



A COMPARISON OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The present study investigates the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by high school students in a Turkish state high school and university students in a Turkish state university and whether there is a difference between these two groups in terms of vocabulary learning strategies and usage. 50 participants from the state high school and 55 participants from the state university participated in the study. The questionnaire by Dóczy (2011) was revised and applied. The results of the quantitative data analysis show that the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy was using English-Turkish dictionary and there is a significant difference between the two groups in terms of using three of the strategies in the questionnaire.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning strategies, high school and university students

1. Introduction

In this research, the researchers aimed at finding any potential difference between high school students who are currently studying at a state high school and university students who are currently studying at Preparation School of a state university in terms of vocabulary learning strategies. Language learning strategies are defined by many researchers; however, it can shortly be defined by Oxford (1990) as the “*specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.*” (p. 8).

In this study, the strategies in terms of vocabulary learning were investigated amongst high school and university level students to find out if there is a significant difference between these two groups. The significance of this study would be profound when we need to improve the quality of English education at state high schools by

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reflecting on the success of university students at vocabulary acquisition and the success of the curriculum that this state university is following.

2. Review of Literature

Undoubtedly, vocabulary is one of the most important elements of language especially when L2 learners are trying to acquire that language. Alqahtani (2015) states that learning the meanings of new words are often emphasized in course books and classroom objectives in the process of learning a foreign language and supports that this is an essential part of language learning. Vocabulary is defined as “*the total number of words that are needed to communicate ideas and express the speakers’ meaning*” (Alqahtani, 2015, p. 25) and it includes many different aspects and challenges. Additionally, knowing a word means not only knowing its meaning, spelling and pronunciation but also being able to employ it in different situations (Schmitt, 2007). However, vocabulary learning is seen as one of the most difficult challenge that someone encounters in the process of language acquisition (Bahanshal, 2015).

To cope with the difficulties of learning vocabulary, language learners make use of different kinds of vocabulary learning strategies. As one of the sub-category of language learning strategies, vocabulary learning strategies have an importance for the learners as it is a never-ending process while possessing difficulties which are sometimes grueling to cope with (Dóczy, 2011). According to Schmitt (2007), English language includes great number of vocabulary and this number makes the learning process difficult for L2 and EFL learners while showing the significance of using vocabulary learning strategies to learn English.

2.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

According to Amiryousefi (2015), vocabulary learning strategies are helpful learners for becoming more self-directed, regulated and autonomous while they allow learners to discover and consolidate the meaning of new words more efficiently. Vocabulary learning strategies includes four types according to Oxford (1990), which are social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies and determination strategies. Social strategies include use of interaction with other speakers and improving the learning process by this way. Memory strategies include the integrating new material with the previous knowledge. In cognitive strategies, learners manipulate and transform the target language (Schmitt, 1997). Lastly, metacognitive strategies include being aware of, planning, monitoring and evaluating the learning process. As an extra strategy, Schmitt (1997) added determination strategies as a new one in which learners make use of lexically focused strategies without any additional help.

2.2 Research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The research conducted on vocabulary learning strategies included different methods and they revealed various results including use of different types of strategies in different contexts. In the study of Kalajahi (2012), the aim of the researcher was to find

out the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary size of the students. There were 125 university level students as participants who were given a vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire and a vocabulary levels test. Results indicated that the students mostly use psycholinguistic strategies while also making use of metacognitive strategies and they have adequate vocabulary size to cope with these strategies. On the other hand, Davoudi (2016) found that both intermediate and advanced learners used linkages, memory strategies and auditory strategies most frequently.

Gu & Johnson (1996) aimed to find out what kinds of vocabulary learning strategies are being used by the university students and whether they affect learning English. They handed out vocabulary size test as questionnaire and correlated it to an English test. The most salient findings showed that the strategies like contextual guessing, skillful use of dictionaries, note-taking, paying attention to word formation, contextual encoding, and activation of newly learned words correlate with test score of the students while other strategies like visual repetition of new words doesn't correlate. Similarly, the study of Nosidlak (2013) showed that advanced students use diverse and multiple sources of new words while mostly using internet as a source of getting the meaning of a new word.

