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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING STRATEGIES AND VOCABULARY
ATTAINMENT IN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Recife
2022

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Dissertation written as a requirement for the
attainment of the degree Bachelor in English
Language Teaching

Supervisor: Dr. Marcelo Augusto Mesquita da
Costa

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Abstract

Vocabulary plays a major role in communication. Several studies have shown that lack or misuse of vocabulary can lead to misunderstandings and that vocabulary depth and size greatly affect one's ability to use the target language. Due to its size and complexity, the acquisition of new lexical items is a continuous process that happens inside and outside of the classroom. Bearing this in mind, students must not only rely on exposure to the language but actively use learning strategies for the improvement of their vocabulary and consequently language proficiency. This work was based on previous research done in the field of vocabulary studies (NATION, 2020), Learning strategies (OXFORD, 1990) and Vocabulary learning Strategies (YONGQI GU, 2020). Moreover, it aims to analyze the data collected through a questionnaire answered by students of English as a Foreign Language. Its importance lies in the fact that by understanding what learners are currently doing, it can be possible to perceive what students already know and what can be improved so as to help their vocabulary learning process. The main question that guides this study is "What strategies are being used by students of English as a foreign language to help them improve their vocabulary knowledge?". Some of the most important findings were the relationship between what students find most difficult and what they are least exposed to, that the majority of students do not plan their own learning, preferring to be told what to do and relying more on the teacher's guidance. These findings were important for they show that one of the topics that need more attention in language and vocabulary learning is students' autonomy.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning; Learning strategies; English as a Foreign Language.

Resumo

O vocabulário tem um papel fundamental no processo comunicativo. Diversos estudos demonstram que a falta ou uso inadequado de vocabulário podem levar a mal-entendidos e que tamanho e qualidade de vocabulário afetam de forma considerável a habilidade de se comunicar na língua alvo. Devido a seu tamanho e complexidade, a aquisição de novos itens lexicais é um processo contínuo que acontece dentro e fora da sala de aula. Considerando isso, os estudantes não devem contar apenas com a exposição à língua alvo, mas fazer o uso ativo de estratégias de aprendizado para melhora de seu vocabulário e consequentemente da sua proficiência na língua. Este trabalho foi baseado em pesquisas feitas nas áreas de Estudos de vocabulário (NATION,2020) , Estratégias de aprendizado (OXFORD, 1990) e Estratégias para aprendizado de vocabulário (YONGQI GU, 2020). Ademais, analisa dados coletados por meio de um questionário respondido por estudantes de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira. A importância deste trabalho está no fato de que por meio do entendimento do que estudantes estão fazendo atualmente, será possível a percepção do que pode ser melhorado com o objetivo de ajudar em sua aquisição de vocabulário. A principal pergunta que guia este estudo é "Quais estratégias têm sido usadas por estudantes de Inglês como língua estrangeira para ajudá-los na melhora do seu conhecimento de vocabulário?" e alguns dos achados mais importantes foram a relação entre o que alunos acham mais difícil e o que eles são menos expostos, e que a maioria deles não planeja o próprio aprendizado, preferindo apoiar-se na orientação dada pelo educador. Estes achados são importantes uma vez que mostram que um dos tópicos que precisam de mais atenção no aprendizado de línguas e vocabulário é a autonomia do estudante.

Palavras-Chave: Aprendizado de vocabulário, Estratégias de aprendizado, Inglês como Língua Estrangeira.

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1.INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary attainment plays a vital role in communication. Previous studies attest that misuse or lack of vocabulary can lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings (THORNBURY, 2002; PAVII TAKA, 2008). Due to its breadth and depth, vocabulary learning is often considered a daunting task and requires not only time and effort but also learning strategies.

Vocabulary studies had not received enough attention until the 1990's in view of the fact that the grammar translation method was prevalent until the 70's. Other methods such as the communicative approach or audiolingual, brought more vocabulary into the classroom, however its acquisition was still considered a consequence of exposure to the language. In recent studies, Rodrigues (2019) affirms that vocabulary is seen as secondary in the classroom, instead of being a focal point, this happening in spite of the fact that its importance is greatly related to language proficiency.

According to Yamada (2018) many studies have been suggesting that students tend to struggle when developing their own Vocabulary learning strategies. In light of that, observing students in the classroom environment, it was possible to notice that most often, learners only have the time of the class for practicing their skills and learning new content. Moreover they are commonly not aware of the many tasks and strategies they can adopt so as to improve their language proficiency. It was also perceived that students tend to struggle with vocabulary learning, once it is not a set of rules that can be memorized, but rather a consistent task that requires many adjustments.

A better understanding of how students see their own learning process and what strategies they are acquainted with can contribute to future research in the field of VLS (Vocabulary Learning Strategies). Moreover, by noticing what students know or not, teachers can help learners to become more aware of their own learning experience and provide them with other ways of improving. Bearing it in mind, the main question to be answered in this work is "What strategies are being used by students of English as a foreign language to help them improve their vocabulary knowledge?".

This work aims to investigate the importance of learning strategies directed to vocabulary learning. Moreover, it intends to describe strategies that are used by students of EFL and understand to what extent students are aware of the existence of different kinds of approaches. Its importance lies in the fact that vocabulary development is crucial for successful communication and learning strategies can maximize its learning as well as enhance students' autonomy.

