

THE INFLUENCE OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract. Vocabulary plays a vital role in the development of reading comprehension skills, especially in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Language learners who possess a broader and deeper vocabulary repertoire are generally able to process written texts with greater ease and accuracy. Thus, the acquisition of vocabulary is not only fundamental to linguistic development but is also critical to comprehending and interpreting a variety of reading materials. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) refer to the intentional, systematic methods and techniques that students employ to enhance their knowledge and retention of new words. The effectiveness of these strategies is now widely studied, and their influence on reading comprehension in EFL contexts has attracted significant scholarly attention.

This study investigates the impact of vocabulary learning strategies on students' reading comprehension using a quasi-experimental design. The results indicate that students who applied vocabulary learning strategies demonstrated significantly improved reading comprehension compared to those who did not.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies, reading comprehension, EFL, vocabulary repertoire, acquisition, linguistic development.

Annotatsiya. Lug‘at boyligi, ayniqsa, ingliz tilini chet tili (EFL) sifatida o‘rganish jarayonida o‘qib tushunish ko‘nikmalarini rivojlantirishda muhim o‘rin tutadi. Keng va chuqur lug‘at zaxirasiga ega bo‘lgan til o‘rganuvchilari yozma matnlarni osonroq va aniqroq tushunish hamda tahlil qilish imkoniyatiga ega bo‘ladilar. Shu bois lug‘at boyligini o‘zlashtirish nafaqat til rivojlanishining asosiy omili, balki turli xil matnlarni tushunish va talqin qilishning ham muhim sharti hisoblanadi. Lug‘at o‘rganish strategiyalari (Vocabulary Learning Strategies – VLS) talabalarning yangi so‘zlarni o‘zlashtirish va xotirada mustahkamlash uchun qo‘llaydigan maqsadli hamda tizimli usul va texnikalarini anglatadi. Mazkur strategiyalarning samaradorligi bugungi kunda keng o‘rganilmoqda va ularning EFL muhitidagi o‘qib tushunish jarayoniga ta‘sirini ilmiy doiralarda katta qiziqish uyg‘otmoqda.

Ushbu tadqiqot kvazi-eksperimental dizayn asosida lug‘at o‘rganish strategiyalarining talabalarning o‘qib tushunish ko‘nikmalariga ta‘sirini o‘rganadi. Tadqiqot natijalari lug‘at o‘rganish strategiyalaridan foydalangan talabalar o‘qib tushunish ko‘rsatkichlari bo‘yicha ushbu strategiyalarni qo‘llamagan talabalarga nisbatan sezilarli darajada yuqori natijalarga erishganini ko‘rsatdi.

Kalit so‘zlar: lug‘at o‘rganish strategiyalari, o‘qib tushunish, EFL (ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o‘rganish), lug‘at zaxirasi, o‘zlashtirish, til rivojlanishi.

Аннотация. Словарный запас играет жизненно важную роль в развитии навыков понимания прочитанного, особенно в контексте изучения английского языка как иностранного (EFL). Изучающие язык, обладающие более широким и глубоким словарным запасом, как правило, способны легче и точнее воспринимать письменные тексты. Таким образом, овладение словарным запасом является не только основой лингвистического развития, но и критически важно для понимания и интерпретации различных видов текстов для чтения. Стратегии изучения словарного запаса (VLS) представляют собой целенаправленные, систематические методы и приёмы, которые студенты используют для расширения знаний и запоминания новых слов. Эффективность этих стратегий в настоящее время широко исследуется, а их влияние на понимание прочитанного в контексте EFL привлекает значительное внимание учёных. В данном исследовании изучается влияние стратегий изучения словарного запаса на понимание прочитанного студентами с использованием квазиэкспериментального дизайна. Результаты показывают, что студенты, применявшие стратегии изучения словарного запаса,

продемонстрировали значительно более высокий уровень понимания прочитанного по сравнению с теми, кто их не использовал.

Ключевые слова: стратегии изучения словарного запаса, понимание прочитанного, EFL, словарный репертуар, усвоение, лингвистическое развитие.