A different study conducted by Gu (2010) aimed at finding the changes in using vocabulary learning strategies of university students over six months' time. The results indicated that the students started to use a more variety of strategies after six months while also starting to use their active vocabulary more effectively. Similarly, Naeimi & Foo (2015) followed ten academic sessions of time to conduct the study. The research showed that direct learning strategies like structured reviewing are more efficient for a higher achievement while indirect strategies like organizing were found to be less effective.

As a Turkish context, a study was conducted by Kırmızı & Topçu (2014) in a state university. The study revealed that the students have a moderate level of learning strategies while some group of the students show differences in note taking strategies, repetition strategies, activation strategies, top down strategies, dictionary strategies, and memory/ repetition strategies.

Apart from other studies, by using a qualitative method, Asgari (2011) found that the most frequent strategies used by university students were learning a word through reading, the use of monolingual dictionary, the use of various English language media, and applying new English word in their daily conversation. Similarly, Lawson & Hogben (1996) used a different method which was observation by using think-aloud procedure and the most salient finding showed that learners mostly used simple reading of dictionary rather than use of context as a strategy.

Different from the studies conducted in universities, Bahanshal (2010) found out in his study that Saudi high school students unconsciously used more strategies which include guessing from the contexts, using dictionaries and memorizing new words. However, other strategies like note taking and seeking help from others were less used by the students.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted at a state high school and a state university in Turkey. The research was conducted to basically reveal whether there is a difference between the learners who study at a high school and a university. Both female and male students were included in the study. Quantitative data were collected from the students to elucidate the following research questions:

1. What are the types of strategies that might be more frequently used by high school and university students?
2. Is there a difference between high school students and university students in terms of the use of vocabulary learning strategies?

3.1 Participants

50 students from a state high school in İstanbul and 55 students from a Preparation School of a state university in Bursa were selected as participants. High school students included both 9th grade and 10th grade students. On the other hand, university students included elementary level of learners. There were 105 participants who participated in the study in total. The participants included both female and male students.

3.2 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected from the students who are currently studying at high school and university. Quantitative data were collected with the help of questionnaires and were analyzed by using software program IBM SPSS Statistics 23.

3.3 Instruments

A questionnaire about vocabulary learning strategies by Dóczy (2011) were adapted (see appendix A) and translated into Turkish (see Appendix B) to collect the data. First section includes variables which are age, grade, gender and type of school. Second part includes 20 items about vocabulary learning strategy usage. For each question, students were given five options to choose from which are 'strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree'. Students were explained that they should answer the questions freely without any pressure.

3.4 Data Analysis

According to the test results of normality in SPSS software program, the distribution of the questionnaires was found to be normally distributed. For this reason, Mann-Whitney U test was applied to the questionnaires items to see the difference in terms of frequency of vocabulary learning strategy usage between the two groups; high school students and university students.

4. Results

In general, the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy for both of the group is the item 3 (using English-Turkish dictionary) with a mean of 4,4. That might be because in Turkey, no vocabulary learning strategies taught explicitly at schools and students only learnt target vocabulary by just looking them up in English-Turkish dictionaries. The second most frequently used strategy is item 8 (paying attention to the spelling of the new words) with a mean of 4,2. English and Turkish have different rules of spelling; this may have led students to have a habit of paying attention to this. Third most frequently selected item is item 10 (note taking on the paper about the meaning of the word and underlining it) with a mean of 4,1. That might be because Turkish teachers use textbooks at schools which are mostly the only place where students come across to new vocabulary items. The fourth and the fifth most frequently used strategies are the item 4 (learning the new vocabulary with its pronunciation) and item 9 (practicing the pronunciation of the newly learnt vocabulary) with a mean of 4,0 which can be again caused by the different spelling rules of Turkish and English. The next most frequently used strategies are item 14 (trying to use the new vocabulary while speaking), item 15 (trying to use the new vocabulary while writing) and item 17 (asking for the direct translation of the words to friends and teachers) with a mean of 3,7. This can be caused by that English is a foreign language for those students; so either they can use those vocabulary items in classroom activities such as writing and speaking or they can ask their Turkish equivalents to their friends and teachers who are among the few people they can reach with the ability of speaking English.

