

## THE VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY UUM STUDENTS IN RELATION TO THEIR PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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### **Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini berfokus pada strategi pembelajaran kosakata yang digunakan oleh Band 1 dan Band 4 mahasiswa sarjana Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mensurvei penggunaan strategi pembelajaran kosakata yang digunakan oleh responden dan untuk menentukan sejauh mana penggunaan strategi dipengaruhi oleh tingkat kemampuan mereka. Instrumen yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah kuesioner yang dikembangkan oleh Lachini (2007) berdasarkan klasifikasi Cottrell tentang strategi pembelajaran yang terdiri dari lima kategori strategi belajar kosakata: kreatif, reflektif, efektif, aktif dan motivasi. Respon dari 100 responden dari masing masing kelompok, Band 1 dan Band 4, hasil kuesioner diperiksa pada frekuensi penggunaan strategi pembelajaran kosakata. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tidak ada perbedaan yang signifikan dalam hal frekuensi penggunaan antara Band 1 dan Band 4 peserta sebagai mayoritas kedua kelompok digunakan sebagian besar strategi baik 'sedikit' atau 'sering'. Temuan penelitian mungkin bisa membantu instruktur untuk memfasilitasi pembelajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris oleh mahasiswa UUM dan mahasiswa lain pada umumnya.*

**Kata-kata kunci:** *Strategi pembelajaran kosakata, tingkatan kemampuan berbahasa*

### **Abstract**

*This thesis is concerned with the vocabulary learning strategies used by Band 1 and Band 4 undergraduate students of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The objectives of this descriptive study were to survey the vocabulary learning strategies used by the respondents and to determine to what extent their use of the strategies was influenced by their proficiency level. The instrument employed in the study was a questionnaire developed by Lachini (2007) based on Cottrell's classification of learning strategies. It consists of five categories of vocabulary learning strategies: creative, reflective, effective, active and motivated. The responses of 100 Band 1 and 100 Band 4 students to the questionnaire were examined on the frequency of their use of the vocabulary learning strategies. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in terms of the frequency of use between Band 1 and Band 4 participants as the majority of both groups employed most of the strategies either 'a little' or 'often'. The findings of the study perhaps could help instructors to facilitate the learning of English vocabulary by UUM students and other students at large.*

**Keywords:** *The vocabulary learning strategies, proficiency levels*

## INTRODUCTION

Research into language learning strategies commenced in the 1960s as a result of the influence of the development in cognitive psychology. The studies on language learning strategies began to mushroom in the 1970s in reaction to teacher-centred education. Since the early 1970s, language teaching practices had increasingly changed into learner-centred (Wenden, 1991). The element of learner-centredness in teaching and learning had attracted researchers to investigate the language learning strategies used by learners. The term, “language learning strategies” in its broadest sense can include learning any components of language such as grammar, syntax, vocabulary etc. With respect to this study, the part of language specified is vocabulary and how it is basically learnt by language learners.

It is arguable that vocabulary learning is a skill that needs to be taught and nurtured like any other skills (Graham, 1997). Macaro (2003) believes that words are the basis of the processes we go through for accessing language and they are probably the most important building blocks in the production of language. Despite the importance of vocabulary, Hedge (2000) argues that the neglect of studying vocabulary in the early 1970s is surprising in view of the fact that errors of vocabulary are potentially more misleading than those of grammar. Wilkins (1972, as quoted in Hedge, 2000, p. 109) claims, “Linguists have had remarkably little to say about vocabulary and one can find very few studies which could be of any practical interest for language teachers.” Vocabulary studies only began to grow in number after the late 1990s (Wu, 2005). This is evident as there was a profusion of publications on vocabulary since the stated year (e.g: Taylor, 1990; Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1997).

