Vocabulary Learning Strategies of EFL Libyan Learners of Omar Almukhtar University, Derna

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A B S T R A C T

Studying previous literature, it is found that some surveys promote teaching specific types of learning strategies to help learners in vocabulary acquisition. However, there was few studies concentrated on EFL Libyan learners. For example, Aljdee's (2011) case study, which conducted to identify the range and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies the learners use at Zawia University. Another survey by Khalifa (2015) studied the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies on academic achievements of pre-university EFL learners. Therefore, this paper aims to address the vocabulary learning strategies used by Libyan Learners at Omar Almokhtar University and the correlation between the strategies they utilize and their English proficiency level. 26 male and female majors were asked to complete a vocabulary questionnaire.

Participants reported using a number of vocabulary strategies: words cards, using dictionaries, repeating new words, and using notebooks.

It found that learners ' proficiency level improves at the same time as they use more learning strategies. In terms of gender aspect, Libyan male students use more strategies than females. In addition, they differ in using specific types of strategies; for example, males use strategies of repeating new words and word cards in comparison with girls who overwhelmingly use dictionaries. This survey concluded that the technique of using dictionaries is the most efficient strategy in vocabulary learning.

Keywords: learners, vocabulary, dictionaries, learning, strategies

الملخص

بالنظر في الدراسات السابقه نجد أن بعض منها يحفز تعليم إستراتيجيات معينه لمساعدة الطلاب لاكتساب المفردات. ولكن القليل منهم ركز على إستراتيجيات التعلم لدى الطلبه الليبيين بجامعة عمر المختار. وعليه هذه الورقه تهدف للإطلاع على الاستراتيجيات الأكثر استخداما لدي الطلبه الليبيين والعلاقة بين

الإستراتيجيات ومستوى مهارات الطلبه. طُلب من 26 من الإناث والذكور لتعبئة استبيان الخاص بإستراتيجيات تعلم المفردات. ذُكر أن المشاركين يستخدمون عدد من إستراتيجيات معينه: مثل بطاقة الكلمه, تكرار الكلمات الجديده، واستخدام القواميس.

ووجدت أن مستوى إتقان المتعلمين يتحسن في نفس الوقت الذي يستخدمون فيه المزيد من إستراتيجيات التعلم. من ناحية الجنس، يستخدم الطلاب الليبيون إستراتيجيات أكثر من الإناث. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإنهم يختلفون في استخدام أنواع مُعينه من الاستراتيجيات؛ على سبيل المثال، يستخدم الذكور استراتيجيات تكرار الكلمات الجديدة وبطاقات الكلمات مقارنة بالفتيات اللواتي يستخدمن القواميس بشكل واسع. استنتج هذا الاستطلاع أن تقنية استخدام القواميس هي الاستراتيجية الأكثر فعالية في تعلم المفردات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المتعلمون ، المفردات ، القواميس ، التعلم ، الاستراتيجيات

Introduction

What do language learning strategies mean?

Green (1995) states that learners often, deliberately, utilize certain techniques (known as language learning strategies) in order to develop their L2 skills improvement.

According to Cohen and Zoltán (2002), learners may employ a number of strategies which are aimed at developing their L2. In learning vocabulary, learners may either intentionally or accidently utilize some strategies. For instance, a vocabulary item in a given lesson may be used by learners for the first time in order to communicate a thought, without any intention of learning that lexical item. In comparison, learners may insert the new word while communicating to help them learning it.

Cohen and Zoltán (2002) classify the language learning strategies as; Cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies.

The language learning strategies of identifying, grouping, retaining and storing of language material, as well as the use strategies of retrieval, practising and understanding or producing

of vocabulary, phrases and other elements of L2, are Known as Cognitive strategies. On the other hand, Meta-cognitive strategies are those procedures that learners intentionally use to achieve their language learning.

Affective strategies serve to control feelings, motivation and attitudes, for instance, those for self- confidence. While social strategies encompass the activities which learners select to take in order to react with native speakers and with other learners, such as, inquiring questions to illustrate social roles. For example, if a joke is not understood, but you laugh any way.

There are two reasons of conducting this survey. The first is the significance of vocabulary learning in second language acquisition:

Although Vocabulary is the problem for most learners, it composes the major part of the meaning of any language. Moreover, the successful learners are those who improve strategies and disciplines in vocabulary learning (Fan, 2003).

Acquiring great and various vocabulary is vital for communicative capability and one of the main tasks for second language learners (McCrostie, 2007).

