Spanish language learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies: The role of gender

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Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge is considered as a vital constituent of learning foreign languages. Therefore, the strategies of vocabulary learning have been gaining great attention in the field of learning and teaching a second and foreign language, due to the significant impact of learning vocabulary on the learners' progress. In this respect, the objective of the present study is to examine the correlation between learners' use of vocabulary learning strategy (VLSs) and gender and how gender might affect the learners' use of VLSs. For this purpose, 86 female and male Spanish learners took part in this study from a Turkish private university, majoring in English language teaching and study Spanish as a foreign language. The data was obtained by administering a VLSs questionnaire. The results of the study at hand proved that the female and male Spanish language learners are active users of VLSs and there were not any significant differences between females and males in terms of entire VLSs. However, it was reported that female learners use cognitive strategies more efficiently than the male learners. These findings will pave the way for language teachers to encourage their students to employ several VLSs in order to enhance their academic achievements.

Key words: Vocabulary learning strategies, language learning strategies, gender

1. Introduction

Psychological variables have shown as much importance as other extraneous variables like social class, methodology and teacher. They can have interactions and weaken or strengthen each other. For instance, a student's high anxiety level (as an internal variables) can be weakened by a group of learners in a continuous interaction with each other (as an external variable). There is also a shift of attention on learners and the way they are intentionally collaborating with other many variables. More collaboration on the part of the learner will bring about more independence and consequently a student who can function more effectively on his/her own. This trajectory of learning has been referred to as autonomous learning. This state of 'autonomy' is usually associated with the amount of strategies a learner employs during learning (Ortega, 2009).

There has been a great deal of research addressing the influence of Language learning strategies (LLSs) and the role of other factors on the efficiency of use of those strategies. However, a challenge of high significance is to find the answer as to why there are disparities between the learners using the same LLSs. In other words, the use of strategies alone has not been regarded as a good answer and has caused the paradigm a hot and controversial area of concern (Zahar, Cobb and Spada, 2001). Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), considered as a sub part of strategies is also rather limited in research. There have been variations in the amount of vocabularies learnt in spite of the similar level of strategies repertoire (Oxford & Nyikos,1989).

Based on some researchers (Rhothstein, Paunonen, Rush, & king, 1994) who examined the relationship between personal features and academic outcomes, released that the number of people willing to learn second/foreign language has increased, several aspects related and unrelated to learning languages have been studied in the recent years to explain more the individual differences (Brown, 2007), in order to explain how these differences have an impact on the learner's performance (Bandura, 1997).

Vocabulary is perceived as a vital feature in learning languages, it can be also regarded as an essential constituent for developing capability in entirely communication fields among language users (Celik & Toptas, 2010; Hoshino, 2010). It is also considered a distinctive aspect that links all language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) together. For Rubin and Thompson (1994) "Vocabulary learning is at the heart of mastering a language". It is a means which enables the learner to communicate, read and write in different languages. Fan (2003) added that learning vocabulary is one of the most central elements in learning languages.

Gu (2003, p. 1) defined VLS as ''the purposeful analysis of the vocabulary learning task, the planning, deployment, monitoring, and evaluation of learning behaviors in order to acquire the vocabulary of a second language." VLSs that are commonly utilized by the learners are repeating, memorizing, writing down some notes on new lexical words (Schmitt, 2000). Schmitt noted that novice learners utilize 'shallow' techniques to learn vocabulary, for instance, repetition and memorization, while advanced learners utilize 'deeper' techniques, such as determination and consolidation techniques (p.132). It is also claimed that the efficiency or inefficiency regarding the use of VLSs depend on multiple factors like motivation, attitude, age and gender among others.

Although there is an increasing interest in this field trying to find relationships between any variable and the use of VLSs. And despite the fact that gender has gained a good deal of interest in a variety of contexts, the researcher couldn't find any research in Turkish context attempting to discover any relationship between the use of VLSs and gender. This study, with the purpose of developing the understanding of the language teaching experts, is an endeavor to find if there is any link between gender and VLSs. Another point that can probably draw a distinction here is the researcher use of Spanish language learners instead of the well-accustomed English language learners.

2. Literature review

The field of research on learning strategies in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular has brought about crucial theoretical and pedagogical implications to the literature and assisted language teaching practitioners a lot. Research pertaining to gender has generated conclusions that point to the superiority of females over their male counterparts.