This research focuses on aspects of vocabulary knowledge and its importance to language proficiency (THORNBURY, 2002; QIAN and H.F. LIN, 2020; NATION, 2020) . It is also based on studies in language learning strategies (OXFORD, 1990; CHAMOT, 2005; BAI, ZHIHONG, 2018; YAMADA, 2018) that presented efficient tools to be used in learning a language. Moreover, data from a survey done with English as a Foreign language students will be presented in order to reveal what strategies students use and better understand their experiences.

This work is both quantitative and qualitative, for it is based on results of a questionnaire that was used as an instrument to collect students' statements on their learning practices. Finally, It will be divided into the following sections: Vocabulary knowledge; Learning strategies; Vocabulary Learning Strategies; Data, which has 5 subsections (Questions, Discussion, On Exposure and Learning, On the awareness and usage of learning strategies and On autonomy); and Conclusion.

2.VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

During the 20th century vocabulary learning was greatly disregarded. One of the reasons for that was the prevalence of the grammar translation method, in which vocabulary instruction was done through bilingual word-lists. Moreover, consideration of vocabulary learning as a result of incidental exposure led to little research on the field of vocabulary acquisition.

Vocabulary learning started to be emphasized especially in the 1990's after Paul Nation's work in learning and teaching vocabulary, and Michael Lewis' work in the Lexical Approach . According to Lewis (1993, p. 6), "Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar".

Nation (2013) addresses mainly word knowledge, contributing to vocabulary studies with a framework that divides vocabulary skills into form, meaning and use. The author (2020) also explains that vocabulary development should both be

considered by the independent learners' actions and the teacher's support and guidance.

Previous studies in the field (THORNBURY, 2002; PAVII TAKA, 2008) have shown the importance of vocabulary attainment in communication. According to Barcroft (2016, p.1) "vocabulary is at the center of language and our ability to communicate successfully." Even though grammar errors are frequent, if one has the knowledge of the content word, the message will be understood. If one does not know a lexical item, however, the communication process will most likely be affected.

When learning a language it is common to focus especially on grammar and vocabulary. This picture can be seen in didactic books, where generally one easily encounters divided sections for these two specific topics. If these two features are compared, lexical knowledge is considered more important for achieving comprehension and production (QIAN and H.F. LIN, 2020). Although grammar plays a vital role, the lack or misuse of vocabulary can lead to misunderstandings and hinder the communication process.

In light of this, vocabulary attainment ought to be taken into account in language learning, as to do so, a few features must be considered. Research suggests that (QIAN and H.F. LIN, 2020), vocabulary knowledge is threefold. It is divided into breadth, depth and fluency, which are intertwined.

First, breadth or size are used to define the amount of lexical items that one has knowledge of. Research indicates that to be able to communicate in daily situations at a basic level one needs a vocabulary size from two thousand to three thousand words. Second, depth concerns information about the structure, use and appropriateness of a given word.

Namely, in classroom instruction students will probably learn the word "book" in one of their first classes. Although beginners might find it easy to associate the form and sound of the word with an object that contains pages and words, another meaning of the word, "to reserve" might not be learned so soon, but rather at a later stage. Students will also take more time to acquire depth concerning its usages such as in the sentence "I would like to book a flight". The same might happen in other case scenarios such as understanding the word "What" and knowing that it is not appropriate to use it when requesting the listener to repeat a piece of information.

Concerning vocabulary acquisition, it is common to find a distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. González-Fernandez and Schmitt

(2017) define receptive knowledge as being able to understand words and associated with reading and listening skills. On the other hand, productive knowledge concerns being able to use those words in various situations and it is connected to writing and speaking. Receptive achievement occurs before and on a larger scale than the productive one.

Another distinction is done in terms of incidental learning, defined as “by-product of a meaning-focused task” (WEBB, 2019, p. 225) and intentional learning, in which there is a focus and effort to learn new items.

Taking those aspects into account and acknowledging difficulty in acquiring new words, that can receive influence from a variety of factors such as exposure to the target language, personal commitment, quality of teaching, etc. This work aims to deal with vocabulary focused on the learner experience and applied learning strategies.

3. LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Learning strategies are embedded within language learning even if individuals are not aware of it. Knowing how this process works can guide students' path and actions towards their intention.

Oxford & Ehrman (1998, p.8) defined second language learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques . . . used by students to enhance their own learning." They are contextualized "battle plans" that might vary from moment to moment, or from one situation to another, or even from one culture to another.(OXFORD & EHRMAN, 1998, p. 8 apud BROWN, 2000 p. 112)

Learning strategies are defined as "procedures that facilitate a learning task... Strategies are most often conscious and goal driven." (CHAMOT, 2005, p. 112). They usually aim to solve problems and are used in a conscious way. This work is based on the strategies outlined by Oxford (1990), who divide them in two groups, direct and indirect learning strategies.

Oxford (1990) divided learning strategies into direct and indirect. Direct strategies are related to language and mental processing and are threefold, regarding memory, cognition and compensation.

