

# IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY TEACHING TO ADVANCED FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION

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## Abstract

*Vocabulary is important for understanding difficult reading materials. English vocabulary teaching at higher reading levels should involve direct teaching and context-based approaches. Many studies have stated the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary teaching and learning, as word knowledge is essential to reading comprehension not only at elementary levels of reading but also to reading and comprehending the texts students read at university.*

*This research was conducted with 80 first year students studying English as their major in the University of Vlora and University of Tirana, Albania.*

*The aim of this research is to give an overview of the beliefs the students have about vocabulary learning, its direct teaching, its importance in university studies and of the vocabulary learning strategies used by them. It also highlights some of the effective strategies used by first-year university students. Teaching and applying a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies will help university students be aware of the importance of vocabulary learning and enrich their own vocabulary. Teaching independent word-learning strategies, including the use of context clues, the use of word parts, and efficient use of the dictionary is useful even for advanced English university students. The conclusions reached are that direct teaching of vocabulary in university context is important and leads to better text comprehension.*

**Key words:** *context clues, reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary learning and teaching, vocabulary learning strategies, word parts*

## Introduction

University students are asked to read a wide range of texts for their study purposes. Many of them may face difficulties when reading either because they are slow readers or because they lack the necessary reading skills. Most of their academic reading is motivated by the need to find, understand and absorb information, ideas and arguments. These difficulties are doubled when the readers have to read academic texts in a foreign language. They may know some words or may be able to use clues supplied by the text to guess at the meanings of unknown words or to infer meanings that are implied. But they find it very difficult to understand unknown texts because of many unknown words, because if the proportion of unknown words is too high, comprehension is disrupted (Carver, 1994). University students often ignore learning these words thinking that at the language level they are they can not learn words as they did at high school. There is a close relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to comprehending text (Nagy, 1997).

Vocabulary plays a great role as a predictor of overall reading ability (Nation, 1990). Having rich vocabulary knowledge is a key element to better reading comprehension (Hudson, 2007). Many foreign language readers find it hard to comprehend a text because of lack of vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies. This happens at all levels of language acquisition. That is why in the recent years there has been an increasing interest in vocabulary learning and teaching in foreign language learning. As vocabulary acquisition is complex, vocabulary learning strategies should be taught even to advanced students and this instruction at higher reading levels should involve direct teaching and context-based approaches. Many studies have stated the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary teaching and learning, as word knowledge is crucial to reading comprehension not only at elementary levels of reading but also determines how well students will be able to comprehend the texts they read at university. The effectiveness of vocabulary learning depends partly on the beliefs university students have about vocabulary learning, its direct teaching, its importance in university studies and on the vocabulary learning strategies used by them.

#### *Problem of Research*

Vocabulary knowledge is essential to reading comprehension not only at high school but at university as well. Reading comprehension involves far more than recognizing words and remembering their meanings. Insufficient vocabulary turns into a difficult problem for university students. It is thought that vocabulary takes care of itself and vocabulary growth comes mostly from reading and listening, but readers often fail to spontaneously learn the meanings of previously unknown words encountered in texts for different reasons such as failure to notice the unknown words as they believe they know it, wrong guessing and lack of systematic work with new vocabulary. The problems encountered are the result of both the beliefs they share about the need of vocabulary learning at university and the learning strategies used by them. This research gives an overview of the beliefs Albanian university students have about vocabulary learning, its direct teaching, its importance in university studies. It also highlights the most useful strategies in the perceptions of these students, which helps the researchers to be able to identify students' needs related to vocabulary learning strategies.

#### *Research Focus*

The focus of this research is to investigate the perceptions of postsecondary Albanian EFL students towards the VLS they frequently use and those, which they find useful. The study focuses on the question that vocabulary teaching is important for EFL university students who have to tackle with a lot of academic vocabulary. The introduction of students to a variety of vocabulary learning strategies in the context of university learning will help them to be aware of the need to apply specific strategies, which will make them more responsible of their own learning. In addition, direct explanation of vocabulary to advanced EFL students will reinforce their preferred learning strategies and will provide them with the necessary strategies for reading academic texts. When EFL students start their university studies they have to take most of their courses in English. They have a very difficult task to cope with. During their first year of studies they are taught such subjects as Introduction to Linguistics, English Morphology, Introduction to Literature and Phonetics. The overt explication of vocabulary helps ESL students to be better language learners by using context, learning and using word parts, using glossaries and the dictionary and recognizing and using cognates. This explication is important for foreign language students who must work to improve their language skills to become proficient users of the language.

