

Assessing Students' Vocabulary Learning Perception and Strategy Use with Particular Reference to EFL Students of Adigrat University

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Abstract: *The main purpose of this study was to assess students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use with particular reference to first year English major students of Adigrat University. In conducting this study, a descriptive survey method was employed. The subjects of this study were 44 EFL students and they were selected using available sampling technique. Two data gathering tools namely questionnaire and interview were used to collect data for the study. Frequency and percentage were used to analyze the closed-ended questionnaire where as qualitative data analysis was used to analyze the interview. The result of this study showed that most of the students had positive perception about vocabulary learning. The result of the study also showed the following order from the most to the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by first year English major students of Adigrat University : Determination Strategies, Social Strategies, Memory Strategies, Meta cognitive Strategies, and Cognitive strategies. This indicates that Determination Strategies and Cognitive strategies respectively were the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by English major students of Adigrat University. This shows that majority of the EFL students Adigrat University were not familiar with most of the vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, instead of depending on a single strategy, students should use diversified vocabulary learning strategies in order to develop their vocabulary knowledge.*

Keywords: English as a foreign Language, vocabulary learning, perception, strategy

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Statement of the Problem

During the eight decades of the 20century, priority was given to grammar than vocabulary. Grammar was taught in the traditional schools. (Chacon, 2010, Laufer, and Nation, 2012, as cited in Theresa Larson, 2014). According to Milton (2009) as cited in Larson, 2014, the main reason why teaching and learning vocabulary got minimal attention was both teachers and students believed that people can learn new language and use it effectively in spite of their limited vocabulary power. Similarly, Oxford (1990) revealed that during the previous time of language teaching, vocabulary items were taught via bilingual word lists to be memorized and translated when students are reading something. Due to this, students faced difficulties to remember a large amount of words needed to foster fluency.

However, starting from 1980s, teaching and learning vocabulary has received a good attention from teachers and linguists. This means that both teachers and linguists conducted different researches on different vocabulary learning strategies. The result of these researches reveals that shortage of vocabulary power hinders learners from becoming proficient readers and writers and from communicating with others effectively and this is the reason why several foreign language learners in academic programs often express their interest for more vocabulary instruction. (Folse, 2004).

According to Read (2000), knowledge of vocabulary enables learners to enhance their language skills like reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Similarly, McCarthy (1990) indicates that whatever students learn grammar, whatever they master the sound of language successfully, without

vocabulary knowledge it is impossible to share information with others effectively.

In Ethiopia, vocabulary is incorporated in the English language syllabus because English is taught as foreign language in different schools and universities of the country. Even though English is taught throughout the country, students' vocabulary knowledge is unsatisfactory. Since I am an English teacher at Adigrat University, I have found a lot of learners who take English courses facing difficulties in English language skills like in writing, speaking, listening and reading due to their poor vocabulary knowledge. For many students of the university, learning vocabulary is the most challenging task. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use with particular reference to first year English major students of Adigrat University

1.2. Research Questions

To accomplish this study, the following research questions were formulated.

- 1) What perceptions do English major students of Adigrat University have towards vocabulary learning?
- 2) What are the vocabulary learning strategies most frequently used by English major students of Adigrat University?
- 3) What are the vocabulary learning strategies least frequently used by English major students of Adigrat University?

1.3. Objectives of the study

This research aims at achieving the following objectives.

- 1) To identify English major students' perceptions towards vocabulary learning at Adigrat University.

- 2) To identify the vocabulary learning strategies most frequently used by English major students of Adigrat University.
- 3) To assess the vocabulary learning strategies least frequently used by English major students of Adigrat University.

1.4. Significance of the study

The result of this study is expected to provide valuable sources of data about students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use. The researcher hopes that the result of this study may reveal some important vocabulary learning strategies which can help learners in developing their vocabulary knowledge and in indicating them the presence of numerous vocabulary learning strategies that they could use to achieve their vocabulary learning needs. Furthermore, the result of this study is expected to help text book writers and syllabus designers in revealing them the significance of incorporating diversified strategies that reinforce students' vocabulary learning.

