frequently (Ahmed, 1989).

A learner can try heart and soul to be adept in vocabulary learning and become an autonomous learner. Adam and Magfirah (2022) found in their study that although the students of Khairun University, Indonesia, deployed all kinds of vocabulary learning strategies, Memory and Cognitive strategies were the most frequently used.

Research on vocabulary learning strategies has been conducted in Bangladesh also. Arif (2021) found in his study that the learners preferred to use contextualization, English-to-Bangla translation, and synonyms when they tried to remember new words. The learners also mentioned that vocabulary retention was more manageable, which they encountered in academic study and social media. The studies of Jahan and Jahan (2011) and Hoque (2017) revealed that ineffective teaching techniques impacted learners' vocabulary use. Bristi's (2015) study showed that the tertiary-level students of United International University used Determination strategies most frequently. They moderately used Social, Memory, and Metacognitive strategies. The least frequently used strategies were Cognitive strategies. In Bangladesh, several researchers studied the vocabulary learning strategies employed by language learners. However, no research has been done on the high achievers' use of vocabulary learning strategies at Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. This study will provide insight to the learners, teachers, and researchers.

The objectives of the study are to explore the vocabulary learning strategies used by high-proficiency language learners of the Department of English at Jagannath University, Bangladesh, and to describe the reasons behind choosing these strategies.

2. Methodology

Thirteen high achiever undergraduate students of the Department of English, Jagannath University, Bangladesh, participated in this research. The age of participants was between 20-22 years. The study was conducted in 2022.

In this research, a mixed-methods approach was used. An adaptation of Schmitt's questionnaire, learners' scores, and interviews were used as instruments to collect data. A 38-item questionnaire was used in this study to determine the learners' vocabulary learning strategies which were adapted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. That was a widely used questionnaire used in numerous studies worldwide (Elzubier, 2016). It had 5 point Likert-type scale.

The researcher distributed the questionnaire among the high achievers to choose their preferred strategies from "Always use it", "Often use it", "Sometimes use it", "Almost never use it", and "Never use it". After the completion of the task, the participants submitted the filled-up questionnaires. Learners' most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies were determined by the points achieved by the strategies. Descriptive statistics were used in data analysis. The purposive sampling method was used in this study. The learners whose score on the language course of last semester final examination was 3.50 or above were high achievers on a scale of 4. The questionnaire was distributed among the participants to fill up. The researcher interviewed the learners on the basis of the questions from Schmitt's questionnaire, which was recorded.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings revealed the preferred vocabulary learning strategies of the high achievers.

Table 1. Frequency of Use of the Determination (Discovery) Strategies

No.	Determination (Discovery) Strategies	Always use it	%	Often use it	%	Sometimes use it	%	Almost never use it	%	Never use it	%
1.	I study the word's part-of-speech.	4	30.76	2	15.38	3	23.07	2	15.38	2	15.38
2.	I study the word's root, prefixes and suffixes.	2	15.38	4	30.76	2	15.38	3	23.07	2	15.38
3.	I look at pictures or gestures to understand meaning.	5	38.46	6	46.15	2	15.38	0	0	0	0
4.	I guess the meaning from the context.	9	69.23	4	30.76	0	0	0	0	0	0
5.	I use an English-Bangla dictionary.	9	69.23	0	0	4	30.76	0	0	0	0
6.	I use an English dictionary.	8	61.53	1	7.69	4	30.76	0	0	0	0

Table 1 shows that the high achievers used two Determination (Discovery) Strategies most frequently, which were Category no. 4: "I guess the meaning from the context" and Category no. 5: "I use an English-Bangla dictionary". The following preferred category was "I use an English dictionary".