Another reason is there has been few studies in vocabulary learning concerning Libyan learners. This study, therefore, aims to address and undertake a detailed examination of vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL Libyan learners.

Literature Review

 At the beginning of this project, the chosen topic was restricted to the Meta-cognitive strategies of learning vocabulary. It has, however, been generalized to vocabulary learning strategies. This was due to many reasons: firstly, to avoid confusion, as I found different sub-classifications of those strategies, which can differ from author to another. For example, Catalán's (2003) classification of vocabulary learning strategies, was to a degree confusing. This is because, it can be difficult to see the difference between the last strategy of the Meta-cognitive ones (e.g. continue to study the word over the time) and the first two Cognitive ones (e.g. verbal and written repetition). Moreover, every time I looked for a clear classification of

vocabulary learning strategies, I found different classifications and, to be more accurate, the subcategories were also diverse. For example, Gu and Johnson (1996) suggested two main strategies: meta-cognitive, and cognitive, which include six sub-categories: encoding, guessing, note- taking, using a dictionary, activating, and rehearsal. Schmitt (1997, 2000), by contrast, established two types of strategies: discovery and consolidation strategies. The former referred to determination and social strategies while the latter involved social, memory, cognitive, and meta-cognitive strategies (Fan, 2003).

Furthermore, Oxford (1990) classified vocabulary strategies into six strategies: affective, social, meta-cognitive, memory-related, general cognitive, and compensatory strategies.

The second reason related to the preceding point is that a multiple-choice question, which is about the various use of vocabulary strategies, has been constructed, in which different strategies were given. As a result of this, it will be inaccurate to use a specific strategy as the title of this project.

One final reason is that most of the researches that I looked at apply their survey to a particular group of L2 learners. For example, Fan (2003) conducted her study on Cantonese learners from Hong Kong, while Fowle (2002) investigated how vocabulary notebooks have been introduced into a secondary school programme in Thailand. Therefore, I have decided to consider vocabulary learning strategies by Libyan learners as I did not come across any study that focuses on Libyan students.

As I was interested to see whether there is a difference between males and females in terms of the number as well as the range (types) of vocabulary strategies they use or not, part of this project was based on Catalán's (2003) research questions.. In addition, she also used a questionnaire to collect the data.

Having researched relevant articles related to my topic, I found that Fan (2003) also focused on the importance of learning vocabulary. That is why she quoted an interesting interview by Michael McCarthy (2001) at Cambridge University. Therefore, I found that this quotation can support my beliefs about the usefulness of learning vocabulary. Like other

researchers, Fan has administrated both a vocabulary size test and a questionnaire to the subjects.

This project is mainly based on Green and Oxford's study (1995), because their findings were interesting; they found that there is a correlation between the greater use of learning strategies with both learners' level of proficiency and gender aspect, as they claimed that women use more strategies than men. However, their analysis was quite complex. I have also quoted a very clear definition of vocabulary learning strategies that come under the importance of vocabulary strategies.

In addition to Gu and Jonson's useful large-scale study, their classification, which also involves subcategories of vocabulary strategies, regulation meta cognitive and cognitive strategies, was helpful, although it was too long, as it included up to 74 strategies.

Although various useful issues regarding vocabulary learning strategies have been provided by Nation (2001), I attempted to adapt his test. However, unfortunately, it was not applied because of some difficulties, significantly, the time limit that refers to the disproportion of learners' lectures schedule, as they were from different grades. Another difficulty was the circumstances that the city came through which enforced the learners to finish their studies earlier than expected and stayed home.

O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) classification of vocabulary learning strategies was simple and clearer than others.

As a questionnaire is one of the most common methods for collecting data, I therefore, modified it from Takač (2008), who also utilized questionnaires.

Research Questions

1. Is there a relationship between types of strategies used and learners' level of proficiency?

2. Do female and male learners differ in the number of vocabulary strategies they use? Is it true that women use more strategies than men?

3. Are some vocabulary learning strategies more efficient than others?

Methodology

Aside examining the importance of vocabulary learning strategies, this study focuses on which ones are more used by learners and whether there is a relation between using these strategies and Learner's levels and genders. Thus, in terms of the procedure of this study was as follows; there was an equal number of participants, males and females (26 in total) English Libyan Learners took part in this survey. Regarding the proficiency level, they were from different levels. Their age was 19 years old and above. Concerning the materials, the questionnaire was applied which adapted from Takač (2008). This survey took place within the English department at Omar Almokhtar University, Derna in May, 2016. Furthermore, the (SPSS) Statistical Package for the Social Science has been used to analyse the data collected.