Introduction. Vocabulary knowledge is vital in the development of reading comprehension especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). With a larger and more comprehensive vocabulary repertoire, learners can tend to process written texts more effectively and correctly. Consequently, not only language development, but also the interpretation and comprehension of a broad scope of written materials are impossible without vocabulary acquisition. The vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are mutually dependent: on the one hand, vocabulary aids reading; on the other hand, reading is supported by vocabulary development [Graves: 5].

Students in EFL situations use different vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) in order to learn and remember new words. Such strategies are cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, and social ones, which play various roles in the learning process [Oxford: 38]. When such strategies are used appropriately, learners can be able to deduce the meaning of unknown words, comprehend the intricate sentence structures, and general textual meaning more efficiently [Richards: 78].

Nevertheless, although much theoretical study has been made on vocabulary learning strategies, little empirical research has been conducted to study their direct effect on reading comprehension in the EFL classes, specifically Uzbekistan. This gap shows that more research is necessary on the effectiveness of strategy use in real classroom contexts in reading outcomes [Schmitt: 19].

Thus, the current research is going to examine the influence of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension of students. It aims to establish whether explicit teaching and use of these strategies can make any significant contribution to the ability of learners to interpret written texts.

Literature Review. Vocabulary learning has long been recognized as a central component of language acquisition, particularly in the development of reading comprehension skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Previous studies consistently emphasize that a rich vocabulary repertoire directly contributes to better understanding of written texts (Graves, 2006; Richards, 1976). Learners with stronger lexical knowledge are able to process meaning more efficiently and make accurate inferences during reading.

Research by Oxford (1990) and Schmitt (1997) highlights the importance of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), which include cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, and social strategies. These strategies enable learners to actively engage with new words, improve retention, and apply vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Schmitt (2000)

further explains that strategy use plays a crucial role in independent vocabulary development and long-term language learning success.

Gu and Johnson (1996) provide empirical evidence that learners who actively use vocabulary strategies achieve higher language proficiency and better reading outcomes. Their study shows that strategic learners are more effective in guessing word meanings, using dictionaries, and organizing lexical knowledge. Similarly, Nation (2001; Webb & Nation, 2017) stresses that vocabulary acquisition is most effective when supported by repeated exposure, contextual learning, and deliberate strategy use.

Laufer (1997) emphasizes the lexical threshold in reading comprehension, arguing that inadequate vocabulary knowledge significantly limits understanding of texts. This supports the idea that improving vocabulary through structured strategies can directly enhance reading performance. Meara (1980) also underlines that vocabulary learning is often underestimated, despite its strong influence on all language skills, especially reading.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates a strong theoretical and empirical link between vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension. However, most studies suggest that the effectiveness of these strategies depends on explicit instruction and classroom implementation, which justifies further experimental research in specific EFL contexts such as Uzbekistan.

Research Methodology. This research was carried out on 30 undergraduates of Kokand University who were learning the English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The participants were all third-year students whose English proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) was approximately on the B1 level. The students were selected due to the fact that they shared similar language backgrounds and experiences in learning. To carry out the study, the students were categorized into 2 groups; experimental group which consisted of 15 students and control group which consisted of 15 students. The subjects were randomly grouped to be fair and to prevent any bias in the outcomes. This study collected data using two primary instruments. The first tool was a reading comprehension test that aimed at assessing the skills of students to comprehend written materials. The test contained different types of questions: multiple-choice questions, true/false statements and short-answer questions. These questions were aimed at the main reading skills, such as finding the main idea, comprehending definite details, and inferring. The questionnaire was a vocabulary learning strategies instrument. The purpose of this questionnaire was to determine the strategies that the students employed in learning new vocabulary. It contained the items to do with various types of strategies, including cognitive strategies (e.g., repetition and word analysis), metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning and monitoring learning), memory-related strategies (e.g., association and imagery), and social strategies (e.g., asking others to help). The questionnaire was very straightforward and easy to comprehend and fill. The experiment was conducted in four weeks. The two groups had a pre-test at the start of the study to

