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# Vocabulary Learning Strategies of South African English First Additional Language Learners

## ABSTRACT

This article reflects the qualitative part of a doctoral degree thesis, in which the researchers used an explanatory, sequential, mixed-methods research design to investigate the role of English academic vocabulary in the reading comprehension of Grade 11 English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners in a district in South Africa. The study represents an attempt to investigate which vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) the learners used. To this end, the researchers employed a focus group discussion to collect data from a sample comprising eight (n=8) Grade 11 EFAL learners. The data were analysed using content analysis. The findings revealed that it is important to explore and broaden learners' VLS knowledge. Also, the results showed that learners can take control of their vocabulary

learning as long as their teachers are trained to offer them opportunities to learn and practise those strategies. It is recommended that stakeholders become conscious of the VLSs which learners in the EFAL environment use, so that the former can design and deliver vocabulary instruction and training accordingly. The teacher needs to assist learners in becoming independent learners during EFAL vocabulary learning. This can be done by exposing them to different VLSs.

**Keywords:** English First Additional Language; Vocabulary; Vocabulary knowledge; Vocabulary learning strategies; Vocabulary development

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the world, people use English as an international language for different purposes. The majority of South African parents regard English so highly that they believe it is the language of empowerment and aspire to have their children educated in English, even though many learners entering English primary schools do not have the necessary background or proficiency to succeed academically (Van der Merwe, 2014). One of the most elementary components of language learning is vocabulary. Learners need to know vocabulary, to be able to use a language functionally, to use the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing creatively.

In an academic setting, reading is a very important skill for high school learners and tertiary students to master if they are to cope with their academic tasks. Research shows that this is the case (Kameli and Baki, 2013; Qian, 2002; Tan and Goh, 2017). Although English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners may successfully decode and read fluently, knowing the meanings of words contained in a text is critical to reading comprehension: If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh (Harmer, 1993).

Language is often compared to a building: the structure of the building is grammar, and words are the bricks in the structure. Both are necessary and important but the number of bricks exceeds the number of structural elements, which is why no linguist today would seriously contest the fact that vocabulary acquisition is the main obstacle to language acquisition (Ma, 2009). Also, research has shown that learning a foreign language is fundamentally dependent on vocabulary knowledge (Manyak and Bauer, 2009; Milton, 2009; Zhang and Annual, 2008).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Of late, to be able to characterise the meaning of a word, researchers propound using dissimilar yet harmonising constructs. The majority of linguists concur that vocabulary awareness is not a fruitless occurrence – it calls for some semblance of familiarity (Kalajahi and Pourshahian, 2012; Lip, 2009). They suggest that vocabulary awareness should be constructed as a field made up of various levels and proportions of acquaintance (Pigada and Schmitt, 2006; Schmitt, 2010). Researchers are now more aware of the multi-dimensionality and difficulty of lexical knowledge. To be entirely knowledgeable about a word means embracing mixed types of vocabulary knowledge which include articulation, spelling, opposites, synonyms and word building (Alfaki, 2015; Moghadam, Zainal and Ghaderpour, 2012; Rashidi and Khosravi, 2010). This serves to show how multi-faceted vocabulary knowledge is and for this reason, it was deemed worthwhile to carry out a study into that fundamental aspect of language.

Chapelle (1998) proposes that a quality explanation of lexical knowledge has to take account of four proportions: vocabulary size, knowledge of word characteristics, lexicon organisation and processes of lexical access. Henriksen (1999) outlines three detached yet linked vocabulary proportions: the partial-precise knowledge dimension, the depth-of-knowledge dimension and the receptive-productive dimension. Researchers note that in both of the aforementioned constructs there is unambiguous consent that lexical knowledge ought to encompass at least two constructs, namely vocabulary breadth (size) and depth (quality).

