

# Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Identification and analysis of 'contextual guessing' and 'key word method' by Algerian students of English

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## Abstract

The present study aims at shedding light on two different vocabulary learning strategies: 'contextual guessing' and 'key word method'. In so doing, the study investigates learners' use of these strategies and attempts to suggest some pedagogical implications for classroom use. To achieve these aims, a questionnaire about language learning strategies in general and vocabulary learning strategies in particular has been administered to 31 third year students from the Teacher Training School of Constantine. Results of the questionnaire show that the majority of students rely on social strategies as well as determination strategies for getting new information, such as asking their teacher for explanation or clarification and guessing new words' meanings from the context in which they appear. Moreover, learners in the population of the study report their use of a variety of strategies to consolidate new information. These strategies include some Cognitive strategies such as keeping a vocabulary notebook, in addition to some Metacognitive strategies such as using English language media like watching English movies and listening to English songs. Finally, the study suggests two methods for teaching the guessing strategy and the key word method through two sample lesson plans which can be implemented in the EFL classrooms.

## ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على إستراتيجيتين لتعلم مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية ألا وهما: إستراتيجي التخمين السياقية و 'طريقة الكلمة الأساسية'. بذلك، الدراسة تبحث في استخدام طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية لهذه الاستراتيجيات، وتحاول أن تشير إلى بعض الآثار التربوية للاستخدام داخل الفصول الدراسية. ولتحقيق هذه الأهداف، أجري استبيان حول استراتيجيات تعلم اللغة عامة و استراتيجيات تعلم المفردات خاصة ضمت 31 طالبا من السنة الثالثة من "المدرسة العليا للأساتذة بقسنطينة". وتظهر نتائج الاستبيان أن أغلبية الطلبة تعتمد على بعض الاستراتيجيات الاجتماعية من أجل الحصول على معلومات جديدة مثل أن يسأل المدرسين للتفسير أو التوضيح بالإضافة إلى تخمين معاني الكلمات الجديدة من السياق الذي تظهر فيه. وعلاوة على ذلك، أبدى التقرير استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من الاستراتيجيات الرامية إلى تثبيت المعلومات الجديدة. وتشمل هذه الاستراتيجيات في بعض الاستراتيجيات المعرفية مثل تسجيل المفردات في دفتر خاص، بالإضافة إلى بعض الإستراتيجيات الإدراكية مثل استخدام وسائل الإعلام باللغة الإنجليزية مثل مشاهدة الأفلام الإنجليزية والاستماع إلى الأغاني الإنجليزية. وأخيراً، تقترح الدراسة طريقتين لتدريس استراتيجيتي التخمين وأسلوب الكلمة الرئيسية التي يمكن تنفيذها لتدريس مفردات اللغة الإنجليزية.

## **I. Introduction**

Learning English as a foreign language requires learners to listen, read, speak, and write adequately. In so doing, learners make use of some strategies which help them cope with different learning tasks. The identification and analysis of these strategies have been an important issue for many researchers. For example, Oxford (1990) described learning strategies as *"specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques, students use –often consciously– to improve their own progress in internalising, storing, retrieving, and using the L2"* (cited in Oxford, 1993: 175). This means that learning strategies are all attempts of learners which aim at improving their performance in the target language. An important characteristic of these strategies is that they are used *consciously*. This is mainly what makes the difference between good and less good learners. The former are usually willing and active users of learning strategies whereas the latter are often not able to describe, or even to recognise, what strategies they are using (Rubin 1975, cited in Oxford 1993).

Using learning strategies is not limited to specific tasks. Oxford's above definition clearly shows that learners attempt to use strategies in different activities including storing, retrieving, and using the L2. As far as using the L2 is concerned, learners will be more concerned with developing adequate vocabulary learning strategies which would facilitate their task of using the target language both in speaking and writing. This subsequent area of learning strategies is attracting more and more attention. The study of vocabulary learning strategies by L2 or EFL learners is becoming specifically important for teachers and researchers who are not only interested in identifying these strategies but also in suggesting effective means for helping learners increase their vocabulary knowledge which would be the key factor for any successful production of the language.