evaluate their starting level of reading comprehension. This aided in setting a level to compare. The experimental group was specifically taught vocabulary learning techniques during the treatment period. The teacher presented various strategies one by one, and showed how they could be applied during reading of texts. Students used skills like using guesswork to tell what words mean that they do not know, analyzing word parts (prefixes, roots and suffixes), effective use of dictionaries and forming associations to memorize new vocabulary. They were advised to use such strategies when reading in classrooms. Conversely, the control group proceeded with the conventional reading lessons but without any special attention on the vocabulary learning strategies. They read and answered comprehension questions in the typical manner, and were not trained on strategies. The two groups then completed a post-test at the end of the four weeks which was similar to the pre-test. This enabled the researcher to make comparisons of the results and to know whether reading comprehension improved. Simple descriptive analysis was used to examine the data obtained during the pre-test and the post-test. Mean scores (average scores) of each group were computed and compared. The enhancement of the respective groups was assessed in terms of examining the difference between the pre-test and the post-test results. Based on the comparison of performances of the experimental group and the control group, it was possible to find out whether the vocabulary learning strategies significantly influenced the reading comprehension of students.

Analysis and Results. The findings of this research were compared through the performance of experimental and control groups of the pre-test and post-test to analyze the results. The purpose was to find out whether vocabulary learning strategy affected reading comprehension of students in a measurable manner. At the start of the research, both groups underwent a pre-test in order to determine their original reading comprehension levels. The outcomes showed that the two groups were not very different in terms of their capabilities prior to treatment. The mean score of the experimental group was 64 and the control group had a marginally higher mean score of 66. Such a minor difference implies that both groups were initially at a similar level, which contributes to the increased credibility of the post-test results comparison. At the end of the four weeks of instruction, the two groups were administered a post-test which was similar in format and level to the pre-test. The outcomes indicated that the two groups had improved but the degree of improvement was significantly different in the two groups.

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Group	Pr e-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Improvement	Percentage Improvement
Experimental (n=15)	64	82	+18	28.1%
Control (n=15)	66	72	+6	9.1%

The performance of the experimental group that was explicitly taught about the strategies of vocabulary learning improved significantly. Their average score was 64 during the pre-test and 82 during the post-test. This is a gain of 18 points hence a good positive change in reading comprehension skills. This group of students could respond more correctly to the questions, particularly those ones based on knowledge of the unknown words and interpretation of meaning based on the context. The increase in the control group, where the traditional reading instruction was used without the strategy training, was less pronounced. The average score went up by 6 points, making the difference between 66 and 72. Although this shows some improvement, it was a much less proportion compared to the improvement of the experimental group. Another aspect that was observed through a closer scrutiny of the test components was that there was difference in performance between the two groups. Experimental group students demonstrated a significant improvement in their ability to recognize the main idea of texts, comprehend particular details, and draw inferences. These abilities are directly connected to effective use of vocabulary implying that the techniques they acquired assisted them in processing the texts more effectively. Moreover, it seemed that students in the experimental group were more effective with unfamiliar words. They also tended to rely more on contextual cues, and word interpretation strategies in order to derive meaning, and so they did not have to guess, or skip over problematic sections of the text. This helped to achieve a more stable and precise comprehension of the passages of reading. Conversely, the control group students tended to have difficulties with unrecognized words. They were prone to skip challenging words or misunderstand important aspects of text without particular strategies to follow. Consequently, their general understanding was not fully developed or correct, and this could be one of the reasons of their poorer level of advancement. The findings also suggest that the difference between the two groups increased following the treatment. Although the difference in pre-test scores was not significant (just 2 points), the difference in post-test scores grew to 10 points (82 in the experimental group and 72 in the control group). This implies that vocabulary learning strategies yielded a definite and quantifiable effect on reading performance of students in the long term. Furthermore, this difference is also indicated by the percentage improvement. The experimental group also improved about 28, compared to the control group, which improved about 9. This big difference confirms the notion that strategy-based instruction is more effective when compared to traditional methods on their own. In general, the results of this research illustrate that learners who were trained on vocabulary learning strategies had a greater increase in reading comprehension than those who were not. The positive change that was evident in the experimental group indicates that these strategies indeed assisted the students to become more effective readers as they were able to comprehend the meaning of words, interpret it, and read the texts more readily.

