

## Vocabulary Learning Strategies in ESP Context: Knowledge and Implication

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Received:9/30/2021

Accepted:2/13/2022

Published: 2/24/2022

### Abstract

The present study aims to explore the knowledge level and preferences regarding vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) among the EFL university students studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. It also investigates the impact of vocabulary learning strategies on EFL learners' performance. A sample of twenty students from an intact class participated in the study. For data collection, a triangulated approach has been employed through the usage of a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, together with classroom observations. Moreover, the cumulative percentage of scores in the pre-tests and post-tests has been incorporated to investigate the impact of vocabulary learning strategies. SPSS software is used to calculate the T-test value. The findings demonstrate that the implementation of various vocabulary learning strategies has a substantial impact on the performance of the English language learners within the context of an English for Specific Purposes classroom. The findings have pedagogical implications in the teaching and learning of vocabulary within the ESP context.

*Keywords:* EFL learners, ESP context, vocabulary learning strategies

**Cite as:** Al Zahrani, S. M. &, Chaudhary, A. (2022). Vocabulary Learning Strategies in ESP Context: Knowledge and Implication. *Arab World English Journal*, 13 (1)  
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no1.25>

## Introduction

Language is the most important instrument of communication and having a large vocabulary is essential for the achievement of effective communication. When it comes to vocabulary in English as a global language, there is an abundance of words that seems nearly inexhaustible. In order to master language, learners are required to put in constant effort and practice. Learners' ability to understand language relies heavily on their acquaintance with the used vocabulary which helps them to understand the ideas conveyed. This significance of vocabulary in the acquisition of a language is supported by Folse (2004, p.2) as he concurs, "... You can get by without grammar; you cannot get by without vocabulary". In the same vein, Wilkins (1972; as cited in AlQhatani, 2015) emphasizes that:

There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say. ... While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. (p.97)

Without a doubt, research on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) demonstrates the significance of vocabulary in the process of language teaching and learning. Indeed, knowledge of vocabulary results in better language comprehension and use. Likewise, Karatay (2004, p.21; as cited in Baskin et al.,2017) has put forward the indispensable importance of vocabulary "The ability of the four basic language skills to read, write, speak and listen, and to be able to use these skills actively is closely related to acquired vocabulary". Furthermore, research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies demonstrates that vocabulary acquisition is crucial to language learning (Coady and Huckin, 1997; Harley, 1996; Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; as cited in Baskin et al.,2017). Schmitt (2010, p. 4) emphasizes the importance of vocabulary for language learners stating that "Learners carry around dictionaries, not grammar books,". Learners' acquisition of new vocabulary is made easier when they use vocabulary learning strategies. Such strategies allow language learners to employ these practical skills both inside and outside of the classroom and therefore, empower them. What has been said so far about the importance of vocabulary acquisition is evident in Oxford's (2017, p.244; as cited in LaBontee, 2019) definition of Vocabulary Learning Strategies as (VLSs) "teachable, dynamic thoughts and behaviors that learners consciously select and employ in specific contexts to improve their self-regulated, autonomous L2 vocabulary development".

Indeed, this topic needs to be addressed in the context of Saudi EFL learners. Despite the fact that vocabulary learning is an immensely complex and vital field of study, it has been observed that more focus in the EFL classroom has been laid on grammar versus learners' word knowledge (Al Qahtani, 2015). In fact, Swan & Walter (1984) argue that it is the most important and challenging aspect of language for language learners to learn (Baskin et al., 2017). On many occasions, students struggle to find the appropriate vocabulary when it comes to producing a comprehensible piece of language. Learners' lack of vocabulary knowledge leads to stress and anxiety and, as a result, learners become demotivated and discouraged from participation in the communication or in the language learning process. Previous studies show that a large number of EFL learners at the tertiary level in Saudi universities have a low vocabulary size (Al-Nujaidi, 2003; Al-Masrai & Milton, 2012; Althalab, 2019). Years of experience in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) prompted the researchers to investigate why EFL students struggle in learning ESP vocabulary more than they do in English for General Purposes (EGP). Elicitation

