

# A Critical Review of Common Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Iranian EFL Classrooms

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**Abstract** Presently, one of the basic challenges that EFL / ESL learners encounter while learning English is vocabulary acquisition, this difficulty in acquiring vocabulary is one of the most prominent aspects of second or foreign language learning process as it can be facilitated through pleasure and ease for EFL / ESL learners. To this end, introducing vocabulary learning strategies to EFL / ESL learners through which their vocabulary knowledge may be improved and applied to real contexts more effectively is central to the realm of language teaching. In this critical review, the importance of vocabulary learning and three commonly used approaches implementing EFL / ESL classrooms including Computer – Assisted Vocabulary Acquisition (CAVOCA), vocabulary learning through games and vocabulary learning through story retelling will be discussed and analyzed.

**Keywords** EFL / ESL learners, Vocabulary learning, Computer – Assisted Vocabulary Acquisition (CAVOCA), Vocabulary learning through games, Vocabulary learning through story retelling

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## 1. Introduction

The significant role of vocabulary acquisition in second or foreign language learning process has been recognized by theorist and researchers such as Rivers. Since it may act like an overpass between main language skills, it has been suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching particular words, but also it should intend to equip learners with strategies necessary to expand vocabulary domain, Hulstijn [1]. Besides, Vocabulary learning strategies (Henceforth VLSs) can be considered as a part of general learning strategies in second or foreign language acquisition.

The first development in learning strategies area began in 1970s with research to recognize the characteristics of good language learners, Rubin [2]. Based on this, numerous kinds of approaches, techniques, and exercises have been introduced through teaching of vocabulary, Hatch & Brown [3]. Based on the prominence of vocabulary knowledge to learning a language research into usefulness of different types of vocabulary learning strategies and methods implementing in EFL / ESL classrooms, it is the instructors' responsibility to make EFL learners familiar with various available strategies and approaches and encourage them to choose the one by which they can improve their vocabulary

knowledge. The role of main language skills in successful communication in both spoken and written contexts has its own place in the realm of language learning process, but no matter how well EFL / ESL learners acquire grammar and other language skills, without second language vocabulary items to express a wide range of meanings and thoughts, communication in a second language might not happen in any significant way. Laufer [4] believes that instructors should give their students more responsibilities for vocabulary learning.

However, some researchers including Rivers [5] strive that vocabulary is a part of language that cannot be taught. Instructors can present and explain them; in spite of the fact that students ultimately learn vocabulary items on their own. Therefore, the most crucial issue in vocabulary acquisition is finding an appropriate way to learn them. As mentioned earlier, since vocabulary is an essential feature of language learning, for instance listening, speaking, reading, and writing, EFL / ESL learners ought to be aware of helpful methods; techniques and approaches which can help them learn and recall new vocabularies. Due to diverse learners' outlooks and manners, it is not comprehensible which approach is the best one for learning vocabulary. On the other hand, it is possible to realize which one can be the best or worst approach in the realm of language learning. In contrast, why is it vital to choose an appropriate strategy to acquire vocabulary? One reason is that EFL / ESL learners may not be aware of the wide choice of current strategies and approaches. It could be assumed that it is the knowledge shortage of the VLSs and approaches of both instructors and

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learners that prevents them from employing the strategies more actively and effectively.

## 2. Recent VLS Strategies

The function of traditional vocabulary methods in EFL / ESL classrooms, including copying definitions, drawing pictures, writing example sentences and Rote Learning, known as RL, which is repeating new vocabulary items without thinking of the meaning until remembering them cannot be doubted in language learning trend. Such methods laid further proof on their positive effect on language learning acquisition; nevertheless, in view of the fact that currently the world is getting more technological and electronic in the communication age, it is the exact time to look for innovated and more updated strategies and approaches to enhance EFL / ESL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

### Computer – Assisted Vocabulary Learning (CAVOCA)

Technology will become more famous in future in the world of language learning and teaching, Wang [6]. According to Lu [7] current development in information technologies has led to a sharp increase in the application of technology in instructional environment. Technology has attracted the interest and attention of many researchers in introducing new ways of learning words and lexicons in language, Groot [8]. Groot introduces "*Computer Assisted Vocabulary Acquisition*" (CAVOCA) as a computer program to learn vocabulary in a foreign context.