It is argued by many researchers (Oxford, 1990; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990

etc) that there are some factors that influence the choice of language learning strategies. As for vocabulary learning strategies, such theory can also be applied in examining whether there are factors that make certain vocabulary learning strategies more preferable than the others. Learner differences namely age, gender, nationality or ethnicity, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, stage of learning or proficiency level (Oxford, 1990) are among the contributing factors for the tendency to use certain language learning strategies. With regard to vocabulary learning strategies, proficiency level of learners is considered an important indicator for choosing vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000), because it can determine what strategies can suit the learners better at their certain stage of learning a language. Therefore, the present research had the focus on investigating if there were any significant differences in terms of the CREAM vocabulary learning strategies used by the students in relation to their different proficiency levels: “very limited user” (Band 1) and “satisfactory user” (Band 4).

According to Oxford (1990), even though teachers view vocabulary learning as something easy, language learners still face difficulty remembering the huge amounts of vocabulary essential to attain fluency. Macaro (2003) on the other hand believes that learners probably have their own strategies in learning vocabulary outside the classroom, but do teachers know what the strategies are? Macaro (2003) further elaborates that the issue that has most divided theorists and teachers is how vocabulary should be taught. Hamzah, Kafipour and Abdullah (2009) also have the same view as they claim that it is still a contentious issue how learners acquire vocabulary successfully or how it can best be taught. A few questions raised by Macaro (2003): “Do teachers want to force learners to learn by rote lists of vocabulary? Will learners be demotivated

by this? Should vocabulary be “embedded” in a series of motivating real-life activities?” These are among the questions that need to be answered when language teachers try to identify the effective techniques of teaching vocabulary and such questions can only be answered when the teachers know how their students learn vocabulary. As suggested by Wu (2005), to offer better vocabulary instruction, a good comprehension of learner’s vocabulary learning strategies is required. This idea clearly signals that once teachers have known the vocabulary learning strategies used by their students, then only the teachers can teach their students vocabulary effectively. Thus, there is a significant link between recognizing learner’s vocabulary learning strategies and developing better vocabulary teaching.

Besides, the issue always debated among researchers is the relationship between their participants’ preferred vocabulary learning strategies and their language proficiency. Some researchers believe there is a relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and the level of language proficiency, while some have the opposite view. For example, the study of cognitive and metacognitive vocabulary learning strategies in relation to English major and non-English major students conducted by Alavi and Kaivanpanah (2006) indicated that the more proficient the students, the less they used the cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The research of Gu and Johnson (1996) discovered that language proficiency of their subjects did not correlate to all vocabulary learning strategies that were studied. For example, the strategy, visual repetition of new words and vocabulary retention strategy were found to have a weak relation to language proficiency. These findings indicate that it is not an absolute certainty that proficiency levels will determine the kinds of vocabulary learning strategies preferred by learners, and proficiency level may affect

some strategies only. Thus, clearly, it is an ongoing problem for researchers of vocabulary learning strategies to decide whether language proficiency affects the vocabulary learning strategy(s) employed, and if it does, what strategy(s) is affected.

Alavi and Kaivanpanah (2006) claim that it is vital for teachers to give their learners instructions on how to learn lexical items better through employing a limited number of strategies used by good language learners. Clearly, teachers should guide their learners in using vocabulary learning strategies but the teachers should first identify what strategies are good for them. Macaro (2003, p. 82) poses the questions: “Are some learners better vocabulary learners than others? Can poor learners be trained to use strategies better thus making them better learners?” To answer these questions, it is important to discover how learners prefer to learn vocabulary rather than simply exercising some vocabulary learning strategies in the classroom with prior perception that they would fit all learners. Perhaps, due to different level of proficiency, some learners find certain strategies suit them more. Obviously, when teachers know how their learners prefer to learn vocabulary, then only the teachers can help their students to use their preferred strategies better to enhance their learning.

