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An Overview of Saudi EFL Learners' Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This paper presents Saudi EFL learners' self-assessment of vocabulary learning strategies. The participants of the study were 50 advanced Saudi EFL learners. 25 statements of vocabulary learning strategies were presented to the learners for self-assessment on a 0-4 point scale. The data was analyzed qualitatively. Results show that learners are unaware of the most of the strategies and also do not use them in learning words. It was found that learners' poor language skills at school level indicate learners' lack of awareness and use of vocabulary strategies. This paper suggests that acquiring

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014

Dr. Rajakumar Guduru, M.A. (TESL), M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. (ELT)

242

An Overview of Saudi EFL Learners' Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

vocabulary learning strategies promotes better learning of both receptive as well as productive vocabulary which in turn enhances learners' knowledge of comprehension of texts in FL and communication. The paper concludes by offering some suggestions and useful techniques that interest learners in acquiring vocabulary.

Introduction

Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides the basis for understanding how well learners listen, speak, read, and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential in terms of academic success. Further, lack of proficiency in vocabulary also hampers learner' optimal use of the language learning opportunities available aplenty (the radio, newspapers, television). Research on vocabulary in recent years has focused on the levels of vocabulary learning which learners need to achieve in order to read original materials, not simplified or abridged, and to process different kinds of oral and written texts. Research also explored the kinds of strategies learners use in understanding, using, and remembering words. Thus, now the importance of vocabulary and its role has been greatly acknowledged both in learning and in teaching a second language.

Defining terms: 'Vocabulary' and 'Strategy'

In the context of second or foreign language learning, it is generally understood that vocabulary means 'new words'. Now let us look at the definitions given by two well-known dictionaries. According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, vocabulary means 'All the words known and used by a particular person' (CALD p. 1423). According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, vocabulary means 'All the words a person knows or uses' (OALD p. 1707).

Language learning strategies gained more importance during the 1970s, and there was a shift of focus from the teaching methods to learners centered activities facilitating their language learning (Schmitt, 1997). Oxford (1990), suggests a number of terms that refer to learning and strategies, for example: *strategies, actions, techniques, tactics, skills*,

etc., These have been, at times, used interchangeably to refer to: “any set of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information that is, what learners *do* to learn and *do* to regulate their learning (Rubin, 1987, p. 19).” In a more simple way, Oxford (1990, p. 9) defines learning strategies “as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.”

Aspects of Vocabulary Knowledge

Learning words in any language other than one’s mother tongue is not a day’s task. In other words, words are not instantaneously acquired by the second language or foreign language learners. A number of researchers in second language acquisition are of the opinion that words are gradually learned over a period of time from numerous sources of exposure. This suggests that there are different aspects and degrees of knowing a word. Also vocabulary knowledge could be thought in terms of the receptive and productive knowledge, of which it is assumed that the receptive knowledge occurs first followed by the productive. One should be aware of the fact that vocabulary knowledge consists of more than just two facets – meaning and word form, of which people talk about mostly while learning new words.

Many researchers advocated that the word knowledge listed below is required in order to master a word (Wallace, (1982); Nation (1990); Henriksen, (1999); and Lowes et al. (2004)).

- a) Recognize it in its spoken or written form;
- b) Recall it at will;
- c) Relate it to an appropriate object or concept;
- d) Use it in an appropriate grammatical form;
- e) In speech, pronounce it in a recognizable way;
- f) In writing, spell it correctly;
- g) Use it with the words it correctly goes with, i.e. in the correct collocation;
- h) Use it at the appropriate level of formality;

- i) Be aware of its connotations and associations.

All the aspects of word knowledge mentioned above are related and therefore are essential for anyone to perform well in a wide variety of contexts. However, it is impossible for one to gain immediate mastery of all the aspects of word knowledge when the word is encountered for the first time. Each aspect of word knowledge may be learned in a gradual manner from numerous contexts. From this perspective, vocabulary acquisition is not spontaneous but incremental in nature (Richards, 2000; Nation, 2001; Read, 2000). Hence, teaching vocabulary and strategies to learning vocabulary becomes an important goal in any language learning programme.

