

An Investigation into Good and Poor Iranian EFL Majors' Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

As a part of a large-scale project, this study investigated good and poor Iranian EFL majors' vocabulary learning strategies in terms of both overall and specific strategy use. To this end, 204 participants completed a Likert-scale vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire (VLSQ) containing 45 statements. The results of independent samples t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences between good and poor learners in terms of overall strategy use. However, their performances were statistically significantly different on the frequency of use of nineteen (out of the whole forty five) specific strategies. That is, whereas the strategies *I use a monolingual English dictionary, I analyze part of speech of the new word, I associate the new word with its coordinates and collocations, I use new words in sentences through speaking, I repeat the new words orally several times, I focus on the phonological form of the new word, I learn the words of an idiom together, I take notes of new words in class, I revise new words several times during a day, I learn new words by listening to live English media, and I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc in English* were used statistically significantly more frequently by good learners, seven other strategies, namely, *I make use of a bilingual dictionary, I ask my teacher for an L₁ translation, I ask classmates for*

meaning through group work activity, I memorize word lists, I use the key-word method, I skip or pass the new word, I make up (coin) new words if I do not know the right ones in English were used significantly more frequently by poor learners. The possible reasons why a given group (either good or poor learners) used a specific vocabulary learning strategy significantly more frequently than the other, as well as the pedagogical implications of the study are discussed in details.

Keywords: good learners, poor learners, overall strategy use, specific strategy use, vocabulary learning strategies.

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that vocabulary study was regarded as a “neglected” area (Meara, 1980; Richards, 1976) and “undervalued in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) throughout its varying stages and up to present day” (Zimmerman, 1994, cited in Coady and Huckin, 1997: 5), it is no longer considered as the “Cinderella” of applied linguistics (Carter and McCarthy, 1988; Gu and Johnson, 1996).

Studies of second/foreign language vocabulary acquisition have mostly dealt with the techniques or strategies of vocabulary learning and teaching (e.g., Ahmed, 1989; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Lawson and Hogben, 1996). Vocabulary learning strategies are a sub-category of language learning strategies which in turn are a sub-classification of learning strategies in general. The study of learning strategies has seen an explosion of activity in recent years (Skehan, 1991: 285, cited in Ellis, 1994). Similarly, as Tseng, Dornyei and Schmitt (2006) maintain, the last twenty years have witnessed a large body of second language research targeting language learning strategies. The bulk of this strategy research has concentrated upon vocabulary learning strategies mainly because, as Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) maintain, discrete point tasks (e.g., vocabulary learning) are both easily subject to empirical validation and are amenable to either classroom or laboratory research. Thus, due to these two reasons, a great number of studies have been

done in this regard in EFL situations especially in Asian contexts like China and Japan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Learning Strategies

Although over the recent years a great number of studies have been conducted on the topic of vocabulary learning strategies, there is no unanimous agreed-upon definition in the literature on the concept of strategy. Strategies have been used interchangeably for “techniques”, “tactics”, “learning skills”, “potentially conscious plans”, “cognitive abilities”, etc (Wenden, 1987: 7). Ellis (1994: 529), generally speaking, defines this “fuzzy” concept as “consisting of mental or behavioral activity related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use”.

From a pragmatic perspective, Wenden and Rubin (1987: 29) define learning strategies as “the process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved and used”. Oxford (2001: 166) reformulating her earlier definition of vocabulary learning strategies defines them as “operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information; specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations”. Cohen (1998: 5) defines strategies as conscious “moves made by second language speakers intended to be useful in either learning or using the second language”.

In a similar vein, several attempts have been made to define vocabulary learning strategies. Schmitt (1997) basing his definition upon Rubin's (1987: 203) understanding of learning as “the process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved, and used”, maintains that “vocabulary learning strategies could be any which affect this rather broadly-defined process”.

2.2 Success and Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The bulk of learning strategy research has been focusing on the relationship between the strategies used by good and poor learners and

success or failure in the process of acquiring an L2 in order to transfer the strategies used by, or ascribed to good or successful learners to poor learners to improve, enhance and facilitate L2 acquisition of poor learners (Cohen and Aphek, 1981; Green and Oxford, 1995; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Quingquan, Chatupote and Toe, 2008; Stern, 1975; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Wesche, 1979).

