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CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND THE USE OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES²

Introduction

So far, a lot of research has been done on investigating the usage of learning strategies by learners from all around the world learning different second or foreign languages. A great deal of researchers' attention has been focused on exploring the issue of relations between learning strategies and individual learner variables (e.g. Politzer 1983, Chamot et al. 1987, Ehrman and Oxford 1989, Oxford and Nyikos 1989, O'Malley and Chamot 1990, Kaylani 1996, Dreyer and Oxford 1996, Gu 2002, Oxford and Cohen 2004). Many researchers have emphasized that the cultural, national, L1 or educational backgrounds which shape learners' beliefs and attitudes have an influence on the use of learning strategies. This, in turn, can have significant teaching implications especially for language teachers teaching abroad, multicultural classrooms and coursebook design. Most of the studies scrutinizing the relationship between language learning strategies and learners' cultural backgrounds have concentrated on looking at the strategies of learners coming from a particular country learning a given language e.g.: ESL learners coming from Spanish-speaking countries and Vietnam (O'Malley et al. 1985), Canadian learners of Spanish (Chamot and K pper 1989), Nigeri-

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an learners of English (Adegbija 1990), Japanese learners of English (Watanabe 1990, LoCastro 1994), American learners of Japanese (Douglas 1992), American learners of French, German, Russian and Italian (Nyikos and Oxford 1993), Puerto-Rican learners of English (Green and Oxford 1995), Chinese learners of English (Bedell and Oxford 1996, Nisbet et al. 2005), Russian and Israeli learners of English (Levine et al. 1996), Polish learners of English (Michońska-Stadnik 1996, Drożdżiał-Szelest 1997), native speakers of English, Farsi, French, Vietnamese learning Spanish (Oxford et al. 1996), German learners of English (Pickard 1996), Australian, Korean, Thai, Hong Kong, German, American and Malaysian learners of Japanese (Grainger 1997), Spanish learners of English (Halbach 2000) and Singaporean learners of English (Gu et al. 2005).

Relatively fewer studies have been aimed at making cross-cultural comparisons of strategies used by language learners (e.g. Politzer and McGroarty 1985). A few researchers (Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995, Bedell and Oxford 1996) attempted syntheses of research on language learning strategies used all around the world but these syntheses were only theoretical and recapitulatory in nature.

The analysis and comparison of data from these studies seem to prove that the effectiveness and use of learning strategies vary depending on the cultural background of a particular learner. Following this line of thinking, Politzer and McGroarty (1985: 119) point out that “cultural background (and possibly professional specialization) has a great deal to do with the type of language learning behaviour likely to be used by students”. Moreover, as suggested by Kaylani (1996: 77) “the use of language learning strategies may vary across cultures, implying that they are not universally effective for all learners and all tasks”. In a similar vein, Saville-Troike (2006: 91) suggests that:

many learning strategies are culturally based: individuals learn how to learn as part of their socialization experiences, and strategies they acquire in relation to other domains are commonly transferred to language learning, which may take place under different circumstances, sometimes within a foreign educational system.

The results of the studies of the influence of cultural background on the use of language learning strategies can be applied to vocabulary learning. Nevertheless, a number of studies have also been undertaken to investigate vocabulary learning strategies themselves as used by learners coming from a particular cultural background. These are the studies of e.g.: American learners of Hebrew (Cohen and Apehek 1981), Sudanese learners of English (Ahmed 1989), French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Arabic learners of English (Sanaoui 1995), Chinese learners of English (Gu and Johnson 1996, Gu 2003, 2005), Australian learners of Italian (Lawson and Hogben 1996), Japanese learners of Eng-

lish (Schmitt 1997, Kudo 1999) and Canadian and Yugoslavian learners of English (Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown 1999). However, there is a dearth of research aimed at the empirical investigation of cross-cultural differences in using and prioritizing vocabulary learning strategies by learners from different countries. As a result, more research is needed in this area and what is more, as pointed out by Gu (2005: 76), vocabulary learning strategy research should

... take cultural factors and pragmatic constraints into account and, rather than finding universal „good” strategies, aim to discover vocabulary strategies that suit different groups of learners with different backgrounds.

To partially fill the gap, the study described in this paper was conducted. The main aim of the study was to identify and compare vocabulary learning strategies employed by 2 groups of learners of English from different cultural backgrounds. The study was also set out to look at vocabulary learning strategies taught at schools in different countries and to examine the differences among different cultural and educational backgrounds.

1. The study

1.1. The hypothesis

The hypothesis that is being tested is that students from different cultural backgrounds use different vocabulary learning strategies.