of students' responses for the aforementioned question reveals that the size and difficulty of ESP vocabulary is one of the main reasons. Hence, students' concerns in their responses about the difficulty of learning ESP vocabulary must be addressed to help instructors and students understand the importance of vocabulary acquisition in the language learning process, and raise their awareness about the importance of VLSs. In fact, careful application of VLSs in students' language learning adds to their attainment of high grades and facilitates the achievement of their primary goal of acquiring a degree. More significantly, VLSs assist students in the fulfillment of their objectives by allowing them to become more engaged and self-directed learners. Moreover, students pursuing higher education must be able to communicate effectively in English and VLSs would help them to increase the size of their vocabulary.

### ***Research Objectives***

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To investigate EFL university students' understanding of VLSs.
- b) To determine which VLS is the most commonly used among EFL university students.
- c) To look at the effect of VLSs on the performance of EFL students in an ESP course.

### ***Research Questions***

- a) What is the level of awareness of VLSs among EFL university students?
- b) Which VLS is the most commonly used among EFL university students?
- c) How do VLSs affect EFL students' success in ESP classes?

### ***Significance of the study***

The current study examines EFL students' knowledge and preferences about VLS and it explores how VLSs affect their performance in the ESP context. The findings may aid instructors in understanding the underlying causes of the difficulties encountered by learners in vocabulary learning within the context of English language classrooms. Furthermore, it may help to formulate methods that can make classes more engaging for the VLS users while enhancing learners' participation in vocabulary development activities. No doubt that vocabulary growth is essential for overall English language proficiency. Indeed, having a broad language understanding is fundamental to providing learners with an education that equips them for the future labor market. Moreover, this need becomes even more relevant within the ESP context as learners deal with the jargon they will use in their future job. For that reason, this research was planned and executed to observe the adult EFL learners' awareness of VLSs and also, to determine their utility in an ESP context.

### ***Literature Review***

The literature on Language Learning Strategies (LLS) suggests that when LLS had appeared, much emphasis was placed on other aspects of the language learning process rather than on vocabulary acquisition. After the evolution of several language teaching techniques, various eminent researchers realized the significance of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). Thus, several taxonomies have been proposed for L2 acquisition to systematize and expand the use of vocabulary learning strategies. The taxonomies proposed by Oxford (1990), Schmitt (1997), and Nation (2001) are among the most popular taxonomies. Oxford (1990) classified VLSs into two main categories of 'direct' and 'indirect' strategies. Furthermore, the direct sub-strategies include 'memory', 'cognitive', and 'compensation' strategies, while 'meta-cognitive', 'affective', and

'social' strategies are the indirect ones. In 1997, Schmitt presented a more comprehensive taxonomy that classifies VLSs under 'discovery' and 'consolidation' strategies. Discovery strategies include 'determination' and 'social' strategies, whereas consolidation strategies include 'social', 'memory', 'cognitive', and 'metacognitive' strategies (Asgari & Mustapa, 2011). Nation (2001) classified the types of VLSs into three categories - planning strategies, source strategies, and processing strategies (LaBontee, 2019) Using planning strategies, learners can select words, aspects of word knowledge, and the strategies to be used. Learners can also use dictionaries, guess the meaning from context, or use background knowledge to learn information about words when they utilize source strategies. Processing techniques such as observing, retrieving, and producing might be employed to reinforce or coagulate previously learned knowledge. Undoubtedly, learners' knowledge and attitude toward the use of VLSs would improve their performance in the language learning process. In the EFL context, adult learners need to use some VLS to augment their lexical competence and to gradually attain autonomous competence. Research has been undertaken to investigate the influence of Vocabulary Learning Strategies on various components of the language learning process in an EFL environment (Pratami & Margana, 2019). Previous research conducted in this area is important for the present study and therefore is described below.

