



A Comparative Study of Vocabulary Learning Strategies as a Function of by Azerbaijani EFL Learners' Proficiency Levels

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Abstract

In this survey study, a questionnaire including 24 items was designed, developed and validated by the researcher on the construct of vocabulary learning strategies as used by adult EFL learners. In total, 90 Adult Azerbaijani learners of EFL were surveyed via the questionnaire. The participants were divided into three equal groups of elementary, intermediate and advanced learners of EFL. Furthermore, 15 participants were interviewed to obtain complementary data regarding the VLS they used (five participants from each level). The VLSs frequently used by elementary learners included: use of L1, bilingual dictionaries, asking teacher and classmates for word meaning. Intermediate participants' position in terms of using VLS was between the elementary and advanced learners; they used VLS such as monolingual dictionary use, relating words to background knowledge and noting the affixes more than elementary learners but less than advanced learners. Advanced learners used the strategies the most frequently; in particular, they noted the part of speech of the new words, used the new words in their speaking and writing and also used the meta-cognitive strategies to test themselves. The results of the study reveal that proficiency level has an impact on the frequency of using memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Elementary learners used some strategies such using L1, asking peers and teachers for the meaning of new words and bilingual dictionaries more than intermediate and advanced learners. Thus, elementary learners used social strategies more frequently than the other groups, intermediate and advanced learners used memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than the elementary group.

Keywords: proficiency level, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), cognitive, meta-cognitive strategies, memory and activation strategies.

1- Introduction

The problem underscored in this study is the differential use of vocabulary strategies by EFL learners at different levels of proficiency. Indeed, the generic problem which researchers and teachers face in teaching vocabulary is how to teach vocabulary. It is hypothesized that EFL learners might apply different strategies for acquiring new vocabulary. However, it is far from clear whether or not different EFL learners in terms of proficiency level use different vocabulary acquisition strategies. In other words, the problem is that there is a lack of research on the role of proficiency with regard to vocabulary learning strategies. The result is that EFL researchers and teachers do not know whether the same strategies should be taught and given to different EFL learners at different levels of proficiency. Although learner proficiency is a significant construct in SLA theory and research, little research has been carried out on the impact of proficiency level on learning strategy use in general and vocabulary learning strategy use in particular.

Research on vocabulary learning strategies is in its early stages. Researchers have not studied the differential use of vocabulary strategies; that is to say, researchers do not know whether EFL learners change their vocabulary learning strategies as their level of proficiency goes up. Nation (2001) points out that vocabulary learning strategies are part of language learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies. However, the intriguing

issue under discussion in this paper is the differential use of vocabulary learning strategies by EFL learners. This research aims to explore whether learners use different vocabulary acquisition strategies at different levels of proficiency.

The significance of this study is in the identification of the strategies that learners of different proficiency levels use. The motivation beyond this research study is to examine whether learners at different levels of proficiency use different strategies for acquiring vocabulary. Thus, the present study will investigate vocabulary learning strategy use by Iranian learners of EFL at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency. By doing so, the researcher would like to see whether the choice of vocabulary learning strategies can be related to the variable of proficiency level.

1.1. Theoretical foundation and related works

Vocabulary and VLS researchers have made efforts to classify VLS used by L2 learners. Instances of such classifications are the taxonomies proposed by Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001). Gu and Johnson (1996) classify vocabulary learning strategies into the following groups which are illustrated in table 1 below.

A comprehensive inventory of vocabulary learning strategies is developed by Schmitt (1997). He distinguishes the strategies into two groups:

- *Discovery strategies* (used for initial discovery of a word's meaning)
- *Consolidation strategies* (used for remembering words)

Table 1. Classifications of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)

Vocabulary learning Strategies (VLS)			
Metacognitive Selective Attention	Cognitive Guessing	Memory Rehearsal	Activation Using new words in different contexts
Self-initiation	Use of dictionaries	Encoding	
	Note-taking		

Table 2. Taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategy (Schmitt, 1997)

Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning	
DET	Analyze part of speech
DET	Analyze affixes and roots
DET	Check for L1 cognate
DET	Analyze any available pictures or gestures
DET	Guess from textual context
DET	Bilingual dictionary
DET	Monolingual dictionary
DET	Word lists
DET	Flash cards
SOC	Ask teacher for an L1 translation
SOC	Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word
SOC	Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word
SOC	Ask classmates for meaning
SOC	Discover new meaning through group work activity
Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered	
SOC	Study and practice meaning in a group
SOC	Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy
SOC	Interact with native speakers
MEM	Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning
Table 2.3. (continued)	
MEM	Image word's meaning
MEM	Connect word to a personal experience
MEM	Associate the word with its coordinates
MEM	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms

MEM	Use semantic maps
MEM	Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives
MEM	Peg Method
MEM	Loci Method
COG	Verbal repetition
COG	Written repetition
COG	Word lists
Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning	
COG	Flash cards
COG	Take notes in class
COG	Use the vocabulary section in your textbook
COG	Listen to tape of word lists
COG	Put English labels on physical objects
COG	Keep a vocabulary notebook
MET	Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc)
MET	Testing oneself with word tests
MET	Use spaced word practice
MET	Skip or pass new word
MET	Continue to study word over time

The above-mentioned classification of vocabulary learning strategies constitutes the theoretical foundation for conducting the present survey on Turkish learners of EFL. In other words, based on the significance attributed to vocabulary learning strategies in the process of vocabulary learning and enhancement, the present study aims at surveying VLS used by Turkish EFL learners at elementary, intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency.

2. The Study

The present study is considered to be a survey of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by Azerbaijani EFL learners at low, intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency. The goal of the study was to find how new vocabulary items may be learned by adult EFL learners at varying proficiency levels with regard to VLS.

2.1. Research questions and hypotheses

Having underscored the research gap on the relationship between proficiency level and vocabulary strategy use, the researcher attempts to address the following research questions and hypotheses:

1. What are the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by *elementary-level* Azerbaijani EFL learners?

Alternative hypothesis 1 (H₁): Elementary-level Azerbaijani EFL learners use significant vocabulary learning strategies more frequently.

