

## **How Much of VLS Research has “Filtered Down” into the ELT Materials a Comparison of Local and International Materials**

**Ali Bastanfar,  
Toktam Hashemi**

Islamic Azad university-Khoy Branch, Iran

### **Introduction**

The need for vocabulary in any act of language learning is self-evident. All through the history of ELT, it has never been doubted that a typical language learner has to build up a reasonable knowledge of vocabulary to construct sentences conveying his meanings. Nevertheless, in earlier periods of ELT, vocabulary teaching was overshadowed by a focus on grammar because it was thought that vocabulary could simply be left to take care of itself. The wave of change came along with the body of research which demonstrated the necessity of including vocabulary instruction in ELT programs. There is now general agreement that lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence and learners must systematically build up an efficient knowledge of vocabulary (Coady & Huckin 1997, cited in Decarrico 2001). Evidence from psycholinguistic research and corpus linguistics suggests that prefabricated chunks are the foundation of fluency and account for more of the choices speakers make than do novel constructions based on the application of grammatical rules (Decarrico 2001; Ranalli 2003).

A look at the practices in ELT suggests that the field has resonated to this change and has tried to account for the new tendency by modifying its approaches and methodologies. The movement has gone so far as a controversial call for a lexical approach (Lewis 1993). According to this view, the most common words of the language, in their typical contexts and patterns of use, will be the foundation for language learning programs (Willis 1990). However it is truism that a typical instructional program for language learning is unlikely to be able to provide all the lexis a learner will need (Lewis 1993; Willis 1990). This becomes more tangible when we understand that lexical needs are largely unique to the individual and are based on personal preference, professional and academic particularities, etc. (Nation 2001). The question is whether this is an insolvable dilemma in language

teaching? A bulk of research on learning strategies continues to grow which can show us a way out. A subcategory of general learning strategies is called language learning strategies which in turn include vocabulary learning strategies (Nation 2001). Language learning strategies are certain skills, techniques and actions used by the learner to facilitate the learning and recall of one or several components of proficiency (Wenden & Rubin 1987). The LLS research is linked to studies which show that more successful learners, in contrast to less successful learners, employ a group of specific strategies which are related to their success. Vocabulary learning strategies, as a subset of LLS, are strongly linked to successful vocabulary learning (Ranalli 2003). The success implies making the process of learning more effective, more self-directed, and more transferrable to new situations. In fact, instead of or in addition to giving a few fish to a person we can teach him fishing.

Although research endorses the benefits of using these strategies, there is evidence to the effect that learners need training to use them efficiently with the ultimate result of improving their vocabulary learning. Left on their own, learners are mostly inclined to use basic vocabulary learning strategies but they "may be willing to try new strategies if they are introduced to them and instructed in them" (Schmitt 1997). Thus, presenting vocabulary learning strategies should be the prime concern for syllabus designers, decision-makers, coursebook writers, materials developers, and finally teachers. While it may be unimaginable to expect all teachers to unexceptionally include training learners to use VLS in their activities, it is more feasible to incorporate such training in ELT coursebooks as they are agenda for classroom practices for teachers and learners alike. Hence, the necessity of incorporation of VLS and training to use them in ELT coursebooks becomes clearer. This concern is even more important than developing a set of principles for selecting a collection of words to be included in a specific language program or coursebook. As a logical result of such discussions, the following questions arise: what measures have been taken in ELT coursebooks to present vocabulary learning strategies and training to use them? If such claims have been made by the authors, are they realized in the books as they are? These questions boil down to a basic question: have insights from VLS research "filtered down" into the ELT materials?

This study aims to delve into the most recent research on VLS and extract insights which can enrich ELT coursebooks. Then an attempt is made to gauge advances in treating VLS in ELT coursebooks. For this purpose, a sample of local and international ELT materials are analyzed to study to what extent insights from VLS research has informed the sampled coursebooks.

## Review of Literature

A good knowledge of vocabulary is essential for communication. Words are containers in which concepts are held. Although grammar and vocabulary are complementary, with a bit of negligence Wilkins (1972) asserts that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed." In many instances, people deal with a particular situation by learning specific words related to that context while they have rarely any mastery of grammatical structures e.g. airport taxi drivers in EFL countries. These people have concluded that words have more communicative value considering the amount of time, attention and energy spent to learn. The common experience of teachers and learners also demonstrates that lack of a specific word cannot be compensated by circumlocution. In an example, a student remembers being caught in a situation where he had forgotten the word 'CHARGE'. The person was shopping from a hotel supermarket in an Asian country. He did not have cash on him so wanted to ask the cashier to 'charge' his room account. He fell back on different words and sentences to fill the gap but with no success. Finally, he decided to show his room card and make the context more relevant. This simple example testifies to the importance of the knowledge of vocabulary. Words are not merely slot-fillers which simply fill in the pre-assigned function slots determined by structures of language. Rather, they are building blocks of a successful communication.

