

MEMORY LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN VOCATIONAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to investigate the usage and its frequency of language learning memory strategies by those students who are learning English as a foreign language in Vocational Studies. A total of 186 students learning English in Hungary, Italy and Spain completed the first nine items of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire and a Background Characteristics survey. These two questionnaires were administered and analyzed using google.docs. The results of the research are generalized as follows. The most used memory strategies are *I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them, I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English and I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.*

KEY WORDS

Memory – language – strategies – vocational - studies

RESUMEN

Este estudio se ha diseñado para investigar el uso y la frecuencia de la memoria como estrategia de aprendizaje por alumnos que cursan la asignatura de inglés como lengua extranjera en formación profesional. Un total de 186 estudiantes de inglés de Hungría, Italia y España completaron los primeros nueve ítems del Inventario de Estrategias para el Aprendizaje de Lenguas (SILL) y una encuesta sobre sus características contextuales. Estos dos cuestionarios fueron administrados y analizados utilizando google.docs. Los resultados de la investigación concluyen que las estrategias de memoria más utilizadas son: *usar palabras nuevas en oraciones para poder recordarlas, pensar en las relaciones entre lo que ya sé y las nuevas palabras que aprendo en inglés y recuerdo una palabra nueva en inglés haciendo una imagen mental de una situación en la que la palabra se pueda emplear.*

PALABRAS CLAVE

Memoria – lengua – estrategia – profesional - estudios

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to talk about the development of language learning memory strategies and offers different taxonomies and definitions since the 1960s. It will provide information about the use of English learners in Vocational Studies so as to enhance English learning for non-native learners and to think about the frequency and suitability of use to successfully develop students' learning autonomy. Main definitions and taxonomies of Language Learning Strategies are exposed such as Faerch Claus (1983), O'Malley et al. (1985), Wenden and Rubin (1987), Cohen (1990), Oxford (1990), Intaraprasert (2000) and The Common European Framework for Languages (2001). Furthermore, we offer the characteristics of a good language learner based on different researchers and language teachers' studies over the past few decades.

In order to better investigate the English learning strategies of those students in Vocational Studies, we have applied Oxford's taxonomy, the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*, published in 1990. Participators from Hungary, Italy and Spain took part in the questionnaire. This study came up as a follow-up activity related to a Pestalozzi Programme course on Intercultural Matters. This programme runs activities on key concerns of the Council of Europe in the field of education such as education for democratic citizenship, human rights, multiperspectivity in history education, etc., as it is mentioned in its webpage (2016). As far as data are concerned, they were computed and analyzed via descriptive statistics. Finally, we will draw conclusions taking into account the results of our empirical research with the aim of serving as a research reference in the field of language learning strategies, particularly the relationship between English language learning and their usage in Vocational Studies.

2. LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

2.1 Introduction

Strategy comes from the ancient Greek term *strategia* related to generalship or the art of war. In a more specific sense, strategy entails the optimal management of the troops, ships or aircrafts in a planned campaign. An easily confused term with strategy is tactics, which means are the tools to achieve the success of strategies. Both terms share some basic concepts: planning, competition, conscious manipulation and movement towards a goal. In nonmilitary contexts, the concept of strategy has been used for non-adversarial situations, where it has to mean a plan, a step or an action is taking for achieving a specific objective (Oxford, 1990).

Research into language learning started in the 1960s due to the developments in cognitive psychology. Aaron Carton published the first research on language learner strategies in 1966. In these first stages during the 70s and 80s, some learners' behaviours were considered as learner strategies.

As the interest in language learning increased during the 1970s, the emergence of cognitive trend paid special attention to language learning and language learners. Thanks to the change from a behaviourism to a cognitive perspective in psychology, studies to explain cognitive processes in language

learning proliferated. As Zare (2012) affirmed, the first studies in language learning focused on analyzing and describing the external behaviours of language learners. These studies also attempted to label strategic behaviours and tried to classify them with the aim of linking those strategic behaviours and language proficiency.

2.2 Definition of Language Learning Strategies

Definitions of language learning strategies shed light on what learners think and do during language learning. In this context, Faerch Claus and Casper (1983) defined the concept of learning strategy as an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language. Wenden and Rubin (1987) described them as any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information. Shortly after, Cohen (1990) stated that learning strategies are consciously selected processes by learners and which may result in actions taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language through the storage, retention, recall, and application of the information about language.

In 1990 Oxford concluded that the context is essential in the language learning process. She considered language strategies as intentions to do and specific actions to undertake planned by a learner. Oxford proclaimed that language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.

Some other definitions on language learning strategies focusing on learner's processes when acquiring a language appeared. Richards and Platt (1992) declared that learning strategies are "intentional behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn or remember new information." That same year Stern published his book *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. He stated that the term of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques. A language classroom environment was seen like a problem-solving situation where learners are likely to face new tasks and challenges given by their teachers. To succeed the tasks, learners have to find the quickest or easiest way to do what is required. Consequently, the usage of language learning strategies is absolutely necessary whether consciously or unconsciously.

The Common European Framework (2001) links strategies and effective communication. Strategies are considered as a means that the language user exploits to mobilise and balance his or her resources, to activate skills and procedures, in order to fulfil the demands of communication in context and successfully complete the task in question in the most comprehensive or most economical way feasible depending on his other precise purpose.

