VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AMONG ESL LEARNERS: A LOOK AT STRATEGIES AND BARRIERS

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Abstract:
Having good vocabulary can help language learners go a long way towards mastering their target language. Language learners need to know both grammatical aspects as well as the meaning of words in order to communicate effectively. This study investigates the vocabulary learning strategies and also language learning barriers of undergraduates in a higher institution of learning. The instrument used for this study is a survey. The survey has three main sections; (a) personal details, (b) vocabulary strategies, and (c) language learning barriers. Data collected is analysed using SPSS and presented in the form of mean scores. Findings revealed that learners use vocabulary strategies such as metacognitive, guessing, dictionary, note-taking and rehearsal strategies. Findings also revealed that language barriers such as effective, environment and motivation can hinder learners' learning of vocabulary of the target language.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, language, learning strategies, learning barriers

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is the key to learning a language. According to Nations (2001), to understand a language is to be able to understand its form , meaning , its usage. Language learners need to know the grammatical form of the target language; they need to also understand the meaning of the words; as well as use them in different contexts. Fortunately, vocabulary can be learnt both directly and indirectly (Montero-Perez, 2012) through the learners' interactions with other language users.

Having good vocabulary helps the learner go a long way. According to Moghadam, Ismail and Ghaderpour (2012), vocabulary knowledge facilitates reading and understanding of the target language. Unfortunately, some feel that vocabulary can be difficult to teach. According to Alqahtani (2015) and Rahmat (2019), among some of

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the many reasons why vocabulary is difficult to teach is that different learners need to be taught different strategies for different contexts of learning. In addition to that different learners may come with different learning barriers that may hinder their language learning. This study is conducted to explore the different strategies that learners employ to learn vocabulary. This study is also done to investigate the barriers that hinder language learning. This study is done to answer the following questions;

1) What strategies do learners use to learn vocabulary?
2) How do language learning barriers influence their learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction
This section discusses the theoretical framework of the study. Vocabulary learning can be facilitated with the use of appropriate vocabulary learning strategies. However, learners should be aware of their own language learning barriers so that their learning is not hindered in any way.
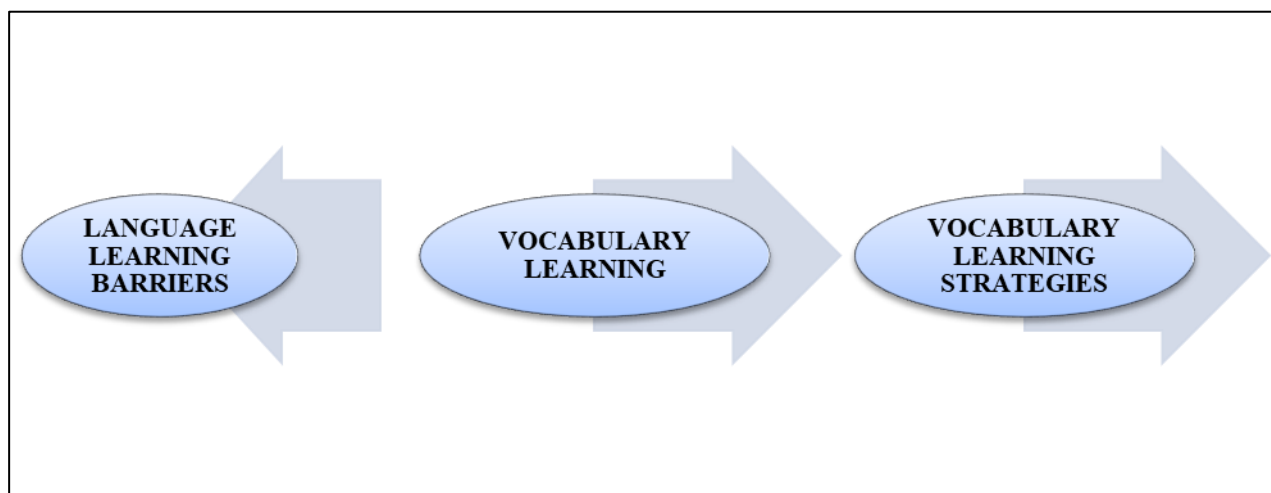

