

## Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Saudi Female University Students: Perspectives and Use

**Seham Elashhab**

Assistant Professor  
English Language Centre  
Umm Al-Qura University  
Makkah  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

### Abstract

*Everything students learn, is highlighted by some sort of strategy. This includes students and their vocabulary learning. Vocabulary learning is an essential part in foreign language learning as the meanings of new words are very often emphasized, whether in books or in classrooms. It is also central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner. There are many factors that can potentially influence vocabulary learning, which makes research on this topic as it relates to English as a foreign language (EFL) vocabulary learning diverse and abundant. This study aims to investigate the effect of a group of Umm Al-Qura University preparatory year (first year) learners' attitude and evaluation of some strategies on their L2 vocabulary learning. It also discusses the effect of the usage of these strategies on EFL learners' learning process.*

**Keywords:** Language learning, vocabulary, strategies, FL learners, adult education

### 1- Introduction

Vocabulary learning strategy is considered as a tool that learners use to acquire vocabulary, which is one of the most important elements of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Learners may employ different learning strategies that they assume to be effective ways of vocabulary acquisition. Successful learners use more strategies than unsuccessful learners do. (Goundar, 2015).

Vocabulary plays an important role in English language learning, especially for college EFL learners. College is a vital period when it comes to students' improvement of their English proficiency. In the process of vocabulary learning, it is essential not only to know the meaning of a particular word, but all the aspects of the word. What does it mean to know a word? Taylor had listed the seven degrees of knowing a word posited by Richards: knowledge of the frequency of the word in language; knowledge of the register of the word; knowledge of collocation; knowledge of morphology; knowledge of semantics; knowledge of polysemy and knowledge of the equivalent of the word in the mother tongue (Taylor, 1990, cited in Ying, 2010). While learning a word, some students find it hard to choose a word and when they want to express meaning, they may have difficulties in choosing a suitable word. Does that mean words are stored separately? Aitchison (2003) states that words are not just "stacked higgledy-piggledy" in our minds, like "leaves on an autumn bonfire". Instead, they are organized into an intricate, interlocking system whose underlying principles can be discovered. That means EFL learners should master some learning strategies to make their L2 learning more effective. Many studies also show that apart from teaching methodologies, learner strategies are another crucial factor that can affect foreign language learning. They can help learners become more autonomous and make the learning process more effective (Ying, 2010).

In the EFL classroom, a teacher teaches students with the same teaching method. Teachers' encouragement and support help learners to adopt the most useful and effective vocabulary learning approaches so that they will have high motivation to learn and improve their language performance. However, some students can learn the language successfully while others fail. Why does this happen? It may have something to do with some learning strategies. Furthermore, the same learning strategies could be useful for some students but useless for others. Hence, this research paper seeks to answer the following questions:

#### 1.1- Research question:

Q1. What strategy is used by EFL students to learn and develop vocabulary?

Q2. How do EFL students see and evaluate the learning strategies as a way of developing EFL vocabulary?

## 1.2- The aim of the study

This study aims to investigate learners' awareness, use and evaluation of EFL vocabulary learning strategies, which will lead to understanding the effect of learning strategies on EFL vocabulary development. It helps teachers to know how frequently university EFL learners use vocabulary-learning strategies in order to make teachers and learners aware about vocabulary development. It also assists in better teaching plans for vocabulary learning strategies.

## 1.3- Significance of the study

The study is particularly important in a university context where students struggle a lot because of not knowing many words. This study will help learners to become aware of their vocabulary learning strategies. Teachers will be able to make decisions about how to teach new words as this study will open their eyes to a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies and their frequency of use. Furthermore, this study will enable teachers to give proper instructions to their students, on how to learn new words as it focuses on the type of learning strategies used by the first year EFL students at Umm Al-Qura University in their vocabulary development. Selecting the proper strategy of learning vocabulary can be difficult for EFL students. This study is allocated to finding a better solution for this particular difficulty.

## 2- Background and Context of the study

Previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies discover that learners have positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning and they believe that someone who is proficient in English has good vocabulary. Liu (2010) states that "words do not exist as isolated items in a language. That is, words are interwoven in a complete system in which knowledge of various levels of a lexical item is required in order to achieve adequate understanding in listening or reading or produce ideas successfully in speaking and writing." Therefore, learners need a large vocabulary to function in a second language, as vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2010).