2. What are the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by *intermediate-level* Iranian EFL learners?

Alternative hypothesis 2 (H₂): intermediate-level Iranian EFL learners use significant vocabulary learning strategies more frequently.

3. What are the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by *advanced-level* Azerbaijani EFL learners?

Alternative hypothesis 3 (H₃): advanced-level Iranian EFL learners use significant vocabulary learning strategies more frequently.

2.2. The participants

This paper was aimed at surveying Azerbaijani EFL learners' use of VLS. The participants or respondents of the present study were the source of data collection. In total, 90 participants from three proficiency levels were included in this study. There were equally 30 participants within each group, i.e. 30 elementary, 30 intermediate and 30 advanced learners of EFL. All of them spoke Turkish as mother tongue and English as the foreign language. Furthermore, Farsi was regarded as their second and official language. All the participants had Iranian nationality and were considered to be typical learners of English as a foreign language with average socio-economic characteristics. Both male and female participants were included in the study. However, gender was not controlled as a major variable of focus. The proficiency level of the learners was already determined before the study was conducted and the intact classes were sequenced according to the proficiency level of the learners. However, in order to ascertain that the selected intact groups exactly belonged to the targeted proficiency levels, the researcher administered proficiency tests on the participants.

2.3. Materials of the study

In this paper, it is hypothesized that EFL learners differing in terms of proficiency level might also differ in terms of VLS use. Since the present study is a survey research, there were no pre-tests and post-tests or teaching materials in the study. However, the researcher made use of three kinds of materials in the study:

- Test of Homogeneity: *Cambridge placement test* was used to specify the proficiency level and check the homogeneity of the participants of the three intact groups (see appendix A). aim of using this test was to find an appropriate sample of participants for the study.
- The questionnaire: it was the pivotal material and the data-collection tool used in the study (see appendix B). It was intended to measure the type and frequency of the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by EFL learners at three proficiency levels.
- Interview: interview questions were similar to and were derived from questionnaire items; however, it was to extend questionnaire questions and elicit more in-depth data from EFL learners with regard to EFL learners' use of VLS (see appendix C). It was designed to triangulate the data gathered through the questionnaire. The interview was conducted in the EFL learners' first language (Azerbaijani Turkish).

2.4. Procedures of the study

The survey study was executed in Tabriz, Iran. More precisely, the study was done in Iran Language Institute (ILI). The reason for choosing this educational center was that the EFL learners at ILI were homogenous in terms of proficiency level and they had taken strict placement tests before they started the class. In fact, ILI is a language center which is run by the government and is probably one of the best language institutes in Iran.

At the outset of the study, the researcher informed the targeted EFL learners and participants of the research purpose, got their consent and asked them to cooperate with the researcher. Then, the researcher gave the Cambridge Test of Homogeneity to the participants in order to homogenize them. The tests were scored according to the test results and the participants' were divided into low, intermediate and advanced learners of EFL. While homogenizing the participants, those participants who were too weak or too strong (outliers) were eliminated from the study. The test of homogeneity was given during the first session of the study.

Before giving the questionnaire to the targeted sample participants of the study, the researcher piloted the questionnaire on 15 intermediate EFL learners. The designed questionnaire was given to ELT experts and other researchers so as to improve its validity and reliability. Furthermore, the questionnaire was given to a few participants similar to the target participants to check its reliability. After making the required modifications and revisions on the questionnaire, it was given to the targeted participants of the study. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and gave the required instructions for filling in the questionnaire. It was emphasized that the survey was anonymous and there were no incorrect answers and that the results would be applied for the sake of ELT research and ELT pedagogy.

3. Data analysis and results

This paper reports a survey on two qualitative variables of foreign language proficiency and VLS use. The results of the questionnaire were examined and analyzed item by item. More precisely, frequency and mean frequency of each item across three proficiency levels were investigated in cross-tabulated charts. Furthermore, data triangulation was used through interviews for enriching the results of the questionnaire data.

3.1. Screening the Participants

As mentioned above, since this is a survey of EFL learners' cross-proficiency differences in applying vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), three independent groups, namely, elementary, intermediate and advanced EFL learners were included in the study.

The researcher gave the participants the Cambridge Placement Test. It is a commercially-available test including 70 questions. All the questions were multiple-choice items. According to the criteria used for the placement test, the following score ranges were used to label the proficiency level of the participants:

- Elementary level: 0-30
- Intermediate level: 30-50

- Advanced level: 50-70

The following table shows the descriptive statistics regarding the performance of three independent groups on the Cambridge Placement Test.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for three independent groups on the Cambridge test

Independent Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Elementary Group	30	25.36	0.3012	1.65
Intermediate Group	30	46.76	0.59116	1.67
Advanced group	30	66.56	0.3796	2.07

This table shows mean as the measure of general tendency and SD (standard deviation) and variance as measures of dispersion. The number of participants within each group is equal (30). As the table shows, the groups' mean scores are different from each other. However, to learn whether the existing differences are statistically significant, the researcher conducted inferential statistics. As such, one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) as a parametric statistical procedure was used for analyzing the difference between group means. It is useful in comparing (testing) three or more means (groups or variables) for statistical significance. Hence, after the calculation of descriptive statistics (table 1 above), the researcher conducted inferential statistics as follows.

Table 4. ANOVA comparing three groups' mean scores on Cambridge Test

	Sum of squares	DF	F	P
Between group	25474.4	2	4.66*	0

As shown in this table, the difference between the proficiency levels of the three groups is significant. Thus, the first requirement for comparing the groups' use of VLS is met.

3.2. Checking the reliability of the questionnaire

Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy was used as a starting point and pool of strategies for designing the used questionnaire. Schmitt divided the VLSs into determination strategies and consolidation strategies. Furthermore, one can consider the VLS as direct and indirect strategies; direct strategies include cognitive and memory strategies whereas indirect strategies might refer to social, and metacognitive strategies though the distinction in this case is somehow difficult and overlapping.

