



PERCEPTUAL LEARNING STYLES' IMPACTS ON VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF TURKISH EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on perceptual learning styles, vocabulary learning strategies and the relationship between these concepts. It also presents the findings of a research study with respect to the impacts of perceptual learning styles on vocabulary learning strategies used by Turkish EFL learners. In addition, this quantitative based research study points out the differences in preferences and frequencies of vocabulary learning strategies used by male and female participants. The major findings can be stated as follows: (1) The most used vocabulary learning strategies by Turkish EFL learners were Determination strategies while the least used ones were Cognitive strategies. (2) Perceptual learning styles did not have an impact on the use of vocabulary learning strategies. Lastly, the paper makes some beneficial recommendations for EFL teachers concerning the effective vocabulary teaching in the classroom.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning strategies, perceptual learning styles, Schmitt's taxonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary refers to a set of words within a language and it is a useful tool for communication and acquiring knowledge which belongs to that particular language. For that reasons, vocabulary learning can be thought an important part of second language acquisition. Wilkins (1972) stated its importance with his famous saying that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Zimmerman also commented on the importance of vocabulary and stated that "vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner" (Zimmerman, 1998).

Regardless of being native or a learner, the acquisition is a never-ending process. The learners can face with new vocabulary any time, and so everything can be a source for them. For instance, an advertisement, a book, a movie or a film help them learn new words. However, this process can be problematic for some students as it is difficult to learn and use a new item. They may not learn vocabulary just by seeing or hearing it so they need some strategies to learn them better.

Since the mid-1960s, many leading scholars in the field such as Schmitt (1977), Oxford (1988), and Nation (1990) have been interested in vocabulary learning strategies and made studies to explore and develop these strategies in order to make learners achieve efficient vocabulary learning. Several of these scholars have produced taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies in relation to their studies and these classification systems have made significant contributions to the field. Some other scholars have investigated the relationship between these strategies and individual factors such as age, gender, and related concepts affecting second language acquisition such as learning styles, vocabulary size, vocabulary retention, language learning strategies and so on. These studies revealed that vocabulary learning strategies employed by students have a great impact on the success of their vocabulary learning.



Therefore, the major aim of this quantitative study is to investigate the impacts of perceptual learning styles on vocabulary learning strategies used by Turkish EFL learners as there have been a few study considering the effects of perceptual learning styles on this concept. Investigating the frequency and type of vocabulary learning strategies used by Turkish EFL learners with regard to gender can be stated as the minor aims of the study.

It is an undeniable fact that vocabulary knowledge is very important to communicate in target language. While learning a new language, many learners have difficulties because of inadequate vocabulary, and even they become advanced users of that language, they still need to improve their vocabulary knowledge. For that reasons, they get some strategies, more specifically, vocabulary learning strategies, into use to help them acquire new words and have rich vocabulary.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are the subclass of language learning strategies. Chamot and Kupper (1989) define vocabulary learning strategies as "techniques which students use to comprehend, store, and remember information and skills" (p.9). These strategies are also defined by Oxford as the operations which are employed by learners to help them for the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information (vocabulary). (Oxford, 1990) Recently, the definition of VLSs has been made by Catalan, from Rubin (1987); Wenden (1987); Oxford (1990); and Schmitt (1997) and mentioned in her study as "knowledge about the mechanisms (processes, strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students (a) to find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode".

As well as different definitions, many different and various classifications of language learning strategies suggested by several scholars such as Cohen (1987); Gu and Johnson (1996); Schmitt (1997); Cook (2001); and Nation (2001) are also available. In this study, the Schmitt's classification system of VLSs was applied to collect data from the participants as it is one of the mostly used and most comprehensive one.

The vocabulary learning strategies have been classified by Schmitt into two main groups: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies are the ones which help learners determine the meaning of new words when they first confronted with these words. That is to say, learners use these strategies to discover the meaning of new words. This group of strategies includes determination and social strategies as sub-classes. Determination strategies are individual learning strategies and used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience." (Schmitt, 1997). On the other hand, social strategies require learners to interact with others. Accordingly, learners do not make use of context, structural knowledge of that language or reference materials and ask directly the other people for help with the unknown word. A student' asking teacher for a synonym, paraphrase or L1 translation of a new word indicates that this student makes use of social strategies (Schmitt, 1997). The second main group is consolidation strategies which help learners to consolidate the meaning of a word when encountered again. This group of strategies also has sub-classes as Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies. Schmitt suggests that social strategies can be used for both purposes, so these strategies are included in both of the main groups. Memory strategies make learners associate their previously learned knowledge with the new words by using imagery, visuals, auditory, etc. Cognitive strategies are the ones that do not require too much metal processing and make use of mechanical means such as word lists and flash cards. Lastly, metacognitive strategies require learners to control and evaluate their own learning by monitoring, making decisions and etc. A learner's testing himself/ herself with word tests or skipping or passing new words are the examples of metacognitive strategies (Schmitt, 1997).