Discussion of Findings

The following feedback was gained from a questionnaire survey of 26 EFL learners. The data, therefore, has been analysed by using SPSS. The most used strategy among the three strategies is obviously the strategy of using the electronic dictionary, which is more utilized than using words cards by learners. In contrast, repeating new words comes second between the three strategies. This is probably because technological issues as it is developing, as all students these days tend to use their devices to search for the new words. They find it

quicker and easier than looking for a word in a dictionary book as it is illustrated in (figure 1).
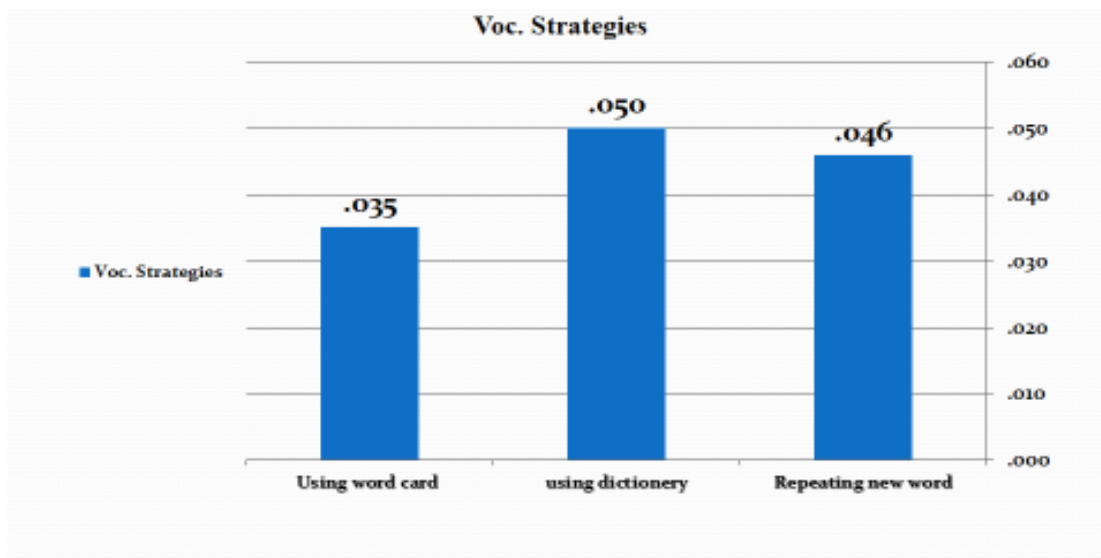
**(Figure 1 significant of finding)**

The second finding is regarding gender aspect, it has been found that male students possibly prefer using both strategies of repeating new words as well as using word cards. As it is a real example that most of Libyan male students at Omar Almukhtar University, Derna branch, do not carry bags. They carry sheets and maybe one or two books in their hands. as a result, they find word cards are easier to use and to be put in their pockets. In comparison with female learners who tend more to utilize book and electronic dictionaries than words cards, since they carry bags and they are more hard-working than male learners. Males also repeat the new words as many as they can either by saying that word many times, or inserting it in a sentence that is familiar to them. So, they use that new word in writing and in speaking dialogues.
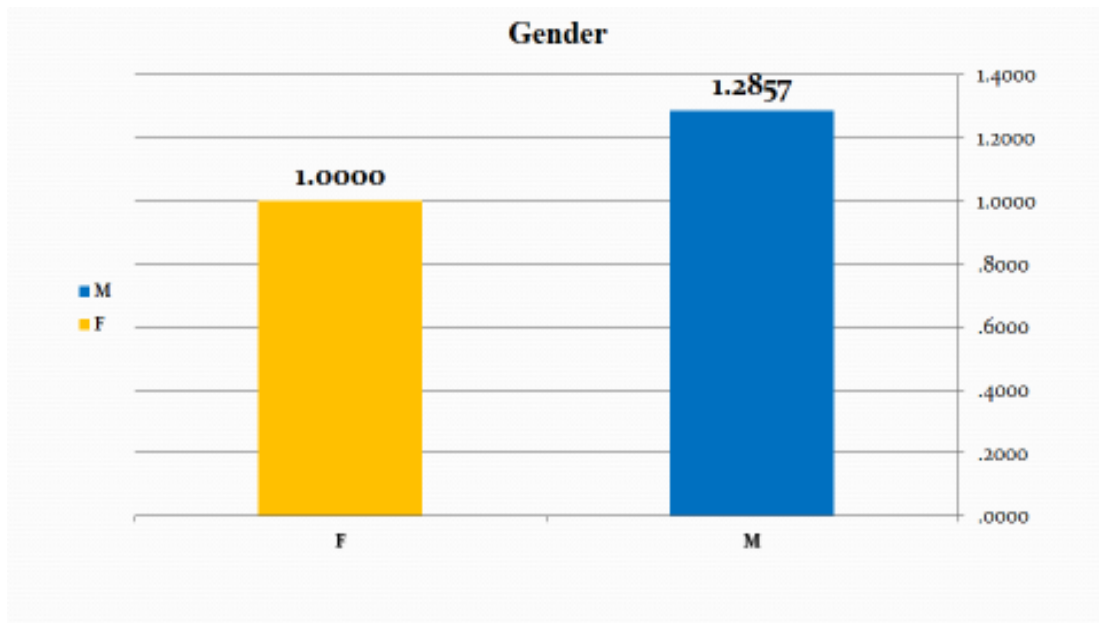
(Figure 2 using word's cards)

