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Abstract

The present study investigated the effect of learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension. To achieve this purpose, a language proficiency test was administered to 120 University students and ultimately 60 homogeneous students were selected and randomly assigned to control group and experimental group. Both groups worked on the equivalent reading passages. The subjects in experimental group were also instructed in awareness raising and the use of vocabulary learning strategies following Oxford (1990) while the subjects in control group received conventional teaching vocabulary training for a whole academic winter semester, 2008. Post-test showed that raising learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies had positive impact on reading comprehension. The findings also indicated that cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies were the most frequent strategies employed by students in experimental group. The implications of the findings for incorporating these strategies in teaching have been discussed in details.

Key words: vocabulary, learning strategies, awareness-training, reading comprehension

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1. Introduction
2.

Education is a lifelong process and the most important of second language (L2) teachers' responsibilities is to equip their learners with all the necessary tools to cope with the demands of an ever-changing world. Undoubtedly, for the successful fulfillment of such a significant responsibility, learners need to be made aware of the true nature of learning and the importance of acquiring skills and strategies that would enhance and promote the learning process (Oxford, 1990). These two major concerns on the part of the second language educators, and researchers alike, have led to a plethora of research on how to help individuals become successful learners and how teachers can help individuals learn effectively. Such concerns have initiated interest in a phenomenon known as raising-awareness and instructing learners in the use of learning strategies in comprehending the texts (Deniz, 2003; Grabe, 2004; Lenz, 2007; Toyoda, 2007).

Vocabulary learning strategy is one of the reading comprehension strategies that some learners use unconsciously while reading, and since they are not aware of these strategies, they cannot improve learning effectively. According to Hunt and Beglar (2005), when learners, can learn how and when to use learning strategies, so learners become more self-reliant and better able to learn independently. Learners who think and work strategically, are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability. That is, strategic learners perceive themselves as more able to succeed academically than those who do not know how to use strategies effectively. That is, those who expect to be successful at learning tasks generally are successful, and each successful learning experience increases motivations of learning tasks.

Although research findings strongly support the importance of learners ' use of strategies and explicit strategy instructions, many learners and teachers are not aware of the power of consciously use of L2 learning strategies for learning effectively (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006). Therefore, this study aims at examining the impact of Iranian learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension at pre-intermediate level.

According to Yu-Ling (2005), learning, retaining, and recalling the new words meaning have always been the main concern of not only English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in reading comprehension, but also those who want to learn English language outside the academic atmosphere. When EFL learners starting to read a text, what comes to their minds is how to learn and recall the new vocabulary meanings; most EFL learners, for example in EFL contexts, in order to learn new vocabulary items meaning, memorize words with their meanings by repeating them several times but after a few days, they forget the meanings and consequently they cannot improve reading effectively.

This problem may stem from the lack of teaching vocabulary strategies in EFL classes. There are some learners that use some strategies unconsciously and since they are not aware of these strategies, they cannot improve their

reading comprehension. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to make learners aware of strategies that they use unconsciously and when necessary, to teach them new strategies in order to learn vocabulary items effectively and improve their reading comprehension.

Therefore, this study was conducted to see the possible effects of learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension of pre-intermediate level Iranian university students in an EFL setting. The main question to be examined in this study is: Does learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies affect reading comprehension at the pre-intermediate level?

2. Background

The results of a study conducted by Griffiths (2003) in a private English language school for international students in Auckland, New Zealand, indicated how progress in language learning related to changes in reported frequency of language learning strategy use over a period of time. Using a questionnaire known as the English Language Learning Strategy Inventory (ELLSI) developed by Griffiths (2003), students were surveyed on entry to the school. Thirty students were surveyed again three months later. The results suggested that, in general, the students who progressed most rapidly were those who reported the greatest increase in frequency of language learning strategy use over the three-month period of the study, especially strategies related to the use of resources, to the management of learning, to vocabulary and to writing in English.