Macaro (2006) provided an alternative theoretical framework, though based on cognitive psychology too. He proposed listing the essential characteristics claiming that strategies should not be defined by a description in relation to variables such as goal, a mental action or a situation.

2.2 Oxford's Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) considers that language learning strategies are oriented towards the development of communicative competence. She divided them into two main groups, direct and indirect strategies, which are subdivided into six main groups.

In Oxford's opinion, direct strategies involve new language directly and these are classified in memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. All direct strategies require mental processing of the language (p. 37).

- Memory strategies involve the mental processes for storing new information in the memory and for retrieving them when needed. These strategies entail four sets: creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action.
- Cognitive strategies require conscious ways of handling the object language and fall into four groups: practicing, receiving and sending messages strategies, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input and output. These strategies are the mental strategies use to make sense of the learning.
- Compensation strategies supply the knowledge gaps that a learner may have either in speaking or writing, overcoming language difficulties. As Oxford says compensation strategies are employed by learners when facing a temporary breakdown in speaking or writing. These strategies are divided into two groups, guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing.

According to Oxford, indirect strategies, which provide indirect support for language learning, include metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

- Metacognitive strategies enable learners to control their own cognition by using different strategies such as focusing, arranging, evaluating, seeking opportunities, and lowering anxiety. These strategies involve overviewing and linking with material already known, paying attention, delaying speech productions, organizing, setting goals and objectives, planning for a language task, seeking for practice opportunities, arranging, planning and evaluating your learning.
- Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements assisting them to cope with their emotions, motivation, and attitudes related to learning. These strategies entail lowering one's anxiety, encouraging oneself and taking one's emotional temperature.
- Social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. These promote language learning through interactions with others. Every language conveys a form of social behavior. So learning a foreign or second language requires a correct interaction. As Oxford states, it is extremely important that learners employ appropriate social strategies in this process. Social strategies comprise asking questions, cooperation with others and emphasizing with others.

Oxford (1990) published the *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*. It is a questionnaire which has been used in a great deal of research and which was first designed as an instrument for assessing the frequency of use of language learning strategies by students at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. There exist two revised versions of SILL, one for foreign language learners whose native language is English. This questionnaire consists of eighty items. The other has been designed for learners of English as a second or a foreign language. This last one contains fifty items.

SILL has been broadly used by researchers in major studies, dissertations and theses. Thus, this questionnaire has been extensively checked for reliability and validated in multiple ways. In this current study, the English as a Second or Foreign Language fifty items version 7.0 of SILL was employed as an instrument to investigate the use of English learning strategies in Vocational Studies. The version 7.0 of SILL consists of fifty items. These items are divided into six subscales:

- a. Memory strategies, from item one to nine
- b. Cognitive strategies, from item ten to twenty-three
- c. Compensation strategies from item twenty-four to twenty-nine
- d. Metacognitive strategies from item thirty to thirty-nine
- e. Effective strategies, from item forty to forty-four
- f. Social strategies, from item forty-five to fifty

These SILL fifty items are evaluated on an increasing five point Likert scale ranging from one to five. The number indicates how often the learner uses the strategies.

- 1 = never or almost never true of me
- 2 = generally not true of me
- 3 = somewhat true of me
- 4 = generally true of me
- 5 = always true of me

3 VOCATIONAL STUDIES IN HUNGARY, ITALY AND SPAIN

This section aims to outline the main characteristics of Vocational Studies in the Hungarian, Italian and Spanish educational system.

3.1 Vocational Studies in Hungary

As it is said in CEDEFOP's report (2011), VET's reputation in Hungary has been low among learners and the Hungarian society in general. There is a high proportion of learners at vocational schools and especially drop-outs are Roma. Thus, this requires linking education and training to social policies. Consequently, the aim of the vocational school development programme is to ease access to skilled workers' training and reduce drop-outs rates by tailoring programmes and methodology to learners' previous knowledge and needs.

Initial vocational education and training (IVET) is primarily offered in secondary, post-secondary and higher education, when students are fourteen. Hungary's IVET is formed by two parts: the first focuses on general education and some pre-vocational training; the second is based on vocational training to obtain a qualification and is referred to as VET grades.

On completion of primary and lower secondary education, learners can choose between different upper secondary education tracks. Two of them provide upper education access.

- a. Grammar schools offer four (or in bilingual schools five) years of general education and award a secondary leaving certificate. This is prerequisite for admission to higher education. Graduates can also move on to post-secondary VET.
- b. Secondary vocational schools offer four (or in bilingual schools five) years of general and pre-vocational education leading to a secondary school leaving certificate, afterwards learners can choose if they want to participate in one to three years VET to obtain a vocational qualification or move to higher education.
- c. Vocational schools provide general and pre-vocational education and training in the first two years; they are followed by one to three years of VET to obtain a vocational qualification.

Higher education, on the other hand, offers two types of education: non-degree advanced vocational programmes which award vocational qualifications and higher degree programmes leading to a degree and qualification.

Adult education and training takes the form of:

- a. Schools- based adult education within secondary, post-secondary and higher education
- b. Adults training outside the school system provided by private and public institutions.