Approaches to Teaching Vocabulary

It is believed that teaching is not always equal to learning for the reasons such as: (a) what is taught is not necessarily what is learnt and vice versa; (b) different learners might learn the same item at different times and (c) different learners might learn the same thing by following different styles and strategies. In other words, different learners learn differently and learners learn different things in different ways. Hence, let us now look into some of the approaches to learning vocabulary.

Incidental Learning

Incidental vocabulary learning refers to learning vocabulary without any intent to learn it— that is, learning vocabulary when the learners' primary objective is to do something else (e.g., to comprehend a reading passage) (Schmidt, 1994).

It is said that incidental learning (i.e., learning vocabulary as a by-product of doing other things such as reading or listening) can be achieved through extensive reading. This strategy has been recommended as a regular out-of-class activity (Nation, 1990; 2001; Schmitt, 2000). It requires teachers to provide opportunities for extensive reading and listening.

Explicit Instruction

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014

Dr. Rajakumar Guduru, M.A. (TESL), M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. (ELT)

245

An Overview of Saudi EFL Learners' Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Explicit instruction has to do with identifying specific vocabulary acquisition targets for learners. It involves diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting words for the first time, elaborating word knowledge, and developing fluency with known words. It varies according to different proficiency levels of various learners and can be successfully used with the elementary and intermediate learners. Here the teacher plays a major role in designing a special vocabulary list or in making use of the existing lists such as; the General Service List (West, 1953), Basic English List (C.K. Ogden), Dolch Word List, or the University Word List (Nation, 1990) etc. These lists focus on the most common words learners need to learn for effective reading.

Independent Strategy Development

This is a strategy under which the learners are given opportunities or taught techniques for inferring word meanings from the given context. It is assumed to be a very complex and difficult strategy as learners are expected to know 19 words out of every 20 words (i.e., 95%) of a text, which requires knowing the 3,000 most common words (Liu & Nation 1985; Nation, 1990). In addition, learners are required to know the background of the text in order to guess the correct meaning. It is proved that initially, guessing words from the context is time consuming and therefore it is more likely to work for more proficient learners than elementary learners. Once the learners decide that a word is worth guessing, they might follow a five-step procedure which Nation and Coady (1988, pp. 104-150) propose:

1. Determine the part of speech of the unknown word.
2. Look at the immediate context and simplify it if necessary.
3. Look at the wider context. This entails examining the clause with the known word and its relationship to the surrounding clauses and sentences.
4. Guess the meaning of the unknown word.
5. Check that the guess is correct.

Other well-known independent strategies such as using dictionaries, maintaining vocabulary notebooks, word parts study, study of prefixes, roots and suffixes, etc., are also a part of independent strategy development.

Integrated Approach

For many years lexis, grammar and discourse are viewed as separate entities and this impression has been translated into teaching. However, with the advent of the communicative language teaching era, it is felt that such a disconnected approach makes language teaching unnatural. Hence, an integrated approach is advocated for effective language teaching. Lexis, grammar and discourse are well connected and given equal and appropriate importance without prioritizing one and dismissing the other. This principle of integrated approach is better actualized in the classroom through suitably designed activities rather than pre-determined content. Teaching vocabulary through reading, selecting reading passages for vocabulary and grammar activities, joint efforts by the teachers and learners in task designing, learner involvement / participation, establishing connection between new and known words are the strengths of this approach. Besides suggesting a number of strategies for building up vocabulary, Nation (2001) argues that vocabulary instruction should be integrated in such a way that the listening, speaking, reading and writing components of a language programme are dealt with collectively.

Why Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies?