Although one has to agree that an ideal and standard *good* language learner may not, in reality exist, there is a general consensus that a good/successful language learner is someone that is metacognitively aware of himself/herself as a learner and of the processes in language learning and uses various kinds of strategies (e.g., cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies) flexibly and effectively (Cohen, 1998; Oxford and Cohen, 1992; Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2003). According to Nation (2001: 394), three characteristics distinguish a good language learner from his/her poor counterpart; they are "attitude, awareness, and capability of handling his/her own learning".

According to Ahmed (1989), good language learners used more dictionary strategies, were more aware of what they could learn and made use of context in learning unknown vocabulary items. Similarly, Gu and Johnson's (1996) study found that active language learners' predictors of success included, among other factors, dictionary look-up, note-taking strategies and contextual learning.

Good language learners are usually identified by the greater number of strategies which they use more frequently than their poor counterparts as well as by the choice of particular strategies not usually employed by less successful learners (Abraham and Vann, 1989; Zhang, 1999 cited in Zhang, 2003). However, studies done by Vann and Abraham (1990), and Kouraogo (1993) did not indicate significant differences in the number of strategies employed by good and poor learners.

Although some rather comprehensive studies have been carried out with regard to vocabulary learning strategies typical of *good* and *poor* language learners in non-Iranian situations (e.g., Ahmed, 1989; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Lawson and Hogben, 1996; Sanaoui, 1995; Schmitt,

1997), to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no such a study has been done in the Iranian context. Thus, proceeding from the findings of previous research indicating that good or successful students use more and a greater variety of strategies in comparison to their poor or less successful counterparts (e.g., O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) on the one hand, and filling the research gap which is felt to exist regarding good and poor Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies, the present study sought answers specifically to the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between good and poor Iranian EFL majors' mean reported frequency of overall strategy use? That is, generally speaking, does one group use vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than the other?
2. Are there any significant differences in the mean reported frequency of specific strategy use between good and poor Iranian EFL majors?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 204 out of 328 Iranian learners majoring in English as a Foreign Language from two universities of Hamedan (the whole population of English students at BuAli Sina university and some EFL majors at Islamic Azad university selected randomly). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35 with the mean age being 23.2. One hundred and thirty four of the participants (65.68 %) were female and the remaining 70 (34.32%) were male. The participants were placed in two groups of good and poor learners based on *what will be mentioned in the procedures section*. The characteristics of the participants in the study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants in the study

	Good		Poor		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent

Sex	Female	80	61.06	54	73.97	134	65.68
	Male	51	38.93	19	26.03	70	34.32
	Total	131	100.00	73	100.00	204	100.00

3.2 Instrumentation

The instrument employed for data collection purposes of the study included a Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) which will be described below.

The VLSQ included 45 statements on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me) which was developed to elicit the participants' self-reported vocabulary learning strategies.

To guarantee the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the following steps- including both content validation and empirical verification- were taken:

1. Drawing upon several well-tried (vocabulary) learning strategies questionnaires such as those of Oxford (1990), Schmitt and Schmitt (1993), Gu and Johnson (1996), those strategies deemed suitable for the purpose of the study were selected.

2. Before the study began, a similar group of fifty two Iranian EFL learners majoring in English were asked to describe and write down in a semi-structured questionnaire, the strategies they employed for learning vocabulary of English as a foreign language. The purpose behind this was to make sure the strategies adopted by Iranian EFL learners which were not included or were not very clearly stated in the famous questionnaires referred to above (e.g., strategies number 10, 11, 12, 13, 28, 40, and 41) were not missing from the final version of the VLSQ of the study.

3. The questionnaire thus prepared which consisted of 53 statements was next pilot tested on another group of Iranian EFL learners majoring in English. The statements or strategies that obtained a use mean below 1.5 (out of 5) which indicated that the strategies were

never or almost never used by the learners (7 strategies) were eventually omitted leaving the final-version with 45 items.

After the pilot-testing, some of the students were asked to comment on the comprehensibility and clarity of the statements of the questionnaires they had completed. Based on their ideas, necessary adjustments were made and examples were added to some statements (e.g., strategies number 23 and 30) to make them readily comprehensible to the participants.

4. Since “triangulation is a major means for validating the findings of different elicitation measures” (Chaudron, 2003: 804), triangulating the data collection instruments of the study, 20 good and poor learners (10 from each group) who were selected randomly from among the participants in the study, were interviewed based on a semi-structured interview. The results indicated that their patterns of strategy choice and use matched, to a great extent, with what they had already reported in the VLSQ.