3.2 Vocational Studies in Italy

In Italy, the educational system is organized following the principle of autonomy of schools as for didactic, organization and research and development activities as exposed by ISFOL (2012) and CEDEFOP (2002). The State has exclusive competence on general issues on education to guarantee the fundamental principles. Consequently, regions share their competences with the State on education matters while they have exclusive competence on vocational education and training.

Education is compulsory from six to sixteen and covers the eight-year first cycle of education (five years of primary school and three years of lower secondary school).

Second cycle of education offers two different pathways:

- a. State upper secondary school for students from fourteen to nineteen. It is offered by licei, technical institutes and vocational institutes.

- b. Three and four year vocational training courses (IFP) addressed to students who have completed the first cycle of education.

Post-secondary non tertiary education is offered through post-qualification and post-diploma vocational courses organized by the Regions, higher technical education and training courses (IFTS).

Higher education is offered by universities and High Level Arts and Music Education System. This education is organized in first, second and third levels according to the Bologna structure.

As for VET studies, they are organized as follows:

- Three and four year education and vocational training courses. These courses fall under the Region's responsibility and provide training for fourteen to seventeen year old students.
- Post-secondary Higher Technical Training System contains guidelines for both the reorganization of the higher technical education and training system and the establishment of higher technical institutes.
- Adult Education. The draft regulation for the reorganization of teaching in adults education centres contains provisions for the establishment of training pathways leading to lower and upper secondary qualifications and to ensure that the low skilled are given priority access to the educational offer.
- Apprenticeship System. Apprenticeships are open-ended contracts with a specific training purpose. They include both on-the-job and classroom training.

3.3 Vocational Studies in Spain

Students from six to sixteen years old are obliged to attend compulsory education in Spain. This education is divided into Primary Education (from 6 to 11) and Compulsory Secondary Education (from 12 to 16). One of the current challenges for the Spanish education system is to reduce the early school leaving found in the eighteen to twenty-four age group (Otero, Muñoz & Fernández, 2002).

The concept of general education includes both basic and compulsory lower secondary education field with the aim of providing pupils with the basic skills needed to cope with a preliminary knowledge (Council of Europe, 2012).

As for Vocational Studies, it can be found different levels:

- Pre-vocational education is related to the Initial Professional Qualifications Programmes, intended for students over the age of sixteen who have not obtained a compulsory secondary education diploma. These students can have a Level 1 qualification from the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications. This pre-vocational education is about to be changed in the next few months because of the new Education Law LOMCE.

- Initial Vocational Training (IVET) is made up of specific vocational training that is taught within the education system at two different levels. This programme allows students to continue further vocational studies.
- Vocational Training in Spain comprises the set of training actions that prepares students to be qualified to work in a variety of professions, to have access to employment and to actively participate in daily life. The term covers the specific courses taught in intermediate and advanced level vocational training courses that lead to diplomas as a technician or advanced technician.
- Post-tertiary education encompasses vocational training for employment courses that lead to level three certificates of professionalism. Training programmes designed to allow those students over twenty-five to enter higher education can also be included.
- Tertiary Education or Higher Education includes university education, advanced education in the areas of artistic education (Advanced Artistic Education) or languages (Advanced Level Language Education).
- Continuing Vocational Training is designed to respond directly to the needs and requirements of the labour market and includes a variety of initiative i.e. on-demand training; training courses on offer; and training alternating with employment.

4 CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS RESEARCH

4.1. Objectives

The aims of this empirical research are:

- A. To know whether or not our students use learning strategies efficiently to learn English as a foreign language
- B. To know which strategies are more popular among our students
- C. To draw conclusions to help them to use learning strategies efficiently

4.2. Methodology

This empirical research will focus on an online survey. This is an adaptation of Oxford's SILL. The questionnaire contains nine questions in a multiple choice answers format.

4.3. Population

The targeted population of this research was vocational students at Secondary Education from different countries in Europe, namely, Spain, Hungary and Italy. Students were selected at random and invited to complete a questionnaire administered using google.docs. In each country, two secondary schools were randomly selected so altogether six schools were involved in this

research. As a result, a total of 195 students, who study English as a foreign language at Vocational Studies from European Secondary Schools were invited to participate in this survey study. Of the 195 questionnaires, 9 were discarded as invalid because they were incomplete. Therefore, a total of 186 subject responses (95'4% of 195 participants) were used for the statistical analysis. Furthermore, based on the ethical consideration, the names of the school and the participant's personal data were kept anonymously in the current study.

Male students represent 71% of all participants. It seems that Vocational Studies are preferred by male students. As for our students' age, 47% affirmed that they were between fourteen and fifteen years old. In other words, they were studying Initial Vocational Studies. 48% students said that they were between eighteen and twenty-one. These participants were studying Mid Vocational Studies and Upper Vocational Studies. Finally, 5% confirmed that they were over twenty-six. Due to the lifelong learning, students go to Vocational Schools while working.

4. 4. Data Collection Instruments

To achieve our goal, we posed our students the following questions and give them multiple choice answers for each question. As for the background personal information, we asked about our student's gender, nationality, age and their marks in English. To elicit some information about the Language learning Strategies, we used The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, *SILL*, published in 1990 by Rebecca Oxford. These two tests were administered by using google.doc., which allowed us to have immediate answers from distant respondents, although some important data analyses such as sex or age comparisons were discarded.

Part A: Memory Strategies

1. I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of an English word and an image or picture of the world to help me remember the word.
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember the new words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.

