The Relationship between Iranian Elementary EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Reading Comprehension Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) and Reading Comprehension Strategies (RCS) is so fascinating that has attracted much attention in English language teaching domain. Accordingly, strategies for vocabulary learning and reading comprehension have been the cornerstone of a lot of studies. Nevertheless, empirical studies on the relationship between vocabularies learning strategies and reading comprehension strategies among Iranian elementary EFL learners are few. The goal of the present research is to shed some light on the relationship between Iranian elementary EFL learners' VLS and RCS. In elementary levels, learners are interested in learning new vocabulary to become good reader being able to understand English text better. As a consequence, vocabulary plays an important role in developing and enhancing one's reading comprehension. Learning vocabulary is a huge assistance for learners to understand, since it provides the learners with more ability in reading comprehension which can potentially lead to learners' autonomy. To this end, two questionnaires including vocabulary strategies questionnaire and reading comprehension strategies questionnaire were administered to 45 male and female elementary students in an English institute in Azadshahr, Golestan Province, Iran to see whether there is a relationship between learners' VLS and RCS. The analysis of the collected raw data finally showed that there is a positive relationship between elementary EFL learners' VLS and their RCS. However, the inferential statistics showed that although there was a trend towards significance even, such a correlation was not significant. The findings have a number of implications for teachers and students.

KEYWORDS: vocabulary learning strategies; reading comprehension strategies; Learning Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) have drawn attention to the fact that vocabulary learning has been regarded as one of the most important components of L2 acquisition. Similarly, Rubin (1987) points out that vocabulary learning is at the heart of mastering a foreign language, given that as Rubin and Thompson (1994, p. 79) argue, "One cannot speak, understand, read, or write a foreign language without knowing a lot of words". Many researchers believe, vocabulary knowledge is not a single but rather a multifaceted and complex construct that involves understanding of a wide range of word knowledge and aspects (e.g., Nation, 2001; Read, 2000, as cited in Amirian, Mallahi, & Zaghi, 2015).

Recently there have been a great number of studies on vocabulary learning strategies. Most research so far has shown a significant relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary learning outcomes results or the relationship between reading strategies and reading comprehension outcomes. However, few studies have been done on relationship between learner's vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) and reading comprehension strategies (RCS). Higher proficiency in English is believed to be a stepping stone for academic and occupational success. In spite of all the efforts nationwide, Iranian English education is perceived not to have improved significantly yet.

The importance of reading comprehension and its contributions to learners' overall knowledge is clear. As Block (1986, p. 465) argue, "comprehension strategies indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand". A review of the

literature shows that extensive reading helps learners build up rich background knowledge (Hayashi, 1999) for which awareness of appropriate strategies seems to be a prerequisite.

The major concern of the present study was to explore, there are many factors that have effect on: the Relationship between VLS and Iranian EFL Elementary RCS. Many students have experiment of misunderstanding reading comprehension and misinterpret writer's ideas for word meaning by their limited vocabulary. Without word knowledge, understanding text is not possible. Reading comprehension strategies and vocabulary learning strategies of elementary students have seen to be the most important and the most activities in learning class especially for Iranian EFL students. The attempt of present study is to investigate whether there is any significant relationship between LCS and RCS' learners. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL elementary students' vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension strategies.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Given the purpose of the study, the following research question (RQ) and hypothesis (H0) were formulated for the present piece of research:

- RQ: Is there any significant relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and Iranian EFL elementary reading comprehension strategies?
- H0: There is no significant relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and Iranian EFL elementary reading comprehension strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
LEARNING STRATEGIES

Oxford (1990) views learning strategies as "specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8).There are also some theoretical assumptions behind language learning strategies (Griffiths & Parr, 2001).Learning strategies have proved to be an important element in students' learning outcomes. As Green and Oxford (1995) maintain, the relationship between language learning strategies and learners' success in learning L2 has been the focus of researchers. Learning strategies are classified into three main categories: meta-cognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective (O'Malley &Chamot, 1990; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985).

