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AN EXAMINATION OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES USED BY KUWAITI EFL STUDENTS AT THE COLLEGE OF BASIC EDUCATION

<sup>1</sup>Mohammad A. Almutairi

<sup>1</sup>Language Centre, College of Basic Education, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait  
Correspondence: Mohammad A. Almutairi, Language Centre, College of Basic Education, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training. Email: [mutairi1968@gmail.com](mailto:mutairi1968@gmail.com)

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by Kuwaiti EFL students at the College of Basic Education. It tries to explore the following research questions: what strategies do EFL students use to understand the meaning of unknown English words? Which vocabulary learning strategies do they prefer to use, **determination** strategies or **social** ones? The data was collected by means of a questionnaire with 11 multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. Questions 1 to 7 examine **determination** strategies: analysing affixes and roots, checking for L1 cognates, analysing available pictures or gestures, guessing the meaning from textual context, using a bilingual dictionary, using a monolingual dictionary, and using word lists. Questions 8 to 11 examine **social** strategies: asking the teacher for an L1 translation, asking the teacher for a paraphrase or a synonym of the unknown word, asking the teacher for a sentence including the unknown word, and lastly, asking classmates for the meaning. The open-ended question asks the participants about what factors they think can help them understand the meaning of the new vocabulary. After the data was collected, the analysis was carried out, and the results revealed that the participants used most of the **determination** strategies in questions 1–5, and avoided questions 6 and 7. The findings also showed that the participants used all the social strategies in questions 8–11. In the open-ended questions, some students expressed their preference to study ESL with bilingual teachers and avoid native speaker teachers. They claimed that national EFL teachers helped them in learning new English vocabulary by translating them to Arabic in an easy way, which reflected positively on their understanding of the lessons.*

**KEY WORDS:** vocabulary learning strategies, word solving, ESL, EFL, vocabulary teaching

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## INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a very important role in ESL/EFL learning, as it is the main component of language proficiency, which offers the basis for learners' performance in other skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vocabulary learning and its use has always been at the front of any consideration for teaching or learning L1 or L2 languages (Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2000). Discovering the ways students used to learn vocabulary could help EFL teachers develop their vocabulary teaching and enhance their EFL students' language achievement accordingly, especially in Kuwait, where most students suffer from low English language proficiency. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the vocabulary-learning strategies of Kuwaiti EFL students, particularly the ways in which they identify the meaning of unknown words.

In this respect, Schmitt (1997) divided vocabulary-learning strategies (discovery strategies) into two types: **determination** strategies and **social** strategies. Determination strategies are those in which EFL students depend on themselves to identify the meaning of unknown words and use one of the following strategies: analysing affixes and roots, checking for L1 cognates, analysing any available pictures or gestures, guessing the meaning from textual context, using a bilingual dictionary, using a monolingual dictionary, or using word lists.

Social strategies, on the other hand, are used when the EFL students seek help from social surroundings, such as by asking the teacher for an L1 translation, asking the teacher for a paraphrase

or a synonym of the unknown word, asking the teacher for a sentence that contains the unknown word, or asking classmates the meaning.

The researchers found Schmitt's (1997) classification to be very useful and decided to apply it to their questionnaire.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

Vocabulary is considered to be the focal element of any process of learning a foreign/second language; therefore, exploring and discovering the strategies that ESL/EFL learners use to develop vocabularies is important in developing and enhancing linguistic education. For this reason, the purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies actively employed by Kuwaiti EFL students at the College of Basic Education to acquire new vocabulary and increase their knowledge of English words and the ways to improve them. In addition, studies about vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies are rare in Kuwait. Hence, this study might present a first step towards understanding and recognising this issue for interested EFL teachers in the country.

### **Research Questions**

As this study aims to explore the unknown vocabulary learning strategies used by Kuwaiti EFL students at the College of Basic Education, it tries to find answers to the following questions:

- 1- What are the strategies that EFL students use to understand the meaning of unknown English words?
- 2- Which vocabulary learning strategies do they prefer to use, the **determination** strategies or the **social** ones?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

One of the most vital challenges that EFL/ ESL learners might face during the process of foreign language learning is learning new vocabulary. Vocabulary has been considered as crucial to language use as insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the EFL/ ESL learners could lead to difficulties in language learning.

Researchers such as Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2001) have realised that learning vocabulary is crucial for successful second language education and consider it as a significant element in the formation of correct spoken and written texts.

According to (Gu 1994), vocabulary learning strategies are specific techniques utilised by ESL learners for the acquisition of new words in a second language. EFL/ESL learners use these steps to gain and understand new English words.

In the process of learning a second language, knowing and understanding a new vocabulary comes at the beginning of the process and represents the basis for second language acquisition. McCarthy (1990, p.50) said, "without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way."

