

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG PAKISTANI ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The current investigation endeavors to explore VLS use among 400 Pakistani learners of higher secondary level in an ESL context with the consideration of gender and their lexical competence. The SILL was used to explore strategy use and vocabulary test to check their lexical competence. The results of an independent t-test demonstrated variation having statistical significance pertaining to the scores in mean of the six categories. As far as gender is concerned, the girls use more VLS as compared to the boys. Moreover, both the boys and girls prefer to exploit metacognitive strategies in order to enrich their vocabulary. The boys use all the six categories at medium level whereas the girls use metacognitive and social at high level in accordance with the scoring system of Oxford (1990). These findings are further confirmed by relationship of strategy use with students' performance. The result of Pearson correlation showed that VLS and learners' performance are significantly positively correlated. Thus, it implies that students' lexical competence increases with an increase regarding the exploitation of strategies.

Keywords: Gender, Vocabulary learning strategies, lexical competence

Introduction

Language teachers are chiefly concerned about the degree of difficulty or ease in acquisition of the vocabulary items who keep on devising and executing various techniques in order to enhance the language students' repertoire of lexical items at regular basis. Although acquisition of lexical items seems easy for some of the language teachers, memorization of greater number of lexical items indispensable for fluent language turn out to be the most addressing issues for the language learners. Keeping in view the process of the acquisition of any language, no matter if it is one's mother tongue or some foreign language, vocabulary turns out to be the most voluminous and substantial ingredient as it encompasses countless various meanings (Hague, 1987). In this context, second language learners have to employ different set of strategies for acquisition of lexical items. Vocabulary learning strategies encompass different set of strategies that are employed as an indispensable component of a continuous process of vocabulary acquisition (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).

Being an internationally recognized medium of communication, English language holds an esteemed status in Pakistan. English language is an official language of the state, mode of instruction at advance

level of education and the language of examinations for CSS at national level in the country. English is deemed to be a substantial means to get admissions to renowned educational institutions and a tool to secure better job prospects. In this connection, National curriculum for English Language of Pakistan too acknowledges its enviable status which lays stress on acquisition of English language since first standard (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Literature Review

As strategies for vocabulary acquisition are subsume of strategies for language learning, they are component of strategies for learning in general. Hence, the strategies or techniques that are employed for the acquisition of vocabulary items readily, quickly and autonomously are termed as VLS. Almost all the linguists have considered students' autonomy a substantial factor in acquisition of the vocabulary items. Gairns and Redman (1986) consider learners' responsibility an important factor for their education; hence they opine that the learners should pay more heed to their differences and requirements at individual level. It is because that the choice of vocabulary items equally effective for all the learners turns out to be a great trouble for the teachers after elementary level of education. In this way, much of their time is wasted in teaching.

As lexical items assume fundamental component of any system of language, consequently knowledge of lexical items plays a remarkable part in order to comprehend and produce language. Since, vocabulary learning strategies occupies an undeniable importance, the language learners and teachers ought to have awareness of their usefulness. Fan (2003) opines that almost all the vocabulary learning strategies encompass the 5 steps discussed in the following lines regarding acquisition of vocabulary items in a non native language that Brown and Payne (1994) have highlighted in their research. The steps are as follows: firstly one should know the sources regarding the concurrence of novel lexical items. Secondly, the person who aims to acquire a new language should have a clear vision pertaining to the forms of novel lexical items whether they are visual or auditory or both. Thirdly, after the acquiring clear vision comes the acquisition of the meaning of lexical items. Fourthly, the acquisition of a new language stipulates that there should be a robust memory relation between forms and meanings of lexical items following the employment of the lexical items.

Rashid (2014) investigated VLS pertaining to Memorization (MemVLS) of a learner population that were being studied, university learners who were having English Literature as their major subjects at the Masters' level in Pakistan. Questionnaire was administered for data collection along with semi-structured interviews that aimed to check the frequent employment of MemVLS and their recognized usefulness. There were thirty six respondents who gave response to the data collection. Newspapers/magazines/ literary books in English language, employment of lexical items in sentences, practice of lexical items in day to day discourse in English, and watching English-Language TV programs were found to be more useful and used in great frequency. Whereas computers/ tape-recorders/ cell phones/mp3, electronic dictionaries, and loud repetition of lexical items were found to be less used in frequency and recognized as less useful strategies.