1.5. Limitation of the study

Due to financial constraint, this paper was limited to study students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use with particular reference to first year English language students of Adigrat University. However, if it had included others like second and third year English major students, it would have contributed more generalized results.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Methodology

In conducting this study, a descriptive survey method was employed on the ground it would help to show the general picture of assessing students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use with particular reference to first year EFL students of Adigrat University, which is found in the Eastern Zone of Tigray region, in Ethiopia. In the department of English language and literature, there were 44 fresh men students, which means 18 boys and 26 girls. Therefore, all these students were taken as subjects of the study as their number was manageable.

2.2. Sampling Population and Sampling Technique

All the first year English language students were taken as participants of the study using available sampling technique.

2.3. Instruments of Data Collection

In conducting this study, data were gathered from respondents through questionnaire and interview.

Questionnaire

The first instrument used by the researcher to collect data from respondents was questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from Schmitt (1997). The questionnaire consisted of 33 close-ended questions concerning students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use. The questionnaire included five alternative words. The questionnaire about students' vocabulary perception included five options like strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. However, the questionnaire about students' vocabulary learning strategies contained five adverbs of frequency such as always, usually, sometimes, rarely, and never.

Interview

Interview was the second instrument of data collection. The interview was prepared for 10 interviewees who were randomly selected from the total number of 44 English major students. Semi structured interview which is highly favored for its flexibility was designed to get data about students' vocabulary learning perception and strategy use.

2.4. Procedures of data collection

To collect data for this study, the following procedures were used. First, a questionnaire was distributed to 44 students after explaining the objective of the study. The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted by the researcher in collaboration with class representative. Next to questionnaire distribution, interview was conducted with 10 students.

2.5. Techniques of data analysis

The data which were collected from participants through questionnaire and interview were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The data collected using close-ended questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed by counting and converting the tallies into percentages. Furthermore, the data collected using interview were qualitatively analyzed. Finally, based on the findings obtained, conclusion and recommendations were given.

3. Result and Discussion

In this part of paper, results obtained from students' questionnaire and interview are discussed as follows.

3.1 Results of Students' Questionnaire

Table 1: Students' Response to their Vocabulary Learning Perception

Item	Strongly agree		Agree		Undecided		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Learning Vocabulary is very important for my academic study in university.	28	63.6%	16	36.4%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Learning vocabulary helps me to develop English language skills like reading, speaking, listening, and writing.	31	70.5%	13	29.5%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Learning vocabulary requires regular practice.	17	38.6%	21	47.7%	-	-	6	13.6%	-	-

Learning vocabulary is not important for my academic study.	-	-	-	-	-	-	26	59.1%	18	40.9%
Learning vocabulary is more difficult than other skills of English.	2	4.5%	8	18.1%	-	-	19	43.2%	15	34.1%
Learning vocabulary requires very less effort than learning grammar and other language skills.	-	-	5	11.4%	3	6.8%	16	36.4%	20	45.4%
Learning vocabulary requires critical thinking.	17	38.6%	23	52.3%	-	-	4	9.1%	-	-
Learning vocabulary is interesting.	12	27.3%	18	40.9%	5	11.4%	7	15.9%	2	4.5%
Learning vocabulary is quite boring.	5	11.4%	6	13.6%	4	9.1%	16	36.4%	13	29.5%
Vocabulary is more in born than learned.	2	4.5%	7	15.9%	-	-	24	54.5%	11	25%

The above table 1 indicates that 28(63.6%) and 16(36.4%) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that learning vocabulary plays an important role in their academic study in university. Similarly, 31(70.5%) and 13(29.5%) of the students strongly agreed and agreed that vocabulary learning helps them in developing the other skills of English. Furthermore, 17(38.6%), 21(47.7%), and 6(13.6%) of the students strongly agreed, agreed, and disagreed respectively that learning vocabulary needs regular practice. Concerning item 4, 26(59.1%) and 18(40.9%) of the participants disagreed and strongly disagreed that vocabulary learning was not important for their academic study. Concerning the difficulty of vocabulary learning, 19(43.2%), 15(34.1%), 2(4.5%), and 8(18.1%) of the students disagreed, strongly disagreed, strongly agreed, and agreed respectively that learning vocabulary was more difficult than other skills of English. Similarly, in item 6, 20(45.4%), 16(36.4%), 5(11.4%) and 3(6.8%) of the participants strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed and undecided respectively that learning vocabulary

