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Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Turkish as a Foreign Language Context

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ABSTRACT

Since the 15th century, when the Turkish language initiated its adventure as a taught foreign language, we have come a long way. In a parallel way, with the increasing demand of Turkish as a Foreign Language (TFL), Turkish language pedagogy has been continuing to improve adjusting to the new trends in language teaching in the world. The ultimate aim of learning a language is that effective communication cannot be actualised without knowledge of substantial vocabulary. Vocabulary learning and teaching, from a 'grammaticalized lexis (Lewis, 1993)' perspective, forms a crucial part of foreign language development, and thus, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) - rooted in cognitive and psycholinguistic research paradigms - are of utmost importance (Lewis, 1993; Nyikos and Fan, 2007). With all these in mind, this study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies employed by 155 international students studying Turkish preparatory year programme at the Turkish Language Learning Centre (TÖMER) of a state university in Turkey. Descriptive results reveal that lower proficiency groups (A1 and A2) employ VLS strategies more than B2 level group does. Memory, Affective and Social Strategies are found to be the most frequently used strategies. One-way ANOVA results reveal that there is a statistically significant difference among proficiency levels of the participants. With respect to gender, t-test results show a difference for one type of strategy employed. The results are discussed in terms of significance and association with previous research. In the end, suggestions and implications are given for stakeholders of learning and teaching TFL.

Keywords:
vocabulary learning strategies, language learning strategies, Turkish as a foreign language, second language teaching

1. Introduction

Definitions of language learning strategies (LLS) have undergone a continuous development from the first definition of Rubin (1975, p. 43), which was "... the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge", and the definition itself has been a matter of debate since then. Of the most appreciated, Oxford's (1990, p. 8) definition of LLS was as "... learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations."

Dornyei & Skehan (2003) modified the definition by adding the self-regulation component and highlighted learners' active involvement in the learning process. Chamot (2004, p. 14) later defined it as "Learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take to achieve a learning goal" stressing the conscious effort. By a relatively recent attempt, Griffiths (2008) made a review of previous definitions by including self-regulation and conscious actions in language learning strategy account.

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The 'good language learner' has been a concept approached from multifarious SLA perspectives; in addition, the way those learners handle strategies has also been observed since Rubin's (1975) pioneering article titled "What the good language learner can teach us". She revealed the fact that good language learners use strategies, though not in current names, and identified what strategies learners use to learn better. Recent notes from the same perspective come from a number of studies. For instance, Griffiths (2003) investigated 348 language learners and found a positive correlation between proficiency and frequency of strategy use, notwithstanding other variables. Griffiths (2010), also studied the strategy use of two successful language learners by means of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and interviews. She found that despite individual dissimilarities, both learners were found to employ strategies frequently.

Oxford (1990) proposes six types of strategies which are cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensatory, affective and social strategies. The strategies are divided into two categories as direct and indirect. Cognitive, memory and compensatory strategies are listed as direct, whereas the indirect ones are listed as metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Moreover, she defines language learning strategies as memory strategies for storing and retrieving information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, compensation strategies for overcoming limitations in language learning, metacognitive strategies for planning and monitoring learning, affective strategies for controlling emotions, motivation, and social strategies for cooperating with others in language learning.

Language learners, in turn, have to employ these language learning strategies to be able to gain communicative competence. Within the scope of the current study, Oxford (1990)'s direct and indirect learning strategies encompass vocabulary learning strategies.

Underlining the importance of vocabulary, Lewis (1993) asserts that "Language is a grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar". Learners develop their languages through acquisition of vocabulary items along with the grammar rules to which they are exposed. Recaptured by Schmitt (2010, p. 5), knowing a word means knowing the meaning(s) of the word, the written and spoken form of the word, grammatical behavior and collocations of the word, the register, associations and the frequency of the word and these features are interrelated with each other, which makes acquiring vocabulary complex in nature for learners.