Figure 1 - Direct Strategies

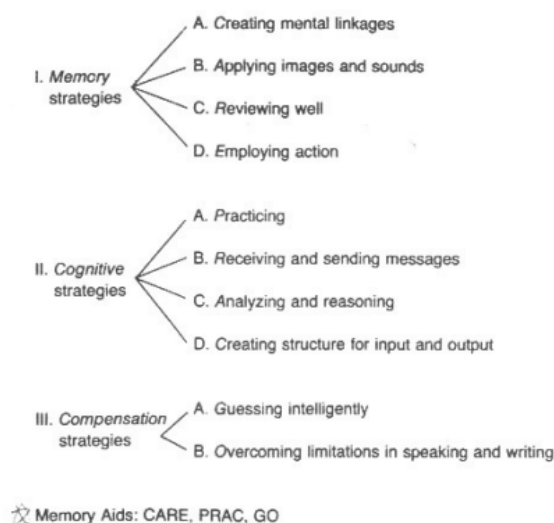


Figure 2.1 Diagram of the Direct Strategies: Overview. (Source: Original.)

(OXFORD, 1990, p. 38)

Memory strategies involve mainly reviewing and associating. Its importance lies in the fact that vocabulary knowledge consists of size and depth, which means that the learner needs to remember not only a number of lexical items but also a great amount of information about each one of them. The author presents as some of the memory strategies grouping, placing new words into a context, structured reviewing, using physical response, among others.

Practicing is the first cognitive strategy that is presented and involves taking notes, summarizing and repeating. Receiving and sending messages is related to rapidly understanding and having the resources in order to understand or produce ideas. Analyzing and reasoning, as stated by the author, are used especially for adults and include translating, breaking structures into parts to understand the meaning, comparing elements, among others.

Finally, compensation strategies are related to understanding and producing the language even if one does not have enough knowledge about a specific subject. Some strategies that are mentioned in Oxford's work are guessing through the analysis of clues that are present in the language or its context, using the mother tongue or asking for help.

In her work, Oxford (1990) divides indirect strategies into metacognitive, affective and social. Metacognitive strategies help learners to plan and design their

learning process. Some of the strategies named by the author are setting goals, paying attention to specific aspects and ignoring possible distractions, self monitoring and evaluating their own progress.

Affective strategies include lowering one's anxiety, self-encouragement and taking one's emotional temperature. Finally, social strategies refer to asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others (OXFORD, 1990).

It is important to take into consideration the fact that students are different. They come from the most diverse contexts and backgrounds and for this reason they have unequal learning experiences. Bearing it in mind, the concept of autonomy must be considered.

The Cambridge dictionary defines the adjective autonomous as "independent and having the power to make decisions for yourself". This means that the autonomous learner can make decisions about what, when, why and how he is going to study according to his own needs. According to Paiva (2011, p. 63) :

Autonomous learners take advantage of the linguistic affordances in their environment and act by engaging themselves in second language social practices. They also reflect about their learning and use effective learning strategies.

The concept of autonomy has to do not only with students and teachers but underlies educational settings and processes. In Brazil, the document that bases instructions that should be given throughout school years, BNCC, states the importance of learning how to learn. Another document that states the importance of autonomy and learning task is the Common European Framework of reference for languages, which states that:

However, once teaching stops, further learning has to be autonomous. Autonomous learning can be promoted if 'learning to learn' is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn[...] (Common European Framework of Reference to Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. p. 141)

4.VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Although there is a clear relation between vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency, its importance was disregarded until recent years.

Vocabulary, broadly speaking, has been treated only as a "supporting role" in the classroom, not receiving any special attention even being, according to the students, one of the main responsible factors for

their difficulties in verbal interaction.(DANIEL RODRIGUES, 2019, p. 11)

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) has been a topic of recent studies. Hiroshi Yamada (2018) in one of his works, researched the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies on vocabulary learning with 132 Japanese students. Similarly, Aquino, Schmidt and Feitosa's research (2022) explored the usage of learning strategies among University students of German in Brazil.

Peter Yongqi Gu (2020, p. 271) describes strategic vocabulary learning as an "Intentional, dynamic and interactive process for the effective, efficient, and even enjoyable learning of vocabulary" . He suggests that there is a range of questions students ask themselves in order to acquire the vocabulary they need. These questions concern the choice of the words, the amount of information about them, where to find them, what are some possible constraints, among others.

Amidst the Language Learning strategies suggested by Oxford (1990), it should be noted that some apply better to vocabulary learning than others. Namely, functional planning, one of the metacognitive strategies presented by Oxford, refers to the arrangement of the linguistic components that are necessary for performing a task, that is, previously planning the content and resources to be used. This could be for instance deciding on which day and time to study about a vocabulary topic and looking for word lists, videos, exercises and other tools to guide one's study time.

Self management is another strategy that along with self-monitoring can promote better results. By recognizing for example if one gets distracted easily or not, learns better with pictures or definitions, needs immediate or spaced review of the learned words can give the learner some guidance.

5.METHODOLOGY

This research aims to investigate the use of learning strategies towards vocabulary learning. This is done with the purpose of identifying what strategies are used by students for acquiring new lexical items. Moreover, it is intended to better understand students' actions and involvement in their studies.