Macaro (2003) discovers that to learn more words than the ones which are explicitly taught by a teacher, learners need to actively participate in the learning process both inside and outside the classroom. This means the learners need to identify the strategies that they would like to exploit to independently learn vocabulary. The significance of studying vocabulary learning strategies is also highlighted by Wenden and Rubin (1987) as they argue that despite the availability of various recommendations for teaching vocabulary, there is little guidance for learners to learn it as they may ask, “How do I memorize vocabulary better?” However, this problem can perhaps be

solved if teachers know how their learners perceive their way of learning vocabulary and how they prefer to learn it. Thus, the specific vocabulary learning strategies employed by learners are vital to be investigated in order to provide teachers with some ideas for designing a better approach in teaching vocabulary.

The rationale for conducting the present study also lies in the benefit of vocabulary learning strategies to both teachers and learners as suggested by Hedge (2000, p. 125), "It would be useful to have information from classroom studies as to which teaching procedures seem to enhance particular learning strategies and which strategies are effective for which aspects of vocabulary learning." As for the present study, the data obtained was expected to determine the vocabulary learning strategies favoured by Band 1 and Band 4 students out of the creative, reflective, effective, active and motivated (CREAM) vocabulary learning strategies, in order for the learners to identify their preferred strategies in learning vocabulary, and to later use them efficiently so that their language learning can be improved. Nation (1990) firmly believes that by mastering a few strategies, learners can deal with thousands of words, and it is worth spending time on these strategies. Once the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies have been discovered, teachers can encourage learners to use the strategies that can promote their learning.

This study mainly attempted to understand one component of language, vocabulary with respect to the strategies that were the most and the least used by Band 1 and Band 4 learners in learning vocabulary. This study also intended to see if there were any differences in terms of the choice of vocabulary learning strategies made by the two groups of learners. At the end of the research, the data collected is expected to be the baseline for future research on vocabulary learning strategies, and to be a guideline to

help teachers to come up with an approach to teaching vocabulary that meet their learners' preferred ways of learning it.

In summary, the main objectives of this research are as follows: to investigate whether UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students use any of the CREAM vocabulary learning strategies; to determine if there are any significant differences between UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students' preferences for CREAM vocabulary learning strategies ; and to discover if there is any relationship between UUM Band 1 and Band 4 students' English language proficiency and their use of CREAM vocabulary learning strategies.

The perception of proficiency as an "unknowable abstraction that reflects the universal competence of native speakers" had resulted in the focus placed on learner variability from the early 1970s (Adegbile & Alabi, 2005). Benson (2005) asserts that learners are individuals, and that their individuality may have significant impacts on their language learning. Benson (2005) further explains that research to date has established a number of important dimensions of learner diversity such as motivation, affect, age, culture, strategy use, setting etc. As for vocabulary learning strategies, there are many factors claimed by researchers to have influence on the choice or preference for some vocabulary learning strategies. Among the factors that have been proposed include vocabulary size (Hamzah, Kafipour & Abdullah, 2009), fields of study (Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2006), and L2 proficiency (Lachini, 2007). With respect to proficiency level, according to Lee and Oxford (2008), since numerous studies about L2 learning strategies have been rooted in the distinction between good and poor language learners, there were many studies thus conducted on the relationship between strategy use and L2 proficiency. In the area of vocabulary learning, the issue of the relationship between language proficiency and the preferred vocabulary learning strategies has been the interest of

many researchers (e.g: Gu & Johnson, 1996).

There have been some evidences discovered by researchers from their studies that there was a correlation between language learners' proficiency levels and their particular choices of vocabulary learning strategies. Some proofs can also be traced back to as far as in the 1980s. For instance, Chamot (1984) found that grouping words as a strategy for recalling them worked better for the more proficient learners than beginners. Sternberg (1987, as quoted in Macaro, 2003) mentions that a number of studies have demonstrated that students especially those with higher verbal ability can correctly guess the meaning of unknown words. The study of Lachini (2007) discovered that there was a correlation between his subjects' proficiency levels and the vocabulary learning strategies they preferred. For example, active learning strategies were used more by the intermediate and elementary students compared to the advanced-level students who preferred creative learning strategies.