Nonetheless, vocabulary learning enhances learners to pass the threshold level which enables them to take part in real communication and to develop high L2 reading comprehension (Clarke, 1980). Nyikos and Fan (2007) emphasize that vocabulary has a crucial role in both receptive and productive skills that are interrelated with effective communication. Additionally, Nyikos and Fan (2007) explain that VLS research has been instigated by the fact that the academic and interpersonal vocabulary needs of learners surpass their ability to learn and effectively integrate newly learned vocabulary.

In this respect, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) have been under investigation to what extent their use facilitates the learning process for foreign language learners. According to Schmitt (2000), VLS are categorised as "(1) strategies that are useful for the initial discovery of a word's meaning, and (2) those useful for remembering that word once it has been introduced."

He further classifies the strategies into five. Determination strategies (DET) contain strategies used by an individual in situations that require discovering the meaning of a new word without resorting to others' help. Social strategies (SOC) occur during interaction with other people with the aim of improving language learning. Traditionally known as mnemonics, Memory strategies (MEM) are about associating words to be retained with some previously learned knowledge, through various forms of imagery, or grouping. Cognitive strategies (COG), based on Oxford (1990) are defined as strategies that "exhibit the common function of manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner." Metacognitive strategies (MET), on the other hand, are the ones that "involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study" (Schmitt, 2000).

Regarding the employment of VLS, studies vary in results which might be a good level of success, a limited level of success in some circumstances resistance from learners (Schmitt, 2000). The level of proficiency is considered a highly significant factor in that (Kern, 1989 cited in Schmitt, 2000). Also, knowledge and acceptance of the instructors, the effects of strategy training are considered influential (Chamot, 1987; Schmitt, 2007). The varying use of VLS among proficient learners sign other factors that might act as determinants.

Gender is one of these causal factors as put forward by a number of researchers (Nyikos, 1987; Grace, 2000; Catalan, 2003; Gu, 2005). To this end, this descriptive study aims to contribute to the literature investigating the variables of proficiency and gender in an international Turkish as a foreign language learning context.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Proficiency and VLS use

Altan (2003) conducted a research study with 21 intermediate level EFL students and revealed that social strategies were employed by the intermediate level learners followed by cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, memory and affective strategies respectively. Another focus of the study was to find out whether the scores on the experimental exam were significantly effective in terms of different strategies. The results indicated that compensation strategies were used by high-achievers more than low achievers which meant that high-achievers used clues to predict novel vocabulary items in the context whereas the lower group needed more proficiency to do so.

Likewise, Hamzah et al. (2009) found out that determination strategies were preferred the most while social strategies were preferred the least. They also analysed the relationship between vocabulary size and VLS use, and only nine items were found to be significant (using physical action, talking to native speakers, taking notes, working on new words repeatedly, using bilingual dictionary, using technology, studying with friends, studying the pronunciation, repetition of vocabulary items, p. 45). These nine strategies were found to be enlarging the vocabulary.

Nacera (2010) explored vocabulary size and vocabulary learning strategies of 46 English major students and found that meta-cognitive strategies were used the most frequently. Besides, wider vocabulary suggested a tendency to use predictions from the context alike Altan's study (2003). However, interaction with native speakers, using a visual to recall a word, getting help from others were also distinguishable for higher and lower learners in that the first group favoured these more than the second group. It was also suggested that higher learners employed strategies that necessitated more diligence and attempt when compared to the lower learners.

Çelik and Toptaş (2010) surveyed 95 Turkish EFL learners who were enrolled in Ankara University School of Foreign languages about the frequency of the use of vocabulary learning strategies and the perceptions of these strategies by the learners. The study illustrated that elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate level learners had almost equal mean scores for social strategies. The determination and metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, were not employed by the lowest group as much as pre-intermediate and intermediate level learners. Intermediate level learners preferred to use the cognitive strategies. As for the perceptions of the participants, it was revealed that they showed a mismatch between their perceptions in that they did not favour social strategies as much as they utilised these strategies. Instead, they perceived the metacognitive strategies as the most useful ones. The ratings of the participants also clearly showed that they did not employ the strategies very often which paved the way for suggesting a need for instruction on language learning strategies.