Zhao (2009) examined how a five-week training program on metacognitive strategies affected college students' vocabulary learning. The research included a total of 134 students. The experimental group (N= 68) was trained for using cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies, whereas the control group (N= 66) was trained using only cognitive strategies. The experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-training test.

Noor & Amir (2009) examined the use of VLSs by a group of EFL learners and the data was collected from postgraduate students (N= 35) through the use of questionnaires. The findings show that a distinctive strategy was implemented by learners for the purpose of vocabulary learning. Notably, the strategies of memorization, dictionary strategies, and linguistic clues were the most commonly used. Conversely, the least used strategy was note-taking.

Asgari & Mustapha (2011) used the qualitative approach to look at the preferences of Malaysian ESL students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language for various vocabulary acquisition methodologies (TESL). The results suggest that the learners' favorite VLSs were several including acquiring words by reading, using monolingual dictionaries, using diverse English Language media, and incorporating new English words into regular conversation.

Omar (2015) did research on Kurdish university students. Twenty male and female undergraduate and postgraduate students were chosen from various colleges and universities. The data shows that advanced L2 learners were aware of cognitive strategies for vocabulary recall. According to the findings, students employed these strategies in a variety of ways. For advanced learners, the use of dictionaries was found to be the most preferred technique, while the use of flashcards was shown to be the least preferred.

Taheri & Davoudi (2016) investigated the effect of the keyword vocabulary teaching strategy on language learning and the long-term retention of vocabulary in an EFL classroom context. They observed fifty Iranian EFL male and female students through the use of control and experimental groups. The findings showed a positive impact of the keyword teaching strategy on vocabulary learning and on long-term vocabulary retention. As expected, the experimental group outperformed the control group at the end of the treatment.

Baskin, Iscan, Karagoz, & Birol (2017) conducted their research to examine the use of VLSs by the learners in a Turkish University. Twenty-two students were given a questionnaire with twenty-five vocabulary items. The findings revealed that students' levels in language skills had a significant effect on the VLSs they employed. Furthermore, the most utilized strategies by the students were the 'determination strategies and the least ones were the cognitive strategies.

Altalhab (2019) explored how Saudi university students' vocabulary knowledge (N= 120) affected their proficiency to communicate in English. The average vocabulary size of Saudi EFL students at the tertiary level was found around 3000 words. Despite this great size of vocabulary, the majority of the students had low scores in the vocabulary low-frequency levels.

In light of the aforementioned studies in relation to VLSs, it is essential that students use these strategies in their language learning to establish an effective vocabulary learning approach. Moreover, this notion becomes more relevant within the ESP context where the size and difficulty of vocabulary are greater when compared to the EGP.

### **Methodology**

In this section, we will discuss the design of the study, population, instruments, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Research Design**

A mixed-method approach to research was used in this paper, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate students' knowledge level and preferences for the use of VLSs. Three qualitative research tools were employed: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Furthermore, descriptive statistics were carried out on the pre-test and post-test scores using SPSS to quantitatively examine the influence of VLSs on students' performance.

### **Participants**

A convenience sampling strategy which is a non-probability sample was selected to be used in this classroom research to collect the needed data. An entire class assigned for the researchers to teach was selected for the data collection. The population used in this study was students in the preparatory year program at a local university. Participants were all in the science stream and they were studying an ESP course in the second semester of the academic year. The majority of the students participating in the study received their pre-university education Arabic language medium and English was only one of the subjects they studied. All students in this sample were enrolled in the advanced-level English for General Purposes (EGP) course in the first semester of their preparatory year. The level of this EGP course was determined based on individual students' performance in an English placement test taken at the start of the academic year. Those participants were between the ages of 17 and 21.