In this program, a given word to be learnt appears on the screen for a second, and then, definitions, meanings and syntactic functions are given and then exercises along with feedback are presented, too. In an investigation study, Kolich [9] found that students learn a greater load of unknown words by using CALL "Computer – assisted language learning" software that provides synonyms and meaning. Groot [8], in his research with relation to the use of multimedia computers in acquiring vocabulary, found that using bilingual inventories of terms proved to be more efficient than using a computer program for learning scholastic vocabulary. The utilizing of technology in instructional atmosphere, as recommended by Wang [6] is a move from behaviorist viewpoint to a constructivist learning process. Multimedia can make a better condition for learning vocabulary.

Prichard [10] concluded that the efficacy of dictionary use may be affected by new technologies such as handheld electronic dictionaries, online dictionaries, and marginal glosses; referring to an unknown word through an electronic link, for example, takes much less time and sidetracks the reader from the text to a lesser degree. Dehghani et al [11] found that homework assignment provides a superior means of learning new vocabulary for beginner language learners. In point of fact, as one of the significant compensations of using computer – assisted vocabulary acquisition (CAVOCA)

in EFL classrooms, learners' motivation can be improved as this approach makes the class more pleasure and without any anxiety, so it might make the progress of learning smoother and expedite learning; moreover, through such method, EFL / ESL learners' time can be saved enough to acquire new vocabularies and focus more on the other aspects of language use and communication skills.

In addition, another advantage of this approach is that by integrating language tasks with computer, learners' excitement in the realm of second / foreign language acquisition might be increased and the stress which is always with learners in language use could be lowered. Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn & Malenoski [12] praise the impact of technology on increasing learners' motivation and achievement. To put it bluntly, the CAVOCA technique endeavors to replicate the way the first language is taught, which is in the course of a step by step procedure that gradually develops with repeated exposure and constant interaction between the various stages, Groot [8]. The program has four divisions, which embrace accumulating the word in memory; using the word in several sentences to learn the spelling and meaning; giving examples for long-term memory; and a self-assessment.

Regardless the advantages of CAVOCA in EFL / ESL classrooms, the most major question which can influence the benefits of this approach, as a drawback must be taken into consideration is that by lack of using technology knowledge, mainly computer in classrooms the teacher from taking its advantages might be impeded and as Zhao and Zciko [13] oppose the most important cause of not using technology in classroom is not being qualified. As the result, traditional methodologies are being remained by instructors.

In order to increase practice, in the language, instructors have to bring a focus on making and planning learning environments technologically, Hartnell [14]. It is believed that computer assists all language learners and instructors to remove the obstacles on the way of language acquisition. Hence, there should be a severe attempt on removing some obstructions which is related to the lack of familiarity of instructors with the appropriate use of technology, computer programs. Sometimes they do not know about computer programs in order to help learners acquire new vocabularies.

### Vocabulary Learning through Story retelling Approach

Another VLS which has been claimed to be an effective instructional strategy in English as a foreign language or English as a second language (ESL) classes is story retelling. Story retelling is meant the process by which the EFL / ESL learners repeat the story that has been learnt. Besides, story retelling approach is a post reading or listening process through which learners promote their comprehension of discourse by memorizing and rearranging what they have read or heard, Stoicovy [15]. As Deacon and Murphey [16] recommend in their study, one of the advantages of this approach is promoting EFL / ESL learners' grammatical structures, pronunciation, and glossary knowledge by endowing them with a variety of conversational topics.