The respondents of the study were asked to comment on the ambiguity and clarity of the items and feedback was elicited to improve the wording of the items. Then, after revising the items, the researcher asked the respondents to answer the items. Then, the piloted questionnaire was given to the statistician to check its reliability. Cronbach's Alpha was used as an index of checking the reliability which indicates inner consistency and homogeneity of the items. Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient ranges from 0 to +1.

The more the number of sound and consistent items, the more the reliability coefficient of the scale will be. However, as a rule of thumb, the instrument should have at least 0.70 reliability coefficient. To check the reliability, the researcher had 15 participants complete the Farsi questionnaire and then based on their replies, the reliability of the instrument was analyzed. The average reliability of the questionnaire for the participants of the study was calculated to be 0.75 which indicates that the reliability of the instrument is acceptable and quite desirable.

3.3. Questionnaire items

The following tables show mean frequency and standard deviation for elementary, intermediate and advanced participants' replies to the questionnaire.

Table 5. Mean frequency and SD of elementary EFL respondents' responses to items

Item No	Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Deviation
1	The use of English to Farsi dictionary to check meaning.	30	1	5	4.61	1.53
2	Noting pronunciation helps understand word meaning	30	1	5	2.2	1.61
3	The use of English to English dictionary to check meaning	30	1	5	2.30	1.55
4	Asking peers about the meaning of new words	30	1	5	3.03	1.32
5	Relating the meaning of words to background knowledge	30	1	5	2.66	1.16
6	Learning words in word groups according to topic	30	1	5	3.03	1.24
7	Checking the comparative and superlative form of adjectives	30	1	5	2	1.42
8	Writing new words repeatedly to learn spelling and meaning	30	1	5	3.37	1.15
9	Testing oneself with word list	30	1	5	2.5	1.67
10	Repeating new words loudly to learn its	30	1	5	3.73	1.08

	pronunciation					
11	Learning common prefixes and suffixes and their meanings	۳۰	1	5	2.56	1.75
12	Keeping vocabulary notebooks for reviewing words	۳۰	1	5	3.2	1.21
13	Evaluating and testing quality and rate of my word learning	۳۰	1	5	2.66	1.90
14	Asking the teacher for the synonyms and antonyms of words	۳۰	1	5	2.5	0.83
15	Noticing the context and sentence in which the word appears	۳۰	1	5	2.3	1.08
16	Making sentences with new words	۳۰	1	5	2.7	1.56
17	Using new words in speaking and writing	۳۰	1	5	2.26	1.42
18	Noticing the pictures to learn word meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.36	1.65
19	Paying attention to prefixes, suffixes and word roots	۳۰	1	5	2.23	1.29
20	Noticing the grammar and part of speech of new words	۳۰	1	5	2.5	1.32
21	Ignoring and skipping unimportant and uncommon words	۳۰	1	5	3.41	1.54
22	Using physical actions and gestures to learn word meanings	۳۰	1	5	2.86	1.40
23	Carrying dictionary in pocket or bag for learning meaning	۳۰	1	5	2.3	1.79
24	Using L1 for learning the meaning of new words	۳۰	1	5	3.83	1.58

Table 6. Mean frequency and SD of *intermediate* EFL respondents' responses to items

Item No	Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Deviation
1	The use of English to Farsi dictionary to check meaning.	30	1	5	3.56	1.28
2	Noting pronunciation helps understand word meaning	۳۰	1	5	2.46	1.33
3	The use of English to English dictionary to check meaning	۳۰	1	5	2.86	1.12
4	Asking peers about the meaning of new words	۳۰	1	5	2.69	1.47
5	Relating the meaning of words to background knowledge	۳۰	1	5	2.53	1.68
6	Learning words in word groups according to topic	۳۰	1	5	2.80	1.94
7	Checking the comparative and superlative form of adjectives	۳۰	1	5	2.3	1.20
8	Writing new words repeatedly to learn spelling and meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.33	1.53
9	Testing oneself with word list	۳۰	1	5	3.1	1.44
10	Repeating new words loudly to learn its pronunciation	۳۰	1	5	3.52	1.53
11	Learning common prefixes and suffixes and their meanings	۳۰	1	5	3	1.43
12	Keeping vocabulary notebooks for reviewing words	۳۰	1	5	3.13	1.42
13	Evaluating and testing	۳۰	1	5	3.43	1.54

	quality and rate of my word learning	۳۰	1	5	3.03	1.05
14	Asking the teacher for the synonyms and antonyms of words	۳۰	1	5	2.86	1.46
15	Noticing the context and sentence in which the word appears	۳۰	1	5	3.33	1.47
16	Making sentences with new words	۳۰	1	5	2.96	1.84
17	Using new words in speaking and writing	۳۰	1	5	3.41	1.88
18	Noticing the pictures to learn word meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.4	1.65
19	Paying attention to prefixes, suffixes and word roots	۳۰	1	5	3.26	1.75
20	Noticing the grammar and part of speech of new words	۳۰	1	5	2.86	1.44
21	Ignoring and skipping unimportant and uncommon words	۳۰	1	5	2.8	1.87
22	Using physical actions and gestures to learn word meanings	۳۰	1	5	3.1	1.55
23	Carrying dictionary in pocket or bag for learning meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.36	1.89
24	Using L1 for learning the meaning of new words					

Table 7. Mean frequency and SD of *advanced* EFL respondents' responses to items

Item No	Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Deviation
1	The use of English to Farsi dictionary to check meaning.	30	1	5	2.16	1.30