The focus on teaching vocabulary reached its peak by a call for a lexical approach. Lewis (1993) believed that language is composed of words connected by rules of language not of grammatical rules filled in by words. Thus, vocabulary was no longer a victim of discrimination in language teaching which, after decades of neglect, recognized lexis as central to any language learning process (Laufer 1997). The change in the status of vocabulary in language learning has affected teaching and learning practices, as well as materials writing which has become more selective and principled about what vocabulary to include (O'Dell 1997). Accompanied with the resurgence of interest in vocabulary, there has been recognition of the importance of equipping learners with how to acquire vocabulary on their own (Ranalli 2003). This made the studies in the field of LLS relevant to vocabulary learning. Thus, as LLS have been defined as "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information" (O'Malley and Chamot 1990), VLS have been characterized as any strategy which affects the process by which words are obtained, stored, retrieved and used (Schmitt 1997).

## **Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Empirical research based mostly on learners' self-report of their strategy use is the cornerstone of VLS studies that are carried out to determine which strategies learners use and to figure out relationships between strategy use and success in language learning. Occasionally there have been attempts to develop taxonomies of VLS. The most frequently cited in the literature are Gu and Johnson (1996), Lawson and Hogben (1996), Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001). Sananoui's (1995) structured/unstructured and Nielson's (2003) contextualized/decontextualized distinction will be also dealt with in passing.

Sananoui (1995) identified two distinctive approaches to vocabulary learning: structured and unstructured. Structured learners engaged in independent learning activities, recorded the lexical items, and practiced them. They were more successful than unstructured learners.

Gu and Johnson (1996) identified six types of strategy - guessing, dictionary, note-taking, rehearsal, encoding, and activation - together with two other factors: beliefs about vocabulary learning and metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive regulation consists of strategies for selective attention and self-initiation. The former allow learners to know which words are important for them to learn and are essential for adequate comprehension of a passage. The latter make the meaning of vocabulary items clear through the use of a variety of means. Guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies are labeled as cognitive strategies. Rehearsal and encoding categories are classified under memory strategies. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies include strategies such as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word-structure. Activation strategies include those strategies through which learners actually use new words in different contexts.

Lawson and Hogben (1996) distinguish four categories of VLS: repetition, word feature analysis, simple elaboration and complex elaboration. Simple elaboration consists of sentence translation, simple use of context, appearance similarity, sound link and complex elaboration includes complex use of context, paraphrase and mnemonic.

Schmitt (1997) organized 58 strategies under five types. He adopted social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive categories from Oxford's (1990) inventory of LLS but added a further category labeled as determination and also made a distinction between discovery and consolidation strategies. The former helps learners to find out the meaning of new words when encountered for the first time, and the latter allows them to memorize, practice and retain the word after it has

been introduced. The categories adopted from Oxford are included within consolidation strategies while discovery strategies contain determination and social strategies. Determination strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience" (Schmitt 1997), e.g. guessing. It is also possible to discover the meaning of a word through asking someone for help.

Nation's (2001) theoretically-based taxonomy makes a basic distinction between the aspects of vocabulary knowledge from the sources of vocabulary knowledge and from learning processes; hence, three general classes: planning, sources, and processes each covering a subset of key strategies. 'Planning' involves choosing where and how to focus attention on the vocabulary item and contains strategies for choosing words, choosing aspects of word knowledge and choosing strategies as well as planning repetition. 'Sources' involves finding information about the word from the word form itself, from the context, from a reference source like dictionaries or glossaries and from analogies and connections with other languages. Process means establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies.

Nielson (2003) distinguishes between contextualized and decontextualized VLS. Mnemonic and non-mnemonic elaboration techniques are decontextualized strategies. Mnemonic techniques involve the use of both visual and verbal mental imagery to relate a word with some previously learned knowledge, e.g. keyword method. Non-mnemonic elaboration techniques, such as semantic mapping and ordering, encourage learners to process target words in terms of their semantic properties. His contextualized VLS category includes learning words through reading and sentence writing method.