In this respect, Schmitt (1997) divided the vocabulary learning strategies or the discovery strategies into two types: the **determination** strategies and **social** strategies. The **determination** strategies are the ones where EFL students depend on themselves to identify the meaning of unknown words and use on the following strategies; analysing affixes and roots of the unknown word, checking for an L1 cognate, analysing any available pictures or gestures to solve the meaning of the unknown words,

guessing the meaning of a new word from textual context, using bilingual dictionaries to find out the meaning of the new vocabulary, using monolingual dictionaries, and using the word lists.

**Social** strategies, on the other hand, are used when EFL students try to seek help from social surroundings, such as asking the EFL /ESL teacher for an L1 translation, asking the EFL/ EFL teacher for a paraphrase or a synonym of the unknown word, asking the EFL/ EFL teacher for a sentence including the unknown word, and asking classmates for the meaning.

Research on vocabulary learning strategies generally has been given little emphasis in Asian countries (Fan, 2003), including Kuwait. Therefore, this study aims to explore which vocabulary learning strategies Kuwaiti EFL students prefer, determination or social, and which categories among determination or social strategies they use.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Population and Sample*

The population of the study consisted of 270 students currently studying bachelor degrees in different specialties at the College of Basic Education. Such specialties include Arabic, Islamic studies, art, interior design, physical education, math, science, and music. The students enrolled in such specialties are prepared to be teachers at government primary schools. During their four-year study at the college, they have to study and pass 3 English language courses: the 099 English remedial course, English 1 (general English), and English 2 (ESP English).

### *Design and Procedures*

The current study is a survey study that has two dependent variables:

- 1- The unknown word-meaning solving strategies used by Kuwaiti EFL students at the College of Basic Education
- 2- Which of the two strategies do they prefer to use, **determination** strategies or **social** ones?

### *Instrumentation*

A test that contained some unknown words was distributed among the population, followed by a structured questionnaire of 11 statements and an open-ended question which was designed by the Jordanian scholar F. M. Al-Khasawneh . The questionnaire was designed according to the discovery strategies of Schmitt (1997), which contained two different vocabulary learning strategies (**determination** and **social**) and had 11 items. Statements 1 to 7 investigate determination strategies, and statements 8 to 11 investigate social ones. The final question (no. 12) is an open-ended question that asks EFL students about the factors they think is useful for understanding the unknown words and hence with understanding the context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the first seven statements of the questionnaire explore the **determination** vocabulary learning strategies used by Kuwaiti EFL students at the College of Basic Education.

**Determination** strategies:

Statement one in the sample asks the students whether they tend to understand the meaning of the unknown words by analysing the words' affixes and roots. Most of the participants, or 140 (51.9%) of them, agree that they use this strategy. On the other hand, 116 participants (43%) disagreed with this statement, and 15 participants (5.6%) answered, "I do not know."

Statement 2 explores the students' unknown word-solving strategy by checking for a first language cognate for the unknown word. Of the participants, 227 (84.1%) agreed that they used this strategy, and 33 (12.2%) participants disagreed with this statement; only 10 (3.7%) declared "I don't know."

Statement 3 investigates the meaning-solving strategy for an unknown word by analysing any related pictures or gestures available. Again, the great majority of participants (236 or 87.1%) agreed that they used this strategy. Very few participants (18 or 6.7%) disagreed with the statement, and 21 participants or (7.8%) answered, "I don't know." Also, the responses for Statement 4 indicate that the great majority of participants (242 or 89.6%) tried to get the meaning of the unknown word by guessing from the textual context. Very few participants (20 or 7.4%) disagreed with the statement, and 11 (4.1%) answered, "I don't know."

Statement 5 is about trying to discover the meaning of the unknown word by using the bilingual dictionary (English/Arabic), the results show that the majority of the participants (234 or 86.7%) are in favor of using this strategy. Only a few participants (29, or 10.7%) are not interested in using the bilingual dictionary, and very few (9, or 3.3%) are not sure.

Although statement six is similar to statement five, the results are very different. Statement six inquires whether the students use the monolingual dictionary in finding out the meaning of an unknown word. The responses show that the majority of participants (106 or 39.3%) do not prefer to use the monolingual dictionary (English/English). The majority of the participants (143, or 53%) only tend to use this strategy. Very few (21, or 7.8%) are not sure.

Statement seven, which is the last one of the **determination** strategies, asks students if they try to get the meaning of the unknown word by searching for its meaning through the glossary at the end of the textbook. The majority of participants (133, or 49.3%) do not agree with this statement. Only 116 (43%) of the participants agree that they use the glossary at the end of the textbook to get the definition of the unknown word and then understand its meaning. 22 participants reply with "I don't know".

