

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EFL INSTRUCTOR'S PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND AND SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE LEARNER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

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### ABSTRACT

This study was set out to investigate whether there is a significant difference between the EFL instructor's suggested type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners and successful learners' type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies. "Furthermore, this study was also designed to find whether the EFL instructors' professional background had any impact on the suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners. The participants in this study were EFL instructors and EFL learners. In fact, the researcher included three groups of total 60 EFL instructors teaching in different institutes in Kerman and Shiraz, Iran. Moreover, 20 EFL advanced learners were selected through taking a general proficiency test. Moreover, all learners were females but age was not considered as a variable in this study. Having surveyed their files and e-mails, the researcher selected 3 groups of total 60 EFL instructors according to their professional background. The first group contained EFL instructors who were selected with no particular deliberate weight given to their professional background. However, the other two groups, who were used for the second hypotheses, were selected in line with their professional background. To test the first null hypothesis Man-Whitney U test was used. Hence the first null hypothesis was rejected. Next, the researcher investigated the effect of the EFL instructors' professional background on their suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners. The researcher failed to reject the second null hypothesis namely the EFL Instructor's professional background which had been designed nominally in terms of under 10 years and over 10 years of experience and his/ her type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners. With respect to the second hypothesis, EFL instructors with over 10 years of service put more emphasis on note-taking strategies, particularly the 61<sup>st</sup>, 62<sup>nd</sup>, and 63<sup>rd</sup> strategies than those with less than 10 years of service. They also put more emphasis on visual repetition, 77<sup>th</sup>, 78<sup>th</sup>, and 79<sup>th</sup> and auditory encoding 91<sup>st</sup>, 92<sup>nd</sup>, and 93<sup>rd</sup> strategies.

**Key words:** Learning Strategies, Mediation, Vocabulary Knowledge, Zone of Proximal knowledge

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## INTRODUCTION

The significance of lexical knowledge as a predictor of school success was investigated by Verhallen and Schoonen (1998). They found that the L1 knowledge of the bilingual children could not counterbalance their poor lexical knowledge in L2. Following from this poor indicator, they highly praised the use of "hierarchical lexical network building" (p.469). In other words, cognitive network of contextually meaningful related words come highly recommended in SLA lit. Following the trend of this argument, there are two main types of approaches to vocabulary learning, namely intentional and incidental (Day et al., 1991; Gass, 1999; Huckin and Coady, 1999; Laufer and Hulstijn, 2001).

Language learning strategies have also been investigated in other disciplines. Donato and McCormick (1994) considered a sociocultural perspective on language learning strategies, focusing on the role of mediation. They suggest that learning strategies are in fact culture bond and community of practice constructs. They argued that "the social life of the classroom is central to the issue of an individual's strategy use" (p.454). In line with this idea, the researcher considers mediation as a key element in bringing the EFL instructor's and the learner's attitude towards leaning strategies of lexical items under the same design; borrowing heavily on Vygotsky's notion of mediation (1986, 1987).

Another main line of argument in favor of investigating the EFL instructor's and language learners' frequency and type of learning strategy is the recent attention paid to the complex nature of relationship between the teacher and the learner in the classroom. Frawley (1987) suggested that the mind is a sociotextual process. In other words, psycholinguistic processes which involve both cognitive and metacognitive levels of thinking is made up of a mental activity that is achieved through discourse (Harre and Gillet 1994). In order to investigate the nature of this discourse in the classroom regarding learning vocabularies, the researcher attempts to investigate similarities or differences between the instructors' and the learner's type and frequency of learning strategies for successful vocabulary learning. In line with the

above argument, the researcher presents the following research questions and hypotheses:

1. Is there a significant difference between actual successful learner's type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies and EFL instructor's type and frequency of suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners?
2. Is there a significant difference between the EFL instructor's professional background and his/her type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies suggested for successful learners?

Regarding the research questions, the following null hypotheses are presented:

- There is no significant difference between actual successful learner's type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies and EFL instructor's type and frequency of suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners.
- There is no significant difference between the EFL instructor's professional background and his/her type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies suggested for successful learners.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

In the last 25 years, the field of second language acquisition has seen the emergence of interest in one area of language study, vocabulary (Meara, 1987), and the appearance of a newly recognized aspect-learner strategies.