### **Training in Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) state that learner training helps learners discover the learning strategies that suit them best. Oxford (1990) believes that learner training creates awareness of the choices available in language learning and facilitates learning and practice of strategies that encourage independence and enable self-directed learning. Wenden (1991) considers learning strategies, metacognitive knowledge, and attitude as components of learner training. Chamot (1999) asserts that "learning strategies instruction can help students of English become better learners" since it assists them in becoming independent, confident learners. Lotfi (2007) reports Cohen and Apeh (1981) who taught a particular VLS and observed that learners using that remembered vocabulary more effectively. Stoffer (1995, cited in Renalli 2003) claims that strategy instruction is the single best predictor of use of VLS. Nation (2001) believes that since "learners differ greatly in the skill

with which they use strategies, it is important to make training in strategy use a planned part of a vocabulary development program". Lawson and Hogben (1996) concluded that there is a need to present strategies more directly during language teaching since students are not aware of their advantages. However, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) make us aware of the fact that strategy training is a complex process which requires committed and informed teachers who spend an extended period of time working with learners.

Chamot (2004) asserts that strategy instruction should be explicit, that is, that the teacher should inform students about the value and applications of the strategies either within regular language course or as a separate course. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) show that an explicit (vs. embedded or implicit) focus on metacognitive knowledge about learning processes is necessary to make them transferable to new learning tasks. Chamot (2004) believes that culture and context influence LLS by determining the demands of the task and the kind of learning strategies deemed effective. Thus, language teachers should help their students use the learning strategies that will best accomplish their instructional goals. This involves taking into account students' level of L2 proficiency (which can affect their ability to understand metacognitive explanations for how and why to use strategies), learning context, learners' cultural backgrounds, previous educational experiences, learning styles, etc (Renalli 2003). Training must also include opportunities for learners to monitor and evaluate their use of learning strategies (Sinclair and Ellis 1992, cited in Renalli 2003). This necessitates pairing metacognitive and cognitive (direct) strategies to give students "direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (O'Malley and Chamot 1990). On the basis of the findings of research the following results can be extracted:

- VLS have a wide variety and a typical learner is aware of and uses only a small fraction of them which may not be the most efficient ones.
- Learners need instruction to widen their range of strategies and use them. This training has the role of changing knowledge into skill. It is the independent use of these strategies which is the ultimate goal of strategy instruction.
- In earlier stages of language learning, decontextualized strategies are necessary and a greater proportion of them is recommended. With progress, the proportion is balanced.
- Since students in earlier stages lack metalinguistic information for explicit VLS training, it is better to rely more on presenting VLS implicitly, that is, embedded within other activities and introduce explicit VLS gradually.

- Metacognitive strategies should be included in instruction along with the direct strategies.
- Learners may show indifference or resistance to strategy training because of their previous learning experience, educational or cultural background, learning style or other factors. So the goals of strategy instruction should be explained and their motivation in terms of positive affective factors should be stimulated and involved.
- Explicit instruction is more effective. So, use of L1 is better unless learners are advanced.

### **The Role of Materials**

Tomlinson (2001) reports that coursebook is the most convenient form of presenting materials; it produces consistency and continuation, gives learners a sense of system, cohesion and progress, and helps teachers prepare and learners revise. Littlejohn (1992) believes that coursebooks today are more influential than ever before in terms of the extent to which they structure what happens in language classrooms. Most of the times, changes in policy are implemented through coursebook revision or change since coursebooks are agenda for classroom teaching and learning practices. While it is possible alternatively to fall back on teacher training and professional development programs to implement a procedure in language teaching, it is more practicable to count on coursebooks. This is the case with presenting VLS and training learners to use them in their activities and is the rationale behind the present study as will be explained presently.

### **The Study**

This study attempts to apply criteria extracted from VLS research on a sample of local and international ELT materials to evaluate their treatment of VLS. The purpose is to analyze the specified coursebooks based on the insights gained from VLS research to gauge the extent to which the sampled coursebooks have incorporated VLS and training in using them. Thus, this study can be considered as a micro-evaluation in that a particular teaching task is selected and is subjected to a detailed empirical evaluation (Ellis 1997). In a similar undertaking, Schmitt (1997) concluded that insights from research and scholarly discussion have been “filtering down” into recently published vocabulary-learning materials. However, a focused and comparative work can be more insightful.

The method of analysis and evaluation was that a set of criteria were derived from the research history on both vocabulary learning strategies and learner training in VLS. Lake's (1997) evaluative framework of learner training was adopted with major modifications according to the goals of the study. The criteria are presented

in Table 1. The degree of correspondence of each coursebook with the criteria were recorded in terms of a subjective rating scheme with four points (0-3) to provide the reader with a mental framework and to facilitate comparisons among the coursebooks in this study.

