

**INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY LEARNING  
STRATEGIES USED BY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS  
AT TAIBAH UNIVERSITY IN LEARNING ENGLISH  
VOCABULARY ITEMS**

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# INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS AT TAIBAH UNIVERSITY IN LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY ITEMS

**ABSTRACT\_** *The present study investigated vocabulary learning strategies used by the first year students (Badr Community College) at Taibah university in learning English vocabulary items. The sample consisted of 98 male and female students during the academic year 2013-2014 who responded to the questionnaire and interviews. Results revealed that students prefer to use the rote learning and ignore other strategies in learning English vocabulary. Accordingly, the researcher recommended developing and improving the idea of using many vocabulary learning strategies which respond to the students' needs and giving them the chance to participate in choosing the instructional materials. This may help them improve their learning practices and their performance in learning English vocabulary.*

**Keywords:** *Taibah University, Vocabulary, Vocabulary learning strategies, English vocabulary items.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is central to English language. Students often recognize its importance to their language learning since they feel that it is necessary to understand and communicate with others in English. They learn them to build their knowledge of words and phrases and helping them in enhancing their English knowledge and use. Accordingly, it is important to study students' strategies that are used in learning vocabulary in the field of foreign language learning. Numerous types of approaches, techniques, exercises, strategies and practices have been introduced into the field of vocabulary learning [8]. It has been suggested that vocabulary learning should not only consist of learning specific words but also aim at equipping learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge [12].

Researchers have suggested that learners' beliefs would affect the way they use learning strategies and learn a foreign language. Wenden [18] asserted that beliefs affected learners' choice of strategies, their attending pattern, criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a language learning activity, and their planning priorities. Learners' beliefs about foreign language and its culture affect their attitudes towards that language and together with other variables play a major role in their motivations to learn a foreign language [2, 4, 5, 6, 11].

Language learners' expectations are influenced and shaped by their beliefs. These expectations influence their choices in using vocabulary learning strategies, guide them in their conceptualizations of language learning and influence the approaches they use to learn vocabulary [19].

## II. THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Investigating the vocabulary learning strategies used by the students in learning English vocabulary items may bring a very deep understanding and important information to the English context. Their responses are highly valued in the process of learning vocabulary.

As a professor of English, the researcher observes that students have problems in using English words appropriately when they want to write or speak. In addition, they suffer from a big difficulty in comprehending what they listen or read. This could be a result of using inappropriate vocabulary learning strategies in their learning. Furthermore, it may prevent their innovation to make their learning improper and result in poor educational outcomes. The present study will explore the vocabulary learning strategies that first year students at Taibah university used in learning English vocabulary items. This study attempts to answer the following question:

1- What vocabulary learning strategies do Pre-service teachers at Taibah University (Badr Community college) use in their learning?

### 1.2 The Significance of the study

The significance of the study stems from the following considerations:

1. It may provide different insights into the students' beliefs about vocabulary instruction to sensitize teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers to emphasizing teaching vocabulary through using different vocabulary teaching strategies.

2. The findings of the study may help professors as well as lecturers to choose and use the proper strategies in teaching vocabulary to improve the quality of teaching English vocabulary.

### Review of Related Literature

Researchers have suggested that many learners' difficulties result from an inadequate vocabulary. Nation [13] states that vocabulary is an area that had drawn researchers' interest within the mainstream of L2 acquisition. Nation [14] mentions that vocabulary learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies which are part of general learning strategies. In the same vein, Oxford [15] observes that language learning strategies encourage self-direction for learners. They help them to become independent learners who are able to carry responsibility for their own learning.

O'Malley & Chamot [16] investigated which vocabulary strategies are most commonly used among learners. Results revealed that more mechanical strategies are often favored over more complex ones. They found that repetition was the most commonly mentioned strategy, with strategies involving deeper, more involved manipulation of information (i.e. imagery, inferencing, Keyword Method) being much less frequent.

Gu and Johnson [7] did a research to know the vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese learners. Results showed that the participants generally did not use memorization strategies. Instead, they employed more meaning-oriented strategies.

