Students' beliefs about vocabulary acquisition strategies of successful learners

Koskinas Manolis
Democritus University of Thrace

1 Research background

In the last decades it has become widely accepted that vocabulary acquisition strategies are of great importance within the educational learning process. The theoretical frame behind the term *vocabulary acquisition strategies* is rather extensive and we will try to provide certain aspects of it from a quite sizeable body of research.

The term *strategy* refers to procedural functions that can be applied in a continuum between language acquisition and language learning (Oxford 1990:8). In the present paper we are going to use the term *vocabulary acquisition* and *vocabulary learning strategies* (VLS) interchangeably following Schmitt et al. (2000:199).

Learning strategies are described as *behaviours and thoughts for influencing the learner's encoding process* (Weinstein et al. 1986: 317) or as *processes that support storage, retrieval and use of information* (Rubin 1987:194; Oxford ibid.) or *procedures that facilitate a learning task* (Chamot 2005:112).

Despite the differences between the taxonomies of VLS proposed by several researchers (Oxford op. cit., Stoffer 1995, Schmitt op. cit.) they all accept VLS to be a vigorous sub-class of general learning strategies. According to Schmitt's taxonomy (1997: 207), there are two major groups of VLS: strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning and strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered. Knowing a word is a rather complicated process that includes not only "*the conquest of significant and significance but furthermore the incorporation in networks and relations to other words*" (Γαβριηλίδου 2001: 56).

Although many researchers focus on the investigation of the effectiveness of VLS, only a few are concerned about the ultimate selection of the students themselves (Oxford op. cit.; Stoffer op. cit.) and even fewer about mother tongue (MT) strategies and that is why Hosenfeld (1976:128) characteristically points out: "*Too often our focus has been on what students should be doing; we must begin by asking what students are doing*". Besides the effectiveness of a strategy or *learner situation* depends on person-dependent factors such as motivation, personality, learning style and self-image (Yongqi Gu 2003:2). In other words effectiveness does not depend solely on a strategy's theoretical conception, but on its popularity as well.

2 Purpose and rationale

Our basic hypothesis, with regard to language teaching, is that students choose teaching strategies which focus on practises that have formerly taken place rather than strategies which can de done in the future, thus displaying a "func-

tional conservatism" (Savignon et al. 2003), attributed primarily to linguistic and cognitive prestige and secondarily accessibility and convenience. In addition, students with diverse linguistic competence seem not to choose simply different strategies, but also different teaching methods (Peacock 1998).

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The research sample consisted of 121 children attending the second grade of secondary school—59 of them were students at the 2nd high school of Oreokastro, Thessaloniki and 62 at the 1st. They were divided into 4 classes (B1 and B3 for both schools correspondingly). Given that participation in the research was not obligatory, only 65 of the total number of students (54%) responded. The representative social classes on an overwhelming majority were: middle-class (52 out of 65, namely 80% with a higher-middle economic status) and lower middle-class (13 out of 65, namely 20% with a lower-middle economic status). In the category sex the distribution is almost isomeric: 34 out of 65 were females (52.3%) and 31 out of 65 were males (47.7%). With reference to origin, the total sum is almost homogeneous (just 2 out of 65 (3%) were foreigners).

3.2 Instrumentation

For the assessment of the students' preferable lexical resources, we used a questionnaire with the following general characteristics:

a. Questions of immediate naming of the lexical resources with qualitative and quantitative criteria correspondingly—see questions (3a&3b).

b. Questions of popular strategies of unknown lexemes (see question 4)

The questions were of the multiple choice type and students were given the option of an additional choice of their liking with the form "*c. other*".

Students had the option to choose in the same question between one or all categories and grade them in a scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 representing "not in the least/ by no means" and 5 "excellent"). Naturally, if they chose to complete one of their own categories ("other"), they would have to assess it as well.

3.3 Procedure

A pre-test sample group consisting of 8 students was given the same questionnaire in order to check its validity in mid-October. The compromise of the questions and the answers were within the acceptable limits, so we moved on to the main procedure. The distribution of the questionnaires with the least possible clarifications took place early November. The students were given a relatively short period of time to answer (1 day), in order for the answers to be as spontaneous as possible. The collection of data, in collaboration with the teaching staff, was completed by mid-November and the processing lasted until December of the same year.

