The Frequency of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by Kenyan Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning strategies are contextualized within the larger area of language learning strategies which are accounted for within the cognitive theory of learning. This study is a description and analysis of vocabulary learning strategies employed by Kenyan learners of Chinese as a foreign language. The objective of the study was to Describe the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies used by Kenyan-Chinese foreign language learners. Purposive sampling was used to select two Confucius institutes from Kenyatta and Egerton universities while stratified sampling was applied in selecting respondents at different levels of learning, namely beginner and intermediate levels. Data was collected using the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire by Schmitt (1997), and then it was analyzed and presented in tables and charts. The study found that Kenyan CFL learners were medium strategy users. It also revealed that cognitive strategies were the most commonly used followed by memory and metacognitive strategies. Learners also used other strategies that mainly involved the use of technology which were not in the questionnaire. The study recommends that learners be made aware of strategies during Chinese language lessons so that they can fully utilize them. Furthermore, there should be more emphasis on strategies that involve the use of technology due to the nature of the language. The research findings provide useful insight for the development of a curriculum for teaching Chinese in Kenya.

Keywords: *Vocabulary, Strategies, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, cognitive theory*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Chinese Language Learning in Kenya

Since the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Kenya in 2006, Chinese language learning has continued to gain momentum. Since then, the Chinese language has only been taught at universities, colleges, and a few secondary schools. This has however changed with the introduction of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) whereby; the Chinese language is now offered as one of the foreign languages learnt from grade 4. The variety learnt in the Kenyan context is Mandarin Chinese which is a tonal language that uses characters (logographic representation of words) in its writing system and employs tone variation to distinguish words.

Therefore, the meanings of words in Chinese vary depending on their tone. Chinese is comprised of four basic tones and variations in pitches. Hence, a change in tones increases the difficulty of learning characters in terms of correct pronunciation and building a connection between the sound and meaning of characters and words (Zhan and Cheng, 2014). This is because most Chinese characters are Phono-semantic whereby, meanings and pronunciations are derived from the characters. CFL learners need to understand the written form since the vocabulary that needs to be learnt is presented in form of characters in textbooks and other reading materials.

Although there is a lot of interest in CFL learning in Kenya, many learners encounter difficulties in the process of acquiring the language. This is because the Chinese writing system uses a logographic representation of words also known as Chinese characters. The alphabetic script also referred to as pinyin (Romanized Chinese) is only used at the beginner levels and thereafter, only Chinese characters are used. Moreover, there are thousands of Chinese characters that learners need to memorize for them to master the language.

According to Bisong (2012), there are approximately 7000 frequently used characters in modern Chinese. Mastering the characters and being able to use them for daily communication and other academic tasks, therefore, becomes one of the most challenging aspects of learning the Chinese language. This is because Chinese is an isolating language with limited morphology hence, there is a need to master many individual words. Consequently, learners require unique strategies such as the use of google pinyin and computer applications to do so.

The learner's proficiency level is also determined by the number of words that one knows. This is done through the HSK and HSKK examinations which cover the four language skills. The examinations consist of vocabulary ranging from 150-5000 words. Thus, with the increasing number of words as one advance in CL learning, students require strategies to help them learn and master the language faster and more efficiently. In the CFL context, VLS is of great importance to learn as many words as possible.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Through the use of vocabulary learning strategies, learners can master the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). It is also important to note that vocabulary learning strategies are of great importance in the learning of Chinese as a foreign language. Furthermore, China's global position has contributed immensely to the spread of the Chinese language in different parts of the world specifically in Africa. This has increased CFL learners outside China and more so in Kenya, creating the need for more research in this context due to the complexity of the Chinese language in comparison to other foreign languages learned in Kenya.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This study uses the cognitive learning theory due to its emphasis on strategies as an important aspect of cognition. This is of great importance in CFL learning since most of the learning aspects, such as character cognition involve memory and mental manipulation.

3.0 Methodology

The study aimed to describe the VLS used by Kenyan CFL learners in terms of type thus describing it as a quantitative study. In this study, quantitative data was collected from a cross-section of respondents at a specific point in time. Thus, the design employed was the one in which variables are typically measured using instruments and the analysis of numbered data is carried out using statistical research procedures.

The study was carried out in two of the four universities that house Confucius Institutes in Kenya. These are the Confucius Institute at Kenyatta University (Beginners 48 and Intermediate 20) and the Confucius Institute at Egerton University (Beginners 24 and Intermediate 11). These two are mandated to be taught by CL and are run by the Confucius Institute Headquarters. Purposive and stratified sampling was used to sample 68 learners from Kenyatta University and 35 learners from Egerton University thus a total number of 103 learners from the two universities at both the beginner and intermediate levels.