In addition, learners also reported using a wide variety of vocabulary learning strategies including dictionary use, note taking, guessing, and repetition. Results also revealed that visual repetition and imagery encoding were both strong negative predictors of vocabulary size and English proficiency, implying that learners probably should not depend too much on visual repetition or fanciful imagery techniques when committing words into memory.

Schmitt [17] surveyed a sample of 600 Japanese students to assess which vocabulary learning strategies learners actually used in their learning. The researcher found that they used more dictionary and repetition strategies and considered them more useful than other strategies. They used fewer imagery and semantic groping strategies than other strategies and regarded them as the least useful. The findings also revealed that more advanced learners tended to use more complex and meaning-focus strategies than less advanced learner.

Wu and Wang [20] investigated the vocabulary learning strategies of Chinese non-English majors in Beijing Normal University. Results revealed that Chinese college students employed a number of vocabulary learning strategies including cognitive strategy and metacognitive strategy. They also indicated that vocabulary learning strategies are strongly associated with both the quantity and the quality of the English vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, They discovered that proficient students had different ways of approaching the vocabulary learning strategies than less proficient students.

Cusen [3] conducted a study to identify and classify vocabulary learning strategies of Romanian English major and minor undergraduates at university of Brasov. He used Oxford learning strategies classification as the analytical framework of his study. He found that advanced learners with a professional interest seem to use almost all the types of strategies from Oxford analytical framework. They appeared to use other strategies related to the context of his study.

Lo [10] investigated EFL students' perceptions about vocabulary learning strategies and its usefulness in a high school located in Hong Kong. Results showed that spelling the words repeatedly, taking notes in vocabulary

textbooks, repeating and reviewing strategies, and analyzing strategies were the most useful and the most frequently used strategies by students.

Wu [21] explored vocabulary learning strategies used by 10 vocational Chinese ESL learners in a vocational institute in Hong Kong. Learners were interviewed individually and their responses were recorded with a tape recorder. According to their responses, they used the following strategies in learning the meaning of the new words: mental rehearsal ,imagery, auditory representation, selective attention, checking the dictionary to find out the meaning of words and co-operation.

Asgari & Bin Mustapha [1] conducted a study to examine the type of vocabulary learning strategies used by Malaysian ESL students majoring at Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). They used the qualitative research design. Result revealed that learning a word through reading, using monolingual dictionary, using various English language media, and applying new English word in their daily conversation were popular strategies and the learners were keen in using them.

Kafipour & Naveh [9] investigated the use of vocabulary learning strategies among EFL undergraduate students in Kerman Province and its contribution to reading comprehension. Results for descriptive statistics showed that learners were found as medium strategy users. They used metacognitive strategies most frequently and social strategies least frequently. The results also showed that among five categories of vocabulary learning strategies, only one category (social strategy) had significant correlation and contribution toward learner's reading comprehension.

One of the most important challenges that learners will face during the process of foreign language learning is learning vocabulary. Vocabulary has been recognized as crucial to language use in which insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the learners led to difficulties in foreign language learning. They should increase their vocabulary knowledge in order to become successful in their academic educational environments. Accordingly, they need to be educated with vocabulary learning strategies and utilize efficient vocabulary learning strategies to increase their vocabulary acquisition. In this study, the researcher investigated vocabulary learning strategies that employed by the first year students at Taibah university in learning English vocabulary items.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Population and sample

The population of the study, which comprised 130 students, consisted of all students in Badr Community college during the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014. The sample consisted of 98 male and female students studying at Badr College.

#### 3.2 Instruments

The researcher developed a questionnaire for the students. It was developed to find out the students' beliefs about vocabulary learning strategies. In addition, The researcher developed a number of interview questions to be answered by the students such as strategies used in their learning, the effectiveness of some strategies and their opinions to learn English vocabulary in innovative ways (see Appendix 2 page 10). The purpose of the questions was to get more information about students' perceptions and beliefs about vocabulary learning strategies especially those which were not covered in the questionnaire. The participants provided the researcher with information through verbal interchange and conversation. The interviewees were asked about their personal experiences in vocabulary learning. A variety of questions were raised to elicit the information most possible in the time available.