requires very less effort than grammar and other skills of English. In addition, in item 7, 17(38.6%), 23(52.3%), and 4(9.1%) of the participants strongly agreed, agreed, and disagreed in order that learning vocabulary requires critical thinking. Likewise, 12(27.3%), 18(40.9%), 5(11.4%), 7(15.9%), and 2(4.5%) of the subjects strongly agreed, agreed, undecided, disagreed, and strongly disagreed that learning vocabulary is very interesting. Concerning item 9, 16(36.4%) and 13(29.5%) of the students disagreed and strongly disagreed that learning vocabulary was boring. Moreover, 5(11.4%) and 6(13.6%) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that learning vocabulary was boring, but the rest 4(9.1%) of the students replied undecided. Related to the last item, 24(54.5%), 11(25%), 7(15.9%), and 2(4.5%) of the respondents disagreed, strongly disagreed, agreed, and strongly agreed respectively that vocabulary learning is more inborn than learned. Generally, from the above table, it can be concluded that most of the learners had positive perception about vocabulary learning.

Table 2: Students' Response to their Meta Cognitive Strategy use

Items	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I use English media like songs, movies, and news papers.	1 2.3%	5 11.4%	12 27.3%	18 40.9%	8 18.2%
I test myself with word lists.	2 4.5%	3 6.8%	9 20.5%	20 45.5%	10 22.7%
I use spaced word practice.	- -	8 18.2%	11 25%	16 36.4%	9 20.5%
I skip new words	10 22.7%	16 36.4%	10 22.7%	4 9.1%	4 9.1%
I continue to study vocabulary over time.	2 4.5%	8 18.2%	5 11.4%	26 59.1%	3 6.8%

In the above table 2, concerning students' use of English media, 1(2.3%), 5(11.4%), and 12(27.3%) of the participants replied always, usually, and sometimes respectively. However, 18(40.9%) and 8(18.2%) of the respondents answered rarely and never respectively. This indicates that majority of the students' English media use to promote their vocabulary skill is unsatisfactory.

Regarding students' self test with word lists, 2(4.5%), 3(6.8%), and 9(20.5%) of the students replied always, usually, and sometimes respectively. But majority of the students 20(45.5%) and 10(22.7%) said rarely and never. This shows that most of the students did not test themselves with word list effectively.

In item 3, students were asked about their frequency in using spaced word practice. Therefore, 8(18.2%) and 11(25%) of them said they usually and sometimes used spaced word practice respectively where as 16(36.4%) and 9(20.5%) of them said rarely and never in order. From this response, it can be understood that students' use of spaced word practice was very low.

In item 4, students were also asked how often they skip new words. So (36.4%), (22.7%), and (22.7%) of them responded usually, always, and sometimes in order. Nevertheless, the

rest (9.1%) and (9.1%) of the students responded rarely and never. This shows that most of the students skipped new words.

Concerning the last item, majority of the students (59.1%) said that they rarely continued to study vocabulary overtime. However, (4.5%), (18.2%), (11.4%), (6.8%) of them said always, usually, sometimes, and never. This indicates that majority of the students' efforts in studying vocabulary over time was very limited.

Table 3: Students' Response to their Cognitive Strategy use

Items	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I put English labels on physical objects.	1 2.3%	9 20.5%	7 15.9%	10 22.7%	17 38.6%
I listen to the tape of word lists.	- -	7 15.9%	10 22.7%	18 40.9%	9 20.5%
I keep vocabulary note books.	1 2.3%	4 9.1%	9 20.5%	19 43.2%	11 25%

As it is shown in the above table 3, concerning item 1, majority of the students (38.6% and 22.7%) said never and rarely where as 20.5%, 15.9%, and 2.3% of them said

usually, sometimes, and always in order. This shows that most of the students had limitation in putting English labels on physical objects to learn vocabulary. In item 2, 40.9% and 20.5% of the respondents replied that they rarely and never listened to tape of word lists and 22.7% and 15.9% of them responded sometimes and usually. So we can generalize from the respondents' responses that most of the

students didn't listen to the tape of word lists frequently. Concerning keeping vocabulary note books, 43.2% and 25% of the subjects said that they rarely and never kept vocabulary note books. However, 20.5%, 9.1%, and 2.3% of them said sometimes, usually, and always respectively. This implies that majority of the students didn't keep their vocabulary note books as it was expected.