Table 2. Frequency of Use of the Social (Discovery) Strategies

No.	Social (Discovery) Strategies	Always use it	%	Often use it	%	Sometimes use it	%	Almost never use it	%	Never use it	%
7.	I ask a teacher for Bengali translation.	4	30.76	1	7.69	3	23.07	1	7.69	4	30.76
8.	I ask a teacher for a paraphrase or synonym.	1	7.69	2	15.38	7	53.84	0	0	3	23.07
9.	I ask a teacher for a sentence using the new word.	4	30.76	3	23.07	4	30.76	1	7.69	1	7.69
10.	I ask my classmates.	6	46.15	5	38.46	2	15.38	0	0	0	0
11.	I learn the meaning in group work.	2	15.38	4	30.76	5	38.46	1	7.69	1	7.69

Table 2 showed that the high achievers' most preferred Social (Discovery) Strategy is Category no. 10: "I ask my classmates".

Table 3. Frequency of Use of the Social (Consolidation) Strategies

No.	Social (Discovery) Strategies	Always use it	%	Often use it	%	Sometimes use it	%	Almost never use it	%	Never use it	%
12.	I ask a teacher for Bengali translation.	2	15.38	3	23.07	5	38.46	1	7.69	2	15.38
13.	I ask a teacher for a paraphrase or synonym.	2	15.38	2	15.38	2	15.38	2	15.38	5	38.46
14.	I ask a teacher for a sentence using the new word.	3	23.07	5	38.46	2	15.38	2	15.38	1	7.69

Table 3 showed that the high achievers most frequently used a Social (Consolidation) Strategy: Category no. 14: "I ask a teacher for a sentence using the new word."

Table 4. Frequency of Use of the Memory (Consolidation) Strategies

No.	Memory (Consolidation) Strategies	Always use it	%	Often use it	%	Sometimes use it	%	Almost never use it	%	Never use it	%
15.	I study the word with a pictorial representation of its meaning.	3	23.07	5	38.46	2	15.38	2	15.38	1	7.69
16.	I imagine the word's meaning.	3	23.07	7	53.84	3	23.07	0	0	0	0
17.	I connect the word to a personal experience.	8	61.53	4	30.76	1	7.69	0	0	0	0
18.	I use semantic maps.	2	15.38	1	7.69	6	46.15	2	15.38	2	15.38
19.	I group the words together to study them.	3	23.07	4	30.76	2	15.38	0	0	4	31
20.	I use the new word in a sentence.	2	15.38	4	30.76	5	38.46	0	0	2	15.38
21.	I study the spelling of the word.	1	7.69	0	0	1	7.69	0	0	1	7.69
22.	I say the new word aloud.	6	46.15	3	23.07	3	23.07	1	7.69	0	0
23.	I draw a line around	5	38.46	4	30.76	3	23.07	0	0	1	7.69

	the word.									
24.	I use physical action when studying words.	4	30.76	3	23.07	3	23.07	1	7.69	2	15.38

Table 4 shows that the good learners most frequently employed a Memory (Consolidation) Strategy, Category no. 17: "I connect the word to a personal experience." The next category was Category no. 22: "I say the word aloud".

Table 5. Frequency of Use of the Cognitive (Consolidation) Strategies

No.	Cognitive (Consolidation) Strategies	Always use it	%	Often use it	%	Sometimes use it	%	Almost never use it	%	Never use it	%
25.	I repeat the word to myself.	11	84.61	1	7.69	1	7.69	0	0	0	0
26.	I write the word many times.	7	53.84	2	15.38	3	23.07	1	7.69	0	0
27.	I use word lists.	4	30.76	4	30.76	2	15.38	1	7.69	2	15.38
28.	I use flash cards.	0	0	1	7.69	1	7.69	2	15.38	9	69.23
29.	I take notes about the new words.	8	61.53	3	23.07	0	0	1	7.69	1	7.69
30.	I use the vocabulary section of my textbook.	4	30.76	3	23.07	4	30.76	1	7.69	1	7.69
31.	I listen to the tape of word lists.	2	15.38	0	0	4	30.76	2	15.38	5	38.46
32.	I put English labels on physical objects.	3	23.07	3	23.07	3	23.07	2	15.38	2	15.38
33.	I keep a vocabulary notebook.	3	23.07	3	23.07	3	23.07	2	15.38	2	15.38

Table 5 showed that the successful learners preferred the following Cognitive (Consolidation) Strategy Category no. 25: "I repeat the word to myself." The second frequently used strategy was Category no. 29: "I take notes about the new words" and Category no. 26: "I write the word many times".