**Table 1– Criteria derived from VLS and learner training research**

<b>Criteria</b>	
Scope of Learner Training: learning strategies, metacognitive knowledge and attitude presented altogether	
Type of VLS Training: Awareness-raising activities, one-off activities, or long-term training	
Language of VLS Presentation: L1, L2 or a combination of the two (preferred)	
Presentation of Metacognitive Strategies	Self-direction: opportunities for individual choice of activities, the method of completing the activity, and the mode in which it is done
	Self-assessment and Monitoring: to enable students to assess and evaluate their performance and progress
Method of Presentation of Metacognitive Strategies: direct or indirect	
Presentation of Direct Strategies	Explicit
	Implicit
	Contextualized
	Decontextualized
Balancing Metacognitive and Direct (cognitive) Strategies	
Breadth: Range and combination of different strategies	
Suitability of Activities to the Academic Level of the Students	
Motivation	Variety and Flexibility: Range of approaches and activity types to suit different interests and learning styles
	Balance of Psychological and Technical Preparation
Feedback: providing explanations for tests	

The coursebooks analyzed and evaluated in this study were coursebook series used to teach English in local General Education in Iran. The series include seven coursebooks. Three books belong to Guidance School level of General Education which has three levels and begins after primary school. This is where English is introduced for the first time in local General Education. All students have to study Guidance School to be qualified to enter High School. Thus, they take three English courses during the three-year period of the Guidance School. High School has three levels and takes three years. Here again students have to take one English course each year. After students finish High School, they have to continue studying



for another one year to be qualified to take University Entrance Exam to enter university. This one-year period is called Pre-University. So every Iranian student takes seven English courses before he enters university. The English coursebooks used in these levels have been arranged as a series and they claim to have one ultimate goal which is the improvement of students' English proficiency. The three Guidance School books have mostly a structural basis sporadically interspersed with some dialogues and functions which are always misused through treating them as Grammar-Translation activities. The three High School books are reading-oriented but the structural basis of the books is in evidence. However, they are a relative improvement compared to the three former ones. This being said, it is very interesting that the new edition of English coursebook of Pre-University level proves to be an exceptionally successful step in developing English coursebooks according to the insights derived from ELT research. However, the efficiency of learning English in local General Education is notoriously low. One reason for this among many other reasons is the structural basis of the coursebooks.

The frustrated students who observe no real gains out of learning English in General Education surge toward private institutes to get more efficient learning there. The coursebooks commonly used in these institutes are the best-seller international coursebooks; for example, recently 'Interchange, Third Edition' (Richards et al. 2005) is used. Thus, 'Interchange' was chosen for evaluation because of its widespread use in international programs and its popularity in the local context. It is arranged in a series which intend to develop proficiency in four skills and give students focused practice in components of language. The book consists of four books which start from 'intro' as elementary level and go through 'Interchange One', 'Interchange Two' and 'Interchange Three'. The series has been compiled around communicative syllabus.

### **Local Coursebooks**

The final scores in table 2 show the degree to which each coursebook within this series has incorporated the criteria. While the six coursebooks all through the Guidance School and High School levels show a weak attention to research base, there is a considerable gain in the case of Pre-University coursebook. This is because the new edition of the book has moved a long way in incorporating vocabulary learning strategies and the elements of learner training. Not only has the book changed the long established direction of the earlier books in the series, but also it has introduced elements which were sort of taboo in General Education coursebooks. An important difference is that earlier books did not address learners all through the book, rather they addressed the teacher by including regular recommendation notes on how to teach various parts of the book.

This is quite against the aims and methods of learner training. Catering for self-directed learning and independence entails trusting in the learner as a person who can take the responsibility of his learning and providing a system of necessary notes for him/her which make for increasingly independent learning. This is embodied in the inclusion of an informative nine-page preface as well as regular notes through the new edition of the book which draw students' attention to strategies and give them practice in using the strategies. It should, however, be pointed out that even in Pre-University book the treatment of vocabulary learning strategies is not adequate when a comparison is made to the treatment of other kinds of strategies, e.g. reading strategies. This shows a general tendency in General Education English coursebooks to place more emphasis on specific components and skills of language, that is, grammar and reading. Nevertheless, inadequate treatment of VLS is a general deficiency which most coursebooks suffer from. What is noticeable in all books of this series is a widespread lack of attention to metacognitive strategies including strategies providing both for self-direction and self-assessment and monitoring. This is not a minor problem as strategies and learner training can be realized only when cognitive strategies are complemented with metacognitive ones as organizing factor. Even in the case of direct (cognitive) strategies, as the rating for 'Breadth' shows, not a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies have been presented all through the series. On the whole, the analysis shows that although the Pre-University coursebook is a significant step in absorbing the insights from research on VLS, the entire series suffer from a widespread lack of attention to VLS presentation and learner training. There is no explicit strategy instruction. The range of VLS which are presented, of course implicitly, is so limited that important strategies such as resource use and note-taking are not dealt with. There is no extended and long-term plan for generalizable and personalized vocabulary construction and strategy instruction, instead single and isolated activities are used. Metacognitive strategies are neglected and there is scarce attention to learner attitude.