5. RESULTS

5. 1. Background Characteristics

As it has been stated in section 4, most of our participants at Vocational Studies, 71%, were males. Vocational schools from Spain, Hungary and Italy took part in this research. As for their ages, 47% were under seventeen and 48% between eighteen and twenty-one.

Students were asked about their marks in English. Only 13% of the participants admitted that they normally fail English. Most of them only get C (pass) and 34% obtain B. Nevertheless, 19% of all students success at English as a foreign language and achieve A.

5. 2. Results of Data Analysis

In what follows, a detailed analysis of the SILL questionnaire and our survey respondents' answers are exposed.

1. *I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.*

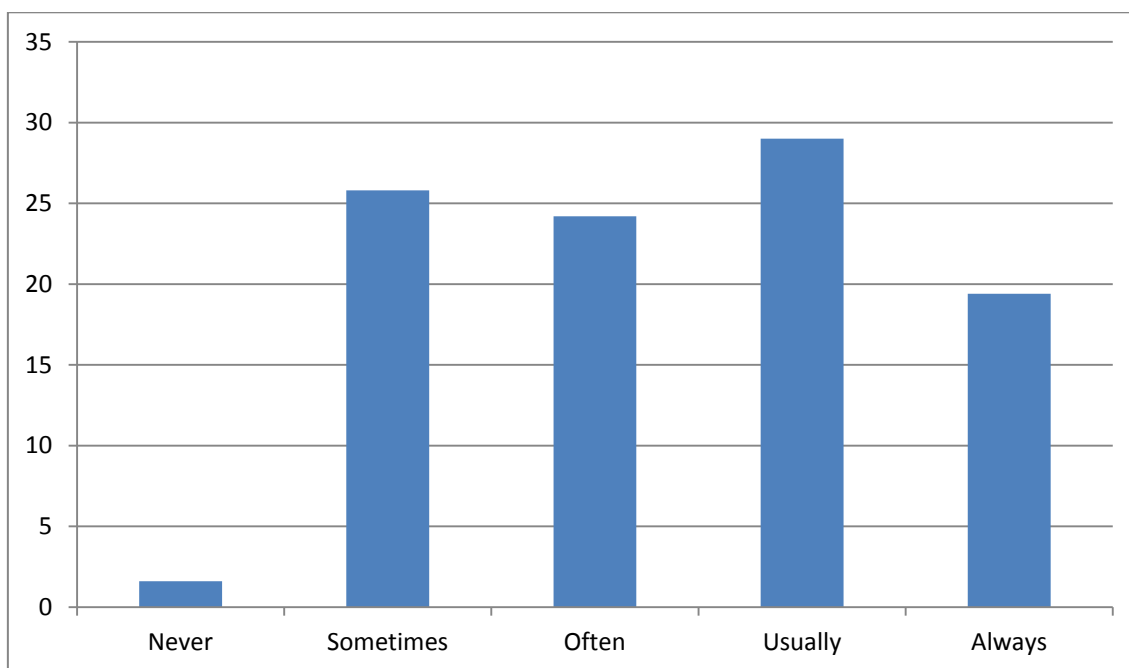


Chart 1: Percentage of memory strategy 1

26% of the students affirm that they *sometimes* think of the relationships between what they know and new things they learn in English. A 29% *usually* use this strategy and 24% *often* do this.

Those students who use this language learning strategy appropriately will increment their second language outcomes as, for example, associating vocabulary instruction with both students' prior knowledge intended to construct background knowledge could help these identify new words encountered in their lexical learning tasks (Al- Hammadi, 2012).

2. *I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.*

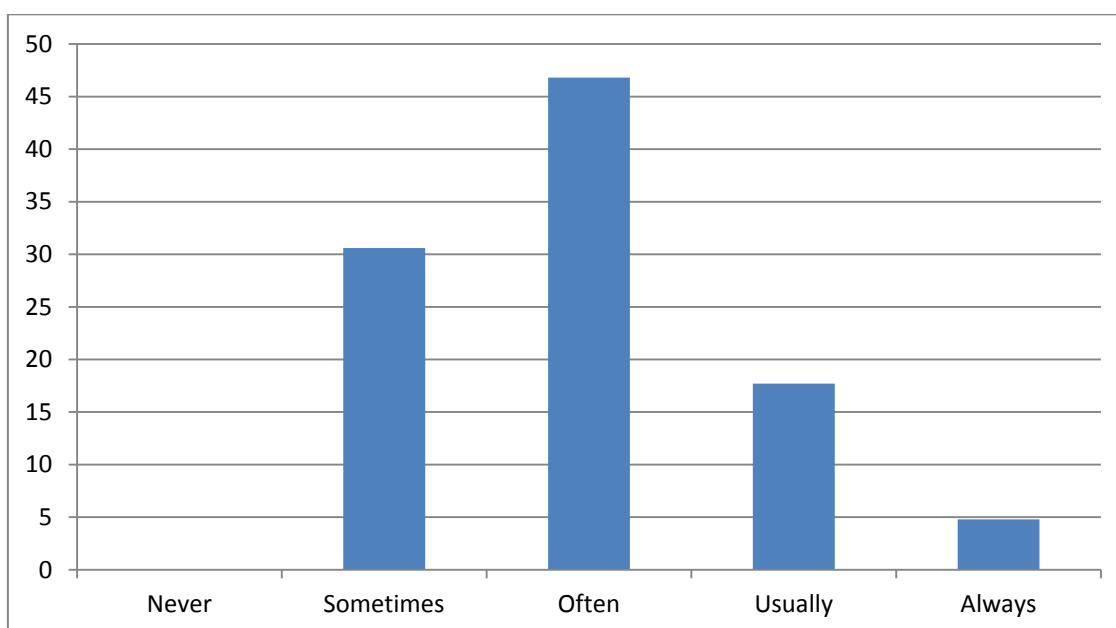


Chart 2: Percentage of memory strategy 2

Most of the participants declare that they use this strategy with a certain frequency (47% *often* and 31% *sometimes*). Only 18% say that they *usually* use new English words in a sentence in order to remember them.