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Study-Vocabulary Learning

2.2 Theoretical Framework of the Study
Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework of the study. The framework is rooted from vocabulary learning strategies by Nie & Zhou (2017) as well as barriers for language learning barriers by Brown (2001) and Yusof & Rahmat (2020). Vocabulary learning is facilitated by the learners' us of learning strategies. However, some learners face difficulties because of some language learning barriers.

a. Vocabulary Learning Strategies
Vocabulary learning can be influenced by several factors. Bai (2018) studied the strategies of English vocabulary learning. He felt that the learning of vocabulary can be influence by the learners (a) individual factors, (b) age, (c) personality, (d) gender, (e) social environment. (f) learning motivation. Individual features such as age, gender and

personality can influence how a learner learns something new-they can either facilitate or hinder the learning process. Next, the social surrounding of the leaners can have an impact on their motivation to learn (or not) a language.

Classroom learning can help leaners make sure of certain strategies throughout the learning of vocabulary. According to Nie & Zhou (2017), listed three categories of strategies and they are (a) metacognitive strategies, (b) cognitive strategies and also (c) social mediation. When learners use metacognitive strategies, they can depend on advanced organisers, selective attention, self-monitoring and self-evaluation. The use of cognitive strategies includes repetition, resourcing, practice, transfer, inferencing, elaboration, reading, keyword method, and grouping. Finally, when the learning of vocabulary throughs social mediation is done through cooperation and self-stimulation.

b. Barriers to Language Learning

Barriers to language learning can come in different forms. According to Xue(2019), barriers take the form of schemas such as linguistic, content or even formal. Communication can be delayed because the involved parties lacked linguistic competency of the target language. Linguistic schema can also refer to learners' prior knowledge, and this include the knowledge about grammar and also vocabulary. In addition to that, some communication may fail because the content is clearly understood by the parties. Contents schema is mostly culture-specific. Finally, formal schema refers to the communicators' knowledge towards the language, the use of conventions and rhetorical structures of different genres. Besides the three forms of schemas, Brown (2001) also listed three hindrance to language and they are (a) affective, (b) environment and also (c)motivation. Affective barriers refer to the learners' perception /feelings towards the target language. A positive feeling towards the language may spark a positive learning experience and vice versa. Next, the learning environment paly a rather major role in the learning of the target language. Finally, the learners' internal and external motivation can influence his /her drive to learn. Furthermore, language barriers can also be seen as personal (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020) when the barrier involves the learners' attaching feeling towards the vocabulary of the language. So, barriers can come from the learners themselves, or even the surrounding environment of the learning experience.

2.1 Past Studies
a. Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary

Language learners often consider learning vocabulary as difficult. The study by Rohmatillah (2014) investigated the difficulties faced by first semester students in learning vocabulary. This study employed a qualitative research design, implementing characteristics of a case study. Findings revealed that students (1) had difficulty in pronouncing the words. They also found it difficult to (2) write and spell. They found that (3) the different grammatical form of a word known as inflections was one of causes of their difficulties in learning vocabulary. In addition to that, (4) the students found difficulties in choosing the appropriate meaning of the words. They are a (5) also still

confused in using the word based on the context. Finally, (6) the students were also still confused when they found words or expression that were idiomatic.

Similarly, Zuraina, Jayakaran, Roselan and Ahmad Baki (2012) revealed three significant findings in their study of which two were pertinent to difficulties in learning vocabulary. The study was designed to investigate second language learner's attitudes towards the methods of learning vocabulary. They asserted that, for (1) Contextual Clues, the second language students claimed that they were confused in identifying the correct clues in a sentence which led them to give the wrong answers in answering the test's questions. They also revealed that, in terms of (2) using the dictionary in learning vocabulary, the students disliked the size of the dictionary which has caused them to use it less. In contrary, the third finding suggested that (3) the use of Computer Assisted Learning Language (CALL) has helped the students to understand the meaning of certain words through the hypertext.

b. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Acquiring second language has always been challenging especially among second language users. Asgari and Ghazali (2011) stated that as much as many studies investigating on the use of vocabulary learning strategies were present, few had focused on second language users. In addition, a study that adopted the qualitative research design through an open-ended interview was carried out to examine on vocabulary learning strategies employed by the second language users. It was concluded that the second language users were keen in using various vocabulary learning strategies namely (1) learning a word through reading, (2) using monolingual dictionary, (3) using various English language media, and (4) applying new English word in their daily conversation that complied with memory, determination and metacognitive strategies.