Moreover, girls are using   dictionaries more than boys as it is shown in (Figure 4). Consequently, and from (figure,2,3) the most number of used strategies is obviously employed by males. This is, however, against Green and Oxford's study (1995) who argued that women use more strategies than men.

Although not all of my findings support Catalán's results (2003), I found that part of her findings is absolutely true. For example, the greater use of formal strategies, such as using the dictionary was more common among females.
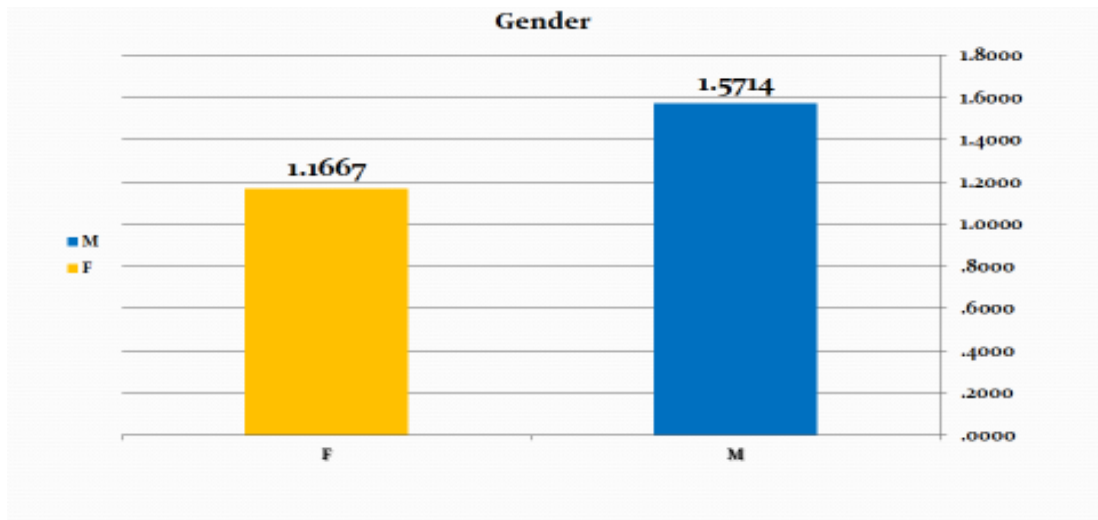
(Figure 3 repeating new words)
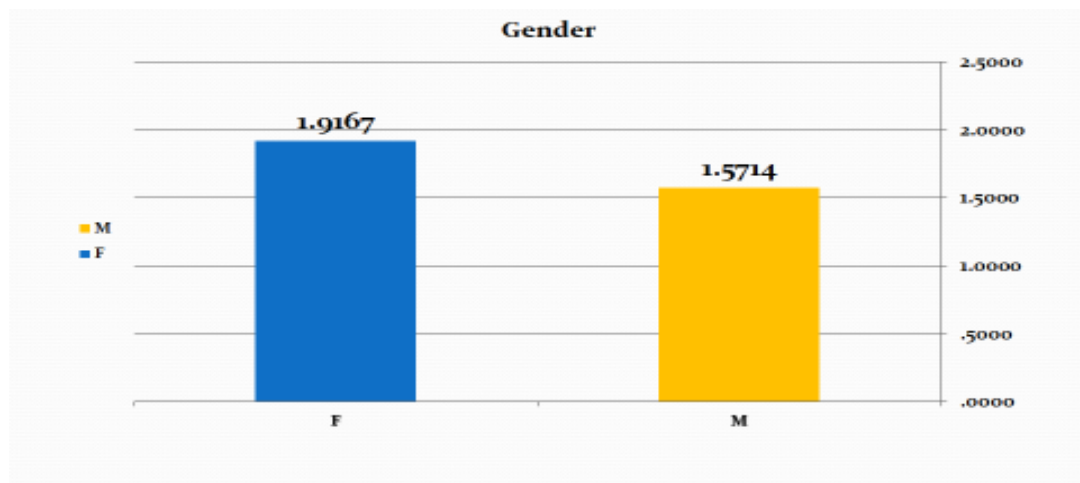
(Figure 4 using dictionery)

