

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Magdalena SCAFARU*, Lucia TOFAN*

*, „Henri Coanda” Air Force Academy

***Abstract:** In this paper we have examined how learners tackle the problem of learning new words. We did this using a think aloud technique which allowed us to identify a number of micro-strategies. Good learners not only use more strategies, but they rely more heavily on different strategies than the ones poor learners use. However, a thorough analysis shows that neither of this two groups is homogeneous.*

***Keywords:** vocabulary-acquisition, macro-strategies, micro-strategies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition research has recently come under strong criticism from a number of sources for the little attention it has paid to lexical acquisition. Much of the work that has been carried out has been concerned with lexical errors, but we are now beginning to realize that this data is very limited, and does not provide answers to some of the more important questions we might want to ask about vocabulary acquisition (Meara, 1980, 1984, Levenston, 1979).

This paper is concerned with identifying some of the factors that affect lexical growth. Specifically we want to ask whether there are any differences between “good” and “poor” learners in the way they approach vocabulary learners.

There are plenty of studies in the literature which demonstrate that cognitive factors and affective factors influence success in learning a second language, and the general methodology for investigating questions of this sort is well-established. Typically, researchers have either investigated a small number of variables using correlational methods, or they have made use of factor analysis techniques to summarise the relationships between a large number of variables (cf Gardner, 1980, 1985).

A particularly fruitful way of approaching these issues is to look at the strategies used by learners, and the effects these strategies have on success.

Bialystok and Frolich, for instance, have shown that strategy use and attitude are related to success in language learning and we can infer from this that effective use of learning strategies is one of the factors that distinguish between good and poor learners.

Unfortunately most of the studies have concentrated on identifying the strategies used for good learners.

The research available shows that there is no absolute advantage in using a strategy, that not all strategies have the same effect on all learners, and that choice of strategies is related to factors like attitude (Naiman et al, 1986). There is thus some advantage in approaching the question of strategies with an open mind, and making systematic comparison between the strategies used by good learners and those used by poor learners.

As far as I know, the question of whether good and poor learners can be distinguished by their use of vocabulary learning strategies has not been asked before.

It is possible to approach this question on two different levels.

Firstly, one can study general approaches to learning, what Scholfield calls “macro-strategies” (Scholfield forthcoming).

Alternatively, one can look at the more detailed, specific learner behaviours or “micro-strategies”.

For example, at the macro-strategy level, most good learners engage in what might be called “practice”. However, some learners use specific micro-strategies in their practice which do not appear in the behaviour of their learners; for instance, some learners test themselves systematically as part of their practice, while others do not. Most of the relevant research has concentrated on the holistic macro-strategy level, rather than the atomistic micro-strategy level, and this has led to the similarities between good learners being inflated.

Statements like “the good learners practice” are not really helpful. What we need are more specific findings which tell us what the learners actually does when he practices. This information would help us to deal with the differences between good and poor learners more adequately and help us to establish the effectiveness of particular micro-strategies.

The study reported in this paper had the following objectives:

a) to identify the types of micro-strategies used by a group of learners of English, and to assess how frequently these strategies were used;

b) to discover whether there were any differences in the strategies used by good and poor learners.

2. EXPERIMENT

The subjects observed in this study come from different areas, university students who have studied English for 7 years; students at secondary school who have studied English for 5 years, or 3 years, students at private secondary schools.

The groups comprised good learners and underachieving learners.

Subjects were assigned to these categories by school officials, on the basis of subjective assessments and scholastic records.

3. DATA COLLECTION

Three tools were used to gather data about learning strategies:

- a think-about task;
- direct observation;
- and an interview.

Think-about task

This method requires the subject to perform a learning task and to verbalize about his performance. While he is doing it. The think-about sessions were recorded on tape, and these tape – recordings were supplemented by notes taken by an observer.

Observation

Observation was used to supplement the data from the think-about task, since not all strategies are in fact verbalised.