5. The reliability of VLSQ was estimated using Cronbach alpha. The alpha reliability for VLSQ was found to be .823 suggesting that the questionnaire enjoyed a satisfactory reliability index.

3.3 Procedures

As mentioned earlier, 328 Iranian learners majoring in English as a Foreign Language from two universities of Hamedan participated in the study. To meet the specific purpose of the study, drawing upon Ahmed (1989) who divided the subjects into several groups of good and poor learners based on their school records and subjective evaluation of the officials, the students' academic records, specifically their total GPAs in the semesters they had already passed were obtained from the registrar's offices at both universities.

Since 12 is the minimum point below which the students are considered *conditional* or *narrow fail* in Iranian Higher Educational System, the students whose total GPAs were below 12 out of 20 were considered as *poor*, those whose GPAs fell between 12 and 15 were put in *average* group and those whose GPAs were above 15, were placed in *good* group. A proficiency test (Oxford Placement Test) was

administered to the participants. Using Pearson correlation coefficient, the scores obtained from this test were correlated with the students' GPAs. Fortunately enough, the reliability index of 0.746 indicated the acceptability of the division criterion for placing the students into *good* and *poor* groups. In about 4 percent of the cases where the students' GPAs lay in the border line, when in doubt as to which group the given student was to be put in, the department instructors who knew the student and had already taught him/her were consulted and their ideas about the proficiency level of the given student were taken into account and necessary adjustments were accordingly made. Thus, based on what was mentioned above, 131 students (39.93%) were eventually placed in good group, 73 students (22.25%) in poor group and the rest 124 (37.82%) in the average group, with only the first two groups being the focus of the study.

The good and poor learners thus selected were asked to complete the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) referred to earlier. The VLSQ was administered to all participants in the study by the first researcher and they were informed of the following points before beginning to complete it:

1. The VLSQ was not a test or a measure of their language proficiency. Thus, they were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible.
2. They were required to answer based on how they actually learned English words and not based on how they felt it could be done.
3. Though the VLSQ had a front page explaining to the participants how it was supposed to be completed, the researcher also gave them detailed instructions on how it was to be filled in.
4. The participants were informed that there was no time limit for completing the questionnaire. However, it took about 45 to 55 minutes for them to complete it.

3. 4 Data Analysis

Using SPSS version 15.5 for Windows, the quantitative data analysis was carried out including descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages which were computed to summarise the participants' responses to 45 strategies listed in VLSQ. t-tests were then run to determine any statistically significant differences between the mean reported frequency of use of good and poor learners' vocabulary learning strategies in general. t-tests were also run to compare the mean reported frequency of use of each individual strategy across good and poor learners to see whether there were any statistically significant differences in specific strategy use.

4. Results and Discussion

The first question aimed at investigating the differences between Iranian good and poor EFL learners' frequency of *overall* strategy use. The results of the independent samples t-test in Table 2 below, indicated that there was a small difference between the two groups with the good learners obtaining a slightly higher mean for strategy use (i.e., 2.95) in comparison to poor learners who gained a relatively lower mean (i.e., 2.89). However, the difference was not big enough ($df=202$, $t=1.04$, $sig.=0.299 > 0.05$) to make the two groups statistically significantly different.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for good and poor learners' overall strategy use

Group	Mean	SD	N	t	df	Standard error differences	Sig. (2- tailed)
Good	2.9504	0.3875	131	1.04	202	0.057	0.299
Poor	2.8908	0.3986	73				

* $p < 0.05$

As Table 2 indicates, the results for the first question, stand in contrast to the findings of most previously-done research in the field of vocabulary learning strategies like that of Ahmed (1989), which clearly showed that successful learners in general, used vocabulary learning strategies significantly more frequently than their unsuccessful peers.

Using the interpretation scale designed by Oxford (1990), it becomes evident that, overall, the participants' average mean of strategy use lay in the "sometimes-use" or "medium" range (2.5 to 3.4) and not in the "usually" (3.5 to 4.4) or "always" (4.5 to 5.0) range of strategy use. In other words, Iranian EFL learners majoring in English are *medium* strategy users who only *sometimes* make use of various vocabulary learning strategies.