### **Aim of the study**

The present study aims at shedding light on two different vocabulary learning strategies: 'contextual guessing' and 'key word method'. Moreover, the study seeks to investigate learners' use of these strategies (the case of third year students at the ENSC). Furthermore, the study attempts at suggesting some pedagogical implications for classroom use.

### **Research questions**

Three main questions are raised:

1. Do Algerian learners of English at the ENSC use 'contextual guessing' and 'key word method' as two vocabulary learning strategies in their learning process?
2. If yes, how are these strategies used?
3. How can students be trained in using both strategies?

## **II. Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Interest in the study of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) accompanied a shift in focus from teacher-oriented to more learner-oriented views of learning. Learners are assumed a more active role and their actions have been subject to different interpretations to discover some of their learning styles and strategies. Schmitt (1997, cited in Schmitt, 2000) proposed a list of 31 different VLS including four main categories: Determination strategies, Social strategies, Memory strategies, Cognitive strategies, and Metacognitive strategies. Moreover, the strategies are classified in two main categories: (1) strategies necessary for discovering new words' meanings, and (2) strategies necessary for consolidating (memorizing) the new word.

Strategy group	Strategy
<b>Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning</b>	
DET	Analyse part of speech
DET	Analyse affixes and roots
DET	Check for L1 cognate
DET	Analyse any available pictures or gestures
DET	Guess meaning from textual context
DET	Use a dictionary (bilingual or monolingual)
SOC	Ask teacher for a synonym, paraphrase, or L1 translation of new word
SOC	Ask classmates for meaning
<b>Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered</b>	
SOC	Study and practice meaning in a group
SOC	Interact with native speakers
MEM	Connect word to a previous personal experience
MEM	Associate the word with its coordinates
MEM	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms
MEM	Use semantic maps
MEM	Image word form
MEM	Use Keyword method
MEM	Group words together to study them
MEM	Study the spelling of a word
MEM	Say new word aloud when studying
MEM	Use physical action when learning a word
COG	Verbal repetition
COG	Written repetition
COG	Word lists
COG	Put English labels on physical objects
COG	Keep a vocabulary notebook
MET	Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.)
MET	Use spaced word practice (expanding rehearsal)
MET	Test oneself with word tests
MET	Skip or pass new word
MET	Continue to study word over time

## II-1 Guessing from context

### II-1- a. What is context?

Context can be considered as within the text itself; i.e., the morphological, syntactic, and discourse information which can be classified and described in terms of general features. But the reader also has the general context of the text; i.e. the background knowledge of the subject matter. According to Nation and Coady (1980, cited in Carter and Mc Carthy, 1988), good learners take advantage of such background knowledge in their learning activities. In an experiment about the facilitating effect of previous knowledge, Adams (1982, cited in Carter and Mc Carthy, 1988, 102) found that learners who are given information about the topic of a passage before they read it achieved significantly higher scores on guessing the meanings of nonsense words in the texts.

### II.1.b. A strategy for guessing new words from context.

Nation and Coady (1980, cited in *ibid*) describe a strategy which learners can use through a good exploitation of the available context clues. The strategy presupposes two things:

1. That learners have sufficient command of vocabulary, grammar and reading skills in order to achieve basic comprehension of the text, and
2. That learners bring some relevant background knowledge to the text.

The described strategy consists of five steps:

1. Finding the part of the unknown word.
2. Looking at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context if necessary.
3. Looking at the wider context of the unknown word. That is, looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences.
4. Guessing the meaning of the unknown word.
5. Checking that the guess is correct.