Lexical familiarity is an obligatory constituent of reading comprehension (Qin, 2015). Measuring vocabulary has therefore also become an indispensable means of envisaging reading comprehension (Qin, 2015). Studies of vocabulary knowledge have revealed that EFAL learners ought to be acquainted with approximated word families, to grasp prescribed texts (Schmitt and Schmitt, 2014). Nation (2006) estimates that 8000-9000-word families are needed to attain the 98 percent text coverage of a wide range of non-academic texts (novels, newspapers) which he suggests are vital for reading efficiently and with adequate comprehension. Nation (2006) also stresses the importance of being aware of how much lexical knowledge learners boast— an aspect that is crucial for curriculum developers. Notwithstanding the significance of gauging lexical knowledge, many second-language researchers have principally attempted to determine learners' vocabulary breadth, since it is less demanding to enlarge instruments measuring breadth than it is to determine grammatical familiarity (Qin, 2015; Schmitt, 2012).

Equally related to vocabulary knowledge is a vocabulary learning strategy (VLS). Despite extensive research in this area, there is as yet no clear definition of the term. VLSs are processes learners use to support the attainment and exploitation of information. These are explicit activities learners engage in, to make learning easy-going, quick, pleasurable and independent, and which link learning to real-life (Kalajahi and Pourshahian, 2012; Tanyer and Ozturk, 2014). VLSs are extraordinary activities that learners manipulate to aid them in understanding and holding onto new knowledge (Aktekin and Guven, 2013; Khoii and Shariffar, 2013; Lip, 2009).

VLSs represent an endeavour, on the part of learners, to expand their linguistic and sociolinguistic proficiency in the intended language, and learners employ these strategies to comprehend, learn and retain words (Begum and Brindha, 2014; Kalajahi and Pourshahian, 2012). Training in various learning approaches may make learners more receptive, by instructing them how to learn and how to utilise what they have become skilled at, to succeed.

Within every teacher's logical vocabulary programme there should be an appropriate blend of unequivocal training and activities from which supplementary learning can happen (Harmer, 2007). Equally important is considering the overall learning context, when recommending VLSs to learners (Harmer, 2007; Schmitt, 2012).

Brown and Payne (1994) list several major stages in the course of lexical acquisition. First, the learner must have sources in/from which to encounter new words. For example, when Grade 11 EFAL learners write an end-of-year literature examination, they are bound to encounter new words. Second, learners need obvious illustrations (optical, acoustic or both) of the structure of unfamiliar words. Third, learners need to learn the meaning of words. Fourth, during the lexical acquisition process, learners need to make a powerful recollection association involving the nature and meaning of a word. Fifth, they need to associate contextual meaning with a word.

For this study, all the above approaches served to show that vocabulary is learned incrementally, and that lexical acquisition requires multiple exposures to a word.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In conceptualising this study, Schmitt's (1997) theory on the discovery and consolidation of vocabulary learning strategies formed the theoretical and conceptual framework. With Schmitt's taxonomy as the foundation of the study, an attempt could be made to answer the research question of this study.

**Table 1: Schmitt's discovery and consolidating learning strategies**  
(Schmitt, 1997:205)

<b>Strategies for discovering the meaning of a new word</b>	Determination strategies (9 items) Social strategies (5 items)
<b>Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered</b>	Social strategies (3 items) Memory strategies (27 items) Cognitive strategies (9 items) Meta-cognitive strategies (5 items)

Referring to Schmitt's (1997) categorisation of VLSs, Jiménez Catalán (2003) and Carril (2009) concur that that taxonomy boasts many advantages, including its suitability to be standardised as a test to gather learners' responses. Moreover, the taxonomy is founded on the premise of learning approaches, in addition to being mechanically straight forward. Therefore, it is just as easy to use for coding, classifying and managing the data in computing programs. Also, it can be used with learners of dissimilar ages and didactic backgrounds, regardless of the intended language. In the current study, the participants hailed from diverse sociolinguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, which made Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy ideal. Schmitt's VLS classification is considered to be more useful, convenient and less confusing than other taxonomies (Easterbrook, 2013).

Thus, the current study –although based on VLS employment – also dwelt on Schmitt’s explanation of VLSs.