This finding is in line with those of some of the previously-done vocabulary learning strategies research such as Vann and Abraham (1990), Kouraogo (1993), Ruutmets (2005), Qinquan, Chatopote & Teo (2008) which indicated that there were no significant differences between good and poor learners in the number of strategies they employed. The findings of the study might thus imply the need for strategy training for both good and poor EFL learners to make them more aware of various strategies at their disposal, to make them strategically competent, and to train them how to use the given strategy at an appropriate place and time (Chen, 2007; Marefat and Ahmadi, 2003; Riazi and Khodadadi, 2007; Vogely, 1995). The second phase of the present study which will be reported later in a separate paper, also clearly indicates that training learners on the use of vocabulary learning strategies can make significant differences.

The second question was concerned with whether there were any differences between the mean reported frequency of *specific* strategy use of good and poor EFL majors. Table 3 below gives a detailed profile of specific strategy use by the two groups.

Table 3: A profile of specific strategy use by good and poor Iranian EFL majors

Number of the Strategy	The strategy	mean			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		good	poor	total			
1	I make use of a bilingual (English-Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.21	3.56	3.33	-2.184	199	0.030*
2	I use a monolingual English dictionary	3.54	3.14	3.40	2.561	199	0.011*
3	I ask my teacher for an L1 translation	1.92	2.46	2.12	-3.605	196	0.000*
4	I ask my teacher for an English sentence including the new word	2.78	2.87	2.81	-0.576	198	0.565
5	I ask classmates for meaning through group work activity	2.40	2.92	2.58	-4.066	200	0.000*
6	I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and wider context	3.30	3.09	3.23	1.707	200	0.089
7	I check prefixes, suffixes and word roots to discover the meaning of unknown words	3.30	3.08	3.23	1.369	198	0.173
8	I have a vocabulary notebook and I write down every new word I come across	3.09	2.94	3.03	0.650	199	0.517
9	In my vocabulary notebook, I write down the word and its definition/synonym	3.12	3.18	3.14	-.252	176	0.801
10	I write down the word, its definition/synonym and an example sentence in which the word is used	2.46	2.81	2.58	-1.657	171	0.099
11	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is used	2.80	2.71	2.77	0.439	168	0.661

12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g., noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	2.56	2.55	2.56	0.053	172	0.958
13	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and, its part of speech, an example sentence in which the word is used and its other grammatically related words.	2.44	2.10	2.32	1.549	169	0.123
14	I analyse part of speech of the new word.	3.16	2.69	2.99	2.780	196	0.006*
15	I check for L1 cognates (i.e. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English)	2.76	2.90	2.81	-0.796	196	0.427
16	I memorize word lists (i.e. lists of words in English with their Persian equivalents).	2.80	3.26	2.96	-2.372	196	*0.019
17	I use flashcards to remember new English words	2.06	2.10	2.07	-0.184	201	0.854
18	I connect the new word to a personal experience	3.11	2.89	3.03	1.389	202	0.166
19	I associate the new word with its coordinates and collocations	3.12	2.56	2.93	3.767	198	0.000*
20	I connect the new word to its synonyms and antonyms	3.52	3.31	3.44	1.429	200	0.154
21	I associate the word to others which are related to it and are located in the same area of meaning (e.g., Water: swim, drink, wet, blue)	2.88	2.84	2.87	0.250	202	0.803
22	Where a new word's meaning lies along a "scale" of gradable	2.88	2.76	2.84	0.792	191	0.429

	adjectives , I use scales for learning and remembering “gradable” adjectives (e.g., burning , hot, warm, cool, freezing)						
23	I use loci method (i.e., I remember new words by putting them in specific locations in my mind)	2.82	3.06	2.90	-1.409	197	0.161
24	I use new words in sentences through speaking	3.45	2.90	3.26	3.451	198	0.001*
25	I use new words in sentences through writing	3.39	3.00	3.25	2.525	197	0.012*
26	I study the spelling of the new word and I write new English words several times	3.00	3.10	3.03	-0.553	202	0.581
27	I repeat the new word orally several times	3.85	3.44	3.70	2.502	202	0.013*
28	I focus on the phonological form (i.e., the pronunciation) of the new word	3.86	3.53	3.74	2.601	201	0.010*
29	I make an image of the word's meanings in my mind	3.32	3.60	3.42	-1.698	200	0.091
30	I use Keyword Method i.e., I think of an L1 word that sounds similar to the new L2 word, then, I make a single mental image combining the meaning of both words (e.g., to learn the English word “shabby” which means untidy , a Persian learner of English might think of the Persian word “ شبی ” meaning a night and then making a relationship between the meaning of the two (English and Persian) words by imagining that at night people are usually shabby at bed time	2.45	2.93	2.62	-2.675	195	0.008*
31	I paraphrase the new word's meaning	2.86	2.85	2.85	0.099	197	0.921

