An Investigation into Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Moroccan EFL High Achievers: IBN Roumi High School as a Case Study

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Abstract:- This research study investigated vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by 42 EFL high school students who are considered as high achievers at Ibn Roumi high schools in Meknes. The aim was to find out the most frequently used strategies among these high achievers. A questionnaire about vocabulary learning strategies was administered to the participants. The results uncovered ten frequently used VLS among these high achievers.

Keywords:- Vocabulary; Vocabulary Learning Strategies; High Achievers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning the vocabulary of a second or a foreign language has gained a significant growth in recent years. Vocabulary is the center of any language and it is very important to language learners because words are the main building blocks of any language. With the help of words, learners can label objects, actions, ideas without which no one can convey their intended meanings. Word knowledge is a necessary part of communicative competence (Seal, 1991), and it is important for both production and comprehension in a foreign language. Learners usually know how important the words are in a language and they also realize the fact that learning strategies can be a very helpful device in their vocabulary learning. Learners autonomy can be improved if they get familiar with different VLSs used in developing their learning process.

II. DEFINITIONS

A. Word and Vocabulary Definitions

Foley and Thompson (2003, p. 10) argued, "All languages have words, a vocabulary or lexicon". Some scholars such as Trask (1995, pp. 46-51) argued that the term "word" is easy to understand, still it is very difficult to define" since "words don't have meanings in isolation, but they are related to the meanings of other words in ways that may be simple or complex". This means that the difficulty of the word is in its context-relatedness.

A few scholars have dealt with "word" and "vocabulary" in a comparative way. For example, Jackson & Amvela (2000, p. 50) stated that a word is "an uninterruptible unit of structure consisting of one or more morphemes and which typically occurs in the structure of phrases. The morphemes are the ultimate grammatical constituents, the minimal meaningful units of language", while vocabulary is synonymous with lexis or lexicon. That is to say, it's "a collection of words" or "a package of sub-sets of words that are used in particular contexts" (Jackson and Amvela, 2000, p. 118). Additionally, Richards (1992, p. 406) defined the word as "the smallest of the linguistic units which can occur on its own in speech or writing", while vocabulary is viewed as "a set of lexemes which includes single words, compound words and idioms" (p. 400). Furthermore, a word is seen as "a unit formed of sounds or letters that have a meaning" (Sheeler and Markey, 2000, p. 2), but vocabulary is defined as the total number we know and are able to use" (Nandy, 1994, p. 1).Mayuree (2007, p. 19) used some researchers' definitions (e.g. Read, 2000; Jackson and Amvela, 2000; Richards, 2000) of the word and vocabulary. He claimed that the word is "the smallest meaningful unit of linguistic structure, which is used for making phrases and sentences". In addition, a word is a form which can stand by itself and has a meaning, or a sound or combination of sounds forming a unit of the grammar or vocabulary of a language, and a part of vocabulary in a language.

More importantly, vocabulary refers not only to single lexical items, but also to complex compound words and meaningful units of language (Jackson and Amvela, 2000, pp. 1-2). In vocabulary learning, Mayuree (2007, p. 19) claimed that there is no question referred to as learning "a collection of words in a language used in particular contexts". Patently, vocabulary learning concerns learning a package of sub-sets of words and learning how to employ techniques to discover unfamiliar words' meaning.

B. Vocabulary Learning Strategies Definitions

"Vocabulary learning strategies are part of language learning strategies which in their turn are part of general learning strategies" (Nation, 2001, p, 217). Thus, part of the definition of VLS is taken from LLS (Jiménez-Catalan, 2003, p. 55). As O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p 7) point out, VLS are the most recognized effective types of language learning strategies. Sökmen (1997, p. 273) defined VLS as essentially actions undertaken by L2 learners so that they can comprehend the meaning of a lexical item, learn it and remember it for later use. Similarly, Schmitt (1997) used Ruben's (1987. p, 29)

definition as "the process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved, and used".

