An Overview of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in English as a Foreign Language

Somayeh Shahidi Shalmani

Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch

Abstract

Researchers in the area of EFL learning have tried to put the way(s) by which EFL learners learn English vocabulary into some frames and present them as strategies. This paper reviews descriptive research on vocabulary learning strategies in English as a foreign language. The review focuses on common strategies that learners use in vocabulary learning such as dictionary strategies, note-taking strategies, Focusing on Form: Word- Formation strategies, and it also discusses other different strategies at length.

Key words: EFL learner, vocabulary learning , Strategies

Introduction

Schmitt (1977) provides a useful overview of the rise in importance of strategy use in second language learning, noting that it grew out of an interest in the learner's active role in the learning process. Nation (2001: 217) claims that it is not easy to arrive at a definition of what a strategy is, but to deserve attention from a teacher a strategy would need to

1. involve choice, that is, there are several strategies to choose from

2. be complex, that is, there are several steps to learn

3. require knowledge and benefit from training

4. increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use

There are numerous strategies which demonstrate these features. Learners not only need to know about these strategies. They need to master them. Concerning vocabulary learning, Nation develops a general classification of vocabulary learning strategies (Nation 2001: 218-22). The

first one is planning, which is to choose what to focus on and when to focus on. There are researches showing that learners who are aware of what they are planning to learn are more likely to succeed. When learning vocabulary, choosing certain aspects of word (usually meaning but for listening and writing, the form of word is also needed to be paid attention to) to focus on and using varieties strategies can make learning process more efficient. Repetition is another important strategy for vocabulary learning. Planning for repetition is useful of strengthen the memorization of vocabulary. The second vocabulary learning strategy is sources, which is finding information about words. Analyzing word parts is a useful strategy, because being familiar with the stems and affixes is useful for remembering word forms, guessing from context and seeking relations between words. Guessing form context is another important strategy of learning vocabulary. Meanwhile, consulting reference sources properly and using parallels can also be helpful in acquiring vocabulary.The third vocabulary learning strategy is processes, which is establishing vocabulary knowledge. Noticing is a widely used way of recording vocabulary, and it can be a very useful first step for further learning of vocabulary. Retrieving strengthen the connection between the word meaning and its form. It is superior to noticing. Generating is the production of the word. It is the further step of learning process.

Dictionaries

Considering three types of dictionaries: monolingual, bilingual and bilingualized, the last ones seem to be the most effective. Bilingual dictionaries may be much helpful for lower proficiency learners as they provide short, easy to understand definitions (Hunt and Beglar, 1998; Far, 2006) although they do have disadvantages: encourage translation, foster one-to-one precise correspondence at word level between two languages and do not describe the syntactic behaviour of words (Gu, 2003). On the other hand, monolingual dictionaries provide information about meaning, grammar and usage (Hunt and Beglar, 1998); nevertheless, they tend to be circular in their definitions and, as Thompson (1987) explains: "employ a special register which is not necessarily the most useful or rewarding for learners to be exposed to." Bilingualized dictionaries try to join the good features of both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. As the former, they include L1 synonyms, and as the former they provide L2 definitions and L2 sentence examples (Hunt and Beglar, 1998). Moreover, the above types of dictionaries are also available in various electronic forms which are more convenient to use and allow learners to

search multiple sources: grammar, text usage, thesaurus, multimedia annotations such as illustrations and videos (Knight, 1994). A lot of research has been done to assess the effectiveness of dictionaries in vocabulary learning. Bilingual dictionaries were proven to result in vocabulary learning by Luppescu and Day (1993). They found out that these dictionaries help in vocabulary learning through reading unless the unfamiliar word has numerous entries, in which case the dictionaries may confuse learners. Nonetheless, they also noticed that using dictionaries make reading longer. Knight (1994), confirming Luppescu and Day's findings, discovered that those who used a dictionary as well as guessed from context not only learned more words immediately after reading but also remembered more after longer time. One way to explain these results is related to the DOPH: since word meaning from context is revealed too easily (shallow processing), dictionary look-up may be necessary to vocabulary retention (deep processing) (Laufer and Hill, 2000). Similar studies were carried out for electronic dictionaries; for example, Chun and Plass (1996) found that unfamiliar words were more efficiently learned when pictures and text were available. It may be explained by Poivio's (1986, as cited in Chun and Plass, 1997) dual-coding theory according to which there are two storage systems for information: a verbal system storing symbolic representation, and a non-verbal system storing analog representation. To conclude, dictionaries are powerful tools but very little time is provided for training in dictionary use (Summers, 1988).

