Popular and useful learning strategies in language acquisition amongst teenagers

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Preface

This thesis examines which learning techniques and strategies teenagers in Iceland prefer to use when it comes to vocabulary acquisition in English and Icelandic both at home and in school, and if any of these strategies seem to work better than others and why. It also looks at the benefits that teaching and training learners in learning strategies bring to both students and teachers and how such training might be best conducted at compulsory school level.

A pilot study was undertaken in one local school during October 2009 and after minor changes to the questionnaire it was put to students in 9th and 10th grade at two schools in the capital area during February 2010.
Acknowledgments

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1. Introduction

For the past couple of years, as I have been studying to become a language teacher, I have learned how important it is to teach vocabulary in order for students to become successful language learners. I have witnessed learners use a range of strategies to learn new vocabulary and wondered if there are any strategies that are more popular and more useful than others, and if learners use the same strategies in second language learning as in their first language learning.

During teaching practices in my 5th semester, where I spent a month teaching and observing teenagers at a local school, I started to wonder what techniques and learning strategies would be best to teach, and what teenagers prefer to use in order to expand their vocabulary. Having spoken to many language teachers, who all agreed with me that teaching vocabulary to students is crucial to students’ second language learning, I decided to investigate three vocabulary learning strategies and try to discover if any of them (guessing for textual context, asking the teacher or using a bilingual dictionary) are (a) more popular and (b) more useful in (a) first language reading and (b) second language acquisition amongst teenagers.

1.1 Vocabulary and learning strategies

The National Curriculum for Compulsory Schools in Iceland states that the foundations of every language are its grammar and vocabulary, which are the bases for our understanding it when we hear and read it, as well as when we communicate orally and in writing:

Undirstöðuþættir hvers tungumáls eru málkerfið og orðaforðinn. Þeir eru grunnurinn að því að við getum skilið það sem við heyrum og lesum og tjáð okkur munnlega og skriflega. (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 2007:10)

However, new words need to be encountered numerous times before they are acquired. According to Schmitt (2000), many learners use strategies for vocabulary learning, and the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategies seem to be
simple memorization, repetition and taking notes. He states that “learners often favour relatively ‘shallow’ strategies, even though they may be less effective than ‘deeper’ ones” (Schmitt 2000:132).

Studies into second language learning have shown that some words are more useful than others (Nation 2001:9). Four kinds of vocabulary can be distinguished when looking at texts: high-frequency words, academic words, technical words and low-frequency words, and a small group of high-frequency words are very important because these words cover a very large proportion of the running words in spoken and written texts, or up to 80 percent of the of the words likely to be encountered (Carter 1987:166). Nation states that “in general, high-frequency words are so important that anything that teachers and learners can do to make sure they are learned is worth doing” (Nation 2001:16). Low frequency words occur very infrequently and learners might only meet many of these words once or twice. If teachers want to help students with these words, they should spend their time on teaching strategies that learners can use to deal with these words rather than teaching the individual words (Nation 1990:159).

Oxford (1990) has categorised learning strategies into two main groups: direct strategies, or “strategies that directly involve the target language and require mental processing of the language” (Oxford 1990:37), and indirect strategies which “provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increase cooperation and empathy and other means” (Oxford 1990:151). Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies are all direct strategies, while metacognitive, affective and social strategies fall under indirect strategies.

Incidental learning via guessing from context, which means “the incidental learning of vocabulary from reading or listening to normal language use while the main focus of the learners’ attention is on the message of the text” (Nation, 2001:232) is one of the most important sources of vocabulary learning. It includes learning from extensive reading, learning from taking part in conversation, listening to stories,
television, films and the radio. Nation recommends that teachers and learners spend time working on guessing strategies and teachers should help learners find reading and listening material of appropriate difficulty in order to get the optimal ratio of unknown to known running words correct. Students can therefore use the reading skills they have developed to infer the meaning of unknown words they meet and guess the unknown words’ meaning from context. Proficiency is a major factor in successful guessing and learners need to use variety of clues, check various types of clue against each other and make sure they don’t arrive at a guess prematurely (Nation 2001:247). This strategy, guessing from contextual context, is mentioned in the National curriculum as one of the strategies that will make it easier for students to get the hang of reading, and recommends that students are taught to use dictionaries early on in their second language learning and combine these two strategies (Aðalnámsskrá Grunnskóla 2007:11).

There are three major kinds of learners’ dictionaries: monolingual, bilingual and bilingualised. Bilingual dictionaries seem to be the most popular dictionaries in second language learning in Icelandic schools, probably because they translate the word into the learner’s mother tongue. “In the real word students first seek a translations (with or without the help of a dictionary) when they meet a new item of vocabulary” (Redman and Ellis 1990:3). Studies from other countries have demonstrated that bilingual dictionaries are the most popular dictionaries learners and teachers use in second language learning (Laufer and Kimmel, 1997). However, in order for dictionaries to help learners with understanding and producing text, as well as with vocabulary learning, learners need to be able to pick suitable dictionaries and trained in using them sufficiently (Nation 2001:282-283).

