

Vocabulary Learning Strategies and English Language Performance: A Case of Secondary School Students in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study presents vocabulary learning strategy use and performance between male and female students in Tanzanian Secondary schools. The study adapted a vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire developed by Oxford. Like other previous studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies, the research has made comparison of strategy use between gender and their relationship with general English language performance. The students' performance was assessed using a comprehension text which measured their reading for comprehension ability, vocabulary knowledge ability and paraphrasing ability. The present study had a sample size of 195 students whose strategy use was compared to English language performance across genders. The study found greater use of vocabulary learning strategies among female students than male students and a higher performance among female students than their counterparts. However, there were a few Vocabulary Learning Strategies that were used most frequently by male students than female students. Even though there could be other variables that might have contributed to students' performance, this study recommends that teachers of English as a Foreign Language to devote their time more in helping the students choose and use the appropriate Vocabulary Learning Strategies.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning Strategies, English as a Foreign Language, Performance, Secondary School, Tanzania.

Introduction

Vocabulary is an essential aspect that contributes to proficiency in target language, and vocabulary learning strategies have been equally important to techniques that commit these words to memory and use (Schmitt, 1997; Oxford 1996). Strategies are the behaviors and thoughts that a

learner engages in during learning that are intended to influence the learner's encoding processes. Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) usually expose the learner of any language with an opportunity to acquire a new language. Many studies show that the conscious and coordinated use of vocabulary learning strategies is associated with language achievement and proficiency (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). It is also said, in order to learn and use English efficiently; learners need to expand proper vocabulary learning strategies for long- term learning. Language learning strategies are of interest not only for revealing the ways language learners apply learning strategies, but also for demonstrating how the use of strategies is related to effective language learning. It is said that students with an extensive knowledge of target language vocabulary become more successful in second language learning.

Previous studies on vocabulary and language learning have shown that (Nation 1990, 2001; Nation and Waring, 1997; Luppescu and Day, 1993; Schmitt, 2015) knowing a sufficient number of words is necessary for language proficiency. Thus, the knowledge of vocabulary is fundamental to the field of second and foreign language learning and so must be learned in some manner in order for learners to be competent in a new language. The use of effective vocabulary learning strategies is related to higher levels of language proficiency and short of that would be a hindrance toward language competence.

One of the challenges that many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face today is inadequate vocabulary knowledge and appropriate strategies for acquiring the target language. Lack of enough vocabulary was for example, found to be the largest reading comprehension problem for L2 Hungarian learners. Jones (1995:95) reports of his self-study experience as Hungarian L2 learner he noted that, his learners faced some difficulties in receptive and productive aspects as a result of inadequate vocabulary. He therefore concluded that, students need an orientation of appropriate vocabulary learning strategies that would direct them to communicative competence. As such, without rich vocabulary no meaningful communication can take place. For meaningful communication can take place better when one is rich in vocabulary, as mostly communication relies on vocabulary (MacCarthy; 1990; Oxford, 1990; Bialystocky 1981). Even to acquire a language, words need to be known and a good stock of vocabulary is the key to using the language effectively. This is equally as saying, when too many words are unknown, comprehension is compromised; listening becomes demanding, speaking becomes a fearing undertaking and reading turns out to be a tedious task.

On the other hand, evidence shows that learners who tend to use learning strategies in small extent usually experience a certain hardship in acquiring language skills that is reading, writing, listening and speaking (Park, 1994; Chang, 1991; Philips, 1991). It was also observed that communicative competence was easy for those learners who used the strategies more unlike those

who moderately used the strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies help to facilitate vocabulary and help the students become more independent in acquiring English language (Oxford, 1990). Thus, it is invaluable for a learner to be guided through a series of strategies that they need to be exposed to, as well as to be encouraged as it is the only way that can assist the learner in learning the target language. It is through the useful and appropriate strategy use when language learning becomes smooth and may therefore last a lifetime.

There is a noticeable difference in proficiency level between the learners who use strategies and those who do not use and those differences between more and less proficient language learners were found in the number and range of strategies used. Likewise, there is a difference in strategy use between poor and good language users, for example, they noted that poor learners of language tended to use inappropriate language learning strategies, mostly memorization strategies but they failed to improve their learning because of their inappropriate language learning strategies (Fewel, 2010; Cohen, 1998; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Wharton, 2000; Oxford, 1995; Samad and Singh; 2010).