### **Research Instrument**

This research aims to examine students' knowledge levels and preferences for VLSs. Therefore, data were collected from the participants by answering questions given in an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews about their use of vocabulary learning strategies in their English learning. To obtain more comprehensive information, field notes from classroom observations were also utilized. Scores from the pre-test and post-test were used to compare the influence of a selection of VLSs.

### **Research Procedures**

In this study, data was collected in phases. To begin with, field notes of ongoing class observations were kept. Then participants were given a 50-item questionnaire based on Schmitt's taxonomy (1997) to collect information on their knowledge level and personal preferences when utilizing VLSs. The items used in the questionnaire for this purpose were adapted from Noor & Amir (2009). Furthermore, students' responses to the questionnaire were then elaborated on in the one-to-one interviews to get in-depth information about the responses they provided to the questionnaire. Finally, students' pre-test and post-test scores were then analyzed to determine the impact of VLSs on students' performance.

### **Data Analysis**

The information gathered from both qualitative and quantitative research methods was examined in two phases. To begin with, the analysis was made using data from the questionnaire to determine students' level of knowledge and preferences regarding the use of various vocabulary learning strategies. Data from field notes and interviews were then thematically analyzed, and the findings were interpreted to learn more about students' knowledge and preferences about vocabulary learning strategies. In addition, percentages and standard deviations were then calculated for both the pre-test and post-test scores as well as the standard deviations of both tests, were compared. Moreover, Paired t-test was run to examine whether there was any impact for the vocabulary learning strategies used by the EFL students on their performance within the ESP context.

### **Results and discussion**

The findings from all types of data collected will be presented and discussed in this part to answer the research questions posed in this study.

#### **Knowledge level of EFL learners VLSs**

To notice the students' knowledge level about vocabulary learning strategies, a questionnaire was administered. As a matter of fact, students were found aware of VLSs the majority of them viewed VLSs favorably. Statistics showed that 28.6% and 42.95% of the students have opted to the options of 'strongly agree' and 'agree', respectively, in the items stating that VLSs are helpful in learning new words. On the other hand, only 14.3% of the students have chosen the alternatives 'strongly disagree' and 'neutral', and no one has selected 'disagree' (as shown in figure 1). This small percentage may indicate that only a small group of the students showed negative or neutral attitudes toward VLSs.

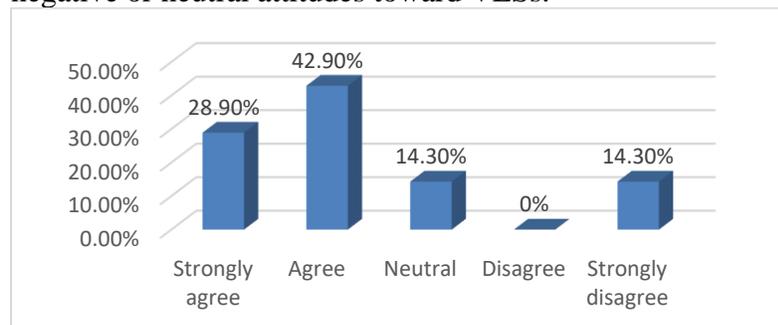


Figure 1: VLSs are helpful in learning new words

To identify students’ knowledge level, a question was asked about their awareness of VLSs before the study started. Almost 53% (9.5% have selected ‘strongly agree’ and 42.90% ‘agree’) of the learners had knowledge of VLSs when this survey was collected, whereas just under 50% gave ‘neutral’ or ‘negative’ responses. (As shown in figure 2 below)