Jiménez-Catalan (2003, p. 56) employed the definitions of VLS adopted from different scholars (e.g. Ruben, 1987; Schmitt, 1997), and incorporated the following definition in her research study as "knowledge about the mechanism (process, strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students (a) to find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode". However, Intaraprasert (2004, p. 9 as cited in Mayuree, 2007, p. 45) referred to VLS as "any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners reported using in order to discover the meaning of new words, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to expand their knowledge of vocabulary". According to Nation (2001, p. 217 cited in Pavicˇicˊ, 2008, p. 52), it is not easy to give a consistent definition of VLS, but an attempt to define the term includes the following characteristics:

➤ They involve choice;
➤ They are complex, i.e. consisting of several steps;
➤ They require knowledge and benefit from training;
➤ They increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and use. (Nation,2001, p.23)

In short, vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies. They can be employed in all language tasks. For instance, Hosenfeld (1984) listed strategies of successful learners including some vocabulary learning strategies, such as guessing a word's meaning from the text/context, and identifying cognates. Nevertheless, vocabulary learning strategies are specific strategies employed in the isolated task of learning vocabulary in the second language. They are actions, processes, a set of techniques, learning behaviors, ways, tactics, and steps undertaken by the learners in order to discover and consolidate words' meaning. Learners employ vocabulary learning strategies to promote vocabulary learning, and substantially promote their language learning.

III.   METHODOLOGY

A. Participants
High achieving students at Ibn Romi High School were involved in this study. We selected Ibn Romi High School for two reasons. Firstly, because we teach there which means we were familiar with the school community and thus the study could be carried smoothly. Secondly, there was no research conducted in this school; and the researcher thought that this research work might benefit us along with our colleagues (English teachers) by indicating some ways to overcome students' problems in using VLSs. This could enhance their vocabulary knowledge as well as their English language achievement. We selected second year baccalaureate students using purposive sampling. They were chosen because they have more than 3 years of exposure to the English language, which will help them to report their use of VSLs appropriately.

B. Research Design
The researcher favoured a quantitative research design to provide a better understanding of research problems.

C. Sampling Technique
To identify the high achievers, the researcher used students' results for the previous and the current year. The study selected students who scored between 18 and 20 out of 20 in all English exams. Such criteria were found in 42 students in the selected school.

D. Instruments
The researcher used four points Likert scale questionnaire. The instrument was prepared and adapted from some well-known questionnaires.

➤ *Questionnaire:* The questionnaire in the present study consists of two main sections. The first section contained questions that aimed at collecting participants' background information such as gender, years of studying English, and students' motivation towards vocabulary. The second section included 55 items of vocabulary learning strategies, which were grouped into two main vocabulary learning purposes: Discovery strategies (DIS), and Consolidation strategies (CON). All of them fell under the following five categories: Determination strategies, Social strategies, Cognitive strategies, Metacognitive strategies, and Memory strategies. The instrument was based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. Participants were to record their responses on a four-point Likert scale. Some changes were made to make the questionnaire more appropriate for the participants.

E. Data Organization and Analysis
Both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were employed to compute the results of the data obtained through questionnaires administered to 42 respondents. The data were filled into SPSS program and the frequencies were calculated. For the simplicity of the analysis, the data were categorized according to the two main categories of VLSs of Schmitt's (1997), that is the Discovery and the Consolidation Strategies.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Frequencies
Guessing words' meaning from the context is a high achiever VLS par excellence. As obviously seen in the table below, the great majority of participants (85.7%) do always make use of this strategy to discover the meaning of English vocabulary. 11.9% of the respondents do sometimes employ it in their English vocabulary learning. Very few students, however, rarely use the strategy (2.4%). Guessing words' meaning from the context was generally used by all high achievers who filled in the questionnaire. There was only a slight difference in how often they make use of it. The great majority of the respondents do always or sometime use the strategy (97.6%). Only 2.4% of the participants rarely utilize the guessing strategy and no

students said that he/she never uses it. This highly frequent strategy among high achievers highlighted the importance

of relying on context clues to find out the meaning of new encountered English vocabulary.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	36	85,7	85,7	85,7
	Sometimes	5	11,9	11,9	97,6
	Rarely	1	2,4	2,4	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 1:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I try to guess words' meaning from the context"

Using an English Arabic dictionary to discover words' meaning seemed to be an unwanted vocabulary learning strategy among high achievers. The frequencies and the percentages provided in the table below did plainly show this. Only 11.9% of the students do always use the strategy, the same percentage of the learners does sometimes use it.