Appreciation of the importance of both these areas has led to considerable research in each, yet the place where they intersect-vocabulary learning strategies- have attracted a noticeable lack of attention. In the beginning, the emphasis was on identifying beneficial language strategies. Stern (1975) developed a list of ten strategies based on introspection, but most researchers tried to identify the strategies that "good learners" use (Rubin, 1975; and Naiman et al. 1978).

It seems that many learners do use strategies for learning vocabulary, especially when compared to more integrated tasks. Chamot (1987) found that high school ESL learners reported more strategy use for vocabulary learning than for any other language learning activity, including listening comprehension, oral presentation, and social communication. This might be due to the nature of vocabulary learning which is different from other more integrated skills (Schmitt and McCarthy, 2009). However, higher

strategy use might be due to the fact that the learner's awareness of the importance of vocabulary is relatively high.

A number of studies have shown the importance of vocabulary learning in the classroom. Ahmed (1989) described different types of learners and found that most took notes on vocabulary or wrote notes in the margins of their notes. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found that repetition is the most frequently used strategy with strategies requiring more active manipulation of information being much less frequent.

In choosing vocabulary learning strategies, the frequency of occurrence of a word is also relevant. Nation (1994) suggests that teaching students strategies is especially important when it comes to dealing with low frequency words. He also found that guessing from context, using mnemonic techniques, and using word parts are most frequently used by students with most frequently used vocabularies.

When studying vocabulary learning strategies as a unified concept, it must not be forgotten that they are for the benefit of the learner. Thus, we must consider the feelings of the learners and take note of what they think of the various learning strategies (Horwitz, 1988; Wenden, 1987). In addition, Hosenfield (1976, p. 128) notes that "too often, our focus has been on what students should be doing, we must begin by asking what students are doing". In this study, the researcher will focus on pre-verbal thought as practiced in the classroom by drawing on the possible differences between the teacher's type and frequency of successful vocabulary strategies and what learners actually think about the frequency and type of successful vocabulary strategies.

### 3. Design of the study

Since this study does not involve any treatment program or control, experimental groups, it can be classified as non-experimental and is built around survey design (Best and Kahn, 2006).

The survey design gathers data from a relatively large number of cases at a particular time. It is not concerned with characteristics of individuals as individuals. It is essentially cross-sectional.

The present study involves comparing the opinions of EFL instructors regarding vocabulary learning

strategies of successful learners and the actual vocabulary learning strategies of successful learners. Therefore, the design falls under activity analysis, a common type of survey studies.

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were EFL instructors and EFL learners. As far as EFL instructors are concerned, the researcher included two groups of total 60 EFL instructors teaching in different institutes in Shiraz and Kerman, Iran. The first group of instructors was selected with no particular deliberate weight given to their professional background. However, the other group, who were used for the second hypothesis, was selected in line with their professional background.

#### 3.2. Instrumentation

To test the hypotheses, the researcher used the following instruments to collect data:

- General proficiency test: In order to select a specific homogenous sample of subjects, the researcher selected a general test of proficiency to administer as the first tool of the study. In fact, the test was a sample of TOEFL paper based. The test contained three parts of structure and written expression, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. It contained 80 questions and the subjects were given 80 minutes to complete the test. It is pressing to note that only, the subjects with 1.5 standard deviation over the mean were selected.
- Vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire (Oxford, 1990): This questionnaire is designed containing different parts such as cognitive, metacognitive, general beliefs, etc. it is scored by the respondents using a 5 Likert-scale.
- Teacher's survey: this survey was made by the researcher. It was designed in order to classify EFL teachers in the study according to their educational status and professional background. Moreover, it had a question which asked the EFL teachers whether they thought vocabulary learning strategies were teachable or not.

#### 3.3. Procedure

In order to test the two hypotheses designed in this study, the following steps were taken by the researcher:

- Initially, the researcher selected potential subjects among language learners who studied in

language institutes in Shiraz and Kerman. Overall, 100 potential subjects were selected but only the top 30 were hand-picked.