The literature on VLSs principally focuses on a number of variables to confirm their correlation with the language learners' choice of strategy use. To cite some dominant and seminal examples among others, motivation (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), language learners' proficiency level (Chang, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995), and gender (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Chandler, Lizotte & Rowe, 1998) can be brought here. Concerning the correlation between the mentioned factors and VLS us, the researches in general unanimously pointed to the existence of a positive correlatio. However, the study at hand embraced the variable of gender in Turkish EFL context. One of the very first studies that investigated the link between gender and the use of strategies was carried out by Politzer (1983) who concluded that female participants in his study used more strategies compared to the males. Peacock and Ho (2003) and Oxford and Nyikos's (1989) large scale study on 1200 learners generated similar results later in 1995 Oxford and Green concluded that females used more variety of strategy categories than male peers. Dreyer and Oxford (1996) also showed a significant difference in terms of strategy use in favor of females.

The motivation for this study scarcity of research (if any) in the context of turkey focusing on students learning Spanish as a foreign language. This, per se, draws a distinction between this study and the ones reported here. A secondary aim of this study was to see if the Turkish female or male learners of Spanish language use different strategy categories in different rates. Among the different vocabulary learning strategies, the following categories were investigated: cognitive, determination, social and memory.

3. Method

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a private university in one of the cities in Turkey, 86 female and male students were chosen randomly from English Language Teaching department, where the students study Spanish language as a compulsory course. A VLSs questionnaire was utilized in the present study to collect the data, which is proposed by Schmitt's (2004) and obtained from Lip (2009).

Procedure

86 male and female Spanish learners were randomly chosen by the researcher to participate in this study at hand. The students majoring in English Language Teaching and study in a private university in Turkey, the students study Spanish language as a compulsory course. In order to gather the data, a VLSs questionnaire was distributed to 86 students. The questionnaire consists of 27 statements that were related to the strategies of vocabulary learning. The total statements were divided in four sections: five statements on cognitive strategies, ten statements on memory strategies, nine statements on determination strategies, and three social strategies in vocabulary learning. The findings of this study were analyzed through two steps. First, descriptive statistics were applied to calculate the learners' use of VLSs. Second, an independent test was conducted to examine the correlation between learners' use of VLSs and their gender. The obtained data of this study was analyzed via SPSS. To investigate the learners' VLSs usage, descriptive statistics were calculated. Also, in order to examine the correlation between learners' gender and VLSs usage, an independent test was conducted.

Table 1. Spanish Language Learners' VLSs usage.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Minimum	Maximum	percentage
Cognitive	86	17.10	2.86	-0.11	6	26	65
Memory	86	36.32	6.34	-0.15	20	51	70
Determination	86	32.55	5.57	0.08	19	45	69
Social	86	12.43	3.8	-0.50	5	18	68
Vocabulary learning strategies	86	93.5	14.97	-0.18	57	125	68

As Table1 displays, the mean score of cognitive strategy of VLSs is 17.10 with the standard deviation of 2.86 and skewness of -0.11. Cognitive strategy of Spanish language learners' VLSs is 65%. The mean score of Memory strategy is 36.32 with the standard deviation of 6.34 and skewness of -0.15. Memory strategy of Spanish Language learners' VLSs is 70%. The mean score of determination strategy is 32.55 with the standard deviation of 5.57 and skewness of 0.08. Determination strategy of Spanish Language learners' VLSs is 69%. The mean score of social strategy is 12.43 with the standard deviation of 3.8 and skewness of -0.50. Social strategy of Spanish Language learners' VLSs is 68%. Lastly, the mean score of VLSs is 93.5 with the standard deviation of 14.97 and skewness of -0.18. In fact, Spanish Language learners' VLSs is 68%.

Table 2. Statistical Indexes of the Learners' VLSs and Gender.

Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cognitive	Male	36	15.1316	4.11230
	Female	50	17.6351	3.56183
Determination	Male	36	30.7152	5.45362
	Female	50	31.3672	5.28214
Social	Male	36	10.6501	2.85221

	Female	50	11.3905	3.34615	
Memory	Male	36	33.8104	5.57673	
	Female	50	35.6508	6.22079	
Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Male	36	90.8168	14.64405	
	Female	50	94.7515	13.35468	

Table 2 displays that the cognitive dimension of female learners with the mean of 17.63 is more than male learners with the mean of 15.13. However, the significance value of the test in relation to the difference between VLSs in determination, social, memory, and total strategies is more than 0.05 (p>0.05). Accordingly, there is not any significant difference between male and female Spanish Language learners, in terms of determination, social, memory, and total strategies of vocabulary learning. However, the tables above show that the language learners are moderately familiar with foreign language VLSs. These findings are in agreement with Zokaee, Zaferanieh and Naseri (2012), and Tsai and Chang (2009) who also identified that there was no statistically significant difference between the both gender and their use of VLSs. Table 3 illustrates the information related to the difference of male and female learners' use of VLSs.