2. Theoretical background to the study

2.1. Definition of a cultural background and a language learning strategy

To avoid ambiguity, there is a need to decide on the basis for understanding the terms *cultural background* and *language learning strategy* for the purpose of this study. Accordingly, in this study *cultural background* is linked to the country of origin. After the analysis of various definitions of a *learning strategy*, it is easily noticeable that there is one thing all researchers unanimously agree about, namely, that learning strategies contribute to the attainment of a particu-

lar language learning goal. Thus, *language learning strategies* can be described as plans that facilitate the achievement of a given language learning-related goal. In a learning situation, a strategy is dependent on the learning context, the task in question and individual learner characteristics. It involves goal specification and employing particular tactics, methods and techniques/procedures.

2.2. The classification of vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies are a subcategory of language learning strategies. Depending on the purpose for which they are used, vocabulary learning strategies are further divided into tactics for:

- organizing,
- finding a source of new vocabulary items,
- discovering different types of lexical information about new words,
- remembering,
- revising.

According to the strategy definition provided in the previous section, each of these tactics are further subdivided into a number of methods, and the methods are further subdivided into a number of techniques. This can be illustrated as follows:

This typology constituted a principle according to which the questionnaire, diary and interview used in the study were organized. In this paper, the focus will be put on presenting discovering and remembering tactics reported to be used by the students. Accordingly, the techniques elicited from the subjects of the study, reflecting what learners actually do to discover different types of lexical information about new words and to remember new vocabulary items, will be analyzed and compared according to this classificatory scheme.

3. The background to the study and methods of data collection

The study was conducted in Bielefeld in Germany and lasted from February to July 2007. 11 case studies were carried out to compare how different learners of the same sex, career orientation and similar age approach the same tasks. To make the results of the study credible, several different methods of data collection were used. The first stage of the research involved filling in a questionnaire which mainly concerned vocabulary learning strategies used by learners. Then, subjects were