According to the study conducted by Tassana-ngam (2005), it was found that training Thai EFL university students in using five vocabulary learning strategies (dictionary work, keyword method, semantic context, grouping and semantic mapping) improved their ability to learn English words and enhanced awareness of how to learn vocabulary. Mental modeling was used by Pani (2004) who focused on the mental processes while reading a text- to teach reading strategies to Indian EFL learners and found it successful.

In the study which examined the impact of Korean students' (from middle school, high school, and university, N=1,110) strategy awareness, Lee and Oxford (2008) English-learning self-image, and Importance of English on language learning strategy use. The results showed that students who had certain characteristics – valuing English as important (Importance of English), evaluating their own proficiency as high (English-learning self-image), and being already aware of many language learning strategies – employed learning strategies more frequently than those who did not. The results also indicated that except for major and gender, all the other variables had significant influences on strategy use and strategy awareness. Gender and major were expected to be helpful indicators of successful learning, but they turned out not to affect strategy use and awareness alone.

3. Methodology
3.1. Participants
A total of 60 pre-intermediate EFL students (42 males and 18 females) majoring in Management in the course of general English participated in this investigation. They were selected among 120 EFL university students (mostly senior) based on non-random judgment sampling. To be sure of the homogeneity, they participated in a homogeneity test adapted from language proficiency test Fowler and Coe (1976) as a pre-test and sixty students whose scores were around the mean were selected. Then they were randomly divided into two groups; one of the groups was randomly selected as the control group and the other one as an experimental group.

3. 2. Instrumentation
First, two tests (pre-test and post-test) were used in this study. The first one (pre-test) was language proficiency test which was used as a standardized measure to check the homogeneity of subjects in terms of language proficiency (r= .87, based on KR-21 formula). The second one, the vocabulary and reading comprehension test (as a post-test) that the reliability of the test was (r= .89) based on KR-21 formula. The vocabulary items in the test were mainly selected from the new lexical items taught and exposed to during the course in both groups.

One of the tools which yielded quantitative data was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1990). The SILL was used in experimental group (the vocabulary learning strategies have been extracted from this version) three times: once in pre-awareness-raising phase (phase 1) to serve as a needs analysis tool and also to guide the researcher in planning and shaping the strategy instruction and raising learners' awareness (SILL 1). Once in awareness-raising phase to help raise awareness in learners about the range of strategies available to them; once in post-awareness-raising phase (phase 3) to help the researcher in identifying any changes in the use of vocabulary learning strategies in phase 3 (SILL 2).

3. 3. Procedure
After selecting sixty homogeneous learners through language proficiency test, they were randomly divided into two experimental and control groups. After division, the control group received conventional teaching vocabulary training without any teaching explicit vocabulary learning strategy treatment while the experimental group received awareness of vocabulary learning strategy treatment through three phases: (1) the pre-awareness raising phase, (2) the awareness raising phase, and (3) the post-awareness raising phase. The treatment sessions took 12 sessions and each session was scheduled to receive 100 minutes of vocabulary strategy instruction at awareness-raising level. The pre-awareness raising phase involved a think-aloud training session.

The researcher first grouped learners in 6 (each group 5) and gave them an Affixes Table to memorize. Then she modeled the think-aloud protocol several times by reading one passage and reporting what she was thinking of while processing the passage in order to understand the vocabulary meaning. For example, the researcher pretended that she does not know the meaning of the word *the premeditated crime*; so she thought and said loudly. At the end of this phase, the Think Aloud Protocol (TAP) along with semi-structured interview was done as a needs analysis tool and to guide the researcher in planning and shaping the strategy instruction and raising learners awareness in awareness-raising phase (phase 2); Therefore, each learner met with the researcher individually in the privacy of the researcher's room and were asked to think aloud on the passage. Once again no mention was made of learning strategies and the learner was asked to simply tell how/why s/he understood the meanings of the unknown vocabulary. The entire session was tape-recorded and the protocols were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then coded for instances of vocabulary learning strategy extracted from Oxford's SILL. Table 1 indicates vocabulary learning strategies focused in the present study.