The first two steps of this strategy focus on the word itself and its immediate context; i.e., the pattern it fits into with words close to it. In this case, a knowledge of basic affixes can be of some help. For example, knowledge of most frequent suffixes such as -ness (noun), -ly (usually adverb or adjective), -ion (noun), -ify (verb), and prefixes like pre-, ex-, de-, sub-, in addition to a knowledge of the fact that prefixes generally change the meaning of a word while suffixes change its part of speech e.g., honest (adj.), dishonest (adj. but a new meaning), dishonestly (adv. but the same meaning as dishonest).

Step three in the strategy focuses on the wider context. It requires the student to look at the relationship between the clause in which the unknown word occurs and preceding and following clauses and sentences. These relationships include cause and effect, contrast, generalization- detail, exclusion (on the contrary, instead), explanation (in other words, that is),

time (before, subsequently, finally), and arrangement (in the first place, secondly). Though these relationships may be stated explicitly, they are left most of the time to the reader to infer.

Step four consists of the actual guess the learner makes on the basis of clues obtained in steps 1 to 3.

The final step consists of checking the guess made in step four. So, after the student has used the available context clues to guess the meaning of an unknown word, he then can use additional information to check that his guess is correct.

## **II-2- The key word Method**

The key word method is recognized as an effective strategy for learning vocabulary. It is often identified as a memory, or mnemonic strategy which serves to consolidate new words' meanings (see Schmitt's above list). In the mid-seventies, Raugh and Atkinson made a research study based on the use of the key word method to teach Russian vocabulary to college students (Mc Pherson, 2003). Since then, many researchers have been attracted by this method attempting to emphasise its facilitating role in learning new vocabulary.

### **II-2-a- A strategy for using the key word method**

The key word method consists of two main stages:

1. Link the foreign word with an English word that sounds like some part of the foreign word (e.g., the Spanish word *carta* sounds like the English word *cart*. Therefore, 'cart' is the key word.
2. Link the key word with the English meaning of the foreign word by forming an interactive image (e.g., *carta* means *letter*, so one could visualize a letter inside a cart). (Mc Pherson, 2003: on-line pages).

The key word method has shown to be effective with students having learning difficulties and those who are at risk for educational failure (Diamond, 2006). Moreover, Mc Pherson (2003) argued that teaching the key word mnemonic to more able students has less impact than teaching it to less able students, because the more able students already make use of a variety of effective learning strategies.

## **III- Investigating learners' use of contextual guessing and key word method to learn English vocabulary**

In order to further investigate students' use of learning strategies in general, and vocabulary strategies, in particular, a short questionnaire was administered to third year students at the ENS. The questionnaire is seen as a valuable means for collecting data about learners' attitudes as well as their use of the two strategies under study: contextual guessing and the key word method.

### **III-1- Respondents**

One group of third year students was randomly chosen to answer the questionnaire. The group consists of 31 students, who answered the questions during their 'Reading Techniques' session.

### **III-2 Description of the questionnaire**

The present questionnaire consists of three main sections dealing respectively with background information about the respondents, their use of some learning strategies, and most importantly their use of contextual guessing and the key-word method as two VLS.

#### **Section One: background information**

It consists of four questions aiming at giving basic information about the respondents by knowing about:

- The reason(s) for their choice of English as a field of study (Q 1),
- Their present attitude towards the study of English (Q2)
- The reasons which make English for them an easy or a difficult subject matter (Q3 & Q4).

#### **Section Two: learners' use of some language learning strategies**

The elicited information concerns:

- learners' favorite activity in the classroom (Q5)
- their reaction towards ambiguous information (Q6)
- The way(s) they manage to improve their performance in English (Q7)
- The method(s) they use to internalize the new information which is presented to them (Q8).

#### **Section Three: learners' use of contextual guessing and the key word method**

Questions in this section deal with:

- Learners' attitude towards having a large vocabulary store (Q 9)
- The way(s) they attempt to enlarge their vocabulary knowledge (Q10).
- The use of contextual guessing (Q11, Q12)
- The use of key-word method (Q13).
- Learners' opinion about the most useful activities which help them build their vocabulary (Q14).

