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## **Vocabulary Learning Strategies of ESL Students at Intermediate Level in Pakistan**

Naila Gul<sup>1</sup>, Sayyam Saeed<sup>2</sup> & Dr. Muhammad Shahbaz<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

*The study investigates vocabulary learning strategies of ESL students of Pakistan with a consideration of their performance in order to identify; the vocabulary level of the students and the most frequently and least frequently used strategies. The research design was quantitative and the participants were Pakistani ESL students of intermediate level. The SILL (Oxford, 1990) was administered to assess the strategy use while their performance was determined by the result of vocabulary test. The findings demonstrate that Pakistani ESL students are medium strategy users with the frequent use of meta cognitive strategies while with least use of affective strategies. Moreover, vocabulary learning strategies show moderate correlation with students' performance. It is demonstrated that there is found a significant positive correlation with vocabulary learning strategies and students' performance.*

**Keywords:** Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Level

### **Introduction**

Languages possess a number of components like Phonology, Morphology and the lexicon, of which the most distinct and significant component is vocabulary as indicated by Bowen et al (1985) and McCarthy (1990). Vocabulary is the one of these elements without which communication and

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<sup>1</sup> M.Phil Scholar, National College of Business Administration & Economics Multan, Pakistan, neena486@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D Scholar, Hazara University Mansehra, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Muhammad Shahbaz, Assistant Professor Department of English, Almajmaah University, AIZulfi Campus Saudi Arabia.



learning process can't take place. Learning vocabulary is thus, a pre-requisite for Second Language Learner for meaningful and successful communication (Beglar & Hunt1995), and (Luppescu & Day1993).

Vocabulary not only encompasses the meaning of words but also incorporates the words arrangement in language, an individual's approach to draw on and build up the repertoire of lexical items and the association between phrases and words. Vocabulary learning implies not only knowledge of meaning of a particular word but also all the facets of a word. Knowledge of words comprises having awareness of its frequency, register, collocability, syntactic pattern, semantic aspect, possible meanings and knowledge of the similar word in the mother tongue (Nation, 2001).

In ESL classrooms, language learners are usually passive learners as they do not have anything to do with vocabulary learning except to listen to their teachers passively. Learners' inability to find and exploit appropriate and right lexical items to express their ideas is attributed to this nonchalant attitude pertaining to vocabulary learning. Moreover, teachers usually teach using the same methodology. However, some students are successful while others remain unsuccessful. The reason for this failure may call into question the teaching strategies. A particular set of teaching strategies productive for some students may be unproductive for others. Apart from the employment of teaching strategies by teachers, learners too come up with a repertoire of learning skills and exploit a variety of strategies in order to acquire language in the procedure of acquiring knowledge of a language. Being a crucial factor in second language learning, learner strategies are supported by many studies too. These strategies aim at the development of autonomous and self

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regulatory behavior in ESL learners and accelerate the language learning process.

Given the significance of vocabulary in Second Language learning, we cannot overlook the inseparable component of VLSs. VLSs are generally considered the sub set of LLS in foreign language teaching (Oxford, 1990), (Schmitt, 1997). They are "actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use, often unconsciously, to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2"(Oxford 1990). Vocabulary learning strategies have strong relationship with successful vocabulary acquisition. The success stands for rendering the procedure of acquisitions more useful, more self-directed, and more exchangeable to novel setting. The research in Language learning and the research in Vocabulary learning strategies both refer to studies which confirm that the successful learners exploit a group of specific strategies that account for a strong link with their success as compared to the less successful learners. Thus, language learning strategies have been identified as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), Vocabulary learning strategies have been described as any system that influences the operation through which lexical items are acquired, stocked, retrieved and utilized (Schmitt, 1997). All the students exploit VLSs in one way or the other but mostly they are unaware of these strategies and use them unconsciously.

Earlier research on vocabulary learning only dealt with vocabulary items and did not pay heed to learning of vocabulary. Now, VLSs are gaining currency since 1970s. Investigation into VLSs has enriched our perception of

language learning process and tend to develop autonomous and self regulatory behavior in learners.