Asking the teacher is a social strategy, the third set of indirect strategies according to Oxford (1990), where learners ask the teacher for information about a new word in order to improve their language learning. The teacher can answer in at least two ways: by providing the student with a synonym, or by providing a translation. However, to maximize the learning outcome, teachers should have students ask these questions in English from the 5th grade, since students in Iceland should be
able to take part in simple English conversations with the teacher (Aðalnámskrá Grunnskóla 2007:20).
2. The First Study

2.1 Method

In the first, or pilot study, 55 students in the 9th and 10th grade at a local school, answered four multiple choice questions and three question/answer questions during October 2009. Students were told, in Icelandic, that they would not have to put their name on the questionnaire. The questions were asked in Icelandic as that would increase the likelihood of more and better answers and students were allowed to tick more than one answer in the multiple choice questions if it applied to them and their strategies.

In questions 1) and 2) students were asked what they would be likely to do if they were reading at home in English / Icelandic and came across a word they didn’t know. Students could pick between five answers or write their answer if it wasn’t one of the choices given. The choices students could pick from were: a) guess from context, b) ask someone, c) look it up in bilingual dictionary, d) Google it, e) skip it, f) something else.

In questions 3) and 4) students were asked what they would be likely do if they were reading in English / Icelandic, in English / Icelandic classes at school and came across a word they didn’t know. Students could pick between six answers or write their answer if it wasn’t one of the choices given to them. The choices were; a) guess from contextual context, b) ask a classmate, c) ask the teacher, d) look it up in bilingual dictionary, e) Google it, f) skip it, g) something else.

In questions 5) and 6) students were asked if they ever tried to remember a new English / Icelandic word and if they did, how they did it. The last question was what their final grade in English and Icelandic was last year.
2.2 Findings

2.2.1 Reading at home

Only about one fifth of the students use guessing for contextual meaning once they are reading in English at home and are likely to look up words using Google translator. Dictionaries are used by 27% of students when reading in English at home and all five students that had a different answer, or answered f) something else, used online dictionaries. Graphs 1 and 2 are a histogram of students’ answers to questions 1) and 2).

Graph 1 – Students’ answers to question 1, First study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1) - You are reading at home in English, and come across a word you don't know. What are you most likely to do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Guess from context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Ask someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Look it up in bilingual dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Google it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Skip it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Something else</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2.2 Reading in school

Students are most likely to ask the teachers if they come across a word they don’t know once in the classroom. Whether during English or Icelandic lessons, the majority of students prefer asking the teacher, followed by asking a classmate, as can be seen in Graphs 3 and 4.
**Question 3)** - You are reading at school in English during English class, and come across a word you don't know. What are you most likely to do?

- **a)** Guess from context: 26%
- **b)** Ask a classmate: 61%
- **c)** Ask the teacher: 5%
- **d)** Look it up in bilingual dictionary: 3%
- **e)** Google it: 3%
- **f)** Skip it: 0%
- **g)** Something else: 5%

**Question 4)** - You are reading at school in Icelandic during Icelandic class, and come across a word you don't know. What are you most likely to do?

- **a)** Guess from contextual context: 67%
- **b)** Ask a classmate: 3%
- **c)** Ask the teacher: 3%
- **d)** Look it up in bilingual dictionary: 3%
- **e)** Google it: 0%
- **f)** Skip it: 0%
- **g)** Something else: 2%
2.2.3 Remembering vocabulary

Many different answers were given from questions 5) and 6) where I asked students if they ever tried to remember new English and Icelandic words and if so, what strategies they use if any. The most frequent answers were: try to memorize it; read it a few times; write it a few times; and say it a few times. Some students said they try to use the words as much as they can in order to learn them; put the new words into sentences; try to connect the new word with someone or something they know; and a couple of students said they try to remember where they were when they heard the word for the first time. There were also (number) students who said they didn’t try to remember new words and (number) students said that about new words in Icelandic than in English.

When I looked at students’ final grades from last term and compared them with what strategies they use I found that students who have high grades in both English and Icelandic have found a strategy or strategies that work for them and use them in both English and Icelandic language learning.