## Methodology of Research

### *General Background of Research*

Words are not acquired in an isolated way. They come out in chunks and learning and memorizing a list of words in the FL does not lead to the acquisition of the language. Lewis proposed the lexical approach to languages in 1993 which “explicitly recognizes word patterns for (relatively) de-lexical words, collocational power for semantically powerful words, and longer multi-word items, particularly institutionalized sentences, as requiring different, and parallel pedagogical treatment”. Vocabulary learning and acquisition can be achieved when there is a mental process that connects the words with the previous linguistic experience of the learner and his knowledge of the words. There are many aspects of word knowledge. Richards (1976) identified seven aspects of word knowledge: frequency, register, position, form, associations, meaning-concept, meaning-associations. Nation (1990) distinguished eight types of word knowledge by adding to Richards’s list a receptive/productive distinction. His main categories are form (spoken/written), position (grammatical patterns/collocations), function (frequency/appropriateness), and meaning (concept/associations), each of which is described in terms of receptive and productive aspects. Chapelle (1998) stated that a definition of vocabulary should include four dimensions: (a) vocabulary size, (b) knowledge of word characteristics, (c) lexicon organization, and (d) processes of lexical access. A very important issue is the breadth of knowledge (Nation & Waring, 1997) and depth of knowledge (Read, 1993). Many researchers have stressed that “knowing a word requires more than just familiarity with its meaning and form” (Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997).

In the process of language acquisition EFL learners use a number of strategies. “Strategies are defined as learning techniques, behaviors, or actions, or learning-to-learn, problem-solving or study skills. No matter what they are called strategies make learning more effective and efficient.”(Oxford and Crookall, 1989). Oxford (1990) has given a taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies consisting of direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, whereas indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Gu and Johnson (1996) developed a vocabulary learning questionnaire containing a considerable number of strategies, divided into the following major categories: beliefs about vocabulary learning, metacognitive regulation, guessing, dictionary, note-taking, memory, and activation strategies. They pointed out that the most studied vocabulary learning strategies are memory strategies.

Learners connect their success in language learning with their ability to remember words, so they prefer some form of mechanical strategy such as repetition in order to achieve long-term retention. Their inability to recall known words is seen as the main reason of failure to comprehend and produce spoken and written language. Laufer and Osimo (1991) grouped methods that reinforce vocabulary retention into four categories: frequency of use; meaningful activities; mnemonic techniques and elaborate processing of words. Grace (2000) writes that the use of translation in the mother tongue helps the students with both short-term and long-term retention of words.

Leeke and Shaw (2000) have evidence that show that recording of vocabulary is efficient. The combination of strategies is a more powerful approach to vocabulary learning (Hulstijn, 1997). Vocabulary learning strategies, metacognitive and cognitive ones, are important in that students cannot be expected to take a fully active role in their lexical acquisition unless they are aware of various types of word knowledge and productive approaches they can take to acquire that knowledge. Metacognitive and cognitive strategy use helps students become more independent and responsible for their own learning; therefore, learners should be encouraged to

individualize their own learning strategies.

### *Sample of Research*

80 Albanian students attending the Foreign Languages Faculty of Vlora and Tirana University participated in the study. They are first year students majoring in English. They participated in the research study in October which is the beginning of the first term. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 21 with a mean of 19.35. The participants had been studying English between 4 and 10 years, with a mean of 9 years.

**Table 1. Background Information of the respondents.**

Respondents	No =80	Females 72	Males 8
Age			
Minimum	18	18	18
Maximum	21	21	21
Mean	19.35	18.79	19
Years of English learning			
Minimum	4	4	4
Maximum	10	10	10
Mean	7.5	7.4	7.66

90% of the sample is made up of females, because most students enrolled in English Studies programs are females. The average age of the respondents is 19.35, as students follow their higher studies straight after they finish middle school.

Most of the respondents, 92 %, come from General Middle schools, where English is studied as a foreign language. The others, 8%, come from Middle Foreign Languages schools where all the subjects are taught in English. Their language levels range from B1 to B2.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

The data for this study were collected through a vocabulary learning questionnaire, which was made up of 30 items regarding students' approaches to vocabulary learning, which included dictionary use, rehearsing, management, sources, guessing, encoding, activation and vocabulary perceptions. The students were asked to rate each strategy statement on a 5-point interval Likert scale in terms of their frequency of use in ascending order ranging from 1 ("almost never") to 5 ("almost always"). It was modified based on the Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (1990).

In addition, respondents were asked to provide personal information (age, foreign language proficiency, years of studying the foreign language, type of middle school attended).

The second questionnaire included questions about students' beliefs, their attitudes towards vocabulary and vocabulary learning. The questionnaires were designed for the purpose of gaining further insights into the situation.

Semi-structured interviews were also used in order to complete the unfinished parts of the questionnaires, to clarify any misunderstanding. The interviews, which averaged 45 minutes each, were undertaken with all students participating in the study and were carried out in groups of four so that opinions or ideas could be brought forward by the interviewer and these could then be briefly discussed by the group and would enhance the responses already provided. The discussions were conducted both in English and Albanian to help students explain themselves

better and make different strategies clear and understandable to them. The data collected in the group of respondents from both faculties, Vlora and Tirana ones, were almost the same. The students studying in these universities come from public high schools, have been taught using the same course books and the same national school curricula.