Tılfarlıoğlu and Bozgeyik's (2012) study with 252 EFL learners from four proficiency levels preferred determination strategies most frequently, and social strategies were the least preferred strategies. Memory strategies were found to be in positive correlation with the proficiency level while VLS preferences were not consistent with the proficiency level overall.

Nosratinia, et al. (2013) explored the correlation between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies. The results illustrated that social strategies and memory strategies were the most salient indicators of learner autonomy.

Tok and Yığın (2014), in their descriptive study with 52 students who were of B2 level, revealed that social strategies were used most frequently followed by determination, cognitive, metacognitive and memory strategies respectively. Preference for interacting with Turkish natives had a percentage of 62 followed by 'asking the meaning of Turkish word to a friend or the instructor' (25.7 %). The highest percentage was for interacting with Turkish natives. As for cognitive strategies writing to revise had a percentage of 32.5 being

the most frequently used strategy. Making use of movies, songs and the internet were preferred most (95.5 %) regarding metacognitive strategies.

Biçer and Polatcan (2015) surveyed TÖMER students to explore the relationship between proficiency and VLS use with the survey prepared by Kocaman and Kızılkaya (2014). The least and most frequently used strategies found were cognitive (mean = 3.10) and metacognitive (mean = 3.56) respectively. Memory, compensation and social strategies yielded results with significant differences regarding proficiency whereas the other subgroups (metacognitive, cognitive and affective) did not. The highest proficiency group (C1) tended to use VLS less often than their counterparts (B1 and B2).

Bristi (2015) conducted a study with EFL learners, and the findings revealed that determination strategies were employed at the highest level by the participants. Cognitive strategies were found to be the least preferred strategy type. On the other hand, using affective strategies such as using movies and songs were specifically preferred at the highest level as an overall result and regardless of the proficiency level. Bristi also stated that no significant difference was found for the three different proficiency groups.

Baskın et al. (2017), in their study with 22 A1 TFL learners enrolled in TÖMER, noted that cognitive strategies were employed less often than the other strategies while the determination strategies such as prediction of unfamiliar words, employing dictionaries, word lists, vocabulary cards were used the most. The fact that the group was of the lowest proficiency was indicated as the reason for the employment of determination strategies more often.

1.1.2. Gender and VLS use

Kocaman (2015), in his experimental study, accompanying the computer-assisted vocabulary teaching and learning tools intended to explore the VLS use of secondary school EFL learners. He revealed a preference of metacognitive strategies over cognitive and compensatory strategies among sixth graders. Besides, a significant difference was found with compensation strategies use. As for gender, the only significant difference was discovered in the use of compensation strategies in favour of male participants.

Barut (2015) found that TFL learners employed compensation and social strategies more frequently than the other strategies while affective strategies were found to be used the least. As for gender, the overall results showed that female participants preferred to use strategies more often than their male counterparts (p. 69 - 70). The frequency of the use of strategies was also found to be higher for more proficient learners which meant that proficiency played a significant role in the preferences of vocabulary learning strategies.

Gu (2002) investigated gender, the area of academic study and VLS use of Chinese EFL learners and found that females used VLS more than males.

Green and Oxford (1995) explored 374 university students' proficiency and gender variables in terms of the preferences of VLS. They concluded that female and higher proficiency groups preferred to use VLS more. However, proficiency levels did not suggest a significant difference for VLS use.

Catalan (2003) questioned the gender differences of 581 Spanish-speaking participants who either learnt Basque or English regarding quantity of VLS and specific VLS and inferred that females tended to use quantitatively greater VLS. Using a bilingual dictionary, taking notes about an unknown word, predicting an unknown vocabulary item from the context were also found to be the first three most used strategies that were adopted by both females and males.