Correspondingly, another study was conducted by Kalajahi and Pourshashian (2012) in determining the vocabulary learning strategies utilised by the undergraduate English Language Teaching students. The findings of the study stated that the students operated the (1) psychological strategies adequately whilst (2) somewhat adequately for the metacognitive strategies in learning vocabulary. Furthermore, the study revealed that the students did not operate on certain strategies, rather a variety of strategies.

c. Language Learning Barriers

In acquiring a second language, learners often encounter barriers that slow down or hinder the process. In a study done by Alhmadi (2014) on English learning barriers, the findings were reported to be expectedly surprising. 10 undergraduate students were observed to find out reasons behind lack of learning the language. The study stated that (1) the academic programme, (2) the strategies of teaching and (3) students' drive, reserve, and anxiety were the prominent barriers to learning English language.

In another similar study, Liton (2016) reported that (1) second language learners projected negative perceptions towards English due to cross-cultural factors. The study also revealed that (2) lack of motivation and (3) teaching method and curriculum strategies were among the prominent factors that affect the students' language learning.

Lastly, Chomchaiya and Dunworth (2008) revealed in their findings on language learning barriers that the second language strategy did not adopt independence and autonomy. The study that was conducted among the undergraduates also stated that materials that were not engaging and environment that was not conducive were among other barriers.

3. Methodology

This quantitative pilot study is done to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies as well as learning barriers among language learners. 49 participants were randomly chosen to respond to a survey. The survey is divided into three main sections; Section A -presents questions about Personal Details (Items 1-3). Next, Section B are statements about vocabulary learning strategies (Nie & Zhou, 2017). Specifically, there are items on Metacognitive Strategies (Items 4-10), Guessing Strategies (Items 11-17), Dictionary Strategies (Items 18-24), Note-Taking Strategies (Items 25-30), and Rehearsal Strategies (Items 31-36). Finally, Section C contains items on Language Learning Strategies Barriers (Brown, 2001 & Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). The items are about Affective (Items 37-39), Environment (Items 40-41), and Motivation (Items 42-45).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.914	42

Table1: Reliability Statistics of Instrument

Reliability analysis was done on the instrument showing a Cronbach alpha score (table 1) of .914 thus revealing high internal validity. Data from the survey is analysed using SPSS version 26. Findings is presented in the form of descriptive analysis using mean scores.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction
This section presents the findings based on the research questions.
1) What strategies do the learners use to learn vocabulary?
2) How do the language learning barriers influence their learning?