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

One big challenge with which language learners tend to struggle is vocabulary learning the burden of which can be alleviated by learning vocabulary learning strategies (Lotfi, 2007). In accordance with Nation (2001), the biggest benefit obtained from various kinds of learning strategies, including vocabulary learning strategies, is the fact that these strategies enable learners to take more control of their own process of learning so that students can take more responsibility for their studies. Accordingly, such strategies function as tools for improving "learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction" (Oxford &Nyikos, 1989, pp. 291-293). There are extensive ranges of different vocabulary learning strategies as demonstrated by the classifications of vocabulary learning strategies which have so far been introduced by different researchers (Nation, 2001; Gu, 2003, as cited in Asgari & Mustapha, 2011).

READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Reading comprehension is a process which requires one to recall information from text, to extract themes and to engage in higher order thinking skills (van den Broek & Kremer, 2000, as cited in Ness, 2011). There are many strategies that can be considered helpful for students to improve their reading comprehension. As Hancock (1998, p. 69, as cited in Chou, 2011, p. 108) states, "comprehension involves understanding the vocabulary, seeing relationships among words and concepts, organizing ideas, recognizing the author's purpose, evaluating the context, and making judgments". There are also some key elements which are regarded as being successful comprehension of text including "prior knowledge, inferential reasoning, self-regulations, and affective factors (Coiro & Dobler, 2007, p. 218).

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

As stated earlier, vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension strategies and their relationship with and/or effect on other issues have been extensively researched. However, very few studies have investigated the relationship between these two variables themselves. For instance, Gu and Johnson (1996) investigated the relationship between Chinese students' vocabulary learning strategies and their learning achievement. The results of their study showed strategy combination lead to difference in students' learning outcomes. In another study,

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O'Malley, et al. (1985) investigated the learning strategy used by elementary and intermediate ESL students. Their results showed that the strategies were of three categories, namely meta-cognitive, cognitive, and social mediating strategies and teachers were unaware of the students' utilization of such strategies. With reference to the studies conducted in the Iranian context, Hamzah, Kafipour, and Abdullah (2009) conducted a study to investigate Iranian EFL students' use of vocabulary learning strategies and its relationship with learners' vocabulary size. The obtained results indicated that only nine from 41 vocabulary learning strategies correlated significantly with students' total vocabulary size and hence contributed to it. Heidari, Izadi and Vahed Ahmadian (2012) also conducted a study to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL juniors' self-efficacy and their utilization of vocabulary learning strategies. Their results confirmed that self-efficacy was positively and significantly correlated with students' use of vocabulary learning strategies and particularly memory strategies.

METHODOLOGY
PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study were 45 female and male students at four levels of elementary who studied English at Sama English language institute, Iran in the spring term of the academic year 2015-2016, Azadshahr city, Golestan province, in the north of Iran. In terms of age variation, the participants were between 7 and 15 years and their level of language proficiency was specified by the institutes. It is worth noting that the selection of the participants was informed by convenience sampling strategy.

INSTRUMENTS

In order to tackle the research question and collect the data, the researcher utilized two questionnaires as the instruments for data collection. The details of the instruments are as follows:

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES QUESTIONNAIRE

The first questionnaire used in this survey study was a Vocabulary Learning Strategies questionnaire (VLSQ) which was adapted from Riankamol (2008) which per se was based on Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy. The information from the preparation step was used in the process of designing the questionnaire. It was designed specifically for the purpose of this study. Since it is one of the most comprehensive lists of strategies available and it matched with the researcher's purpose of the study, the researcher decided to utilize the questionnaire in order to explore the students' perceptions and use of vocabulary learning strategies.

There are some 56 strategies from 6 categories in Schmitt's Taxonomy. Yet only 25 strategies are adopted in the questionnaire due to some limitation and appropriateness.

The vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire consisted of two parts as follows:

Part I*:* The respondents' personal information

Part II*:* The questionnaire about students' use of vocabulary learning strategies. The 25-item questionnaires were designed to ask the respondents about the frequency of the use of vocabulary learning strategies implemented by participants.

