

# Vocabulary Discovery Strategy Used by Saudi EFL Students in an Intensive English Language Learning Context

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Received: April 26, 2012    Accepted: May 7, 2012    Published: June 1, 2012

doi:10.5296/ijl.v4i2.1724    URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v4i2.1724>

## Abstract

This study examines the preferred vocabulary discovery strategies (VDS) of Saudi EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language programme at the University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia. A sample of 746 male and female students participated in the study. The data collection was carried out through a questionnaire. The collected data were computed and analysed via descriptive statistics, *t*-test, and one-way repeated measure ANOVA. The results revealed that the students reported using different VDSs. The data analysis showed that social and skipping strategies are the most used strategy categories, while guessing and dictionary strategies were used less frequently. The results also showed that females use all the strategies more frequently than males, and there was a statistically significant difference in guessing and skipping strategy use by females. Females also used social and dictionary strategies more than males according to mean differences; however, there was no statistically significant difference. This paper discusses the implications of the findings and some pedagogical considerations for teaching and learning vocabulary within an EFL context.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary discovery strategies

## 1. Introduction

For many years, methodologists, linguists, and language teachers have considered vocabulary incidental to the main purpose of language teaching; namely, the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. However, they have since realised that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use, and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. In ESL/EFL learning, vocabulary items play a vital role in all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); consequently, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to vocabulary. It is now clear that the acquisition of vocabulary is just as important as the acquisition of grammar, both of which act as essential components of all language uses.

Language teachers tend to try to teach their students the vocabulary they think students will encounter; however, students' need to read grows extensively, and their vocabulary needs increase accordingly, but teachers rarely have enough time to teach them all the vocabulary they may need. In addition, individual differences exist between the learners, which makes deciding what vocabulary students should learn difficult and not easily predictable (Schmitt, 2000). Williams (1985) points out that trying to teach students most of the words they might need will make them dependent upon teachers, which could affect their ability to think and read for themselves. However, learners, particularly as they get older, want to depend on themselves most of the time because they are aware that teachers are not likely to be available to them each time they come across a problem word. Furthermore, some teachers, especially those who have been taught by course planners, concentrate on high frequency words while often ignoring low frequency words.

What learners need, then, is to use vocabulary discovery strategies (VDS) by themselves to overcome this kind of difficulty. It is much better to spend time with students on learning VDSs than to try to teach them words they think they might need, and are likely to be learned through reading, the latter of which is actually preferred over learning them in isolation.

The purpose of this study is to investigate VDSs used by Saudi male and female EFL students enrolled in an intensive English language program. The focus will be on two specific factors proficiency level and gender in order to discover their effect on the choice of these strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Guessing Strategies*

It has been said that direct teaching of vocabulary is not cost effective beyond the high frequency level, because many words occur so infrequently (Nation, 1988), and that, instead, learners should rely on guessing to expand their vocabulary. Foreign language learners, as well as native speakers, certainly make use of guessing, and rely heavily on it when they encounter new words while reading. Guessing, or inferencing, is 'the use of both pragmatic and linguistic clues to guess the meaning of an unknown' (Ffrench, 1983, p. 12).

Guessing from context as a way of dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary in unedited selections has been suggested widely by L1 and L2 reading specialists (Dubin, 1993). However, it is not

clear what exactly is meant by context. Nation and Coady (1988) claim that there are two types of contexts: one within the text, which includes morphological, semantic, and syntactic information in a specific text, and a second in the general context, or non-textual context, which is the background knowledge the reader has about the subjects being read. Williams (1985) agrees with Nation and Coady in considering the specific context as ‘the other words and sentences that surround that word. It follows that other words in the context of the unfamiliar word often “throw light on” its meaning’ (p. 122). These other words can be found in the sentence containing the unknown word or other sentences beyond the sentence of the unknown item. Similarly, McCarthy (1988) sees context as within the text itself (i.e., the morphological, syntactic, and discourse information), which can be classified and described in terms of general features. Further, learning from context not only includes learning from extensive reading, but also learning from taking part in a conversation, and learning from listening to stories, films, television, or the radio (Nation, 2001). How it works is not clear, as noted by Nation and Coady (1988): [T]he very redundancy or richness of information in a given context which enables a reader to guess an unknown word successfully could also predict that the same reader is less likely to learn the word because he or she was able to comprehend the text without knowing the word. (p. 101)

Guessing is a widely used strategy. Previous literature on VDSs shows that studies have almost exclusively concentrated on guessing from context: Hosenfeld (1970), Clarke and Nation (1980), Nation and Coady (1988), Ahmed (1989), Chern (1993), Haynes (1993), Huckin (1993), and Schmitt (1997), among many others. For example, the use of guessing strategies differs significantly in terms of the grade levels of students learning French as a target language (Bialystok, 1979).