According to Schmitt (2010), vocabulary is knowledge of words, including explanations of word meanings. Briefly, a word is described as a sound or a combination of sounds, or its representation in writing or printing that symbolizes and communicates a meaning. To master a word is not only to learn its meaning but also to learn its register, association, collocation, grammatical behavior, written form, spoken form and frequency. All these properties are known as "word knowledge". Therefore, learning vocabulary is one of the most challenging tasks of any language, which is why there is a need to equip learners with strategies that can tackle this issue. Thus, it is advantageous to explore deeper into the difficulties encountered by learners and offer some innovative ideas in order to facilitate learning and teaching of vocabulary. It is through the learners' perspective that the problem and process of acquiring vocabulary can be interpreted better.

Groundar (2015) suggests that the first goal is to look at the strategies that the students actually use to learn new English words and make them aware of the many vocabulary-learning strategies that could be implemented in learning new words. Through research, it has been found that various scholars define vocabulary-learning strategies differently. Strategies have been defined as ways, approaches, methods and techniques, or intentional actions learners take to fully acquire the target language. These processes can be conscious or subconscious. He further explains it as the mental processes of acquiring and using the second language (L2).

Two major kinds of learning strategies have been discussed recently: cognitive learning strategies and meta-cognitive learning strategies. The cognitive learning strategies refer to the steps or operations used in language learning or problem solving that requires direct analysis, translation, or synthesis of learning materials. Meta-cognitive learning strategies refer to the knowledge of cognitive process and regulation of cognition or executive control or self-management through such process as planning, monitoring and evaluating. (Ying, 2010). Tuluhong (2006) finds that Malaysian proficient and less proficient Chinese ESL learners use various strategies in learning vocabulary. They used mostly the meta-cognitive strategies. These learners used media like the television, newspapers and the internet to help them in their vocabulary learning. Furthermore, they also used the cognitive and memory strategies, whereas the least used strategies were the social strategies.

Concerning vocabulary learning, Nation (2001) develops a general classification of vocabulary learning strategies. The first one is planning vocabulary learning, i.e. to choose words. Learners should know what their vocabulary goals are and choose what vocabulary to focus on in terms of their selected goals. What is more, learners should also have a clear strategy to decide what vocabulary to focus on and where to find this vocabulary. When learning vocabulary, choosing certain aspects of a word (such as meaning, but for listening and writing, the form of a word is also a necessary aspect of the word) to focus on so using various strategies can make the learning process more efficient.

In order to cope with new vocabulary when it occurs and to learn unfamiliar vocabulary, learners have to be able to get information about the words. Analyzing word parts is a useful strategy, since familiarity with the stems and affixes can be useful for seeing connections between related words, checking guesses from context, strengthening form and meaning connections, and in some cases working out the meaning of a word. Meanwhile, consulting reference sources and using parallels can also be helpful in vocabulary learning (Nation 2001).

Learning language requires persistence. Learners should be consistent while learning language. Nation points out that repetition is essential for vocabulary learning because there is so much to know about each word that one meeting with it is not sufficient to gain this information. Vocabulary items must not only be known, they must be known well, so that they can be fluently accessed (Nation, 2001). A good way to learn vocabulary well is to use it **repeatedly**. This requires students to have a good learning habit. According to Zhang (2011), for anyone who has learned a second language, it becomes clear that they learn a language by getting used to it. They hear the same vocabulary or phrases over and over, and that is how they remember them.

The third vocabulary learning strategy is **processes**, which is establishing vocabulary knowledge. It involves ways of remembering vocabulary and making it available for use. **Noticing** is a widely used way of recording vocabulary, and it can be a very useful first step towards deeper processing of words. **Retrieving** strengthens the connection between the cue and the retrieved knowledge. It is superior to noticing. **Generating** is the production of the word. It is the furthest step of the learning process (Nation 2001).