**Table 1. Kuwaiti EFL students' responses to the determination vocabulary learning strategies**

Statement	Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1- analysing the prefixes and origin of the unknown word.	140	51.9	116	43	15	5.6
2- checking for L1 cognate.	227	84.1	33	12.2	10	3.7
3- analysing any available pictures or gestures.	236	87.4	18	6.7	21	7.8
4- guessing the meaning from textual context.	242	89.6	20	7.4	11	4.1
5- using a bilingual dictionary.	234	86.7	29	10.7	9	3.3
6- using a monolingual dictionary.	106	39.3	143	53	21	7.8
7- using word lists.	116	43	133	49.3	22	8.1

Secondly, the **social** strategies:

Statement eight is the first one that tests the **social** strategies. It asks the students whether they seek their EFL teachers' help in finding out the meaning of the unknown word by translating it to its Arabic meaning. The results show that 229 participants (84.4%), the vast majority, support and use this strategy, while 30 participants (11.1%), a minority, do not use this strategy. 14 participants (5.2%) reply with (I don't know).

Regarding statement nine, which is the second statement of the **social** strategies section, the statement explores whether EFL students try to find the meaning of the unknown word by asking their EFL teacher to give them its synonym. 131 (48.5%) of the participants agree that they use this strategy to learn the meaning of the unknown word. 20 participants (7.4%) replied only with "I don't know."

Statement 10 argues that students tend to ask their EFL teachers to place the unknown word in a full sentence in order to find out its meaning. Unlike the responses to statement 9, the vast majority of the participants, 241 (89.3%), agree that they prefer to use this strategy to learn the unknown word's meaning. Only 22 of the participants (8.1%) disagree with this statement, and eight participants (3%) replied with "I don't know."

Statement 11, which is the fourth and the last statement of the **social** strategies, investigates whether students try to ask their colleagues about the meaning of the unknown word. The responses show that the majority of the participants, 189 (70%), agree that they do this. 61 participants (22.6%) disagree with this statement, and only 23 participants (8.5%) reply with "I don't know."

**Table 2. Kuwaiti EFL students' responses to the social vocabulary learning strategies**

Statement	agree		disagree		I don't know	
	frequency	percent	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
8- asking the teacher for an L1 translation.	228	84.4	30	11.1	14	5.2
9- asking the teacher for a paraphrase or a synonym of the unknown word.	131	48.5	121	44.8	20	7.4
10- asking the teacher for a sentence, including the unknown word.	241	89.3	22	8.1	8	3
11- asking classmates for the meaning of the unknown word	189	70	61	22.6	23	8.5

From the above responses, we notice that the **determination** strategies are being used by the majority of EFL students at the College of Basic Education except for statement 6, using English dictionaries to find out the meaning of unknown words, and statement 7, trying to grasp the meaning of unknown words from the glossary at the end of the textbook, which contains the definitions of the unknown words in English. This indicates that the EFL students try to avoid English/English methods of getting the meaning and prefer to use other methods, such as using English/Arabic dictionaries, analysing any available pictures or gestures, or checking for L1 cognates. In terms of **social** strategies, it is

obvious that the majority of EFL students at the College of Basic Education use all of the **social** strategies to get the meaning of unknown words. This is shown, for example, in statement 8, in which 88% of the participants indicate that they prefer to ask their EFL teachers to give them the meaning of the unknown words in Arabic. This inclination towards using their L1 language to get the meaning of unknown words and their tendency to avoid getting the meaning from English/English dictionaries or from the glossary at the end of the textbook could result from their weakness in the English language, which is very common among Kuwaiti EFL students (Motairi, 2013).

In their responses to the open-ended question, some of the students state that having EFL teachers whose first language is Arabic is an advantage in the matter of vocabulary learning. They claim that such teachers help the students to understand the meaning of the unknown words and, therefore, understand the lessons. They also add that when registration takes place in the college, they avoid registering their English language courses with native speaker EFL teachers and choose the national ones. This opinion could be supported in their responses to question 8: (*we prefer to ask our EFL teacher to translate the unknown English word to its meaning in Arabic*), where the vast majority of students, 228 (84.4%), prefer to choose this vocabulary learning strategy.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the findings of this study, we notice that the majority of Kuwaiti EFL students used most of the **determination** strategies (1–2–3–4–5) and avoided the strategies 7–8. If we refer to statement 7 and statement 8: (I try to find the meaning of the unknown word by using English/English dictionary) and (I try to find the meaning of the unknown word by referring to its English definition in the glossary at the end of the textbook), we find that the students try to avoid understanding the meaning of the unknown word by reading its English explanation. For this reason, EFL teachers should focus on training their EFL students on understanding the meaning of unknown words by reading the English definitions of such words.

Regarding **social** strategies, we discover that majority of Kuwaiti EFL students used social factors and sought help from others to get the meaning of unknown words. If we take questions 8 and 11 as examples, “I prefer to ask my EFL teacher to tell me the meaning of the unknown word in its Arabic translation” and “I always ask my classmates to tell the meaning of the unknown word,” we find that majority of Kuwaiti EFL students tended to use such strategies. This could mean that they are not trained enough to depend on themselves to look for the meaning of unknown vocabulary and could be a sign of insufficient vocabulary lessons. Therefore, it is the task of EFL teachers in Kuwait to enhance their vocabulary classes and train their EFL students to use **determination** strategies and to be self-dependent when looking for the meaning of new English vocabulary.

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