Focusing on Form: Word-Formation

Knowledge of lexical roots can help students predict what a word means, how a word is spelt and is useful in remembering a word (Kelly, 1991). A learner needs three skills to take advantage of affication: dividing a new word into parts; knowing the meaning of the parts; and being able to join the meaning of the parts with the meaning of the word (Nation, 1990). However, a degree to which roots and affixes indicate the meaning of whole words differs widely. Shu et al. (1995) indicates that there are two types of words: morphologically transparent words whose meaning can be easily inferenced on the basis of the word parts, even with no help from context; and morphologically opaque words whose components contribute to the meaning to a very little extent. Still, vocabulary learning strategies based on word form assisted by guess from context can help in vocabulary acquisition since most words' meanings although cannot be derived

solely from word parts are likely to be clear when they appear in even a little helpful context (Far, 2006).

Note-Taking

Learners differ in what they do in note-taking: some keep vocabulary notebooks, some prepare vocabulary cards, others simply note along margins or between lines. Moreover, some students leave their notes in the order in which they were collected whereas others copy their notes after class (McCarthy, 1990). Although note-taking is one of the strategies appreciated by researchers and learners (e.g. Schmitt, 1995; Gu, 2003) little has been done so far to determine how different types of note-taking can influence vocabulary learning.

Word Lists and Repetition

Presenting words in list form can help learners memorize large number of words in a short time. However, students are likely to forget the learned words after a short time (Meara, 1995). To prevent such a problem, lists are usually used with a reading passage to give context. This way, lists not only provide a format which is easy to memorize but also ensure exposure to meaning in context. Word lists aid in organizing words, and they are helpful at the beginning level since lists become tedious as they grow in length (Critchley, 1998). One solution is suggested by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995). According to them, students should write new words on index cards: this way students are more engaged in their learning process and use the list more effectively for their own purposes. Repetition is the easiest and the most naturally strategy people apply to memorize foreign words. Unfortunately, most studies done in this issue were carried out before the 1970s as later studies have concentrated on 'deeper' strategies (Gu, 2003). There are four problems to be discussed on word lists learning: the number of repetitions needed to remember a word list, the optimum number of words to be studied at one time, the timing for repetition and repeating aloud vs. repeating silently. More researchers agree that an astonishing amount of word pairs can be learned within a relatively short time, and not many repetitions are needed to remember L1-L2 word pairs (7 repetitions to remember all 108 English-Russian word pairs, 6 repetitions to remember 80% of 216 word pairs according to Crothers and Suppers, 1967 as cited in Gu, 2003). The list sizes depend on the difficulty level of the words on the list, e.g. if a word list does not contain a great deal of difficult words, 100 or more words can be studied at one time (Crothers and Suppers, 1967 as cited in Gu, 2003). It is also advisable for students to begin repeating

newly learned words immediately after their first encounter and do it aloud as it helps better retention than silent repetition (Gu, 2003). As Kelly (1992) expressed it: "the ear does assist the eye in the long-term retention of lexis."

Mnemonics

Mnemonic strategies, mnemonic devices or simply mnemonics are designed to improve one's memory. The word mnemonic derives from the Greek godness of memory, Mnemosyne, and means: "memory enhancing" (Hrees, 1986). Mnemonic strategies require some amount of deep processing and they work miraculously in boasting memory. Since vocabulary learning is a memory issue, they started to be used for foreign language vocabulary learning. Research in this field began with Atkinson in 1975, and since this date, mnemonic devices have been widely analyzed as a tool for acquiring and understanding of new vocabulary. Among mnemonics there are four groups: linguistic, spatial, visual and physical mnemonic strategies. The linguistic mnemonics are represented by the peg method and the keyword method. The peg method is based on memorizing lists of words by linking them to familiar words or numbers by means of an image. For instance, if students try to learn words describing types of weather, they should think of the days of the week (pegs) and associate them with a certain kind of weather (e.g. Wednesday – windy), and then form a picture in their mind of the sky on such a day (Holden, 1999). The most known and used, however, is the keyword method. There are two versions of this method: one based on the construction of visual imagery and the second based on the construction of sentences. The first step in the two versions is linking the foreign word to a keyword: a native L1 word which sounds similar to the L2 word (Atkinson, 1975). Pressley et al (1982) shows how both these versions can be used by the following illustration: "Consider, for example, the Spanish word carta meaning (postal) letter. Using the keyword cart, a learner might generate either an image of a shopping cart transporting a letter, or a sentence such as The cart carries the letter." The effectiveness of the keyword method in word retention has been proven by many researchers: Avila and Sadoski, 1996; Pressley et al., 1982; Nuria and Matthew, 2006). Spatial mnemonics include the loci method (remembering words by picturing them in specific locations), spatial grouping (remembering words on a page to form different kinds of patterns), and the finger method (associating new words with fingers). Visual mnemonics consist of pictorial method (pairing pictures with words),and visual method (visualizing a word instead of