Table 6. Frequency of Use of the Metacognitive (Consolidation) Strategies

No.	Metacognitive (Consolidation) Strategies	Always use it	%	Often use it	%	Sometimes use it	%	Almost never use it	%	Never use it	%
34.	I use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.) to study the words.	4	30.76	4	30.76	4	30.76	0	0	1	7.69
35.	I test myself with word	1	7.69	3	23.07	4	30.76	0	0	5	38.46

	tests.									
36.	I develop a schedule to review the words at various intervals.	3	23.07	1	7.69	3	23.07	3	23.07	3	23.07
37.	I skip or pass the new word.	0	0	2	15.38	3	23.07	1	7.69	7	53.84
38.	I continue to study the word over time.	6	46.15	2	15.38	4	30.76	0	0	1	7.69

Table 6 showed that the high achievers' most frequently used Metacognitive (Consolidation) Strategy was: Category no. 38: "I continue to study the word over time." The second most frequently used strategy was Category no. 34: "I use English language media (songs, movies, newscasts etc.) to study the words".

The data showed that the Cognitive (Consolidation) Strategy Category no. 25: "I repeat the word to myself" was the high achievers' most frequently used strategy. The following preferred strategies were Determination (Discovery) Strategies Category no. 4: "I guess the meaning from the context" and Category no. 5: "I use an English-Bangla dictionary." The Memory (Condensation) Strategy Category no. 17: "I connect the word to a personal experience", Cognitive (Condensation) Strategy Category no. 29: "I take notes about the new words", and Determination (Discovery) Strategy Category no. 6: "I use an English dictionary" were in the third position.

a. The Interview

The interview complemented the quantitative data of this study. Six participants participated in the interview sessions. The results revealed that the good language learners' most frequently used strategy was a repetition of the word to themselves. The next employed strategy was guessing the meaning from the context, using English-Bangla dictionaries, connecting the word to a personal experience, taking notes about the new words, and using English dictionaries. They also preferred the following strategies: imagining the word's meaning ("Often": Memory Strategy, Category no. 16), asking a teacher for a paraphrase or synonym ("Sometimes": Social Strategy, Category no. 8), writing the word many times ("Always": Cognitive Strategy, Category no. 26), asking their classmates ("Always": Social – Discovery Strategy, Category no.10), looking at pictures or gestures to understand the meaning ("Often": Determination Strategy, Category no.3), saying the new word aloud ("Always": Memory Strategy, Category no. 22), continuing to study the word over time ("Always": Metacognitive Strategy, Category no. 38) etc. The interview sessions supported these findings. The participants reported in the following way:

"I can learn any word quickly if I repeat the word silently." (Participant 1)

"In maximum cases, I guess the meaning when I find new words. This happens regularly when I read newspapers". (Participant 2)

"I use a bilingual dictionary which helps me to remember the meaning of the words." (Participant 3)

"When I find a new word during reading or listening, I try to relate it with my life-related incidents. Then it was easier for me to remember the next time." (Participant 4)

"I use the dictionary apps because it is easier for me to find out the meaning instantly." (Participant 5)

"I prefer the hard copy of the monolingual dictionaries because I do not like apps." (Participant 6)

"I do not want to forget any word. For that reason, I repeat the new words again and again." (Participant 2)

"When I find a new word, I note it down. It helps me to learn the word." (Participant 6)

"When I see a word and come to know the meaning of a word, I imagine and visualize the word to retain longer." (Participant 4)

"When I do not understand the meaning of a new word in the classroom, I ask my teacher to help me". (Participant 1)

"I write the word again and again so that I can remember the word." (Participant 2)

"When I feel confused about any word, I ask my classmates to tell me the meaning which is appropriate. In the dictionary, I find a lot of meanings. My friends give me the contextual meaning." (Participant 1)