2	Noting pronunciation helps understand word meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.36	1.29
3	The use of English to English dictionary to check meaning	۳۰	1	5	4	1.45
4	Asking peers about the meaning of new words	۳۰	1	5	2.36	1.31
5	Relating the meaning of words to background knowledge	۳۰	1	5	4.35	1.27
6	Learning words in word groups according to topic	۳۰	1	5	4.58	1.53
7	Checking the comparative and superlative form of adjectives	۳۰	1	5	3.2	1.43
8	Writing new words repeatedly to learn spelling and meaning	۳۰	1	5	2.86	1.81
9	Testing oneself with word list	۳۰	1	5	3.6	1.28
10	Repeating new words loudly to learn its pronunciation	۳۰	1	5	3.5	1.32
11	Learning common prefixes and suffixes and their meanings	۳۰	1	5	2.87	1.65
12	Keeping vocabulary notebooks for reviewing words	۳۰	1	5	3	1.94
13	Evaluating and testing quality and rate of my word learning	۳۰	1	5	3.63	1.37
14	Asking the teacher for the synonyms and antonyms of words	۳۰	1	5	3.13	1.54
15	Noticing the context and sentence in	۳۰	1	5	4	1.94

	which the word appears					
16	Making sentences with new words	۳۰	1	5	3.67	1.97
17	Using new words in speaking and writing	۳۰	1	5	3	1.02
18	Noticing the pictures to learn word meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.5	1.98
19	Paying attention to prefixes, suffixes and word roots	۳۰	1	5	3.96	1.32
20	Noticing the grammar and part of speech of new words	۳۰	1	5	3.83	1.89
21	Ignoring and skipping unimportant and uncommon words	۳۰	1	5	2.36	1.56
22	Using physical actions and gestures to learn word meanings	۳۰	1	5	3.03	1.66
23	Carrying dictionary in pocket or bag for learning meaning	۳۰	1	5	3.4	1.44
24	Using L1 for learning the meaning of new words	۳۰	1	5	2.83	1.50

The first research question was concerned with the identification of the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). In order to identify the frequency of the VLS used by elementary, intermediate and advanced participants, the percentage of the answers were calculated. Since each item represents an independent strategy in its own right, item-by-item analysis of the data was taken into consideration which is given below.

Table 8. Cross-tabulation for question 1

Q1	Using bilingual dictionaries to check word meaning											
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total	
Elementary	1	3.3 %	4	13.33 %	6	20 %	6	20 %	13	43.3 %	30	100 %
Intermediate	2	6.66 %	5	16.66 %	10	33.33 %	10	33 %	3	10 %	30	100 %
Advanced	5	16.6 %	11	36.66 %	6	20 %	6	20 %	4	13.3 %	30	100 %

As the table shows the frequency distribution for the three groups, it is the elementary learners who use bilingual dictionaries more than the intermediate and advanced learners. More precisely, advanced learners sometimes use this kind of dictionaries and intermediate learners fall between elementary and advanced learners in terms of using bilingual dictionary.

Table 9. Cross-tabulation for question 2

Q2	Paying attention to pronunciation as a key to understand meaning										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	11	36.66 %	8	26.66 %	6	20 %	4	13.33 %	1	3.33 %	30
Intermediate	7	23.33 %	12	40 %	4	13.33 %	4	13.33 %	3	10 %	30
Advanced	3	10 %	5	16.66 %	6	20 %	10	33.33 %	6	20 %	30

This table shows the frequency of the replies to the choices of the second question by three groups. The eye-catching figure for elementary respondents is that 11 out of 30 of them had selected *never* and only one respondent had selected the choice *always*. It means that the frequency of using the pronunciation of new words as a cue for decoding their meaning is so low. On the other hand, more of the intermediate learners (12 responses out of 30) selected the choice *sometimes*. However, ten of the advanced learners often used the pronunciation as a key to word meaning.

Table 10. Cross-tabulation for question 3

Q3	Using monolingual dictionaries										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	8	26.66%	12	40%	5	16.66%	3	10%	2	6.66%	30
Intermediate	5	16.66%	9	30%	6	20%	5	16.66%	5	16.66%	30
Advanced	0	0%	4	13.33%	6	20%	6	20%	14	46.66%	30

Question three was concerned with the use monolingual dictionaries (English to English) to learn word meanings. The elementary learners were the least users of monolingual and advanced learners were the most users of this kind of dictionaries. With regard to intermediate learners, it appears

that they used monolingual dictionaries less than advanced learners but more than elementary learners.

Table 11. Cross-tabulation for question 4

Q4	Asking classmates and peers about the meaning of unknown words										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	4	13.33%	8	26.66%	6	20%	7	23.33%	5	16.66%	30
Intermediate	4	13.33%	1	3.66%	7	23.33%	4	13.33%	3	10%	30
Advanced	9	30%	1	3.33%	5	16.66%	3	10%	3	10%	30

The fourth questions asked the respondents how long they ask their classmates and peer learners about the meaning of unknown and difficult words. As the table illustrates, elementary learners used this strategy more than intermediate and advanced learners. However, there is no marked difference regarding the use of this strategy between elementary and intermediate learners, though advanced learners indicated that they *sometimes* asked their classmates for the meaning of unknown words.

Table 12. Cross-tabulation for question 5

Q5	Relating new words to background knowledge and experiences										
Choices	Never	Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total	
Elementary	9	30%	6	20%	5	16.66%	6	20%	4	13.33%	30
Intermediate	7	23.33%	1	3.33%	7	23.33%	2	6.66%	4	13.33%	30
Advanced	1	3.33%	6	20%	7	23.33%	1	3.33%	6	20%	30

Question five of the instrument measured the frequency of relating word meaning to learners' background knowledge and personal experiences. Nine out of thirty

elementary respondents mentioned that they *never* related word meaning to their background knowledge and experiences and only four of them *always* used this strategy; this means that this group seldom used this strategy. Like elementary participants, intermediate learners did not use this strategy very often. However, more of them (10 participants) *sometimes* used this strategy. in the case of advanced participants, it turned out they related word meaning to their experiences more than elementary and intermediate learners since only one participants *never* used this strategy whereas seven of *usually* used and ten *often* used this strategy.