According to Aitchson (2003), learners find it difficult when they are learning the meaning of the word. There are two main differences between the meaning in a certain context and its fixed meaning and the “fuzzy meaning assumption”. The fixed meaning assumption as every word has a basic meaning, so when students acquire the basic meaning of a word, hence the essential meaning is acquired. Contrary to the fixed meaning, the confusing meaning assumes that the word cannot have a fixed meaning. Schmitt (2010) states that words have confusing meaning, which means that a word could have a different meaning in a different context, for example, *skinny*, in the dictionary refers to “very thin” when describing a girl’s slim body, but it also means “so thin” as to be unhealthy or unattractive (that is when describing a starving old man).

According to Nation (2001), the usual strategy for students learning vocabulary is learning from word cards. A learner writes the foreign word on one side of a small card, and its translation of the first language on the other. The learner goes through a set of cards and tries to recall the meanings. Furthermore, Nayan&Krishnasamy (2015) argue that learners also used memorization techniques, dictionary strategies and linguistic clues in their vocabulary learning and they seldom used note taking.

### 3- Methodology

This section describes the method used by the researcher. It explains how the data was collected and analysed. In addition, it demonstrates the tools used in this study and the participants. Finally, this section demonstrates an explanation of data collection methodology and reasons behind selecting these tools and methods.

#### 3.1-Tools

Two different data collection tools were used in this study: a questionnaire and interviews.

##### 3.1.1- Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed to the students in class. The researcher remained in the classroom while the subjects answered the questionnaire to respond to any queries that the subjects may have in regards to the questionnaire. Upon completion, the researcher collected all answered questionnaires. These questions focused on the vocabulary learning strategies. There were 15 close-ended questions.

##### 3.1.2- Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to clarify specific problems. In particular, the interviews were used to specify why learners chose specific strategies as well as noting what they perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of the different strategies. The researcher prepared the open ended questions of the interview beforehand to clarify some answers of the questionnaire items. The interviews were done individually, so that participants would not be influenced by one another. The researcher selected these two tools as most appropriate for exchanging and evaluating ideas about the strategies of vocabulary learning.

#### 3.2-The participants

The participants of this study were 20 female first year, second semester, preparatory year students at Umm Al-Qura University. The age group of the participants was between 18 and 19 year olds.

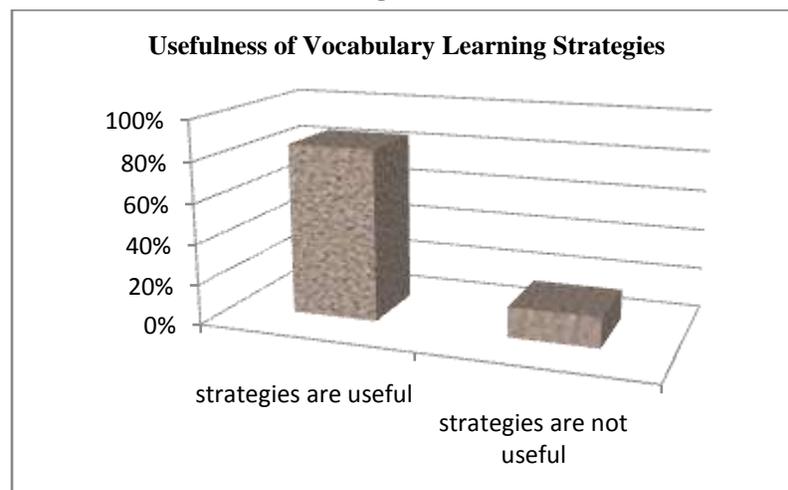
### 3.3-Data collection and analysis

This process was done by means of the questionnaire and the interviews. After taking the questionnaires from the participants, the researcher took all the data to be forwarded to data analysis. Similarly, the data obtained from the interviews was also forwarded to the data analysis and weretabulated and converted to percentages. Through the data analysis the researcher analysed the data quantitatively by collecting the data and representing them in figures (percentages) by charts. The researcher made use of an equation to obtain the figures. The equation was the obtained number divided by the total number times one hundred per cent.