4.2 Vocabulary Strategies
According to Nie & Zhou (2017), among some vocabulary strategies that learners use is metacognitve, guessing, dictionary, note-taking, and rehearsal. This section reports the findings in terms of mean scores based on the vocabulary strategies used.
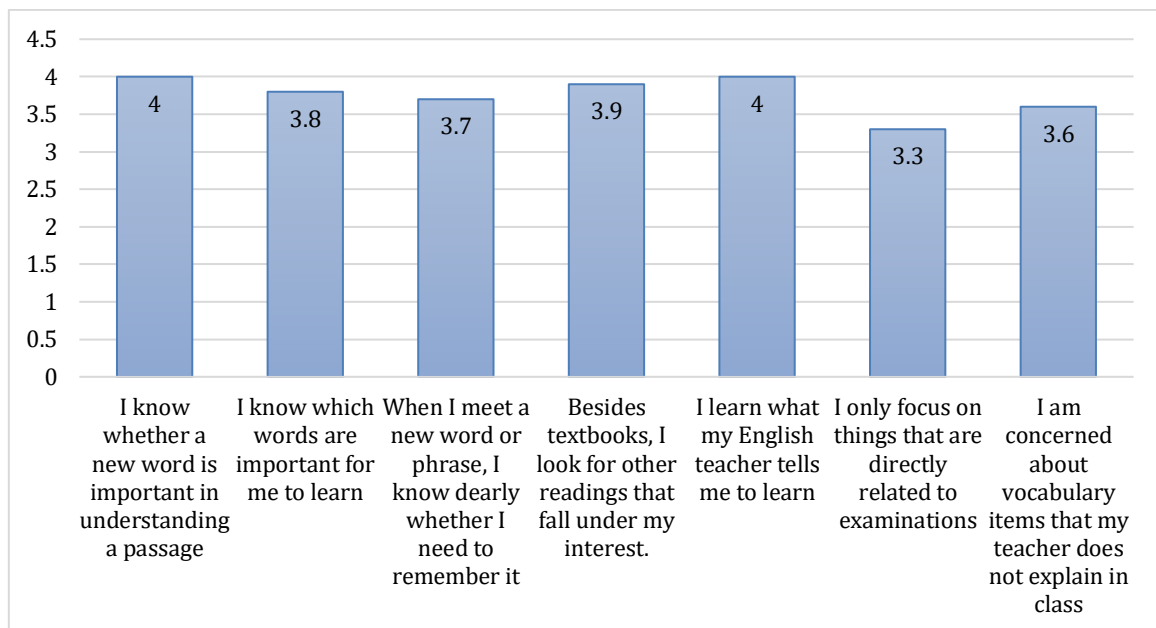
a. Metacognitive Strategies

Figure 2: Bar Chart showing the Mean Scores for Metacognitive Strategies

In terms of vocabulary learning respondents report that they knew "a new word is important" (4), and they "learn what their English teachers them to" (4). Learners also made their own effort to learn new vocabulary by looking "for other readings that fall under their interest" (3.9). It is good to know that learners did not only focus on "things that are directly related to examinations" (3.3).

b. Guessing Strategies
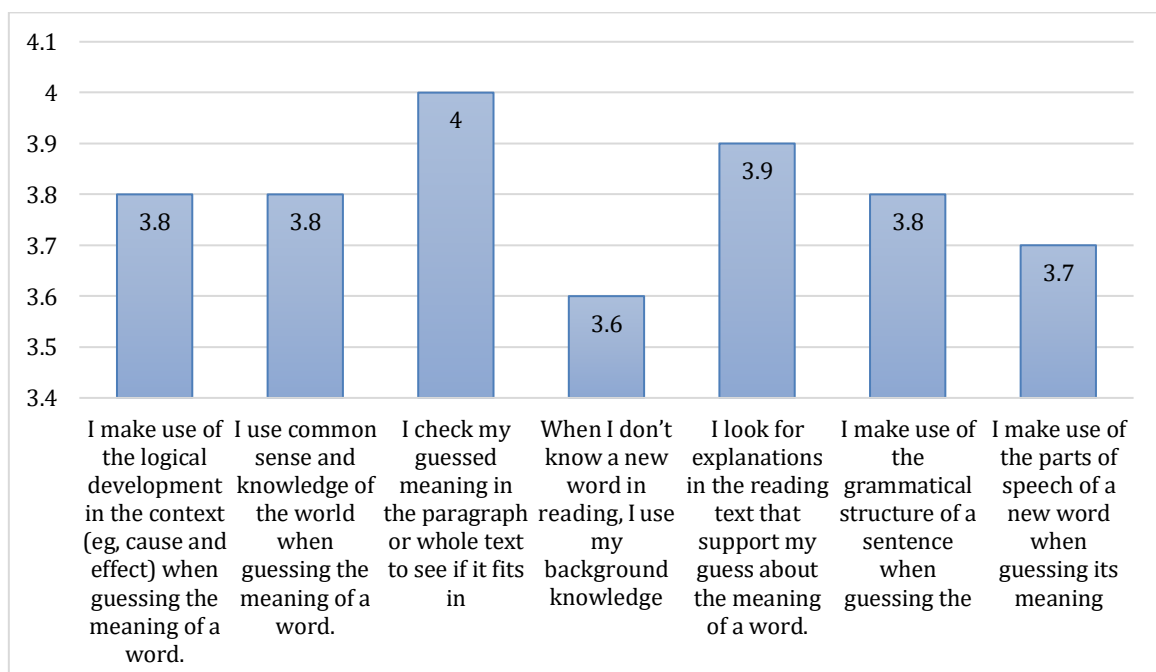
Figure 3: Bar Chart showing Mean Scores for Guessing Strategies