- Having collected the subjects' e-mails, she sent them a copy of general proficiency test with a two week notice for the subjects to respond. After eliminating incomplete or faulty responses, 20 subjects were selected.
- Earlier on, parallel to the first stage of the study, the researcher also selected 2 groups of 60 EFL instructors from Shiraz and Kerman Institutes. She also sent the copy of vocabulary learning questionnaire to the selected EFL instructors and they were asked to select the type and frequency of those strategies they thought were to be used by successful learners. The researcher set a 20 day deadline for the EFL instructors to respond.
- Having received the responses from both groups of subjects taking part in the study, the researcher analyzed the data in line with the two null hypotheses.

**3.4. Analysis of Data**

In this study the researcher tested the hypotheses. To this end she carried a series of non-parametric tests, specifically the Man-Whitney U test which is a non-parametric test. This non-parametric substitute for t-test is used when dependent variable is scaled on at least an ordinal scale. Since in this study, the dependent variable (vocabulary learning strategies) was on an ordinal scale (1-2-3-4-5), the researcher used this particular type of non-parametric analysis.

**4. RESULTS**

In the first phase of the present study, the researcher administered a general proficiency test in order to select subjects under study. The test contained three parts, namely, structure, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for the first instrument of the study.

Table1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grammar	200	15.00	20.00	17.12	1.58688
Vocabulary	200	8.00	20.00	00	
Reading	200	8.00	20.00	16.52	1.60702
Comprehension	200			00	
Valid N(List wise)				16.51	1.65635
				50	

Having analyzed the descriptive statistics, the researcher selected only those subjects with 1.5 standard deviation over the mean.

**Testing Hypotheses**

In order to test the first hypothesis, namely, investigating possible significant relationship between successful learner's type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies and EFL instructor's type and frequency of suggested learning strategies for vocabulary, the researcher compared the responses of English instructors and English successful learners using non parametric analyses, independent samples, Man-Whitney U test. According to Bordens and Abbott (2008), Man-Whitney U test is a nonparametric inferential statistic used to evaluate data from two group

independent experiment in which the dependent variable was measured along at least an ordinal scale, which is in this case, the Likert scale. It is also a good alternative to t-test.

Having obtained the Man-Whitney U value for each statement, the researcher compared each with the critical value of U for two-tailed test (<.05) with m and n, both corresponding to 20, the critical value was found to be 127. If the U obtained was smaller than tabled U (127), the groups differed significantly. However, if the obtained U value was larger than the tabled U, there was no significant difference between the two independent groups. In simple terms:

- $X < 127$  = significant difference between the type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies

selected by successful student and the type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies selected by EFL teachers as the strategies used by successful learners.

● X>127= no significant difference.

Having considered the above, the researcher concluded the following tables.( Tables 2 and 3)

Table 2: Summary of the strategies and beliefs with significant difference between the groups.

x<127	A2	A3	A4	A6	A7	A8	B9	B10	C13
	C15	C16	D21	D22	D23	E25	E26	E27	E28
	F30	F32	F34	F35	F36	G38	G39	G40	G41
	H42	H43	H44	H45	I46	I47	I48	I50	I51
	J56	J57	J58	K59	K63	L64	L65	L66	M70
	M72	O77	P80	P81	Q84	Q86	Q87	S92	S93
	T95	T96	U97	V101	V102	V103	V104	V105	V106
	V107	ΣX=64							

Table 3: Summary of the strategies and beliefs with no significant difference between groups.

X>127	A1	A5	B11	B12	C14	C17	D18	D19	D20
	D24	E29	F31	F33	G37	J53	J54	J55	K60
	K61	K62	M68	M69	M71	M73	N74	N75	N76
	O78	O79	P82	P83	Q85	R88	R89	R90	S91
	T94	U98	V100	V103	V108	I49	I52	L67	ΣX=44

Having observed the fact that the rate of type and frequency of those vocabulary learning strategies with significant difference between the groups under the study exceeded the rate of type and frequency of those vocabulary learning strategies with no significant difference between the groups under the study, the researcher rejected the first null hypothesis. In fact, there was a significant difference between the type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies selected by successful learners and type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies suggested by teachers as applied by successful learners.