Despite the significant relationship identified by many researchers regarding the vocabulary learning strategy preferences and language learners' proficiency levels, there were some researchers that found there was no obvious relation between these two variables (e.g: Gu & Johnson (1996). For example, Lessard-Clouston in 1988 did a study which indicated that there was no correlation between the students' approach to vocabulary learning and their proficiency level as it was revealed that structured vocabulary learning strategies were not used by most of them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design using questionnaire survey on the vocabulary learning strategies employed by the participants. The present research attempted to see whether there was a

significant difference between the participants' language proficiency levels and their choice of vocabulary learning strategies.

The participants were selected based on their results (Band 1 and Band 4) in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). MUET is an integrate test instrument designed to measure a candidate's productive and receptive skills and the knowledge of grammar as well as vocabulary in the context of language use (Don et al, 2002). 100 Band 1 and 100 Band 4 students were randomly sampled for this study.

A Band 1 English user is described as one who is hardly able to use the language in terms of communicative ability, has a very limited understanding of the language and context with respect to his comprehension of the language, and as for his task performance, this user has a very limited ability to function in the language (Don et al, 2002). In contrast, a Band 4 user in terms of communicative ability corresponds to a generally fluent English user who presents generally appropriate use of the language with some grammatical errors. As for comprehension of the language, a user at this level demonstrates a satisfactory understanding of the language and context, while his task performance generally indicates satisfactory ability to function in the language (Don et al, 2002).

The instrument employed in this study was the CREAM vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire developed by Lachini (2007) based on the strategies in learning proposed by Cottrell (1999). CREAM vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire consisted of 60 items which were self-reporting statements: 12 items (creative), 13 items (reflective), 11 items (effective), 12 items (active) and 12 items (motivated).

CREAM vocabulary learning strategies basically involve the learners being creative (having confidence to use

their individual strategies and styles, and applying imagination to their learning), being reflective (being able to learn from experience, analyzing and evaluating their own performance, and drawing lesson from it), being effective (organizing their spaces, time, priorities, state of mind and resources to the maximum benefit), being active (being active in doing things physically and mentally to help them make sense of what they learn) and being motivated (being aware of their own desired outcomes, maintaining their commitment in order to reach the short and long term goals they have identified for themselves).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Overall, based on the range of scores, most of the respondents reported using the strategies averagely “a little” for the first four types of strategies: creative, reflective, effective, and active strategies in learning vocabulary (see Table 1). Such degree of frequency of use indicates that most of the respondents did not employ the mentioned strategies very often. The participants also can be perceived as selective in terms of the types of strategies

they preferred to use and how frequent to use the strategies, since they in majority (36%) rated a lot of motivated strategies as what they “often” used. Only this category of strategies that received the highest scores for the response option, “often” for its most strategies. One possible reason for this was perhaps the participants favoured learning vocabulary for motivational purposes. Also, the same category of strategies was given the highest scores by the respondents for the degree of frequency, “very frequently.” This implies that the participants preferred to be motivated in learning vocabulary and clear about their aims for learning it.

Of all the five types of vocabulary learning strategies, creative category had the largest number of respondents who rated they employed the strategies “very little” (19%), as well as they had “never” used the strategies (9%). Probably, the learners found the creative strategies did not suit them well as some strategies require a higher cognitive ability (e.g: “When it is necessary, I combine two words to create a new word”, “I try to make semantic or structural charts of the words for learning them”).

Table 1. Frequency (*f*) Distribution (in percentage) for All Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Band 1 and Band 4 Students (n=200)

Vocabulary Learning Strategy	Never		Very Little		A Little		Often		Very Frequently	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Creative	18	9	38	19	71	36	52	25	21	11
Reflective	12	6	31	16	74	37	63	32	20	10
Effective	14	7	34	17	64	32	61	31	27	14
Active	16	8	35	18	70	35	57	28	22	11
Motivated	5	3	20	10	57	28	72	36	46	23

To discover if the levels of proficiency of the participants would produce any difference, it was revealed

that three (reflective, effective and active) out of the five divisions of vocabulary learning strategies showed a difference in

terms how frequent their strategies were used by Band 1 and Band 4 participants (see Table 2). Band 4 respondents mostly employed the strategies in the three categories more frequently than Band 1 respondents. In contrast to Band 4 students who in majority rated the strategies as what they “often” used, most Band 1 students nevertheless felt they exploited the strategies slightly less frequent than Band 4 students since they rated them “a little.”