The findings of this research make it clear that vocabulary learning strategies positively influence the reading comprehension of students. The explicit group that was given proper guidelines on strategies of learning vocabulary showed a significant improvement in contrast to the control group. It indicates that an instruction based on strategy is a significant part of helping students comprehend written texts in a better way [Gu and Johnson: 135]. Cognitive strategies could be one of the potential explanations of this improvement. The experimental group students were also trained to recognize word structure, detect prefixes and suffixes, and make guesses about meanings based on context. All of these methods probably assisted them in coping with new vocabulary more efficiently, which consequently contributed to their overall understanding of texts. Also, it is possible that metacognitive strategies led to the improvement in the students. Students got to know more about their reading process by learning how to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning [Nation: 33]. This awareness enabled them to become aware of a lack of understanding of a word or a sentence and use the appropriate strategies to overcome the problem [Laufer: 33]. Association and imagery as memory-related strategies were also helpful in retaining vocabulary. These strategies assisted the students to memorize new words more easily and it became possible that they could identify and comprehend when they came across reading texts [Meara: 230]. Consequently, their reading was more effective and smooth. Social strategies might have contributed too. Through classroom exercises, learners in the experimental group were advised to pose questions, converse about meanings, and exchange ideas with their colleagues. This interplay must have boosted their self-esteem and have enabled them to form a more profound awareness of vocabulary [Schmitt: 204]. Conversely, there was only a weak improvement in the control group. Because they were taught in traditional reading and not trained as a strategy, they might have employed more simple reading skills and had little to use to cope with new vocabulary. This might be the reason why their development was backwards and less prominent. On the whole, the results of this study are shared with the outcome of the former studies, according to which vocabulary learning strategies are critical to language learning. The findings indicate that learners can be more autonomous and successful readers when they are taught how to make these strategies effective.

Conclusion. The focus of the study was the effect of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) on reading comprehension in 30 EFL undergraduate students studying at Kokand University, Uzbekistan. The experimental group was taught cognitive, metacognitive, memory and social vocabulary strategies explicitly using a quasi-experimental design, whereas the control group studied traditional reading lessons without strategy training.

The findings are a clear indication that VLS instruction is a significant improvement in reading comprehension. The means of the pre-test score of the experimental group (64) were compared with the post-test score (82) and the difference of the two scores was 18 points (or about 28%), and the means of the pre-test score of the control group (66) were

compared with the post-test score (72) and the difference between the two was only 6 points (or about 9%). The difference in performance between the two groups increased to 10 points after the four weeks of the intervention, as compared to 2 points at the beginning of the intervention.

The research question was whether explicit teaching and practice of vocabulary learning strategies have a significant effect on the comprehension of written texts by the learners. The answer is yes. VLS trained students were also better in detecting main ideas, comprehending details and inferencing. They learned to analyze parts of words, derive meaning by using context, apply association strategies, and be aware of their own comprehension, and they became more confident and efficient readers.

To EFL teachers the message is simple, strategies of learning vocabulary must be taught in an integrated manner during reading lessons and not as a separate activity. Cognitive strategies (e.g., contextual guessing, morphological analysis), metacognitive awareness (planning, monitoring, evaluating), and memory-related and social strategies are to be modeled by teachers and be implemented in regular classroom activities. Strategy training is not a "Add-on" but a fundamental part of effective reading instruction.

The weaknesses of this study are that it is a short period (four weeks), a small sample size (30 students of one university), and the descriptive statistics is used. Future studies are needed to include longer interventions, bigger and more heterogeneous populations, and inferential statistics (e.g., t-tests) to establish significance. It would also be a nice addition to have qualitative research investigating the application of strategies by students in practice.

To sum up, vocabulary acquisition strategies significantly, positively affect reading comprehension in EFL classrooms. The 28% enhancement in the experimental group, which is almost three times more than the control group, is a good indication that explicit strategy instruction is effective. Vocabulary learning strategies are not a luxury; it is a step towards improved reading.

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