Factors Influencing Vocabulary Learning Strategy Preferences

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ABSTRACT Vocabulary is a significant factor in learning a second language. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have become an area of current interest in language teaching, learning and research. Throughout history many researchers and applied linguists have looked at various factors, such as gender, level of education, etc. that might influence learners' choices of VLS. However, the question what exactly influences learners' choice and frequency of use of certain VLS and certain types of VLS still remains open. The overall aim of this research was to explore which type of VLS learners use most frequently and whether any of the factors such as gender, level of education, years of learning English as a foreign language or learners' individual preferences and perceptions influenced this. The sample consisted of 320 learners of both elementary and high-school learners of English as a foreign language. The participants filled out the Croatian version of the VOLSQES questionnaire which measured learners' preferences regarding VLS use, as well as a demographic questionnaire which provided information about learners' preferences, and perceptions regarding certain aspects of English. The results of the analyses revealed certain differences between learners' perception of difficulty of English and their choice of incidental type of VLS, as well as some positive and negative relationships between learners' preferences and perceptions, and years of learning English and their choice of certain types of VLS. This indicates that some differences and relationships do indeed exist, but that further investigation is required.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins 1972, 111). The preceding quote perfectly sums up the importance of vocabulary for second language acquisition (SLA), teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), teachers themselves and, of course, learners. In the process of learning vocabulary, both teachers and learners employ certain strategies to significantly improve the results of the task at hand – the task that is vocabulary learning. They do so by employing strategies by the name of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS).

Vocabulary learning strategies are "specific strategies utilized in the isolated task of learning vocabulary in the target language" (Pavičić Takač 2008, 52). Many researchers (see Siriwan 2007; Gu 2010; Craven 2013) have their own way of defining VLS, however all of them agree on the following: they all refer to VLS as actions, steps or procedures that learners do when having as a goal to learn certain lexical items, that is vocabulary.

Just as every scholar and every researcher has their own way of defining VLS, they all have their own ways of classifying them as well.[1] For the purposes of this research, the chosen classification of the VLS was the one found in Pavičić Takač (2008). The classification goes as follows:

a) FORMAL VLS includes the "VLS employed in learning a [foreign language (FL)] in a formal (classroom-based) context" (Pavičić Takač 2008, 104). For example, planning for vocabulary learning, translating words into L1, etc.;

b) INFORMAL VLS is "characterized by a more systematic approach to vocabulary learning, i.e. by conscious efforts that learners make in order to learn lexical items" (Pavičić Takač 2008, 104). For example, leafing through the dictionary, using new words in sentences, etc.;

c) INCIDENTAL VLS "contains strategies of spontaneous vocabulary learning in naturalistic learning situations" (Pavičić Takač 2008, 100). For example, remembering words from magazines, associating new words with already known, etc.

2. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main aim of the research was to explore which type of VLS learners use most frequently and whether any of the factors such as gender, level of education, etc. influenced their choice of VLS type.

What follows from this are research questions. There were three main research questions – the first one being which type of VLS learners use most/least frequently; the second one being which VLS learners use most/least frequently independent of the VLS type; and the third one being some interrelations between the most frequently used VLS type and certain variables and therefore the remaining research questions are as follows:

a) Is there any difference between gender groups considering the most frequently used type of VLS?

b) Is there any difference between learners' level of education considering the most frequently used type of VLS?

c) Is there any difference between learners' perception of English as an easy language considering the most frequently used type of VLS?

d) Is there a relationship between learners' preferences of certain aspects of English[2], their perception of importance of certain aspects of English[3], their perception of difficulty of certain aspects of English[4], and the use of a certain type of VLS?

e) Is there a relationship between years of learning English as a FL and learners' use of a certain type of VLS?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. SAMPLE

Out of 320 participants in this study, 95 were male, 209 were female, and 16 participants did not specify their gender. More precisely, 112 of them were elementary school students from 6th and 8th grade,

Table 1. Sample

		Frequency	Percent
	Male	95	29.7
Sex	Female	209	65.3
	Missing information	16	5.0
Total		320	100.0
	Elementary school	112	35.0
Education Level	High school	208	65.0
Total		320	100.0

Table 2. Learners' perception of difficulty
of English as a foreign language (FL)

	Value
Mean	2.62
Standard Deviation	1.036
Mode	3.0

and 208 of them were high school students from all grades. Learners perceive English as being medium in difficulty with the mean value being 2.62 (SD = 1.036). These data can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

3.2. INSTRUMENTS

The instruments used in this study were questionnaires – the first one being the Demographic Questionnaire which was used to find out more about learners themselves and the second one being the VOLSQES Questionnaire or the *Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire for Elementary Schools* designed by Pavičić Takač (2008). It consisted of 27 items with 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (always). The Questionnaire's internal consistency reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha at .845 for this sample which was considered quite satisfactory.