Table 4: Students' Response to their Memory Strategy Use

Items	Always		Usually		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
I connect words to my personal experience.	8	18.2%	6	13.6%	3	6.8%	27	61.4%	-	-
I associate the new word with its coordinates.	6	13.6%	11	25%	9	20.5%	13	29.5%	5	11.4%
I use physical action when learning a new word.	-	-	4	9.1%	12	27.3%	28	63.6%	-	-
I say the new word aloud when I am studying.	-	-	3	6.8%	15	34.1%	22	50%	4	9.1%
I study the spelling of the new word.	6	13.6%	6	13.6%	16	36.4%	10	22.7%	6	13.6%
I study the sound of the new word.	5	11.4%	2	4.5%	10	22.7%	17	38.6%	10	22.7%

Based on the data presented in table 4, concerning item 1, 61.4% (rarely), 18.2% (always), 13.6% (usually) and 6.8% (sometimes) of the participants connected words to their personal experience and on item 2, 13.6%(always), 25% (usually), 20.5%(sometimes), 29.5%(rarely), and 11.4% (never) of them associated the new word with its coordinates. Besides, in item 3, 63.6 % (rarely), 27.3 % (sometimes), and 9.1 % (usually) of the respondents used physical action when they were learning a new word. Similarly, in item 4, half (50%) of the respondents answered that they rarely said a new word aloud. But, the rest 34.1%,

6.8%, and 9.1% of them sometimes, usually, and never said the new word aloud. In items 5 and 6, students were asked about their frequency in studying the spelling and sound of the new word. Related to spelling, 22.7% and 13.6% of the participants said rarely and never where as 36.45, 13.6%, and 13.6% of them said sometimes, usually, and always. Furthermore, about sound, 38.6% and 22.7% said rarely and never. However, 22.7%, 4.5% and 11.4% of them answered sometimes, usually and always. Therefore, it can be said that majority of the students were not good at using memory strategies

Table 5: Students' Response to their Determination Strategy Use

Items	Always		Usually		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
I guess the meaning of the new words from textual context.	-	-	8	18.2%	6	13.6%	15	34.1%	15	34.1%
I use English dictionary to find the meaning of the new word.	13	29.5%	17	38.6%	7	15.9%	7	15.9%	-	-
I use bilingual dictionary to find the meaning of the new word.	19	43.2%	16	36.4%	6	13.6%	3	6.8%	-	-
I study the parts of speech of the new word.	16	36.4%	13	29.5%	8	18.2%	3	6.8%	4	9.1%
I study affixes and roots of the new word.	21	47.7%	11	25%	4	9.1%	5	11.4%	3	6.8%

As presented in the above table 5, 68.2% of the students rarely and never guessed the meaning of new words from textual context. In addition, 18.2% and 13.6% of them said that they usually and sometimes guessed the meaning of new words from context. Concerning dictionary use, 29.5% and 43.2% of the respondents said that they always used English and bilingual dictionary respectively. Similarly, 38.6%, and 36.4% of them replied they usually used English and bilingual dictionary respectively. But the other 15.9%,

13.6%,15.9%, and 6.8% of the subjects answered sometimes and never in order. In addition, 36.4%, and 47.7% (always), 29.5%, and 25% (usually), 18.2%, and 9.1% (sometimes), 6.8% and 11.4% (rarely), 9.1% and 6.8% (never) of the respondents replied that they studied the parts of speech and the affixes and roots of the new word. Thus, it can be said that determination strategies were the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by majority of the students during vocabulary learning

Table 6: Students' Response to their Social Strategy use

Items	Always		Usually		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
I ask my teacher for L1 translation.	2	4.5%	4	9.1%	8	18.2%	13	29.5%	17	38.6%
I ask my classmates for meaning.	12	27.3%	16	36.4%	7	15.9%	9	20.5%	-	-
I ask my teacher to construct a sentence using the new word.	-	-	8	18.2%	10	22.7%	17	38.6%	9	20.5%
I study and practice the meaning of the new word in group.	4	9.1%	3	6.8%	10	22.7%	19	43.2%	8	18.2%

