

Investigating Students' Perceptions of Memory Strategies Use in EFL Vocabulary Acquisition among Sabratha University students

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التحقيق في وجهات نظر الطلاب حول استراتيجيات الذاكرة ودورها في اكتساب مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لدى طلاب جامعة صبراته

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Abstract:

If memory strategies are to effectively reflect the goals of vocabulary learning, it is essential for learners to actively engage in their application. As noted, memory strategies have long been associated with learner's contribution to the development of all language skills. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the use of memory strategies among Libyan EFL university students at Sabarth College of Arts and Education in the acquisition and development of vocabulary skills. The Language Strategy Use Survey questionnaire was employed to collect the data. Thirty-one students responded to the questionnaire during the academic year 2024-2025. Descriptive statistics (percentage of frequency) was used to analyze the data. Findings revealed that Libyan EFL university students favored cognitive and analytical strategies, particularly those involving attention to word structure, semantic relationships, and root analysis, while visual and physical strategies were less consistently applied. Learners also emphasized the importance of regularly reviewing vocabulary, recalling the original context in which words were encountered, and practicing vocabulary repeatedly in varied contexts and enhance communicative use. These results are consistent with recent research on depth-of-processing, contextual retrieval, and spaced repetition (Schmitt, 2020).

Keywords: Memory Strategies, Vocabulary Acquisition, Vocabulary Development.

الملخص:

لكي تعكس استراتيجيات الذاكرة أهداف تعلم المفردات بشكل فعال فمن الضروري أن يشارك المتعلمون في نشاطات تطبيقها؛ وقد لوحظ أن استراتيجيات الذاكرة تسمى بشكل كبير في تطوير المتعلم لمهاراته اللغوية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء استخدام إستراتيجيات الذاكرة بين طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لاكتساب وتطوير مهارة المفردات. لقد تم استخدام استبيان (The Language Strategy Use Survey) لجمع البيانات المشارك فيها 31 طالباً خلال العام الدراسي 2024-2025م، وقد استخدمت الإحصاءات الوصفية لنسبة التكرار في تحليل البيانات. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية الليبيين يفضلون الاستراتيجيات المعرفية والتحليلية، وخاصة تلك التي تركز على بنية الكلمة، والعلاقات الدلالية، وتحليل الجذر، بينما كانت الاستراتيجيات البصرية والحسية أقل استخداماً بشكل عام، كما أكد المتعلمون

على أهمية مراجعة المفردات بانتظام واسترجاع السياق الأصلي عند استعمال الكلمات والمفردات بشكل متكرر، أو في سياقات مختلفة، وهذا يعزز الاستخدام التواصلي في استخدامها، وهذه النتائج تتوافق مع البحوث الحديثة التي أقيمت حول عمق المعالجة والاسترجاع السياقي والتكرار المتباعد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إستراتيجيات الحفظ، إكتساب المفردات، تنمية المفردات اللغوية.

Introduction:

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental aspect of learning a second language, posing a significant challenge for learners in mastering new words efficiently (Nation, 2001). Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) have received considerable attention, with various scholars proposing different classifications. Among these strategies, memory –based strategies play a prominent role in vocabulary learning as structured approaches have been shown to significantly outperform simple repetition. (Schmitt, 2000)

As a Libyan university teacher of English, the researcher has observed that many Libyan EFL students at Sabrath College of Arts and Education face considerable difficulties in memorizing new words and often forget them quickly. These difficulties might be due to their unfamiliarity with memory strategies or to its inappropriate use.

This phenomena has been consistently reported by researchers across various disciplines. For instance, Hasram & Singh (2021) suggested that students often experience difficulties in memorizing new words and recommended the use of appropriate memory strategies to overcome this problem. In the same vein, Celik & Toptas (2010) claimed that even when students are proficient in grammatical knowledge, they cannot communicate effectively if they lack the ability to memorize the required vocabularies.

However, a review of the local research on using memory strategies as a specific vocabulary learning strategies (Elzunni, 2018; Warda, 2018) indicated that the relationship between memory strategies and the development of Libyan EFL undergraduate students' vocabulary skill has not been studied as a distinct area. Due to the importance of this topic, the present study has been designed to investigate students' perceptions of the memory strategies used by undergraduate students in the English Department at Sabratah Faculty of Arts and Education for vocabulary development.

In particular, the present study aims to answer the following research question:

1- What are Libyan EFL students' perceptions of the frequency of use of memory strategies in vocabulary acquisition ?