### 4- Findings and discussion

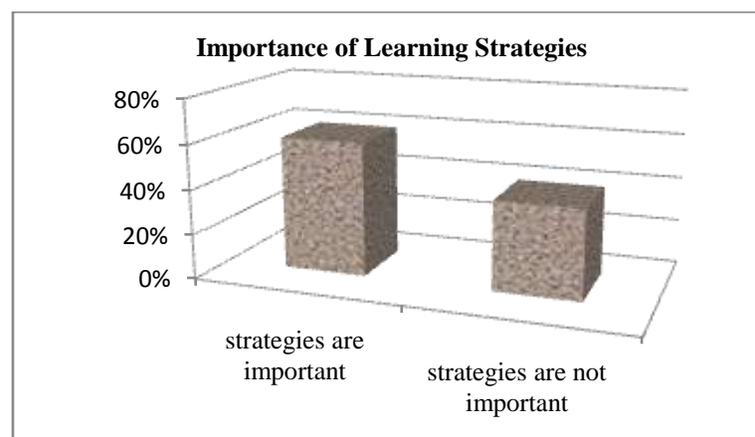
According to the analysis of the answers obtained from the interviewees, it has been found that 17 students claimed that FL vocabulary learning strategies are very useful in their learning process. There are three students who had the different idea that FL vocabulary learning strategies are not useful for them to learn new words. A student stated that using FL vocabulary learning strategies could help her spend less time, and acquire more new words in the learning process. However, one of the students who argued that FL vocabulary learning strategies is not useful stated that those strategies require many skills. Moreover, she believed that those strategies are only useful for higher level students because they have sufficient vocabulary and learning skills. Two more students also claimed that they prefer to memorize words without learning any vocabulary strategies, though it takes more time, and they are in fact not good at FL vocabulary learning (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**



For question 2 of the interview, twelve students stated that using FL vocabulary learning strategies in the learning process is very important, while the other 8students claimedthat they are slightly important. Only two of the eight students stated that learning vocabulary through word formation help them to learn new words (Figure 2). The reasons given by these students was thattheyare still beginners of English learning and lack the correct learning skills.

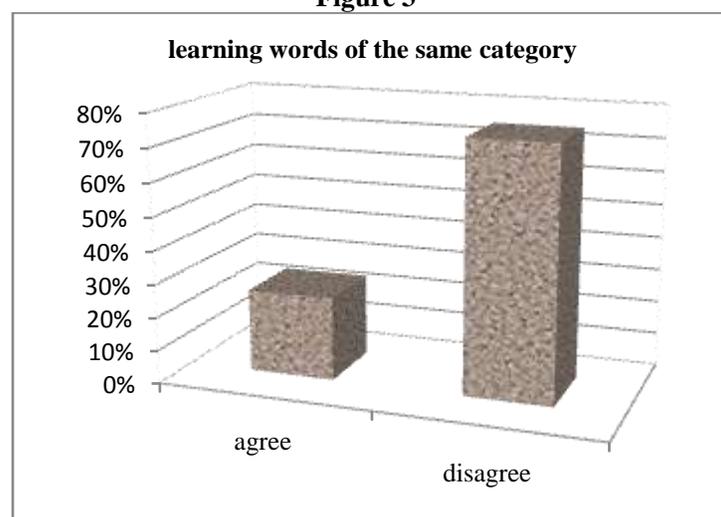
**Figure 2**



For question 3, five interviewees stated that learning words of the same category might be more useful for young learners when learning second language. When young learners learn a second language, they do not have the concept of what a certain thing is, as a result, learning the same kind of things together could be helpful for them to form the concept and it could be much easier for them to learn the same kind of things together. However, for adult FL learners, this strategy is useless because they already have the concept in their minds. Other subjects also stated that learning the same words within each category is a good learning strategy for reviewing words. In fact, they can recall one word from another according to the association between the words of the same category.