Perceptual Learning Styles

The learners are not the same because of individual differences. There are many factors affecting learners' strategy selection such as age, gender, level of proficiency and learning styles. Although not quite enough, there have been a few studies conducted on the subject of relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and individual differences; however they have mostly focused on age, gender, level of vocabulary knowledge and ignored the learning styles (Zokaee, Zaferanieh & Naseri, 2012). Reid defines learning styles as "an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills." and classified them into three categories: perceptual learning styles, cognitive learning styles and affective learning styles (Reid, 1995).

In this study, the emphasized one is perceptual learning styles. These are depend on the learners' preferred learning modality and categorized into six different types: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group and individual. Visual learners prefer learning by using images, pictures and colors so they are stick to their sights to organize new information (Nilson, 2003). Auditory learners prefer spoken language and learn via either listening or hearing (Nilson, 2003). Dunn (1993) and Zapalska & Dabb (2002) define kinesthetic learners as the ones who prefer learning in an environment where material can be touched and he or she can be physically involved with the to-be-learned information. Tactile learners tend to learn by doing or feeling. They need hands-on activities where they can feel the sense of touch and physical interaction to learn a given concept best (Sarasin, 1998). Lastly, as the names suggest, a learner who has a group learning style can learn "more effectively through working with others" while an individual learner prefers to work alone and use self-study (Reid, 1995).

Researches Conducted on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

In literature, there have been a number of researches investigating the correlation between vocabulary learning strategies and some other factors.

Gu and Johnson (1996) conducted a study on Chinese students by aiming to establish a relationship between their vocabulary learning strategies and learning outcomes. Firstly, they asked the students to complete a vocabulary learning questionnaire and then a vocabulary size test. When they analyzed the results, they saw that students used a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies. According to results, while contextual guessing, note-taking, contextual encoding were positive predictors of both vocabulary size and general proficiency; the strategy of visual repetition of the new words was negatively correlated with the test scores.

Another study that will be discussed is Schmitt's research. Schmitt is one of the significant scholars who has made studies on this subject. In one of his studies, he aimed to recognize the vocabulary learning strategies used by good and poor Japanese language learners and he concluded that these learners used written repetitions and paired associate words on lists and cards when they first started their learning process. Later in the process, as their vocabulary knowledge increased, they began to reduce the use of these strategies (Schmitt, 1997).

Catalan (2003) also conducted a descriptive study on vocabulary learning strategies and aimed to identify whether there was a difference in vocabulary learning strategy use in terms of gender. Results of the study indicated that females used these strategies more than males and while females used "formal rule strategies, input elicitation strategies, rehearsal strategies and planning strategies" in a greater extent, males preferred to use image vocabulary learning strategies.

Another study was carried by Zokaee, Zaferanieh and Naseri (2012) to explore the impacts of perceptual learning style and gender on Iranian EFL learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies. The findings of this study pointed out a relationship between perceptual styles and preferred vocabulary learning strategies although they didn't show any statistically significant difference between them with regard to gender.

One of the latest studies was administered by Zhang and Lu (2015) to investigate the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary breadth and depth knowledge. The results of this study indicated that "strategies that focus on learning the forms and associative meanings of words were significant predictors of both vocabulary breadth and depth knowledge. However, even learning strategies of the same type may have different effects on meaning recognition and meaning recall."(Zhang & Lu, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This study was a quantitative research in nature and the data was collected via two questionnaires which aimed to identify participants' perceptual learning styles and vocabulary learning strategies used by them as well as the relationship between these styles and strategies. The research questions to be investigated in this study are as follows:

1. What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among Turkish EFL learners?
2. Is there any difference in learners' preferences of vocabulary learning strategies with regard to gender?
3. How do the perceptual learning styles affect the Turkish EFL learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies?

Setting

The research was conducted at a State-run University in Turkey. The learners who took part in this research are students in the preparatory classes within The School of Foreign Languages, established in 2012. These are optional preparatory classes and provide one year of English language teaching for students with the aims of both preparing them for the courses of following years in English and making them enable to use English language communicatively outside of the classroom. All of these classrooms have technological devices such as computer, interactive whiteboard, audio systems and there is internet connection to make learning environment higher quality. The New English File by Oxford and its online English language teaching tool is used as course book.

Participants

In this study, the participants were forty preparatory class students, studying English language during the 2015-2016 academic year. They had five hours of class per day for five days in a week totaling twenty-five hours of instruction per week. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 and there were 20 females and 20 males among the 40 participants. According to their attendance list numbers, the participants were represented as A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 and so on.