Literature Review:

The Role of Memory Strategies in Developing Vocabulary:

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental aspect of learning any language, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. Without a sufficient vocabulary base, learners struggle with all aspect of language competence – reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Nation, 2001). Among the many approaches to vocabulary instruction, memory strategies have gained sufficient attention for their ability to promote deeper encoding and long-term retention of new words. (Schmitt,2010)

Memory strategies, often categorized under cognitive strategies, are techniques that involve linking new vocabulary to existing knowledge through meaningful association, imagery, and structured repetition (Oxford,2017). These strategies not only aid recall but also contribute to learners' ability to use vocabulary productively in context.

One key advantage of memory strategies in vocabulary learning is their ability to promote efficient recall and involving multiple forms of encoding such as, combining auditory, visual and semantic information. This strengthens memory traces and improves vocabulary recall. (Godwin, 2018)

Another sufficient benefit is that memory strategies promote learner autonomy and confidence. Learners who are aware of and trained in using such strategies become more independent in managing their vocabulary learning. (Griffiths, 2018)

In addition, memory strategies may increase motivation and engagement, in which memory techniques provide more structured and enjoyable ways to learn vocabulary. (Hsiao &Oxford, 2002) However, memory strategies should not be employed in isolation. Effective vocabulary development requires a balance between rote learning and meaningful engagement with the other skills.

In summary, memory strategies are not only effective tools for enhancing vocabulary acquisition but also empower learners by making the learning process more meaningful, structured, and self –directed. Their use leads to better recall, deeper understanding, and more flexible language use, which are essential for EFL learners striving to achieve fluency.

Types of Memory Strategies:

Memory strategies involve activities that encourage learners to memorize new words efficiently. This approach is traditionally known as mnemonics (Schmitt, 1997). Scholars have categorized memory strategies into distinct types, each offering unique benefits for vocabulary development.

Repetition and Memorization:

Repetition is the most basic and commonly used memory strategy, involving the frequent review of vocabulary items to facilitate retention. While often criticized as mechanical, rote repetition is effective for initial memorization (Nation, 2013). Research indicates that frequency of exposure is a strong predictor of vocabulary retention. (Webb, 2007)

The Keyword Method:

This method is a powerful mnemonic technique in which learners link a new word to a familiar – sounding word in their first language (the “keyword”) and then create a mental image connecting the two meanings (Ramezanali, 2012). Research also indicates that using such a method is effective for learning abstract or unfamiliar words, as it engages dual coding – both verbal and visual memory.

Semantic Mapping and Grouping:

Semantic mapping involves organizing vocabulary by meaning either visually through diagrams or conceptually by thematic categories (Al-Otaibi, 2016).

Grouping words into sets – such as synonyms, antonyms, or topics, allows learners to build mental connections that support easier recall. This strategy is particularly effective for learners with analytical cognitive styles, as it emphasizes logical relationships (Oxford, 2017)

Imagery and Visualization:

Creating mental images related to a word’s meaning enhances retention by activating the brain’s visual processing system. Studies have shown that when learners create vivid, personalized images to represent vocabulary items, they are more likely to recall the words later (Sadoski & Paivio, 2001). Visualization can be combined with other strategies, such as the keyword method, for greater impact.

Association and Contextualization:

Associating new vocabulary with personal experiences, emotions, or familiar contexts improves memorability. Learners might connect the word rain with a memory of a rainy day or an emotional event, making the word meaningful and thus easier to remember (Oxford & Crookall, 1989). They added that embedding vocabulary in sentences, stories, or dialogues also helps learners internalize word usage in authentic contexts.

Using Physical Action:

Through less common, incorporating physical movement (e.g., gestures or acting out word) can reinforce memory through kinesthetic learning. This approach, based on total physical response method, has shown effectiveness particularly among young learners and beginners (Asher, 2009).

Flash Cards and Digital Tools:

Flash cards – both physical and digital – are widely used memory aids that support active recall and spaced repetition. Apps such as Anki and Quizlet implement memory science principles by adjusting the frequency of card reviews based on learners’ performance (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Flashcards often combine written words with images or audio, supporting multi-modal learning.

Methodology:

Research Design and Sample:

This paper employed a quantitative tool for data collection and analysis. A structured questionnaire was adopted in this study to ensure methodological triangulation (Cohen et al., 2002).

Questionnaire:

A closed -ended questionnaire was employed as the primary instrument for collecting measurable data concerning students’ experiences and perceptions. The questionnaire was adopted from the Language Strategy Use Survey by Cohen (2002), which was constructed according to a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) never; (2) rarely; (3) sometimes, often (4), Always (5).

The questionnaire included three ways: table 1, 2 and 3: way “1” is structured in “ways to learn vocabulary”. It has 9 items; way “2” is about “ways to remember vocabulary”. It has 3 items; way “3” contains “ways to use vocabulary”. It has 3 items. Thus, the questionnaire has a total of 15 items.