About one fifth of the students that answered my questionnaire said they use a strategy to remember new English words but don’t try to remember new Icelandic words. Most of these students had also got a lower grade in Icelandic last term than in English. The students that answered my questionnaire and had the lowest grades last term in both English and Icelandic either didn’t use any strategies to remember new words or said they sometimes tried to remember new words.
3. The Second Study

3.1 Method

After sending The Data Protection Authority in Iceland notification regarding my theses study, two secondary schools in the capital area were picked and a letter sent to the headmasters, asking for their permission to put the questionnaire to student in 9th and 10th grade. Once approval had been obtained I got in contact with the English teachers at each school and together we found suitable time to put the questionnaire to students.

All together, 160 students in the 9th and 10th grade, from two secondary schools took part in this research project. The questionnaire was the same one as I used in my pilot study consisting of four multiple choice questions and three question/answer questions, but I included one more answer option in questions 1-4, as I had learned from my pilot study that many students use online dictionaries when they come across new words.

I turned up at the beginning of the lesson, explained the research project and its purpose to students and made sure they knew they would not have to put their name on the questionnaire. The questions were asked in Icelandic to increase the likelihood of more and better answers, and students were allowed to tick more than one answer in the multiple choice questions if it applied to them and their strategies.

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Reading at home

The majority of students that took part in this research project use guessing strategies or ask someone when they are reading in either Icelandic or English at home and come across a new word. 26% of the students use dictionaries to look up new English words, while 15% of students use Google translator. These findings are all in line with my pilot study findings, apart from the fact that more students (27%)
used Google translator to look up new English words at home in the pilot study. Google translator was also used more by students in the pilot study when it comes to new words in Icelandic, and dictionaries a little less when reading in Icelandic.

Graph 5 - Students’ answers to question 1, Second study

**Question 1** - You are reading at home in English, and come across a word you don’t know. What are you most likely to do?

- **a) Guess from context**: 28%
- **b) Ask someone**: 6%
- **c) Look it up in bilingual dictionary**: 15%
- **d) Google it**: 25%
- **e) Use online dictionary**: 15%
- **f) Skip it**: 11%
- **g) Something else**: 0%
3.2.2 Reading at school

The vast majority of students use the social strategies, asking the teacher or a classmate, when they come across new words in both English and Icelandic when reading at school as can be seen in graphs 3 and 4. Dictionaries are used more during English lessons than Icelandic lessons and guessing strategies are used by 14% of students. These findings are similar those in my pilot study, although students in the pilot study didn’t use guessing strategies very much and relied more on asking the teacher or a classmate.
Question 3) - You are reading at school in English during English class, and come across a word you don't know. What are you most likely to do?

- a) Guess from context: 11%
- b) Ask a classmate: 3%
- c) Ask the teacher: 27%
- d) Look it up in bilingual dictionary: 14%
- e) Google it: 0%
- f) Use online dictionary: 0%
- g) Skip it: 50%
- h) Something else: 14%

Question 4) - You are reading at school in Icelandic during Icelandic class, and come across a word you don't know. What are you most likely to do?

- a) Guess from context: 1%
- b) Ask a classmate: 5%
- c) Ask the teacher: 50%
- d) Look it up in bilingual dictionary: 14%
- e) Google it: 0%
- f) Use online dictionary: 0%
- g) Skip it: 25%
- h) Something else: 0%
3.2.3 Remembering vocabulary

In answer to questions 5) and 6), students reported using numerous different strategies in order to remember new vocabulary in both English and Icelandic. The most popular strategies reported in both languages were: writing the word down, saying it in their head a few times, and memorizing it. Other strategies that students reported using were: listening (having someone say the word to them); saying it out loud a few times; putting the word into context; reading it a few times; trying to connect it with something; trying to imagine a picture of the word (creating a picture in their head that describes the word well); dividing the word into parts and changing its form by adding or removing prefixes or suffixes (e.g. happy/unhappy, care/careless); keeping the word in mind and trying to use it as much as possible; using visual memory (closing their eyes and trying to “see” the word); and trying to remember the word from a song or text. 19% of students said they didn’t use any strategies in order to remember new English words while 30% of students said they didn’t when they came across new Icelandic words.

Students with high grades in both English and Icelandic seemed to have found a strategy or strategies that work for them and use them in both English and Icelandic language learning while students with the lowest grades were mostly those that do not try to remember new words.
Graph 9 - Students’ answers to questions 5 & 6, Second study

Remembering new vocabulary

Students answers to questions 5 and 6

- English words
- Icelandic words
4. Discussion

4.1 Learners use of strategies

I was very surprised to learn after my first study how few students used guessing strategies when reading at home in both English and Icelandic. During my second study, this number rose slightly with around one fourth of students guessing from context when coming across a new word in both languages at home. The most popular strategy was to ask someone and much more so when reading in Icelandic, which indicates that students have easier access to people at home who are better in Icelandic than English.