Liu and Nation (1984), as cited in McCarthy (1988), working with advanced L2 learners, found that high proficiency learners guessed between 85% and 100% of unknown words. In Ahmed’s (1988) study, guessing was used by 17.1% of all subjects, and he found that good L2 learners can guess the meaning of unknown words, whereas underachieving ones cannot. The reason beginning L2 learners are not able to use guessing is their lack of basic language skills in the target language sufficient to make sense of new words and their contexts; they would have much more trouble learning vocabulary incidentally. Johnson (1996) also indicates that the higher the L2 proficiency of students, the more likely they are to use guessing strategies.

Guessing was also categorised as one of the most-used VLSs by Schmitt’s (1997) subjects. Further, Al-Qahtani’s (2001) results showed that guessing from the context strategy was more often used by the higher proficiency group (with a mean of 2.65) than the lower levels. Furthermore, studies of guessing from context have shown that there are high correlations between guessing and vocabulary knowledge (Herman, Anderson, Pearson, & Nagy, 1987). Similarly, O’Malley (1985) found that contextualisation was used by intermediate level students more than beginners, which inconsistent with Cohen’s report that contextualisation is difficult for beginner students to use because it presumes some level of proficiency (Cohen & Apeh, 1981). However, Huckin and Coady (1999) 189-190 warn us that ‘guessing from the context has serious limitations. It is still seen as an important part of vocabulary-building, especially among advanced learners, but it requires a great deal of prior training in basic

vocabulary, word recognition, metacognition, and subject matter' (p. 189-190). In order for learners to use a guessing strategy, they must know what clues are available in the text.

## *2.2 Skipping Strategies*

Skipping or ignoring is another possible VDS. There is a genuine lack of research on ignoring or skipping as a VDS, as the literature focuses mainly on guessing. According to Al-Qahtani (2005), surely we cannot claim that this is truly a vocabulary learning strategy since we do not expect anyone to learn a word by skipping it; skipping may, however, be effective for reading or listening. This is in line with Hosenfeld's (1977) findings, which classified skipping as contributing maintenance of the 'main meaning line'. This means that she does not consider skipping as a VDS. The reason for this might be that she feels that readers, using skipping, do not show any attempt to overcome the lexical comprehension problem. It could be argued that readers use skipping when confronted with a difficult word because they are interrupted by lexical comprehension problems; they might decide to skip such words as a strategy in an attempt to find more clues or to focus on the overall meaning of the text.

In the researcher's experience, this is similar to the situation in Saudi Arabia: learners use skipping when reading newspapers or stories, but in exam situations, they tend not to skip many words. Therefore, the purpose of reading is the main factor that may affect learners' choice about whether or not to ignore unknown words while reading. For example, when the aim of reading is for pleasure, ignoring can be used. There are some words that can be ignored without affecting the meaning of the text. For example, learners may try to ignore adjectives and adverbs, and focus on nouns and verbs, instead. Al-Qahtani (2001) reported that his subjects used skipping very often, especially the advanced group. However, Schmitt (1997) found that the least used strategy was 'skip or pass new word', with a usage figure less than 50%. The difference between the findings of the aforementioned two studies could be related to the fact that the advanced group in Al-Qahtani's study were more proficient than Schmitt's subjects.

## *2.3 Social Strategy*

Social strategy is a means to discover meaning by asking someone who knows. Teachers are often the ones in this position, and they can be asked to give help in a variety of ways, such as giving the L1 translation, synonym, definition, or using the new word in a sentence. From the researcher's experience, Saudi EFL learners rely heavily on asking the teacher as s/he plays the main role in the educational system. In other words, EFL learners prefer asking the teacher about the meaning, spelling, or any issue beyond trying to depend on themselves. However, this strategy has been reported by many researchers, including O'Malley et al. (1985), who reported that questioning for clarification, which involves contact with another person for additional information, was the next strategy in frequency after note-taking and repetition. Further, 56.7% of Ahmed's (1988) and 73% of Schmitt's (1997) subjects reported it as one of the most-used VLSs.