### **III-3- Results and Analysis**

Before discussing the results of the three sections, it is worth noting that the total answers for each question is often more than 31, the total number of the respondents, because the latter are allowed to tick more than one answer if they find it necessary.

**Section One: background information**

Section I	Questions	Options				
		A	B	C	D	E
		N°	N°	N°	N°	N°
	1	11	12	09	14	05
	2	00	04	14	15	01
	3	03	03	--	--	--
	4	00	07	03	04	02

**Table 1: results of the first section (background information)**

Results of the first section show that the majority of the respondents have chosen to study English at the ENS because they have more chances of getting a job (Q1, option C). This reflects an instrumental motivation which may imply that these students are more attracted by the end product of their studies (having a job), which in turn, may indicate that they will pay less attention to their learning styles and strategies.

These results are confirmed in the second question (Q2). The effect of learners' instrumental motivation is that the majority are facing difficulties in their learning process (option D). The main reason for these difficulties, according to their answers to the fourth question (Q4, option, b ), is that learners are not able to manage their time. In other words; they feel overwhelmed, not capable of being at the same pace with their studies. These learners may be described as being less strategic; this is why they are unable to manage their own problems. This is not the case, however, for those who asserted finding the study of English a manageable task (14 students). Here learners seem to be more comfortable because they managed to organize their time and adapt themselves to any new situation. Likewise, the four (04) students who considered the study of English an easy task (Q2) may also be described as successful learners. Their main argument, according to their answers to the third question (Q3), is that they are able to use different strategies which enable them to overcome possible difficulties. These students asserted that their background level of English (they used to be good at the secondary school) made it easier for them to go further in their study.



## Section 2: Language Learning Strategies

Section II	Questions	Options				
		A	B	C	D	E
		N°	N°	N°	N°	N°
	5	19	08	12	03	
	6	15	09	09	05	04
	7	09	08	09	25	10
	8	05	09	24	10	

**Table Two: Results for the second section: Language Learning Strategies**

The above table shows that the majority of learners prefer listening to the teacher explaining the lesson (Q5, option A). This assumes rather a passive role for learners who are unwilling to participate individually, or at least be part of pair or group work. This confirms the previous results (1<sup>st</sup> section) where most learners showed to have difficulties in their study of English, and also the fact that they have an instrumental rather than integrative motivation for learning. The result is clear; these learners are unwilling to provide any effort.

This should not be generalized, however, because the rest of the students may be described as active learners who like being involved either by participating in the lesson or by contributing to pair and group work.

As for the sixth question, results in the above table show that most learners are anxious about ambiguous information. In order to get clarification, most of them rely on other persons in the classroom, either their teacher or their classmates (A, B). According to Schmitt's above list (p. 3), learners here are using social strategies since they tend to interact with other people in the classroom.

Answers to the seventh question about the way they manage to improve their performance in English, show that learners use different strategies, mainly metacognitive ones requiring the use of English media (watching English programs, option D).

Results of the last question in this section (Q8) about the way students attempt to internalize, store, the new information show that learners use various strategies including metacognitive (revising the notes they've taken, 'C'), social (have a discussion with a classmate, 'D'), and cognitive (using verbal repetition, 'A')

**Section Three: Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Section III	Questions	Options				
		A	B	C	D	E
		N°	N°	N°	N°	N°
	9	29	04	--	--	--
	10	11	27	--	--	--
	11	28	18	06	03	--
	12	09	16	10	--	--
	13	20	10	00	10	03
	14	08	11	10	12	--

**Table 3: Results of the third section (learners' use of contextual guessing and key word method)**

The first question in this section (Q 09) deals with learners' opinion about the importance of having wide vocabulary. This is an important question because it is not logical to ask learners about their use of some vocabulary strategies without ensuring first that they are convinced about the usefulness of these strategies for building their vocabulary store. Results of this question show that the majority of respondents have a positive opinion about the importance of vocabulary for their language proficiency. 27 students answered 'yes' whereas only four (04) students answered no. This means that most students are aware that being good in English implies having good command of its vocabulary.