In their meta-analysis study, Nematollahi et al. (2017) scrutinized 30 experimental studies to explore the frequency and type of strategies used. Based on Schmitt's (2000) taxonomy, the most frequently employed strategy was found to be determination strategy respectively followed by cognitive, memory, meta-cognitive and social strategies. They concluded that direct strategies result in a better grasp of vocabulary along with the finding that the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies and different learning contexts, treatments, and research methods are interconnected.

Park (2000) investigated Korean EFL learners' (n=600) use of VLS with a questionnaire based on Schmitt (1997). The results were discussed in relation to informants' grades (from elementary to university), ages and gender. The results attested that Korean learners preferred to use diglot dictionaries (cognitive strategy), predicting the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context (memory strategy) and asking the meaning of words to

their friends (social strategy) most often to learn new vocabulary items. In terms of age variable, all four groups employed dictogloss dictionaries and predicting meaning from context most often. The results did not indicate a significance for gender groups. However, there was a subtle difference in males' and females' preferences in that males preferred to ask the meaning of an unknown vocabulary to the instructor while females desired to focus on the parts of an unknown vocabulary item to figure out the meaning.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the most frequently employed strategies overall?

2. Is there any significant difference in VLS preference between genders?

3. Does level of proficiency have a significant impact on the VLS preferences of the TFL learners?

2. Method

2.1. Participants & Setting

The study comprised 155 international students (100 Male, 52 Female, 3 unspecified gender) enrolled in TÖMER (Teaching Turkish as a Foreign Language Center) at Sakarya University, Turkey. The data were collected by convenience sampling method. The sample consisted of 108 A1, 19 A2 and 28 B2 level students who were graded according to the placement test given by TÖMER. Since the data were collected during the class hours, due to the available group sizes the number of the participants varied in each group.

2.2. Data collection and Instruments

The data were collected during the participants' regular classes in the fall term of the 2016-2017 academic year. This study instrumented a VLS questionnaire which was adopted from Kocaman (2015) to collect the data to identify students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies. The questionnaire consisted of 32 items measuring direct (memory, cognitive, compensation) and indirect (metacognitive, affective and social strategies) strategies. Upon negotiating with the administrators and the instructors, the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was implemented in English, and only the students with adequate proficiency in English were requested to answer the questions. Firstly, the students ensured that they understood all items before marking their answers and those who had difficulty grasping the meaning of the items were excluded from the procedure. Both the instructors and the students were informed about the purpose of the study.

Table 1. Distribution of the items according to strategies

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Memory strategies
Items 8, 9, 11, 12, 13	Cognitive strategies
Items 10, 15, 16 and 32	Compensation strategies
Items 14, 17, 18, 19	Metacognitive strategies
Items 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25	Affective strategies
Items 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31	Social strategies

2.3. Data Analysis

The reliability was analysed, and Cronbach Alpha value was found to be .85, which was considered highly reliable. In order to decide on the appropriate statistical tests to analyse the data with respect to gender and proficiency, a test of normality was run.

3. Results

Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests indicated the normal distribution of the data for both factors ($p>0.05$). Hence, parametric tests were employed for further statistical analyses.

Table 2. Tests of Normality for Gender and Proficiency

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	GENDER	Statistic	df	p	Statistic	df	p
Sum3	MALE	,054	100	,200*	,989	100	,612
	FEMALE	,112	52	,108	,973	52	,286

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	PROFICIENCY	Statistic	df	p	Statistic	df	p
Sum3	A1	,069	108	,200*	,977	108	,064
	A2	,120	19	,200*	,972	19	,809
	B2	,161	28	,062	,959	28	,338

Research Q 1.