31% of the respondents rarely use this strategy and 45.2% of them never use it. The majority of these students (76.2%) do rarely or never use English Arabic dictionary to learn words' meaning. Only 23.8% does either always or sometimes use this kind of the dictionary.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	5	11,9	11,9	11,9
	Sometimes	5	11,9	11,9	23,8
	Rarely	13	31,0	31,0	54,8
	Never	19	45,2	45,2	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 2:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I use an English-Arabic dictionary"

Unlike the English Arabic dictionary, the English-English one is completely used in a highly frequent basis by high achievers. All of the respondents use the English-English dictionary to learn the meaning of words (100%). 76.2% of them do always use this kind of dictionary to

learn English vocabulary and 23.8% of them do sometimes utilize it for the same purpose. The English-English dictionary is a primary source of English word meaning for high achievers.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	32	76,2	76,2	76,2
	Sometimes	10	23,8	23,8	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 3:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I use an English-English dictionary"

Relating words to similar French words to discover their meaning was another apparently good English vocabulary learning strategy. As noticeably seen in the table below, 33.3% of the students do always make use of this strategy to discover the meaning of English vocabulary. 45.2% of the them do sometimes employ it in their English vocabulary learning. 16.7% of respondents rarely use the strategy and only 4.8% of the participants never relate English words to similar French ones to discover their meanings. Unlike the case for Arabic, high achievers seem

to see some connection between French and English in some respects and, thus, relate English vocabulary to similar French ones to understand what they mean. 78.6% of the learners do always or sometimes use this strategy while the remaining 21.4% of them do rarely or never utilize the strategy. This common strategy among high achievers uncovered the importance of an L2 in learning vocabulary of another language especially if the two languages share some similarities.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	14	33,3	33,3	33,3
	Sometimes	19	45,2	45,2	78,6
	Rarely	7	16,7	16,7	95,2
	Never	2	4,8	4,8	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 4:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I relate words to similar French words to discover their meaning"

Using an English-French dictionary is not as most frequently used as English-English one nor as least frequently utilized as English-Arabic one. Using this type of dictionaries seems not to be the high achievers' good strategy. No dominating frequency or percentage, which can make obvious whether this strategy is most or least continually used by high achievers, can be seen in the table below. 19% of the students always use this kind of dictionary, 35.7% of them sometimes use it, 23.8% of respondents rarely employ it and 21.4% never utilize it. This kind of dictionaries is not heavily used nor fully ignored by high achievers. Therefore, consulting an English-French dictionary to learn English words' meaning seems not to be that significantly important for these students.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	8	19,0	19,0	19,0
	Sometimes	15	35,7	35,7	54,8
	Rarely	10	23,8	23,8	78,6
	Never	9	21,4	21,4	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 5: Frequencies of the strategy: "I use an English-French dictionary"

Connecting words to their synonyms and antonyms to remember their meanings is a pure good English vocabulary learning strategy. As evidently seen in the table below, 40.5% do always make use of this strategy to remember the meaning of English vocabulary. 45.2% of the respondents do sometimes employ it. Very few students (9.5%) rarely use the strategy and only 4.8% of the respondents never make use of this strategy. Connecting words to their synonyms and antonyms to remember their meanings is generally used by most high achievers who took part in the study. The great majority of respondents do always or sometime use the strategy (85.7%). Only 14.3% of participants rarely or never utilize this strategy. This greatly common strategy among high achievers reveals the significance of relying on synonyms and antonyms to remember the meaning of new learnt English vocabulary.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	17	40,5	40,5	40,5
	Sometimes	19	45,2	45,2	85,7
	Rarely	4	9,5	9,5	95,2
	Never	2	4,8	4,8	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 6:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I connect words to their synonyms and antonyms to remember their meanings"