Next question (Q 10) further investigates learners' attempt to enlarge their vocabulary. It mainly concerns learners with a positive attitude in the previous question. Results in the above table show that listening is the major channel for almost all the concerned respondents (option B). This confirms learners' use of metacognitive strategies, namely the use of English media which, once again, correlates with answers to the seventh question where listening to music and watching English programs were described as the most useful ways for improving their performance.

The eleventh question is related to guessing new words' meanings as a strategy which learners use in reading or listening. Results to this question show that most respondents use guessing as a strategy to get the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary (option A). This may be explained by the fact that most students at the ENS are familiar with the guessing strategy from their reading techniques module which they study for three successive years.

The next question is also related to the 'guessing' strategy. It concerns only those respondents who confirmed their use of this strategy in the previous question. Here learners are asked about the way they proceed in

their guess; by analysing the word itself (option A), its immediate context (B), or its larger context (C). Results in the third table show that the majority of students tend to guess the meaning of new words by analysing the sentence in which they appear; i.e., its immediate context. In all cases, these learners may be said to be using the guessing strategy in an effective manner, which may be due, once again, to their reading techniques module where this strategy is being fully dealt with.

Question 13 in this questionnaire deals with the second strategy at hand, the key-word method. Results for this question show that the majority of students use a cognitive strategy which is keeping a vocabulary notebook. This means that most of them do not make use of the key-word method, though both strategies belong to the same category (cognitive). This may be explained by the fact that most students are not familiar with the key word strategy because it is not dealt with in the classroom, unlike the guessing method.

The last question in this section and in the questionnaire as a whole (Q14) elicits information about different activities which learners find important in building their vocabulary knowledge. Results indicate that most students opted for comprehension questions (option D), multiple choice activities (B), and word games (C). This means that learners are conscious about the importance of vocabulary and the necessity for including different activities which may enable them to enlarge their vocabulary store. The role of teachers, therefore, is to respond to their learners' needs and try to facilitate the task for them.

### III-4- Conclusion

The questionnaire has enabled us to collect important data about learners' attitudes and use of different strategies in learning English as well as their use of the two vocabulary strategies under study, 'contextual guessing' and 'key-word method'. Finally, the following points bring together the main findings of the questionnaire:

- Most students in the sample population have an instrumental rather than an integrative motivation for the study of English. Their main objective is to ensure a job after four or five years of study.
- One major consequence for this is that most students find the study of English 'difficult'. A common argument is that these learners are unable to manage their time and to adapt themselves to their different learning difficulties.
- On the contrary, learners who find the study of English a manageable task or even an easy subject matter attribute this feeling to their solid background knowledge of English (which started at their middle and secondary schools) and also to their ability to use different learning strategies which facilitated most of their tasks.

- The majority of respondents prefer listening to the teacher explaining the lesson rather than participating or being part of pair or group work in the classroom. This assumes rather a passive role for learners which can be a logical consequence for their lack of motivation and negative attitude towards the study of English.
- As a reaction to unclear information in the lesson, most learners in the sample population make use of a **social** strategy for learning which consists of asking their teacher for clarification.
- In their attempt to improve their performance in English, most respondents tend to use a rather **metacognitive** strategy, namely watching English programs and listening to English songs.
- In order to internalise new information, most respondents reported revising the notes they have taken which can be considered as a **cognitive** strategy according to Schmitt's classification.
- The majority of learners according to the sample population are convinced about the importance of having a large vocabulary in developing their language proficiency.
- Most of these students attempt to enlarge their vocabulary store through extensive listening to English materials, a **metacognitive** strategy for learning.
- In dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, most learners make use of the guessing strategy (a **Determination** strategy). In so doing, learners proceed in different ways, namely through analysing the smaller and larger contexts of the new word.
- Unlike the 'guessing' strategy, most learners seem to be unfamiliar with the 'key-word' method. Their use of word associations to remember the meaning of new vocabulary is very weak compared with other strategies like writing the new word on a notebook.
- Finally, most learners are convinced about the importance of vocabulary instruction through the use of a variety of activities such as word games, fill in the blank, comprehension questions, and so forth.