Since “a little” and “often” do not signify a very wide gap in terms of how frequent the strategies were employed, the difference discovered then was not really significant. One possible reason for the Band 1 participants to use the strategies only “a little” could be their lack of interest in reflecting and evaluating how they learned vocabulary (reflective and effective strategies) and their tendency to play a less active role in learning vocabulary (active strategies). This could be due to their level of proficiency that perhaps restricted them from exercising the strategies more often as compared to Band 4 students. For instance, some strategies such as item 19 (“I reflect upon the words’ meaning and their usage”), item 32 (“I try to make meaningful connections between the new words of different lessons”), item 33 (“I try to use the newly learned words in daily conversation”), item 39 (“I always make a meaningful link between the newly learned words and the words I knew before”), and item 44 (“I teach the newly learned words to the others or I use them to talk about a topic”) probably require learners with better command of the language since those strategies involve the learners’ ability to apply the words they acquire and to see how the words are related. With limited command of the language, it can be hypothesized that the Band 1 students perhaps had a very small vocabulary and poor understanding of the language (unlike Band 4 students) that made them unable to

function well in the language (Don et al, 2002).

For the other two categories of CREAM vocabulary learning strategies (creative and motivated), most participants of both groups on the other hand displayed their similar frequency of use. However, of the two categories, motivated strategies were more frequently used by both Band 1 (19%) and Band 4 (17%) respondents as the majority of them assigned “often” to most of the strategies. A large number of Band 1 (20%) and Band 4 (31%) participants on the other hand indicated their employment of creative strategies as “a little.” This shows that their frequency of use of the creative and motivated strategies was not affected by their different levels of proficiency since they reported the same pattern of use. Perhaps the strategies did not involve any strong association with a particular level of proficiency for using them that they could simply be employed by learners with any proficiency level.

When looking at the results of the survey, an interesting tendency can be observed. The research revealed that the Band 1 and Band 4 participants differed in how they responded to a particular level of frequency of use. The difference was statistically significant on items that were reported to be used “very frequently.” For each category of vocabulary learning strategies, the scores of Band 4 students doubled or tripled the scores contributed by Band 1 participants. This shows that Band 4 students employed a greater number of strategies more frequently than Band 1 students. Perhaps, Band 4 respondents made more efforts in learning vocabulary that they used the strategies at a higher frequency than Band 1 participants. The outnumbering of Band 4 respondents was perhaps due to their higher proficiency that made them to have more confidence to use the strategies more often. With their proficiency, most probably Band 4 students managed to use some strategies such as consulting a

dictionary to find the appropriate usage of a word (item 3), reflecting upon the words' meanings and their usage (item 19), comprehending the words in their context (item 35), and summarizing a passage and replacing the new words with their synonyms (item 38) more frequently as they perhaps did not face much difficulty in doing so. Possibly, what the Band 4 respondents were able to do in the language that prompted them to use some strategies "very frequently."

In contrast to the scores for the strategies that were exploited "very frequently", for each category of the vocabulary learning strategies, Band 1 participants appeared to have contributed more participants who associated themselves with having no experience of using some strategies at all. In other words, there were more Band 1 respondents who had "never" used the

strategies than Band 4 respondents. One possible reason could be their lower proficiency that limited their ability in using some strategies. For example, many Band 1 respondents revealed that they had "never" employed strategies such as keeping a notebook with themselves to write down their ideas on learning new words and later to see which ones work better (item 12), and summarizing a passage and replacing words with their synonyms (item 38). To use such strategies, a learner probably needs to possess a higher proficiency level than Band 1 since those strategies demand not only a good command of the language, but also a higher cognitive ability in learning vocabulary. Clearly, some strategies were not favoured at all by the participants perhaps because of their difficulty in using the strategies or to make the issue simple, it was a matter of individual choice.