With reference to Figure 3, it is good to know that learners checked " their guessed meaning in the paragraph or whole text to see if it fits in" (4). Next, the respondents also looked "for explanation in the reading text that supports the guess" (3.9). Learners also "made use of logical development in the context", "used common sense and knowledge of the world" to guess (3.8) and also "made use of grammatical structure of a sentence when guessing " (3.8).
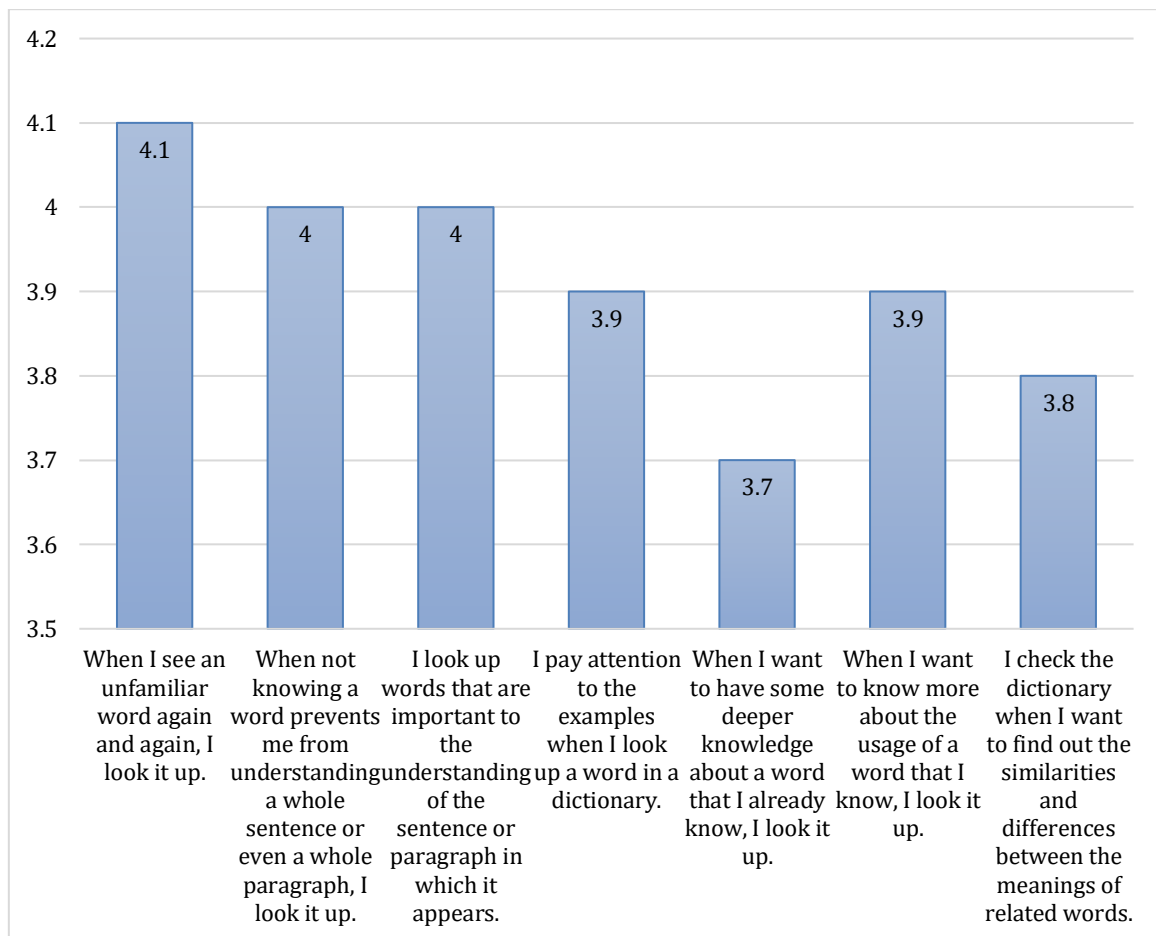
c. Dictionary Strategies