Using words in English sentences to remember their meanings is largely a good English vocabulary learning strategy. As perceptibly noticed in the table below, 52.4% of the participants do always make use of this strategy to remember the meaning of English words. 42.9% of the respondents do sometimes resort it. Only two students, however, do rarely or never use the strategy (4.8%). One student out of 42 does rarely use this strategy and one student also out of 42 never uses words in English sentences to remember their meanings. The great majority of the learners do always or sometime use the strategy (95.2%). This highly frequent strategy among high achievers highlights the importance of relying on context clues to remember the meaning and activate learnt English vocabulary.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	22	52,4	52,4	52,4
	Sometimes	18	42,9	42,9	95,2
	Rarely	1	2,4	2,4	97,6
	Never	1	2,4	2,4	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 7:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I use words in English sentences to remember their meanings"

Taking notes about words in class to remember their meanings is another primarily good English vocabulary learning strategy. Both the tables below show that the great majority of participants (88.1%) do always or sometimes make use of this strategy to remember the meaning of the English vocabulary. While 54.8% of these respondents do always employ it in their English vocabulary learning, 33.3% of them sometimes utilize it. Very few students, however, rarely or never use the strategy (11.9%). Among this 11.9%, 9.5% of the learners rarely use this strategy and the remaining 2.4% never resorts to this way of remembering words' meanings. This highly frequent strategy among high achievers conveys the importance of note taking in remembering the meaning of new learnt English vocabulary.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	23	54,8	54,8	54,8
	Sometimes	14	33,3	33,3	88,1
	Rarely	4	9,5	9,5	97,6
	Never	1	2,4	2,4	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 8:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I take notes about words in class to remember their meanings"

Revising the vocabulary section in the textbook to remember words' meanings is apparently another commonly used vocabulary learning strategy by high achievers. As bluntly seen through the frequencies and the percentages provided by the table and the pie chart below, 45.2% of the learners do always resort to revising the vocabulary section in the textbook to maintain the meaning of English words they have learned. 33.3% does sometimes make use of it for the same function. 14.3% rarely uses the strategy and only 7.1% never resorts to it. This strategy can be viewed as a frequent one among these high achievers since 78.6% of them do always or sometimes use it to remember words' meaning whilst only 21.4% rarely or never uses the strategy. For most of these high achievers, revising vocabulary in the textbook appears to be remarkably helpful in remembering the meaning of English vocabulary.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	19	45,2	45,2	45,2
	Sometimes	14	33,3	33,3	78,6
	Rarely	6	14,3	14,3	92,9
	Never	3	7,1	7,1	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 9:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I revise the vocabulary section in my textbook to remember words' meanings"

High achievers seem to believe that keeping a notebook helps them a lot in remembering words' meaning. As clearly read in the table below, 52.2% of the respondents say that they always use a vocabulary notebook to remember words' meanings. 33.3% of them do sometimes use this strategy, 9.5% rarely employs it and only 4.8% of the students never utilize it. This strategy appears to be highly frequent among high achievers for 85.7% of them do always or sometimes make use of it. Only 14.3% of the participants do either rarely or never use a vocabulary notebook to remember words' meanings. Having a vocabulary notebook seems to be extremely helpful for high achievers to remember the meaning of English words.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	22	52,4	52,4	52,4
	Sometimes	14	33,3	33,3	85,7
	Rarely	4	9,5	9,5	95,2
	Never	2	4,8	4,8	100,0
	Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 10:- Frequencies of the strategy: "I use a vocabulary notebook to remember words' meanings"

V. CONCLUSION

As the above analysis shows, the 42 Moroccan EFL high school students, who are considered as high achievers, at Ibn Romi high school used ten strategies in learning new vocabulary. Among these ten strategies, guessing and dictionary use are the most frequently used strategies. The researcher can draw a conclusion that high achievers in the current study have the same VLS preferences and use or find similar strategies useful for their vocabulary learning. However, the findings of this study cannot be conclusive. An obvious implication is therefore that more studies with much larger sample sizes are necessary.

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