With a similar view is Bialystock's (1981), who said, poor learners fail to improve their learning because they apply wrong strategies. On the other hand, he said, the use of language learning strategies helps the learner to cope with difficulties that prevent them from attaining desired proficiency in the new language. This is equally saying that the use of vocabulary knowledge plus a proper utility of strategies help to develop competence in the target language. This is why some strategy specialists believe that learners with strategic knowledge of language learning, compared with those without, become more efficient, resourceful, and flexible, thus acquiring a language becomes easier. The idea is that, if learners can develop, personalize, and use a repertoire of learning strategies, they will be able to achieve language proficiency in a much facilitated manner. What is still unknown up to this date, are what strategies and their frequency of use the Tanzanian learners utilize in vocabulary learning strategies and their relationship with English language performance.

Many studies have been conducted to study vocabulary learning strategies. These include (Noguchi, 1991; Oxford, 1990; Green, 1991;) much of these studies have been carried in Puerto Rico, Taiwan, China, Japan, the U.S., India and Egypt. These studies have demonstrated that learners differ in the range of strategies they use and in the effectiveness with which they apply those strategies (Gu & Johnson 1996; Schmitt 1997; Nyikos & Fan, 2007). These studies have researched on the effectiveness of particular vocabulary learning strategies, such as memory-based strategies, incidental vocabulary learning from reading, or consulting reference sources.

Some previous studies carried out in East African context (Msuya, 2016; Wambui; 2010) may be mentioned here. A study by Msuya studied general language learning strategies whereas Wambui studied vocabulary teaching in Kenya. Up to recently, there is little research done on vocabulary learning strategies in Tanzania, to be more specific. It was therefore crucial to carry out this study to compare vocabulary learning strategies use between male and female secondary school students in Tanzania. This was again important, since in Tanzania, English language is somewhere in between, it is not a completely foreign language neither is it a second language, hence many students in this context will meet most of their language encounters in the classrooms. Having realized that, it was imperative to find out what was still unknown in this side of EFL/ESL context. The other reason for this focus has partly been the significance attached to vocabulary and VLSs in enhancing English language proficiency. Therefore, due to scanty literature and the contribution vocabulary learning strategies has to language proficiency, it was enough a justification for carrying out this study. Therefore, this study was conducted to compare vocabulary learning strategy use between male and female students in Tanzania and their relationships with English language performance.

Studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

There are a number of large-scale studies carried out on vocabulary learning strategies, For example, Ahmed (1989) investigated how good and poor learners (300 EFL learners in Sudan) used vocabulary-learning strategies. Ahmed used a think-aloud procedure, observations, questionnaires, and interviews to collect data. The results showed that both good and poor learners used the same macro strategies (note-taking, memorization, practice, dictionaries or other information sources), but good learners applied more micro-strategies within each macro-strategy; for example, they often used words in context or tested themselves while practicing.

Also, Schmitt's (1997) administered 58-item questionnaire to 600 Japanese EFL learners of different ages: junior-high school, high school, university students, and adult learners. Following Nation (1990), Schmitt distinguished between strategies used for discovery of new words and strategies for consolidating the knowledge. Discovery strategies included determination strategies used for independent looking up of the word's meaning and social strategies used for asking teachers or classmates for a meaning. Consolidation strategies included social, cognitive, metacognitive, and memory strategies. The participants were asked to indicate what strategies they used most often, and what strategies they found most helpful. The results showed that using of a bilingual dictionary, verbal and written repetition, studying the spelling, guessing from context were the most frequently and helpful used strategies. It was also found that the youngest learners favored repetition; focus on form, L1-L2 word lists and cards. While more mature learners reported more strategies that involved deeper processing: imaging, associations, and analysis.

Some studies have looked into other variables such as gender, age, culture and context (Oxford, 1990; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989.) other studies have compared learners of different proficiency levels. Since the initial attempts at good language learner studies, considerable research has been devoted to understanding learning strategies with the specific target of identifying the relationship between proficiency and strategies (Lai, 2009).

Another study on vocabulary and performance was carried by Gu and Johnson (1996). Their study sought to establish the vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese university learners of English and the relationship between strategies and outcome in English. They administered a vocabulary learning questionnaire to 850 students categorized into three proficient groups. Their participants reported to use a variety of VLSs, the best students were using strategies than the other two groups, which they termed them as poor and moderate group. The strategies used included contextual guessing; paying attention to word formation and activation some strategies correlated with performance and others with vocabulary size but did not correlate to L2 proficiency. They concluded that vocabulary learning strategies contributed to both vocabulary size and performance.