using real pictures). Physical mnemonics require to enact the meaning of a word. Some teaching techniques are based on physical reenactment, among them Asher's Total Physical Response (Holden, 1999). Despite positive experimental results in the effectiveness of mnemonic strategies, they do have some limitations such as: they strongly depend on nature of words, e.g. it is very hard to use them for abstract words (Ellis, 1997), they help establish one of necessary meaning links; however, the applied linguist's conception of vocabulary stresses multiple meanings and multiple dimensions of meanings (Gu, 2003), they are much less effective for productive purposes (Ellis, 1997).

Nonmnemonic Elaboration Techniques

One of the nonmnemonic techniques is semantic mapping which is based on a word semantic properties. In semantic mapping learners arrange words into a diagram with a key word at the centre or the top, and related words as branches linked to the main word and to each other. Another method may be The Sentence Writing Method (or The Sentence Generate Method) in which students construct a sentence having the word to be memorized. However, learners should make a sentence from which the meaning of the word can be identified (Nielsen, 2002).

Word Cards Theory

The most usual strategy for students learning vocabulary is learning from word cards. According to Nation, a learner writes the foreign word on one side of a small card, and its translation of the first language on the other. The learner goes through a set of cards and tries to recall its meaning (Nation 2001: 297). In China, it is one of the most commonly used strategies for learning English vocabulary among College students. Learning from word cards is a form of decontextualised learning, which means there is no context to help learners to understand the meaning and usage of the words. It helps learners with learning the written form of the word, learning the concept of the word and making connections between word form and meaning. To L2 vocabulary learners, learning from word cards is a good strategy for it is both useful for successful learners and students who find it difficult to learn vocabulary. Though it may be somewhat boring, it is the easiest way for learners to memorize the meaning of the new word.

Behavioristic Theory

Behaviorists believe that language acquisition is the result of habit formation (Lightbown & Spada 1999: 9). They use the term "habits" to explain all kinds of behavior found in language acquisition (Ellis 1997:31). Behaviorism concerns the connection between the target language and the learner the target language, no matter whether it is verbal or non-verbal. The s.This connection begins when the learner receives the linguistic input from connection becomes stronger through practice, then a habit forms through this process, and the language learning process is regarded as the habit-formatting process. The quality and quantity of language input which learners hear from the environment can help them to form the habit and have an effect on their success in L2 acquisition (Lightbown & Spada 1999: 9). From this aspect, learning a language is just like putting language items into the learner's ears, and a habit then forms through this. Once the habit is formed, a language system is established in the learner's mind and the learner can make the conditioned reflex to the language.From the behaviorist point of view, the most useful strategy of learning vocabulary is through hearing the word repeatedly. The more frequently the word is heard, the more deeply it will impress the learner, and the learner will acquire the word more easily, e.g. a man hears the word 'sorry' when someone doing something wrong. At first he completely does not know what does it mean, then he would realize that it means that people do something improperly and feel regret about it. As a habit forms in his mind, he has the deep impression of the word 'sorry'. In this process, the learners can acquire vocabulary easily through repeated hearing.

Incidental Learning Theory

The incidental learning theory is an important vocabulary learning strategies in L2 vocabulary acquisition. Many linguists have made the definition of incidental vocabulary learning. Nation (2001: 232) defines the incidental learning via guessing from context to be the most important of all sources of vocabulary learning. It refers to the learning which occurs without specific intention to focus on vocabulary. One can develop vocabulary knowledge subconsciously while being engaged in any language activities, especially from reading and listening.