This research utilized the vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire adapted from the classification by Schmitt 1997. It is a 38-item Likert-scale questionnaire that was used to show the type of strategy used. The whole VLSQ was divided into five main parts with each indicating the appropriate VLS use frequency ranging from 'never, 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often', and 'always' on a rating scale of 1 to 5 respectively.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overall Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by Kenyan CFL Learners

Data on VLS use in the specific categories under SDM (determination and social strategies) and SCW (social, cognitive, memory, and metacognitive strategies) is presented. Figures 1 and 2 present the means of the overall use of VLS in the SDM and SCW categories
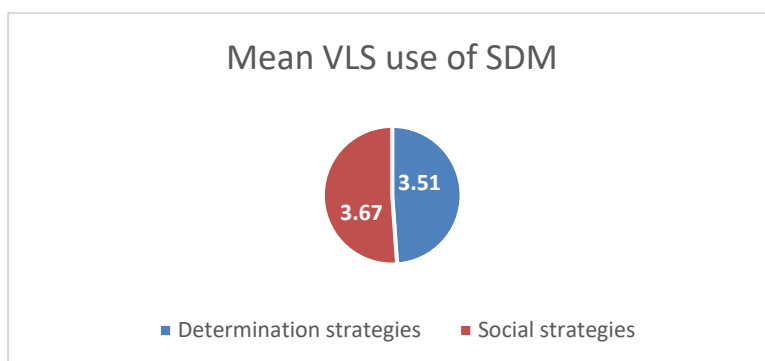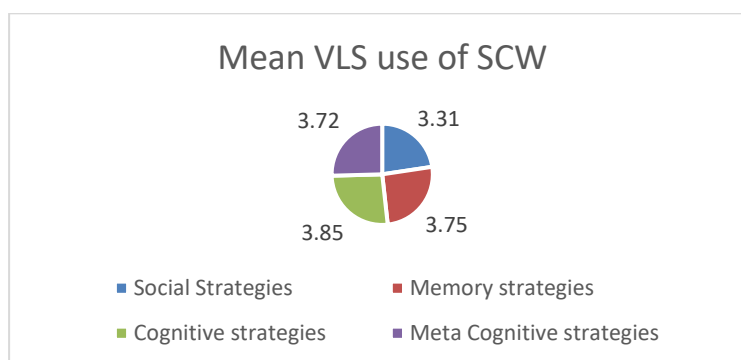

Figure 1: Overall VLS use in the SDM Category

Figure 2: Overall VLS use in the SDM Category

In terms of the overall use of the VLS, under the SDM category, social strategies were the most frequently used with a mean of 3.67 (Figure 1). In the SCW category, cognitive strategies were the most popular with a mean of 3.85 (Figure 2) while social strategies were the least popular among Kenyan CFL learners. Overall, in the two categories (SDM and SCW), cognitive strategies were the ones that the learners used most with a mean of 3.85 (Figure 4.5) followed

by memory and metacognitive strategies, respectively. The cognitive strategy was the most used while the social strategy was the least used. Under the discovery of meanings of new words, the social strategy was the most used with a higher mean than in the consolidation category.

Frequency of VLS use by Kenyan CFL Learners

The frequency of VLS use has been categorized as low, medium, and high (Intaraprasert, 2000). This was determined by students' responses to the vocabulary learning strategy learning questionnaire (VLSQ). The results on the frequency of use of the VLS are presented analyzed and discussed.

Table 1: Frequency of Use of VLS Categories Employed by Kenyan CFL Learners

VLS Category	Frequency of VLS use		
	Low	Medium	High
A. Strategies for the discovery of new word meanings (SDM)			
Determination strategies	20%	56%	24%
Social strategies	10%	53%	38%
B. Strategies for consolidating words (SCW)			
Social strategies	45%	43%	12%
Memory strategies	13%	44%	44%
Cognitive strategies	12%	52%	37%
Meta Cognitive strategies	15%	56%	32%

Table 1 reveals that Kenyan CFL learners reported medium use of strategies in all the categories. In comparing the percentage scores among the SDM and SCW categories, under the SDM category learners used the social strategies (38%) more than the determination strategies. However, there was not much difference between the two categories. Thus, determination strategies seemed to be the least used category in discovering the meaning of new words. For the consolidation of words (SCW), memory strategies reported the highest use (44%) followed by cognitive strategies (37%), and metacognitive strategies (32%) while social strategies were the least used (12%). Kenyan CFL learners are, therefore, high users of social VLS strategies (and low users of determination strategies) for the discovery of new word meanings while they are high users of memory strategies (and low users of social strategies) for consolidation of words.

Most and Least used Specific Strategies for CFL Learning

This is a summary of the most and least used VLS among Kenyan CFL learners. Table 2 captures the summary.