### *Data Analysis*

Data from this study were recorded on the computer. The qualitative data from the structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. In answer to the open-ended questions respondents express their concern regarding vocabulary, both the passive and active one. Three important issues were discussed, namely the importance of vocabulary learning and teaching at university, sources of learning vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategy training at university.

All the respondents have a positive attitude towards vocabulary, because they see it as the reason of many of the difficulties they perceive in their program of study. Upon entering the Foreign Languages Faculty students are exposed to a great amount of vocabulary in different content subjects. English is used as the medium of instruction. But lack of appropriate vocabulary affects their academic performance in two ways, first, a limited active vocabulary makes it difficult for students to express higher level complex thoughts, opinions, or concepts; and second, limited passive vocabularies make it difficult for students to comprehend academic texts. Regarding sources of vocabulary learning resources, measured on a three-point Likert scale, independent learning and daily use of English language media are reported with a mean of 2.55 and 2.35. Classroom learning is 1.94, which reflect their perception that vocabulary learning is mostly incidental because other areas of language are more important at university.

**Table 2. Sources of vocabulary learning.**

Sources of vocabulary	N	Mean
Classroom learning	80	1.94
Independent learning	80	2.55
Daily use of English language media	80	2.35

Intentional vocabulary learning, defined as “any activity geared at committing lexical information to memory” (Hulstijn, 2001), takes place only in one subject, Integrated language Skills, comprising 8 consisting of eight credits. Students state that learning words and chunks of words in context, use of monolingual dictionaries, the use of new vocabulary in new situations, both in a written and oral form, helps them. They have not had any strategy learning training and feel that university teachers should model different strategies in the classroom.

**Table 3. Vocabulary learning strategies.**

Strategy used	N	Mean
1. I think of relationship between what I know and new things I learn in English.	80	1.85
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	80	3.4
3. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.	80	3.5
4. I use rhymes to remember new English words.	80	1
5. I physically act out new English words	80	1.01
6. I review English lessons often	80	4.5
7. I remember new English words by remembering the location on the page	80	2.5
8. I keep a vocabulary notebook to put down new words I want to learn.	80	4.5
9. I try to make use of prefixes and suffixes when learning a word.	80	3.2
10. I try to learn the new word by repeating it out loud several times.	80	2.5
11. I make a list of new words with Albanian translation to memorize them.	80	3.9
12. I think of cognate words to understand the meaning of a word.	80	4.2
13. I write new English words several times	80	1.3
14. I try to talk like native speakers	80	1
15. I use the English words I know in different ways	80	4.7
16. I start conversation in English	80	4.1
17. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English	80	3.7
18. I read for pleasure in English.	80	4.2
19. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English	80	5
20. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English	80	3.2
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand	80	2.2
22. I try not to translate word-by-word	80	3.3
23. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses	80	4.7
24. I read English without looking up every new word	80	4.1
25. I translate passages from English to my native language and vice versa	80	3.7
26. I study new words later in order to remember them	80	3.2
27. I use monolingual dictionary to discover the meaning of a new word	80	4.1
28. I use bilingual dictionary to discover the meaning of a new word	80	4.6
29. I use online dictionary to discover the meaning of a new word	80	4.8
30. I ask my teacher or friend for a meaning of a new word	80	2.5

The responses to the questionnaire show that the top six strategies that the first year students use are cognitive strategies using dictionary, guessing, word formation. The mean of frequency is above 4.5 to 5.0.

Memory strategies range from 1.0 to 3.9. Four strategies of the questionnaire show low use of memory strategies, which in the discussion were defined as strategies used by elementary EFL learners.

The most-used strategies are cognitive strategies. The use of monolingual or

bilingual vocabulary is highly used by our students, out of which on line dictionaries are topping the list. The respondents prefer them because they are user-friendly and at hand wherever students are.

### Results of Research

There are great individual differences in vocabulary learning strategies. 55% of the respondents, who are good readers use a wide variety of strategies in combination. More proficient students use cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than less proficient students. Their strategies vary according to the reading task and the type of the reading text. The most-used strategy by students, use bilingual dictionary, reveals a quick and very easy way of find out the meaning of the word. They report that they just look up the word, and try to apply it in their reading passage, without consulting the other forms and usage of this word. This may lead to misinterpretation of the reading text and does not help the retention of the word in their long memory.

The respondents make use of memory strategies and especially translation. They may be useful for understanding the text for the moment, but prevent the students from working with the text and from using vocabulary and language.