Table 13. Cross-tabulation for question 6

Q6	Learning vocabulary in groups of related words										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	5	16.66%	6	20%	7	23.33%	7	23.33%	5	16.66%	30
Intermediate	4	13.33%	10	33.33%	7	23.33%	6	20%	3	10%	30
Advanced	2	6.66%	7	23.33%	10	33.33%	5	16.66%	6	20%	30

Question six asked about the frequency of learning words in groups of related vocabulary according to topic and function. Elementary learners had selected all choices with similar frequency. Hence, it is difficult to figure out whether they used this strategy systematically or not but intermediate learners' replies show that they sometimes used this strategy since ten participants had selected the choice *sometimes*. Regarding advanced learners, although they did not always use this strategy, their replies were at the center of the scale; that is, ten advanced respondents *often* used this strategy and seven of them *sometimes* used this strategy.

Table 14. Cross-tabulation for question 7

Q7	Noticing the gradability of adjectives (comparative and superlative forms)										
Choices	Never		Someti mes		Usually		Often		Always		T o t a l
Eleme ntary	14	46.66 %	7	23.33 %	4	13.33 %	4	13.33 %	1	3.33 %	30
Interm ediate	9	30 %	10	33.33 %	6	20 %	3	10 %	2	6.66 %	30
Advan ced	3	10 %	6	20 %	8	26.66 %	8	26.66 %	5	16.66 %	30

Question seven asked the respondents whether or not and how often they notice the comparative and superlative form of the adjectives they learn. Fourteen elementary participants, according to the questionnaire replies, maintained that they never noticed the comparative and

superlative form of the adjective. The intermediate participants' standing was slightly better than elementary learners, i.e. although nine intermediate respondents *never* noticed the comparative and superlative formations of the adjective, still ten of them indicated that they *sometimes* noticed the gradable form of the adjectives while learning their meanings. However, advanced EFL learners used this strategy more frequently than elementary and intermediate learners. Although only five advanced participants indicated that they *always* used this strategy, eight of them mentioned that they *usually* used this strategy and eight others indicated that they *often* used this strategy.

Table 15. Cross-tabulation for question 8

Q8	Writing down new words repeatedly to learn their spelling and meaning										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	0	0%	8	26.6%	7	23.3%	7	23.3%	8	26.6%	30
Intermediate	1	3.33%	7	23.33%	10	33.33%	6	20%	6	20%	30
Advanced	4	13.33%	9	30%	8	26.66%	5	16.66%	4	13.33%	30

Table 16. Cross-tabulation for question 9

Q9	Evaluating word knowledge by checking word lists										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	5	16.66%	1	3.33%	6	20%	4	13.33%	2	6.66%	30
Intermediate	2	6.66%	9	30%	10	33.33%	6	20%	3	10%	30
Advanced	0	0%	4	13.33%	10	33.33%	1	3.33%	6	20%	30

This question asked the participants how often they write the items in trying to learn their meaning and spelling. None of the elementary respondents mentioned that they *never* used this strategy; that is, all elementary participants use this strategy. Equal number of them mentioned that they *usually* and *often* used this strategy (seven of them checked usually and seven *often*). With respect to intermediate

learners, the distribution of the frequency of choices was very similar. Only one intermediate participant *never* used this strategy. Both elementary and intermediate learners appeared to use this strategy with moderately high frequency. As the table shows, advanced respondents used this strategy slightly less frequently than the elementary and advanced participants. Indeed, nine of the advanced participants *sometimes* used this strategy.

This question measured the frequency of using meta-cognitive strategy of using one's word knowledge via word lists. Although participants of all three proficiency groups are aware of their word knowledge, the more proficient learners (intermediate and advanced) increasingly use this strategy more than the elementary participants.

Table 17. Cross-tabulation for question 10

Q10	Repeating words loudly to learn their pronunciations										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	0	0%	5	16.66%	8	26.66%	7	23.33%	10	33.33%	30
Intermediate	0	0%	6	20%	7	23.33%	9	30%	8	26.66%	30
Advanced	1	3.33%	5	16.66%	9	30%	8	26.66%	7	23.33%	30

The analysis of the cells shows that all three groups had very similar responses to the items. Indeed, it is not possible to distinguish the three groups in terms their frequency of using this strategy (repeating the words to learn their pronunciation).

Table 18. Cross-tabulation for question 11

Q11	Learning common prefixes and suffixes										
Choices	Never		Sometimes		Usually		Often		Always		Total
Elementary	6	20%	1	3.33%	6	20%	4	13.33%	3	10%	30
Intermediate	3	10%	7	23.33%	10	33.33%	7	23.33%	3	10%	30
Advanced	0	0%	4	13.33%	10	33.33%	8	26.66%	7	23.33%	30

As the table illustrates, the intermediate and advanced learners use this strategy more than elementary learners. Six of the elementary respondents indicated that they never learn the meaning of common prefixes and suffixes; this number is reduced to three for intermediate learners (three of them chose never). Unlike elementary and intermediate

learners, none of the advanced respondents selected the choice *never*, i.e. the frequency of this option for advanced respondents is zero. In brief, the advanced respondents used this strategy more than elementary and even intermediate respondents. Hence, it might be argued that this vocabulary learning strategy is more typical of advanced learners.

Table 19. Cross-tabulation for question 12

Q12	Keeping vocabulary notebooks for reviewing words										
Ch oi c e s	Never		Someti mes		Usual ly		Often		Always		T o t a l
Ele me n t a r y	2	6.66%	10	33.33%	5	16.66%	6	20.00%	7	23.33%	30
Int er me dia te	3	10%	8	26.66%	7	23.33%	6	20.00%	6	20.00%	30
Ad van ced	2	6.66%	11	36.66%	7	23.33%	5	16.66%	5	16.66%	30

The table above shows the frequency distribution for keeping vocabulary notebook. As it is clear from the table cells, all proficiency groups have similar distribution and it is hard to isolate groups in terms of the frequency of keeping vocabulary notebooks.