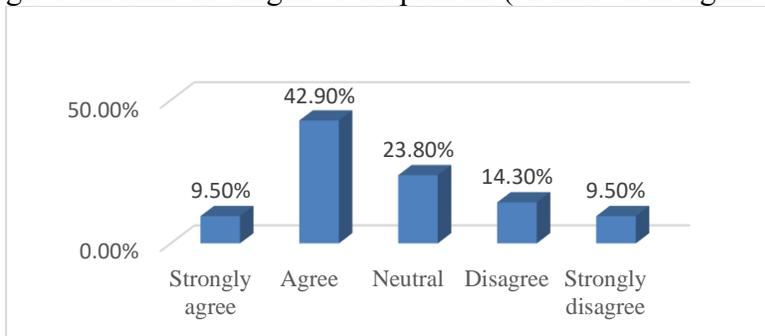


Figure 2: Students’ have prior knowledge of VLSs

Most students believed that using VLSs while learning new words does indeed help them to become more autonomous. In this regard, 23.8% of the students strongly supported this notion, 47.6 % agreed with it, and 28.6% were neutral about it. None of the participants disagreed with this notion. This finding can be easily observed in figure 3.

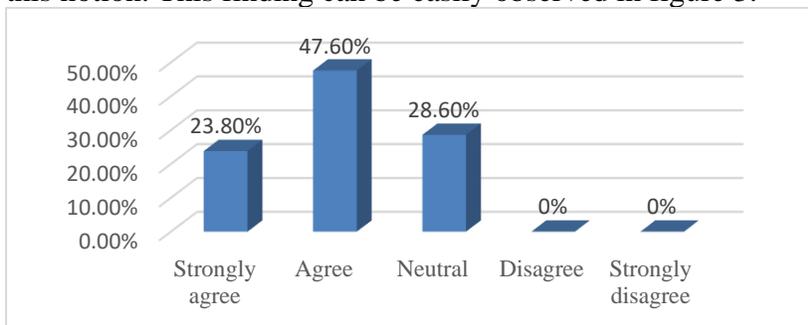


Figure 3: Vocabulary learning strategies help students in becoming autonomous learners

It is worth noting that the results from the questionnaire illustrated that the majority of the students felt better equipped to learn new vocabulary items when using VLSs. This is because 14.3% and 57.1% of the students respectively strongly agree and agree with the notion that VLSs help them to deal with unknown words. However, 19% of the students are neutral and 4.8% disagree, and strongly disagree. (As shown in figure 4)

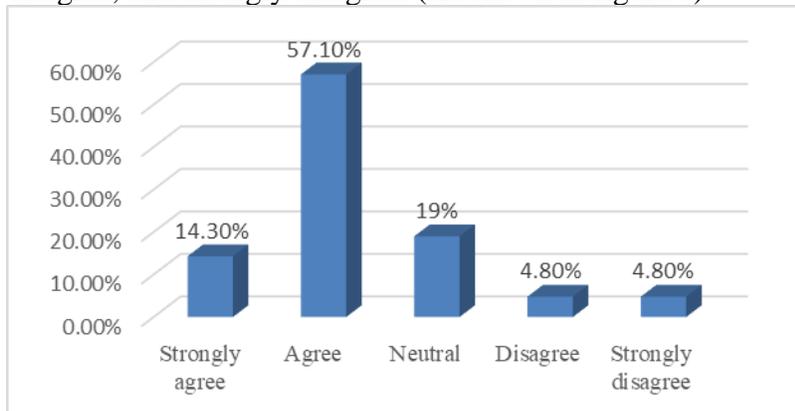


Figure4: VLSs help students’ in dealing with unknown words

Furthermore, students' opinions on the size and difficulty level of the vocabulary in the ESP course they were studying indicated that more than half of the sample (i.e., 53.3%) were found satisfied with the size of the vocabulary. Whereas 23.8% were neutral and dissatisfied, respectively, figure 5 shows the graphical representation of the statistics.