Similarly, Rachmawaty & Hermagustiana [17] found another benefit, as participants in their study progressed in retelling the story; they successfully used words different from those in the original text that had similar meanings.

Coupled with this, Rachmawaty and Hermagustiana [17] used the retelling technique to find out its effect on the students' speaking fluency and to know the strategies they used while retelling a story, they found that the students' vocabulary improved as well. The findings revealed that not only students are better able to sort out, put together, come to conclusions, and categorize information, but also they can also take a broad view and speak about ideas that do not exist in the story. This suggests strength of EFL learners' story retelling which is useful for the improvement of vocabulary achievement. The findings of this study confirm the effectiveness of this technique and are in line with the previous studies (Rachmawaty & Hermagustiana [17], Brandi-Muller [18], Scheinkman [19], Stoicovy [15], Deacon & Murphey [16], Lipson & Wixson [20], Gambrell, Koskinen, & Kapinas [21]).

Weiss & Hamilton [22] also known as "Beauty and the Beast Storytellers," have been teaching children and adults to tell stories for many years. They suggest storytelling as a teaching tool for the following reasons:

1. Storytelling is the oldest form of education.
2. Stories are the way we store information in the brain, and go straight to the heart.
3. Telling and reading are different. Without the book as an obstruction, the teller stares right into the eyes of the audience and gestures, signs, facial expression, and body movements are free to use by the teller.
4. Listening to stories instills the love of language in children and encourages them to read, in the same way storytelling excites the imagination and thoughts. As scientist Albert Einstein alleged "imagination is more important than knowledge."
5. Stories teach lessons, desirable behaviors and strengthening character.
6. Storytelling develops listening skill. Concentration can be developed by storytelling; accordingly, stories act as a humanizing element. They help to work against the increasing emphasis on technology at home and in school.
7. Telling stories from around the world creates awareness and appreciation of different cultures, storytelling by instructors motivates students to tell stories as well.

In the same manner of other approaches, techniques and methods, story retelling has its own shortcoming which makes instructors to be more careful about implementing it in their classrooms; story retelling is generally deemed to be time-consuming and difficult, for this reason, it has not been commonly practiced in EFL/ESL classes, Palingo [23]. The main problem of using this practical technique is to be the large number of students in each class; therefore, it could be difficult to find time for each learner involving more actively in this method. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to remove

this negative part of story retelling technique by reducing the number of the EFL / ESL learners in classrooms.

### Vocabulary Learning through Games

Games can be applied in several ways and at different points in a lesson. Consequently, there is diverse game types designed to stimulate and enhance various aspects of language learning. Some authors such as Pham [24] suggest the following classification of games in EFL: 1) Structure games which provide experience of the use of particular patterns of syntax in communication. 2) Vocabulary games in which the learners' attention is focused mainly on words. 3) Spelling games. 4) Pronunciation games. 5) Number games. 6) Listen – and – do games 7) Games and writing 8) Miming and role play 9) Discussion games.

In the first place, as Yip and Kwan [25] exhibited in their study the main pro of this approach is that students preferred learning that is supported by educational games rather than traditional activity by lessons. In line with their research, EFL / ESL learners who were provided with games became more successful in learning new words compared to those who learned the same vocabulary through activity-based lessons. Therefore, instructors that condemn the insufficiency of the current strategies demanded by language teaching programs might be willing to set up or try new techniques where games could play a major role.

As Allen [26] points out, the use of word games to teach vocabulary does not mean or suggest pleasant ways of passing the time of class. An instructor's responsibility is not the entertainment of students, rather instructors are responsible for creating a constructive class environment, which promotes vocabulary items expansion, and a carefully selected game can assist the learners acquire words correctly and feel that certain words are important and necessary because without those vocabulary items, the intention of the game cannot be materialized. In that case, as Schultz & Fisher [27] advocated game playing is a popular way to engage learners in language learning. Prensky [28] designed twelve elements as to why games engage people. To name a few, games motivate players (to achieve goals), gratify the ego (when winning), are fun (through enjoyment and pleasure) and spark the players' creativity (to solve the game).