### 3.3 validity and Reliability of the instruments

To validate the questionnaire, a jury of ten EFL specialists was asked to examine it and provide their comments and suggestions. These experts were four university professors, three EFL supervisors, and three experienced EFL teachers. Experts' suggestions included deleting some irrelevant items and adding new ones, re-categorizing of items and editing. To ensure the validity of the interview questions, the jury was asked to judge whether the questions were appropriate and comprehensive. They suggested editing some of the questions. The researcher edited them accordingly.

To obtain the reliability, 25 students, who were randomly chosen from the population of the study and excluded from the sample, responded to the questionnaire twice with a two-week interval between them. The reliability coefficient was computed using Cronbatch Alpha. The obtained value was 0.91. This result was considered satisfactory to use this questionnaire to collect data and analyze them.

### 3.4 Design of the study

Two approaches were used in this study. The first one was quantitative in which the responses of the students were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. The second one was qualitative through interviewing students and letting them talk about their vocabulary learning.

### 3.5 Data analysis

This study is mainly a quantitative one in which the answers were analyzed using percentages, means and standard deviations for the first questions. A minor part of this study is a qualitative one in which the students were given the chance to talk about their vocabulary learning strategies.

## IV. RESULTS

The question was about vocabulary learning strategies used by the students at Taibah University (Badr Community College) in learning English vocabulary items. In order to answer this question, the researcher calculated the percentages, the means and the standard deviations for students' responses.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for the domains and items of the questionnaire

Rote learning	Mean	S. D	Guessing	Mean	S. D	Applying images and sounds	Mean	S. D	Dictionary	Mean	S. D
1	3.59	1.05	11	2.16	1.17	21	2.56	1.30	31	3.55	1.29
2	3.58	1.15	12	2.03	.86	22	2.65	1.36	32	3.49	1.27
3	4.27	.96	13	2.55	1.17	23	2.79	1.32	33	3.08	1.34
4	3.90	1.01	14	2.28	1.20	24	2.14	1.08	34	1.87	2.18
5	3.44	1.02	15	2.92	1.31	25	2.26	1.24	35	2.06	1.18
6	3.65	1.17	16	2.49	1.19	26	2.32	1.26	36	2.42	1.30
7	3.53	1.21	17	2.30	1.13	27	2.68	1.40	37	2.08	1.00
8	3.55	1.25	18	2.31	1.01	28	3.02	1.28	38	2.45	1.39
9	3.59	1.22	19	2.43	1.06	29	3.47	1.26	39	2.10	1.32
10	3.39	1.40	20	2.60	1.15	30	2.29	1.32	40	2.42	1.21
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>1.14</b>		<b>2.41</b>	<b>1.13</b>		<b>2.62</b>	<b>1.28</b>		<b>2.56</b>	<b>1.35</b>

Table 1 shows that the first dimension (Rote learning) has the highest mean. It also shows that other dimensions (Guessing, Applying images and sounds, and Dictionary) have means ranging from 2.41 to 2.62. It also shows the means and the standard deviations for all items of the questionnaire. (see Appendix 1).

Most of the interviewed students saw that vocabulary is an important aspect in learning English language. They consider learning vocabulary as an essential way to learn English as a foreign language. Accordingly, they agreed that more words students know, the better they are able to learn and comprehend. Furthermore, They agreed that there is no single strategy for vocabulary Learning that fits all types of learners and all kinds of words to be learned. However, some strategies may appear to be used more frequently than others according to the teachers' and

students' beliefs. The answers of the interviewed students showed that they used repetition, translation and memorizing in their learning. The participants believed that the use of technology such as computers, electronic dictionaries, mobiles and educational websites might be difficult to be used in their learning because they need a lot of practices and studying to be familiar with . (see appendix 2, page 10).