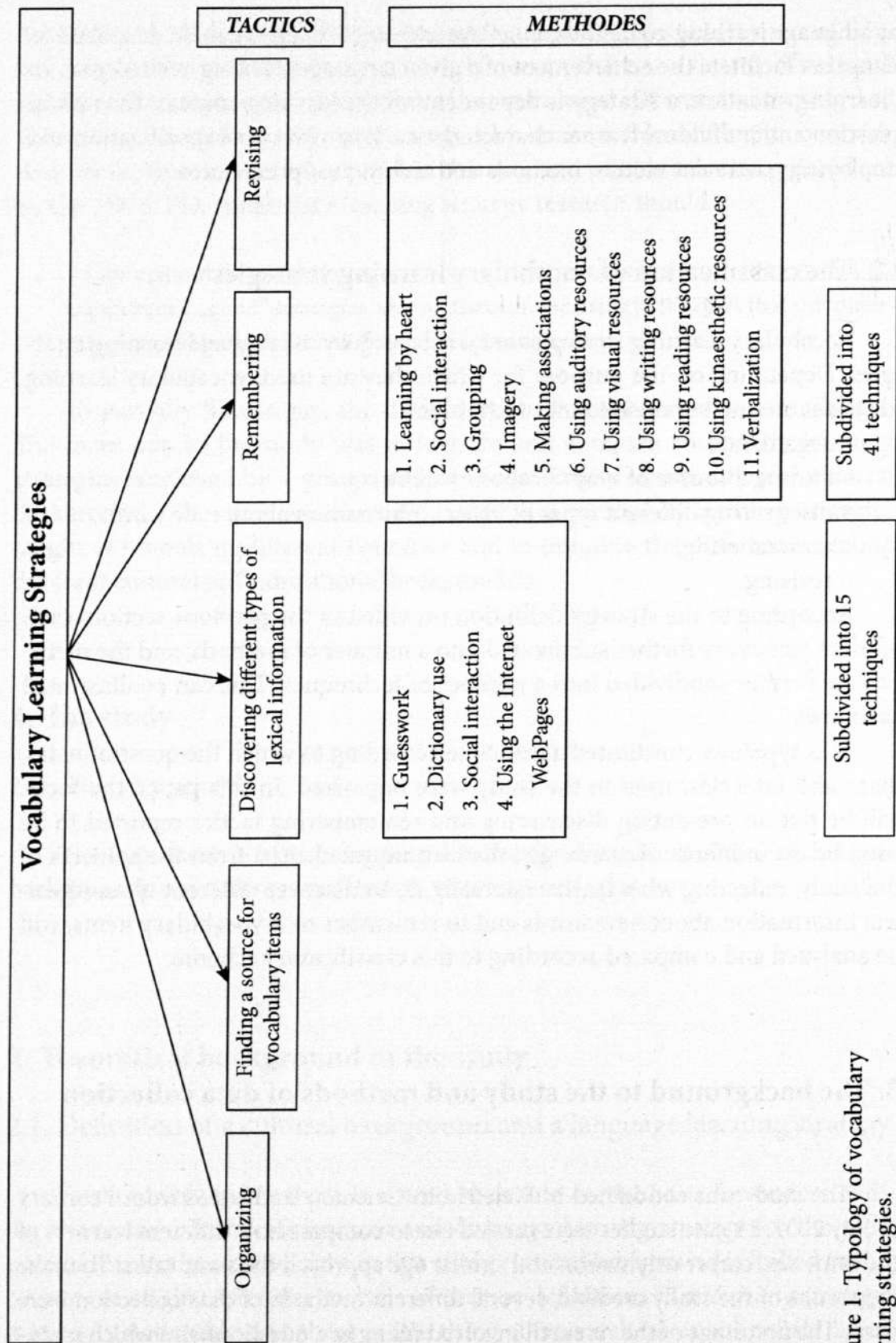


Figure 1. Typology of vocabulary learning strategies.

asked to keep over 3 days a detailed diary on learning 10 vocabulary items. Since both groups of subjects who took part in the study were at different levels of language proficiency, they received different lists of vocabulary to learn. They were asked to report all the strategies they used in the learning process. The final stage of the study involved a structured interview which was recorded.

4. Subjects

A total number of 11 subjects took part in the study. The participants of the study came from 11 different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and, at the same time, from four different continents. They all started their studies in their home countries and continued their education in Germany where they had spent a few months (apart from the German student). They were collated into two homogenous groups in terms of sex and career orientation (major). The first group of participants (Group I) comprised 3 men from India, Cameroon and Ecuador studying mechanical engineering. Their age ranged from 23 to 27. The second group (Group II) consisted of 8 women studying English coming from such countries as Bulgaria, China, Finland, Jordan, Germany, Poland, Romania and Russia. The age of female participants of the study ranged from 22 to 26.

5. Results of the study

5.1. Results for male students

As far as male students of mechanical engineering are concerned, there can be seen differences in their usage of methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words. All of them, while discovering lexical information, made use of dictionaries, however, when it comes to the use of particular dictionary types and their number, large differences occur. Additionally, the Cameroonian learner made use of social interaction and the Ecuadorian learner of guesswork, whereas the Indian learner relied exclusively on dictionary use. There are also differences in the number of techniques from each vocabulary method group. The largest number of vocabulary learning techniques was used by the Ecuadorian learner (27%). Both the Indian and Cameroonian learners used the same amount of discovery techniques, name-

ly 13%. The subjects made use of 3 out of 4 different methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words. Only 1 of these methods was used by all the subjects.

Table 1. Results for discovery methods as used by Group I.

Methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words	Number of techniques from each discovery method group* used by male students of mechanical engineering from:			Number of subjects using a particular method
	Cameroon	Ecuador	India	
Guesswork	0	1	0	1
Dictionary use	1	3	2	3
Social interaction	1	0	0	1
Using Internet WebPages	0	0	0	0
% of all techniques used	13%	27%	13%	-
Average % usage of all techniques	18%			

*) Total number of techniques in all methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words amounts to 15.

When it comes to remembering methods as used by male students of engineering, a number of major differences are visible. All the learners made use of social interaction, associations and writing resources while remembering new vocabulary items. However, there is a difference in the number and kind of particular techniques used from each group of methods. The greatest number of techniques for remembering vocabulary was used by the Indian learner – 29%. The Ecuadorian and Cameroonian learners made use of 17 and 12% of all the remembering techniques, respectively. The subjects made use of 7 out of 11 remembering methods. 3 of these methods were used by all the subjects.

5.2. Results for female students

As for female students of English, all of them made use of dictionaries while discovering different types of lexical information about new words. Additionally, 6 of them interacted with others to find out all the necessary information about new vocabulary items. 5 made use of guesswork and 3 of the Internet. However, subjects differ considerably in the number of discovery methods and particular techniques they used while learning. The numbers range from 13% of all vocabulary learning techniques used in the case of the

Table 2. Results for remembering methods as used by Group I.