Table 2: Most and Least used Specific Strategies for CFL Learning

Strategy Category	Percent of respondents using strategy					
	5 = Always	4 = Often	3 = Sometimes	2 = Rarely	1 = Never	Mean
FOR DISCOVERY OF NEW WORDS MEANINGS (SDM)						
Determination strategies						
…use bilingual (Chinese-English-Chinese) dictionary	47.5	19.8	19.8	8.9	4.0	3.9802
…use monolingual (Chinese) dictionary	15.6	14.6	27.1	19.8	22.9	2.8021
Social strategies						
…ask the teacher for a paraphrase or synonym of the new word	12.2	32.7	35.7	14.3	5.1	3.3265
…ask classmates for the meaning of new words	32.0	30.0	25.0	13.0	0.0	3.9406
FOR CONSOLIDATING WORDS (SCW)						
Social Strategies						
…study and practice meaning in a group	31.0	22.0	24.0	18.0	5.0	3.5600
…interact with native Chinese speakers	13.5	21.9	34.4	17.7	12.5	3.0625
Memory strategies						
…group words together spatially on a page	15.8	26.3	24.2	25.3	8.4	3.1579
… study the sound (tone) of the word	66.0	22.0	8.0	4.0	0.0	4.5000
Cognitive strategies						
…use flashcards	25.0	16.0	21.0	24.0	14.0	3.1400
…take notes in class to highlight new words in class	57.6	26.3	13.1	1.0	2.0	4.3636
Meta Cognitive strategies						
...skip or pass new words	13.8	8.5	13.8	22.3	41.5	2.3085
…pay attention to Chinese words when someone is speaking	64.0	17.0	17.0	1.0	1.0	4.4200

The results in Table 2 indicate that the most used strategy for determining the meanings of new words was the use of a bilingual dictionary with a mean score of (3.9) and the least used was the use of a monolingual dictionary (2.8). With regard to the social category, asking classmates for the meaning of new words (3.9) was the most used while asking the teacher for a paraphrase or synonym of a new word (3.3) was the least used. In consolidating words once they have been learnt, 4.11 shows that studying and practicing meaning in a group (3.5) was the most used strategy while interacting with native speakers (3.0) was the least used under the social category. In memory strategies, the least used strategy was grouping words spatially on a page (3.1). Studying the sound (tone) of the word (4.5) was the most used. Taking notes in class to

highlight new words (4.3) was the most used while the use of flashcards (3.1) was the least used strategy under the cognitive category. Finally, concerning the metacognitive strategies, paying attention to Chinese words when someone is speaking (4.4) was the most used, while skipping and passing new words (2.3) was the least used.

Under the social category for SCW, interaction with native speakers was not a popular strategy among the CFL learners. This is because the learners interact more with classmates and there are not many native Chinese speakers in the Kenyan context within their reach and circles.

In terms of the overall use of VLS for the discovery of words' meanings, the cognitive strategy was the most highly used as depicted in Figure 2. This, therefore, indicates that Kenyan CFL Learners mainly rely on strategies that involve mental processing, the view supported by the cognitive theory of learning.

The use of memory and cognitive strategies indicates that CFL students mostly rely on memorization and repetition to consolidate words' meanings once they have been learned. These findings are similar to Omaar (2016) who recorded the same in a study among Libyan EFL students. The use of metacognitive strategies, which is among the most frequently used, also indicates that Chinese language learning in CFL contexts could be, to some extent, influenced by the learners' motives, attitudes, and goals towards learning Chinese. This view is similar to that of (Wang et al, 2008) who state that learners should be encouraged to analyze their learning processes which lead to improvement in their metacognitive learning strategies. The results of the current study are also similar to Shen (2005) who found that metacognitive strategies were some of the most commonly used by non-native speakers of Chinese (English speaking) for learning Chinese characters. The challenges encountered by CFL learners, such as the logographic writing system (Sung & Wu, 2011), prompt the CFL learners to rely more on strategies that involve mental processing as shown by the results of the current study.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

On the frequency of VLS use, the Kenyan CFL learners are medium strategy users. They are aware of the existence of the various strategies but they do not utilize them fully. They mostly use social strategies for the discovery of meanings of new words and tend to use strategies that involve mechanical processing in consolidating the already learnt words.

Future research studies on vocabulary learning strategies can be done from a different perspective by using the qualitative approach. The current investigation used the cognitive theory of learning whereby learning strategies are seen to involve mental processes that support the learning of Chinese as a foreign language. As is evident from many studies on vocabulary learning strategies, most scholars tend to use the cognitive perspective. It would be prudent to explore multidimensional approaches in the study of vocabulary learning strategies or look into other perspectives such as the sociocultural approach as a complement to existing views on vocabulary learning.

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