32	I learn the words of an idiom together	3.52	2.99	3.33	3.537	200	0.001*
33	I use physical actions when learning a new word.	2.22	2.43	2.29	-1.334	199	0.184
34	I take notes of new words in class	3.67	3.10	3.47	3.225	199	0.001*
35	I use vocabulary section or glosses in my textbook to learn the new words	3.10	2.92	3.04	1.100	175	0.273
36	I skip or pass the new word	2.08	2.46	2.21	-2.205	194	0.013*
37	I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board , or on a street sign	2.80	2.96	2.86	-0.888	198	0.375
38	I make up (coin) new words if I don't know the right ones in English	2.31	2.70	2.45	-2.401	198	0.017*
39	I revise new words several times during a day	2.83	2.51	2.72	2.145	200	0.033*
40	I pick up new words from various English websites when searching the internet	2.44	2.32	2.40	0.649	200	0.517
41	I learn new words by listening to live English media like BBC, VOA, etc and by watching English TVs and movies	3.58	3.00	3.37	4.657	201	0.000*
42	I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc in English	3.95	3.43	3.77	3.625	199	0.000*
43	I pick up new words when playing computer games in English	2.71	2.79	2.74	-0.401	198	0.689
44	I draw a picture of the new word	1.98	2.03	2.00	-0.269	196	0.788
45	I learn new words from English songs and poems	3.12	3.06	3.10	0.352	199	0.725

As is evident from Table 3, overall, 19 strategies were used significantly more frequently by either one of the two groups. Whereas the strategies number 2, 14, 19, 24, 25, 27, 28, 32, 34, 39, 41, 42 were used significantly more frequently by good learners, strategies number 1, 3, 5, 16, 30, 36, 38 were used significantly more frequently by poor learners. Each of these and the possible explanations and justifications for their significantly more frequent use in the study by a given group are discussed in details below.

The findings of the bulk of research in the field reveal that, in general, dictionary use strategies are popular among EFL learners and are frequently used by them (e.g., Ahmed, 1989; Fan, 2003; Schmitt, 1997). Good learners' significantly more frequent use of *monolingual dictionaries* could be supported by Ahmed's (1989) findings which indicated that successful learners made full use of monolingual dictionaries, though in Ahmed's study, another cluster of high-achieving learners made good use of bilingual dictionaries. Another reason why monolingual dictionaries might be related to success is that monolingual dictionaries provide a more detailed overview of the lexical system of a foreign language and contain much more information about each word (Benjoint and Moulin, 1987, cited in Laufer and Hadar, 1997: 189; Nation, 2001).

Although the findings of some studies in L2 vocabulary acquisition clearly indicate that bilingual dictionaries are used by EFL learners (e.g., Schmitt, 1997; Wu, 2005), the findings of the present study reveal that poor learners significantly outperformed good learners in bilingual dictionary use. This could plausibly be explained by the fact that poor learners, due to their insufficient proficiency level, are perhaps not able to understand the meanings of the defining words and example sentences as well as other related information. Thus, poor learners find bilingual dictionaries which are based on translation and provide meanings in a very accessible way useful and frequently make use of them. However, as Nation (2001) maintains, the relationship between bilingual and monolingual dictionaries in foreign language

acquisition can be complementary in nature and that they are, by no means, mutually exclusive.

Analysing part of speech of the new words was another strategy mostly favored by good learners. This strategy is the first step of the broader strategy of guessing from context (Clarke and Nation, 1980; Nation and Coady, 1988, both cited in Nation, 2001). As Table 3 indicates, using context to guess the meaning of unknown words (strategy number 6 in Table 3) received a relatively higher mean of use by successful learners. One of the first elements good learners focus upon in trying to guess the meaning of unknown words better and more accurately is analysing the part of speech of the word. This view could be supported by Nation (2001: 55) who maintains that “in order to use a word, it is necessary to know what part of speech it is and what grammatical patterns it can fit into”. Good learners’ significantly more frequent use of this strategy might plausibly indicate that they make use of any available contextual and grammatical cues, one aspect of which is analysing part of speech of the unknown words to comprehend their meaning.