Surprisingly, the use of interactive games has impacted on the mode of teaching, Foreman, et al. [29]. According to Wood [30], it can be said another advantage of using learning games as a learning tool and it can be concluded that game-like formats could be more effective at capturing learners' attention than traditional media such as textbooks. Many experienced textbook and methodology manuals writers have argued that games are not just time-filling activities but have a great educational value. Purushotma [31] has suggested that games can be so highly motivating that they can even cause addictive manners. These compensations of games can aid educators create an enthusiastic, ready to learn, active and vigorous atmosphere in their classrooms. The main inspirational idea of this work ,

Bakar, et al [32]; Sahhuseyinoglu [33]; Bayirtepe and Tuzun [34]; Tuzun [35] is the fact that people feel better, get less tired, and are highly motivated when they do things they enjoy, such as playing games.

Another reason why games are often used in language classes is that they lower students' stress in the class. In conventional classes, a lot of stress put on students trying to master the target language can be easily seen. By the same token, Schultz and Fisher [27] said that stress is a major hindrance in language learning process. Learning language in traditional way is by its nature time consuming and stress provoking and raise the stress level to a point at which it interferes with student attention and efficiency and slowly weaken motivation. Relaxing learners by engaging them in stress-reducing task like games could be one method which has been developed to make students forget that they are in class. Since students know that they are playing games and want to communicate efficiently they do not worry about making mistakes and do not try to correct themselves in every single structure. As a result when students are free from concern, tension and pressure, their fluency and natural speaking styles can be flourished. As Schultz & fisher [27] claimed subsequently learners learn without realizing that they are learning.

Huang [36] came to the conclusion that the operation of certain psychological and intellectual factors may be encouraged by "learning through games" consequently, could facilitate communication heightened self-esteem, inspiration and spontaneity, reinforcing learning, improving inflection and building self-assurance. Besides all the advantages this approach has, its weakness can be: 1) discipline issues, learners may get extremely noisy; hence, playing games are joyful and entertaining by nature, it might be tough to put a scaffold based on the educational aim to control the class, novice instructors may have this problem in the early years of teaching. 2) Straying away from the basic purpose of the game - play activity, perhaps, due to inadequate rules instruction, resulting in playing too much and the lack of learning, in the first place, learners should be given this point that games are not just for passing the time pleasurably. Definitely it is a tutorial tool to facilitate language acquisition process. 3) Due to the fact that there are not many available games, and by repeating them all the time, EFL / ESL learners may become familiar with the games or boring, consequently, not get equally involved. 4) Some learners, especially teenagers, because of their attitudes and characteristics, may find games unnecessary and childish.

### **A Critical Comparison of the Three Methods**

In this section, the implementation of story retelling with the CAVOCA and games approaches are compared from different perspectives such as improving speaking skill in EFL, decreasing anxiety and nervous tension in language acquisition process, etc. The emphasis in this comparison is on story retelling because of its magnificent effect on language skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing)

and the ability of taking advantage of such skills. As already stated, words may function like a bridge between main language skills. From this viewpoint, the role of understanding the vocabulary's meaning comes to account. According to Blachowicz, Fisher, & Watts – Taffe [37], three factors cause difficulties in learning meanings of words such as learners' personalities, complexity levels of words, and feature words; on the other hand, the consequence of these vocabulary learning approaches on developing main skills in EFL contexts varies.

