A Comparison between ECE and TEFL University Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies in the Lebanese Context

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the difference in the reported use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) between university students majoring in Teaching Early Childhood Education (ECE) and students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The participants were 84 sophomore and junior EFL students at a public university in Beirut, Lebanon, taking English as mandatory courses. A test was administered to determine the vocabulary level of the participants, and a questionnaire was used to collect data about their VLS. The test and questionnaire were piloted earlier to ensure the validity of the tools. The obtained data were analyzed by using SPSS. In addition, qualitative data were collected from interviews conducted with random samples of the participants and their instructors and from classroom observations. The results indicated that TEFL students had a significantly higher reported use of memory strategies than ECE students. Therefore, it was concluded that memory strategies are significantly correlated to vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: *VLS, ECE, TEFL.*

1. Introduction

Mastering the four basic skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) relies greatly on the learner's vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have long been considered pivotal for vocabulary acquisition, for if the learners are inclined to procure L2 vocabulary, they should acquire substantial knowledge of VLS. Thornbury [1] declared that good language learners are those who can build up their own VLS with the aim that they can do it without an instructor's help.

In the Lebanese context, where the research is conducted, only a limited number of research studies have focused on the strategies learners use to acquire new vocabulary. Therefore, more research studies are required to help in understanding the roles VLS play in developing the EFL learners' vocabulary repertoire and which strategies EFL learners rely on most.

The findings of the current research study are expected to contribute meaningfully to teaching English as a Foreign Language field.

The primary purpose of the current research study is to compare the reported use of VLS and the vocabulary level of TEFL and ECE students at a public university in Beirut. For this, the following research questions have been formulated:

- What is the difference in vocabulary knowledge between TEFL and ECE students?
- What is the difference in the reported use of VLS between TEFL and ECE students?

2. Theoretical Background and Review of Literature

After being overlooked for several decades, vocabulary learning has recently attracted the attention of many researchers [2]. To aid EFL learners and enrich their vocabulary learning experience, researchers have exerted tremendous effort to discover the diverse aspects of vocabulary learning. Nunan [3] assures that learners need to use specific strategies and techniques to reach a proficiency level of vocabulary knowledge.

Catalan [4] stated that vocabulary learning strategies involve the mindfulness of the strategies used to learn, retain, retrieve, and utilize new vocabulary. Following is a description of the vocabulary learning strategies utilized in the current study:

- *Metacognitive regulation strategies:* are regarded as high-order thinking skills which entail planning, considering the learning process, examining one's production, and finally gauging the learning outcome after the activity completion [5].
- *Guessing Strategies:* for successful guessing of words, students should be knowledgeable about the world, linguistics, and strategies [6]. The higher the learners' language level is, the more efficient their guessing would be [7].
- *Dictionary Strategies:* are the strategies used mainly by learners [8]. However, both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries have their limitations. Laufer [9] recommended employing bilingual dictionaries for quick reference and monolingual dictionaries for comprehensive knowledge about the words.
- *Memory Strategies*: encompass lexical semantics and mental lexicon. Research proves the efficiency of the semantic network e.g., [10].

3. Research Methodology

To address the study questions, the current research applies the mixed-methods research design. Descriptive statistics, reliability and factor analysis, and correlation coefficients were used to address the study questions.

3.1. Participants

The participants in the current research study are 45 students at one public university in Beirut. The participants were majoring in ECE and TEFL, studying English as a Second Language as part of their major courses.

3.2. Instruments

The participants' vocabulary knowledge was assessed through a modified version of the TOEFL Test. The Vocabulary Knowledge Test included four main tasks: Choosing the word closest in meaning to the underlined word (24 words), selecting the correct words from frequently misused pairs (8 pairs), selecting the correct definitions for confusing pairs of words (9 words), and selecting the word that best completes the sentence (9 words).

The participants' reported use of vocabulary learning strategies was measured through a self-administered Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire which encompassed 24 items adapted from Gu and Johnson's [11].

Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations (8 visits to each class) as well as thorough interviews with the two English instructors (each instructor was asked five questions previously set for this research) and a focus group of four participants (6 questions were previously set).

3.3. Research findings and discussion

The findings are presented and discussed according to the two main purposes of the current study: 1) to determine the difference in vocabulary knowledge between TEFL and ECE students, and 2) to identify the difference in the reported use of VLS between TEFL and ECE students. The answers are based on the data collected from the students using the quantitative and qualitative tools.

3.4. The Participants' Vocabulary Knowledge

The vocabulary test was used to collect data about the participants' knowledge of vocabulary. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice items. The scores obtained range between 0 and 100. The results in Table 1 below demonstrate that the vocabulary knowledge of the TEFL students is (Mean = 64.86) was better than that of the ECE students (Mean = 60.07).