Figure 4: Bar Chart showing the Mean score for Dictionary Strategies

Figure 4 presents the bar chart for dictionary strategies. Learners would look up the words in the dictionary "when they see an unfamiliar word" (4.1). In addition to that, they would also look up in the dictionary when they felt that "not knowing a word prevents them from understanding the whole sentence" (4), and "the words are important to the understanding of the paragraph" (4).
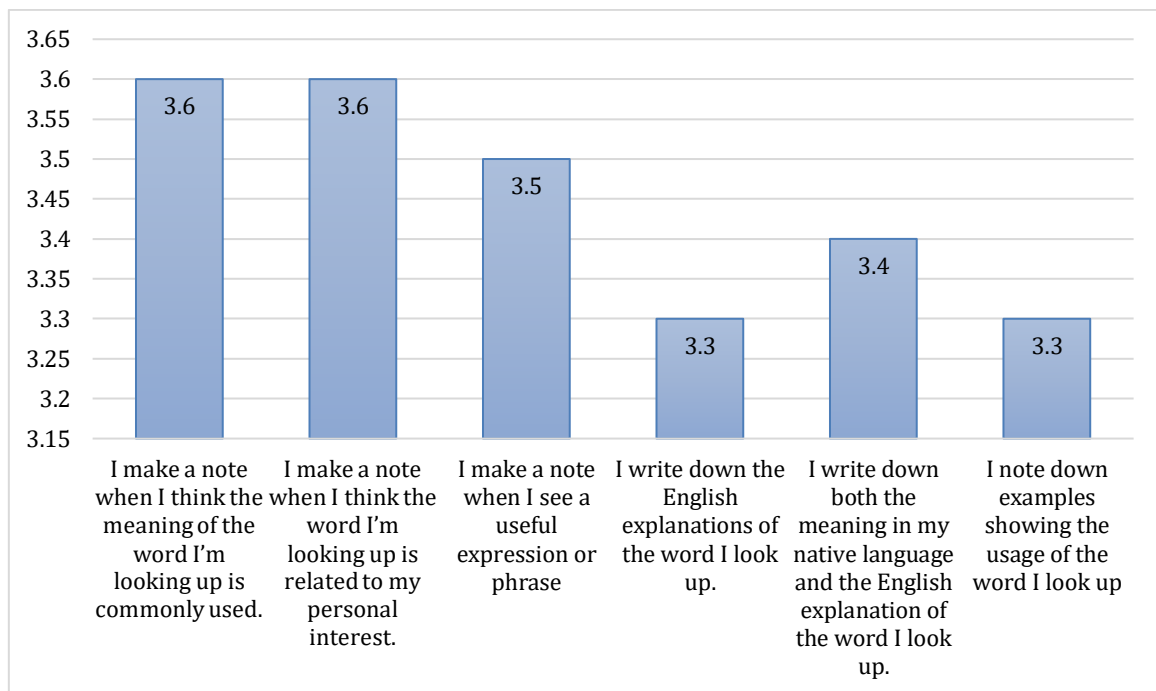
d. Note-taking Strategies