There are two different schools of thoughts about whether vocabulary should be taught at all: one which supports the idea that vocabulary should be taught to the learners and the other which does not. Research gives reasons for the need for an efficient learning of vocabulary in FL because vocabulary knowledge has an impact on other abilities which contribute to successful learning of FL. Since Saudi EFL learners lack vocabulary as well as awareness of vocabulary learning strategies, it is very important in the present context to give them an opportunity to self-assess these prominent and well known techniques under one single framework. The other reasons for such a need for Saudi EFL learners' self-assessment of vocabulary learning strategies are because these strategies:

- play an active role in acquiring learners' both receptive and productive vocabulary
- sustain learners' interest in acquiring vocabulary
- facilitate learners with easy learning of unknown words
- provide learners with ample resources and ways for learning new vocabulary
- raise awareness of learners of various new vocabulary learning strategies
- encourage learning of new and unknown words outside the classroom
- expose learners to various material outside the classroom
- reinforce and strengthen the existing vocabulary knowledge of learners

In the light of above arguments, the need for self-assessment of vocabulary learning strategies cannot be ignored, more so in the case of the Saudi EFL Learners. The present study supposes that raising awareness of vocabulary learning strategies through self-assessment would certainly enhance the Saudi EFL learners' competence and performance in acquiring new and unknown words. This would in turn facilitate efficient comprehension leading to learners' confidence and academic success.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were 50 Saudi EFL learners studying undergraduate course in a college. These learners' mother tongue (L1) is Arabic and they belong to age groups of 19-24 years. Learners live in a context of English as a foreign language (EFL) and have very limited proficiency in English language both inside and outside the classroom.

Questionnaire

The vocabulary learning strategies self-assessment questionnaire was administered to 50 Saudi EFL learners of College of Science and Arts, King Khalid University, Balqarn. The learners belonged to subject streams of Computer Science and English. The questionnaire consisted of two parts intended to gather information on **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014

Dr. Rajakumar Guduru, M.A. (TESL), M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. (ELT) 248

An Overview of Saudi EFL Learners' Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

learners' proficiency, and 25 statements of vocabulary learning strategies. The self-assessment questionnaire, on 4-0 point scale, was administered in a classroom for about 60 minutes. Learners took their own time on self-assessing questionnaire.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Learners' Background

The questionnaire (Qs. 1-2) focuses on learners' current level of proficiency in English. The table below presents learners' responses to the first question.

1. *How often do you do the following activities?*

Frequency of doing the Following Activities

Activities	Always	Sometimes	Never
a) Listen to English programmes on the radio	0%	4%	46%
b) Watch TV programs in English	5%	15%	30%
c) Watch English films	8%	15%	27%
d) Interact in English with others	0%	13%	37%
e) Participate in elocution/debates in English	0%	7%	43%
f) Read English newspapers	0%	8%	42%
g) Read English novels/stories	0%	3%	47%
h) Write poems, stories and essays in English	0%	3%	47%

The table above records learners' response to the first question: how often they do a select set of activities that help improve their FL proficiency. The table reveals that Almost 100% of the learners do not listen to English programmes on the radio. Majority of the learners 90% of the learners state that they hardly watch TV programs in English on channels like Discovery, Animal Planet, Travel and Living, and others. 85% of the learners stated that they sometimes watch English films. 95% of the learners stated that they never read English newspapers.

The 'Always' column of the table reveals the rather deplorable language skills that the Saudi EFL learners are equipped with. In brief it shows that learners never read English novels/stories, never attempt creative writing, never participate in elocution/debates in English because of low language proficiency and fear of facing an audience. The table thus exposes the rather pathetic scenario that the learners are placed in, in terms of language skills: they lack vocabulary, their reading skills are limited, listening skills are inadequate with their writing skills touching the lowest ebb. Further, learners do not seem to evince interest in developing their language skills through the activities outlined above.

2. How often do you use English in the following contexts?

Use of English in Various Contexts

Context	Always	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
At home	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
At college	0%	0%	8%	12%	30%
Among friends	0%	0%	0%	6%	44%

The table above records the responses to the second question of the questionnaire *how often do you use English in the following contexts?* The responses above reveal that none (100%) of the learners use English at home. They speak only the mother tongue, Arabic (L1), at home. Only few learners, probably those who are aware of the importance of English in both academic and professional career, use English at colleges in order to enhance their skills. 95% of the learners state that they never use English among friends. This is because they share a common L1 and are rather shy and reticent to speak in English owing to the fear of making mistakes and the subsequent ridicule. We can therefore conclude that learners rarely speak English at home, college and among friends. From the analysis above, we can conclude that Saudi EFL learners operate within very limited functional literacy in English.