These studies have provided the evidence that there is a positive relationship between language proficiency and the use of vocabulary learning strategies. To the best of my knowledge, up to recent, very scant literature has studied the relationship between VLSs and their relationship with gender and performance, and most especially in Tanzania. This study would therefore add to this knowledge gap. In the same line, majority of studies have been carried in Asia, America, hence the present study would add to the body of knowledge on vocabulary learning strategies in Tanzania.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania. The study purposively selected 195 students from four secondary schools in the Moshi Municipality. The sample of this study consisted of students from four secondary schools purposively selected. The sample was purposively selected first because this group was considered competent enough to be able to understand the questionnaire which was in English language. The second reason was this group was considered free from other internal and external routines such as national examinations. Then from each individual school one form III class was randomly sampled due to their availability in their school timetable. The data were gathered using a questionnaire adapted from Oxford (1990) on vocabulary learning strategies, all redundant items were removed from the questionnaire. The questionnaire reflected previous quantitative and qualitative research (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Ahmed, 1989; Gu, 1994). The questionnaire was divided into two parts: part one was about general information whereas part two comprised the five groups of strategies: cognitive, memory,

metacognitive, social, and memory strategies. There were a total of 17 items of individual strategies. The students were asked to rate each statement of a 5-point scale from all the time, often, sometimes, rarely, and never. The second instrument was a reading for comprehension text.

A Reading for Comprehension Text

We used a reading for comprehension text in this study as a measure of English proficiency not as an achievement on a given curriculum. The text was designed to assess the students' English language performance in relation to other students. The text had three sections which aimed at measuring their reading for comprehension ability, paraphrasing ability and word knowledge ability. The students were given 80 minutes to read and answer the questions which came along with the text. The students' written exercise from the text was marked and posted to SPSS in which their scores were computed and compared between male and female students and correlated with strategy use.

Analysis Procedures

This section presents the findings on strategy use between male and female EFL Tanzanian students. A group of five categories of vocabulary learning strategies from Oxford Taxonomy questionnaire (1990) were used to guide this study, they were: determination, social, metacognitive, memory and cognitive strategies. The strategies are presented both individually and in group. A Table for each strategy group is also presented showing their frequency, percentage and significance of use. The correlation test was run to compare the actual frequencies in which students gave different responses on the 5-point scale. The responses '1' and '2' (all the time and often") were consolidated into a single "high strategy use" category, and responses '3' and '4' ("sometime" and "rarely were combined into a single "medium strategy use" category, while the response '5' "never" was termed as no use strategy category so as to obtain cell sizes with expected values high enough to ensure a valid analysis.

Results

The Use of Determination Strategies between Male and Female Students

The findings on the use of determination strategy between male and female students showed that female students were high-users of determination strategies (131.4%) than male students (112.2%) however with low significance level ($p < 0.071$). Similarly, the results showed that male students were the moderate users of determination strategies (168.9%) while female seemed to be below men in the medium category use 146.3%.

Giving a closer look into individual strategies in the determination group, the strategy *guessing from the context strategy* was most frequently used by female (31.4%) while male scored low (28.4%). More female students used *dictionary* (66.1%) while male students who used

dictionary were (41.9%). On the other hand, the strategy of making sentence using a new word was most frequently used by male students (41.9%) whereas a few female students were (33.9%).

Table 1: The use of determination strategies

	Gender	High-use	Med-use	No-use	Total	Sig.
Guessing the meaning of vocabulary	Male	21(28.4%)	48(64.9%)	5(6.8%)	74	0.071
	Female	38(31.4%)	73(60.3%)	10(8.3%)	121	
Dictionary use	Male	31(41.9%)	41(55.4%)	2(2.7%)	74	0.071
	Female	80(66.1%)	36(29.8%)	5(4.1%)	121	
Making sentence using new word	Male	31(41.9%)	36(48.6%)	7(9.5%)	74	0.072
	Female	41(33.9%)	68(56.2%)	12(9.9%)	121	

The Use of Social Strategies between Male and Female Students

The findings on the use of social strategy between male and female students showed that female students used social strategies most frequently (147.9%) than male students (122.9%). Just like determination strategies, male students seemed to be the moderate users of the social strategies (135.2%) while the percentage of female who used this strategy was a little lower (120.6%). The strategy of *asking teacher for meaning* was most frequently used by male students (40.5%) than it was with female students (32.2%). A strategy of asking a friend for meaning was most frequently used by female students (71.9%) than (58.1%) of male students. A *strategy of asking help from parents or others*, had more female students (43.8%) as the most frequent users while males were (24.3%) and their difference was significantly higher.