Memorizing word lists, a mechanical memorization strategy, was one of the strategies where poor learners significantly outperformed their good counterparts. Although some researchers (e.g., Nation, 2001) argue that list learning of vocabulary items can be beneficial especially at the beginning levels of foreign language study, others like Schouten-Van Parreren (1985, cited in Mondria and Wit-De Boer, 1991: 250-51) reject list learning of words as contributing to success in L2 learning simply because words in a list might easily be mixed up and forgotten, may not be known outside the list, are decontextualised and do not show how the words are used and that “most word pairs are only partly synonymous with potential, cultural, stylistic or grammatical differences” (Grains and Redman, 1986: 23). Furthermore, in list learning, learners memorize words in a set order (Nation, 2001) and are not thus, capable of recalling their meanings when the order is changed. Therefore, intuitively, this strategy can not be employed more frequently by good learners and is, as a result, more

typical of poor learning. This was also corroborated by the findings of Fan (2003) where list learning of words as well as the keyword method were the two least frequently used strategies (i.e., they had a mean score lower than 2 out of 5) by the participants.

The other two strategies which good learners used significantly more frequently than their poor peers were *I associate the word with its coordinates and collocations* and *I learn the words of an idiom together*. This is not a surprising finding. Collocational knowledge is believed to be at the heart of language knowledge and is needed for native-like and appropriate language use (Pawley and Syder, 1983). Nation (2001) also maintains that both regular and idiomatic collocation sequences are important for gaining vocabulary knowledge. Thus, it becomes clear that knowledge of collocations and idioms is an indispensable part of vocabulary knowledge. The successful learners in the study might have been aware of this and have used these strategies which need elaboration or deeper manipulation of information significantly more frequently.

The other two strategies which were reportedly used significantly more frequently by good learners were *I use the new words in sentences through speaking*, and *I use the new words in sentences through writing*. Since both of these strategies are output-based, they are referred to as generating strategies.

Previous studies have found conflicting results about the effect of output-based sentence writing on some aspects of L2 word learning. Some studies have found positive effects (e.g., Ellis and He 1999), some, negative effects (Barcroft, 1999) and some null effects (Watanabe, 1997). Perhaps, one of the most comprehensive studies in this respect is that of Barcroft (2004). The results of his both experiments indicated that writing new words in sentences had a strong “inhibitory effect” on new word learning measured productively. He justified his results in terms of Morris et al.’s (1977) “transfer appropriate processing” (TAP) theory of human memory and Barcroft’s (2000) “type of processing-resource allocation” (TOPRA) model sharing the central idea that “although semantic elaboration can

facilitate memory for known words, it may not facilitate and can even inhibit memory for new word forms” (Barcroft, 2004: 385).

Unlike the findings of Barcroft and the assumptions of TAP theory and TOPRA model discussed above, overall, the significantly more frequent use of this strategy by good learners can be interpreted in terms of the cognitive principle of elaboration holding that the more operations and activities are involved in learning new words, and the more attempts are made to relate the new words to known material, the better they would be learned and retained (Hulstijn, 2001; Wittrock, 1992). Good learners’ more frequent use of *learning words through speaking* strategy can be explained in the light of the findings of Newton (1993) and Joe, Nation and Newton (1996) indicating that discussing the meaning of unknown words through speaking activities results in better learning.

Other strategies which were reportedly used significantly more frequently by good learners in the study include *I repeat the word orally several times, I focus on the phonological form (i.e. the pronunciation) of the new word, I take notes of new words in class, I revise new words several times, I use new words in sentences through listening, and I learn new words by reading books, magazines, etc in English.*

Repetition or rehearsal strategies are seen as shallow strategies which are mechanical in nature (Ahmed, 1989; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997) and are among rote memorization strategies which do not need elaboration or deeper levels of information manipulation. However, they are reportedly used widely by many Asian learners (e.g., O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo and Kuper, 1985, cited in Fan, 2003; Wu, 2005). With reference to oral repetition strategies being more popular with good learners in the present study, the findings can be supported by Lawson and Hogben’s (1996) study indicating that repetition strategies were used substantially frequently not only by bottom-scoring groups, but also by *top-scoring* groups (i.e., by good learners). Schmitt (1997) also found that repetition was strongly preferred by Japanese learners. The findings of Griffiths

(2003) are also of interest and in line with the findings of the study in this regard indicating that higher-level learners significantly outperformed elementary-level learners in the use of “I say or write new words several times” (i.e., verbal or written repetition) strategy. Nevertheless, there are some other studies (e.g., Fan, 2003) which reveal repetition is not favored by EFL learners.