Mubeen, I. et al (2014) carried out an investigation and two hundred and fifty students of post-graduate level belonging to the University of Sargodha, Pakistan were the participants of their investigation. The data was collected through using an adopted version of VLSs suggested by Gu & Johnson. The findings of the study demonstrated that the students were having different opinions and accomplishment pertaining to the strategies of vocabulary acquisition. Among the favoured strategies were meta cognition regulations, strategies regarding guessing, strategies to use dictionary, note-taking, repetition and activation approach etc.

Fatima and Pathan(2016) executed a study on Strategies of Investigating Learning for vocabulary enhancement: A Comparative Study of Two Universities of Quetta, Pakistan”in order to explore the exploitation of VLS by the learners at undergraduate level. One hundred and eighty students of undergraduate level were the participants of the study and a close ended questionnaire was administered to collect data for the study. In this context,an adopted version of VLSs suggested by Gu&Johnson was administered that included forty five items comprising 4 broad VLSs that were: metacognitive regulation strategy, cognitive strategy, memory strategy, and activation strategy. The finding of the investigation revealed that the students preferred strategy of cognitive regulation and strategy of activation in comparison with other strategies in acquisition of the new lexical items of English language. There was also found no variation having statistical significance between the students of “SardarBahadur Khan Women’s University” and “University of Baluchistan” of undergraduate level regarding the employment of VLSs.

Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The proficiency regarding lexical items includes considerable understanding and competence that in turn requires employment of different strategies to attain expertise and knowledge. In this context, learners of second language use a great deal of various techniques so that they could attain the lexical understanding of their target language. Consequently, a great number of second language researchers offer various classifications of strategies regarding second language acquisition that can be of benefit for learners of second language so that they could enhance their understanding and knowledge of their target language. Like LLSs, there are a great number of VLS strategies too. Among these numerous taxonomies of strategies for vocabulary acquisition: suggested by O’Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford, 1990; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997, 2000, none of them are agreed upon being favorable for all situations.

As to consider the research at hand, The SILL suggested by Oxford (version 7.0) was selected and administered in order to investigate the VLSs exploited by the learners. Nevertheless, the SILL generally includes the strategies that are used to explore LLS (language learning strategies) , it also helps in the investigation of strategies employed pertaining to vocabulary acquisition specifically, for a great deal of strategies in language learning in this categorization are either VLS or can be exploited to acquire the vocabulary items as scholars (O’Malley, 1985) and (O’Malley et al, 1990) endorse the idea that numerous language learning strategies are utilized and exploited in order to learn vocabulary items. Thus, for the present study, the SILL (Oxford 1990) was exploited as the data collection tool on 5 point Likert scale.

Variables in influencing the selection of VLSs

Now a day, a growing interest has been observed in the research area regarding investigation of the connection of VLSs with gender and other variables pertaining to the successful mastery of the L2 or foreign language. Oxford (1989) endeavored to synthesize the available studies in order to determine the features that affect the selection of strategies in order to enhance learning of L2 learners and the findings revealed that gender and ethnicity are crucial regarding the exploitation of strategies. On the other hand, MacIntyre (1994) is of the opinion that the affect of these 2 variables can be better brought home by keeping in view the differences of learners’ attitude, their motivation and learning styles that have undeniable association with gender and ethnicity. There are numerous variables that contribute to the selection of VLSs but we’ll discuss those variables that are major and have implication for the current study in the following lines.