The frequency of this learning strategy among the participants could be related to those activities on textbooks. In spite of the fact that editors are making a considerable effort, there still is a prevalence of grammar- oriented activities and mechanical practice.

3. *I connect the sound of an English word and an image or picture of the world to help me remember the word.*

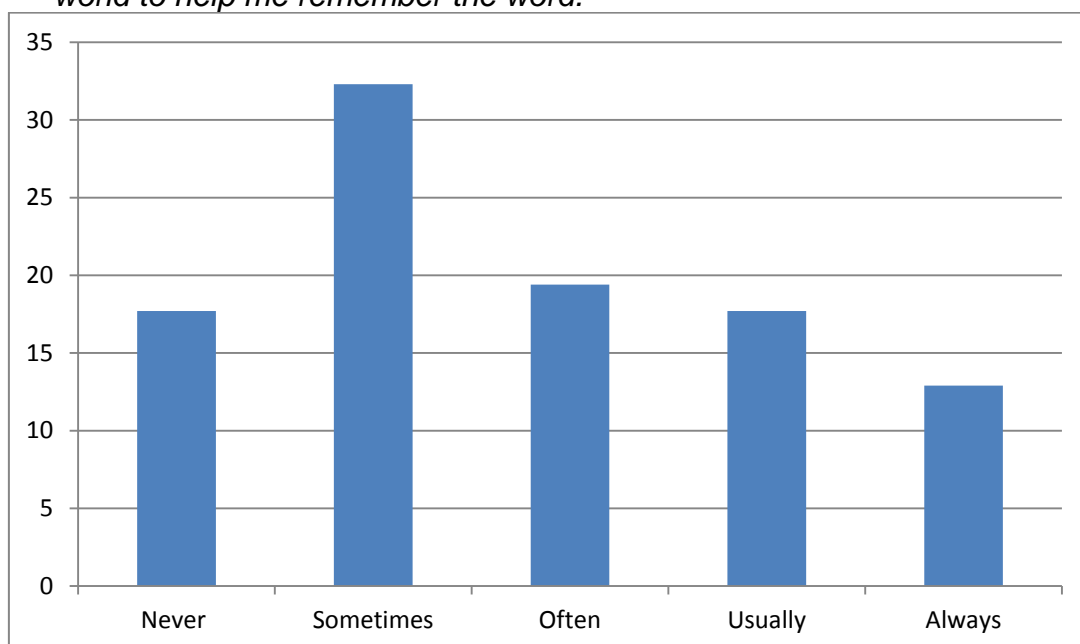


Chart 3: Percentage of memory strategy 3

This strategy is not very popular among the survey respondents. As a matter of fact, most of them, 32 %, admit that they only *sometimes* employ it and what is even worse 18% confess they never do this. 19% *often* take advantage of this language learning strategy. As a disadvantage of this, Corpas (2008) states that this lack of connection between phonological and semantic word aspects reduces the adequate acquisition of vocabulary.

4. *I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.*

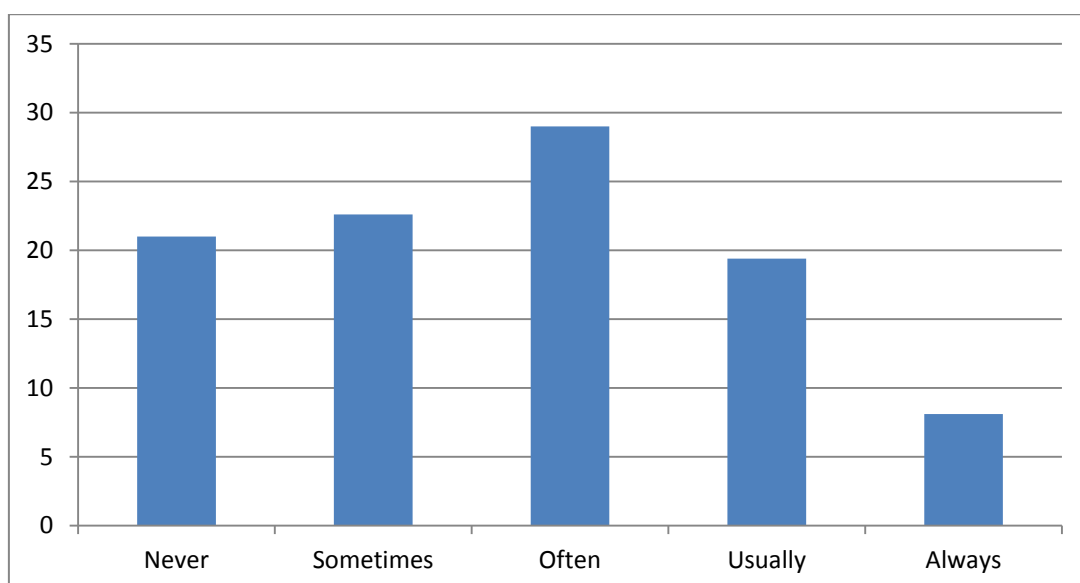


Chart 4: Percentage of memory strategy 4

Most of these students *sometimes* (23%) or *often* (29%) rely on remembering a new English word by making a mental picture of the situation in which the word might be used. The third most popular option is *never* (21% of the participants).