Table 3. Results of Mean Comparison for VLSs and Gender.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test Equality of Variances		fort-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cognitive	Equal variances assumed	2.318	.325	-2.300	102	.026
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.162	81.442	.043
Determination	Equal variances assumed	.063	.916	-1.258	102	.172
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.245	89.326	.174
Social	Equal variances assumed	1.589	.328	-1.012	103	.308
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.000	82.726	.325
Memory	Equal variances assumed	1.232	.289	-1.116	106	.286
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.104	88.106	.283
Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Equal variances assumed	.949	.338	-1.931	108	.068
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.842	81.466	.076

Table 3 demonstrates the findings of independent sample t-test. The significance value of the test related to the difference of VLS use based on the Spanish learners' gender is less than 0.05 (p<0.05) and t=2.30. Therefore, there is a significance difference between cognitive dimension of VLS of male and female Spanish Language learners. This finding is in line with the findings of Wharton (2000), Gu (2002), Catalan (2003) and Baldoumi (2016) who revealed that female learners employ nearly all VLSs more efficiently than the male learners.

5. Discussion

According to this study, the results released that Spanish learners use diverse strategies of vocabulary learning efficiently. Cognitive strategies of Spanish learners' VLSs is 65% (M=17.10). Memory strategies of Spanish learners' VLSs is 70% (M= 36.32).

Determination strategies of Spanish learners' VLSs is 69% (M=32.55). Social dimension of Spanish learners' VLSs is 68% (M=12.43) Consequently, Spanish learners' VLSs is 68% (M=93.5). The findings are along the sides of Cengizhana (2011) who reported that the foreign language learners use meta-cognitive strategies the most while they use the cognitive strategies the least. Also, Ahour and Abdi (2015) released that both male and female learners employed more frequently memory strategies rather than the other component of VLSs. On the other hand, Manzoor, Kazi, Naeem, Inayat and Muhammad (2017) and Behbahani (2016) proved that memory strategies and social strategies were the least used strategies by the learners.

Moreover, it was reported that the cognitive techniques were used by female Spanish learners more than the male learners with the mean of (17.69) while male learners mean is (15.13). On the other hand, in respect of social, memory, determination and the entire VLSs, there was not any significant difference reported between female and male Spanish learners. This result is in line with Noormohamadi (2015), and Soleimani, Azizmohammadi and Maghsoudi (2015) who found that there was no significant difference between female and male students in terms of the total use of learning strategies. In contrast, Soureshjani (2011) revealed that there was a significant difference between the male and female learners in using the vocabulary learning strategies. Politzer (1983) indicated that females use social learning strategies significantly more than males. Hadavi and Hashem (2014) reported that female learners use social strategies, while that male learners were more self-directed.

6. Conclusion

This study at hand attempted to examine the correlation between learners' VLSs usage in Spanish language and their gender and whether gender affects their usage of VLSs. In accordance with the present results, it was proved that the Spanish leaners are active users of various strategies of vocabulary learning. Furthermore, it was reported that there was not any significant difference between female and male Spanish learners in respect of utilizing memory, determination and social strategies. However, there was a significant difference in cognition strategies of female and male learners, females employ cognition strategies more actively than male learners.

The findings of the present study will help students to be more aware of the different strategies of learning vocabulary which will lead them to acquire a great number of vocabulary. Consequently, their learning ability will be promoted, and academic performance will be improved. Similarly, the findings will benefit the teachers to employ different VLSs in the classroom and train their students to utilize them effectively. Also, language teachers will be more aware of their students' interests and needs.

The current research was limited by selecting 86 students from one private university in Turkey, majoring in English Language Teaching Department, who study Spanish language as a compulsory course. Also, it was a quantitative study and a VLSs questionnaire was utilized to examine the correlation between learners' use of VLSs and gender only. For this purpose, some recommendations were arose for further research. First, other studies can be carried out in more than one university in Turkey. Second, more participants can be included from different departments, Third, other researcher can work on more than one factor, such as the effect of the first language, age, cultural background and self-efficacy. Finally, qualitative approaches can also be applied, for instance, interviews and observations.

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