

Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Differences Between Arabic and Non-Arabic Majoring Students at the International Islamic University Malaysia

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Abstract: Previous studies conducted in the field of learning AFL or ASL, especially in Malaysia, have found that the most frequent problem faced by learners is vocabulary learning. Consequently, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have proven to be one of the solutions to this problem. Studies have been carried out on VLS among Arabic learners. However, these studies are restricted to learners majoring in Arabic, leaving the non-Arabic majors out. Thus, this study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by Arabic and non-Arabic majors at the International Islamic University Malaysia. A sample of 311 students from both groups answered the 'Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire' by Takac (2008). The study found no significant difference between the Arabic and non-Arabic majors and the spontaneous strategies. Several implications are discussed in light of the results.

Key words: Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) • Learning Strategies • Arabic Majoring Students • Non-Arabic Majoring Students

INTRODUCTION

An aspect of language learning that has long been a focus of study is vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary is acknowledged to be central to language learning [1].

[2, 3] report that many learners tend to use vocabulary development strategies than other linguistics aspects. Most learners believe that learning vocabulary is more important than learning grammar [4].

Though vocabulary learning is important in acquiring a language, [5] asserts that it is the core problem in learning Arabic in the Malaysian context. Mastering Arabic words may not be an easy task for Arabic learners. Consequently, [2] reveals that learners adopt a variety of strategies for dealing with new words.

Different learners use different strategies in vocabulary learning. Learners' choice of strategies is largely influenced by their beliefs about vocabulary and vocabulary learning, as well as other pre-existing

cognitive and social factors [6, 7]. In addition, culture seems to influence the choice of strategy employment among language learners [8]. This paper reports on some findings of vocabulary learning strategies employed by different learners of Arabic in a Malaysian university.

Literature Review: According to [9], learning strategies are specific thoughts or behaviours used by learners in order to comprehend, learn or retain new information in language learning. Based on this definition, vocabulary learning strategies are described as special steps taken by individual learners to help them learn new vocabulary easily and effectively [10].

Various taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies are found in the literature. Among the renowned taxonomies are by [11]. They classify vocabulary learning strategies into two main categories: Initial learning of new words and subsequent learning. [7] propose different types of vocabulary learning strategies: Meta-cognitive

regulation, dictionary use, guessing, note-taking, memory and activation strategies. Later, [12] revises his earlier taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford's [13]. The revised taxonomy falls into five basic categories: Determination strategies, social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive strategies. A taxonomy by [1] is based on levels of vocabulary learning: Planning, which includes choosing what and when to focus on; sources which refer to obtaining information about the words; and processes which include noticing, retrieving and generating. One of the recent works was conducted by [14]. He divides vocabulary learning strategies into three major types: strategies of formal vocabulary learning and practising, self-initiated independent vocabulary learning and spontaneous (incidental) vocabulary learning. This taxonomy is more comprehensive in the sense that it encompasses both explicit and implicit learning, which are equally important for vocabulary growth and enrichment [2].

Vocabulary deficiencies will consequently hinder comprehension and effective communication [2]. It is assumed that once learners use a diversity of VLS, they will be able to comprehend and memorize more new words in the target language. For language instructors, identification of learners' VLS is important to help them learn the language.

Many studies have been carried out to identify vocabulary learning strategies used by learners in learning new vocabulary in the second or foreign language [15-20] and [21]. At least two studies of the studies on VLS were conducted on Arabic learners. [22] investigated VLS used among successful and less successful learners of Arabic as a second language in Saudi Arabia. Anchoring on Schmitt's classification of VLS [2], as well as O'Malley and Chamot's cognitive and metacognitive distinctions [9], this study found major differences in all types of VLS categories. There was moderate relationship between Arabic dialects used outside formal learning and VLS used.

A study by [23] on first year Arabic students in a Malaysian university found that using a dictionary to learn vocabulary was the most frequently used strategy among them.

Previous studies have reported that VLS correlates with other factors such as proficiency [24], gender [25] and learning environment [26]. In addition, [24] believes that the level of language proficiency is also a variable that can affect the choice of VLS among learners.