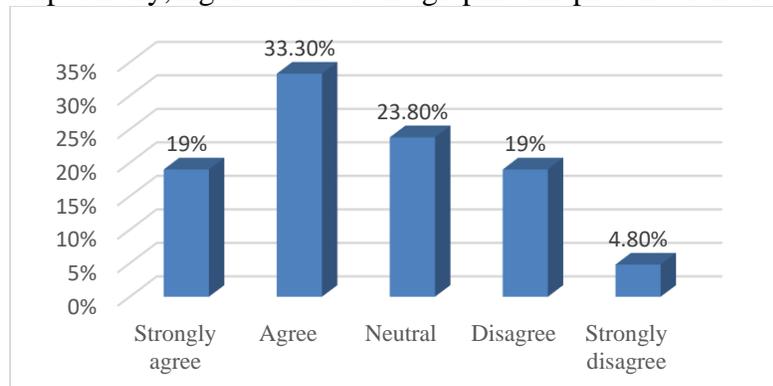


Figure 5: The vocabulary size is satisfactory in the ESP course

The findings from the questionnaire revealed that the difficulty level of vocabulary is greater within the ESP course as compared to the EGP course which they had successfully completed in the previous (first) semester. Namely, 42.95% of the students went with 'strongly agree' and 33.3% with 'agree' that the vocabulary in the ESP course is more difficult than the EGP course. On the contrary, 14.3% of the subjects remained neutral, and only 9.5% disagreed with this statement (see Figure 6)

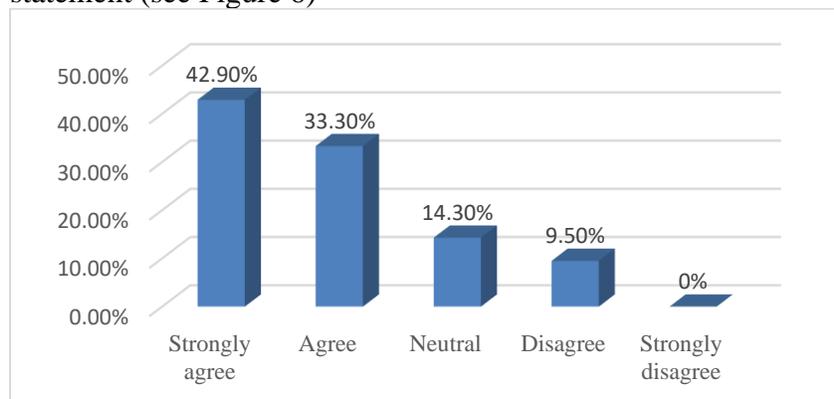


Figure 6: Vocabulary in the ESP course is more difficult as compared to the EGP course

### ***The most Common VLSs among the EFL learners***

One section in the questionnaire was designed to explore students' preferences for various VLSs. These items concerning preferences for VLSs were written using Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of language learning techniques. The data showed that students have preferences as per their own choices. Among the determination strategies, more than half of the students (57.1%) preferred to use the strategy of 'guessing the meaning from context' to understand the meaning of unknown words. On the other hand, 28.6% of students chose the strategy to 'consult a dictionary to figure out the meaning,' while 14.3% of them preferred to learn vocabulary by 'identifying the parts of speech of new terms.' As a result, it was revealed that 'guessing the meaning from context' was the most favored vocabulary acquisition approach in the area of determination. In terms of the social strategies, the majority of the students chose to consult their classmates about new vocabulary items rather than to consult the teachers. The most popular social strategy was 'asking

classmates,' which was chosen by almost half of the students. Surprisingly, only 33.3% of the students preferred to ask their teachers about unknown words, whereas 14% preferred to ask native speakers. The findings of students' preferences are in line with the results of Schmitt's study (1997), which shows the high popularity of the social strategies among the students.

Moreover, the most preferred strategy by 52.4% of the students among the memory strategies, was 'learning vocabulary by making pictures and images'. The second preferred strategy in this category is 'grouping words', with a percentage of 42.9% of students favoring it. On the contrary, a small percentage of students (4.8%), selected the strategy of 'making acronyms' to learn new words.