For this purpose, the main instrument used to collect data was a survey carried out through a questionnaire(appendix). It consisted of closed-ended and

open-ended questions about the subjects' experience in learning English as a foreign language and strategies adopted to facilitate their acquisition of new words

Initially, the questionnaire had a total amount of 17 questions. In order to observe if the questions were clear to students, a pretest was administered with 5 students of English. In observing the results, some questions were altered and became more specific, and open-ended inquiries that had more than one question together were divided into two, for some of the students only answered one of them. The final version of the questionnaire had 25 questions.

Although the participants were all students of English, their levels ranged from elementary to advanced, and for this reason, the questions were all in Portuguese. The questions addressed 3 aspects that are related to vocabulary acquisition. Students were asked about language learning broadly, for instance about the four skills, study time, preparation for tests and materials in English. The second aspect is vocabulary learning, in which students answered questions about materials they use to study specifically vocabulary, the frequency in which they review it, the tasks they perform, among others. Last, students answered a few questions about the topic learning strategies. The categories of analysis used in this work were: Exposure to the language, Awareness and usage of strategies, and Autonomy.

There were 25 participants in this study. All of them are adults with the age ranging from 19 to 51. All of them are native speakers of Portuguese and students of English as a foreign language (EFL) currently enrolled at a language course. Their levels of English range from basic to advanced. 9 of the participants are from elementary, 8 from intermediate and 8 from advanced level. The language school in which the test was applied is placed at Federal University of Pernambuco, as a result, the majority of the subjects are undergraduate, masters or doctorate students. Some of the participants work and study and a minority is at the marketplace.

6.DATA DISCUSSION

6.1 Questions

The subjects of research were asked 25 questions (see table 1, appendix), 2 of them referring to their age and educational and professional background and the other 23 involving aspects of language learning, vocabulary learning, and learning

strategies. The questions were directed to the students' previous experience in studying English as a foreign language and were all asked in Portuguese, mother tongue of all of the participants.

6.2 Discussion

In the first question participants were asked about their motives for initiating their English learning process. 10 Participants (40%) chose professional needs/growth, 8 personal interest (32%), 6 academic studies (24%), 1 person chose the option "other" (4%), and none of the participants marked the option of traveling.

The second question aimed to understand how much time learners directed to studying English outside of the classroom. 9 participants (36%) said they study from 1 to 2 hours. 7 (28%) from 3 to 4 hours. 4 (16%) said they study more than 4 hours and 5(20%) said they do not study outside of the classroom.

In question 3, students were inquired about how they prepare for an English test. The majority of the answers, one way or another, mention reviewing the previous studied content. In order to do so, students use didactic books/material used by the teacher, watch videos on youtube and redo assignments. Table 2 shows some of the students' answers to these questions

Table 2

STUDENT A	Revisão de conteúdo abordado em aula, vídeos no youtube e apps de estudo. ¹
STUDENT M	leio os assuntos passados e tento fazer todas atividades ²
STUDENT T	Geralmente, costumo revisar os tempos verbais e alguns vocabulários específicos (procurando no google mesmo), mas também revisando alguns livros de inglês ³

In the 4th question students were asked about the materials they use to study vocabulary. Answers diverged a lot, however, Most of the students mentioned tv series, music, films and videos on youtube. Some of the students mentioned material from class, translator and dictionaries. In table 3, some of the students' answers were provided.

¹Reviewing content seen in class, youtube videos and study apps.(Tradução minha)

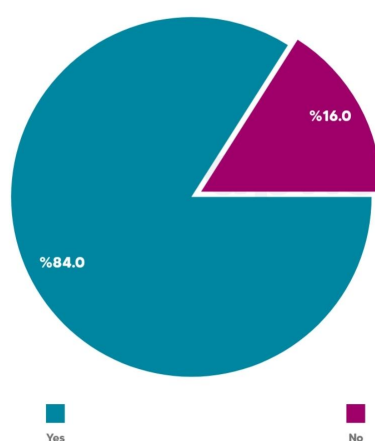
² I read about the content and try to do all of the assignments (Tradução minha)

³ Usually, I review the verb tenses and some specific vocabulary (using google), also, reviewing in some English books.(Tradução minha)

Table 3

STUDENT R	Ainda não estudo ⁴
STUDENT Q	Muito do meu vocabulário é adquirido de maneira aleatória a partir dos conteúdos que consumo (filmes, youtube, redes sociais). ⁵
STUDENT W	Quizlet (criando flashcards), tento associar imagens à palavra para evitar o uso do português, leio textos e circulo palavras novas, faço o mesmo com letras de música. ⁶
STUDENT L	Mídias digitais, netflix, youtube e etc. ⁷

Figure 2 (Question 6)



Questions 5 and 6 are related. In question 5 students were asked which of the presented options were part of their daily exposure. Students could choose more than one option. 27,84% of the participants chose “music”, 27,84% “movies and series”, 15,18% “news”, 12,62% “Language apps” and 5,06% chose the option “other”. In question 6 students are supposed to answer If they use these materials (mentioned in question 5) specifically to study vocabulary. Figure 2 shows that 21 of them (84%) do it, and 4 (16%) do not.