Different instruments were used to identify students' VLS [2], [7], [14] and Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) for speakers of other languages by [13].

[25] mentions that the most frequently used strategies were "connecting a word to its synonyms and antonyms" and "using physical actions" while the least frequently used were "imagining word form" and "imagining word meaning". The participants were asked to select three from 16 different kinds of VLS which they most often used when learning new words. In another research, results from descriptive statistics show EFL undergraduate students in Kerman Province frequently used meta-cognitive strategies while social strategies were least frequently used [15]. Both studies adopted Schmitt's vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire [2].

Some research focused on investigating the strategies adopted by students of various disciplines such as English [16, 27], non-English majors [18, 19], Arabic majors [22, 23], or both English and non-English majors [20]. The English majors were found to use VLS more frequently than non-English majors [20].

Scope of the Study: The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is the only higher learning institution in Malaysia which places Arabic as a second medium of instruction and communication after English. In this regard, some Arabic courses are made compulsory to students according to the field of study. Students who major in Arabic are required to take more courses in Arabic, compared to the others.

Based on the claim that different individuals and learning environment contribute to a different choice of vocabulary learning strategies [6, 7, 26], this study aims to investigate differences in vocabulary learning strategies between Arabic-majoring students and non-Arabic majoring students in IIUM. Employing the taxonomy by [14], it hypothesizes the following:

- H1:** There is significant difference between Arabic-majoring students and non-Arabic majoring students in formal strategies.
- H2:** There is a significant difference between Arabic-majoring students and non-Arabic majoring students in self-initiated strategies.
- H3:** There is a significant difference between Arabic-majoring students and non-Arabic majoring students in spontaneous (incidental) strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross sectional study was carried out to achieve the objectives of this research. It was conducted at the *Kulliyyah* of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS), IIUM from April to May 2012.

Participants: The population of this study consisted of undergraduate students of the Revealed Knowledge Division, International Islamic University Malaysia. There were following Arabic Language and Literature, *Fiqh* and *Usul Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Usuluddin* and Comparative Religion and *al-Qur'an* and *al-Sunnah* programmes. Arabic majors are from the Department of Arabic Language and Literature while the non Arabic majors are from other departments. A total of 311 students participated in this study, which exceeded the minimum sample size required by [28]. Table 1 below shows the distribution of participants by year of study and major.

Table 1 shows that the total population of Arabic and non-Arabic majors is almost equal. Most of them are in their second year of study (41%). This study adopted the convenience sampling method. Questionnaire survey was distributed to classes where permission to do so was granted.

Instrument: Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire by [14] was used in this study. The 27 items in the questionnaire investigated three different vocabulary learning strategies which are formal, self-initiated and spontaneous strategies.

Formal strategies (11 items) encompass strategies of rote vocabulary memorization, reliance on first language and meta-cognitive aspect of regular and planned revision. Self-initiated strategies (9 items) refer to independent strategies of elaborated approaches to vocabulary study, such as the use of memory strategies. Spontaneous (incidental) strategies (7 items) consist of strategies of spontaneous vocabulary learning in natural learning situations as well as communication strategies. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale.

In order to measure inter-item reliability, Cronbach's alpha is calculated for all the three types of strategies. The values are acceptable, ranging from 0.724 to 0.839 (see Table 2). Thus, all components are deemed reliable as the Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70 [29].

Table 1: Distribution of students across departments and year of studies ($N=311$)

Year of Study	Arabic-Majors	Non-Arabic Majors	Total
1 st year	25 (8%)	37 (12%)	62 (20%)
2 nd year	40 (13%)	86 (28%)	126 (41%)
3 rd year	64 (20%)	14 (5%)	78 (25%)
4 th year	27 (9.5%)	18 (4.5%)	45 (14%)
Total	156 (50.5%)	155 (49.5%)	311 (100%)

Table 2: The internal consistency reliability for Three Strategies

Strategies	Cronbach's alpha
Formal	0.829
Self-initiated	0.839
Spontaneous	0.724

Procedure: Administration of the instrument was conducted at the end of each regular class time. Prior consent was obtained from the class instructors. Students were assured of their anonymity and their involvement was optional. Students took less than 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

RESULTS

A descriptive analysis of the data is presented in Table 3 below:

The results in Table 2 show that all means fall between 3.10 to 3.46, indicating that most learners adopted spontaneous strategies ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.60$), followed by formal strategies ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.55$) and self-initiated strategies ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.63$).