Questionnaire

English vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire was self-assessed on a 4-0 point scale (4 = always use it; 3 = often use it; 2 = sometimes use it; 1= seldom use it; 0 = never use it) by the Saudi EFL learners. The analysis is presented below.

The Statement of Vocabulary Learning Strategies.	Degree of frequency				
	4	3	2	1	0
1. I use a bilingual dictionary to help me translate English words into Arabic language.	35	8	5	2	0
2. I use pictures illustrated in the textbook to find the word meanings	28	12	7	2	0
3. I learn meaning of words by identifying its part of speech.	8	5	9	20	8
4. I ask the teacher to translate the words into Arabic.	41	6	3	0	0
5. I ask the teacher to put an unknown word into a sentence to help me understand the word meaning	17	12	5	10	6
6. I ask my classmate for meaning.	34	11	4	1	0
7. I know some new words when working in group works.	4	9	24	12	1
8. I practice English in group work activities.	5	3	9	26	7
9. I ask native speakers for help.	0	0	0	0	50
10. I learn words about the culture of English speaking countries.	2	2	8	31	7
11. I write a new word in a sentence so I can remember it.	5	7	11	9	18
12. I study a spelling of new words.	3	5	17	4	21
13. I use physical actions when learning words.	12	7	13	14	4
14. I speak words out loud when studying.	23	11	4	7	5
15. I repeatedly practice new words.	4	6	8	23	9
16. I write a new word on a flash card so I can remember it.	0	0	0	0	50
17. I learn words by listening to vocabulary CDs.	0	0	3	1	46
18. I record vocabulary from English soundtrack movies in my notebook.	0	3	0	2	45
19. When I try to remember a word, I write or say it repeatedly.	6	15	23	6	0
20. I make vocabulary cards and take them with me wherever I go.	0	0	0	3	47

21. I listen to English songs and news.	2	1	6	15	26
22. I memorize word from English magazines.	4	2	12	21	11
23. I review my own English vocabulary cards for reviewing before the next lesson starts.	0	0	3	2	45
24. I do not worry much about the difficult words found when reading or listening, I pass them.	14	11	9	11	5
25. I use on-line exercise to test my vocabulary knowledge.	0	0	4	2	44

From the table above it can be seen that 86% of the learners use a bilingual dictionaries to translate English words into Arabic language; 80% of the learners use pictures illustrated in the textbook to find the word meanings; 56% of the learners never learn meaning of words by identifying its part of speech; 94% of the learners ask the teacher to translate the words into Arabic; Majority 40% of the learners ask the teacher to put an unknown word into a sentence to help me understand the word meaning; 90% of the learners ask their classmates for meaning; 70% of the learners learn some new words when working in groups; 66% learners practice English in group work activities. 50% of the learners never take native speakers for help; 72% of the learners never learn words about the culture of English speaking countries; only 20% of learners try to write a new word in a sentence so that they can remember it; 25% of the learners study a spelling of new words; 25% of the learners use physical actions when learning words; 30% of learners speak words out loud when studying; 35% of learners never practice new words; 100% of learners never write a new word on a flash card so I can remember it; 95% of learners never learn words by listening to vocabulary CDs; 95% of learners never record vocabulary from English soundtrack movies in their notebook; 40% of learners try to remember a word, they write or say it repeatedly; 100% of learners never make vocabulary cards and take them with them wherever they go; 95% of learners never listen to English songs and news; 25% of learners sometimes memorize words from English magazines; 100% of learners never review their own English vocabulary cards for reviewing before the next lesson starts; 35% of learners do not worry much about the difficult words found when reading or listening, they pass them; 95% of learners never use on-line exercise to test their vocabulary knowledge.





Discussion of Findings

From the findings of the results it can be said that English in Saudi EFL context is taught through traditional methods of Grammar Translation, Structural Approach, and Rote Learning. The college has been provided with modern equipment such as computers, a tape recorder, language laboratory. However, these aids have not been fully utilized by the learners due to lack of interest in learning language. One of the main reasons could be that the classrooms are entirely teacher-centered; consequently learning English appears to be an agonizing experience for the learners.