READING STRATEGIES QUESTIONNAIRE

The next instrument adopted by the researcher was a Reading Comprehension Strategies Questionnaire (RCSQ) (Bang &Guanfang Zhao, 2007) to explore test-takers' strategy use. This questionnaire consisted of five sections and sixty-four items, namely 'before reading' section (eight items), 'while reading' section (28items), 'remembering the content of the text' section (six items), 'when encountering a difficult part in a text' section (17 items), and 'after reading 'section (five items).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The 45 selected participants took both Reading Comprehension Strategies Questionnaire (RCSQ) (Bang &Guanfang Zhao, 2007) and Vocabulary Learning Strategies questionnaire (VLSQ) (Riankamol, 2008) simultaneously. First the teacher explains about test and asked the learners to find the meaning of difficult vocabularies. Due to logistic issues, this phase of the study had to be handled in different locations and at different times. The participants spent one hour answering the reading subtests and thirty minutes to fill the reading comprehension strategy questionnaire with a 15-minitue break for refreshment.

DESIGN

Among several research designs, the one which seems to best fit the purpose of the present research is the design known as correlational design that is often used in survey-based research and can be used in different ways such as testing a relationship between or among variables, and making predictions. Given that the researcher was not

interested in testing the effect and/or cause of a variable and had no treatment while conducting the research, the adopted design was correlational or associational.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to answer the research question, questionnaires were first collected. All data were then processed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 19.0) to analyze the raw data. First, the descriptive statistics of the questionnaires such as frequencies, means, and standard deviation were calculated. The reliability of the instruments was also measured using Cronbach Alpha. Based on the results of the test of the normality which suggested the normal distribution of the data, the researcher also used Pearson Product Moment correlation for inferential statistics in order to test the research hypothesis and describe the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables.

RESTATEMENT OF RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The following null-hypothesis was formulated for the present study:
- There is no significant relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and Iranian EFL elementary reading comprehension strategies.

RESULTS

As it was mentioned before, the study was done at Sama language institute. The reliability of VLS questionnaire was calclulated by Cronbach Alpha as 0.763, so it was considered to have acceptable level of reliability. The reliability of RCS questionnaire was also calculated by Cronbach Alpha which was 0.771, so it was regarded to have an acceptable level of reliability too.

As Table 1 illustrated, the values related to the two questionnaires, including mean, standard deviation, standard deviation error of mean, variance, minimum, maximum were calculated as follows:

Table1.*The Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Reading Comprehension Strategy*

	N	mean	Std. Deviation	Range	Minimum
Vocabulary learning	45 3.2427	.41990	1.68 2.40	4.08	
Reading comprehension	45	3.3146	.22305	1.08 2.59	3.67
Valid N (listwise)	45				

According to Table 2, for vocabulary learning strategies scale the minimum of score was 2.40; the maximum of the score was 4.08; the mean was 3.2427. Moreover, for reading comprehension strategies scale the minimum of score was 2.59; the maximum of the score was 3.67; the mean was 3.3146; the standard deviation was .22305.

Table 2.*The Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Reading Comprehension Strategy*

	N		Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness	Kurtosis	Std. Error of Kurtosis	Range	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid	Missing									
V L	45	0	3.2427	.41990	.031	.354	-.712	.695	1.68	2.40	4.08
R C	45	0	3.3146	.22305	-.562	.354	1.002	.695	1.08	2.59	3.67

At the Table 3 illustrated, the calculated KS value for both variables, i.e. vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension strategies were both more than 0.05., suggesting that the distribution of the data is normal for which parametric statistics are permitted.

Table3.*Test of Normality (KS Test)*

	N	Normal Parameters[a,b]		Most Extreme Differences			Test Statistic	Asymp. Sig.(2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Absolute	Positive	Negative		
VL	45	3.24	.419	.079	.071	-.079	.079	.200[c,d]
RC	45	3.31	.223	.068	.055	-.068	.068	.200[c,d]

a. Test distribution is Normal.
b. Calculated from data.

DATA ANALYSIS OF HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis of the present study is, there is no significant relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and Iranian EFL elementary reading comprehension strategies. According to Table 4, the degree of correlation between elementary EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension strategy was positive and significant. Based on the data represented in this table, it can be seen that there was a positive correlation between the two variables, i.e. VLS and RSC. Although there was a trend towards significance even, such a correlation was not significant: r = 0.28, n = 45, *p* = 0.057> 0.05.