In order to find out the frequency of overall strategy use by all levels, descriptives were investigated, and the means indicated that Memory Strategies (A2>A1>B2) – Affective Strategies (A1>A2>B2) – Social Strategies (A1>A2>B2) had the highest means respectively (Table 3). Also, B2 level students were found to use the strategies the least.

Table 3. Means for overall strategy use

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cognitive	155	7,00	24,00	17,1373	3,65297
Memory	155	10,00	35,00	24,9419	4,41991
Compensation	155	5,00	20,00	14,6438	3,24858
Metacognitive	155	7,00	20,00	14,2856	2,84273
Affective	155	14,00	30,00	23,4223	3,40562
Social	155	10,00	30,00	20,7437	4,34449
Valid N (listwise)	155				

Research Q 2.

With respect to gender, independent t-test was run, and although there was not a total significant value, and only use of compensation strategies differed significantly (,033<0,05) by gender and the means show that male group use compensation strategies more than females.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-test results for VLS according to gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		Mean Difference	p
Sum3	Male	100	116,9600	16,04176	1,60418	Equal variances assumed	3,78892	,150
	Female	52	113,170	13,85204	1,92093	Equal variances not assumed	3,78892	,133
Cognitive	Male	100	17,2938	3,60596	,36060	Equal variances assumed	,42143	,504
	Female	52	16,8724	3,81143	,52855	Equal variances not assumed	,42143	,512
Memory	Male	100	25,0700	4,46367	,44637	Equal variances assumed	,22385	,769
	Female	52	24,8462	4,43862	,61553	Equal variances not assumed	,22385	,769
Compensation	Male	100	15,0375	3,12345	,31234	Equal variances assumed	1,19159	,033
	Female	52	13,8459	3,43231	,47598	Equal variances not assumed	1,19159	,039
Metacognitive	Male	100	14,3458	2,93456	,29346	Equal variances assumed	,17872	,716
	Female	52	14,1670	2,73744	,37961	Equal variances not assumed	,17872	,710
Affective	Male	100	23,7032	3,19430	,31943	Equal variances assumed	,80940	,165
	Female	52	22,8938	3,75380	,52056	Equal variances not assumed	,80940	,188
Social	Male	100	21,1089	4,49527	,44953	Equal variances assumed	,98615	,188
	Female	52	20,1228	4,09239	,56751	Equal variances not assumed	,98615	,176

Research Q 3.

For the question whether the level of proficiency is determinant of VLS use, One-way ANOVA was run, but prior to that, homogeneity of variances test (Levene Test) was conducted to decide the appropriacy of ANOVA.

According to One-way ANOVA results, A1 - B2 levels differed regarding the use of Metacognitive, Social and Affective Strategies and there was also a significant difference between A2 - B2 levels regarding Memory Strategies. A1 level TFL students used Metacognitive, Social and Affective Strategies more than B2 learners did. In addition, A2 level students employed Memory strategies more frequently than B2 level students.

Table 5. Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	p
Sum3	,774	2	152	,463
Cognitive	,842	2	152	,433
Memory	,086	2	152	,918
Compensation	,327	2	152	,722
Metacognitive	,755	2	152	,472
Affective	1,359	2	152	,260
Social	,994	2	152	,372

Table 6. One-way ANOVA results for differences among proficiency levels

Proficiency Level	N	Mean		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
A1	108	117,4056	between groups	2479,512	2	1239,756	5,636	,004
A2	19	117,7189	Within groups	33436,439	152	219,977		
B2	28	107,0597	total	35915,951	154			
Total	155	115,5750						

In order to determine by which levels the difference was generated, post-hoc (Scheffe) test was run, and the results illustrated that there was a significant difference ($p<0,05$) between A1 - B2 levels. No statistically significant scores were found for A1 and A2 in terms of strategy types employed.