⁴ I don't study[vocabulary] yet (Tradução minha)

⁵ Much of the vocabulary I have is acquired in a random way by the content I consume (films, youtube, social media) (Tradução minha)

⁶ “Quizlet (making flashcards), I try to associate images to the word to avoid Portuguese usage. I read texts and circle new words, I do the same with lyrics of songs.(Tradução minha)

⁷ Digital media, netflix, youtube, etc (Tradução minha)

Figure 3 (Question 7)

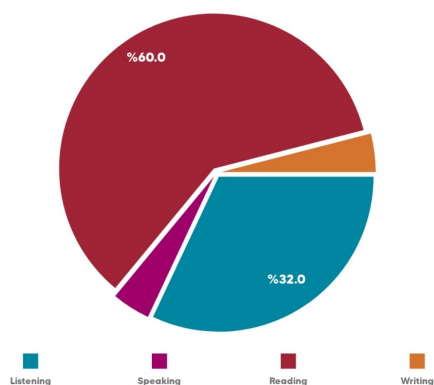
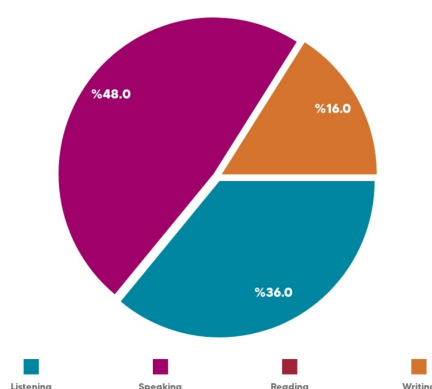


Figure 4 (Question 8)



In questions 7 and 8 students were asked about the 4 language skills. The first of them inquired about which skill they feel more comfortable using. The second, which skill they considered to be more difficult. As seen, students find reading the easiest (60%) and speaking the most difficult one (48%).

In question 9 students were asked about the reasons why they believed that skill to be difficult (referring to question 8). The 9 students who chose listening as the most difficult one mentioned the following aspects in their answers: Pronunciation, Accent, connected speech (mentioned as “junction of sounds”), and speed. The 12 participants who thought of speaking as the most difficult mentioned diction, lack of opportunity, lack of vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. Lastly, the 4 participants who chose writing, mentioned that some of the reasons were lack of practice, many features of the language such as vocabulary and grammar put together, and genre.

Figure 5 (Question 11)

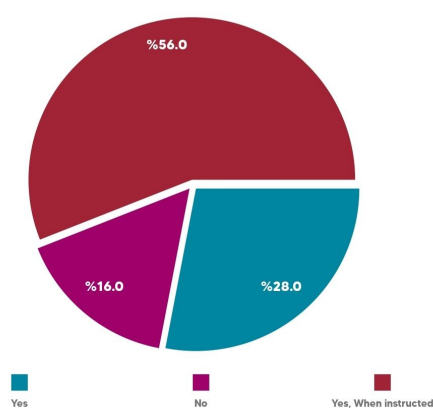
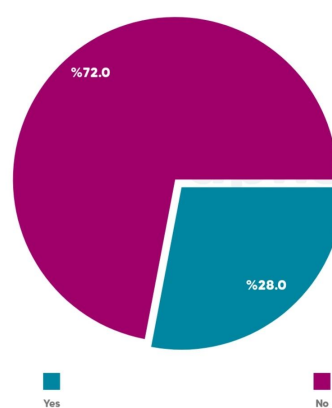
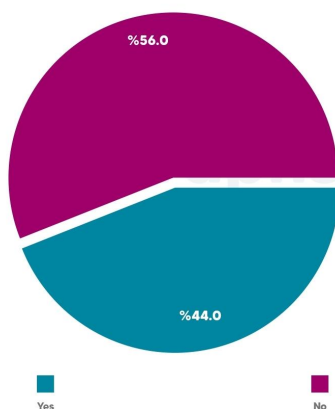


Figure 6 (Question 11 - real percentage)



Students were also asked whether they plan what they are going to study or not (question 10). Result shows that only 7 of them do (28%), while 17 (72%) are not used to doing it. In question 11, students answered if they usually test themselves through quizzes or other activities. 7 said they do it, 4 attested they do not do it, while 14 said they do it, but only when instructed by a teacher. This question was asked with the purpose of finding out students' autonomy, therefore, figure 6 shows that the real number of students who do not test their progress is actually 18 (72%).

Figure 7 (Question 12)



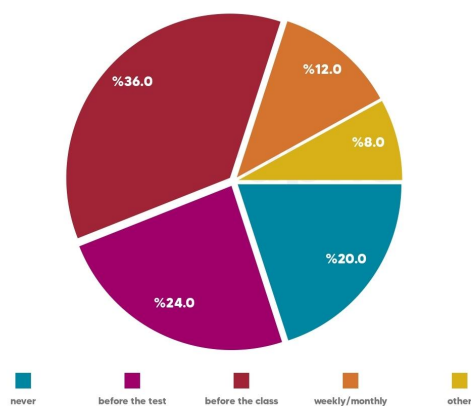
In question 12, students are asked what strategies they use to memorize vocabulary. Figure 7 shows that the majority of students (60,83%) do not utilize any specific strategy to help them memorize vocabulary. 11 (39,13%) students talked about the activities they do in order to do so. 5 of them said they write the vocabulary alone or create sentences, 2 of them try to remember with the context, 2 of them use repetition, 1 uses google images and 1 mentions association with already known subjects.