Furthermore, we must bear in mind that second language activities that make students construct maps, charts or graphs representing the semantic relatedness of words or concepts also increase their language learning outcomes.

5. *I use rhymes to remember new English words.*

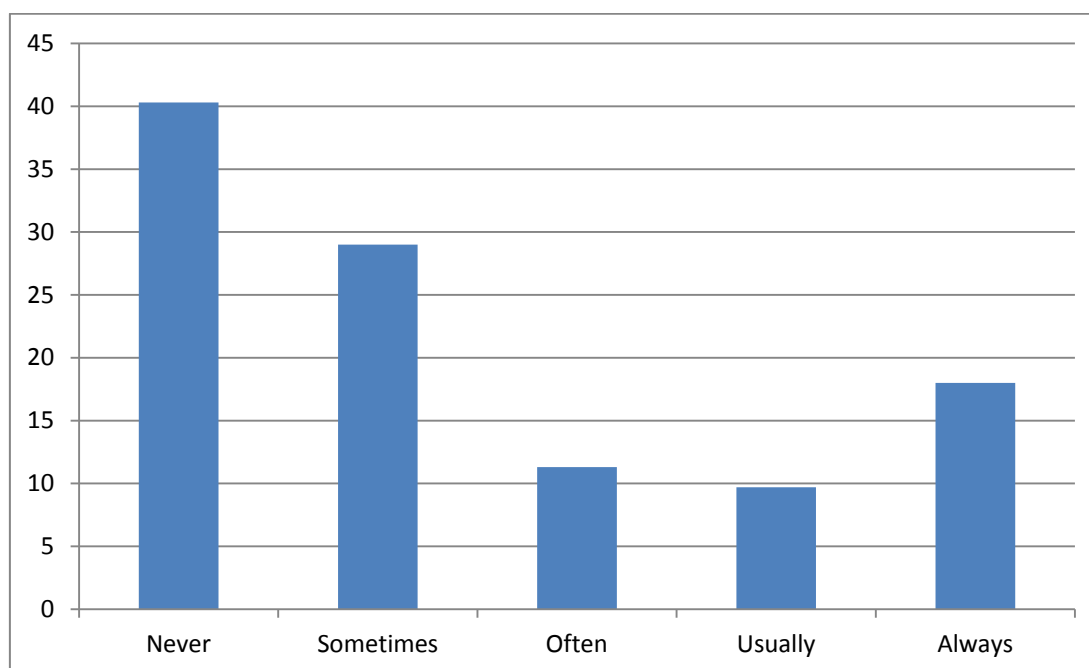


Chart 5: Percentage of memory strategy 5

This strategy is not used very frequently by the English learners in Vocational Studies. 40% and 29% *never* or *sometimes* use rhymes to remember English words, while 18% *always* make use of this. In line with this, those students with an auditory learning style use music, sound, rhyme, rhythm, speaking or listening.