The type of information L2 learners try to ask about varies from one learner to another among these studies. For example, 27% of Ahmed's subjects asked for the meaning in Arabic, 19.1%

asked for a sentence that included the unknown word, 56.7% asked the teacher; 86% of Schmitt's respondents reported that asking the teacher for a paraphrase and synonym was one of the most helpful VLSs. Asking for the meaning in Arabic and for a sentence that includes the unknown word is often the most informative. As far as gender is concerned, research shows that females appeal for assistance more than males; girls are more likely to show a continuing need for social approval and acceptance (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). However, the situation in Saudi society might be different because of cultural differences.

#### *2.4 Dictionary Use*

L2 learners might try to pick up the unknown word's meaning from a dictionary. Many different factors, such as how important the meaning of the word is in the passage, the number of unknown words, and the reason students are working on it, affect whether or not the student might turn to the dictionary for help (McCarthy, 1988). However, trying to guess the meaning of the unknown word from the context before consulting a dictionary is more beneficial since this could help learners to pick the correct meaning relevant to the text. Nuttall (1982) points out that using a dictionary should be limited to those unguessable words whose meanings can hinder the learner's understanding. The learner might periodically encounter unknown or unguessable words. In such instances, s/he might turn to the dictionary as a last resort and for the sake of speed. Furthermore, most people only use a dictionary to find the meaning of a word. Similarly, Hosenfeld (1977) summarises:

[I]t is not that successful readers never look up words in a glossary. They do but only after more efficient strategies have failed. A distinguishing characteristic of successful and non successful readers is the priority system of their word solving strategies: while looking up words in a glossary or dictionary is a non-successful reader's first and most frequent response, it is a successful reader's last and most infrequent response to unknown words. (p. 121)

This is consistent with Scholfield (1982a, 1999) and Nation (1990), who propose that guessing from the context needs to be the first step before consulting the dictionary in order to be able to pick up the appropriate meaning. Knight (1994), for example, discovered that while incidental vocabulary learning through contextual guessing did take place, those who used a dictionary as well as guessing through context not only learned more words immediately after reading but also remembered more after two weeks. She also found that low verbal ability participants benefited more from the dictionary than high verbal ability participants who, in turn, benefited more from contextual guessing. Another interesting point Knight found was that high verbal ability students would look up a word even if they had successfully guessed its meaning, a finding in line with Hulstijn (1993). Further, Hulstijn (1993) suggests that it is not the case that students with more guessing ability use the dictionary less than those with less guessing ability. In other words, he argues that the importance of the word in the text affects the learner's choice, not his or her ability to guess.

### 2.5 Purpose of the Study

There is little in the extant literature which focuses especially on the VDSs of students learning English in the context of intensive English programmes (IEPs) at the university level. This programme is a very important step in developing students' language proficiency, a topic which is receiving increasing attention as a contributing factor to learners' academic success (Cummins, 1979). Hence, this study investigates the overall VDS use of English learners enrolled in a university preparatory programme at University of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia, looking at the relationship between VDS use and language proficiency, and assessing any difference in strategy use by gender.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 746 male and female students enrolled in an intensive English language programme in the preparatory year at University of Ha'il in Saudi Arabia. The sample was fairly balanced across males (n=315) and females (n=431). The participants were chosen randomly. The preparatory programme at University of Ha'il is a foundation year for pre-admission university students who want to join different colleges at the university, such as the College of Medicine, Applied Medical Science, Engineering, Education, Arts, and Science. The students take an intensive English language programme in addition to mathematics, physics, and computer science; all such courses are taught in English. At the beginning of the programme, the students take a placement test and are placed at the appropriate proficiency level. The test assesses listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. The students engage in some form of language instruction in English for four hours daily in the classroom.