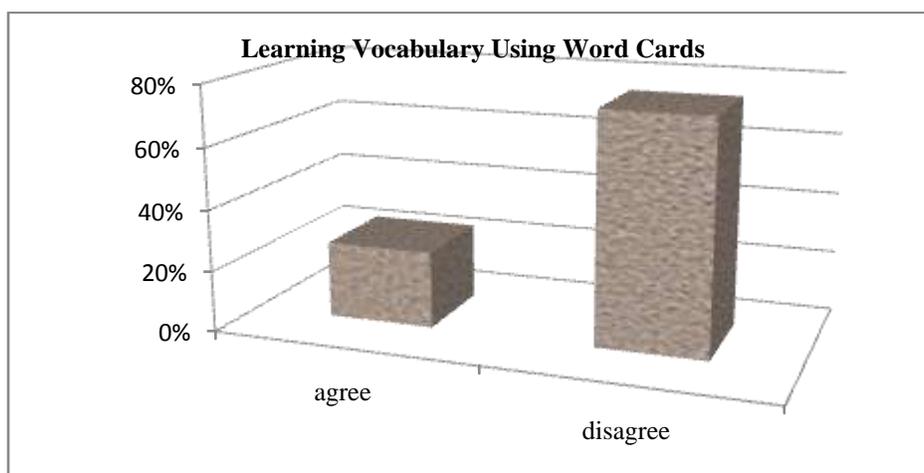
Another interviewee cited learning vocabulary through word formation as an example. She asserted that learners need to be aware that there are some changes to stem and affixation when they are combined together, e.g. the word “happiness”. The “happiness” is not formed by “happy” and “ness”. There is a change to happy that “y” changes into “i”. The interviewee argued that sometimes it is a big problem for her to use this strategy. However, she also stated that she could find some ways to solve this problem, e.g. through the relationship between pronunciation and spelling, she can acquire the words correctly. Another interviewee claimed that the changes always make her confused in the vocabulary learning process, and sometimes, she cannot make the right pronunciation and spelling (Figure 3).

Figure 3



An interviewee discussed learning vocabulary using word cards as an example. It seems that this strategy is useless in her FL vocabulary learning process. She claimed that she usually writes the basic meaning of the word in the back of word cards using Arabic, and without explanation of how the word can be used and in what context, the word can be used. As a result, even if she memorizes the basic meaning of a word, she does not know how to use the word. Figure 4 demonstrates that fourteen of the interviewees were supportive to this claim, which then would account for 75% of the participants of this study.

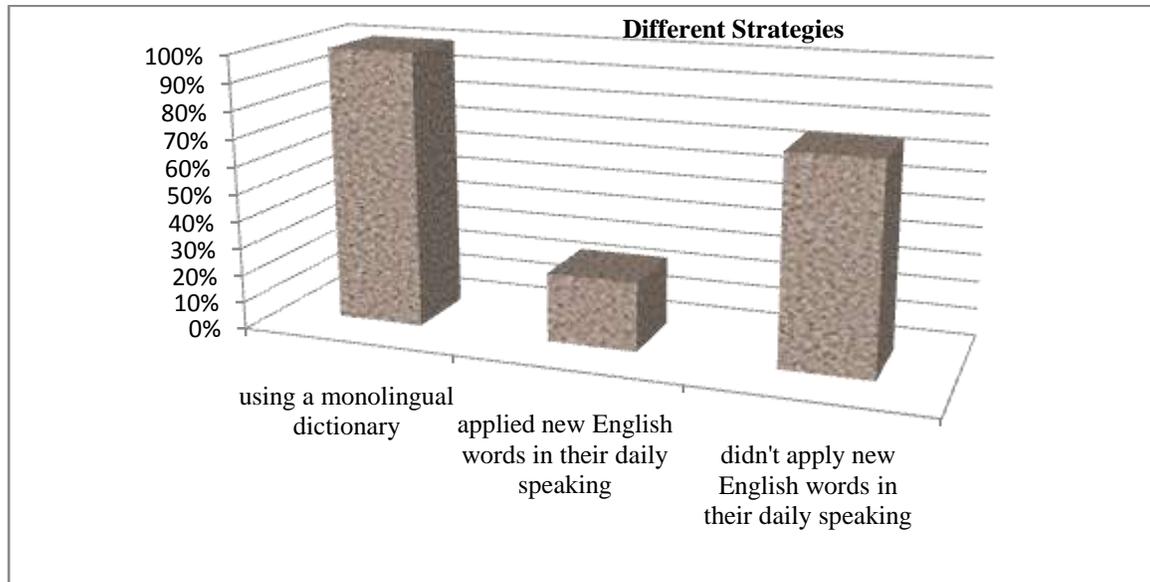
Figure 4



As for another common strategy, it was using a monolingual dictionary (that comes under categorization of determination strategies, and has been mentioned by most of the students) which accounts for 100% of the participants of this study. The popularity of this strategy is expected simply because the use of a monolingual dictionary is a common practice among foreign language learners. These dictionaries give detailed guidance on pronunciation, grammar, and usage with explanations written in a controlled, simplified vocabulary. The monolingual dictionaries are designed for native users but publishers have later on developed this type of dictionary for FL/L2 students as well.