In term of vocabulary evaluation, as the results have shown that there is a correlation between vocabulary level and the number of used strategies, both learners who use more strategies their vocabulary level is excellent. In contrast, very good level students utilize less strategies. Lastly, learners who have acquired the smallest amount of words come third and are assessed as good ones.

Even though, learners were not administered to a vocabulary size test, they were asked about the meanings of a number of words. Also from my experience as a teacher the assessment of my students' proficiency level was not too difficult.
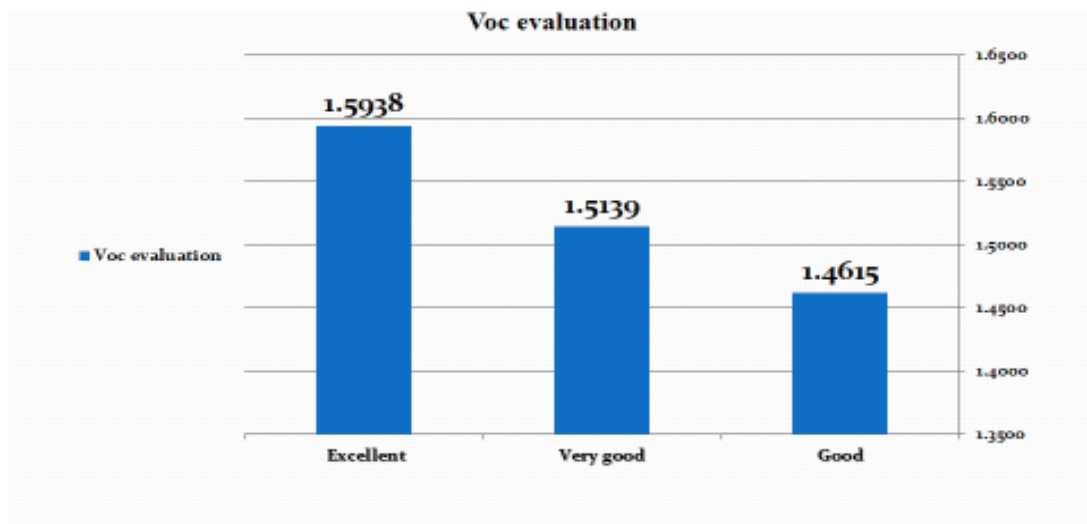
(Figure 5 vocabulary level & number of used strategies)

As one of the significant findings of my research is that the notebook has a less predictive result. I endeavoured to support my result in comparison with McCrostie (2007), who has done research on vocabulary notebooks. Moreover, his findings were similar to mine whereas the notebook strategy does not always meet the learners' vocabulary learning needs.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study was primarily conducted to establish the different strategies of vocabulary learning used by EFL Libyan learners of Omar Almukhtar university. It enquired some issues such as the relation between learners' proficiency level, gender aspect, and the number of learning strategies used. Reaching the findings of the following; first, it has illustrated that there is a difference between male and female learners, since males use more strategies than females and that is absolutely against Green and Oxford's study (1995).

Second, learners more use vocabulary learning strategies more their level improves. Another finding is that the most common used strategy among learners is using either electronic or book dictionaries. Although the study mainly focused on the dictionary book, electronic dictionaries are also found useful and helpful for female learners in contrast with males who use strategies of repeating the new word as well as words cards. Therefore, the result related to this was in fact significant. As a result, learning vocabulary via dictionary strategy is the most efficient technique among other strategies. In comparison with vocabulary notebooks which are not used any longer by learners.

Consequently, and as noticeable the most efficient strategy is the electronic dictionary. This is in fact related to technological developments, as learners find it more quicker and easier than other strategies.