Table 20. Cross-tabulation for question 13

Q13	Evaluating and assessing one's quality of vocabulary learning										
Ch oi c e s	Never		Someti mes		Usual ly		Often		Always		T o t a l
Ele me n t a r y	4	13.33%	13	43.33%	6	20.00%	3	10.00%	4	13.33%	30
Int er me dia te	1	3.33%	6	20.00%	7	23.33%	13	43.33%	5	16.66%	30
Ad van ced	0	0%	6	20.00%	8	26.66%	7	23.33%	9	30.00%	30

As the table illustrates, this question measured the frequency of using the meta-cognitive strategy of evaluating one's quality of vocabulary learning. All of the advanced learners used this strategy whereas four elementary and one intermediate learners *never* used this strategy. Nine of the

advanced learners mentioned that they *always* evaluated their vocabulary learning while only five intermediate and four elementary learners *always* evaluated their own vocabulary learning. The cell figures reveal that the frequency of this meta-cognitive strategy is higher for the advanced learners than elementary and intermediate learners.

Table 21. Cross-tabulation for question 14

Q14	Asking the teacher to give synonyms and antonyms for the new words										
Ch oi c e s	Never		Someti mes		Usual ly		Often		Always		T o t a l
Ele me n t a r y	5	16.66%	13	43.33%	6	20.00%	4	13.33%	2	6.66%	30
Int er me dia te	2	6.66%	7	23.33%	12	40.00%	6	20.00%	3	10.00%	30
Ad van ced	1	3.33%	8	26.66%	11	36.66%	6	20.00%	4	13.33%	30

Table 22. Cross-tabulation for question 15

Q15	Noticing the context of new words to guess their meaning										
Ch oi c e s	Never		Someti mes		Usual ly		Often		Always		T o t a l
Ele me n t a r y	8	26.66%	12	40.00%	5	16.66%	3	10.00%	2	6.66%	30
Int er me dia te	5	16.66%	9	30.00%	6	20.00%	5	16.66%	5	16.66%	30
Ad van ced	0	0%	4	13.33%	6	20.00%	6	20.00%	14	46.66%	30

Item fourteen of the questionnaire asked the respondents how often they ask their teacher to give synonyms and antonyms for the new vocabulary items. All groups made use of this vocabulary learning strategy. Indeed, five of the elementary respondents mentioned that they never asked their teachers to tell them synonyms and antonyms of the items while only one advanced learner and intermediate learner never used this strategy. Thirteen elementary respondents indicated that *sometimes* asked the teacher to give synonyms and antonyms for the new words but this figure is lower for the intermediate and advanced

learners. In other words, more of the intermediate and advanced respondents (twelve intermediate and eleven advanced learners) said that they *usually* ask their teachers to give synonyms and antonyms. Hence, it turns out that asking for synonyms and antonyms is not of significance for the elementary learners.

This table shows the respondents' answers to the strategy of using context as a key for guessing the meaning of unknown words. The frequency cells reveal that almost half of the elementary participants (fourteen) *sometimes* use the context of new words to guess their meanings. Only two of them *always* use the context to decode the meaning of words whereas fourteen advanced participants mentioned that they *always* use this strategy. As such, advanced respondents markedly use this strategy much more frequently than elementary learners. When it comes to intermediate learners, they are moderate users of this strategy as nine of them *sometimes* use this strategy, six of them *sally* use this strategy, five of them often use this strategy and the five of them *always* use this strategy.

Table 23. Cross-tabulation for question 16

Q1 6	Making sentences with new words										
Ch oic es	Never		Someti mes		Usuall y		Often		Always		T o t al
Ele me nta ry	3	10 %	1 3	4 3. 3 3 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	4	1 3. 3 3 %	3	10 %	3 0
Int er me dia te	0	0 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	9	3 0 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	5	16 .6 6 %	3 0
Ad van ced	0	0 %	5	1 6. 6 6 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	1 0	33 .3 3 %	3 0

Question sixteen asked the respondents how often they make sentences with new words. Three of the elementary participants mentioned that they never made sentences with new words. However, none of the intermediate and advanced participants mentioned that they never use this strategy. In other words, all of the intermediate and advanced respondents use this strategy. More precisely, whereas five intermediate participants *always* made sentences with new words, ten of the advanced participants used this strategy which indicates the higher frequency of using this strategy for advanced learners.

Item seventeen was concerned with the strategy of using the new words in speaking and writing. Ten elementary respondents mentioned that they *never* used this strategy and eleven of them *sometimes* used this strategy which indicates that they do not find it useful and helpful. In contrast, twelve of intermediate respondents mentioned that they *usually* use this strategy which indicates the higher frequency of using the same strategy for intermediate participants. Regarding the advanced respondents, it is

observed that they are the most frequent users of this strategy since all of them use this strategy with higher frequency.

Table 24. Cross-tabulation for question 17

Q1 7	Trying to use new words in speaking and writing										
Ch o i c e s	Never		Someti mes		Usuall y		Often		Always		T o t a l
Ele me n t a r y	1 0	33 .3 3 %	1 1	3 6. 6 6 %	4	1 3. 3 3 %	3	1 0 %	3	10 %	3 0
Int er me dia te	3	10 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	1 2	4 0 %	4	1 3. 3 3 %	4	13 .3 3 %	3 0
Ad van ced	0	0 %	3	1 0 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	9	3 0 %	1 0	33 .3 3 %	3 0

Table 25. Cross-tabulation for question 18

Q1 8	Noticing the pictures as a cue for word meanings										
Ch oices	Never		Someti mes		Usuall y		Often		Always		T o t al
Ele me nta ry	0	0 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	9	3 0 %	1 0	3 3. 3 3 %	4	13 .3 3 %	3 0
Int er me dia te	0	0 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	9	3 0 %	6	20 %	3 0
Ad van ced	0	0 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	1 0	3 3. 3 3 %	6	20 %	3 0

The table shows the participants' frequency of using pictures as a cue to understand the meaning of words. As it is evident from the frequency cells, it appears that this strategy does not distinguish the participants from each other. All the groups use this strategy with similar frequency.

Item nineteen asked the participants whether they notice the affixes and roots of the words when they learn them. This item shows the significance of the proficiency level for using this strategy as intermediate learners use it more than elementary learners and in turn advanced learners use it more frequently than the intermediate group.