Table 2: The use social strategies

	Gender	High-use	Med-use	No-use	Total	Sig.
Asking the teacher, the meaning of vocabulary	Male	30(40.5%)	33(44.6%)	11(14.9%)	74	0.072
	Female	39(32.2%)	61(50.4%)	21(17.4%)	121	
Asking help from parents/ others	Male	18(24.3%)	44(59.5%)	12(16.2%)	74	0.069
	Female	53(43.8%)	53(43.8%)	15(12.4%)	121	
Asking a friend to translate for me	Male	43(58.1%)	23(31.1%)	8(10.8%)	74	0.072
	Female	87(71.9%)	32(26.4%)	2(1.7%)	121	

The Use of Metacognitive Strategies between Male and Female Students

The general findings on the use of metacognitive strategy between male and female students indicated that female students used metacognitive strategy more frequently (267.8%) than male students (254.1%). *Loud practice* strategy had many female students (39.7%) who said they used this strategy most frequently while a few male students (28.4%) agreed to have been using this strategy most frequently. In the same line, female students (35.5%) out performed male

students *in note taking at home* while (33.8%) of female students used this strategy when at home. Findings showed that male students were a little bit higher (45.9%) in using *memorization strategies*; female students scored (45.5%), the difference with just a point in variation of use.

Table 3: The use of metacognitive strategies

	Gender	High-use	Medium-use	No-use	Total	Sig.
Loud practice	Male	21(28.4%)	29(39.2%)	24(32.4%)	74	0.071
	Female	48(39.7%)	42(34.7%)	31(25.6%)	121	
Note taking at home	Male	25(33.8%)	37(50.0%)	12(16.2%)	74	0.070
	Female	43(35.5%)	52(43.0%)	26(16.2%)	121	
Memorizing new words after class.	Male	34(45.9%)	28(37.8%)	12(13.2%)	74	0.071
	Female	55(45.5%)	44(36.4%)	22(18.2)	121	
Listening and watching songs/videos at home.	Male	56(75.7%)	17(23.0%)	1(1.4%)	74	0.058
	Female	90(74.4%)	25(20.7%)	6(5.0%)	121	
Translation to know the meaning of the new word.	Male	52(70.3%)	17(23.0%)	5(6.8%)	74	0.072
	Female	88(72.7%)	25(20.7%)	8(6.6%)	121	

The strategy of *listening to music and watching video (English language)* was most frequently used by male students (75.7%) than female students (74.4%). The strategy of *learning vocabulary through translation*, like other strategies, was most frequently used by female students (72.7%) while male students were (70.3%) though their significance level was low (0.072).

The Use of Memory Strategies between Male and Female Students

The findings on the use of memory strategy between male and female students showed that female students used this strategy most frequently (158%) than male students (147.2%). Just like determination, cognitive and social strategies, male students seemed to be the moderate users of memory strategies (122.9%) while female who used this strategy moderately were lower (106.6%) than male students.

Table 4: The use of Memory Strategies

	Gender	High-use	Med-use	No-use	Total	Sig.
Making mental association	Male	37(50.0%)	31(41.9%)	6(8.1%)	74	0.068
	Female	49(40.5%)	51(42.1%)	21(17.4%)	121	
Silent practice	Male	36(48.6%)	26(35.1%)	12(16.2%)	74	0.072
	Female	63(52.1%)	42(34.7%)	16(13.2%)	121	

Visualizing the spelling of the new words	Male	36(48.6%)	34(45.9%)	4(5.4%)	74	0.072
	Female	80(66.1%)	36(29.8%)	5(4.1%)	121	

In assessing the individual strategy in the group memory strategies, making *mental association strategy* was most frequently used by male students (50%) while female students were (40.5%) a little below the male students. Learning vocabulary through *silent practice* was most frequently used by female students (52.1%) and only (48.1%) of male students used it. The strategy of *visualizing spellings of the new word* was most frequently used by female (66.1%) than male students (48.6%). More male students (45.9%) used this strategy in moderation compared to female students (29.8%).