Over half of the population (i.e., 57.1%) favored 'taking notes' on new vocabulary items when it came to cognitive strategies. In contrast, the strategy of learning vocabulary through 'repetition' was more popular than the strategy of 'highlighting new words.' The percentage of preference for both the strategies was 28.6% and 14.3%, respectively. In the area of metacognitive methods, more than half of the students (52.4%) favored the approach of planning vocabulary exercises, while 23.8% chose 'monitoring' progress and 'evaluating' progress, respectively. Furthermore, it is observed that the most preferred strategies are 'guessing the meaning from context' and 'taking notes of the vocabulary', corresponding to 57.1 %, and the least preferred VLS is 'making acronyms' with a percentage of 4.8%. Figure 7 shows the preferences of students for VLSs.

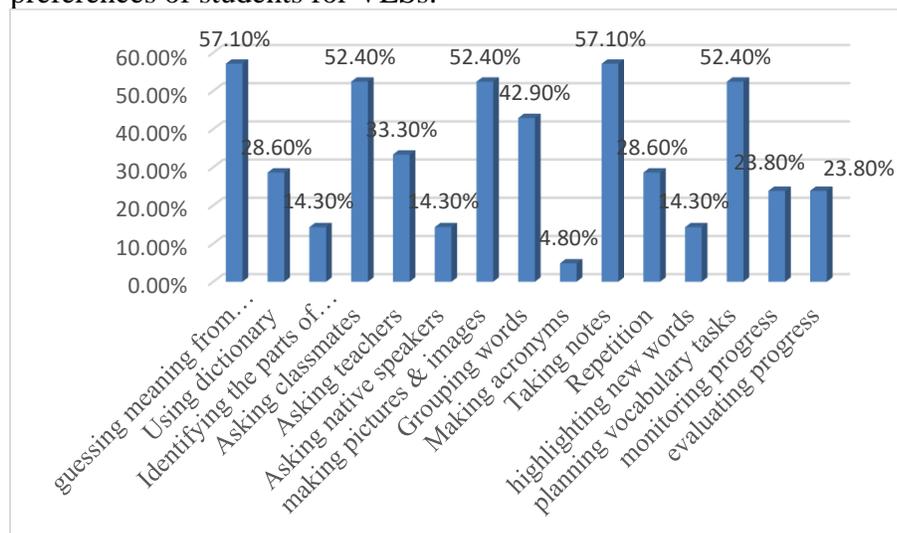


Figure 7: Preferences for VLSs

### ***Vocabulary Learning Strategies' Effect on Student Performance***

To measure the impact of VLSs on students' performance, the descriptive statistics method was used. The calculations show that the highest score achieved by the learner in the pre-test is 65%, and the achievement goes up to 99% in the post-test. A significant difference of 34% shows the relevance of VLSs for the learner. Similarly, the respective lowest scores in the pre-test and post-test were 25% and 26.5%. The difference between the two scores is similar, i.e., the student performed better on the post-test than on the pre-test by a margin of 1.5%. The numerical analysis of the data is shown in figure 8.

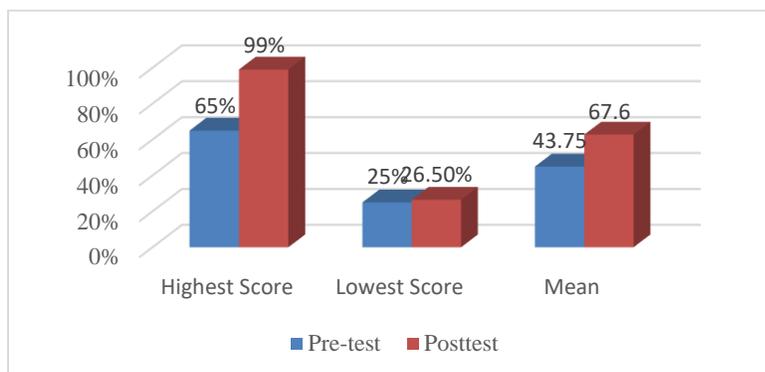


Figure 8: Comparative scores: pre-tests & post-tests

Further, when the mean scores of both the tests were compared, the results demonstrated that the difference is quite considerable. The mean of the pre-test scores is 43.75% (SD= 12.23), and the mean of the post-test is 67.6 % (SD=18.74). In figure 9, the red graph line representing the post-test scores indicates better performance in comparison to the blue line, which represents the pre-test scores.