"I try to find out the meaning of new words through pictures and demonstration." (Participant 6)

"When I pronounce a word, it enters into my ear and consequently, it becomes easier for me to learn." (Participant 4)

"I do not want to forget the newly learnt word, so I study the word continuously. In this way, my brain retains the word for a long time." (Participant 5)

b. Discussion

The research findings showed that the successful learners employed Cognitive Strategy (Category no. 25) "I repeat the word to myself," among all the other strategies most frequently as they found the strategy highly useful for their vocabulary learning. The strategy achieved 84.61 points. In Bangladesh, learners usually memorize their lessons to fulfil the course requirements by following that strategy. The finding is in line with Schmitt's (1997) research result, which shows that the learners used verbal repetition most frequently.

The second frequently used strategy of guessing the meaning of a new word from the context received 69.23 points (Determination - Discovery Strategy, Category no. 4). The tertiary level students have to go through a lot of texts. Sometimes they cannot manage time to consult a dictionary to find out the meaning of a new word. In these situations, they resort to the guessing strategy.

EFL learners face a grave problem in comprehending the meaning of English words by consulting English to English dictionaries as they do not feel comfortable with English. They speak in Bengali, think in Bengali, and communicate with other people in Bengali. Therefore, they can understand the meaning of an English word effectively if they can find a Bengali synonym (Determination - Discovery Strategy, Category no. 5). The strategy also had a high-frequency index of 69.23 points.

The strategy "I connect the word to a personal experience" scored 61.53 points (Memory - Consolidation Strategy, Category no. 17). The learners can recollect the incidents of their lives when they first hear or read the specific word. The strategy helped them to retain the meaning of the word. Nakamura (2000) argued that learners rely on their own experience as there are lesser opportunities to interact with native speakers and lesser contact with the target language for foreign language learners.

The learners took notes about the words they encountered (Cognitive - Consolidation Strategy, Category no. 29). It received 61.53 points. With the help of that in-depth study, it was easier for them to build their vocabulary skills, eventually leading to further retention.

The learners wrote the words several times to retain them in their memory (Cognitive - Consolidation Strategy, Category no. 26). Visual learning helped them to master vocabulary learning. When a learner sees a word with his own eyes, the word occupies a permanent place in his cognition, which he can retrieve when necessary. That strategy got 53.84 points and was in line with Chamot's (1987) findings.

Uttering a word loudly can help a learner to remember that word for a more extended period because he can hear the pronunciation of the word through his own ear (Memory - Consolidation Strategy, Category no. 22). The strategy achieved 46.15 points. It was congruent with Schmitt's research finding, where he found that the learners more frequently used that strategy.

In this study, the strategy where the students asked their classmates the meaning of a new word received 46.15 points (Social-Discovery Strategy, Category no. 10). That was one of the strategies most frequently used by Japanese EFL learners (Schmitt, 1997).

Another strategy, "I continue to study the word over time" (Metacognitive - Consolidation Strategy, Category no. 38) achieved 46.15 points. The learners tried to develop their vocabulary knowledge. For that reason, they revised the words again and again. The result was consistent with Schmitt's (1997) finding, which revealed that Japanese EFL learners employed the strategy fairly frequently during their preparation for their examinations. These strategies ensured their spontaneous learning and aided them in becoming autonomous learners.

4. Conclusion

In this research, the successful learners employed Cognitive (Consolidation) and Determination (Discovery) Strategies most frequently in their everyday activities of language learning because they found the strategies aided them to learn new vocabulary. The findings of this study will contribute to learners, teachers, and researchers. The results revealed effective vocabulary learning strategies employed by good language learners, which can provide insight into the way to success. Eventually, both successful and weaker learners will be benefited from this research. The teachers will understand the learners' techniques; consequently, they will be able to plan the vocabulary instruction procedures effectively. Researchers are expected to conduct a more in-depth study with a larger population on vocabulary learning strategies.

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