Table 26. Cross-tabulation for question 19

Q19 Analyzing prefix, root and suffixes of the new words										
Ch o i c e s	Ne ver	So me times	Us u ally	O f t e n	A l w a y s	T o t a l				
E l e m e n t a r y	8 .66%	2 .33%	4 .66%	4 .66%	1 .16%	3 .33%	3 .33%	3 .33%	3 .33%	3 .33%
I n t e r m e d i a t e	1 .33%	3 .66%	6 .66%	2 .33%	6 .66%	7 .77%	2 .22%	7 .77%	2 .22%	3 .33%
A d v a n c e d	0 0%	3 .33%	7 .77%	2 .22%	8 .88%	2 .22%	1 .11%	4 .44%	3 .33%	3 .33%

Table 27. Cross-tabulation for question 20

Q20 Paying attention to the part of speech of the new words										
Ch o i c e s	Ne ver	So me times	Us u ally	O f t e n	A l w a y s	T o t a l				
E l e m e n t a r y	4 .33%	13 .66%	5 .33%	6 .66%	2 .16%	6 .66%	3 .33%	10 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%
I n t e r m e d i a t e	0 0%	7 .77%	2 .22%	1 .11%	4 .44%	7 .77%	2 .22%	13 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%
A d v a n c e d	0 0%	3 .33%	1 .11%	9 .99%	3 .33%	8 .88%	2 .22%	33 .99%	3 .33%	3 .33%

Like item nineteen, item twenty shows the positive relationship between the proficiency level and the frequency

of using this strategy. This item measured the frequency of noticing the part of speech of new words as they learn them. The frequency of using this strategy goes up as the proficiency level increases. The elementary participants are considered to be the modest users of this strategy since half of them *sometimes* use this strategy. However, intermediate participants used this strategy with higher frequency since twelve of them *usually* use this strategy and seven of them *often* use it. The figures increase for the advanced participants inasmuch as ten advanced learners *always* use this strategy.

Table 28. Cross-tabulation for question 21

Q21 Skipping unimportant and passive words										
Ch o i c e s	Ne ver	So me times	Us u ally	O f t e n	A l w a y s	T o t a l				
E l e m e n t a r y	0 0%	2 .66%	3 .33%	2 .66%	23 .33%	3 .33%	3 .33%	23 .33%	3 .33%	3 .33%
I n t e r m e d i a t e	5 .66%	9 .66%	3 .33%	6 .66%	5 .66%	16 .66%	5 .66%	16 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%
A d v a n c e d	1 0%	3 .33%	3 .33%	1 .66%	3 .33%	10 .33%	3 .33%	10 .33%	3 .33%	3 .33%

Table 29. Cross-tabulation for question 22

Q22 Using physical gestures and action to learn and remember word meanings										
Ch o i c e s	Ne ver	So me times	Us u ally	O f t e n	A l w a y s	T o t a l				
E l e m e n t a r y	1 .33%	4 .66%	8 .66%	2 .33%	5 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%	6 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%
I n t e r m e d i a t e	2 .66%	1 .33%	4 .66%	9 .66%	3 .33%	4 .66%	3 .33%	6 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%
A d v a n c e d	1 .33%	3 .66%	8 .66%	2 .33%	6 .66%	2 .33%	4 .66%	13 .66%	3 .33%	3 .33%

Question twenty-one asked the participants whether they skip unimportant words while learning vocabulary. The table above shows a different distribution of frequency as the proficiency level increases, the frequency of using this strategy decreases. In other words, whereas all of the elementary learners use this strategy, nine of the advanced participants mentioned that they *never* use this strategy. The

interpretation and further discussion of these results will be given in the next chapter of the dissertation.

Question twenty-two asked the participants how often they use physical actions and gestures for learning the meaning of words. Again, as it can be perceived from the cell figures, all groups have similar frequency distribution and there is no significant difference in their using physical actions and gestures for understanding word meanings. As such, the use of this strategy seems to be unaffected and unrelated to the participants' proficiency level.

Table 30. Cross-tabulation for question 23

Q2 3	Carrying dictionary in your bag or pocket for checking the meaning unknown words										
Ch oi c es	Never		Someti mes		Usual ly		Often		Always		T o t al
Ele me nta ry	1 0	33 .3 %	9	3 0 %	6	2 0 %	2	6 .6 %	3	6 .66 %	3 0
Int er me dia te	4	13 .3 %	6	2 0 %	9	3 0 %	5	1 6 .6 %	6	20 %	3 0
Ad van ced	1	3. 33 %	6	2 0 %	1 0	3 3. 3 %	6	2 0 %	7	23 .3 %	3 0

Table 31. Cross-tabulation for question 24

Q2 4	Using L1 as an aid for learning the meaning of words										
Ch oi c es	Never		Someti mes		Usual ly		Often		Always		T o t al
Ele me nta ry	0	0 %	4	1 3. 3 3 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	9	3 0 %	1 0	33 .3 3 %	3 0
Int er me dia te	0	0 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	1 0	3 3. 3 3 %	8	2 6. 6 6 %	5	16 .6 6 %	3 0
Ad van ced	0	0 %	1 5	5 0 %	7	2 3. 3 3 %	6	2 0 %	2	6. 66 %	3 0

The table shows how often the sample EFL learners carry dictionaries by themselves in case they use it. Indeed, the frequency of using this strategy might indicate their dependence and habit of using dictionaries. The distribution of the frequency as shown in the table reveals that the advanced participants report that at least they *usually* carry a dictionary to check the meaning of new words. However, ten elementary learners reported that they never carry a

dictionary for checking the meaning of new words. This shows a significantly less frequent use and dependence on dictionaries for elementary learners.

The last item on the questionnaire asks about the frequency of using L1 for word learning. As the table shows, it seems that there is a negative relationship between the L1 use and proficiency level since elementary participants reported the most frequent use of this strategy while advanced learners, according to the frequency distribution are the least frequent users of this strategy.