Table 1. Vocabulary learning strategies used in the study

Parts	Strategies	Vocabulary Tasks
A	memory strategies	a) reviewing b) place new words in new sentences
B	cognitive strategy	Analyzing word into its parts(affixes)
C	compensation strategies	a) guessing from context linguistically b) guessing non-linguistically
D	meta-cognitive strategies	a) planning b) monitoring c) evaluating
E	affective strategies	encouragement
F	social strategies	Group work

In awareness-raising phase, the learners were introduced to vocabulary learning strategies by giving descriptions, examples, and practices and how these can help them learn more effectively and efficiently. They were then told how certain strategies are especially beneficial to the task of understanding the unknown vocabulary meanings. Then they were asked to work in groups and list the strategies they used when reading their text. The purpose of this activity was simply to make them aware of those strategies that they already used and help them to see the relevance of these to their understanding of the unknown vocabulary meanings. Then the learners were given the SILL to complete so as to present them with a generalized version of strategy use. The SILL is a very useful instrument to help raise awareness in learners about the range of strategies available to them. The learners then went on to discuss the strategies in the SILL and whether they would consider using them. In this phase, different reading passages ware analyzed by learners with TAP; also the learners were asked to write a diary about how they got the meaning of the

unknown words meaning, and what strategies they used to understand the unknown words meaning, and what strategy(ies) was(were) more useful and difficult. In post-awareness raising phase, the researcher gave learners a new passage to comprehend and discover the unknown words meaning for forty minutes.

At the end of the treatment, both groups took a post-test that was the same and related to the instruction; finally, the means of both groups were compared to examine the effect of raising learners' awareness of the vocabulary strategies on reading comprehension through *t*-test analysis. In experimental group, learners were also asked to fulfill the vocabulary learning strategy inventory (SILL 2) to see any change in strategy use. The protocols and SILLs from Phase 1 and 3 were then analyzed to look for instances of vocabulary strategy use to see whether there have been any progress in using the strategies and which strategies they used more.

4. Results
4.1. Results from the post-test

The results of the post-test in the two groups were compared using independent samples *t*-test statistical procedure, whose result showed that the mean scores of the experimental group (M = 29.26, SD = 6.35) was significantly (*t* = 4.14, p< .05) different from the control group (M = 23.06, SD = 5.13). In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test and this means that the null hypothesis is rejected. The result of the *t*-test of post-test in both groups is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. T-test of both groups (post-test)

GROUP	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	*t*-observed	*t*-critical	df
control	30	23.0667	5.13899	.93825	4.14	2.00	58
experimental	30	29.2667	6.35140	1.15960			

The aim of administering the SILL in phase 1 was to guide the researcher to know about what strategies the students use. According to table 4.2, the most percentage of strategy use belonged to the memory and meta-cognitive strategies each 33.33% use. Compensatory strategies ranked the second with 16.66% use. The third place in ranking order was taken by the social strategy with 13.33% use. Affective strategy ranked the forth with 10% use. Finally, the least percentage belonged to the cognitive strategy with 2.66% use. You can see more details in Appendixes B and C (in Table 3, only those strategies that was going to be worked in the study has been considered).

Table 3. Strategy use in descending order

	Strategies	%
1	Memory strategies	33.33
2	Meta-cognitive strategies	33.33
3	Compensatory strategies	16.66
4	Social strategy	13.33
5	Affective strategy	10
6	Cognitive strategy	6.66

As was mentioned before, the aim of administering the SILL in phase 3 was to see if there were any statistically significant gains regarding the type and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies. According to Table 3, the most percentage of strategy use belonged to the cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies each 86.66% use. Compensatory strategies ranked the second with 71.66% use. The third place in ranking order was taken by the memory strategies with 68.33% use. Finally, the least percentage belonged to the affective strategy with 46.66% use. In Table 4, only those strategies which was been worked in the study has been considered.