Compared with CAVOCA and vocabulary learning through games, according to Gambrell, Koskinen & Kapinus [21], "Retelling" is an effective instruction of strategy for enhancing the comprehension of proficient and less proficient reader because verbal reconstruction of text helps readers to organize and to deploy their processing capacity more successfully. In contrast, EFL / ESL learners should start reading short stories and literature; in order to be able to use story retelling. Here, getting habituated with the target language's culture and mentality is another significant advantage of this method lies. One advantage of reading literature texts based on a research by Pardede [38], is to supply authentic circumstance for processing new language. By the same token, stories include real examples of grammatical structures and lexical items. Reading text and stories (short or long) aid learners to comprehend the cultures, people, thoughts and philosophy of the target language is another important point about reading and understanding passages that gives more credits to "Story retelling" approach comparing with others. Consequently, reading text makes learners enthusiastic enough to retell the stories through learning vocabularies and improving speaking skill, whereas the VOCACA and Games approach methods are relatively poor in delivering these benefits to learners.

Another advantage of story retelling is the direct and instant feedback that it provides. In contrast with CAVOCA and games, Stoicovy [15] points out that based on several studies, retelling has positive influence in language learning as it promotes students' ability in rearranging information from the text that they have read. On the other hand, story retelling may help instructors as a precious assessment tool in evaluating learners' conception listening, speaking skills. As claimed by Slater [39] "retelling is an important skill often overlooked in regular reading instruction. Students' retelling gives instructors insight into their levels of language competence, comprehension, vocabulary items, and backdrop knowledge that they cannot give in the other two methods. As a matter of fact, story retelling ,the process by which a student listens to or reads a story and then summarize, or "retells" the story in his or her own words is a procedure that ties into these learning experiences and is an effective way to improve students' reading comprehension and consequently their speaking. In comparison, the two other methods, CAVOCA and games may not have strong effect on improving speaking skill.

Nevertheless, there are some critiques on this concept, O'Malley and Pierce, [40] argue that EFL / ESL learners must speak according to that story they had read or listened in this type of teaching speaking. Moreover, retelling story may be good for EFL students in their beginnings. So, this category is a closed assignment. Consequently, it might be assumed that retelling can also be used to determine students' understanding of story structure. As opposed to story retelling, games approach gains advantage in terms of proactively engagement in the learning process; Story retelling and CAVOCA by which learners acquire language intentionally, games provide language learning in an incidental manner. As a result, this leads to making learners concentrate more on learning for the reason that they do not feel they are forced to learn. In point of fact, the compensation of games according to Hansen [41], identically, they are highly motivating and amusing, and more opportunity can be given to shy learners to express their outlook and thoughts, so learners are not anxious about making mistakes, get ready to acquire new language psychologically and expressively as well, while we cannot observe this ability in story retelling method.

However, how to apply games in language learning program is a matter which must be taken into consideration. One weakness of this approach is although games are effective in cooperative learning new words; they cannot be successful if the instructor does not explain the tasks and roles of students clearly in playing games. Another critique upon this method is the limitations that are related to members' characters, using games in the classroom sometimes fails owing to the lack of cooperation among members of the class. Games have need of all learners' participation; For that reason, it is very important that learners have a cooperative attitude. It could be said it is the instructor's job to explain the rules clearly and let learners and prospect to learn, apply and to assess the English language in a pleasant atmosphere. In the event that, the goal of language learning is the communicating with people in real settings, CAVOCA and story retelling are somehow underprivileged in getting this vital end as these two methods do not require learners' contribution.

In spite of the above limits, compared with CAVOCA and story retelling, games due to their fun nature may remove psychological barriers which affect language learning process. It is obvious that games lower learners stress over language learning. In particular, language learning takes place in a stress-free environment and vocabulary learning games reduce the children negative stress. According to a study done by Crookall [42], games are advantageous at this point because they lessen apprehension, enhance positive outlook and improve self-assurance because learners are not afraid of punishment or criticism while practicing the target language freely, while CAVOCA and story retelling may not have strong influence in removing stress and concern in learning atmosphere.