**Table 3. Rank order of the most and least frequently used strategies.**

No	Most and Least Frequently Used Strategies	Mean	Strategy
1	I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English	5	Cognitive
2	I use online dictionary to discover the meaning of a new word	4.8	Cognitive
3	To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses	4.7	Cognitive
4	I use the English words I know in different ways	4.7	Cognitive
5	I use bilingual dictionary to discover the meaning of a new word	4.6	Cognitive
6	I review English lessons often	4.5	Memory
7	I make a list of new words with translation to memorize them.	3.9	Memory
8	I try not to translate word-by-word	3.3	Memory
9	I try to make use of prefixes and suffixes when learning a word	3.2	Cognitive
10	I study new words later in order to remember them	3.2	Memory
11	I write new English words several times	1.3	Memory
12	I physically act out new English words	1.01	Memory
13	I use rhymes to remember new English words.	1.0	Memory
14	I try to talk like native speakers	1.0	Memory

Table 3 shows the rank of the most and least frequently used strategies by university students. It reveals the tendency of university students to use many strategies in their learning. 50% of the respondents report that vocabulary learning is a part of their everyday learning, the rest reports that just through reading they can remember words As for the approaches to vocabulary learning they say that they do not need to repeat a word many times, but simply work with the word, by dealing with the text related tasks, or trying to handle the academic work. Only 10% write that they record words, their definitions and sample sentences and have a look at them from time to time. In the interviews they justified this approach with the fact that they just can remember words and can enrich their vocabulary in an incidental way. 100% agree that reading texts enhances vocabulary acquisition. After some reading of the words they feel that they know it. But the fact that they do not work with the words does not increase their active vocabulary. They say that they have not had any training in using strategies for learning

vocabulary. Students at this stage and level need to be taught how to deal with language chunks and their content-based meaning. It is true that at this stage much of the vocabulary is learned through incidental reading, which in our case is reading the content subjects they take, but the explicit teaching will help them to learn more lexical phrases. Lewis (1993) has stated as the key principle of a lexical approach the fact that “language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar”. They need to improve their English language skills to use English language as a means of communication and as a working language for academic studies.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed at investigating vocabulary learning strategies reported by university students used by EFL university students. They make use of different types of learning strategies in their language learning, but not a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies. This is connected with their perception about vocabulary. The responses given in the interviews conducted reveal the fact that the difficulties EFL students experience with reading content subjects taught in English are related to the way they learn vocabulary. They just look up a new word in a bilingual vocabulary (100%) when the unknown word makes it impossible for them to understand the paragraph they are reading. They neglect the other strategies as they think that they will take their time at the expense of learning the subjects they are assigned. Learning new words is a complex process and the students need to use many strategies in order to remember the meaning of the words. Gu (1996) points out that “It is only the number of strategies and the frequencies of strategy use that deprive the poor of improvement, providing them with more alternatives obtained from the strategically rich and telling them to use their strategies more often would easily solve the problem”.

The findings show that the use of a wide variety of strategies is characteristic for good learners acquiring new vocabulary, consolidating and elaborating vocabulary knowledge, using dictionaries and inferring from context. However, to become successful, advanced learners will need to experiment with each of these strategies in a variety of contexts and eventually integrate them into a complex, metacognitive approach that is applied appropriately to specific tasks. Learners will benefit from combining strategies and it is worth considering adding a vocabulary learning strategies component to language teaching in university settings. Students will eventually need to effectively control their own vocabulary learning and become more independent learners. It is very reasonable to introduce the students to a variety of strategies and let them decide which ones are right for them.

The implementation of a questionnaire as a tool helped to collect data as well as present students with a number of vocabulary strategies. All respondents stated that they understand the importance of learning vocabulary as it is the basis for understanding and using language. The study shows that university students have a positive perception about the usefulness of vocabulary learning strategies in the context of university studies. Reading and discussing about different strategies makes them aware of their importance. Knowing what strategies university students employ the teachers can provide them with a wide range of effective vocabulary learning strategies. In this way they assist students to become cognizant of the ways they learn most effectively. It also helps the students to develop strategies and ways to become more motivated and independent learners. The understanding of the students’ perceptions of vocabulary learning and their vocabulary learning strategies use enables teachers design teaching activities that enhance students’ lexical competence.

## Conclusions

Reading comprehension is closely linked with vocabulary knowledgs. Effectiveness in vocabulary learning depends on the strategies students use. University students employ a number of strategies. Cognitive and memory strategies are the most frequently used. In order to enhance students' performance in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension university teachers should model different vocabulary learning strategies so that students will apply those that are most suitable to their learning styles. By introducing different vocabulary strategies to the students, by discussing them in the class English students change their beliefs about vocabulary learning and learn useful metacognitive strategies. First year university students need to improve their learning skills so that to deal successfully with their difficulties. Explaining to them different strategies of language learning will be very helpful to them. This is of paramount importance for language aspects as vocabulary, which in many cases is considered not essential by students.

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