### **International Series**

The even ratings assigned to the four books show the congruity of approaches to VLS and learner training among the books within the series. This is rewarding in that learners are exposed to an organized plan concerning vocabulary development from the beginning. Some good elements of this plan are self-assessment, generalizable vocabulary systems, and taking learner's attitude into consideration. However, 'Interchange' coursebooks do not obtain quite high ratings since their treatment of vocabulary is not adequate compared to the potential and necessities of this course. There is no explicit teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, a problem which undermines a systematic approach to vocabulary.

Again also important strategies like resource use are missing. This refers to the narrow range of strategies presented. The element of self-direction is present but quite moderately in comparison to the treatment of four skills. On the whole, the books in 'Interchange' series have taken good steps in incorporating VLS but considering the vast use of the book in various language learning programs there is a long way before we can evaluate the treatment of VLS in this series as efficient and adequate.

### **Conclusion**

Before the analysis, the researcher had the hunch that local materials would not be able to gain high ratings compared to international materials because the latter enjoy the support of an ongoing research base. The new edition of Pre-University book proved to obtain higher scores regarding VLS and learner training. This is rewarding since by improving General Education coursebooks it is possible to exert a positive influence on students' proficiency. One more advantage that local coursebooks have is the possibility of using L1 to present VLS explicitly and metacognitive knowledge about them. The research recommends use of L1 when students' level of proficiency is not high enough to understand metalanguage. It can also summon the element of attitude which is a very important factor in VLS training.

## Appendix 1

**Table 2– The results of applying criteria on local general education/international coursebook series**

Criteria/Values	GS1	GS2	GS3	HS1	HS2	HS3	PU	I-i	I-1	I-2	I-3
Scope of Learner Training	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
Type of VLS Training	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3
Language of VLS Presentation	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Presentation of Metacognitive Strategies	Self-direction	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	2
	Self-assessment and Monitoring	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2
Method of Presentation of Metacognitive Strategies	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
Presentation of Direct Strategies	Explicit	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
	Implicit	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
	Contextualized	0	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2
	Decontextualized	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Balancing Metacognitive and Direct Strategies	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
Breadth	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2
Suitability of Activities to Level	2	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	2	1	1
Motivation	Variety and Flexibility	0	1	1	1	1	2	3	3	3	3
	Balance of Psychological and Technical Preparation	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
Feedback	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	2
<b>Total</b>	11	13	14	18	17	17	31	28	28	27	27

GS= Guidance School

HS= High School I= Interchange

i= intro

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## **Summary**

### **How much of VLS research has “filtered down” into the ELT materials A comparison of local and international materials**

**Ali Bastanfar,  
Toktam Hashemi**

Islamic Azad university-Khoy Branch, Iran

After the long-time dominance of structure over language teaching and learning, there is general agreement that lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence and learners must systematically build up an efficient knowledge of vocabulary (Decarrico 2001). Evidence from psycholinguistic research and corpus linguistics suggests that prefabricated chunks comprise the foundation of fluency and account for more of the choices speakers make than do novel constructions based on the application of grammatical rules (Ranalli 2003). Admittedly, ELT has resonated to this change. However, the classroom is unlikely to be able to provide all the lexis a learner will need and lexical needs are largely unique to the individual, personally, professionally and academically. Is this an insolvable dilemma in language teaching? A growing body of research has demonstrated the advantages of using vocabulary learning strategies in learning L2 vocabulary, which not only facilitate learning but also make it more self-directed and more transferrable to new situations. Research also indicates the need for training learners in the use of VLS. While it may be unimaginable to expect all teachers to unexceptionally include training learners to use VLS in their activities, it is more feasible to incorporate such training in ELT coursebooks as they are agenda for classroom practices for teachers and learners alike. This study attempts to gauge advances in treating VLS in ELT coursebooks. Thus, a sample of local and international ELT materials were analyzed to study to what extent VLS and training in using them has informed the sampled coursebooks.