6. *I use flashcards to remember new English words.*

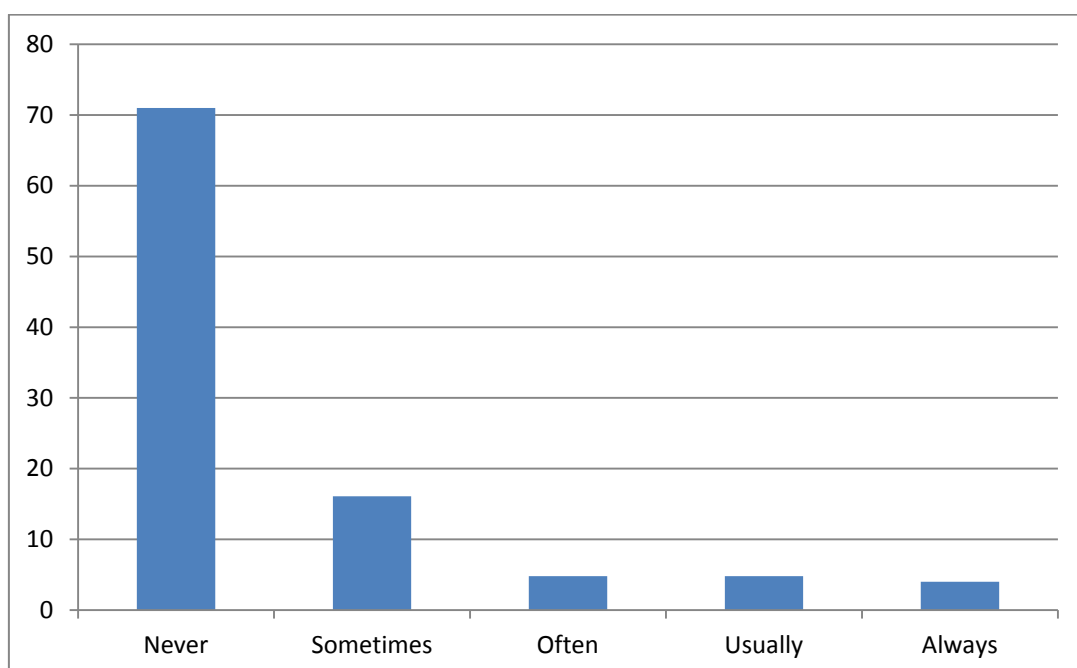


Chart 6: Percentage of memory strategy 6

Over 70% of the students admit that they *never* use flashcards to remember English words and 16% confess that they *sometimes* use this learning strategy. This is one of the least popular language learning strategies among the survey respondents.

Although the textbooks for secondary education, in general, are visually attractive to motivate students to learn, they do not normally offer an image glossary or flashcards to foster visual links.

7. *I physically act out new English words.*

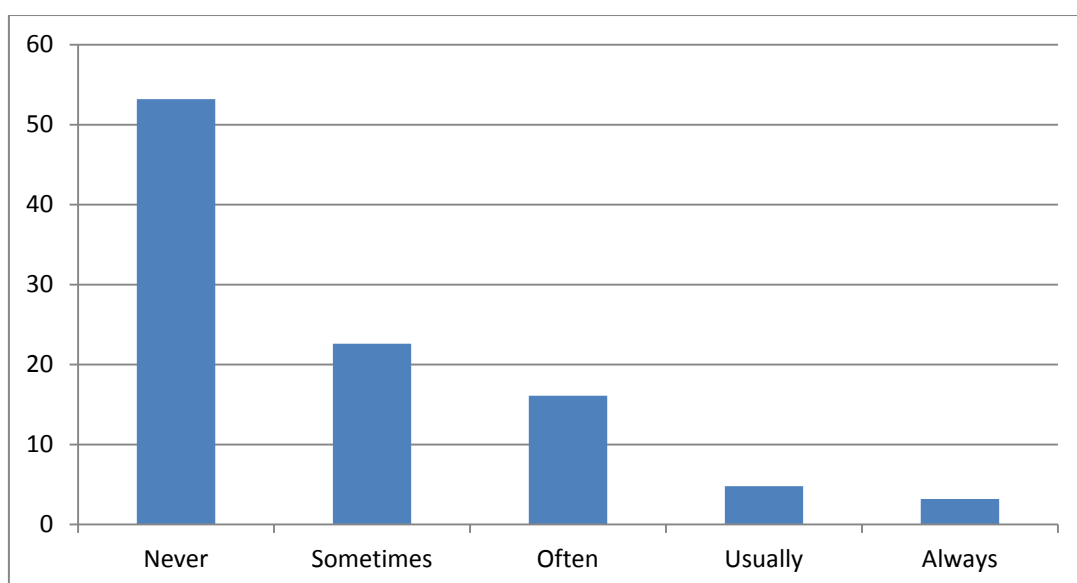


Chart 7: Percentage of memory strategy 7

Over half of the students (53%) indicate that they *never* physically act out new English words, whereas 22% of the participants *sometimes* use it. Nevertheless 15% affirm that they *often* use it.

This learning strategy and others related to mime or drama are not very popular in the English language classrooms, though they could benefit all those students who rely on kinesthetic learning.