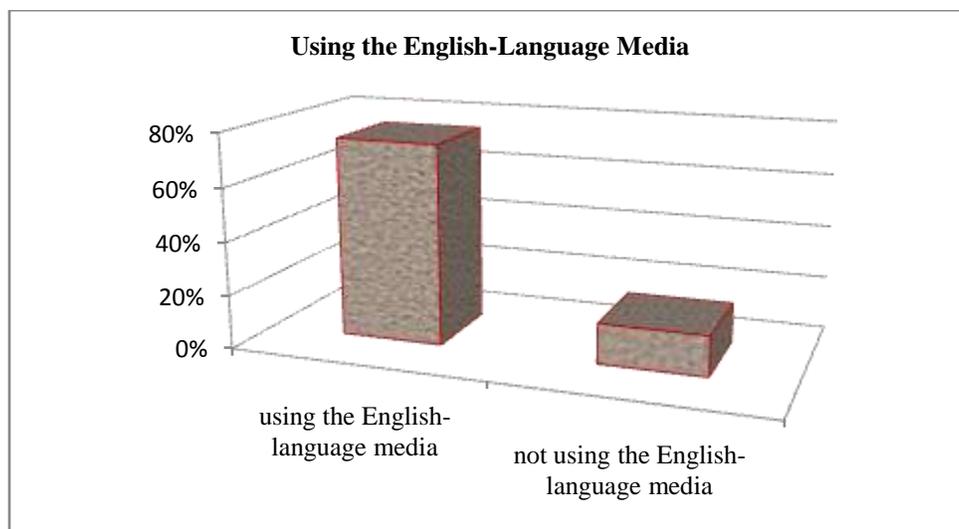
One of the significant findings to emerge from this study was that some respondents applied new English words in their daily speaking. It could be considered as a social strategy. Only five of the participants claimed that they made use of this strategy, while the rest claimed that this strategy required people who already know how to interact in English proficiently (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**



Another important finding of this investigation showed that, using the English-language media (songs, movies, internet, computer games, TV programs, etc.) is also among the highest frequency strategies that are used by the students. In addition, using materials that involve authentic language is also listed among the frequent strategies used. A possible explanation is that the popularity of this strategy may relate to the accessibility of the materials. Moreover, authentic materials are good in terms of learning new words in their contexts. All 15 of the interviewees claimed that they use this strategy as one of their vocabulary learning strategies (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**



## 5- Conclusion

### 5.1-Summary of the study

The study has discovered that EFL students perceive vocabulary as a branch of language learning. However, some strategies such as: learning a word through reading, the use of monolingual dictionary, the use of various English-language media, writing down the new words and their meanings on cards, and applying new English words in their daily speaking that are related to memory, determination, and meta-cognitive strategies. Respectively they are popular strategies and the learners are keen to try them. On the other hand, participants of this study do not mention strategies that require cognitively deeper processing such as putting English labels on physical objects, listening to recordings of word lists.

It also discusses the influence of the attitudes of learners towards FL vocabulary strategy leaning on their learning processes. This study offers several advices to FL vocabulary teachers based on the above-discussed strategies. According to the data from the questionnaire and the interviews, the study shows that nearly all the strategies (except learning vocabulary using word cards) are favored by students who are proficient language learners. As a result, when teaching vocabulary, teachers may explicitly teach students learning strategies and guide them to use these strategies in their learning process based on their English levels and abilities.

### 5.2- Limitation

This study was limited to small number female students only because Umm Al-Qura university policy is not coeducational. Therefore, the results of this study will only apply to female students of the preparatory year (first year).