Gender

A great number of studies reveal that there is a remarkable difference regarding successful learning of L2 that varies according to the gender of the learners (Politzer 1983, Lee 1994, and Kim 1995). The investigations that exploited gender as one of the detriments in strategy use revealed that there were always found a remarkable difference in the exploitation of LLS .i.e. the girls use LLS more often than those of the boys. The findings of Politzer (1983) revealed that the social learning strategies are exploited more often by the girls in comparison with the boys. Ehrman and Oxford (1988) conducted a research at the U.S Foreign Service Institute where their subjects were the students and teachers exploiting the SILL as their research tool suggested fair sex utilized LLS remarkably more often in comparison with themales in 4 areas, techniques of general study, strategies functional practice, techniques employed in order to search and communicate meaning, and strategies employed for self-management. In nutshell, a great deal of the past studies reveal that there were found remarkable differences between gender regarding strategy use especially in one direction .i.e. girls exploit a wide range of strategies more frequently than those of the boys.

Proficiency Level

A great deal of prior investigations suggests that the level of language course also affect the manner and rate of the learners' acquisition of L2 or foreign language. The results of Politzer (1983) suggest that selection of language acquisition strategies made by the L2 learners was affected by the level of course and the learners of higher level exploit those strategies that are positive, learners' centered, helpful for communication and practices. The study of Chamot et al. (1987) revealed that with the advanced level of foreign language course, there was found an increase in the utilization of metacognitive strategy whereas the exploitation of cognitive strategy became less. As far as the employment of social-affective strategy was concerned, it was found less in use across all course levels. The increased level of course or advance years of study do not significantly suggest that the learners utilization of strategies get improve with their higher levels. The study of Cohen and Apek (1980) revealed that there existed good as well bad strategies across all course levels in their investigation where the participants were Englishspeakers acquiring Hebrew. Nonetheless, a great deal of studies reveals that students generally choose and utilize better strategies with an increase in their level.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were endeavored to be investigated in the current investigation:

1. Are there any significant differences in the choice of strategies of language learning among learners in terms of their gender?
2. Is there any relation of significance between VLS use and students' lexical competence?

Methodology**Participants**

The current investigation investigated four hundred participants who were studying English as L2. These four hundred students – 200 girls and 200 boys were of intermediate level in Pakistan. The selection of these subjects was made at random.

Instruments

The tool administered in order to collect the data of this study was The SILL suggested by Oxford (1990). The questionnaire comprised of 50 items that are related to the learners’ approach pertaining to the acquisition of VLSs. These items were categorized under 6 major areas as memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective, and social strategies. The learners responded to each item on 5 point Likert-scale ranging from “never or almost never” to “always or almost always”. Another tool used in the investigation at hand was a vocabulary test to investigate the learners’ performance about their lexical competence.

Results & Discussion

Strategy use and gender

The first question attempted in order to investigate the variation exploitation of strategies regarding vocabulary acquisition between both boys and girls. In this connection, 2-tailed t-test was carried out so that it could be determined if there was any variation of statistical significance in mean score of both the genders in terms of the frequency of exploitation of strategies reported by the students at the level of 0.05 level of significance. The reported data was interpreted at 2 levels to acquire a better insight of learners’ reported strategy employment as shown in the following Figure:

Figure: Data analysis for differences in Strategy Use

Level 1: VLS employment in general
Level 2: VLS employment in 6 major groups

Difference in VLS Use

First of all, descriptive statistics was carried out in order to calculate the total scores of mean for both male and female students. In order to find out that if there was any variation in scores of mean of both male and female students regarding VLSs use, a 2-tailed t-test was run. The findings suggested by independent t-test and P value are as follows:

Table: Difference in VLS Use

VLS Use	Boys		Girls		Comments	
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	P.value	Difference Pattern
VLSs Use	3.20	.53	3.42	.44	.000	Girls > Boys

The results demonstrated in the table below indicate that there were found differences of statistical significance between mean scores of both the male and female learners (M=3.42, M=3.20, respectively, P<.05) regarding utilization of VLS as a whole. The result suggests that the girls employ strategies more frequently than the boys at intermediate level. These findings are congruent to the result of (Oxford & Ehrman 1989; Jones, 2006; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989).