3.3. PROCEDURE

All the Questionnaires were administered during regular classes and it took learners approximately 15 min to complete them. The data that were collected were first entered into IBM SPSS Statistics software Version 20 and were analyzed afterwards. The statistical measures that were used were: descriptive statistics[5], independent-sample t-test[6], and Pearson Correlation test[7].

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the research questions will be answered. The results of analyses will be presented and explained.

Table 3 shows that the most frequently used VLSs are No. 5 (I pick up words from films and TV programs I watch), No. 27 (I pick up words from the Internet), and No. 19 (I translate words into my mother tongue to understand them) with their mean values being above 2.4. This is so because we live in a modern age of technology and we know that learners spend a lot of time in front of the TV and on the Internet.

Table 3. Most/least frequently used VLS independent of the type

VLS	Value	Standard Deviation
I pick up words from films and TV programs I watch.	2.53	.648
I pick up words from the Internet.	2.45	.636
I translate words into my mother tongue to understand them.	2.42	.701
I group words together in order to remember them.	1.35	.609
I write down words while I read books and magazines for pleasure.	1.31	.595
I write down words when I watch films and TV programs.	1.17	.442

The least frequently used VLSs are No. 20 (I group words together in order to remember them), No. 7 (I write down words while I read books and magazines for pleasure), and No. 13 (I write down words when I watch films and TV programs) with their mean values being lower than 1.3. This is so because all of these require more mental activity and more work, which a lot of learners are not ready to do.

These findings are consistent with the findings of Kulikova (2015) in so that the most frequently used VLS are, among others, those which involve the use of technology in one way or another, with their mean values being higher than 3.3. However, even more frequently used strategies are those which involve some sort of note-taking, with their mean value being higher than 4.5, which is then inconsistent with the findings of this research.

In research done by Azgari (2010) the findings are even more so consistent with the findings of this research. The researcher found that the most frequently used strategies are, among others, those which involve the use of media while the least frequently used strategies are, among others, those that require more efforts on the part of learners to learn a new lexical item, for example writing down words that are new and unfamiliar.

Table 4. Most/least frequently used type of VLS

	Formal VLS	Independent VLS	Incidental VLS
Mean	1.97	1.64	2.27
Standard Deviation	.465	.361	.468
Mode	1.82	1.67	2.0
Median	2.00	1.67	2.29

Table 4 portrays the answer to the second research question referring to the most/least frequently used type of VLSs. According to the analysis, the most frequently used type of VLS are incidental VLS with their mean value being 2.27 (SD = .468) and the least frequently used type are independent VLSs with their mean value being 1.64 (SD = .361). These results, of course, are not surprising and the reasons for this are pretty much the same as for the previous research question. Learners simply do spend a lot of time in front of the TV and on the Internet so they pick up on a lot of vocabulary. As far as the formal VLS are concerned, learners do not really have a choice because this takes place in a classroom-based context and, as far as the independent VLS go, these actually require making conscious efforts to learn vocabulary which learners are simply not willing to make as opposed to incidental VLS which do not require any conscious efforts.

These findings are consistent with the findings of many researchers, namely Pavičić Takač (2008), Gu (2010), Azgari (2010), and Craven (2013). They all found that incidental VLS are the most frequently used type of VLS and as far as the rationale for this goes, they mostly agree that the reason for this is that we live in a modern age in which technology has become a major part of peoples' lives by day and therefore, materials that source from various technological devices are very accessible, learners are exposed to them every day, so learning vocabulary without the mass media playing a significant role in it is simply inevitable.

Table 5. Difference between gender and incidental VLS

Sex	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	2.23	.492			
			-1.114	289	.266
Female	2.30	.454			

Table 6. Difference between the level of education and incidental VLS

Education Level	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Elementary school	2.28	.470			
			.108	304	.914
High school	2.27	.468			

Table 7. Difference between students' perception of difficulty of English as a foreign language (FL) and incidental VLS

Perception of Difficulty	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Easy	2.41	.040			
			4.325	303	.000
Difficult	2.18	.034			

Concerning the interrelations between incidental VLS, being the most frequently used type, and learners' gender, education level, and perception of difficulty of English as a FL, the t-test analysis, which can be seen in Tables 5, 6, and 7, has shown no statistically significant difference between learners' gender and education level, but has shown statistically significant difference between learners' perception of difficulty (M = 2.41; SD = .040). In other words, those learners who perceive English as an easy language use incidental VLS more frequently than those who perceive it as difficult. This is not surprising because it is logical – if learners believe that English is easy they will also believe that they do not need to put in any additional effort to learn it and therefore, they do not use independent VLS, but rather they rely on what they pick up on TV and the Internet.

As far as the research in literature goes, Siriwan (2007) states that in the most literature and research she has reviewed gender significantly influenced the choice of the most frequently used VLS type in that female learners were the ones who used the most frequently used type of VLS which is inconsistent with the findings of this research.

When it comes to the level of education, both Pavičić Takač (2008) and Gu (2010) state that learners who are on the higher level of education will consequently use strategies which require more mental activity and processing, which is also inconsistent with the findings of this research.