Table 2. Cross Tabulation for Frequency (*f*) of Use of CREAM Vocabulary Learning Strategies between Band 1 and Band 4 Students (n=200)

Category of Strategies	Scale	Band 1		Band 4	
		<i>F</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Creative	Never	10	5	8	4
	Very Little	20	10	18	9
	A Little	40	20	31	16
	Often	24	12	29	15
	Very frequently	6	3	15	8
Reflective	Never	7	4	6	3
	Very Little	21	11	13	7
	A Little	41	21	32	16
	Often	27	14	35	18
	Very frequently	5	3	15	8
Effective	Never	8	4	5	3
	Very Little	20	10	12	6
	A Little	39	20	30	15
	Often	25	13	34	17
	Very frequently	8	4	19	10
Active	Never	9	5	7	4
	Very Little	21	11	14	7
	A Little	41	21	29	15
	Often	24	12	33	17
	Very frequently	5	3	17	9
	Never	3	2	2	1



<b>Motivated</b>	<b>Very Little</b>	12	6	8	4
	<b>A Little</b>	33	17	23	12
	<b>Often</b>	37	19	34	17
	<b>Very frequently</b>	15	8	33	17

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data, it is evident that generally in spite of their dissimilar proficiency levels, both Band 1 and Band 4 students did not reveal a great deal of differences in how much they used CREAM vocabulary learning strategies. No matter how much the students had achieved in the language, their proficiency level in general did not operate as the key determinant for their frequency of use of the strategies. The significant difference aimed to appear after the data was analyzed between Band 1 and Band 4 students, however was not discovered. Rather, minor differences were exposed by the results that showed the different proficiency levels did not contribute much to revealing substantial differences. It can be concluded that the proficiency levels of the students did not reflect a great deal of distinctive learner styles or preferences in learning vocabulary.

Despite the non-existence of significant differences, the results of the study can still be referred to for a general picture of how the participants preferred to use the strategies. As most respondents of both levels of proficiency favoured exploiting motivated strategies more frequently than the other four types of strategies, perhaps teachers can introduce teaching vocabulary that is more motivational and purposeful as learners obviously prefer to learn words when they are aware of their objective and aim for learning them. In addition, teachers can probably justify the positive reasons for learning words in order to make the learners more motivated in their vocabulary learning. As a larger number of participants from both groups favoured employing the strategies of other categories approximately in moderation as most of them responded to the frequency

level, “a little”, teachers can maybe help and guide them how to use the strategies more effectively. Nation (1990) proposes that it is more important for teachers to teach learners strategies for dealing with words than to teach the words themselves. Nation (1990) also recommends that it is worthwhile ensuring that learners are able to apply their vocabulary learning strategies and that they get plenty of help and encouragement in doing so. Thus, teachers play an important role in assisting and supporting their learners in learning vocabulary.

To conclude, there are many other possible reasons for the data to appear as it did and proficiency level should not merely be considered the sole factor. Thus, further research should be conducted to confirm the other potential reasons. As suggested by Schmitt (2000), in fact, there are so many different variables that affect second language vocabulary acquisition, such as L1, age, amount of exposure, motivation and culture, that it is very difficult to formulate a theory of acquisition that can account for them all. In addition, the study did not aim at uncovering the reasons behind the differences in preferences for vocabulary learning strategies between the Band 1 and Band 4 students. Thus, the reasons pointed out are merely hypothetical and further research is needed to clarify the issue. The present research however has contributed some ideas of which vocabulary learning strategies that were most commonly used by the respondents and which were not. Some of the insights gained in the present research perhaps can help teachers to come up with a better approach of teaching vocabulary to students that can perfectly suit their needs.

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