## V. DISCUSSION

The question of the study asked about the vocabulary learning strategies that Pre- service teachers at Taibah University (Badr Community college) employed in their learning English vocabulary. After analyzing the questionnaire and the interview questions, the researcher found that the most common beliefs among students about rote learning strategies in learning new vocabulary were

that they should repeat a word aloud, place it in a group with other items based on topic, theme or function, skip or pass an unknown word which seems inessential for adequate comprehension of a passage and write it repeatedly. They believe that using translation in learning vocabulary and keeping a vocabulary notebook may facilitate vocabulary learning. Besides, they think that students' memory may be enhanced through connecting a new word to a personal experience, writing words many times, paraphrasing their meanings and using physical actions while learning new vocabulary (see Appendix 1 , page 8). The results of O'Malley & Chamot [16] ,Schmitt [17] and Lo [10] confirm the results to which the present study ends up.

Results revealed that students had poor beliefs about using the guessing strategy in learning new vocabulary. By investigating the actual situation, the researcher found that they did not know how to use this strategy in comprehending the text. In addition, they found it as a difficult strategy to be learned and to be practiced. The researcher interpreted this situation in light of the fact that students had a tendency to learn vocabulary through using ready answers or depending on their teachers' explanations, and they did not like to spend a lot of time when learning new vocabulary and answering the teacher about the meanings and pronunciations of new words regardless of the benefit which their students might get from their teaching. In addition, students may not be able to infer the meaning of new words because they do not know the meaning of other words in the contexts to guess the meaning of new words(see Appendix 1 , page 8). The finding of this study in this regard is inconsistent with Gu and Johnson [7] who found that learners used a wide variety of vocabulary learning strategies including guessing.

The researcher found that students ignored using applying images and sounds strategy in their learning new vocabulary. It seemed that they followed the way of learning vocabulary practiced in their schools. They thought that learning vocabulary without using this strategy might save their time and effort. In addition, they thought that using listening tools such as cassettes and CDs might be insufficient in learning since most of the speaking materials seemed to be difficult. They prefer teachers' explanations and considered it as a good strategy in learning vocabulary (see Appendix 1, page 9). This result does match the results of Wu [21] who found that students used the mental rehearsal ,imagery and auditory representation.

Students also ignored using the dictionary in their learning new vocabulary. It seemed that the students' ignorance of this strategy stemmed from the fact that most of students did not need to use dictionaries in their daily life outside the classroom; beside that, students had already learned the meaning of the new vocabulary from the ready

answers which helped them to know the meaning of the new words without efforts. Teachers might justify this by saying that their students' active participation could be an indicator of their understanding of the use and meaning of new vocabulary. Furthermore, they thought that teachers might not give them enough time to find new vocabulary items and they did not learn them how to use dictionaries appropriately in order to find the meaning, pronunciation, words' derivatives and frequent contexts of occurrence (see Appendix 1 , page 9). This result is inconsistent with Gu and Johnson [7] and Asgari & Bin Mustapha [1].

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study investigated vocabulary learning strategies used by students in Badr Community College at Taibah university in learning English vocabulary. One out of four vocabulary learning strategies is somehow considered to be used according to their responses. They preferred using the rote learning strategy and ignore other strategies in learning English vocabulary. It seemed that the students' ignorance of these strategies affected their performance, vocabulary knowledge and learning the English language as a whole. They depended on their teachers' explanations and did not like to spend their time in applying new strategies in learning new English regardless the benefits which they gained from these strategies.

### Recommendations

This study revealed that students had poor beliefs about using vocabulary learning strategies in learning English vocabulary items. Accordingly, some recommendations can be made to the teachers as follows:

1. Teachers should be aware of vocabulary teaching strategies and think of ways to improve students' vocabulary learning through improving their own theoretical knowledge about vocabulary learning.
2. Teachers should develop and improve new vocabulary teaching strategies that suit their students and accept the idea of changing their practices.
3. Teachers should provide students with vocabulary learning strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners such as promoting the use of electronic dictionaries and spelling investigations to extend the range of words used.
4. Other studies should be conducted to identify constraints that prevent students from applying variety of vocabulary learning strategies in learning vocabulary.
5. A similar study should be conducted in other colleges to find out more about students' beliefs about strategies used for learning vocabulary.

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