3.5. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The researchers analyzed the results obtained from Table 1 pertaining to the various sections of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire. Those sections were categorized as 1) Metacognitive Strategies, 2) Guessing Strategies, 3) Dictionary Strategies, and 4) Memory Strategies.

The results depicted in Table 1 below indicate that students of both majors, ECE and TEFL, use a variety of effective vocabulary learning strategies, but they do so quite moderately.

Metacognitive Regulation Strategies: For metacognitive regulation strategies, the mean scores ranged between 21.75 for ECE students and 22.57 for TEFL students. This signifies that 48.3% of the ECE students use metacognitive regulation strategies, whereas 50.1% of the TEFL students use them.

In classroom observations, the researchers noticed that the instructors occasionally wrote noted about the new words on the board, and only some students were writing down the notes.

- *Guessing Strategies:* For the guessing strategies, the mean scores ranged between 19.63 for ECE students and 19.98 for TEFL students, revealing that the frequency the respondents use the guessing strategies is very acceptable. This signifies that 43.6% of the ECE students use guessing strategies while 44.4% of the TEFL students utilize the guessing strategies. In classroom observations, the researchers noticed that both instructors encouraged their students to use their common sense to guess the meanings of the unfamiliar words before consulting the dictionary applications on their cellphones.
- *Dictionary Strategies:* For the dictionary strategies, the mean scores ranged between 23.86 for ECE students and 25.13 for TEFL students. This signifies that 53% of the ECE students used dictionary strategies, whereas 55.84% of the TEFL students used these strategies. In classroom observations, the researchers noticed that both instructors encouraged their students to use the monolingual dictionaries on their cell phones to check the pronunciation or the spelling of the word.
- *Memory Strategies:* For the memory strategies, the mean scores ranged between 20.64 for ECE students and 22.02 for TEFL students. This signifies that 45.8% of the ECE students used memory strategies, whereas 48.9% of the TEFL students used these strategies. In classroom observations, the researchers noticed that none of the instructors asked the students to specify a notebook for vocabulary learning. Similarly, none of the instructors encouraged the students to form a mental image (visualize) the meaning of the word. But both instructors encouraged their students to activate their schemata when trying to learn a word or grouped the words spatially on the board.

In the interview, the instructors affirmed that most of their students try to relate the new words to already learned ones. They also confirmed that barely any of their students tend to study the synonyms, antonyms, or the other definitions of the words.

	ECE		TEFL		t-test	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Vocabulary	60.07	15.53	64.86	14.27	-1.807	0.073
Metacognition	21.75	3.69	22.57	3.26	-1.329	0.186
Guessing	19.63	2.57	19.98	2.90	-0.742	0.459
Dictionary	23.86	3.14	25.13	3.96	-1.762	0.081
Memory	20.64	3.66	22.02	3.01	-2.298	**0.023**

Table 1
Comparison of VLS and Vocabulary Knowledge between ECE and TEFL Students

4. Comparison between ECE and TEFL University Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies

In the table above, we notice that the vocabulary knowledge of the TEFL students (Mean = 64.86) is higher than the vocabulary knowledge of the ECE students (Mean = 60.07).

We also notice that the p-value of the memory strategies is less than 0.05, which indicates a statistically significant difference between the students of ECE and the students of TEFL. The results of the obtained descriptive statistics and the independent t-test indicated that both groups utilized the four vocabulary learning strategies: Metacognitive regulation strategies, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, and memory strategies. Although TEFL students used the above-mentioned strategies more frequently than their ECE counterparts, there is only a significant difference in the use of memory strategies among the two groups. TEFL students used memory strategies more frequently than ECE students did. These findings of the current research match Schmitt's [7] findings in his study about EFL students in Japan. Students with high proficiency levels were found to be using different kinds of VLS more frequently than their less proficient counterparts.

The results depicted in Table 1 of the current study are in agreement with the findings of several research studies. In a research study titled The Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Good and Poor Language Learners, Zhang and Li [12] discovered that "both good and poor language learners used many effective strategies for vocabulary learning" and that poor language learners used learning strategies less frequently than good learners, which made the authors conclude that "vocabulary learning strategies were positively related to learning outcomes" [12].

Finally, the results in the current study indicated that there are no significant differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies between ECE and TEFL students. These results are in agreement with the results of a large-scale survey conducted by Gu [13], which revealed that discrepancies in the use of vocabulary learning strategies among learners of different academic majors were found mainly between arts and science majors, but the distinctions between strategy categories were not clear-cut.

Conclusion and Implications

The current research study has investigated vocabulary knowledge and the use of vocabulary learning strategies by university students majoring in TEFL and ECE. The results evidently show that the utilization of vocabulary learning strategies is quite common among university students in Beirut. The results also indicate that students with high vocabulary knowledge use memory strategies more frequently than their counterparts.

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