Schmitt (1997) fashioned his categorisation of VLSs by separating memory strategies sequentially into six areas: a) repeating, b) using mechanical means, c) associating, d) linking with prior knowledge, e) using imagery and f) summarising. To this end, a) and b) are deemed closer to cognitive strategies, while c), d) and e) are memorisation strategies. Repeating and using mechanical means are cognitive strategies because their manipulation of information is less obvious, whereas associating, linking with prior knowledge, and using imagery are traditionally closer to mnemonic techniques that organise mental information together, or transform it in a way that makes it more memorable (Schmitt, 1997).

Schmitt (1997) crafts a division between activities that are useful for a) the initial discovery of a word’s meaning and b) remembering that word once it has been introduced. When encountering a word for the first time, learners must use contextual clues or reference materials to figure out its meaning or ask someone else (Schmitt, 1997). In the current research, the main reference material (as Schmitt refers to it), was deemed to be the dictionary (either hardcopy or online).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Vocabulary knowledge and VLSs are of immense significance, especially in EFAL reading comprehension contexts. This article is an attempt to answer the following research question: What vocabulary learning strategies do Grade 11 EFAL learners use?

### ***Participants***

For the qualitative research design, the researchers used a focus group discussion (FGD) to collect data. The participants were in the Free State province and were conveniently selected. The FGD comprised eight (n=8) Grade 11 EFAL participants, with the researchers having chosen only the top eight from the 30 participants used in the quantitative part of the doctoral study – the researchers had averaged the marks collected from data gathered using three instruments namely, the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT), the Word Association Test(WAT) and the Reading Comprehension (RC) Test.

In all social sciences research, a researcher is mandated to protect the privacy of the participants. Consent to carry out the study reported in this article was sought from the Free State department of education as well as from the school board of governors and the learners’ parents. The researchers guaranteed that any particulars supplied would not be used without the consent of all participants.

## ***Instrument***

In this qualitative part of the study, the researchers used an FGD to obtain a better understanding of the issue under study, to assess the problem/concern/new programme or idea, as proposed by McMillan and Schumacher (2010). Using eight Grade 11 EFAL learners seemed apt, as this number of participants would enable the researchers to keep the focus group on-task. A small number of participants is characteristic of qualitative research; phenomenological research can typically range from three to ten participants (Creswell, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) recommend that for some topics a smaller group of five to seven is permissible, while Skop (2006) suggests a focus group with seven to 12 participants. Also, the researchers used FGD as an additional tool in the study, to increase not only the soundness of the results but also the credibility of the entire research project.

## ***Data-collection procedure***

Before the learners took part in the FGDs, they were informed of the general aim of the study and were assured that their performance in the tests would not affect their course outcome. The data collection procedure for the qualitative part of the study was carried out as a fourth session (after the VLT, WAT and RC sessions). The FGD participants were referred to as 'Learner 1' to 'Learner 8', to ensure their anonymity and maintain confidentiality.

To kick-start the session in the FGD, the researchers used inquiries based on the themes derived from the tests. During the interview, the researchers tape-recorded the session and also took notes, to comprehend the interpretation behind the analyses and view the focus group participants articulated. Shared views on the themes were thus attained through probing and consideration.

## ***Data analysis***

The qualitative data for this study were analysed using content analysis (also known as the interpretive method). Content analysis is a process involving a close examination of data, to find constructs, themes and patterns that address the research goal (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). In other words, interpretative analysis reduces the volume of information and identifies significant patterns. The researchers closely analysed the participants' responses to the focus interview questions, finding links and similarities in the responses, before coding these appropriately. Then, the researchers abridged and sorted the results into themes. In this study, the effort to categorise and formulate the themes was pursued by grouping themes that were entrenched in the literature review and that aligned with the aims of the study, and the focus group interview questions used to gather data.