Interview results

3.4. Interview results

The oral interview session followed the administration of the questionnaire. The purpose of interviewing the participants was to ask the respondents to explain the reasons for using or not using the targeted vocabulary learning strategies. The researcher herself interviewed the participants. The interview questions were fixed and semi-structured. The interview was conducted in the participants' L1 to maximize the ease of expression and understanding for the interviewees. The interview results provided some explanatory data which was beyond that offered by the questionnaire. The questionnaire only revealed the frequency of VLS use but the interview data offered complementary information. The interview with five elementary participants revealed that they were aware of all the strategies included in the questionnaire but they used a small number of them with high frequency. When asked the elementary interviewees why you do not use the strategy of noticing pronunciation as a key to meaning, they said that it is impossible to get the meaning of the words from their pronunciation.

The interview questions included both yes/no and WH-questions. For example, the researcher asked the elementary learners' whether they use dictionaries and if yes what type of dictionaries they use. The interview questions are mentioned in appendix D.

4. Discussion of the results

The first research question of the study was concerned with the identification of the most frequent vocabulary learning strategies used by elementary-level EFL learners. One of the most frequently used strategies by elementary EFL learners was the use bilingual dictionaries. Another strategy which was highly frequent among elementary learners was asking for classmates and the teacher to tell them the meaning of words. According to the results of the survey questionnaire, the elementary learners write the new words repeatedly to learn its spelling and meaning. With regard to the meta-cognitive strategies, the elementary learners sometimes used them to evaluate their knowledge of vocabulary. Indeed, they did not use the meta-cognitive strategy for vocabulary learning very frequently. The sample elementary learners of EFL frequently used the strategy of repeating words loudly to learn its pronunciation.

The second research question of the study asked what strategies were frequently used by the sample intermediate EFL learners. Not unlike elementary learners, intermediate EFL learners, according to the results of the questionnaire and interview, used bilingual dictionary for word learning. However, intermediate learners did not use

the bilingual dictionaries as frequently as elementary learners. Indeed, they used monolingual dictionaries more frequently than bilingual ones. Elementary learners *sometimes* used the pronunciation as a key to understand word meanings. With regard to the social strategies of asking for teachers and students for the meanings of unknown words, they sometimes used this strategy but not as frequently as elementary learners. The sample intermediate EFL learners moderately used the strategy of relating new words to their background knowledge and personal experience. With regard to keeping vocabulary notebooks, the intermediate EFL learners were not very frequently users of this strategy but they modestly used this strategy. Like elementary EFL learners, intermediate EFL learners frequently used the strategy of writing words to learn their spelling and meanings. The sample EFL learners used the meta-cognitive strategy frequently to evaluate the quality of their word learning and vocabulary knowledge.

Research question three asked what strategies are frequently used by the advanced respondents of the study. When it comes to advanced sample learners of EFL, they are the most frequent users of the majority of the strategies which were included in the questionnaire. However, there are only few strategies which advanced learners did not report to use frequently. While they reported using cognitive, meta-cognitive and memory strategies frequently, they do not use the social strategy of asking classmates and peers for the meaning of words. With regard to the use of dictionaries, the sample advanced learners only used monolingual dictionaries frequently while they said that they do not use bilingual dictionaries. Another strategy which advanced learners do not use frequently is the use of L1. The advanced learners mentioned that they are not interested in using L1 in their vocabulary acquisition claiming that the use of L1 is not useful for expanding their vocabulary knowledge.

The fourth research question of the study asked whether there are significant differences between elementary, intermediate and advanced EFL learner in terms of using vocabulary learning strategies. The results of the survey and interview revealed that there are differences between elementary, intermediate and advanced learners in using VLS. As the percentage and frequency distributions revealed, the difference between the elementary and advanced learners is more significant and meaningful than the difference between intermediate and advanced learners.

To sum it up, it can be argued that vocabulary learning strategies as reported by the learners themselves are different for the different EFL learners in terms of proficiency level. In other words, if proficiency level can be considered as steps of a continuum, each proficiency level will give a different supply of strategies to EFL learners with regard to vocabulary acquisition.

5. Conclusion and directions for further research

In this study, an attempt was made to examine whether vocabulary learning strategy use is a function of proficiency level. The answer to the research question was cautiously positive. In other words, the research found that as the proficiency level increases, the frequency of strategy use also increases. However, as the questionnaire and interview results revealed, there is a qualitative change in the type of VLS used by EFL learners.

The results of the present study might shed some light into vocabulary learning and teaching in classroom context. As the results revealed, learners at different levels of proficiency might differently approach the task of vocabulary learning. Hence, the teacher should not use the same procedure of vocabulary instruction for learners of different level.

This research considered only one facet and issue in strategies of vocabulary learning. Many issues in this area still remain untouched which should be studied by future researchers. The researcher examined vocabulary learning strategies as reported and mentioned by EFL learners. Whether high levels of strategy use is directly related to high achievement in vocabulary tests is considered to be an open question which should be studied by interested researchers. That is to say, it is far from clear whether there is relationship between actual vocabulary knowledge and use of vocabulary strategies. Another issue which might interest future researchers is that whether there is a congruence between vocabulary teaching and vocabulary learning strategies as practiced by EFL teachers and learners.

In the present study, the researcher examined the impact and interrelationship between learners' proficiency level and VLS use, another open research question is that whether there is a relationship between VLS use and other variables of individual difference such as age, maturity, bilingualism, cognitive and psychological styles. These complex issues need to be explored on further research by interested future researchers.

The findings of this study should be considered with respect to the limitations of the study. The present study was a survey study on the vocabulary learning strategies as used by EFL learners. It is not clear whether the strategies which EFL learners report are indeed used by them; that is, the researcher relied on the learners' self-report of VLS use. This is considered to be a methodological limitation. Although the researcher used interview as a data triangulation to complement questionnaire results, again, the researcher maintains that other instruments such as observation and think aloud procedures can be used to better understand the strategies which EFL learners use though employing such procedures can complicate the research implementation.

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