8. *I review English lessons often.*

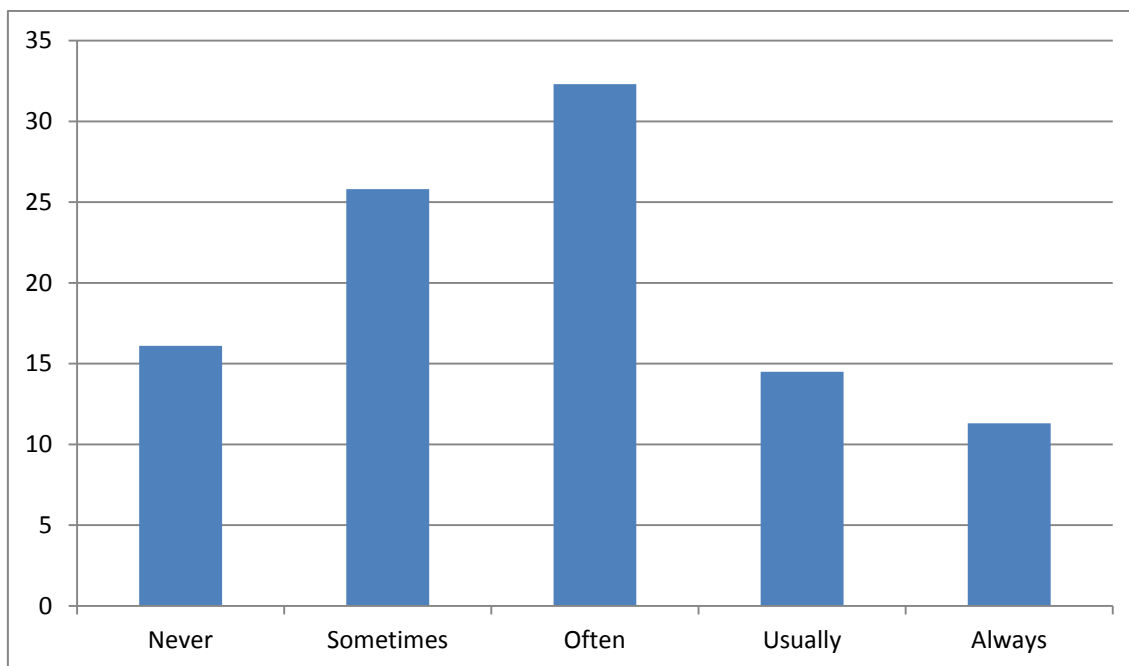


Chart 8: Percentage of memory strategy 8

Almost 60% of the survey respondents affirm that they *sometimes* (26%) or *often* (32%) review lessons often. Those who say that they *never* review English lessons often represent 16%. Only 14% and 11% *usually* or *always* use this learning strategy, even though revision is mostly important because it enables language learners to assimilate, restore and retrieve information.

9. *I remember the new words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.*

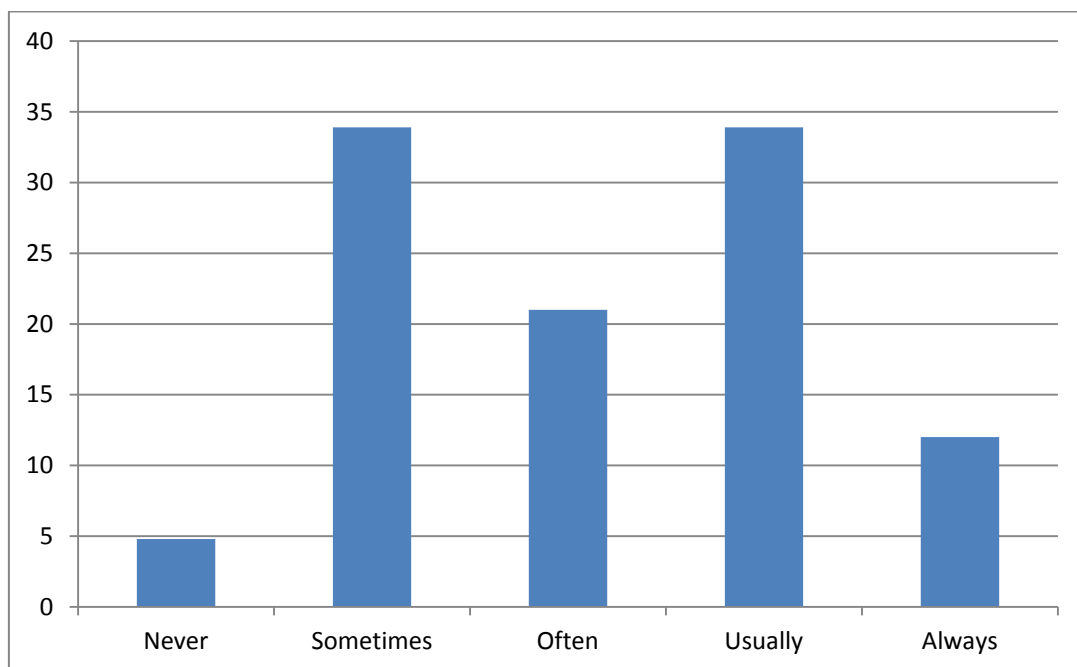


Chart 9: Percentage of memory strategy 9

34% of the students admit that they *sometimes* remember the new words or phrases by remembering their location. The same percentage (34%), declare that they *usually* employ this strategy when learning English, while 19% *often* do this. Obviously, this strategy is related to a visual learning style. These visual students are aided by images, pictures and spatial organization of elements.

6. CONCLUSION

Even though the group of memory language strategies is frequently used by foreign language students as a whole (Corpas, 2010), an exhaustive analysis sheds light on each memory strategy. As a result, we offer a classification regarding their frequency of usage among our survey respondents. According to the aforementioned results, the memory learning strategies have been divided into three main groups, as follows:

(1) Frequently used language learning strategies

- *I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.*

(2) Moderately used language learning strategies

- *I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.*

- *I remember the new words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.*

(3) Infrequently used language learning strategies

- *I connect the sound of an English word and an image or picture of the world to help me remember the word.*
- *I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.*
- *I use rhymes to remember new English words.*
- *I use flashcards to remember new English words.*
- *I physically act out new English words.*
- *I review English lessons often.*

The results derived from the current research may suggest some pedagogical implications. Since it is essential for students to use and apply memory language learning strategies in the process of language learning, teachers should get this message across. Taking into account the findings of this study, some of the students showed that they do not really use these strategies and some of them even do not know there are some strategies for language learning as *using flashcards to remember new English words*. As a result, teachers should ponder on this and help their pupils to foster and raise awareness of the advantages of a proper use of memory strategies when learning English as a foreign language. We propose to teach learning strategies in the classroom explicitly in order to supply this lack in the traditional teaching methods and materials as textbooks.

Because of the Internet is a widespread tool among our students to communicate, to socialize, to learn, to work, to have fun, etc. we propose that future ELT research could focus on the English learning strategies when using the Internet, for example, acquisition of new vocabulary, chatting with native speakers, reading for pleasure on the Internet and so on.

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