In Pakistan, the outdated grammar translation approach is in use in most of the institutions (Warsi, 2004), and language learning strategies are scarcely employed which make the students to cram vocabulary items without giving any idea of their usage. Thus, it becomes a part of students' passive vocabulary being unaware of its usage and could not use them in productive skills: Writing and Speaking. Apart from grammar translation method and outdated methods of teaching, the students are being imparted English language skills through Literature, inexpert English language teachers, outdated text books, advocacy of memorization, insufficient language aids, short period of class in the week, and crowded classrooms. All these factors account for learners' poor performance.

As far as the syllabi of English Language and teaching methodology at intermediate level is concerned, only reading and writing skills are the main focus. Though text books involve both direct and indirect methods, a great deal of text is taught through translation method. Subsequently, the students' writing skills are evaluated through different means: choice for synonyms, question answer technique, translation into First language and Second Language, knowledge of grammar etc. Thus the students' mind process in two ways: alternate usage of first language and target language. Though learners have awareness of importance of vocabulary items for language learning, they are generally unfamiliar with VLSs that facilitate the acquisition of the lexical items. Hence students learn the vocabulary items mechanically and use only a

few strategies for learning vocabulary items. Thus their linguistic competencies remain deficient.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **1IDS**

Some people almost attain the native like proficiency in a FL, while others appear to be at a beginner's level. Some second language learners progress rapidly and seemingly efficiently while others make a very slow progress with great struggle. It is because that they are heterogeneous. They have varied personalities and behaviors. As Dörnyei, (2005) puts, these IDS are "enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree". Learners vary remarkably in terms of their achievement in learning a language. This is exactly the case regarding acquisition of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) although there is a remarkable difference. As far as first language learning is concerned, children differ in their speed of learning but all master their mother tongue except those who do not find favorable and conducive environment while in case of L2 acquisition (SLA), learners vary not only in the rate of learning but also in their subsequent attainment with a few attaining native-like mastery and others stopping far short. Broadly speaking, these factors have been categorized under three different sets: social, cognitive, and affective.

Different researchers have proposed different number of factors. Skehan, 2002 (as cited in Eddy, 2012) emphasizes the four areas regarding the factors contributing to individual differences in second and foreign language acquisition

- (1) Language aptitude
- (2) Learning style
- (3) Motivation,
- (4) Learning strategies

Further, He adds personality too.

Bond, 2002 (as cited in Eddy, 2012) in her research on successful language learners, presents a comprehensive approach towards factors that may prove helpful in language learning. She has proposed the following factors that determine individual differences of language learners.

- (1) Age
- (2) Exposure to foreign language in infancy
- (3) Immersion
- (4) Intelligence
- (5) Personality
- (6) Attitude and motivation
- (7) Relationship between first and target language
- (8) Sensory style
- (9) Learning strategies, and
- (10) Other factors (mimicry, musical ability)

### **Language Learning Strategies**

Wenden and Rubin,(1987) describe LLSs as a group of actions, steps, schemes, patterns that the learner uses to expedite to acquire, store, retrieve and utilization of information. Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) see language learning strategies as “intentional behavior and thoughts that

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learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information”.

As far as the classification of LLs is concerned, Oxford (1990) has presented a comprehensive one which presents a division of LLSs under two chief classes: direct strategies concerning language and indirect strategies dealing with general direction and control of learning. Direct strategies precisely concern the target language and are further divided into 3 classes: (1) memory, (2) cognitive, and (3) compensation strategies. Direct strategies comprising these three groups necessitate different mental processing of L2 and for different objectives. The taxonomy is as follows:

**Table 2.2 LLSs Classification by Oxford (1990)**

Type	Primary Strategies
Direct Strategies	1.Memory strategies
	2. Cognitive strategies
	3.Compensation strategies
Indirect Strategies	1.Metacognitive strategies
	2.Affective strategies
	3. Social strategies

### **Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Vocabulary learning strategies subsume LLSs which sequentially become a constituent of general learning strategies (Nation 2001).Therefore, VLSs definition originates from the definition of LLSs (Catalan 2003). Cameron (2001) describes VLSs in terms of the steps taken by the language learners in order to assist them in comprehension and memorize the lexical

items. Catalan (2003) utilizes Robin’s definition of VLSs (1987); Wenden (1987); Oxford (1990); and Schmitt (1997) as the functional definition in her research and defines VLSs in terms of information related to the mechanisms (procedures, systems) utilized for learning vocabulary items as well as actions or operation students take (a) to search the meaning of unfamiliar lexis, (b) to reserve them in long-term memory, (c) to recollect them when they desire to, and (d) to utilize them in spoken or written form.