The 13th question inquired participants if they participated in communities or groups where they could practice the language outside of the classroom. 80% of participants said they do not participate in any group and only 20% said they do.

In the question 14 students answered if they use translation to help in their studies. 1 student answered no, 4 students answered rarely and 20 students said yes. In the same question, they would have to say in which situation they use translation as a resource. Some answers presented involve situations in which they do not know the word, cannot understand the context. to check the spelling or

meaning, and just when there is a need for specific words.

Figure 8 (Question 15)



In question 15 (Figure 8) , students were also inquired about the frequency in which they revised the already learned vocabulary. From the 25 students, 9 of them said they reviewed before class (36%), 6 students affirmed they reviewed only before the test (24%), 5 students said they never do it (20%) and only 3 students said they have the habit of reviewing in a weekly or monthly basis (12%), 2 students marked the option “Other” (8%) their answers being related to personal need and available time.

In question 16 students are inquired about the kind of activities they do to learn new words. In their answers, students mention mainly reading, watching videos, movies and series, listening to music or podcasts, talking to friends and playing games.

Figure 9 (Question 17)

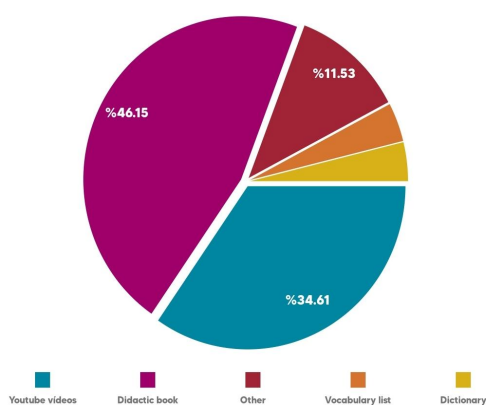
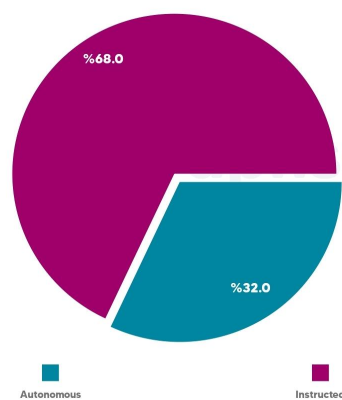


Figure 10 (Question 18)



In question 17 students provided answers about the material they use the most to learn new words. 12 students chose didactic book, 9 students chose videos on youtube, one student chose vocabulary lists, one student chose dictionary and three students chose the option “Other”.

The 18th question aimed to understand if the students felt more confident when instructed about their study or when they searched ways of improving on their own. Results showed that 17 students (68%) prefer to be instructed and only 8 students (32%) feel confident about their autonomy in language learning.

In the 19th question, participants were asked about what they would do in a hypothetical situation in which they were speaking with a person who could only understand English, and in the middle of the conversation you do not know some words in the language. Broadly speaking, students mentioned explaining the word in another way, using gestures and an online translator. A few samples of students' responses can be found in table 4.

Table 4

STUDENT P	Se fosse a pessoa falando, provavelmente pediria para ela me explicar o que é ou usar outra palavra com mesmo sentido. Se fosse eu falando pensaria numa forma de explicar o que desejo expressar com o vocabulário que tenho (na escrita há a chance de recorrer a um tradutor). ⁸
STUDENT T	Provavelmente entraria em pânico, mas tentar explicar qual palavra em específico eu estou tentando lembrar. ⁹
STUDENT E	Usaria o tradutor ¹⁰

The 20th question asked participants about the strategies they used while reading a text but not understanding a few words. The results show that 13 (52%) of the students stop reading in the middle of the text to look for the meaning of the unknown word, 8 (32%) of them ignore the word and try to understand by the context, and 4(16%) of them continue reading the text, but write the word to look for its meaning later.

⁸ If it was the other person speaking, I would probably ask her to explain that word to me or use another one that had the same meaning. If it was me, I would think of another way to express myself with the vocabulary I have. (In writing there is the possibility to use a translator) (Tradução minha)

⁹ I would probably panic, but I would try to explain the specific word I'm trying to remember. (Tradução minha)

¹⁰ I would use the translator (Tradução minha)

The 21st question asked students about their preferences and difficulties regarding vocabulary and grammar. Students were asked which one they preferred to study, and also which one they found more difficult. Some samples of the answers are found at table 5.

Table 5

STUDENT F	gosto mais de vocabulário, e gramática acho mais difícil, por que apesar de terem algumas regras parecidas com a língua portuguesa, tem alguns detalhes que diferenciam ¹¹
STUDENT N	Gramática. Vocabulário. Diferente da Gramática, vocabulário me aparece ser um campo de infinitas possibilidades e pouco difícil de criar um método próprio de fácil entendimento. ¹²
STUDENT S	vocabulario é mais difícil, especialmente os phrasal verbs ¹³
STUDENT L	Vocabulário, e considero mais difícil a gramática, pois tenho dificuldade para me lembrar das regras. ¹⁴

Participants were asked to mark the strategies they knew or had heard of in the 22nd question, and then, if they used them in the 23rd question. Results in figure 11 show that the better known is flashcards and the least known is shadowing. It is noteworthy that although students marked different strategies, only 5 (20%) of the 25 students said they actually use them (figure 12).