Instruments and Procedure for Data Collection

Two questionnaires were used to collect data for the present study. Both of these questionnaires were written in English and the students were requested to complete them within 25 minutes. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the number of the statements and the approximate duration for responding before they started. At first, Reid's perceptual learning style preference questionnaire (PLSPQ, 1987) was given to participants to determine their learning style preferences. This self-reporting questionnaire measures six types of perceptual learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning and individual learning and it consists of five statements on each of these six types. Students responded these statements on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Later, the second questionnaire, which was adapted from Schmitt's (1997, 2000) vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire was distributed to participants in order to find out their chosen vocabulary strategies. This questionnaire consisted of the five categories: Determination, Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies. The participants used the five-Likert Scale, ranging from (0= scarcely used to 4= always used) to answer 25 statements.

Procedure for Data Analysis

The obtained data was analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) as frequency, mean and standard deviation. In accordance with the purpose of the study, independent sample T-tests were adopted to identify the impacts of gender on learning styles and vocabulary learning strategies. Also, descriptive statistics were employed to determine which vocabulary learning strategy is the most preferred and which the least preferred one is. The last research question was for investigating whether there was a valid relationship between the perceptual learning styles and the vocabulary learning strategies, and so Pearson correlation matrix was used to reveal the type of correlation. At the end of the tests, effect size calculator was used to report the strength of the relationship and Cohen's *d* calculator was used to compute the effect size of the difference between males and females.

RESULTS

In this study, three research questions were prepared to investigate Turkish EFL learners' preferences for VLSs, difference in preferences with regard to gender and correlation type between their VLSs preferences and perceptual learning styles. In this part of the paper, the collected data will be discussed and analyzed under the heading of each research question.

Research Question 1: What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies among Turkish EFL learners?

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the five categories of VLSs employed by participants. It can be easily seen that of all the five strategies on the questionnaire Determination strategies ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.79$) had the highest mean score and it was followed by Social strategies ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.52$). The third place in the ranking order was taken by Memory strategies ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.81$) and Metacognitive strategies ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.80$) followed it in the fourth place. Lastly, Cognitive strategies ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.66$) had the least mean score of the five categories of the VLSs used by the participants.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics For The Frequency Of The Five Categories Of VLS Used By Participants

	Determination	Social	Memory	Cognitive	Metacognitive
N Valid	40	40	40	40	40
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2,6667	2,2607	2,0063	1,7125	1,8150
Median	2,6667	2,1429	2,0000	1,6667	1,8000
Std. Deviation	,79529	,52052	,81352	,87134	,76780
Minimum	1,00	1,14	,25	,33	,60
Maximum	4,00	3,43	3,50	3,50	3,20

Research Question 2: Is there any difference in learners' preferences of vocabulary learning strategies with regard to gender?

The statistics for the VLSs preferences with regard to gender indicate that when considered the mean scores, most frequent strategy type used by both female ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.61$) and male ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.84$) participants was determination strategies. On the other hand, Cognitive strategies were the least frequent strategies employed by female participants ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.63$) while this referred to Memory strategies for male participants ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.67$). (see Table 2)

Table 2: Group Statistics For VLSs Preferences

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Determination	Female	20	2,3500	,61630	,13781
	Male	20	2,9833	,84102	,18806
Social	Female	20	2,1071	,47691	,10664
	Male	20	2,4143	,52826	,11812
Memory	Female	20	2,1250	,93365	,20877
	Male	20	1,8875	,67607	,15117
Cognitive	Female	20	1,4000	,63614	,14225
	Male	20	2,0250	,97374	,21774
Metacognitive	Female	20	1,5500	,68326	,15278
	Male	20	2,0800	,77160	,17254

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the VLSs preferences of male and female participants. The results indicate that there was not statistically significant difference in the preferences of Social and Memory strategies ($p < .05$) between males and females. On the other hand, there is statistically significant difference between males and females in the preferences of Determination, Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies. (see Table 3)

Table 3: Independent Samples T- test For Gender Differences In VLSs

		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed) p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Determination	Equal variances assumed	-2,716	38	,010	-,63333	,23315
	Equal variances not assumed	-2,716	34,839	,010	-,63333	,23315
Social	Equal variances assumed	-1,930	38	,061	-,30714	,15914
	Equal variances not assumed	-1,930	37,609	,061	-,30714	,15914
Memory	Equal variances assumed	,921	38	,363	,23750	,25776
	Equal variances not assumed	,921	34,628	,363	,23750	,25776
Cognitive	Equal variances assumed	-2,403	38	,021	-,62500	,26008
	Equal variances not assumed	-2,403	32,719	,022	-,62500	,26008
Metacognitive	Equal variances assumed	-2,300	38	,027	-,53000	,23046
	Equal variances not assumed	-2,300	37,452	,027	-,53000	,23046

Research Question 3: How do the perceptual learning styles affect the Turkish EFL learners' choice of vocabulary learning strategies?