Figure 5: Bar Chart showing the Mean score for Note-Taking Strategies

Based on the findings in Figure 5, learners would "make a note when they think of the they are looking for is commonly used" (3.6). and learners "make a note when they think the word is related to their personal interest" (3.6).
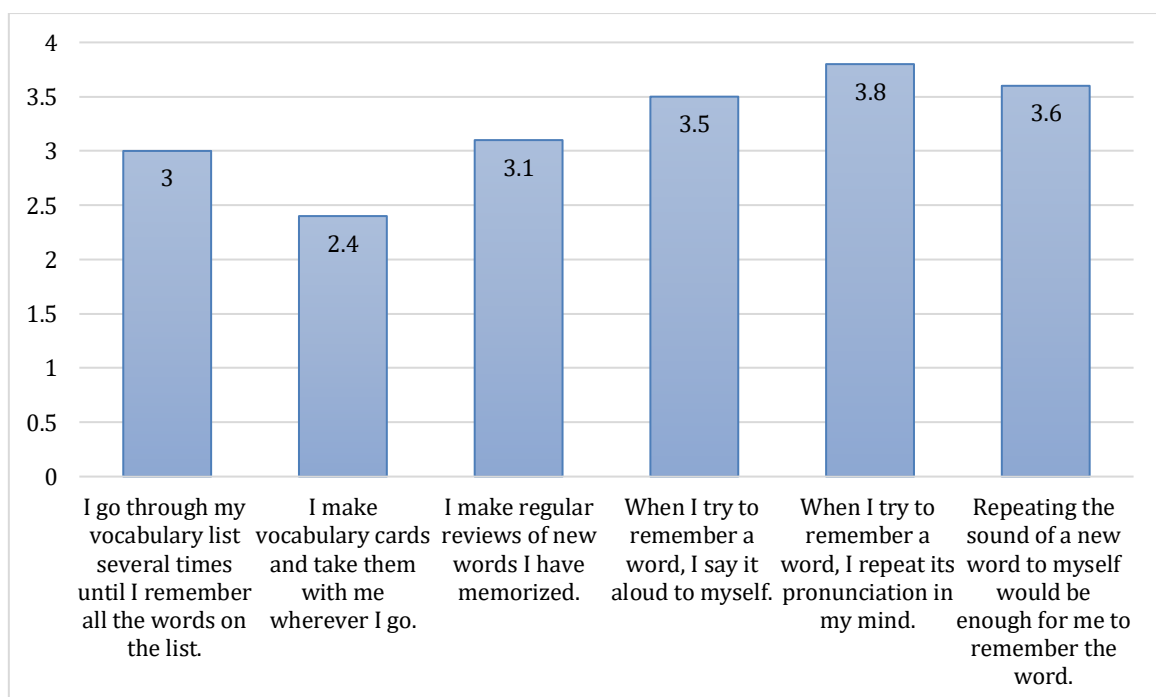
e. Rehearsal Strategies

Figure 6: Bar Chart showing the Mean score for Rehearsal Strategies

Figure 6 shows the mean score for rehearsal strategies. Learners would "repeat the pronunciation of word if they want to remember" (3.8). Some also felt that "repeating the sound of the new word to themselves would be enough to remember the word" (3.6) and also "saying the word aloud" (3.5).
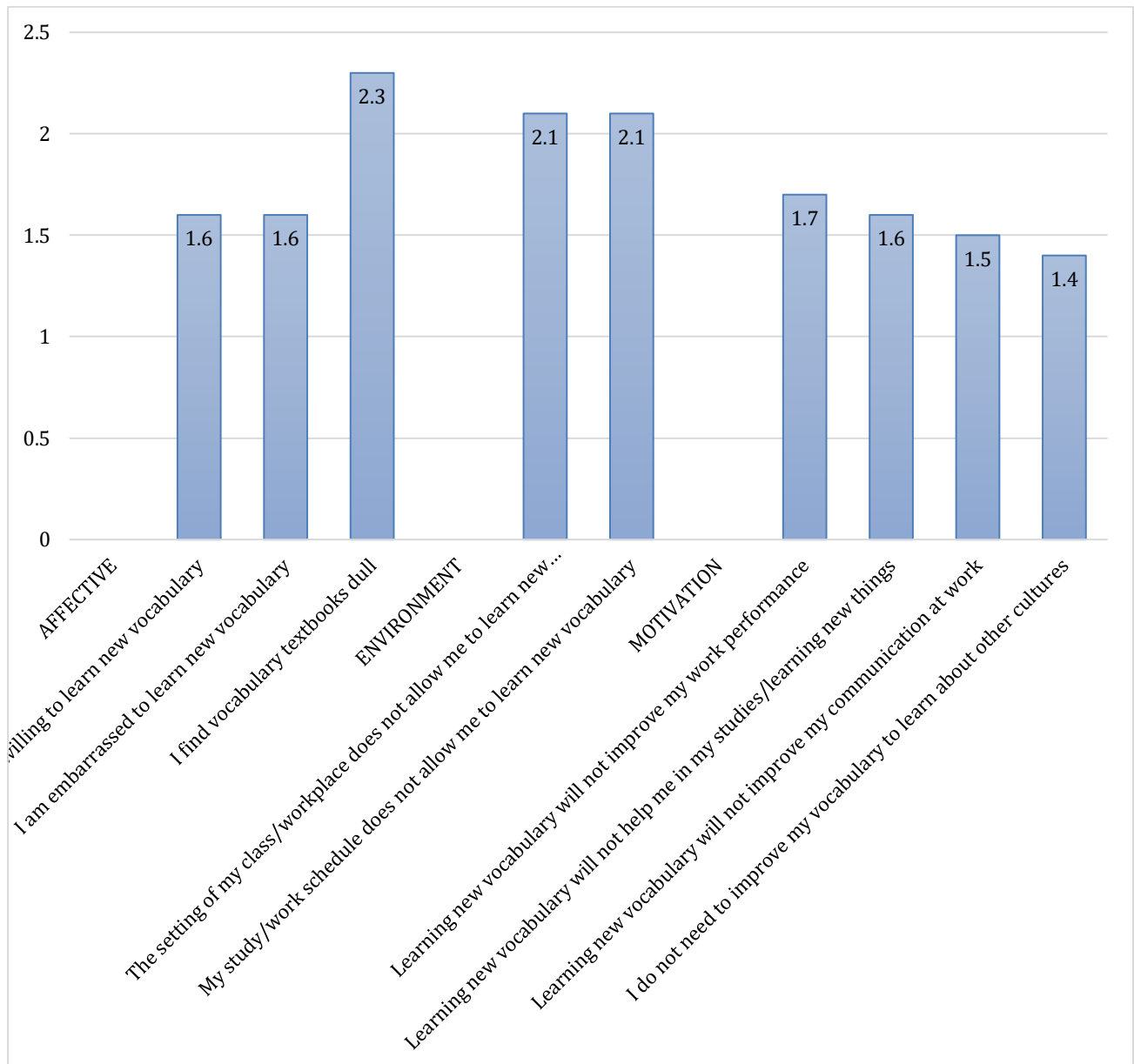
f. Language Learning Barriers