Table 7. Post Hoc Scheffe test Results

Dependent Variable	(I) PROFICIENCY	(J) PROFICIENCY	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p
Sum3	A1	A2	-,31333	3,68979	,996
		B2	10,34584*	3,14533	,005
	A2	A1	,31333	3,68979	,996
		B2	10,65918	4,40840	,057
	B2	A1	-10,34584*	3,14533	,005
		A2	-10,65918	4,40840	,057

Table 8. One-way ANOVA results- descriptives

		N	Mean
Memory	A1	108	25,2037
	A2	19	26,0526
	B2	28	23,1786
	Total	155	24,9419
Metacognitive	A1	108	14,6070
	A2	19	14,4200
	B2	28	12,9545
	Total	155	14,2856
Affective	A1	108	23,8231
	A2	19	23,1211
	B2	28	22,0808
	Total	155	23,4223
Social	A1	108	21,1485
	A2	19	21,6015
	B2	28	18,6004
	Total	155	20,7437

According to the means, A1 and A2 proficiency groups demonstrated a greater tendency to use VLS more than B2 group.

4. Discussion

Baskın et al.'s (2017) findings depicted that cognitive strategies were the least preferred when compared to the other types of VLS; however, the current study revealed that TFL learners made use of memory strategies most. Overall results indicated that TFL learners employed metacognitive strategies, which promoted planning and organisation skills, at the lowest level.

The results of Biçer and Polatcan's study differed in that memory, compensation and social strategies had significant differences in terms of proficiency level (B1 (n=7), B2 (n=30), C1 (n=13)). C2 learners, in their study, were also found to be using VLS less than the lower groups as it was in our study. Also, Biçer and Polatcan claimed the fact that higher group showed less use of VLS was rooted in the assertiveness of highly proficient learners. However, the differences in the use of VLS might have been due to the different proficiency groups included in the studies. While Biçer and Polatcan compared B1, B2 and C2 learners, the current study did so by comparing A1, A2 and B2 learners.

Tok and Yığın (2014) found the memory strategies as the least frequently used ones by B2 learners and the current study revealed that the memory strategies had the highest scores of all. The results obtained from B2 learners were in line with the B2 sample in Tok and Yığın (2014) in terms of memory strategies. However, findings in our study posited that B2 learners showed a significantly lower scores in all types of strategies.

Metacognitive and determination strategies were used most frequently and this is also in contrast with our findings in that metacognitive strategies were preferred the least by our sample groups.

In contrast with Barut (2015), Gu (2002), Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Catalan (2003)'s studies, male participants of the current study used VLS more than females. However, the overall VLS use was not significant for the two groups. Only the compensation strategies revealed significant results, and males used compensation strategies more often than females. The use of technology (technological programs, games and videos) was of the compensation strategies (questionnaire items 10, 15, 16, 32). Although significantly different scores may have attribution to the individual characteristics, the results showed that gender played a significant role in the choice of VLS and it may be concluded that males were inclined to use technology while learning a second or foreign language. Similarly, Kocaman's (2015) study revealed that male participants employed compensation strategies (use of computer, use of the internet, use of videos and games) more than female participants.

5. Limitations

This study was conducted with only three levels of TÖMER students. The results could be different with a wider range of proficiency levels. The gap among the distribution of the participants according to proficiency levels and gender might have affected the results. Due to time and participant accessibility restrictions, triangulation in data collection could not be utilised. Also, the nationalities of the participants, which could be a rational variable in the present context, was not treated as a variable due to the unequal distribution of nationalities.

6. Suggestions

As Little and Kobayashi (2014) points out the need for an explicit VLS instruction for lower and higher proficiency level learners, TFL learners may be offered explicit instruction about VLS.

Specifically designed VLS instructions may be employed for TFL learners who are coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds. A focus on the strategies that were favoured by the participants may be an indicator for researchers to develop VLS instruction plans.

A wider number of TFL students who are studying at other universities in Turkey may be included in future studies. Due to the scarce literature about TFL students' VLS use, replications of the study might be informative when conducted with higher proficiency levels.

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