Table 1. Background Details: Summary of Participants

Gender	Male		Female		Total
		315		431	
Level	001	002	001	002	746
	119	196	195	236	
School	Public	Private	Both		
	565	135	46		
Gender	Male001	Female001	Male002	Female002	
Level	119	195	196	236	

### 3.2 Instruments

A questionnaire was used in the study as the designated instrument to gather information and assess the frequency of use of VDSs. The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of a careful examination of previous questionnaires and had some content validation by two refereed professors in applied linguistics. The Arabic version of the questionnaire was discussed and checked by professional Arabic teachers to avoid any ambiguity in the wording of the questionnaire (a problem which can lead to confusion and errors of interpretation on

the part of the respondents) and to ensure content validity. The reviewers also verified that the terminology used was definitely known to the participants and understood. The questionnaire consisted of 26 items to which students were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5. A range of 3.5-5 is thought to reflect high use of that strategy, 2.5-3.4 medium use, and 1.0-2.4 low use (Oxford, 1990). The internal reliability analysis was performed using alpha to determine the extent to which the items in our questionnaire are related to each other. Alpha shows the internal consistency, based on the average inter-item correlation. The internal reliability for our questionnaire was .79.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered to the students by the classroom teacher during a regular class period (Fall 2010-2011). The full descriptive instructions regarding the procedures of administration were provided to, and discussed with class instructors before the administration. The students were told that there were no right or wrong answers to any question, and that their confidentiality was secured and their responses would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that while their participation would not affect their grades, they still had the option not to participate.

Data was analysed using SPSS 17.0. The data was analysed using frequency, means, and standard deviation to identify the strategies used, as well as participants' demographic information. A two-way repeated measure ANOVA was used with a *post hoc* comparison test to investigate the variation in strategies used by the participants.

## 4. Results

Table 2. Frequency rating of VDSs used by all subjects of different level and gender

Categories	Descriptive statistics				Inferential statistics	
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Gender	Level
Guessing strategies	1	4.4	2.57	1.07	.002	.045
Skipping strategies	1	4.75	2.67	.89	.001	.001
Dictionary strategies	1	4.5	2.64	.88	.099	.508
Social strategies	1	5	2.99	1.00	.234	.152

4.1 Overall Strategy Use

The aim of this section is to show the mean frequency of each strategy category. Table 2 shows a summary of the use of all VDSs as categories. However, the means of all DS categories are near the midpoint rating (3), so none in absolute terms is rated ‘frequent’. This will be followed by more detailed discussion about the individual strategies in order to show significant relationships, in terms of proficiency level and gender, respectively. As shown in Table 2, we can clearly observe some relevant differences in the preference of social strategy use. The social strategy category was reported to be used more than other categories with a frequency rating of 2.99 and SD 1.00. These differences were corroborated through one-way repeated measures ANOVA, which showed significant differences in the use of VDSs by all subjects ( $F=55.081, p=.001$ ).

To know where the difference lies between the four categories, the Bonferroni adjusted multiple comparison were applied. The results showed that social strategies are used significantly more than all other categories ( $p=.001$ ). Furthermore, skipping strategies and dictionary strategies are used significantly more often than guessing strategies ( $p=.001$ ) which, in turn, is the least frequently used reference work in the study. On the other hand, no significant differences were found between skipping strategies and dictionary strategies. Figure 1 below depicts the differences in VDSs used by all subjects, regardless of their proficiency level and gender.