The Use of Cognitive Strategy between Male and Female Students

The results on the use of cognitive strategies by gender showed that female students were high users of cognitive strategies (143%) than male students (124.3%). Surprisingly, despite the fact that majority of female students seemed to utilize cognitive strategies more often than male students, the finding on the other hand has depicted that there has been a great number of female students (30.6%) who reported not to use this strategy at all when learning vocabulary, unlike (24.4%) of male students who said they never used this strategy when learning vocabulary.

Table 5: The use of Cognitive Strategies

	Gender	High-use	Medium-use	No-use	Total	Sig.
Repetition	Male	35(47.3%)	36(48.6%)	3(4.1%)	74	0.071
	Female	70(57.9%)	46(38.0%)	5(4.1%)	121	
Learning from vocabulary list	Male	23(31.1%)	42(56.8%)	9(12.2%)	74	0.070
	Female	40(33.1%)	60(49.6%)	21(17.4%)	121	
Note taking in the class	Male	34(45.9%)	34(45.9%)	6(8.1%)	74	0.071
	Female	64(52.9)	46(38.0%)	11(9.1%)	121	

Note taking in the classroom strategy was most frequently used by female students (52.9%) while male students were only (45.9%). Again, repetition strategy was most frequently used by female students (57.9%) while there were (47.3%) male students who used this strategy. *Word list strategy* was most frequently used by female students (33.1%) while male students using it were a little lower (31.1%). Generally, in all strategy categories, female students were the most frequent users of all the strategies however there were also many female students than male student who reported not to use any strategies when learning vocabulary.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Students' Performance

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The assessment of the test scores was clustered and linked with strategy use between genders. Results as presented earlier have shown that, there was significantly greater overall use of strategies among female students. Similarly, the results have shown a positive relationship to performance for all five strategy categories. It is important to mention here that, though majority of female students had higher performance (47.93%), there were many female students than male students who had low performance (33.06%). Majority of male students are to seen to be clustered in the medium performance (32.43%). These findings showed that, all the students who were not the frequent users of the strategies had at the same scored below in the given test. See Figure one on students' performance.