Having used Man-Whitney U test, the researcher compared the obtained U values for each strategy with the tabled U in order to see if there was any significant difference between the type and frequency of suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners.

In order to test the second hypothesis, namely whether there is any significant difference between the EFL instructor's professional background and his/her type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies suggested for successful learners, the researcher compared the EFL instructors in terms of another variable namely, their professional background which had been designed nominally in terms of under 10 years and over 10 years of experience. In fact, it is pressing to note that during the sampling phase, the researcher had selected 10 EFL instructors for each variable.

Having obtained the Man-Whitney U value for each statement, the researcher compared each with the critical value of U for two-tailed test (<.05), the critical value was found to be 23. If the U obtained was smaller than tabled U (23), the groups differed significantly. However, if the obtained U value was larger than the tabled U, there was no significant difference between the two independent groups. In simple terms:

• X<23= significant difference between EFL instructors over 10 years of service and EFL instructors below 10 years of service in terms of the type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies suggested for successful students.

● X>23= no significant difference.

Having considered the above, the researcher concluded the following tables. (Tables 4 and 5)

Table4: Summary of the strategies and beliefs with significant difference between the EFL teachers with over 10 years of service and those with under 10 years of service.

X<23	BB9	CC17	BB18	DD24	FF23	JJ54	JJ58	KK61	KK62
	MM68	MM71	OO77	OO78	OO79	PP80	PP83	RR85	RR87
	SS88	SS91	SS92	SS93	TT94	TT96	UU99	VV102	VV103
	VV104	FF33	ΣX=29						

Table5: Summary of the strategies and beliefs with significant difference between the EFL teachers with over 10 years of service and those with under 10 years of service.

X>23	AA1	AA2	AA3	AA4	AA5	AA6	AA7	AA8	BB10
	BB11	BB12	CC13	CC14	CC15	CC16	DD19	DD20	DD21
	DD22	DD23	EE25	EE26	EE27	EE28	EE29	EE30	EE31
	FF32	FF34	FF35	FF36	FF37	FF38	GG39	GG40	GG41
	HH42	HH43	HH44	HH45	HH46	II47	II48	II49	II50
	II51	II52	II53	JJ55	KK59	KK60	KK63	LL64	LL65
	LL66	LL67	MM69	MM70	MM72	MM73	NN74	NN75	NN76
	PP81	PP82	QQ84	RR86	SS89	SS90	UU97	UU98	VV100
	VV101	VV102	VV105	VV106	VV107	VV108	EE25	ΣX=79	

Having observed the fact that the rate of type and frequency of those vocabulary learning strategies with no significant difference between the subjects under the study (73%) exceeded the rate of type and frequency of those vocabulary learning strategies with significant difference between the subjects under the study (26%), the researcher failed to reject the second null hypothesis. In fact, there was no significant difference between the type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies selected by successful learners suggested by EFL instructors with over 10 years of service and type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies selected by successful learners suggested by EFL instructors with under 10 years of service.

**5. CONCLUSION**

After running the instrumentations of the study which included a general proficiency test, the vocabulary strategy questionnaire and the professional background questionnaire, the first hypothesis was rejected. In fact, there was a significant difference between actual successful learner's type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies and EFL instructor's type and frequency of suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners. However, the researcher failed to reject the second hypothesis. Therefore, there was no significant difference among EFL instructors in their type and frequency of suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners.

However, the data analyses revealed that although the majority of vocabulary learning strategies fell under "no significant difference" category, the EFL instructors were significantly different in their frequency and type of suggested vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners in terms of their professional background. For example, EFL instructors who were in service under 10 years differed from EFL instructors with over 10 years of service in their frequency and type of the following vocabulary learning strategies for successful learners:

- Note-taking strategies
- Visual repetition
- Auditory encoding

Interestingly, the researcher found that the majority of EFL instructors believed that vocabulary learning strategies used by successful learners can be taught to less successful learners.

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