The questionnaire was piloted first to check its clarity. In addition, it was reviewed by one faculty member from Sabrath University to ensure its validity. It is modified in light of his feedback and comment before distribution.

Participants:

The study population consisted of 31 students from the English department at Sabrath College of Arts and Education. Participants were selected from various academic years and included both male and female students to ensure representative sample.

Process of Data Collection and Analysis:

The Language Strategy Use questionnaire was administrated to gather the required data. This study was conducted at Sabrath college of Arts and Education. Prior to administrating the instruments, participants were provided with brief explanation of the purpose of the study along with its nature and objective. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential. The questionnaire was distributed and participants were allotted in 20 minutes to complete it. Upon completion, they were requested to return the form immediately.

For analysis, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 was employed to analyze the data collected through the questionnaire. The frequencies of memory strategies use were calculated in order to determine the distribution of each strategy.

Data Analysis:

In this study, a quantitative descriptive research design was adopted to address the research question. A structured questionnaire utilizes as the primary data collection instrument to obtain information regarding EFL undergraduate students' perceptions of developing their vocabulary skills. Five likert scale was employed to enable respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the given statements. The scale ranges from (1) never; (2) rarely; (3) sometimes, often (4), Always (5).

Analysis and Reporting of Questionnaire Data:

The researcher employed 15 items in the questionnaire to explore EFL undergraduate students' perceptions toward the use of memory strategies in developing their vocabulary skills. The collected data were analyzed and interpreted based on the percentage of the frequency reported by the respondents.

Students' Perceptions of Memory Strategies Use in Acquisition Vocabulary Skill:

The results are represented in tables and figures to provide a clearer understanding of the findings. (See table 1, 2, 3)

Table (1): Ways to learn new words

NO	Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I pay attention to the structure of a new word	3.2%	3.2%	25.8%	6.5%	61.3%
2	I break the word into parts that I can identify	0.0%	12.9%	35.3%	41.9%	9.7%
3	I group the word into parts of speech (e.g nouns, verbs)	3.2%	32.2%	19.4%	25.8%	19.4%
4	I make mental image for new words.	16.1%	22.6%	29.0%	12.9%	19.4%
5	I use rhyming to remember new words.	6.5%	25.8%	19.4%	25.8%	22.6%
6	I remember related word together.	3.2%	6.5%	54.8%	9.7%	25.8%
7	I practice new words using action	9.7%	25.8%	25.8%	16.1%	22.6%
8	I use flash cards to learn new words.	29.0%	29.0%	6.5%	19.4%	16.1%
9	I relate new word with related words e.x: teach/teacher	12.9%	12.9%	29.0%	39.3%	32.3%

The data presented in (Table 1) provides insights into the memory strategies most commonly used by 31 undergraduate students during leaning new vocabulary. The majority of respondents (61.3%) reported that they always pay attention to the structure of a new word, indicating a strong awareness of morphological features as a key component of vocabulary acquisition. Similarly breaking words is frequently used strategy, with (41.9%) using it often and (35.5% sometimes).

Grouping words into parts of speech shows more balanced pattern with (32.2%) rarely using it and 29% using it sometimes, suggesting this strategy is moderately applied. In contrast, creating mental images for new words is used less frequently, as 22.6 % rarely employ it and only 19.4% always do.

Rhyming is more widely used, with 22.6% always relying on it, although a significant number 25.8 rarely use it, indicating mixed preferences. Remembering related words together is a well-adopted strategy, with (54.8% sometimes) and 25.8% using it, reflecting strong engagement with semantic associations. The use of physical action to practice new words shows a similar pattern, with 25.8% using it sometimes and (22.6% always), but also (25.8% rarely) applying it.

On the other hand, flashcard usage appear to be one of the least favored strategies, with (29% never) using them and only (16.1% always) relying on them. However, relating new words with similar or related word (e.g. teach /teacher) is a widely adopted technique, as (32.2% always) and (30.3% often) use this strategy.

Result (1):

Overall, the data suggest that students favor cognitive and analytical strategies, particularly those that involve paying attention to word structure and semantic relationship, while visual and physical learning strategies are less consistently used. (See table 1 above).

Table (2): Ways to remember new words

NO	Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I review the word often to remember the word for a long time.	6.5%	3.2%	32.3%	16.1%	41.9%
2	I try to remember the situation where I first heard the word or saw the word.	3.2%	12.9%	25.8%	22.6%	35.5%
3	I find the root word of the word to remember it.	3.2%	12.9%	38.7%	12.9%	32.3%

The table 2 presents data on strategies used by individuals to remember new words, highlighting three main approaches. The first strategy “I review the word often to remember the word for a long time” shows that 41.9% of respondents use this strategy most frequently, indicating it is the most preferred technique. A small portion 16.1%- use it often, while 32.3% use it sometimes, with only 6.5% and 3.2% indicating rare or very rare use.