**Schmitt (1997)**

Schmitt (1997, pp. 207-208) has generated a taxonomy of VLSs based on comprehensive LLSs taxonomy ordered by Oxford’s (1990, pp. 17-21), including Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social categories. Schmitt’s (1997) Classification of VLSs is as follows:

**Table VLS classification by Schmitt (1997)**

Category	Strategies
Strategies involving discovery of a new word’s meaning	a) Determination Strategies b) Social Strategies
Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered	a) Social Strategies b) Memory Strategies c) Meta cognitive strategies

Stern (1975) examined the LLSs exploited by the ‘good language learner’ and discovered that LLSs employed by the good language learner are different from those of the ‘poor learner’. He recorded (Stern, 1975, p. 316) ten theoretical features that might distinguish a good language learner: 1) a personal learning style or positive learning strategies; 2) an active learning

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mechanism to the learning task; 3) a broadminded and continuous approach to the target language and affinity with its speakers; 4) technical expertise to deal with a language; 5) strategies related to experiment and plan aiming at development of the new language into a systematic manner as well as revision of this system sequentially 6) continuous quest for meaning; 7) readiness for practice; 8) readiness practice of the language readily in actual communication; 9) self-overseeing and critical awareness of language use; and 10) development of the target language as a different reference system and training to think in English.

Ahmed (1989) distinguished five types of learner who employ specific strategies. 'Good learners' have awareness about their learning, significance of learning of contextualized words, semantic link between the L2 words that are newly learned and those learned previously. (Ahmed 1989, cited in Schmitt, 1997, p. 202); while 'poor learners' exploit a small number of strategies, have little understanding about way of learning new words or to associate the new words to those learned previously. (Ahmed, 1989, cited in Schmitt, 1997, p. 202). Returning to the idea of the 'good' vs. 'poor' learner, studies (Stern, 1975; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Sanaoui (1995) discriminated between two different types of learner, on one hand are those who organize their vocabulary learning through participating in a wider range of activities autonomously, reviewing and practicing the target words, and on the other hand are those whose approach is quite opposite.

Schmitt (1997) discovered that vocabulary learning strategies appears to be used more frequently than those of language learning. He further puts in

that there is greater exploitation of vocabulary learning strategies than strategies like listening comprehension, oral presentation and social interaction.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The present study included 400 students of intermediate level in Pakistan who were selected randomly for this study.

### **Instruments**

The Strategy Inventory For language Learning (SILL) proposed by Oxford (1990) is utilized for the current study. The SILL is organized comprising strategies combined into six categories: memory strategies (9 items), cognitive strategies (14 items), compensation strategies (6 items), Meta cognitive strategies (9 items), and affective (6 items), and social strategies (6 items). It elicits data using five point Likert-scale ranging from “never or almost never” to “always or almost always” about each component dealing with a learning strategy. To determine the performance of students regarding their lexical competence, another tool used in the study was vocabulary test.

## **Results & Discussion**

### **Frequency of Students’ Overall Strategy Use**

In order to determine the vocabulary level of Pakistani ESL students at Intermediate level and answer the first research question, descriptive statistics was used.

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**Table Frequency of students' overall strategy use**

Students' Strategy Use	No. Of Students	Mean	S.D	Frequency Category
Overall Strategy Use	400	3.31	.50	Medium Use

Table shows the mean of 3.31 and standard deviation of .50 of utilization of strategy as a whole as reported by students. For the present investigation, mean score of 3.31 showed that as research subjects, Pakistani ESL students reported medium use of strategies as according to the calculating rubric suggested by Oxford (1990) which suggests mean frequency score above 3.5= high use, mean frequency score of 2.5 to 3.5 = medium use and mean frequency score below 2.5 =low use.