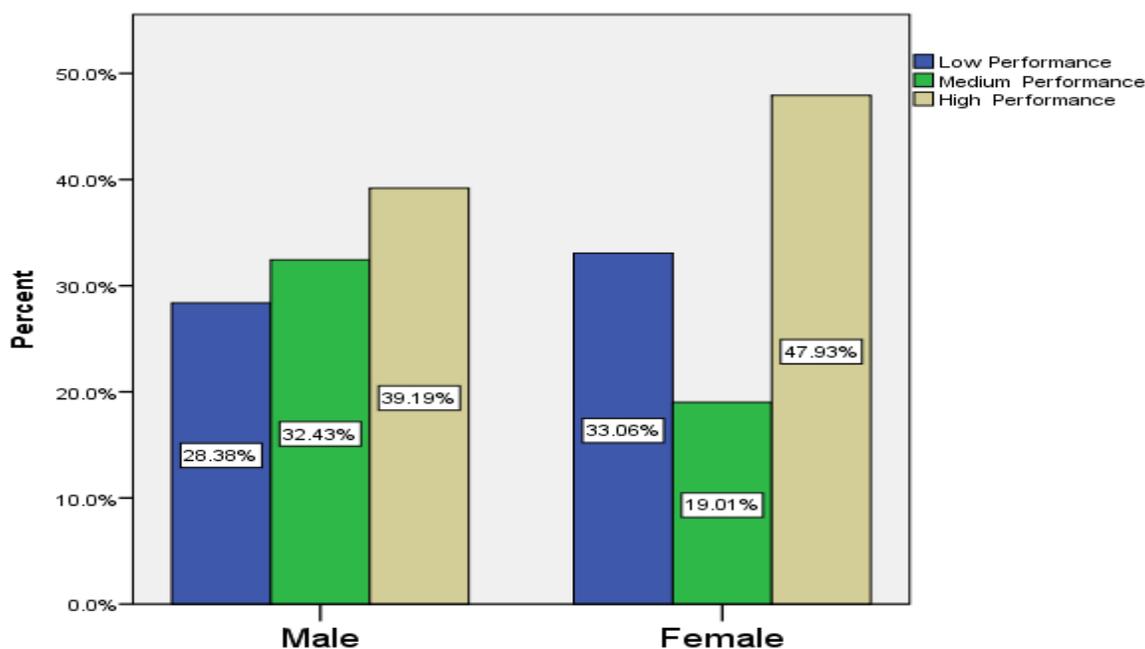


Figure 1: Gender Performance

The results of this study are consistent with previous Vocabulary Learning Strategies (Oxford and Burry-stock, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) studies and provide new evidence for a substantial relationship between strategy use and performance in language learning. Like previous studies, this study of Tanzanian male and female students found significantly greater overall use of VLSs among female students. It was found that all male students were generally the moderate users of vocabulary learning strategies whereas female students were the dominant users of almost all strategy categories. Also, as majority of the male students were the medium users of strategies and so were their performance on the given test.

Likewise, these findings on VLSs and performance corroborate the findings by Oxford (1996). In his study, he found a relationship between high strategy use with performance. He

however cautioned that strategies may highly correlate with vocabulary size but not with overall proficiency. Meaning that, the students would benefit more if they aimed at learning the language skills rather than at just recalling English equivalents of their L1. Assessing what Oxford has put forward, we can say that, teachers need to help the learners into using the strategies that will help the learners acquire all the skills of a word. This is in line with some earlier researchers (Richard, 1976; Hymes, 1971) who said that knowing a word includes knowing all other aspects such as syntactically and pragmatically forms of a word, and the ability to use it appropriately in social contexts as a social and cognitive phenomenon.

Discussion

The overall findings showed higher overall strategy use by female students than male students in all categories, i.e. determination, social, metacognitive, memory and cognitive strategies. This means that the female students were the higher users of all strategies while male students were moderate users of all the strategies. The most-used strategy was metacognitive, memory strategy was the second most used strategy, social strategy came third in the list, cognitive strategies came fourth and the least used strategy was determination. In individual strategies, it was however found that, a total of five strategies out of seventeen were most significantly used by male than female students. These were: *asking teacher for meaning, listening to music and watching video (English), the strategy of making sentence by using a new word, making mental association and memorization*. Some researchers such as (Hulstijn, 1997; Cohen & Aphek, 1981) believe that there are better strategies which students can use which enhance better retention than memorization. Regarding the use memorization strategy, Gu and Johnson (1996) believed that this strategy has never been a good predictor of vocabulary size and performance. They reported that, the Chinese students who used this strategy most frequently did not do well in language performance and in their vocabulary size.

Findings showed predominantly use of metacognitive strategies followed by determination, social, memory and the least in frequency of use was cognitive strategies. Similar to these findings were the results by (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Park, 1997) who supported the claims that metacognitive strategies are closely related to a higher level of language proficiency. Similarly, their study found a correlation between cognitive strategies to proficiency; it was however contrary to this study as the students' cognitive strategy did not correlate with performance since this was the strategy with least frequency of use.

Generally, it is crucial to point out here that, though female students were the most frequent users of all twelve strategies their variation in terms of frequency and percentage in strategy use between these two groups was not statistically significant with $p\text{-value} = 0.068$. One could therefore agree that using more strategies is better than using a few seeing the fact that the results

of this study have shown positive correlations with performance, with female students seen to do better than male students.

A study by Oxford and Burry-stock involving a large scale (N = 374) students on language learning strategy use reported similar findings, the more the participants used the learning strategies the better was their performance. The participants of their study were the students at three different course levels at the University of Puerto Rico. Their study found that female students were the frequent strategy users which also correlated with their overall general English language performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings showed that the female used strategies most frequently than male students. Like other previous studies, the present study has also demonstrated the relationship between strategy use and English language performance. This study provides new evidence regarding strategy use between male and female students, with female students seem to perform better in strategy use and in the test that measured their language performance.

It is worth mentioning that, the sampling of the data was limited to only 195 sample size of secondary students in Tanzania. Therefore, some of the findings are limited to this study and may not be generalizable to all language learners given the fact that there are many variables that were not put studied in the present study. According to Oxford (1990) culture, motivations and language learning context have an influence to strategy choice and to language learning as a whole. What could be done is for the teachers to help their students using a variety and appropriate strategies in learning vocabulary.

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