VLS Use in sixmajor groups

A 2 samplet-test of The SILL main groups at the significance level of 0.05 was carried out to showif there was any variation of statistical significance in the total scores of male and female learnersin each group. The SILL comprises 6 major categories of VLS: Memory, Cognitive, Meta cognitive, Affective, Compensation and Social. There was seen variation in frequency and preference regarding the learners’ utilization of these grouped categories in terms of their gender asdemonstrated in the following table.

Table : VLS Usevariation in 6 categories

VLs	Boys		Strategy ranking among boys	Girls		Strategy ranking among girls	P.value	Variation Pattern
	Mean	S.D		Mean	S.D			
Memory	3.08	.67	6	3.35	.55	4	.000	Girls>Boys
Cognitive	3.15	.61	3	3.28	.51	5	.030	Girls>Boys
Compensation	3.24	.75	2	3.46	.68	3	.003	Girls>Boys
Metacognitive	3.52	.75	1	3.76	.69	1	.002	Girls>Boys
Affective	3.13	.84	4	3.24	.75	6	.143	_
Social	3.09	.83	5	3.54	.80	2	.005	Girls>Boys

As demonstrated in Table above, the boys reported mediumemployment of all the 6 categoriesin the current study: memory (M=3.08), cognitive(M=3.15), compensation(M=3.24), metacognitive(M=3.52), affective (M=3.13), social (M=3.09).On the other hand, the girls reported to use (Metacognitive (M=3.76), Social(M=3.54)) at high level in accordance with the scoring system of Oxford (1990) i.e. high use ranges between 3.5 to 5.0, and memory (M=3.35),cognitive(M=3.28), Compensation(M=3.46) and Affective strategies(M=3.24) of medium use. The findings suggested by the result of 2 sample t-test demonstrate the girls’ employment of VLS in higher frequency in comparison with those of the boys. Besides, Affective strategies (P=.143>0.05), There were seen statistically significant variationin other 5 groups. A great deal of previous studies too found significant variation regarding the employment of Affective strategies in terms of gender.(Green & Oxford 1995; Yang 1992).

Though both the male and female learners preferred same strategy the most, differences were found inother strategies use particularly in social strategies use that was recorded 2preferred by the female students but reported 5 by the male learners.Likewise,the boys reported order of strategy usewasMetacognitive, Compensation, Cognitive, Affective, Social and memory whereas that of the girls was Metacognitive, Social, Compensation, Memory, Cognitive and Affective.

Relation of VLS with students' performance

For the investigation of the second research objective, Pearson correlation coefficient of strategies and students' performance of the boys and girls was carried out individually. Later, their answers' consistency was utilized to draw a comparison between the two genders in order to identify the pattern.

Table : Relation between VLS use and students' performance

Grade (r)	Gender	
	Boys (N=200)	Girls(N=200)
	.260**	.331**

**p < .01

According to table, a positive correlation of moderate significance was found between VLS and girls' performance ($r = .331, p < 0.01$). On the contrary, a positive but weak correlation was found between VLS use and performance of the boys ($r = .260, p < 0.01$). The results showed that students' lexical competence increases with the increased use of strategies. Besides, it may also imply that the type of VLSs most frequently employed by girls reported an increase in their lexical competence.

Conclusion

The current investigation endeavors to explore VLS use by the students of intermediate level in terms of its frequency and variation on the basis of their gender. Numerous significant findings are brought to light out of which some are confirmed by the investigations executed previously regarding recent trends in second language learning investigation. The students utilize a variety of VLS with moderate frequency except for metacognitive and social strategies which the girls use of high level as compared to the boys. They use metacognitive strategies high in frequency. Moreover, the results of the investigation reinforce the presumption that there is a marked variation regarding the choice of strategies pertaining to the gender of the learners. There is found a marked variation of significance regarding strategy use among learners on the basis of gender in the current investigation. These findings are further confirmed by relationship of strategy use with students' performance. The results showed that students' lexical competence increases with the increased use of strategies.

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