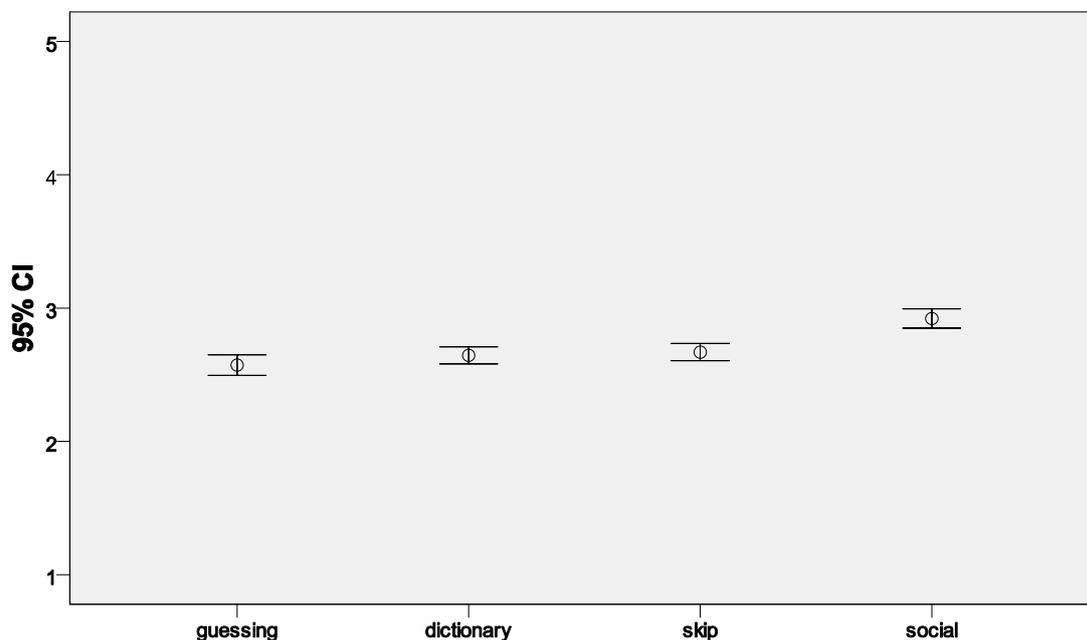


Figure1. The use of all four categories of VDSs among all the subjects.

The results could indicate that students in Saudi Arabia rely mainly on teachers or someone else to learn basic information about new English words rather than trying any other strategies. In other words, EFL learners prefer asking the teacher about the meaning, spelling, or any issue more than trying to depend on themselves. However, similar findings have been

reported by many researchers, such as O'Malley et al. (1985), who reported that questioning for clarification, which involves contact with another person for additional information, was the next most frequent strategy after note-taking and repetition. Furthermore, Schmitt (1997) asserts that 73% of his subjects reported it as one of the most-used VLS.

The intensive learning environment of the English language programme (ELP) for the preparatory year may be a prime contributor in several ways to the preferred use and selection of social strategies. Many students showed a strong preference for learning with others by asking questions and cooperating with peers. Furthermore, the environment of ELP where native English speakers are around the students and the instruction in ELC strongly encourage and support more interactive learning for the sake of developing greater linguistic fluency. The ELC has established an English language club where the students can practice their English with their colleagues and teachers. The main purpose of this club is to encourage the students to be more sociable and interact with their peers and teachers, which is expected to help in improving their English skills. Furthermore, the ELC offers tutorial classes for students to attend in their free time to seek help from the teachers about different issues related to English. I believe that all these factors have contributed to a high use of social strategies on the part of the students. These findings are in line with those of Phillips (1999), whose study of Asian students also enrolled in college IEPs showed increased use of social strategies relative to other strategies.

The use of skipping strategies is remarkably high for some of these strategies, with a mean frequency rating of 2.67 and SD 0.89. These results were consistent with Al-Qahtani (2001) who reported that his subjects used skipping unknown words very often, especially the advanced group. Schmitt (1997) found that the least used strategy was 'skip or pass new word' with a usage figure less than 50%. Similarly, Schmitt, Huckin, and Bloch (1993) found that their subjects did not ignore any of the 44 unknown words in their study, although ignoring was not disallowed.

The dictionary use strategy is, on average, the third most used category by our subjects, with a frequency rating of 2.64 and SD 0.88. These results mean that consulting the dictionary is, on average, Saudi EFL learners' third choice in determining the meaning of unknown words. This issue was raised with some of the teachers who claimed that the vast majority of their students lacked dictionary use skills and that they had never been trained how to use dictionaries in their high schools. Lastly, guessing strategies were reported to be the least used VDSs by our subjects, with a mean frequency rating 2.57 and SD 1.07. This is not a surprising result as most of the students were either in the beginner or elementary level.