### 5.3-Recommendations

According to the answers from the questionnaire and the interviews, the majority of students are in favor of using FL vocabulary learning strategies in the learning process, while a minority of students did not find these strategies as useful as intended. As a result, the FL learning strategies may be a great help for good language learners, while they are useless for those learners who are not so good at English learning. Teachers can teach students to use FL vocabulary learning strategies based on their English learning abilities. That means, teachers can divide FL vocabulary learning strategies into several levels and parts based on their usage and requirements, and then use different learning strategies to teach different types and levels of students.

For those learners who are not good at learning English, using some of the FL vocabulary learning strategies requires them to have some skills, such as selecting information and guessing the word meaning. This kind of student may not have the ability to use these skills; as a result, it could be hard for them to use the FL vocabulary learning strategies. Moreover, they may not be aware of the importance of autonomous learning. They would do what they have to do in order to learn new words and always try to find the simplest way to memorize words. For this kind of student, teachers can teach them the importance and usefulness of FL vocabulary learning strategies. Some kinds of easy learning strategies that do not require skills can be taught to those students in order to make them feel confident in using FL vocabulary learning strategies, and then they will benefit from those learning strategies. For instance, teachers may encourage students to keep a vocabulary notebook because a great deal of vocabulary growth ultimately depends on the learner (Alqahtani, 2015).

For those learners who are in favor of learning strategies, the FL vocabulary learning strategies are very useful in their learning process. Teachers can teach them many learning strategies based on their learning abilities, e.g. some students prefer learning vocabulary through communication, and so teachers can set some speaking classes for some advanced learners. As a result, the students might easily learn many new words in this kind of classes. Hence, in presenting one planned vocabulary item, the teacher needs to combine more than one technique, instead of employing one single technique. This research suggests employing planned vocabulary presentations, as various as possible (Pinter, 2006). EFL learners would need to engage in more strategies to enhance their learning and memory of the vocabulary. Although the subjects of this study were discovered to have knowledge of certain strategies, they failed to practice what they had previously learned. It is important to make students aware that learning does not only involve having knowledge of a particular strategy (competence), but rather it will become enhanced when we make use of that knowledge (performance). So this is the difference between strategy awareness and use. Therefore, learning new vocabulary is a challenge to foreign language students but they can overcome this difficulty by having access to a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. On the other hand, educators and teachers need to understand that learners develop their vocabulary learning over a period of time (Noor & Amir, 2009).

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**APPENDICES****1. Student Questionnaire****General Information**

1. Age  19-21 years
2. How long have you been studying English?  
 3-5 years  5-10 years  more than 10 years

**Instructions**

- This questionnaire of vocabulary learning strategies is designed for students who learn English as a foreign language. Please read each statement.
- Put (√) in the box (4, 3, 2, 1, or 0) that tells the degree of opinion on the strategies you use to learn English vocabulary. Please mark the statement that most describe you.

- 4 = Always use it  
 3 = often use it  
 2 = sometimes use it  
 1 = seldom use it  
 0 = never use it

**Statement of Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Put (✓) in the box which most describes your opinion on the strategies you use to learn English vocabulary.

The statement of vocabulary Learning Strategies	Degree of frequency				
	4	3	2	1	0
I use a bilingual dictionary to help me translate English words into Arabic language.					
I learn meaning of words by identifying its part of speech.					
I ask the teacher to translate the words into Arabic.					
I ask my classmate for meaning.					
I know some new words when working in group works.					
I write new words in a sentence so I can remembering it.					
I study a spelling of new words.					
I use physical actions when learning words.					
I speak words out loud when studying.					
I repeatedly practice new words.					
I learn words by listening to vocabulary recordings.					
When I try to remember a word, I write or say it repeatedly.					
I listen to English songs and news.					
I am not worry very much about the difficult words found when reading or listening, I pass them.					
I use on-line exercise to test my vocabulary knowledge.					

**2. Interview Questions**

1. Do you think that vocabulary strategies are useful in EFL vocabulary learning? How?
2. Do you assume that vocabulary strategies are important for EFL vocabulary learning? Why?
3. Do you find learning words from the same category helpful? Why?
4. Do you agree that using word cards is helpful in vocabulary learning? Why?
5. Do you use English language media to learn new vocabulary? Why?
6. Do you use any other strategies that may help in vocabulary learning?