Learning vocabulary from context is a kind of incidental learning strategy. How does context contribute to the vocabulary learning? Nation argues that the more often an unknown word is shown in the context the more likely it can be guessed and learnt (Nation 2001: 233). The nearer the repetition is the easier it can be acquired. Context provides clues for word guessing. Different contexts provide more clues for guessing the same word. The clues that are near the unknown word are more likely to be used. The more clues there are, the easier guessing will be. The synonyms in the context can help guessing. If the word is essential for understanding the context, learner will put more effort in guessing. The topical knowledge about the context also can be helpful in guessing new words. Learning vocabulary in context can be very efficient. An analysis of twenty studies shows that fifteen percent of the unknown words are learnt from guessing in the context, in which the unknown words make up tree percent of the running word (Nation 2001: 243-5). Meara (1994:3726-3728) claims that incidental learning is a by-product of learning something else and it is not like the intentional learning which is designed by teachers or students.That means learners acquire vocabulary when they are involved in some learning activities, such as reading, speaking, and interacting with others.

Learning vocabulary in daily life belongs to incidental focus on form. Different from learning in context, learning vocabulary in real life stresses the interaction between learners and the environment in which the word appears. Loewen (2005) suggests four potential benefits of incidental focus on form. First, it can make learners pay attention to form, meaning and use in a single cognitive event. When they encounter an unfamiliar word in life, learners can see the word spellings or hear the pronunciation of the word. Usually learners need to make some reactions to the word. For example: the sign on the highway. The learner can see the word written in Chinese, followed by a word written in English. When seeing the sign, the learner needs to do what it says. That is the reaction to the words. Though the learner pays attention to the Chinese characters, the English words also give him an impression. Second, incidental focus on form can provide learners with the opportunities of alternating their attention between processing language for meaning and for form. When the learner sees the sign on the high way, he does not only see the written words, but also sees it meaning in Chinese. Third, it also can force learners to produce pushed output. According to the interactionist, only comprehensible input is not enough, output is also necessary to acquire a L2. Fourth, producing output can make learners process language syntactically rather than semantically. If learners only pay attention to meaning, they

may not fully acquire the target language, for sometimes they do not need to know every word to understand what a context means. However, output force learners understand the utterance thoroughly, because they need to make some reactions according to it.

From the views mentioned above, incidental learning of vocabulary can be defined as a kind of learning method from reading, listening, speaking or writing to language use while learners' main attention focuses on the information of passages or texts. This method includes learning from extensive reading, learning from taking part in conversations, and learning from listening to stories, films, television or the radio. (Nation 2001: 232).

Factors Affecting Language Learning Strategies

Research has shown that strategy use and effectiveness depend on an individual's personality, the kind of task being carried out, and the learning environment (Schmitt and Schmitt, 1993; Gu, 2003; Far, 2006). These aspects are based on Flavell's (1979 as cited in Gu,2003) conception of the three components of metacognitive knowledge. The person task-context-strategy model stresses the importance of each elements and their interrelation. As a result, an analysis of learning strategies must be carried with knowing the person, task and context (Gu, 2003). Oxford (1989; 1990) identified several personal factors which have an influence on a strategy's usefulness:

• motivation – generally, more motivated learners use more strategies than less motivated students

• sex – females often employ greater overall strategy use than males

• age and L2 stage – students of different ages and stages of L2 learning use different strategies

• personality type – especially lack of inhibition encourage strategy use

• learning style – general attitude to language learning influence the choice of L2 learning strategies These person-related factors are quite stable, and have a great influence on the way a learner approaches a task (Gu, 2003).

A task is an activity which is the final product in the learner's mind. It can be seen as an individual activity which learners carry out, e.g. remembering a word, or in broader sense, it can be described as trying to master a target language. This conception of task is broader than the

definition used in task-based approaches. Different types of task material and task aims given at different difficulty levels require different learning strategies. The learning environment (or the learning context) is created by social, cultural and political factors, and includes, e.g. the people in the class and the classroom atmosphere, the family relationships, and the curriculum (Gu, 2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented the various areas of vocabulary learning strategy research. Furthermore, a lot of work has been done along a more nomothetic line, in terms of investigating overall patterns of strategy use. However, the choice, use, and effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies very much depend on the learner (e.g., cognitive and cultural styles of learning, motivation), and the context (e.g., L1, L2, or FL contexts). More research needs to be undertaken to examine the effectiveness of strategy training in a specific area and increase the possibility of EFL learners becoming more responsible for their own learning.

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