#### IV- Pedagogical Implications

Since most learners are aware of the importance of using different learning strategies, teachers should help them know about these strategies and draw their attention to the way they use some of them. Schmitt (2000: 157) argue in this respect: *"vocabulary acquisition is an incremental process, and teachers must concentrate not only on introducing new words, but also on enhancing learners' knowledge of previously presented words"*.

The following are two sample lessons, proposed by Diamond (2006) for teaching contextual guessing and the key word method.

#### IV-1- Lesson Plan 1: Teaching the Guessing Strategy

##### Stage One: Direct explanation

Tell students that they can sometimes use context clues to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word they come across in their reading. Remind them that context clues are the words, phrases, and sentences surrounding an unfamiliar word that can give hints or clues to its meaning. Caution students that although these clues can prove to be helpful, they can sometimes be misleading.

##### Stage Two: Teach / Model

Explain to students that in a definition clue the author provides the reader with the specific definition, or meaning, of a word right in the sentence. Point out that words such as 'are', 'is', 'means', and 'refers to' can signal that a definition clue may follow. Then print the following sentences on a transparency:

A conga is a barrel-shaped drum.

At night you can see constellations, or group of stars, in the sky.

Read aloud the first sentence.

Say: *I'm going to look for a context clue to help me understand the meaning of the word conga.*

Underline *conga* in blue

Say: *In the sentence, I see the word 'is'. The word 'is' can signal a definition context clue. Underline is in red.*

Say: *The phrase a barrel-shaped drum follows the word is.*

Underline the context clue in green.

Say: *A conga is a barrel-shaped drum. The author has given a definition context clue.*

N.B: the same steps can be use with the second sentence.

#### Lesson Plan 2: Teaching the Key word Method

##### Stage One: Direct explanation

Explain to students that you are going to show them how to use the key word method, a useful strategy for remembering the meanings of vocabulary words. Tell them you are going to model the strategy twice, using the words *archipelago* and *lunar*.

##### Stage Two: Teach / Model

###### ➤ Define the target word

Read aloud the following sentence from "Alaska Adventure."

The Aleutian *archipelago* stretches for more than a thousand miles.

Then tell students that an archipelago is "a group of islands".

###### ➤ Think of a key word for the target word

Say: to help me remember the meaning of the word *archipelago*, a group of islands, I am going to think of another word, called a "key word". The key word is a word that sounds like *archipelago* and also is a word that can be easily pictured. My key word for *archipelago* is *pelican*. *Pelican*

sounds like *archipelago* and is the name of a water bird with a very large bill.

➤ **Link the key word with the meaning of the target word**

Explain to students that the next step is to create an image of the key word *pelican* and the meaning of the target word *archipelago* interacting in some way. Tell them it is important that the key word and the meaning actually interact and are not simply presented in the same picture. On the board, sketch a picture of a pelican flying over a group of small islands.

Say: *Look at the picture of the pelican flying over the group of islands.*

Ask: *Pelican is the key word for what word? (archipelago)*

Say: *Yes, archipelago. To recall the meaning of the word archipelago, imagine a pelican flying over a group of small islands.*

➤ **Recall the meaning of the target word**

Tell the students that when they see or hear the word *archipelago*, they should first think of its key word and then try to remember the picture of the key word and the meaning interacting.

Ask: *What is the key word for archipelago? (pelican). In the sketch, where was the pelican flying? (over a group of islands)*

Say: *Right, over a group of islands.*

Ask: *So what does archipelago mean? (a group of islands)*

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