When reading at school, the majority of students, or over 90% of them, like to ask the teacher or a classmate for the meaning when coming across a new word in both English and Icelandic. I was anticipating this to be the most popular strategy at school, as my first study had similar findings, but I also expected more students to use guessing strategies in the classroom, which was not the case, as only 5% of students use guessing from context when reading in English at school, and 3% of students when reading in Icelandic at school.

What I found very interesting was that the number of students using other strategies than asking someone was lower at school than at home. Fewer students used guessing strategies, dictionaries or Google translator in the classroom than at home, which furthermore supports my theory that students who are not able to ask someone at home can and will do so once at school.

Using Google translator is one strategy teenage students in Iceland use quite a bit in both English and Icelandic language learning. Many students have access to the internet were Google translator is free of charge so it’s very easy for them to type the word in and get the translation. This program is more reliable when only one word is being translated, but can give incorrect translations when a whole sentence or a paragraph has been entered. Students are much better off using online dictionaries, English – Icelandic and Icelandic – English, but subscribing many of
them cost money which is probably one of the reasons so many turn to Google translator.

When it comes to remembering new vocabulary, what seems to be the robust finding in this strategy study is that learners who use a greater range of strategies recall more words and use strategies more often than learners who recall fewer words. These learners were few, had all got high grades in both English and Icelandic and seemed to take more responsibility for their own vocabulary learning. All the strategies that were only used by very few students came from students in this group and in almost all cases it was one of three or more strategies they said they used in English and sometimes in Icelandic.

4.2 Training learners in strategy use

Training learners in using vocabulary strategies would benefit teachers as well as learners, as it can be very time consuming having to answer and give students correct translations and / or explanations for words during class. Vocabulary strategies allow learners to take more control of their own learning away from the teacher, which allows the teacher to concentrate on other things. Training learners in vocabulary strategy use should therefore be a planned part of their language development (Nation 2001:222).

Once teachers have decided on which strategies to teach, how much time to spend on each of them, explained and demonstrated them to learners and made sure students understand the goal of each strategy, they need to give plenty of time for practice in order for students to be able to use these strategies successfully. It’s also important that teachers monitor and test students on their strategy use once they start putting them into practice, giving students feedback and advice when necessary and encouraging students to examine the effects these coping strategies have on their language development.

Two of the learning objectives in the National Curriculum are that students read for pleasure and research, and are able to guess what words mean from the context of
the text. (Aðalnámsskrá grunnskóla 2007:25-27). For students to really be able to achieve both of these goals, the text has to be of interest to them and the reading not be interrupted too often by the need to look up new words they come across. The more training students get in using guessing strategies, the easier it will be to meet these learning objectives.

The National Curriculum for English also states that students should be able to use dictionaries systematically to aid them in their language learning. To be able to use dictionaries successfully, students need to be aware of the different types of dictionaries available, and know which to use according to the task in hand. “The skills required differ according to whether the dictionary is used in conjunction with listening and reading, or with speaking and writing” (Nation 2001:284). Students need to be taught these skills and given assignments that will train them in using dictionaries to the best of their ability.
5. Conclusion

Since my 5th semester teaching practice, when I started to really think about learning strategies in vocabulary acquisition, and how best to teach vocabulary to teenagers, I have become more assertive that learning strategies can speed up students’ vocabulary acquisitions and give them confidence to study and use the language for their own pleasure outside the classroom.

It’s important to teach a range of techniques and strategies from early on and get students to take a more active role in the learning process. Those students, who know a range of learning strategies, are able to pick the most appropriate strategy, decide how to pursue it and when to switch to another strategy, will become the most successful learners. By teaching a wide range of strategies, teachers are also able to take into account students’ multiple intelligences and allow students to benefit from their different strengths.

In order for students to really benefit from using learning strategies, they have to be taught effectively during the learning process and practice systematically. It is not enough to teach the strategies and expect students to do the rest, as my studies have revealed that most students will use the strategy that is most easily available to them without giving any thought to what the learning goal is and which strategy to use in order to attain one’s goal. Many students are not even aware of their own learning strategies or lack of them, and those that are using some strategies are often not aware of other strategies that might be better suited for the task. It was also apparent through my studies that students aren’t always aware they can use learning strategies across subjects, with many using strategies quite successfully when it comes to English, but not using them at all when it comes to Icelandic.

Some schools are now offering a study technique course, taught by the school’s Educational and Vocational Guidance counsellor, where students are taught and trained in learning strategies as an elective course during their last term of compulsory school, in preparation for college. Courses like these will benefit students’ right across subjects, especially if made compulsory and taught sooner in
students’ compulsory education. If that became reality, teachers of all subjects would gain immensely as the foundation for further strategy training would already be laid. Having been taught learning strategies in their mother tongue and given examples of strategies that might work well during a specific subject, students are much more likely to realize that they are able to use these strategies in all subjects, not just the subject the strategies was introduced in.
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