Table 6 above shows that, 38.6%, 29.5%, 18.2%, and 4.5% of the participants replied that they never, sometimes, usually, and always respectively asked their teachers for L1 translation. This depicts that majority of the students did not dare to ask their teachers for L1 translation. Likewise, in replying to item 2, 36.4%, 27.3%, 20.5%, and 15.9% of the subjects respectively confirmed that they usually, always, rarely and sometimes with the statement that "I ask my classmates for meaning." This shows that most of the

students asked their classmates when they encountered new words.

In a similar way, in item 3, students were asked to what extent they asked their teachers to construct a sentence using the new word. Thus, 38.6%, 22.7%, 20.5%, and 18.2% of them answered that they rarely, sometimes, never, and usually respectively asked their teachers to construct a sentence using the new word. It can be understood from the students' responses that most of the students didn't have the

tendency to ask their teachers to construct sentence using new words.

On the basis of item 4, 43.2% of the respondents rarely studied and practiced meaning of the new word in group. The rest 22.7%, 9.1%, 6.8% and 18.2% of the respondents replied that they sometimes, always, and usually and never respectively studied and practiced the meaning of new word in group. Therefore, it can be possibly said that majority of the students had limitation in studying and practicing the meaning of new word in group.

3.2 Results of students' interview

1) What is your perception about vocabulary learning?

All of the interviewees had positive perception about vocabulary learning. Vocabulary learning helps them in their academic study, which means it helps them to read, speak, write, and listen effectively. It also helps them in their net work study to share information among themselves clearly. The students also said that vocabulary cannot be mastered overnight rather it needs ceaseless practice and critical thinking. In general, without vocabulary knowledge it is unthinkable to be successful student.

2) What vocabulary learning strategies do you most frequently use?

Majority (8) of the interviewees used English and bilingual dictionaries to discover the meaning of the new word. However, 2 interviewees used guessing the meaning of the new word from textual context. In addition to dictionary and guessing, all of the interviewees asked their classmates for meaning.

3) What vocabulary learning strategies do you rarely use?

The interviewees explained that there were several vocabulary learning strategies which they rarely used during vocabulary learning. For example, they asked their teacher to make clear the meaning of the new word, kept vocabulary note books, tested themselves with word lists, listened tape of wordlists, connected words to their personal experience, asked their teacher for L1 translation, put English labels on physical objects, and used English media like songs, movies, and newspapers.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to assess students' vocabulary learning perception and to identify the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by first year English major students of Adigrat University. Therefore, the results obtained from students' questionnaire and interview revealed that most of the students had positive perception about vocabulary learning. Most of Students perceived vocabulary as the most important skill for their academic study. It helped them in developing their English language skills like reading, speaking, writing, listening and knowledge of grammar. The result of the study also showed the following order from the most to the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by English major

students of Adigrat University: Determination Strategies, Social strategies, Memory strategies, Meta cognitive strategies and Cognitive strategies .This indicates that Determination Strategies and Cognitive strategies respectively were the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by English major students of Adigrat University. This shows that majority of the students were not familiar with most of the vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, instead of depending on a single strategy, students should use diversified vocabulary learning strategies in order to develop their vocabulary knowledge.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the result and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Students should provide equal emphasis to vocabulary learning as they give to grammar and other skills of English like reading, speaking, writing, and listening.
- Students should clearly understand that vocabulary learning helps them in strengthening their knowledge of grammar and in developing the other skills of English as these skills are taught interactively.
- Learners should aware of the significance of learning vocabulary via different vocabulary learning strategies in their day to day activity in order to be encouraged and play their best roles in using and practicing vocabulary learning strategies during the teaching-learning process. Learners should also enhance sense of autonomous vocabulary learning by practicing guessing using different clues and by using vocabulary self collection strategy.
- Students had better be trained on several vocabulary learning strategies as it mitigates their knowledge of strategy. Strategy training helps students to aware of their interests, habits, and feel responsible for their own learning.
- Teachers had better teach vocabulary learning strategies to their students and guide them in using these strategies effectively during the process of teaching-learning.

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