The reason why the strategy of *focusing on the phonological form* (i.e., *the pronunciation*) of a new word was preferred and used significantly more frequently by good learners in the study can be justified by the likelihood that they may have been aware that knowledge of a word does not consist only of its meaning, but includes, among many other factors, knowing the phonological and graphological form of a word, especially the former which has been found to affect its learning, an assumption supported by Nation (2001). The findings of Ellis and Beaton (1993) shed more light on this belief indicating that the pronounceability of the new words influences their learning. Another line of support for the connection of this strategy to success might come from the fact that phonological processing has been found to facilitate visual and semantic processing of words (e.g., Doctor and Colthart, 1980; Foster and Chambers, 1973) as well as information storage in working memory (e.g., Kleiman, 1975; Levy, 1975).

The findings of the study about this strategy could also lend especial support to the findings of Qingquan, Chatopute and Teo (2008) who also found that, the strategy, *I try to pronounce each English word correctly* was used often by both successful and unsuccessful learners and that the successful learners used it significantly more frequently than their unsuccessful counterparts.

The fact that the strategy *I take notes of new words in class*, was found to be used significantly more frequently by good learners corroborates the findings of Gu and Johnson (1996) who also found a connection between note-taking strategies and success in their study.

I revise new words several times was another strategy highly frequently used by good learners. Reviewing or recycling new words or

spaced retrieval (Baddeley, 1990; Pimsleur, 1967, both cited in Nation, 2001) of the already-learned items is regarded as crucially important in vocabulary acquisition. The superiority of good learners over their poor counterparts in the use of this strategy can be explained and justified in terms of Nation's (2001) argument that successful vocabulary acquisition "requires repeated attention to the items". Another line of support for this assumption comes from the findings of studies like Fan (2003) which indicated that reviewing and consolidating knowledge of newly-learned words was one of the most-frequently used strategies by the participants. This implies that learners should be pushed to revise and review newly learned words as much as possible in order for the words to be internalized.

The good learners' significantly more frequent use of learning words through reading activities particularly supports the findings of Gu and Johnson's (1996) study in which the most successful group of learners were *readers* or those who learned EFL vocabulary through reading. Since reading requires higher levels of proficiency and multi-faceted knowledge, it can not logically be used more frequently by poor learners.

This is a very strong evidence supported by both research on L1 reading (Nation, 2001; Stahl, 1990) as well as by the findings of L2 vocabulary acquisition studies (e.g., Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Paribakht and Wesche, 1997) suggesting that reading and vocabulary are strongly reciprocally related. Pedagogically speaking, this implies that the EFL students should be encouraged and provided with opportunities to read enough authentic reading materials if they are to enhance their L2 vocabulary knowledge.

As the results indicated, another significantly more frequently used strategy by successful learners was *I learn new words by listening to English media and watching English TVs, movies, etc*, a finding in line with the findings of Qingquan, Chatupote and Teo (2008). Ellis (1995) emphasizing the absence of adequate research on learning new words from oral input maintains that oral input can act as a primary source of information for learning the form and meaning of new words.

The findings of several studies (e.g., Elley, 1989; Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi and Share, 1993; Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus, 1996) also corroborate the finding of the present study regarding the existence of a close relationship between learning words through listening and success in L2 acquisition. Another line of empirical support for this finding comes from Sanaoui (1995) who observed the students who followed a “structured” approach to learning seemed to make better progress and thus succeeded in L2 learning. One of the strategies adopted by these successful learners was learning words through listening to the radio, watching videotapes, etc.

Taking the context where Iranian learners learn English as a foreign language which is input-poor in terms of listening comprehension activities, the pedagogical implications and the paramount importance of encouraging poor learners to use, and exposing them to authentic listening materials for the purposes of vocabulary acquisition become amply evident.