¹¹ .I like vocabulary the best and think that grammar is more difficult because even though there are some rules that are similar to portuguese, there are some details that make them different.(tradução minha)

¹² [I prefer] grammar. [I think] vocabulary [is easier]. Different from grammar, vocabulary seems to be a field that has infinite possibilities and it is a little hard to create a method that can be easily understood.(Tradução minha)

¹³ Vocabulary is more difficult, especially phrasal verbs (Tradução minha)

¹⁴ [I prefer] vocabulary and consider grammar the most difficult because it is difficult for me to remember rules.(Tradução minha)

Figure 11 (Question 22)

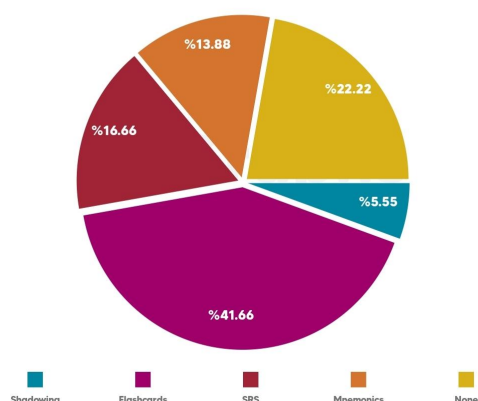
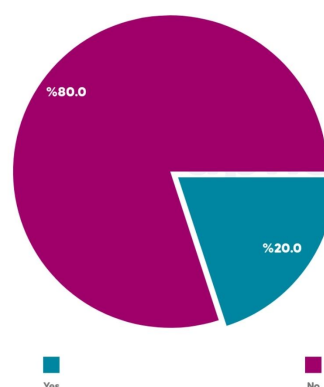


Figure 12 (Question 23)



6.3 On Exposure and Learning

Throughout the questionnaire, students were asked about the content they consumed in English, materials they used to study vocabulary, and communities they were involved in. This was done with the purpose of understanding to what extent the participants were involved with English in their daily lives.

Results from questions 5 and 6 show that students not only consume authentic material but also use them as an instrument to learn new words. However, another finding was that most of the students were not involved in a group or community where they could actually practice their speaking skills (See results of question 13).

This finding is in accordance with the results shown in question 8, where the majority of students (48%) found speaking the most difficult skill. When presenting about receptive and productive skills, González-Fernandez and Schmitt argue that receptive knowledge tends to be reached before the productive one. That can also be linked to the level of exposure learners have to the language once that they have much more contact with listening and reading than to speaking.

In the 4th question, Student B has mentioned that most of the vocabulary he learned was actually in a random way by being exposed to content in English. Webb (2019 p. 225) defines incidental learning as “*as occurring as the by-product of a meaning-focused task*” and states that studies show that learners tend to spend more time paying attention to unknown words while reading.

In conclusion, these findings show that learners are more exposed to the type of content in English that helps them improve their listening and reading skills, hence

they feel better at these abilities. On the other hand, once they do not participate in groups where they can practice speaking outside of the classroom and do not mention writing as an usual practice, they do not exercise their productive skills. Therefore, the level of exposure students have to the 4 English skills may lead to better or worse results in their language proficiency.

6.4 On the Awareness and Usage of Learning Strategies

Thornbury (2002) states the importance of memory in learning new words and given the fact that vocabulary size is linked to storing capacity, participants were asked if they used strategies to memorize vocabulary (see results of question 12). The majority said they do not, and the ones that said yes, mentioned activities involving writing and repetition.

Results shown in question 16 attest that students tend to have rather receptive practices in order to learn and memorize vocabulary such as watching videos, listening to music or podcasts and reading. Another important aspect to be considered is the fact that most students only have the habit of reviewing before a test or before the class (see results of question 15).

In one of his works, Peter Youngi Gu (2020) has mentioned studies which show that teaching students about strategies have increased the vocabulary size and retention. Based on that, one must consider that students cannot use strategies if they do not know they exist.

One of the most important findings of this study was that students do not know many ways to study vocabulary, and if they do, they generally do not apply them. When asked to mark the methods they knew or had heard of (see results of question 22), 22% of the students said they did not know any, and the others marked mostly flashcards, the others having a much lower percentage. Next, students were asked if they used these same methods and 80% affirmed they do not (see results of question 23).

It is possible that the results were rather alarming simply because students are not aware of the existence of practices which can help them improve their vocabulary knowledge or do not know how to use them effectively.

Learning strategies have a lot to do with the autonomy of the students and their willingness to work towards the improvement of their skills and vocabulary size.

This is an important issue for future research, once it is important to support the idea that students are taught how to study. That can be related to the findings of question 18, where it is shown that 68% of the students feel more confident to study when instructed on how to do it.

6.5 On Autonomy

According to Smith (2008), autonomy is related to being able to manage one's own learning. When talking about Learning Strategies, Oxford (1990) brings direct and direct strategies which are linked to management of the learner's actions and situations.

Participants were asked about planning what they are going to study and evaluating themselves and results from questions 10 and 11 show that 72% do not have any planning about what they are going to do next and the majority of them only evaluate themselves through activities requested by their teachers.