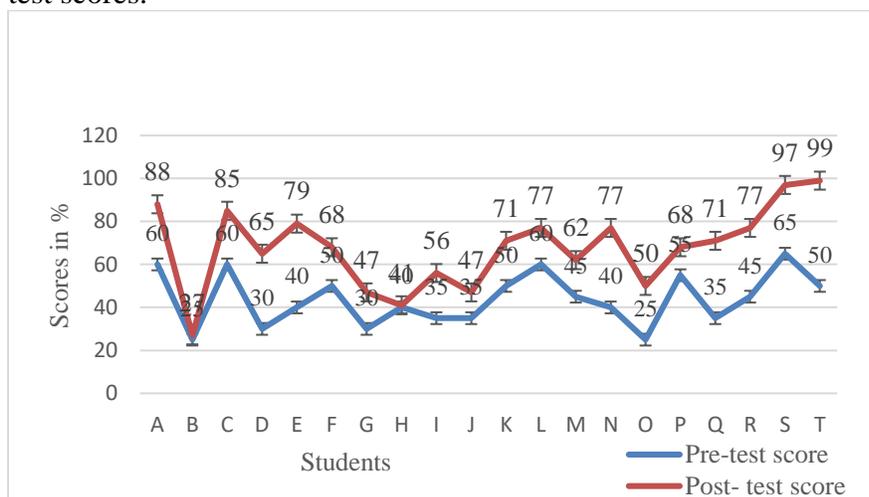


Figure 9: Pre-test and post-test scores of students

To find out whether or not the impact of the VLSs is statistically significant, a T-test was run and the result demonstrates that the value of the T-test is 8.6207 and the two-tailed value is less than 0.0001. Also, the Standard Error of Difference (SD) is 2.767 which represents a statistically significant difference. As a result, all of the numerical data suggest that VLSs have a considerable influence on students’ performance. Likewise, the comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores of every student individually reflects this conclusion.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to examine the EFL learners' experiences both qualitatively and quantitatively. In particular, students’ knowledge level and preferences for various Vocabulary learning strategies were investigated besides the impact of VLSs on students’ performance in an ESP course. It was found that the majority of the students have a good understanding of VLSs. 'Guessing the meaning' and 'taking notes' were the most popular VLSs, while 'using acronyms' was the least popular. It is possible that students employ several VLSs when acquiring a new

language; nevertheless, the data contradict this idea. The comparative analysis of the pre-test and the post-test scores showed a substantial difference in the results. Considering the interpretation of data, EFL students showed a significant improvement in their performance, as evident in the post-test scores. This also shows consistency with the findings in other studies (Zhao, 2009; Noor & Amir, 2009; Omar, 2015; Taheri & Davoudi, 2016; Baskin et al., 2017; Altalhab, 2019). Hence, explicit training on the usage of vocabulary acquisition procedures makes it easier for students to acquire new words.

As a result, the research has pedagogical consequences since it allows teachers to learn more about their students' knowledge levels and preferences for Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Getting to know such information on vocabulary learning may assist teachers in using better teaching strategies in the EFL classrooms, which would result in the achievement of both students' and teachers' objectives.

### Limitations

A total of twenty female students participated in the study which may mean that the findings do not apply to the entire population. This limitation is common in educational institutions. It is not always feasible in educational institutions to conduct empirical research with a representative sample as researchers have to deal with intact groups in the way the institutions had already grouped students.

### Acknowledgment

The Deanship of Scientific Research of Umm Al-Qura University provided financial assistance for this project, 19-EDU-1-02-0003 is the grant number.

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