**Frequency of VLS Use**

To answer the second research question and find the most frequently and least frequently strategies, descriptive statistics was employed.

**Table Frequency of VLS use**

Categories	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D	Ranking	Strategy use
Meta cognitive	400	1.00	5.00	3.64	.73	1	High use
Compensation	400	1.00	5.00	3.35	.72	2	Medium use
Social	400	1.00	5.00	3.31	.85	3	Medium use
Cognitive	400	1.00	4.78	3.21	.56	4	Medium use
Memory	400	1.36	5.00	3.21	.63	5	Medium use
Affective	400	1.00	5.00	3.19	.80	6	Medium use

As presented in this Table the mean score of Meta cognitive strategies in this study was above 3.5, thus indicated it as high use. Though the frequency of other five categories put them under medium strategy use, affective categories had low mean score 3.19 as compared to the other categories and, thus were found least used in this study. No strategy had mean score below 2.5 and thus was to be reported used at low level. This result is in the line of that of the study executed by Kazi, A & M. Iqbal (2011) that meta cognitive strategies are the preferred strategies at intermediate level as well to some extent regarding less preference for affective strategies as their findings indicated that the learners utilize less social affective strategies.

### **Frequency of Individual VLS**

The mean scores of the 50 strategies were separately calculated to determine the most often and the less often employed individual strategies. Table 4.3 provides on the basis of the mean score, a clear picture of 400 Pakistani ESL students' exploitation of 50 individual learning strategies in order to acquire the vocabulary items listed in the SILL. These items are ranked according to their frequencies being reported by the Pakistani ESL students at intermediate level.

**Table Frequency of individual VLS (50 items)**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Item. No</b>	<b>Individual Strategy</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
1	Meta_38	Judge my progress in acquiring English.	4.03	1.075
2	Comp_29	Utilize similar word or phrase, if can't think of an English word.	3.97	1.068
3	Meta_33	Try to become aware of how to be a better learner.	3.96	1.102

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4	Meta_32	Pay heed to those talking in English.	3.92	1.048
5	Mem_7	Perform newly acquired vocabulary items.	3.79	1.171
6	Aff_40	Support myself to talk in English even apprehensive of committing a mistake.	3.77	1.229
7	Mem_8	Of times review of English lessons.	3.74	1.135
8	Cog_13	Utilization of English lexical items differently.	3.71	1.202
9	Mem_4	Memorize new English word through abstract image of situation, that word can be used.	3.70	1.216
10	Soc_45	Ask others to repeat or to slow down in case of difficulty to grasp at something in English.	3.70	1.312
11	Cog_18	First skim, and then scan the passage.	3.70	1.360
12	Cog_10	Of times practice of new English words in oral or written form.	3.67	1.299
13	Comp_24	Make guess for understanding of unknown English lexical items.	3.66	1.105
14	Meta_37	Have definite aim to improve English skills.	3.66	1.252
15	Meta_31	Note down mistakes and utilize them to perform better.	3.59	1.257
16	Aff_39	Try to de-stress when afraid to use English.	3.59	1.281
17	Soc_49	Raise questions in English.	3.54	1.238
18	Mem_2	Make sentences of newly acquired English words to memorize them.	3.53	1.222
19	Meta_36	Strive to avail chances in order to read in English.	3.48	1.296
20	Comp_28	Make guesses what others will next speak in English.	3.45	1.266
21	Meta_30	Look for maximum possible ways to practice English language.	3.44	1.210