When we compare the high school students and university students' usage of those strategies, we see that the most significant difference is about the usage of item 2 (using English-English dictionaries) which is highly preferred by high school students than university students with a significance score of .000. The second most significant difference between those two groups is about the usage of item 16 (using vocabulary tests) which again is highly preferred by high school students than university students with a significance score of .026. To conclude, the final most significant difference between those two groups is about the usage of item 19 (revising the old vocabulary items while learning the new ones) which is highly preferred by high school students than university students with a significance score of .007.

5. Discussion

It was not surprising that among both of the groups, the most frequently used strategy for vocabulary learning was using English-Turkish dictionary that was also in congruence with the results of Asgari's study (2011). In Turkish educational context, in elementary and high schools, students are not taught specific vocabulary learning strategies explicitly. Therefore, the only way for students to check the words' meanings is looking them up in dictionaries; which is mostly Turkish-English ones. Turkish students are encouraged to use Turkish-English dictionaries from the very early stages

of their English language learning journeys and teachers try to promote learner autonomy while encouraging them to use dictionaries; however, it is not even common to use English-English dictionaries as we see in the results of the present study as well unlike Gu et al. (1996)'s results showing the skillful use of dictionaries. Besides that, it was seen that students are so concerned with the spelling of English words that they try to practice on the spelling the most after using Turkish-English dictionaries. It might be caused by the fact that Turkish and English have very different spelling rules and Turkish learners of English have so much difficulty while they are learning new vocabulary. That is why the participants of this study might be using this strategy more than most of the strategies on the questionnaire. Most of the participants also claimed that they underline the words and take some notes on the paper that also supports the results of the studies of Kırmızı et al. (2014) and Gu et al. (1996). It is one of the expected results of the educational system in Turkey where mostly theoretical knowledge is being taught on the textbooks or tests. Students come across those vocabulary items on paper and it decreases the creativity of students which would enable them to learn new vocabulary in different contexts. After all those strategies, students also seem to work on the pronunciation of the words which may again be a result of the different spelling rules of English and Turkish. It is also seen that students try to use new vocabulary in classroom activities such as writing and speaking since it is their foreign language and the only place they can use those items is the classroom environment.

When we look at the difference between high school students and university students, we see three significant differences such as using English-English dictionaries, using vocabulary tests and revising the previously-learnt vocabulary while learning the new words. It was surprising that even though high school students do not have any specific lesson to learn vocabulary while university students have two hours for learning only vocabulary regularly every week with a specific vocabulary book, all those three strategies mentioned above are used far more by the high school students than university students. We can infer that high school students may get motivated to use vocabulary tests because in two to three years, they are going to take the university-entrance exam and they may follow the idea that the more test experience, the better test results. However, it is surprising that even though university students will have a proficiency exam which they need to pass to be able to start studying at their departments, they are using those three strategies far less than high school students do. They are revising the previously-learnt vocabulary far less than high school students too. It may be the result of the system which the preparation school has been applying that is spending seven hours a week for grammar, seven hours for listening and speaking, five hours for reading, five hours for writing and two hours for vocabulary learning. Students may not be able to spend more time on vocabulary than they do for other skills as they are consuming most of their times. It should be also stated that university students are taught English obligatorily while high school students do not feel much pressure about learning English and it is mostly their intrinsic motivation; therefore, university students' motivation may not be as high as high school students' is. To make the situation better, perhaps teaching vocabulary learning strategies to

university students explicitly and practicing them with the students would serve since it is obvious that university students need more motivation on vocabulary learning.