In questions 19 and 20, participants are exposed to hypothetical situations and asked how they would deal with them. These questions aimed to understand how students cope with possible difficulties and in what aspects they rely on. The findings were that being exposed to unknown words students tend to rely more on translation devices and dictionaries than on the context.

It may be the case, therefore, that students prefer to rely on external sources than on their established knowledge to use other words. This is directly related to the participants' sense of autonomy and self-esteem, that was put to proof on question 18, where only 32% of the participants feel confident about conducting learning practices on their own.

7. CONCLUSION

In reviewing the literature and based on classroom observation it was noticed that vocabulary still does not have a central role in language learning. This can be related to prior methods which focused on grammar-translation or a grammar based syllabus. Although nowadays other methods have been used and given vocabulary an important place within the classroom, such as the communicative method and

task-based approach, its level of importance to reach successful communication continues to be underestimated.

Recent research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies (Yamada, 2018; Youngqi Gu, 2020) show the importance of their usage in attaining vocabulary size and depth as well as retaining the information. This work aimed to answer the question “What strategies are being used by students of English as a foreign language to help them improve their vocabulary knowledge?”. Observing the results of a questionnaire carried out with students of English as a Foreign language it was possible to perceive that students do not know many different ways of studying vocabulary and most often attribute their learning to exposure of the language through reading, watching tv, listening to music or podcasts.

Although being exposed to the language plays an important role in vocabulary acquisition, one should not consider it the only learning path, especially because by using learning strategies one can improve the vocabulary size and therefore its chances to engage in a successful communication.

This work restates the findings of previous studies which show that students reach good results in receptive skills before productive skills. In this work this was shown by the fact that students find speaking more difficult and reading easier. This was too considered in terms of which activities they performed the most on their daily routines, the results showing that only 20% of the students participate in groups where they can practice the speaking, that turned out to be the skill they considered the most difficult.

This work states there is a strong relationship between learning strategies and autonomy, and this too, according to the results, has not been receiving enough attention. Results show that students prefer to be instructed on what to do and tend not to plan their own learning and evaluate themselves.

It is, therefore, likely that students still rely more on teachers than on their own abilities to seek the vocabulary they need, and once the majority of the responses presented a scenario in which students do not know different methods and therefore do not use them. Based on these findings, it is important to raise the awareness that teachers should not only provide language lessons, but present students with more tools and stimulate them to take initiative.

In conclusion, the current work aimed to establish a relationship between learning strategies and vocabulary towards successful communication as well as consider aspects such as learners' actions, difficulties and autonomy.

The findings from this work may be addressed in future studies regarding the autonomy of students of English as a second language, teaching of learning strategies in the EFL classroom and vocabulary development in a broader context.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Questions
How old are you? What do you do? (e.g. University student, intern, math teacher, etc.)
1. What reason made you start learning English? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travelling • Professional development and/or demand • To help my academic studies • Curiosity/Interest in the language • Other
2. How many hours do you study English outside of the classroom on a weekly basis?
3. How do you prepare for an English test?
4. What kind of materials do you use in order to learn vocabulary?
5. What kind of English material do you usually have access to in your daily routine? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News • Apps (e.g. duolingo, busuu, etc.) • Non-didactic books in English (e.g. Harry Potter) • Movies/Series • None • Other
6. Do you use any of the material mentioned above specifically to study vocabulary?
7. In which of these skills do you feel more comfortable? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening • Speaking • Reading • Writing
8. Which of these skills do you consider to be more difficult? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening • Speaking • Reading • Writing
9. For what reason do you consider it to be more difficult?
10. Do you plan what you are going to study? (e.g. answer a future simple exercise on Monday afternoon) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
11. Do you evaluate yourself in any way to see the progress you are making in the language? (e.g. tests, online exercises, quizzes, etc) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Yes, but only those suggested by the teacher

12. Do you use any specific strategy to memorize vocabulary?
13. Are you a participant of a community or group where you can practice English outside of the classroom? (e.g. book club, conversation group, etc.)
14. Do you use translation to help in your studies? If so, in which situations?
15. How frequently do you review the vocabulary you study? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never • Before tests only • I try to review before English class • I have the habit of reviewing monthly/weekly • Other
16. What kind of activities do you usually do with the purpose of learning new words?
17. Which of these materials do you use the most to guide your learning of new words? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didactic book and/or material sent by the teacher • Vocabulary lists I find on the internet • Pictionary • Videos on youtube • Dictionary • Other
18. In which of these situations do you feel more confident during your studies? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I am instructed about what activities to perform outside of the classroom • When I look for activities I like to do and will help me improve autonomously
19. Imagine you are talking to someone whose only language is English, but in the midst of the conversation you do not know a few words. What would you do?
20. Imagine now you are reading a newspaper article and find some new words. With which of these statements do you relate the most? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I continue to read it ignoring the words and try to understand by the context • I stop the reading and look for the meaning of the word before continuing it • I continue to read it but I take note of the word so that I can check later
21. Which do you prefer to study: Vocabulary or grammar? Which do you consider the most difficult? Why?
22. From the following list, choose the methods you know or have heard of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shadowing • Flashcards • SRS (Spaced Repetition System) • Mnemonics • I do not know any of them
23. From the list above, do you utilize any of them to help in your studies? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No