Figure 7: Bar Chart showing the Mean score for Language Learning Barriers

With reference to Figure 7, there are three language barriers (Brown, 2001; Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). Low mean scores were reported for many items which mean that the respondents in this current study faced very minimal language learning barriers. The disagreed that "learning new vocabulary will not improve their communication" (1.5).

They also disagreed that "they do not need to improve their vocabulary to learn about other cultures" (1.4).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary and Discussions

Findings revealed that learners felt it is their responsibility to increase their vocabulary. The willingly depended on strategies such as guessing the meaning and even relied on dictionaries when they needed too. This finding is in accordance with the study by Zuraina, Jayakaran, Roselan and Ahmad Baki (2012) who reported that the attitude of the learners would be a determining factor for their motivation to improve their vocabulary strategies. Asgari and Ghazali (2011) also reported that the use of vocabulary learning strategies help learners improve their vocabulary skills. On the other hand, the use of learning strategies can be sometimes hindered if learners have learning issues. These issues like their language and cultural background, as well as attitude towards some methods of learning can hinder their vocabulary acquisition. This is also agreed by Alhmadi (2014), Liton (2016) and Chomchaiya and Dunworth (2008) who reported past studies that revealed some language learning barriers can be factor that hinders learners improving their vocabulary.

5.1.2 Pedagogical Implications

Determining the right strategies for English teachers in teaching vocabulary has always been challenging and fulfilling at the same. In ensuring a good return, such strategies have to be effective and appealing to both, teachers and students. In an intentional teaching environment, using dictionary can be useful. With the growth technology, teachers may want to explore the use of online / mobile-application dictionary that will help students to identifying meaning of words instantaneously. Besides this, designing a computer-based language learning programme can expand the learning vocabulary horizon for the students. Impactful materials are also another significant strategy along with helping students to be independent learners as well as making vocabulary learning personal.

5.1.3 Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this paper may suggest few ramifications of effective vocabulary learning for future research. The analysis, however, would be more reliable if the population size of the respondents is increased. In addition, more analyses across gender, programme and semester should be carried out to capture greater involvement of all aspects in learning vocabulary. Ideally, with different perspectives, the analysis will be more dynamic and interesting.

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