Table 4.*Correlation between Vocabulary Learning Strategy and Reading Comprehension Strategy*

		vocabulary	reading
Learning Vocabulary	Pearson Correlation	1	.28
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.057
	N	45	45
Reading Comprehension	Pearson Correlation	.28	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.057	
	N	45	45

A scatter plot summarizes the results (Figure 1) as follows:
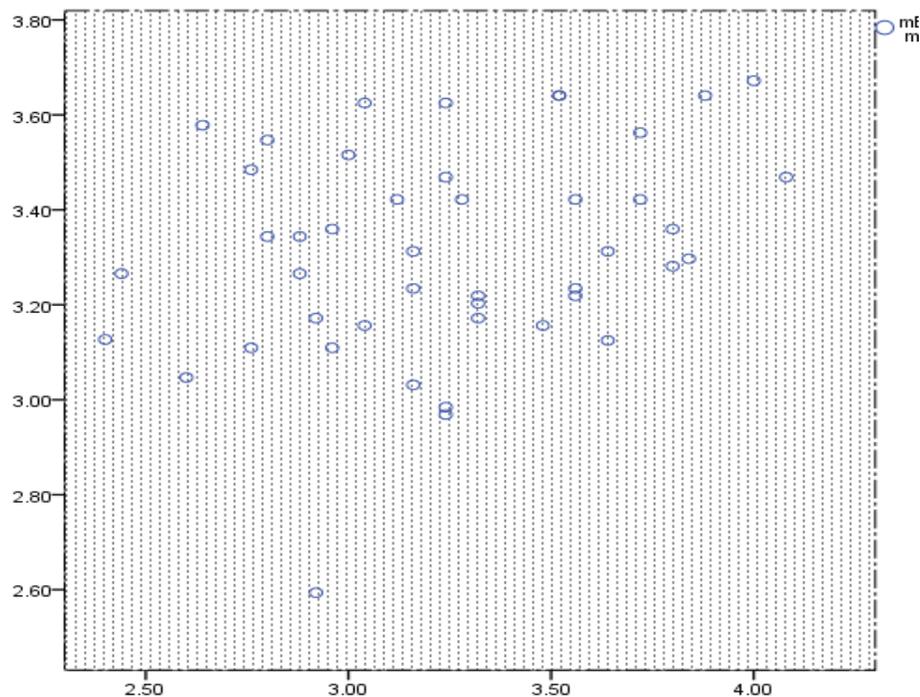
Figures 1.Scatterplot for VLS and RCS

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between Iranian EFL elementary learners' vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension strategies. Language learning vocabulary styles and strategies are among the main factors that help to determine how well our student learns a second or foreign language (Oxford, 2003). The results revealed that there is a positive relationship between elementary EFL learner's vocabulary learning strategies and reading comprehension strategies. However, the inferential statistics revealed such a relationship was not significant. As it was stated earlier, the results showed that the relationship between VLS and RCS had a trend towards significance level, even though the calculated value suggested that such a correlation was not significant. Therefore, the results need to be interpreted and discussed with caution. Overall, the findings of this study somehow support those of Hosseini Naveh, Kafipour,&Soltani, (2011) in which the researchers concluded that vocabulary learning strategies were not significantly correlated with the students' reading comprehension ability. Such a finding might be due to the fact that students are not aware of the importance of strategies for language learning. On the other hand, many elementary Iranian EFL learners suffer from their little understanding or their inability to choose the usable VLS and RCS which might have exerted negative impacts on the results of this study.

CONCLUSION

The major conclusion derived from the present study demonstrates that there is a positive relationship between Iranian EFL elementary learners' vocabulary learning strategies and their reading comprehension strategies; the correlation between these two variables showed that such a correlation is not, however, significant. Therefore, teachers perhaps do not need to overemphasize on one variable in order to maximize the other one. Indeed, promoting students' vocabulary learning strategies may not necessarily relate to their reading comprehension strategies and therefore may not necessarily promote their reading comprehension ability.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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