22	Comp_25	Make use of gestures in absence of suitable word during discussion in English.	3.44	1.344
23	Mem_1	Relate between already known and newly acquired things in English.	3.42	.949
24	Cog_16	Reading for felicity in English.	3.42	1.373
25	Cog_15	Watch TV shows or movies in English language.	3.39	1.374
26	Cog_19	Find out L1 words similar to new lexical items in English.	3.33	1.214
27	Cog_17	Pen down notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.	3.32	1.393
28	Mem_3	Associate the sound of new lexical items and picture of the word in order to memorize the word.	3.27	1.342
29	Aff_42	Pay heed to my nervousness while studying or practicing English.	3.25	1.389
30	Soc_50	Acquire knowledge about the culture of the natives.	3.24	1.513
31	Mem_9	Memorize new vocabulary items/phrases of English language keeping in mind their position on page, on the board, or on a sign board.	3.22	1.450
32	Soc_48	Seek assistance from native speakers.	3.17	1.341
33	Soc_47	Practice English language with fellows.	3.17	1.394
34	Cog_21	Break down the lexical items into known constituents in order to search out the meaning of an English lexical item.	3.13	1.337
35	Cog_14	Converse in English language.	3.10	1.290
36	Soc_46	Ask for correction in spoken from English speakers.	3.09	1.363

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37	Aff_41	Celebrate or give present to myself for good performance in language.	3.07	1.515
38	Aff_44	Share my feelings with others regarding acquiring English.	3.05	1.341
39	Comp_26	Coin new vocabulary items in absence of the suitable words in English.	3.03	1.345
40	Cog_12	Practice the sounds/pronunciation of English.	3.03	1.309
41	Meta_34	Chalk out a timetable to avail maximum time to learn English.	3.02	1.367
42	Cog_20	Look for patterns in English language.	2.95	1.225
43	Cog_22	Avoid literal translation.	2.86	1.487
44	Meta_35	Search for people to speak English with.	2.85	1.394
45	Cog_11	Strive to talk like the natives.	2.76	1.401
46	Cog_23	Summarize the information read or heard in English.	2.72	1.369
47	Comp_27	Read English without tracking down every new lexical item.	2.55	1.383
48	Mem_6	Utilize flashcards to memorize new lexical items.	2.45	1.329
49	Aff_43	Pen down feelings in a language learning diary.	2.42	1.466
50	Mem_5	Make use of rhymes to memorize new English words.	2.32	1.199

Frequency of VLSs exploitation with regard to all the 50 strategies at the individual strategy level indicate the high frequency use of the 18 strategies as reported by the students in the present execution of investigation. These strategies involve in all the six categories, different in terms of their

different numbers of items. But out of the top 4 preferred strategies, 3 fall under the category of Meta cognitive strategies: item no38 (Judge one's progress in acquiring English); item no33 (Try to become aware of how to be a better learner); item no 32(Pay heed to those talking in English). As far as the least frequently strategies are concerned, there are 3 items having mean frequency score less than 2.5 demonstrating their less utilization. They fall under Affective and Memory strategies i.e. item no 6 (Utilize flashcards to memorize new lexical items);item no 43(Pen down feelings in a language learning diary); and item no 5 (Make use of rhymes to memorize new English words).This reported result of high use and low use strategies are in line with that of categories.(See table 4.2.).

### **Relationship between Strategies and Students' Performance**

In order to see the relationship between VLSs and lexical competence of students, Pearson correlation was executed between the mean scores of SILL and result obtained through vocabulary test. There was found a positive relation between these variables as presented in Table 4.4 as follow:

**Table 4.4 Correlation between Strategy use and Students' performance**

Grade (r)	Students (N=400)
	.354**

\*\*p< .01

As can be seen in Table 4.4, it was found that employment of VLSs was significantly correlated with the lexical competence of the students at the significant level of .01. It implied that students' performance and vocabulary learning strategies were correlated with each other in a positive moderate manner ( $r = .354, p < 0.01$ ). The result of correlation coefficient demonstrated

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that an increase in utilization of VLSs reported an increased level of lexical competence.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, we can maintain that Pakistani learners at intermediate level are medium strategy users as indicated by mean score of 3.31. They prefer metacognitive strategies. Though they utilize other strategies at a medium level but affective strategies are least used.

As another findings, the results indicate that there was found significant relation between vocabulary learning strategies and performance of the students. Furthermore, it was found that all vocabulary learning strategies contribute to the vocabulary level of the students. They use strategies in this order: metacognitive, compensation, social, cognitive, memory and affective strategies.

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