It was found that there were a few learners who find it difficult even to recognize certain letters of the alphabet. This was because the learners were not exposed to the correct models of pronunciation. The learners were not aware of the silent letters in words— a common feature in the English spelling. As a result, the learners pronounce words phonetically and this misleads them. This can be regarded as one of the major reasons for the learners' poor spellings ability as well. It was found that the learners do not possess adequate reading skills. Most of the learners were unwilling to read aloud. Teachers persuade them for a long time to achieve this skill. It was because the learners never do any reading in FL on their own. At this point, it can be strongly emphasized that the importance of extensive reading in FL and its benefits in learning FL vocabulary.

Few Hints for Learning Vocabulary

The following are a few hints that have been suggested over the years in learning a second or a foreign language vocabulary especially at elementary level. It is believed and proved from practice that if learners follow these techniques, they can achieve better proficiency in terms of vocabulary knowledge. The language teachers too may keep these techniques in mind while teaching FL in the 'compensatory classes' suggested above.

-  read English newspaper daily for about one hour
-  listen to English news on television or on radio daily
-  listen to teachers and friends speaking
-  read stories, magazines and other books of interest

- ✚ maintain vocabulary notebooks
- ✚ use a good dictionary
- ✚ Ask teachers or friends for the meanings of new words
- ✚ read posters, wall papers, tickets, etc. when travelling to new places
- ✚ read books on vocabulary building and do exercises
- ✚ watch films in English or films with subtitles
- ✚ watch T.V serials, educational programmes, news etc., in English
- ✚ play vocabulary games and do more puzzles on vocabulary online

Hints on Gathering and Studying Words

Firstly, at elementary stages, it is quite important for one to choose which words one is going to study. If one tries to learn too many words, it is easy to forget them soon or get confused with them. It would be better to limit the number of words to 5 or 6 and learn them thoroughly than try to learn fifteen to twenty words at one go. It is good to employ certain techniques while studying new words effectively. Lowes et al. (2004) suggests some techniques that can be used as a checklist by oneself on how one records or remembers the new words encountered. Some of the ways to record are:

- ✓ Word + translation
- ✓ Word + picture
- ✓ Word + spelling
- ✓ Word + an example sentence
- ✓ Word + definition in English
- ✓ Word + pronunciation
- ✓ Word + opposite or synonym
- ✓ Word + the text it came from

Secondly, after choosing words to study, what bothers most of the learners is the question: how to study them? There are plenty of ways to study words. Some of them are active and some are passive in nature. They are given below.

Sixteen ways of studying vocabulary

Some of the feasible ways to study words among those suggested by Lowes et al. (2004: p.82) are given below:

Here are 16 ways of studying vocabulary. Tick the ones you use:

- | | |
|---|----------|
| 1. Underlining or highlighting words in a text | () |
| 2. Using a dictionary to find the meaning of a word | () |
| 3. Using pictures and diagrams in the text to help | () |
| 4. Keeping word lists and reading through them regularly | () |
| 5. Using a vocabulary workbook to do exercises | () |
| 6. Organizing new vocabulary in mind maps or tables | () |
| 7. Collecting examples of new words, such as tickets,
advertisements, letters and realia | () |
| 8. Carrying cards with new words on them in your pockets | () |
| 9. Repeating new words to yourself many times | () |
| 10. Learning a poem or a song with new vocabulary in it | () |
| 11. Labelling items with their names in English | () |
| 12. Asking someone to explain a word to you | () |
| 13. Asking a friend to test you | () |
| 14. Guessing the meaning of the word in context before checking
with the dictionary | () |
| 15. Writing paragraphs using new vocabulary | () |
| 16. Explaining the vocabulary you have learnt to a friend | () |

Few Hints on Using Dictionaries

It is essential for all the FL learners, especially for the beginners to keep a good dictionary. A good dictionary can be a great help in building one's vocabulary. Almost all the aspects of vocabulary knowledge can be found in a good dictionary. One should be very careful while choosing the dictionary one wants to use. First, learners have to know what their level (elementary, intermediate, or advanced) is. In this regard, teachers would

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014

Dr. Rajakumar Guduru, M.A. (TESL), M.Phil. (ELT), Ph.D. (ELT)

255

An Overview of Saudi EFL Learners' Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

be able to suggest to the learners the suitable dictionaries since they can assess the learners' level of proficiency. Therefore, it is good to approach one's teacher before buying a dictionary. Also one can seek teachers' and friends' help when using a dictionary.