### 3. Conclusions

It can be concluded that vocabulary acquisition strategies is one of the most important aspects of teaching language which must be taken into consideration more masterly by instructors in EFL / ESL classrooms. Since learners' English knowledge can be evaluated by finding out how well they use acquired vocabularies in real contexts, introducing and teaching vocabulary learning strategies, known as VLSs and approaches to learners can be considered as significant job for instructors. The author believes that through vocabulary, EFL / ESL learners can integrate listening; speaking, reading and writing skills together, therefore these skills could be improved by integrating relevant tasks in the second or foreign language acquisition process.

The prominent role of using technology in everyone's life is certainly clear while it can facilitate tasks such as language acquisition that considered difficult in the past. One of the innovated and updated techniques which is used in Iran is "Computer – assisted vocabulary learning" (CAVOCA) as it was discussed earlier, this method has this advantage of improving EFL / ESL learners' motivation, achievement and excitement in the realm of second or foreign language acquisition. Thus, the procedure of language learning can be accelerated. conversely, the most prominent issue is that by lack of using technology knowledge, mainly computer in classrooms the instructor from taking its advantages might be obstructed and as Zhao and Zciko, [13] has shown in his paper the primary cause of not being involved in using technology in classroom is not being taught. As the result, traditional tactics are being chosen to remain by instructors.

Therefore, there should be a serious effort on removing some obstructions which is related to the lack of familiarity of instructors with the appropriate use of technology, computer programs. Sometimes they do not know about computer programs in order to help learners acquire new vocabularies. The author believes that this drawback must not be highlighted since by training instructors to get this knowledge could be removed, nevertheless, these days in Iran; most of the instructors were trained how to use technology in their classrooms.

The second approach which was discussed in the critical review and is used as a practical method in most of EFL classrooms in Iran is vocabulary learning through story retelling. Based on Stoicovy [15] story retelling approach is a post reading or listening process through which learners promote their comprehension of discourse by memorizing and rearranging what they have read or heard. As it was mentioned earlier, instructors can promote learners' knowledge of grammatical structures, pronunciation, and vocabulary by providing them with a variety of conversational topics. According to studies which done by Rachmawaty and Hermagustiana [17], It can be closed that retelling technique effect on the students' speaking fluency and to know the strategies they used while retelling a story,

they found that the students' vocabulary improved as well. The findings revealed that students are well able to organize, integrate, make inferences, and classify information.

Moreover, they can also generalize and relate ideas that do not exist in the given story. This suggests that EFL / ESL learners' story retelling approach is useful for the improvement of vocabulary achievement. On the other hand, the author took a closer look at the negative parts of this approach; while Palingo has publicized in his article story retelling is generally deemed to be time-consuming and complicated, it has not been extensive in EFL/ESL classrooms. Consequently, it could be non-manageable to find time for each learner involving more actively in this technique. With the aim of removing this problem and processing this approach more effectively, language training centers can reduce the number of the EFL / ESL learners in classrooms.

The last technique which was considered in this article is vocabulary learning through games; it is employed for young learners in Iran, though. In view of the fact that language classrooms always are full of stress resulting in not using language skills more successfully, game playing may have a prominent role in reducing learners' stress and making them prepared to acquire language. Based on Wood [ ] the use of learning games as learning tool and game-like formats could be more effective at capturing learners' attention than traditional media such as textbooks, having well – chosen game regarding the educational purpose and the learners' level, can help instructors create an enthusiastic, ready to learn, active and vigorous atmosphere in their classes. The author believes this approach like any other approaches has its own unconstructive parts. Discipline issues, learners may get extremely vociferous, straying away from the basic purpose of the game - play activity, perhaps, due to inadequate rules instruction, resulting in playing too much and the lack of learning, already familiar or boring games and finding games unnecessary and childish by some learners, in particular adolescents as negative parts must be taken into account. The author comes to judge by having organized scaffold on games which explains how to play, time, make learners enthusiastic to play and control the class during using this method, these weak points might be eliminated.

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