The results found in Table 8 portray correlations between learners who prefer certain aspects of English (such as knowing grammar, knowing vocabulary, understanding what is read, etc.), and think of them as important and perceive them as easy and the type of VLSs they use. As can be seen, there is a positive statistically significant correlation between learners who like doing certain tasks in English and their use of both independent (r = .186) and incidental VLS (r = .262) with the correlation being significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). This is logical because learners who like doing certain tasks in English will make an effort to consciously learn more words and as far as the incidental ones go,

Table 8. Correlation between learners' preferences
and perceptions and VLS types

	Liking Tasks in English	Important in English	Difficult in English
Formal VLS	.100	.088	-.045
Independent VLS	.186***	.090	.128*
Incidental VLS	.262***	.232***	.325***

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

the answer is the same as always for this type – they just spend a lot of time in front of the TV and on the Internet. There is also a positive statistically significant correlation between learners' perception of difficulty and the same two types of VLS with the correlation being significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) for independent VLS (r = .128) and at the 0.001 level (2-tailed) for incidental VLS (r = .325). This is also not surprising because the more learners perceive English as easy, the more they will like it and, the more they like it, the more effort will be put in learning more words. And finally, there is a positive statistically significant correlation between learners who think that certain aspects of English as a FL are important and incidental VLS (r = .232) with the correlation being significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). This was also surprising. It was expected that learners who give a lot of importance to certain aspects of English will use independent VLS more frequently because that would mean that they make conscious efforts to learn more because it is important, but the analysis has shown that they use incidental VLS more frequently.

Table 9. Correlation between years of learning English
as a foreign language (FL) and independent VLS

	Years of Learning
Formal VLS	-.231***
Independent VLS	-.147**
Incidental VLS	-.081

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

And finally, Table 9 presents correlation between the types of VLS and years of learning English as a FL. As can be seen in the table, there is a negative statistically significant correlation between years of learning and formal VLS (r = -.231) with the correlation being significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed) and between years of learning and independent VLS (r = -.147) with the correlation being significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). In other words, the longer the learners have studied English as a FL, the less independent VLS they use and even fewer formal VLS. This only makes sense if we think of it in this way – if we assume that the longer the learners have learnt English, the more vocabulary they think they know, then they will think that there is not much vocabulary left to learn and will therefore make less and less conscious efforts to learn more new words because if there are not any, why bother?

This conclusion is consistent with Gu's conclusion (2010) in which it is stated that "when learners reach a point where they do not perceive the need to enrich their active vocabulary any more, their efforts and strategies in developing a richer productive vocabulary will stop" (Gu 2010, 114).

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, a referral to the main aim of this research, which was to explore which type of VLS learners use most frequently and whether any of the factors such as gender, level of education, years of learning English, or learners' individual preferences and perceptions influenced this, will be made.

As we have seen, the most frequently used types of VLS were incidental VLS. As far as the factors influencing the choice of VLS to be used are concerned, according to the results, gender and level of education do not influence the choice and the frequency of use of incidental VLS, whereas learners' perception of difficulty does in so that the easier they think English is, the more incidental VLS they will use.

As far as the learners' individual preferences and perceptions are concerned[8], there is a positive statistically significant correlation between learners liking particular aspects of English, their perception of difficulty, and their choice of certain type of VLS. The same goes for their perception of importance of certain aspects of English and their choice of certain VLS.

And finally, there is a negative statistically significant correlation between years of learning English as a foreign language and learners' choice of formal and independent VLS.

Many scholars argue that vocabulary is a significant factor in learning a second language, but that very little attention has been given to it in the classroom. What gives hope that something might change in the near future is the fact that precisely vocabulary learning strategies have become the area of current interest in language teaching, learning and research. And indeed, this is important because helping learners to get acquainted with different types of strategies and helping them to develop certain skills in using them will result in learners becoming better learners, confident learners, and most importantly, independent learners.

NOTES

[1] A great overview of the research that has been done so far along with the overview of different ways of classification of VLS can be found in Siriwan (2007): overview of the research done so far can be found from page 61 to 71, and an overview of different ways of classification of VLS can as well be found from page 46 to 58 in Kulikova (2015).

[2] Aspects such as reading texts, talking, learning new words, writing, learning grammar, and listening to texts.

[3] Aspects such as knowing grammar, knowing a lot of words, understanding what is read, knowing how to write, understanding what is heard, knowing to speak.

[4] Aspects such as writing essays, memorizing words, speaking, remembering words when necessary, understanding what is read, writing words correctly, grammar, understanding what is heard, pronouncing words.

[5] Descriptive statistics was used to describe the sample and to answer the first two research questions.

[6] Independent-sample t-test was used for questions labeled a) to c).

[7] Pearson Correlation test was used for questions labeled d) and e).

[8] For example, liking certain aspects of English, thinking of them as important and perceiving them as easy.

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