Learners may initially choose bilingual dictionaries at elementary level. But as they progress in studies, they should switch over to monolingual dictionaries. Teachers should encourage and guide their learners to buy and make use of good dictionaries when learning new words in FL. Some of the good dictionaries are:

- ❏ Oxford Picture Dictionaries (for Elementary Learners)
- ❏ Oxford Learner's Pocket Dictionary (for Intermediate Learners)
- ❏ Longman's Active Study Dictionary (for Intermediate Learners)

Conclusion

The study has attempted to understand the Saudi EFL learners' vocabulary learning strategies. Vocabulary is the 'felt need' of these learners. It is essential for these learners to learn these words in order to meet the demands that learning an FL involves. This study is an attempt to raise awareness of Saudi EFL learners of their vocabulary learning strategies to better facilitate their learning and to address most of the problems affecting the learners' academic success such as– lack of basic vocabulary, inability to recognize words and comprehend the text.

The paper strongly recommends all the Saudi EFL learners to be familiar with the vocabulary learning strategies so that these learners could easily acquire basic vocabulary, word families, past tense markers, present tense markers, plural forms, gender, person, number of English nouns, inflection forms, etc. Mastering these strategies will also help learners prioritize various aspects of vocabulary knowledge which are necessary to meet their immediate academic needs.

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Appendix

**King Khalid University
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Questionnaire of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Course: Vocabulary Building 2
Code: 219
Teacher: Dr. Rajakumar Guduru

This of vocabulary learning strategies is designed for students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL).

Part I: General Information

Name: _____ Id No: _____

Age: _____

How long have you been studying English?

3-5 years

5-10 years

10 years and more

1. How often do you do the following activities?

Put a tick mark in the box which best describes your choice.

Activities	Always	Sometimes	Never
a) Listen to English programmes on the radio			
b) Watch TV programs in English			
c) Watch English films			
d) Interact in English with others			
e) Participate in elocution/debates in English			

f) Read English newspapers			
g) Read English novels/stories			
h) Write poems, stories and essays in English			

2. How often do you use English in the following contexts?

Put a tick mark in the box which best describes your choice.

Context	Always	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
At home					
At college					
Among friends					

Part II: Statements of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Put a tick mark in the box (4, 3, 2, 1, or 0) that tells the degree of opinion on the strategies you use to learn English vocabulary.

4 = always use it **3** = often use it **2** = sometimes use it **1** = seldom use it
0 = never use it

The Statement of Vocabulary Learning Strategies.	Degree of frequency				
	4	3	2	1	0
1. I use a bilingual dictionary to help me translate English words into Arabic language.					
2. I use pictures illustrated in the textbook to find the word meanings					
3. I learn meaning of words by identifying its part of speech.					
4. I ask the teacher to translate the words into Arabic.					
5. I ask the teacher to put an unknown word into a sentence to help me understand the word meaning					
6. I ask my classmate for meaning.					
7. I know some new words when working in group works.					
8. I practice English in group work activities.					
9. I ask native speakers for help.					
10. I learn words about the culture of English speaking countries.					
11. I write a new word in a sentence so I can remember it.					

12. I study a spelling of new words.					
13. I use physical actions when learning words.					
14. I speak words out loud when studying.					
15. I repeatedly practice new words.					
16. I write a new word on a flash card so I can remember it.					
17. I learn words by listening to vocabulary CDs.					
19. When I try to remember a word, I write or say it repeatedly.					
20. I make vocabulary cards and take them with me wherever I go.					
18. I record vocabulary from English soundtrack movies in my notebook.					
21. I listen to English songs and news.					
22. I memorize word from English magazines.					
23. I review my own English vocabulary cards for reviewing before the next lesson starts.					
24. I do not worry much about the difficult words found when reading or listening, I pass them.					
25. I use on-line exercise to test my vocabulary knowledge.					

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