Observation covered two categories of strategy which were likely to be missing from the think about data: strategies involving motor activity (e.g. repeatedly writing a word to help remember it), and strategies that required a conscious level of analysis on the part of the learners (e.g. locking up a word in a monolingual dictionary rather than a bilingual one).

Interview

Subjects were later interviewed about their strategies for learning words using a questionnaire.

Part one of the questionnaire was concerned with what sources of information learners used to find out about different words, and what questions they ask of these sources.

Part two was concerned with dictionary use, what dictionaries the subject typically used, and what information they looked for in it.

Part three dealt with note taking and associated micro-strategies. Part four covered practice and memorization.

Analysis of the data identified different strategies.

This analysis showed that there is a difference between the vocabulary learning

strategies used by good learners and those used by underachieving learners. Good learners not only use more strategies, but they also rely more heavily on different strategies than the ones poor learners use. However, the analysis showed that neither of these two groups is homogeneous: different subtypes can be distinguished for both good and underachieving learners.

List of micro-strategies and macro-strategies used by the learners

- macro-strategies - information
- sources
- micro-strategies - ask classmates
- guessing
- ask teacher
- overlook
- ask for L₂ paraphrase
- ask for L₁ equivalent
- ask for example of use
- group work
- dictionary
- dictionary use - monolingual dictionary
- bilingual dictionary
- look up meaning
- look up derivation
- look up word class
- look for example of use
- memorization - write and repeat aloud
- repeat aloud
- write, repeat and L₂ synonyms
- write, repeat and L₁ equivalent
- practice - using new word in real situation
- using new word in imaginary situation
- ask for test
- ask others to verify knowledge
- use written sources to

- verify knowledge
- self - test
- preferred source of information - asking somebody
- group work
- dictionary
- note – taking - taking notes at all notes in margin
- vocabulary book
- ordering new words sequentially
- organizing words by meaning
- spelling info
- L₁ equivalent
- L₂ synonym
- word derivation
- grammatical info

The results of the analysis show that at the macro-strategy level, there is little to distinguish between good and poor learners. In particular, three macro-strategies appear to be common to all learners:

- a) Using sources to find out about difficult words;
- b) Memorisation;
- c) Note-taking.

The main difference between learners lies in the choice of specific micro-strategies within these broad categories, and the presence or absence of the macro-strategy of practice.

The second interesting and unexpected point to arise from this analysis is the importance of the group-work strategy. Co-operation is basically a micro-strategy used by poor learners when they are faced with a difficult task.

The third point to discuss is that the importance of English medium teaching is underlined by the fact that even the underachieving students are clearly differentiated from the other underachieving students by this type of analysis.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that in the process of learning new words the main distinguishing

feature is that “good” learners typically use the macro-strategy of practice, while “poor” learners do not.

This analysis has also proved that patterns of vocabulary learning strategies deserve further detailed investigation. The results of the analysis support the view that most progress is likely to be made at the level of micro-strategy use, and that this atomistic type of approach is more likely to contribute to our understanding of vocabulary acquisition than the more common holistic approach to strategies.

REFERENCES

1. Bialystok, E., Frolich, M., *Oral communication strategies*, Inter-language Studies Bulletin, 5,1, 1980, p.3-30;
2. Gardner, R., *On the validity of affective variables in second language acquisition: conceptual, contextual and statistical*.
3. Levenstone, E.A., *Second language vocabulary acquisition: issues and problems*, Inter-language Studies Bulletin, 4,2, 1979, p.147-160;
4. Meara, P., *Vocabulary acquisition: a neglected aspect of language learning*, Language Teaching and Linguistics Abstracts, 13,4, 1980, p.221-246;
5. O'Malley, J., *Learning strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students*, Language Learning, 35, 1, 1985, p.21-46;
6. Scholfield, P., *Cluster analysis in the study language variation*, forthcoming.