The results indicate that the students who took part in this study mostly adopt tactile learning style with a score of 22,5%. That means that they prefer learning by using their hands and doing projects. The second most frequent styles were individual and auditory styles and they had the same percentage, 20,0%. Kinesthetic style with a percentage of 15,0% ranked the third preferred style and

group style followed it with a percentage of 12,5%. The least popular perceptual learning style among the participants was visual style (10, 0%). (see Table 4)

Table 4: Statistics Concerning Perceptual Learning Styles

		Perceptual Learning Styles						Total	
		Tactile	Individual	Auditory	Kinesthetic	Group	Visual		
Gender	Female	Count	6	3	4	3	2	2	20
		% within Gender	30,0%	15,0%	20,0%	15,0%	10,0%	10,0%	100,0%
Male	Count	3	5	4	3	3	2	20	
		% within Gender	15,0%	25,0%	20,0%	15,0%	15,0%	10,0%	100,0%
Total	Count	9	8	8	6	5	4	40	
		% within Gender	22,5%	20,0%	20,0%	15,0%	12,5%	10,0%	100,0%

In order to identify correlation type between the perceptual learning styles and vocabulary learning strategies of students, Pearson correlation matrix was used. The results indicated that there was not a significant correlation between these concepts (Table 5).

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix

		Determination	Social	Memory	Cognitive	Metacognitive
Visual	Pearson Correlation	,157	,038	,297	,071	,065
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,333	,817	,063	,661	,692
	N	40	40	40	40	40
Tactile	Pearson Correlation	,171	-,080	,043	,131	,060
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,292	,623	,791	,419	,713
	N	40	40	40	40	40
Auditory	Pearson Correlation	,080	,166	,135	,040	-,002
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,624	,305	,405	,809	,988
	N	40	40	40	40	40
Group	Pearson Correlation	,042	,178	-,187	,190	-,097
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,797	,273	,249	,241	,550
	N	40	40	40	40	40
Kinesthetic	Pearson Correlation	,120	,016	,070	,002	,088
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,461	,920	,669	,989	,590
	N	40	40	40	40	40
Individual	Pearson Correlation	,078	-,009	,181	-,133	,081
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,634	,958	,265	,412	,620
	N	40	40	40	40	40

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With these results, it was found out that the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by Turkish EFL learners were Determination strategies while the least used ones were Cognitive strategies. Some other studies such as Kapifour (2010), Celik & Toptas (2010), and Bahrudin & Ismail (2015) also pointed out that Determination strategies are the most frequently used ones by learners and the results of the present study are consistent with them. Moreover, these results prove that while learning new words, Turkish EFL learners do not use in-depth mental processing required in Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies much. They prefer simple and direct strategies such as memorizing words, using dictionaries, asking instructors to translate new lexical items into their native language, etc. categorized under Determination, Social and Memory strategies.



Taking into account the correlation type between the perceptual learning styles and vocabulary learning strategies of students, it can be concluded that the data obtained from this research study conflicts with the findings of Zokaee, Zaferanieh & Naseri (2012) who conducted a similar study on Iranian Undergraduate EFL learners and found out that auditory perceptual learning styles significantly correlated with social and cognitive vocabulary learning strategies while group and kinesthetic perceptual style correlated with social vocabulary learning strategies.

These results mean that the Turkish EFL learners who participated in this research are not aware of the importance of vocabulary learning strategies a lot and they are not using them along with their perceptual learning styles. Moreover, the findings of present study are consistent with the study of Shih and Gamon (2003) although their research was about learning strategies in general. In their research, they concluded that learning styles did not have an impact on the use of learning strategies. The study conducted shows that the mean scores for vocabulary learning strategies used by Turkish EFL learners were not over the medium (2.50) level except determination strategies, meaning that Turkish EFL learners do not use these strategies enough to learn new lexical items. Besides that, another conclusion drawn from these results is that learners may not perceive these strategies as beneficial and effective. According to the results, there was not a significant impact of perceptual learning styles on learners' preferences of vocabulary learning strategies. The reason of this can be that the learners are not aware of all of these strategies.

Based on these results, some recommendations can be made. Firstly, EFL teachers should increase the awareness of the students on vocabulary learning strategies as students try to learn new words by using a few strategies which do not require in-depth mental processing such as looking up dictionaries, memorizing, asking teacher for translation, etc. When learners are aware of other strategies especially cognitive and metacognitive ones and use them, it can be easier to learn and retain new lexical items as they can choose appropriate strategies to their learning styles. Secondly, the teachers can improve their vocabulary teaching methods considering these strategies. They can offer various activities and exercises which appeals to each perceptual learning style and vocabulary learning strategy.

The future studies on this topic can be both qualitative and quantitative based researches to get better understanding of perceptual learning styles and vocabulary learning strategies of learners.

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