Methods for remembering	Number of techniques from each methods for remembering group* used by male students of mechanical engineering from:			Number of subjects using a particular method
	Cameroon	Ecuador	India	
Learning by heart	0	0	0	0
Social interaction	1	2	1	3
Grouping	0	0	0	0
Imagery	0	1	3	2
Making associations	2	1	3	3
Using auditory resources	0	0	0	0
Using visual resources	0	0	2	1
Using writing resources	2	1	2	3
Using reading resources	0	1	0	1
Using Kinaesthetic resources	0	0	0	0
Verbalization	0	1	1	2
% of all techniques used	12%	17%	29%	-
Average % usage of all techniques	19%			

*) Total number of techniques in all methods for remembering amounts to 41.

Table 3. Results for discovery methods as used by Group II.

Methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words	Number of techniques from each discovery method group* used by female students of English from:								Number of subjects using a particular method
	Bulgaria	China	Finland	Germany	Jordan	Poland	Romania	Russia	
Guesswork	1	1	0	1	0	0	2	1	5
Dictionary use	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	2	8
Social interaction	0	1	2	1	1	0	1	1	6
Using Internet WebPages	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	3
% of all techniques used	20%	20%	27%	27%	20%	13%	27%	33%	
Average % usage of all techniques	23%								

*) Total number of techniques in all methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words amounts to 15.

Polish learner to 33% in the case of the Russian learner. The subjects made use of all the methods for discovering different types of lexical information about new words enumerated in the typology. Nevertheless, only 1 of these methods was used by all the subjects.

As regards methods for remembering, the majority of female learners favoured writing and visual resources. As far as other vocabulary methods are concerned, there are disparities in both the kind and number of particular techniques used by all the learners. The percentage of techniques used while remembering new vocabulary items varies from 5% in the case of the Chinese learner to 22% in the case of the Russian learner. The subjects made use of 9 out of 11 methods for remembering new lexical items. There is no method, however, used by all the subjects.

Table 4. Results for remembering methods as used by Group II.

Methods for remembering	Number of techniques from each remembering method group* used by female students of English from:								Number of subjects using a particular method
	Bulgaria	China	Finland	Germany	Jordan	Poland	Romania	Russia	
Learning by heart	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Social interaction	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	2	3
Grouping	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	3
Imagery	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	3
Making associations	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
Using auditory resources	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Using visual resources	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	6
Using writing resources	2	1	1	2	2	2	0	3	7
Using reading resources	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Using Kinaesthetic resources	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Verbalization	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
% of all techniques used	7%	5%	10%	15%	17%	10%	10%	22%	-
Average % usage of all techniques	12%								-

*) Total number of techniques in all methods for remembering amounts to 41.

6. The comparison of 2 groups of subjects

The comparison of learning strategies used by male students studying mechanical engineering and female students studying English yielded some additional results, which do not fully support the results of previous studies. Some researchers adduce evidence that female students use more and a greater variety of strategies (Ehrman and Oxford 1989, Oxford and Nyikos 1989). Additionally, as suggested by e.g. Ehrman and Oxford (1989) and Oxford and Nyikos (1989), learners who have something to do with linguistics and language teaching are believed to employ far more strategies than laymen in this field. The results of this research substantiate these claims only in relation to methods for discovering different types of lexical information. The female students reported making use of 23% of various discovery techniques whereas male students 18%. As for remembering methods, the evidence from the study is quite contradictory to what is generally claimed. The number and diversity of remembering methods used by students of mechanical engineering outnumbered the ones used by students of an English department, 19 to 12%.

Conclusion

Definitely, some further research investigating the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and cultural background should be undertaken. More research using the same procedures and methods of data collection should be carried out so that the data obtained could be compared and valid conclusions could be drawn. Similarly, it would be advisable to further scrutinize the impact that career orientation and sex have on the use of vocabulary learning strategies.

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ABSTRACT

Many researchers claim that the use of language learning strategies varies depending on the cultural background of a particular learner (e.g. Oxford and Burry-Stock 1995, Oxford 1996, Wharton 2000, Chamot 2004, Gu 2005). In a similar vein, Sutter (1987, as cited in Oxford 1989, 1996) suggests that teaching strategies that are not in accordance with learners' cultural background can have a detrimental effect on the learning process. However, despite the fact that there seems to be a relationship between culture and the language learning strategy use, this issue has received only scant attention among researchers (e.g. Oxford 1996). There are some studies investigating language learning strategies as used among the members of a given community, nevertheless, there is still a paucity of research making cross-cultural comparisons of the language learning strategy use. The objective of this paper is to present the results

of the study of vocabulary learning strategies, which are the subcategory of language learning strategies, as used by 2 groups of learners coming from different cultural backgrounds.