Table 3. Relationship Between Categories of VDSs

Strategy category		Dictionary strategies	Skipping strategies	Social strategies
<b>Guessing Strategies</b>	Person Correlation	.728**	.593**	.672**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	p<.001	p<.001	p<.001
<b>Dictionary Strategies</b>	Person Correlation		.728**	.738**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		p<.001	p<.001
<b>Skipping Strategies</b>	Person Correlation			.586**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			p<.001

The correlations that appear in Table 3 show interesting findings; there is a positive and strong significant relationship among all the categories. That is, people who use one strategy category more tend to use others more, as well. This relationship suggests that the learners, as a group, do not rely on one strategy to solve their vocabulary problems. They may try to ask someone, consult a dictionary, or guess the meaning from the context. According to Scholfield (1982, 1999) and Nation (1990), guessing from context ideally needs to be the first step before consulting the dictionary. However, this is not the case in our study; here, guessing is reported to be the least used strategy by our subjects. This might be due to the fact that our learners' proficiency level is quite low, which may not help them to infer meaning from the context as we mentioned earlier. They also do not have the basic language skills in the target language to make sense of new words and their contexts, and they would have much more trouble learning vocabulary incidentally.

Table 4. The 5 VDSs Most Used by All Subjects

DS	Category	Min	Max	Mean	SD
<b>I seek help from my teacher</b>	Social	1	5	3.26	1.40
<b>I use online dictionary</b>	Dictionary	1	5	3.23	1.41
<b>I use paper dictionary</b>	Dictionary	1	5	3.17	1.29
<b>I guess the meaning of the new vocabulary item from its picture if available</b>	Guessing	1	5	3.10	1.77
<b>I reread the sentence before and after the unknown word</b>	Guessing	1	5	2.97	1.42

The results for the five most-used VDSs revealed interesting findings. Seeking help from the teacher ranked as the most frequently used strategy by Saudi EFL students in this study. This confirms our results mentioned above, in which social strategies were reported to be used more frequently than other strategies.

Secondly, online bilingual dictionaries and paper bilingual dictionaries ranked second and third, respectively. This not only confirms the use of bilingual dictionaries more than any other kind of dictionary, but also agrees with several other researchers who found that bilingual dictionaries were used by the majority of the students (Tomaszczyk, 1979; Ahmed, 1988; Schmitt, 1997; Al-Qahtani, 2005; Alhaysony, 2011). This finding, moreover, supports Piotrowski (1989) who concludes that no matter what their level of competence, foreign learners and dictionary users turn to their bilingual dictionaries as long as they use dictionaries at all. The preference for the bilingual dictionary does not mean that bilingual dictionaries are more helpful, as Atkins (1990) found that a monolingual dictionary was more successful in helping users find more information than was the bilingual dictionary. Investigating exactly how L2 learners use their bilingual dictionary by getting closer to what actually goes on during language work seems important here. However, this was not a part of our study, and it may need further research (see Scholfield, 1982, 1999; Harvey and Yuill, 1997).

Guessing the meaning from a picture when it is available is reported to be the fourth strategy most frequently used by Saudi students of this study. This is because the strategy is simple and it does not require deep processing or any L2 vocabulary knowledge. This result supports the finding of Levin (1983), Paivio (1983) who argue that pictures have been shown to be useful if learners focus on them. Re-reading a sentence containing an unknown word is reported to be the fifth most used strategy in this study, which must be associated with guessing from context. With regard to the effect of proficiency level and gender, no significant relationship was found, except with the use of an online bilingual dictionary and seeking help from the teacher, where females reported using them more often than males.

Table 4. The 5 VDSs Least Used by All Subjects

<b>DS</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>I guess the meaning of the new vocabulary item by its sound</b>	guessing	1	5	1.95	1.48
<b>I guess the grammatical class/part of speech of phrases/sentence in which the item appear</b>	Guessing	1	5	2.02	.89
<b>I use CD-ROM dictionary</b>	Dictionary	1	5	2.04	1.28
<b>I use monolingual dictionary</b>	Dictionary	1	5	2.21	1.66
<b>I reread the sentence just before and after the unknown word</b>	Guessing	1	5	2.25	1.34

As Table 5 shows, the least used strategies are used, at least occasionally, by 16% of the subjects. Saudi students in this study were found to be unlikely to pay attention to guessing the word by its sound or guessing the grammatical class or part of speech as these approaches seemed too difficult for our students to use, given the level of their vocabulary knowledge. The use of CD-ROM dictionaries and monolingual dictionaries were reported to be among the least used strategies in this study. The low use of a monolingual dictionary agrees with Tomaszczyk (1979) who found that his subjects used bilingual dictionaries far more than monolingual dictionaries for all language skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation into and from L2. To determine whether the use of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries by all the learners was significantly different, we ran the paired sample *t*-test, which shows that there was significantly less use of the monolingual dictionary ( $t=17.172$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $df.454$ ).