This model of qualitative content analysis was applied to the transcripts of the focus group interviews, in which the units of analysis ranged from a sentence to a paragraph. The researchers read each sentence or paragraph to decide whether it contained relevant information, and, if so, to which category the information belonged. From relevant information, the researchers formulated short, descriptive statements about the values in the dimensions. Each of the dimensions contained either a single word or phrase (Gläser and Laudel, 2013). After gathering the data, the researchers processed it to further consolidate the study's information base by summarising scattered data, removing redundancies and correcting errors.

In choosing this mode of analysis, the researchers took into consideration the subject under study, the research question and the aim of the undertaking. The researchers adopted the content analysis method since the study was non-experimental.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through the FGD are presented below. The focus group theme chosen for this qualitative study was "What vocabulary learning strategies do Grade 11 EFAL learners use?" which was derived from the theme "vocabulary learning strategies". The researchers hoped to discover which measures the learners employed to ensure that their learning becomes easy and applicable even in unfamiliar circumstances (Kalajahi and Pourshahian, 2012; Tanyer and Ozturk, 2014). Learners need opportunities to use newly learned words in a bid to broaden their vocabulary bases. In line with this thinking, simply talking to other people can help a learner discover new words (Kumar, 2014). Teachers need to take cognisance of the importance of learning tasks that allow learners to use newly learned words. Learners 1 and 8 made the point so well:

*Every time I meet a new word of interest, I try to use it in a situation when I'm either writing or speaking. I also find my cellphone very useful, because I easily search (google) for the correct meaning of that new word. (Learner 1)*

*... I also come up with my sentences using the new words I would have just met. (Learner 8)*

Learners can repeat words in speech as well as in writing – their frequent encounters with a word will enhance their vocabulary knowledge and pronunciation. One focus group participant's response strongly related to this notion:

*I agree with Learner 1, but in addition to that, I believe repeating a word in speech is good for easier remembrance. (Learner 2)*



This statement indicates that repetition and pronunciation helped the participant to remember a word. It thus becomes imperative for teachers to employ approaches for teaching and learning that guarantee a significant recall of explicit words, to promote memorisation.

Vocabulary can be developed through the use of prefixes, suffixes and root words. In this qualitative study, the participants recognised the importance of morphological knowledge. In this regard, two of the study participants commented as follows:

*... in my case, when I want to learn new words, I use the first letters, which is a prefix, and the last letters of a word, which is a suffix. Those two aspects, I find them useful. (Learner 3)*

*Sometimes, I break the word into smaller parts and try to define each part separately. (Learner 6)*

Learners' vocabulary can be developed when the teacher asks them to use both linguistic and non-linguistic ways of processing information and enhancing their understanding of a new word (Marzano, 2004; 2009). As two of the focus group participants reported, as learners, they badly need exposure to non-linguistic tasks in a bid to explain new and abstract terms, because their vocabulary base is limited:

*I think my strategies depend on the subject I'm doing [at] that time because with some subjects I can just draw a diagram or a picture to express the meanings of the new words. (Learner 4)*

*In some cases, I link a given new word to an object or picture, and then I define that new word using that image I imagined for that new word. (Learner 7)*

Teachers' word use and questioning help learners to acquire new vocabulary. They acquire such vocabulary faster if the teacher moves from the known to the unknown. Teachers can start with the concepts the learners are already conscious of – especially examples of physical items around them. This notion was consistent with the focus group responses, where the participants explained that vocabulary teaching ought to embrace teacher-learner dialogue and intermingling actions that target new words:

*... I also trust my friends and my English teacher, who[m] I always ask if I don't have a dictionary with me. (Learner 8)*

*Every time my teacher uses a new word that interests me, I write it down and look for its meaning in the dictionary way later, or even ask my English teacher or even my roommates. (Learner 7)*

Learners can acquire vocabulary based on similarity. For many words in a language, their metaphorical referents have certain similarities with their original meaning concerning their shape, function and characteristics. In keeping with this explanation, semantic motivation helped some of the learners to master vocabulary. As Learner 6 aptly put it:

*I always make use of assonance and alliteration, because there are many words in English whose sound is almost similar. In addition to that, I refer to my dictionary.*