A more detailed descriptive analysis in Table 4 reveals that the most frequently used strategy from the formal strategies was "I translate the words into my mother tongue to understand them" ($M = 3.84$) and the least used strategy was "I use spaced word practice to remember words" ($M = 2.98$). As for the self-initiated strategies, the most frequently used strategy was "I read and leaf through a dictionary to learn some new words" ($M = 3.55$), while the least strategy used for this group was "I write down words when I watch films and TV programmes" ($M = 2.55$). Finally, the item "If I cannot remember a word in a conversation, I describe it in my own words in the foreign language" in spontaneous strategies had the highest mean value ($M = 3.69$), while the lowest mean value ($M = 3.04$) was for the item "I pick up words from films and TV programmes I watch".

Table 3: Means of formal, self-initiated and spontaneous strategies (N=311)

Strategies	Mean	Std. Deviation
Formal	3.32	0.55
Self-initiated	3.10	0.63
Spontaneous	3.46	0.60

Table 4: The most and the least use items of formal, self-initiated and spontaneous strategies (N=311)

Strategies	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Formal: the most used	I translate the words into my mother tongue to understand them	3.84	0.90
Formal: the least used	I use spaced word practice in order to remember words	2.98	0.91
Self-initiated: the most used	I read and leaf through a dictionary to learn some new words	3.55	0.89
Self-initiated: the least used	I write down words when I watch films and TV programmes	2.55	1.01
Spontaneous: the most used	If I cannot remember a word in a conversation, I describe it in my own words in the foreign language	3.69	0.87
Spontaneous: the least used	I pick up words from films and TV programmes I watch	3.04	1.02

Table 5: Differences in vocabulary strategies used between the Arabic majoring (N=156) and non-Arabic majoring students (N=155)

Strategies	Major	Mean	Std. Deviation
Formal	Arabic	3.36	0.59
	Non-Arabic	3.27	0.48
Self-initiated	Arabic	3.10	0.64
	Non-Arabic	3.04	0.60
Spontaneous	Arabic	3.45	0.62
	Non-Arabic	3.47	0.58

Table 6: Independent Samples Test

Strategies	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Formal	1.44	297.772	.150	.089
Self-initiated	.90	310	.368	.064
Spontaneous	-.26	310	.789	-.01

Table 5 below presents the difference in vocabulary strategies used between the Arabic major (156) and non-Arabic major (155) students. The mean for the formal strategies for Arabic majors was 3.36 and the mean for non-Arabic majors was 3.27. The standard deviation for Arabic majors was 0.59 and for non-Arabic majors was 0.48. For self-initiated strategies for Arabic majors, the mean was 3.10, while for non-Arabic majors was 3.04. The standard deviation for Arabic majors was 0.64 and for non-Arabic majors was 0.60. Finally, the mean for spontaneous strategies for Arabic majors was 3.45 and the mean for non-Arabic majors was 3.47. The standard deviation for Arabic majors was 0.62 and for non-Arabic majors was 0.58.

When the two groups were compared, no statistical difference was found between them in their use of formal strategies ($p < 0.05$). A similar result was obtained when the self-initiated and spontaneous strategies were compared.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, there is no significant difference between the Arabic majors and the non Arabic majors in their usage of the VLS. These results are not in line with the findings reported by [20]. Non-Arabic majors used

VLS to understand new words as much as those who majored in Arabic. The similarities in their background (education, religious belief, culture) may have contributed to this factor.

Limitations of the study include the lack of variety in the population and setting. The sample consisted of mostly Malaysian students and the results were gained from students of only one of the divisions of a university. Further research involving students from various cultural backgrounds could be conducted to broaden our understanding on vocabulary learning strategies among the learners. Moreover, the study can be replicated in other settings to investigate the related effectiveness and importance of each vocabulary learning strategy.

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