Limitations

Although this work was in fact going well, it has, to some extent, faced some limitations like any research project. In terms of collecting data, the questionnaire was the methodology, which has been administrated to the participants. Although it is considered an easy and quick way of collecting data, it tends to be in some measure insufficient. This was due to the unreliability of the respondents, as they might not answer the questions seriously. For example, for question 6 (a/b) about the results of exams, I found that some responses were unrealistic, especially in the data analysis stage. For this reason, more questionnaires have been administrated to new participants.

Another major limitation that has been encountered in conducting this project is the time limit as the plan was to administer a vocabulary size test to the students, hence, the self report (questionnaire) was the only way to collect the data. For instance, question (5) was used for learners to evaluate their vocabulary size instead of the test. It was thought to interview the participants in order to provide more interpretation of some of the participants' responses.

The final major issue was related to the data analysis. It was difficult to obtain descriptive statistics using the SPSS method. Consequently, I have to discover the significant findings

(by calculating the average of the mean score) or the best predictors and the correlations between all of the findings, as well as to identify the less important results.

The implications of this project

Referring to the limitations of this project, I have come up with many tips, not only for vocabulary learning, but also for conducting research on all kinds of topics. For example, various factors can affect the reliability of the results, such as the time factor, according to which, the instruments for collecting the data should be chosen very carefully. In other words, if you have plenty of time, using interviews will be more accurate and the responses will be easier to interpret.

Another major factor regarding the reliability of the results is the number of subjects who will be involved in the survey.

Therefore, for future research, I will construct a large-scale survey, using a large number of participants. Furthermore, it may be helpful to administer a pilot test or a questionnaire to a small number of majors in order to make sure that the used instrument covers all of the information that the study needs, and that is what Fan (2003) did in her study. Moreover, this method is useful in ensuring that the questions are clear and easy to answer, either in terms of terminology or the language itself. For example, next time, I will provide two versions, in English and Arabic, of both the questionnaire and the test.

Having studied many issues in the Research Methods, I would like to highlight more essential issues referring to the questionnaires as a data collection instrument, which influence the attractiveness of the questionnaire, which subsequently affects the participants' responses. Firstly, the length of the questionnaire, should not be too long, as the respondents will get bored by the end of answering it. As a result of this, they will not answer the final questions seriously. This point leads us to another practical one, which is the design of the questionnaire. For example, two or more groups of majors will be given the same questions but in a different order. Secondly, the questions should not be leading questions to reach the results that you

would like to achieve. In addition, the questions should not be all closed or all open, but a variety of questions. All the preceding points are significant for attaining reliable findings.

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Appendix

The questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to investigate the strategies of learning vocabulary of

English as a second language that are used by Libyan students of English

Department of Omar Almokhtar University.

Instructions:

Answer **all** the following questions. Notice that in some of the following

questions, you may choose **one or more answer**.

1- **Gender**   Female   ☐   Male   ☐

2- **Age** 15-16 ☐   17-18 ☐   19-20☐   20-21 ☐   22-23 ☐   24-25 ☐

More 25 ☐

3- Reason of studying English. (Choose <u>one or more</u>)

Find a job   ☐   Study at the university ☐   pleasure   ☐

Pass a test   (IELTS, TOEFL, etc…)   ☐others……………..   ☐

4- Proficiency level   lower intermediate ☐   beginner ☐

advanced ☐ upper intermediate ☐   intermediate ☐

5- Evaluate the amount of your vocabulary

Excellent ☐ very good ☐   good ☐ Fair ☐   Weak ☐

6. a. If you have done any English language test, choose your most recent score in each skill: (which are made out of ten)

	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	5.5	6	6.5	7	7.5 Or more
Listening										
Reading										
Writing										
Speaking										

b. Put a circle around your most recent <u>general</u> score in the English language test:

❖ Score	❖ 3	❖ 3.5	❖ 4	❖ 4.5	❖ 5	❖ 5.5	❖ 6

7- a. When you learn vocabulary what strategy/strategies do you usually use?

Choose <u>one or more:</u>

a- I keep the important words in a notebook. ☐

b- I highlight the important words in texts.   ☐

c- I read outside the class for pleasure (e.g. magazines/books/stories/internet). ☐

d- I use word cards. ☐

 e. By using the media (T.V., Radio, etc) ☐

 f- I look up the meaning of the words in the dictionary. ☐

 g- I repeat the new words. ☐

h- I try to connect a new word to a similar word I already know. ☐

   (e.g. Window/ wind, etc,)

 I. I use the electronic dictionary. ☐

J. Others; mention please --

b. Illustrate your reasons of using specific strategies

……………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………

Thanks a lot