When learners choose age-appropriate reading materials that awaken their enthusiasm and maintained their interest, they enlarge their vocabulary base and encounter both high- and low-frequency words. This was consistent with a focus group comment:

*My wish is to have too much vocabulary; that is why I'm reading a lot of novels and other books. (Learner 4)*

Modern cellphones have downloadable dictionaries, and learners can easily access new words from online dictionaries. The ease of electronic access makes it much more likely that learners will look up words, and this adds a deliberate element to vocabulary learning. The online dictionaries reported on in the qualitative study focused on spelling, parts of speech, synonyms and pronunciation. This trend was consistent with a focus group response, as one participant indicated:

*My phone has a dictionary which I downloaded, but I don't use it in class because phones are not allowed in school. (Learner 3)*

Based on Schmitt's (1997) vocabulary taxonomy, learners rely on contextual clues to work out the meaning of new words through the so-called determination strategies. When teachers let their learners observe how words are presented in context, learners can attach fitting connotations and denotations to those words (Graves, 2006; Sanusi, 2009). Example sentences that are used to explain meaning could teach the meaning of a new word:

*I believe from the given content I can make a correct guess to define any new words. Then, when I still doubt my guesswork, I refer to the dictionary for the correct definition of a given word. (Learner 6)*

*As Learner 6 said, context is important, to add to that is naming that new word's part of speech, like a verb, noun and pronoun. (Learner 7)*

*Truly, English is difficult, such that there are times when I run out of ideas as to the meaning of a new word, then I end up just guessing its meaning. What else can I do if I don't know its real meaning? (Learner 5)*

When a learner questions the meaning of a certain word, s/he could ask a friend or even the teacher for assistance. Two respondents from the focus group confirmed this:

*When I'm in doubt and it's not during an examination, I ask my desk mate to help me define any new words for me. That's why I love working in pairs or groups. (Learner 8)*

*I usually use newly learned words when I speak with friends or [communicate via] even WhatsApp. (Learner 1)*

Sometimes learners learn new vocabulary using descriptions and definitions. An adequate definition of a word shows its meaning as distinct from the meaning of other words. Also, an adequate definition indicates the grammatical function or category of a word - noun, verb or an adjective. It also indicates other, formal aspects of the word (Elyas and Alfaki, 2014; Nation, 1990; Sanusi, 2009). This resonates with the findings of the qualitative study, where participants reported relying on given descriptions and definitions to understand new words. The following comments highlight this:

*One of my former English teachers taught us to consider the part of speech of any given new word, so that's how I survive when I meet new words. (Learner 5)*

*I just look at the words that are related somehow, like 'thunder' and 'lightning' to define them, because some things fall under one thing; 'transport' meaning cars, buses, and trains. (Learner 1)*

*Certain words have many meanings; we call them poly...something. I'm always on the lookout for those words' different meanings. (Learner 4)*

During the FGD, translation was highlighted as a useful technique in vocabulary development. This finding was summed up by a participant who explained:

*At times, I try to find the translation of that new word in my language, but with some words, as I have realised, it's difficult to find their translations. (Learner 8)*

Word lists are very useful for learners' vocabulary development. In the qualitative study, word lists were reported as being useful for vocabulary development. As one participant stated:

*I almost forgot to mention that I sometimes just enjoy going through a list of new words listed in the textbook. This list is usually at the end of the textbook. (Learner 8)*

## DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of the study revealed that it is vital to explore the VLSs learners' use in an EFAL environment. This may help learners, teachers and curriculum designers to become aware of VLS profiles, vocabulary knowledge and competency when designing and delivering vocabulary instruction and training. Nation (2001) notes that strategy training has proven to be very useful in broadening learners' VLS knowledge. This implies that teachers can train learners to make informed decisions regarding their choice of strategy (used on different learning occasions), especially in the case of linguistically challenged learners. Teachers, therefore, have a pivotal role to play in the strategy training of learners. They are solely responsible for offering opportunities for learners to learn about and practise such strategies.