One of the strategies used significantly more frequently by poor learners was the *keyword method* developed by Atkinson (1975). Although several studies can be found in the field which approve of the keyword as resulting in faster learning and better retention (Brown and Perry, 1991; Moore and Surber, 1992), the popularity of this method with poor learners in the study can be supported by McDaniel and Pressly (1984) who found that the effectiveness of the keyword method differed according to the verbal ability of the students and that the students of lower ability found it more useful than those of higher ability. Another possible explanation for the lack of popularity of this method with good learners seems to be the fact that it focuses on only receptive vocabulary (Meara, 1980) and that it needs too much effort on the part of learners (Stenberg, 1987, cited in Fan, 2003).

Another pitfall of the keyword method which might make it less attractive to good learners may be the point that, it can be suitably and flexibly used with only certain classes of words especially with concrete nouns. Since successful learners usually need and study an abundant number of words, this strategy can not be plausibly favored

very much by successful learners. This view can be supported by Fan's (2003) finding in which the keyword method was the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategy along with list learning of words.

The poor learners' significantly more frequent use of the four strategies of *asking the teacher for L1 translation*, *asking classmates for meaning through group work activity* (which are both considered as social strategies in Schmitt, 1997), *skipping or passing the new word*, and *coining new words when you do not know the right ones in English* which are usually known as compensation strategies, might plausibly indicate that they resort to these strategies due to limited resources at their disposal and the fact that they do not have any other alternatives at hand to compensate for their limited knowledge, an argument supported by Yuan, Liu and Zhang (2004).

It is interesting to note that unlike the findings of the present study, the social strategies mentioned above, were used significantly more frequently by *successful* learners in Qingquan, Chatupote and Teo (2008) though they fell into "sometimes-use" and not into "often-use" range of strategy use.

Skipping or passing a new word was also rated among the least helpful ones in Schmitt's (1997) study, thus once again, supporting the findings of the study in this regard suggesting that this strategy is not related to success in EFL vocabulary learning.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of the study on good and poor Iranian EFL majors' vocabulary learning strategy use can be summarised as follows:

1. Good and poor Iranian EFL majors were not statistically significantly different with regard to their mean reported frequency of *overall* strategy use. That is, both good and poor learners' reported mean frequency of strategy use lay in the 'sometimes-use' range of Oxford's (1990) interpretation scale for strategy use indicating that, in general, Iranian EFL majors are not high strategy users and thus need to be trained on the use of various vocabulary learning strategies.

2. Statistically significant differences were found between good and poor learners in the use of *specific* strategies for vocabulary acquisition.
3. Besides using a great number of much deeper and more elaborative strategies, Iranian EFL majors in general, like many Asian learners, used oral repetition strategies (which are among rote memorization strategies) highly frequently in comparison to the majority of other strategies in the questionnaire. Even more interestingly, good learners were found to use oral repetition significantly more frequently than their poor counterparts.

Some important practical implications can be drawn from the findings in this study. First, the awareness of both good and poor EFL learners especially that of the latter should be raised about, and they need to be trained on the use of various vocabulary learning strategies.

The second implication of the study seems to be the fact that good learners use different *types* of strategies, but not necessarily, a greater number of strategies in comparison to poor learners suggesting that “simple strategy counts” (Vann and Abraham, 1990: 177) do not tell us the whole story of strategy use and thus, must be treated with caution. In the light of the findings of the present study, poor EFL learners should be encouraged by their teachers to use those specific vocabulary learning strategies employed significantly more frequently by good learners in the study including use of monolingual dictionaries, learning words of collocations and idioms together as a whole, using newly-learned words generatively in speaking and writing, learning unknown words through reading and listening, repeating the words orally, focusing on the phonological form (i.e., the pronunciation) of the new word, taking notes of and reviewing words. Syllabus designers and materials developers are also recommended to incorporate into their syllabi and materials those vocabulary learning strategies found in the study to contribute to success in L2 vocabulary acquisition.

One point worth mentioning here is that although triangulated to some extent, the data gathered for the purpose of the study were mostly

based on a self-report questionnaire. Although, as Griffiths (2003: 372) put it, self-report questionnaires have been criticized by several researchers in the field like Cohen (1998), Dornyei (2003), Ellis (1994) for such factors as “inability of the learners to remember accurately, lack of self-awareness by students, varying interpretations of terms, the effects of cultural background on response patterns”, and lack of correspondence between what people report to do and what they actually do, their value for obtaining quantitative data has been recognized by the same researchers (Cohen, 1998; Dornyei, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Oxford, 1990), and used in most of the studies carried out on vocabulary learning strategies (Zhang, 2003).

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