6. Conclusion

In the study, the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies used by both high school students and university students; and if there is a difference between those two groups in terms of vocabulary learning strategy usage in the Turkish context was investigated. It was seen that the most frequently used strategy is using English-Turkish dictionary by both of the groups. In addition, there are some significant differences between two groups in terms of using three strategies mentioned in the discussion part which are mostly preferred by high school students. It should be stated that university students who participated in the study were all elementary level students and high school students who participated in the study were only 9th and 10th grade students which is a limitation for this study. It is recommended to have participants from all levels at preparation school and all grades from high schools for further studies.

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Appendix A:

The English translation of the Questionnaire on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Part 1

Age:.....

Sex (*circle the answer*):

- M
- F

Where do you study? (*circle the answer*):

- university
- college
- high school

Year of study at:

- university
- college
- high school

Number of years studying English:.....

WoPaLP, Vol. 5, 2011 Dóczy 156

Part 2

*In this part I would like to ask you to decide whether the statements are true or false. If the statement is true for you, please circle **Yes**, if not, then circle **No** (which. For example, if you like chocolate, please circle Yes like this:*

I like chocolate.

- Yes
- Not

2.1.a Where and when are you aware of meeting new vocabulary?

1. In seminars and lectures/lessons

- Yes
- Not

2. When reading texts for my university/high school courses

- Yes
- Not

3. When reading texts outside university/high school

- Yes
- Not

4. When listening to and watching English-language media (e.g. songs, TV, movies, newscasts)

- Yes
- Not

5. When speaking with native speakers of English

- Yes
- Not

6. When corresponding with native speakers of English in writing

- Yes
- Not

7. When speaking with other non-native speakers of English

- Yes
- Not

8. When corresponding with other non-native speakers of English in writing

- Yes
- Not

9. When browsing the internet

- Yes
- Not

10. When browsing through a dictionary or a thesaurus

- Yes
- Not

2.1.b. In which of the above contexts does vocabulary cause a problem? (*Please write the suitable number(s) here*):

2.1.c. In which of the above contexts do you think you acquire the most vocabulary? (*Please write the suitable number(s) here*):

2.1.d. What do you do first when you meet new words?

1. ask the speaker at once to explain

- Yes
- Not

2. Make a note and look them up afterwards

- Yes
- Not

3. Read with a bilingual dictionary

- Yes
- Not

4. Read with a monolingual dictionary

- Yes
- Not

5. Underline the word and look it up later

- Yes
- Not
- other: _____

2.2 How do you discover the meaning of new vocabulary?

1. I analyse the form of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

2. I try to guess from context.

- Yes
- Not

3. I use a bilingual dictionary to find out the meaning of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

4. I use a monolingual dictionary to find out the meaning of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

5. I use a computer-based dictionary to find out the meaning of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

6. I ask a native speaker for the meaning of a word in L2 (e.g. English).

- Yes
- Not
- other: _____

WoPaLP, Vol. 5, 2011 Dóczy 157

2.3 Who do you turn to when you need help with new vocabulary?

1. I ask my teacher, a classmate or someone else for the L1 (e.g. Hungarian) translation of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

2. I ask the speaker for a paraphrase or synonym of a new word, an example sentence, or a definition, etc.

- Yes
- Not

2.4 How do you memorize new vocabulary?

1. I make note of a new word on my handout – underline, add L1 equivalent, etc.

- Yes
- Not

2. In my vocabulary notebook I write vocabulary in context, or add new words with a definition, synonyms or collocations.