Strategy training aims to promote learner autonomy. For this to be attainable, teachers need to possess enough knowledge of a comprehensive strategy repertoire that allows them to train their learners both in respect of instructional texts and independent study. Brown (2002) notes that learners may resist strategy training when they find it difficult to improve their VLS competence. Therefore, teachers need to help learners become aware of their styles, preferences and habits for practising the strategies they deem to be effective and take charge of their learning. It is necessary to give learners a chance to recognise their learning styles and to employ cognitively demanding strategies that foster higher memory storage than cognitively shallow activities such as verbal repetition (Sener, 2015).

Moreover, in the distant past, vocabulary learning in the EFAL context was primarily teacher-centered, meaning learners relied heavily on their teachers and less so on themselves. With the advent of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the learner-centered approach has driven EFAL learners to take more responsibility for and initiate their learning. It has become important for the learner to use a VLS that enhances their learning autonomy and self-direction. Naturally, learners who exert more control over their learning will employ VLSs more frequently (Nirattisai and Chiramanee, 2014).

In recent years, helping learners learn how to continue to acquire vocabulary on their own has been favoured as an approach. For this reason, teachers should lead learners to understand that vocabulary acquisition is a task that involves their active participation, especially when using social strategies such as pair work and class discussions. It is incumbent upon the EFAL teacher to design classroom activities in which learners can learn different, independent ways of picking up vocabulary. Ur (2002) and Sener (2015) believe that only highly motivated learners can create the necessary conditions to be successful at second/foreign language learning. Therefore, it may be helpful to consider the role of motivation in helping learners to boost their motivation so that they become more successful EFAL learners.

The results have served to show the importance of VLSs in EFAL teaching and learning contexts. Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and the acquisition of a second/foreign language. In this study, the participants demonstrated different VLSs which ranged from determination, consolidation-practice to consolidation-memorisation strategies. Their strategies included the dictionary method, contextual clues, asking either a teacher or friend, to mention a few. All in all, it was clear that the study participants employed many and diverse strategies to discover the meaning of new words, but mainly concentrated on solving specific meaning-related difficulties.

## CONCLUSION

This study is a culmination of an interest in EFAL vocabulary research which also implies the need to re-think the approaches we use in the teaching and learning of vocabulary. It is common knowledge that long ago, the basis for teaching a language was communication. But presently, applied linguists have also seen the absolute need for vocabulary knowledge to realise communication.

The study has shown that it is impossible to conclude which VLS is best to be employed by learners because learners employ different VLS to master vocabulary in an EFAL setting. These VLS are seen as empowering tools used by learners in terms of what to learn and how to learn. CAPS promotes the teaching and learning of EFAL as a learner-centred process and not one in which the teacher is all-knowing. The language teacher facilitates learning. This communicative approach gives the learners a sense of ownership and belonging.

The study has demonstrated that learning a new word in an EFAL setting is a process that requires learners to engage many VLSs. It becomes the teachers' role to avail many opportunities to the learner to use these VLS in learning new vocabulary. The teacher needs to assist learners in becoming independent learners during EFAL vocabulary learning; this can be achieved by exposing them to different VLSs. Such exposure will help learners choose VLSs that match the subject under discussion, the motive for doing a task, their learning styles and personalities. Other considerations might include the level or grade of the learners and the availability of time.

Knowing and understanding why certain factors become the reason for VLSs choices will benefit teachers and researchers when designing appropriate materials for learners. Learning new vocabulary is a challenge to EFAL learners. Hopefully learners can overcome this by having access to a variety of VLS which are suitable for their environment. Learners need to be informed of the benefits of vocabulary learning strategies, their limitations and learn to take more responsibility for their vocabulary learning. If EFAL learners are well-trained in VLSs, then it is possible to achieve the objectives.

As a recommendation for future studies, the researchers interested in doing a similar study can employ bigger samples and more defined dependent variables. Besides, other methods of data collection can be employed such as questionnaires and observations to obtain more detailed and reliable data concerning VLSs used by EFALearnersto to carry out a more thorough and conclusive study.

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