The second strategy “I try to remember the situation where I first heard or saw the word” is also widely used, with 35.5% selecting as their most common strategy and another 22.6% using it often. Meanwhile, 25.8% use it sometimes, and 12.9% rarely and 3.2% never.

The third strategy “I find the root word of the word to remember it” is similarly popular, with 38.7% using it sometimes and 32.3% indicating it as their most frequent strategy. An equal 12.9% use it often and rarely, while only 3.2% use it very rarely.

Result (2):

Overall, the data suggests that reviewing word regularly, recalling the context in which a word was first encountered, and analyzing root word are all effective and commonly used strategy for vocabulary retention.

Table (3): Ways to use new words

NO	Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
13	I use new word in many ways	12.9%	6.5%	25.8%	19.4%	25.8%
14	I practice using familiar words in different ways	3.2%	3.2%	25.8%	41.9%	25.8%
15	I make effort to use new word in my life	6.5%	16.1%	29.0%	16.1%	32.3%

Table 3 shows data on strategies to apply new words in practical contexts. The most frequently used strategy is practicing familiar words in different ways, with 41.9% of respondents doing so often and 25.8% always. Indicating it is a widely favored approach.

Making an effort to use new words in daily life is also common, with 32.3% of participants always using this one and 29.0% doing so often. In addition, using new word in many ways is moderately practiced, with 25.8% using it sometimes and another 25.8% always.

Result (3):

Overall, the data suggests that learners value repeated and varied use of both familiar and new vocabulary to reinforce language retention and practical usage

Discussion:

The main purpose of this section is to provide a detailed discussion and interpretation of the findings. The discussion begins with the analytical extraction of introducing a number of memory strategies that have been found as the most commonly used among Libyan EFL university students. Interestingly, the

research findings presented the respondent's perspectives on the memory strategies training able to give the input to identify the most preferable tools.

The findings of this study indicate that learners show a marked preferences for cognitive and analytical memory strategies in EFL vocabulary acquisition. As reflected in Result 1, students favor approaches that focus on word structure and semantic relationships, while visual and physical strategies are less frequently applied. This tendency supports the argument of Boers and Lindstromberg (2012) that morphological awareness and semantic mapping can promote deeper vocabulary retention by enabling learners to process words at a structural level rather than relying solely on surface memorization. Similarly, Teng (2020) found that analytical strategies encourage learners to make meaningful associations, which strengthens long –term recall.

Result 2 demonstrates that learners highly value reviewing word regularly, recalling the original context of encounter, and analyzing root words. These practices are consistent with Laufer and Roitblat's (2015) findings that spaced retrieval and contextual recall significantly improve retention rates in L2 vocabulary learning. The emphasis on context retrieval also aligns with Nakata and Webb (2016), who note that encountering vocabulary in meaningful contexts reinforces both semantic and synthetic knowledge.

Moreover, root analysis is particularly effective for learners in morphologically rich languages, as it allows them to recognize patterns and form new vocabulary items based on known competence. (Kiffer & Lesaux, 2012)

Result 3 highlights learners' appreciation for repeated and varied use of both familiar and new vocabulary to strengthen retention and encourage practical application. This finding resonates with Webb and Nation's (2017) assertion that vocabulary must be recycled through multiple encounters in diverse contexts to become fully integrated into learner's active lexicon. Similarly, Peter (2019) stresses that varied usage- such as through speaking, writing and comprehension activities –support not only memorization but also the transfer of vocabulary into productive language skills.

These results reveal that learners tend to adopt strategies that combine analytical thinking, contextual learning, and repetition, while less emphasis is placed on visual and kinesthetic methods. While this preference aligns with research on depth –of-processing theory (Schmitt, 2020)

Conclusion:

The main purpose of the current study is to provide more detailed picture of the most commonly memorization learning strategies used by Libyan EFL university students, and its relationship with vocabulary development. The findings indicate that technique such as, spaced repetition, mind mapping and association methods makes learning more effective. Moreover, selecting the appropriate strategy depends on the type of material and student's learning style, highlighting the importance of adapting strategies to individual needs.

Recommendations:

Based on the conclusion gained, the following recommendations are offered for better teaching English vocabulary:

1. Diversify strategies: Encourage students to try different memorization techniques to find the most suitable one for them.
2. Promote interaction : Encourage group activities, discussion, and educational games to strength memory.
3. Utilize technique : Leverage educational apps and digital tools to support memorization and recall.
4. Teaching training : Organize workshops to introduce teachers to modern memorization methods and how to integrate them into teaching.

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