Table 4. Percentage of strategy use

	Strategies	%
1	Cognitive strategy	86.66
2	Meta-cognitive strategies	86.66
3	Social strategy	86.66
4	Compensatory strategies	71.66
5	Memory strategies	68.33
6	Affective strategy	46.66

5. Discussion and conclusion

The major concern of the present study was to explore the effectiveness of raising learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension of the EFL students. As it was shown in table 2, the mean scores of the experimental group (M = 29.26, SD = 6.35) was significantly ($t = 4.14$, p< .05) different from the control group (M = 23.06, SD = 5.13). In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test and this means that the null hypothesis is rejected.

The significance of awareness-raising has been accepted by almost all of the researchers in the relevant field, and they have emphasized its benefits by means of integrating it into their strategy training models. For instance, [2] proposed the incorporation of consciousness- raising by means of small group retrospective interviews, thinking aloud, or by carrying out interviews. However, their program was not limited merely to awareness raising training. That is to say, after raising the awareness of the learners on the strategies under focus, they modeled the strategies and made the learners engage in cooperative

learning tasks like peer tutoring or group discussions. Also it is widely accepted that unless the participants are motivated enough and believe in the benefits of strategy instruction, it is almost impossible for any treatment to have the desired effect.

The findings of this study indicated that raising learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies had positive impact on reading comprehension of EFL students. It matched with some studies (e.g. Pani, 2004; Philip & Hua, 2006) focused on awareness raising of learning strategies which affect the development of skills and components of language such as reading comprehension; while some studies (e.g. Tassana-ngam, 2005) found that strategy instruction and raising learner awareness of them do not have a significant effect on reading comprehension. Moreover, students were motivated enough and became aware of the benefits of strategy instruction. These factors and other mentioned factors are those that made this study successful.

According to Yamamori, Takamichi, Tomohoto, and Oxford (2003), and Munoz (2006), the relationship between strategy use and achievement is complex, multifactor and not always linear; the absence of a systematic association between learner strategies and proficiency level and, more generally language achievement, has recently led certain authors to claim that the effective use of language learning strategies depends on a complex and dynamic interplay of a range of factors such as task purpose, the learners' style, gender, attitude, motivation, anxiety, encouragement, confidence, and personality among others. This supported by some scholars (e.g., Inozu, Tuyan & Cakir, 2007; Chamot & O'Malley, 1990; Conttia, 2007; Oxford, 1990; Rossiter, 2003; Steinagel, 2005) that learning strategy and affective variables are important factors in effective learning.

The findings of this study indicated that raising learners' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies had positive impact on reading comprehension of EFL students. In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test and this means that the null hypothesis was rejected.

Regarding the results from SILL 2 in terms of the type and frequency of strategy use, we can conclude that the most used strategy category was related to the meta-cognitive, cognitive and social strategies equally each 86.66% use. Compensatory strategies ranked the second with 71.66% use. The third place in ranking order was taken by the memory strategies with 68.33% use. Finally, the least percentage was related to the affective strategy with 46.66% use.

Both learners and teachers need to become aware of learning strategies through strategy instruction. Attempts to teach students to use learning strategies have produced good results. The main objective of such attempts is to allow students to become more aware of their preferred learning strategies and to help them become more responsible for meeting their own objectives. Such objectives can be only achieved when students are trained in strategy use so that they become more independent and effective. Thus according to Conttia (2007), teachers should systematically introduce and reinforce learning

strategies that help students use the target language more effectively and thus improve their performance. According to Oxford (1990), strategy training can be achieved after familiarizing the students with the language learning strategies and providing them with opportunities for practicing these strategies through integrating them into the classroom instructional plan and embedding them into regular class activities.

Concerning curriculum developers and material producers should work cooperatively with teachers and students so that they can design a better program, appropriate materials and tasks that will promote a more efficient and a more effective language learning atmosphere; that according to the findings of this study, it be suggested that material designers produce lessons based on strategy-instruction especially on cognitive, meta cognitive and social strategies. Finally, there is a need for more comprehensive research on a wide range of variables affecting language learning strategies use. Variables such as cultural background, beliefs, learning style, motivation, and attitude that may have a bearing on language learning strategy use should be studied with students of different language backgrounds and proficiency levels. Moreover, research on the frequency of use of the social and affective strategies and choice of given strategies is recommended since it is helpful for both learners and teachers.

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