Using local clues was infrequently used by the subjects, which concurs with our findings; guessing strategies were reported to be the least used among DS categories.

#### *4.2 Use of the Strategies by English Proficiency*

Many studies have shown that proficiency level does not necessarily equate with the amount of learning, more experienced language learners have been shown to use more strategies (Bremner, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Wharton, 2000). Studies that have examined strategy use and proficiency levels of students have shown a positive relationship between the two factors (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Green & Oxford, 1995; Wharton, 2000).

However, this study found that when students were categorised into low proficiency students and high proficiency students, data analysis revealed statistically significant differences for the use of guessing strategies. This agrees with Haynes (1993) and Schmitt (1997) who found that guessing is one of the strategies reported to change over time as learners move from one level to another or become more proficient in the target language. Furthermore, Al-Qahtani (2001) found that guessing from the context is used more by higher proficiency learners. Similarly, Oxford et al. (2004) conclude that high-proficiency learners more often tended to use “top-down” strategies like guessing from the context. Nation (2001) also stated that for learners to be able to use clues for guessing unknown words, they should be familiar with at least 95% of the running words.

#### *4.3 Strategies use by Gender*

Much research has shown that females tend to use more learning strategies than males. The findings of this study bear this out. The results showed that females use all the strategies more frequently than males; there was a statistically significant difference in guessing and skipping strategies use among females. Females also used social and dictionary strategies more, according to mean differences; however, this relationship was not statistically significant. One possible explanation is that women tend to build relationships and use social networks with greater consistency than men. Thus, this observed use of emotional and social support systems in the context of language learning is expected.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of VDSs by Saudi EFL students (males and females) enrolled in an intensive English programme at University of Ha'il. The results showed that the students were clearly aware that VDSs were a part of their language learning process, although all four categories of VDSs were initially reported at a medium use level. This may be due to the English courses these students had in high school. These courses do not prepare the students to be familiar with different vocabulary learning strategies. Hence, textbook designers should be aware that students lack certain vocabulary learning strategies; thus, vocabulary learning strategy instruction could be provided in the future.

Students' reported a high preference for social strategies over other strategies. The findings revealed that women in this study appeared to use their social networks as a means of support, while male students apparently did not prefer to talk to their peers. Teachers can help students to benefit from an opportunity to journal for a few minutes at the end of each lesson about to how they felt about class and their performance that day. This might encourage students to express their feelings in a more private way, and to recognise how these feelings may have impacted the day's learning. In addition, as trust is built between teacher and student, the teacher may request access to journal entries, which would provide an additional source of information that could be useful in mediating students' progress.

The results of the present study revealed that learners at a higher proficiency level report more strategy use more than low level learners, indicating that learners at different levels have different needs, in terms of teacher intervention, in the learning process. For beginner students, teachers need to be explicit in developing declarative and procedural knowledge that helps heighten understanding of the mechanics of successful language learning. Results also showed that the students have knowledge of some strategies, but they seem not to practice what they have learned. Hence, it is very important to help these students be aware that learning does not only involve having knowledge of a particular strategy, but rather, it will become enhanced when we make use of that knowledge.

Ediger (1999) holds to the idea that developing learners' vocabulary knowledge should be a major goal in each academic discipline. Vocabulary development emphasises that learners seek purpose in learning. This purposeful learning in vocabulary development means that learners perceive reasons for achieving good vocabulary knowledge. As educators and teachers, we need to understand that learners develop their vocabulary over a period of time. Furthermore, English language teachers should have a vital role in helping the students explore VDSs and methods so as to develop autonomous learners in vocabulary learning. Learners should understand that knowing many words does not mean that the learner is capable of reading efficiently. According to Anderson (2004), there should be a steady study of vocabulary within a reading improvement program. Through this iterative exposure to words, learners will be able to improve and develop the complexity and proficiency of their language mastery.

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