- Yes
- Not

3. I write the new word down together with its pronunciation.

- Yes
- Not

4. I tend to learn vocabulary in short phrases.

- Yes
- Not

5. I group words together to study them.

- Yes
- Not

6. I put the words into sentences.

- Yes
- Not

7. I study the spelling of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

8. I study the pronunciation of a new word.

- Yes
- Not

9. I say the word aloud when studying.

- Yes
- Not

10. I learn an idiom as a whole.

- Yes
- Not

11. I study the word in a bilingual/monolingual dictionary.

- Yes
- Not

12. When possible, I associate it with a similar word in my L1.

- Yes
- Not
- other: _____

2.5 What strategies do you find effective for consolidating new vocabulary?

1. I say the word aloud.

- Yes
- Not

2. I repeat words in writing.

- Yes
- Not

3. I use word lists for revising.

- Yes
- Not

4. I take notes in class.

- Yes
- Not

5. I make an effort to use new vocabulary when speaking.

- Yes
- Not

6. I make an effort to use new vocabulary in writing.

- Yes
- Not

7. I interact with native speakers and try to use new words.

- Yes
- Not

8. I use English-language media (e.g. songs, movies, newscasts).

- Yes
- Not

9. I test myself with word tests.

- Yes
- Not

10. I practise new vocabulary on a regular basis.

- Yes
- Not

11. My practice time is scheduled and organized.

- Yes
- Not

12. I skip or pass a new word.

- Yes
- Not

13. I continue to study a word over time and revise old vocabulary regularly.

- Yes
- Not
- other: _____

2.6 What aspect of vocabulary acquisition/knowledge do you find problematic?

1. Word form

a. pronunciation

- Yes
- Not

b. spelling

- Yes
- Not

c. morphology

- Yes
- Not

d. syntactic properties

- Yes
- Not

WoPaLP, Vol. 5, 2011 Dóczy 158

2. Word meaning

a. to establish the exact meaning

- Yes
- Not

b. to get rid of L1 influence

- Yes
- Not

c. to learn more synonyms

- Yes
- Not

d. to deal with words which have several meanings

- Yes
- Not

e. to remember collocations/idioms

- Yes
- Not

f. to find L1 equivalents

- Yes
- Not
- other: _____

List any other strategy you do not use but find useful:

Add any other comments here:

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix B:
Questionnaire on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Dear students,

The questions below were prepared to reveal the strategies that we use for vocabulary learning. The results will be used for a scientific purpose and will not be shared with the third person.

Part 1

Age:

Grade:

Gender:

F

M

Where you study:

University

High School

Part 2

In this part, please specify the situation that best suits you by carefully reading each item given. Please do not leave blank items and give only one answer to each item.

	Scale Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	How much do you agree with the following items?					
		5	4	3	2	1
1.	To learn the meaning of a word, I examine the word in terms of structure (name, adjective, envelope, etc.).					
2.	I use the English-English dictionary to learn the meaning of a word I first encountered.					
3.	I use the English-Turkish dictionary to learn the meaning of a word I first encountered.					
4.	I learn a new word with its pronunciation.					
5.	I try to learn new words in phrases and short sentences.					
6.	I try to guess the meaning of a word I encountered for the first time by looking at the context in which it was used.					
7.	I use the words I learned in sentence.					
8.	I pay attention to the spelling of the new word.					
9.	I try to pronounce the word I just learned.					
10.	If there is a new word on my paper, I take notes on the word, underline it, I write the meaning.					
11.	I learn a statement as a whole and I don't break it up.					
12.	I review the words I just learned by writing.					
13.	I use a word list to review the words.					

Tansu Yigit, Burcak Aykul
A COMPARISON OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF
HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

14.	I try to use the new words I learned while I am speaking.					
15.	I make an effort to use the new words I learned while I am writing.					
16.	I test myself by doing word tests.					
17.	When I come across a word I don't know, I ask my friends or teacher the exact translation of that word.					
18.	When I come across a new word, I pass that word without learning it.					
19.	When I study with the words I just learned, I try to repeat the words I learned earlier.					
20.	I use English media tools to learn vocabulary. (eg: songs, movies, news).					

Tansu Yigit, Burcak Aykul
A COMPARISON OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF
HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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