4 Data analysis

Analysis includes binary categorical (sex), descriptive (lexical level) and quantitative (optimal lexical sources). The statistical analysis methods used were Monte Carlo analysis in order to check the distribution of the sample, X^2 distribution, and Crammer's V and Spearman's Rho measurements depending from the data conditions. Our sampling fault is ± 5% (p= 0.05). Our instrument of statistical analysis was statistical package SPSS (version 15.0). The results are showed in separate indexes.

5 Discussion

I. Regarding question (3a), students' selection as optimal lexical source, from a quantitative view, was clearly "school", despite the fact that in reality it is rather the opposite (Pinker 2000). The results lead us to the following conclusions:

a. Students seem to be disorientated amongst the different poles of qualitative to quantitative vocabulary, daily to "sophisticated", but limited vocabulary (3–5%, Schmitt et al. 2000, Laufer 1998, Read 2000:118). This disorientation might be due to the fact that at school they are set off by being told that the so far used vocabulary is insufficient and "poor" (Τοκατλίδου 1986, Τζιμώκας 2003, Τοκατλίδου 2003, Αρχάκης 2005).

b. Students might identify vocabulary with school knowledge and with more general prerequisites for school success. Of course, under no circumstances do we question vocabulary as an instrument of facilitating high school performance (Κασσωτάκης 1981, Καρακατσάνης 1994, Κοντογιαννοπούλου-Πολυδωρίδη et al. 2000). Nevertheless this identification is considered to be rather harmful for the students themselves (Wells 1981, Παπάς 1990, Gee 1996, Hasan 1996).

II. The second question's criterion was qualitative. The answers were typical. Almost all the categories seemed to be quite popular. These data lead us to the following conclusions:

a. From this question as well we can argue that the idea of "sophisticated" vocabulary is a field of disorientation among students (Μπασλής 2006: 31).

b. With regard to the improvement of their vocabulary students' degree varies. More specifically:

i. There is a clear priority of written versus spoken speech.

ii. One can identify a "conservatism" of choices. Students seem to respond to what they believe we would expect from them ("compliance", Γεώργα 1999: 54–65).

iii. There is more diversity in the sources of lexical improvement in relation to its increase.

iv. There is a potential of sociolects' distinction, even if this is impulsive.

Concerning our first conclusion, the above students' opinion reveals that they operate on a communicative basis from the moment they detect the different vocabulary forms, even in evaluative scale. This assessment can be presumed as a consequence of a linguistic school prejudice, which could only affect students' judgment (Αρχάκης et al. 2004:161).

Students seem to express the view that "sophisticated" words can be identified almost anywhere. This opinion is not far from social reality. However when they have not cleared what exactly stands for "sophisticated" words, this parametrical variability is rather an indicator of confusion than a realization of the actual practise.

Another main characteristic of these linguistic "channels" is that their type of expression requires high *lexical capability* (Read 2008:29). In addition, vocabulary used by the institutions described above has the attributes of "difficult" and less common with regard to pronunciation, length, morphology, grammar, meaning, syntax, and distribution (Laufer in Schmitt et al. 2000:141–151). At the same time, the use of this specific vocabulary reveals, for most of addressees, a more elegant and sophisticated speaker and a more "written" form of speech (Read 2008:194).

III. The third question concerned the most popular vocabulary learning strategies. The main data are the following:

a. A high preference in almost all the categories.

b. Differences in their evaluation and different characteristics of each and every strategy, which might also suggest a difference in the level of confidence (Kambakis 1992).

c. Lack of spontaneous answers

The general high percentages of all strategies lead us to two possible scenarios:

a. Students, with regard to the management of an unknown word, follow all the available strategies.

b. Regarding the use of strategies, similarly to former questions, there was disorientation amongst students.

Schmitt et al. (2000: 207) contributed an important clarification to the situation. Even if the sample consisted of EFL students, the described strategies were quite similar and therefore comparable.

Comparing the strategies' popularity in both researches the following general conclusion arises: In our research, the *appeal to the teacher* followed by *appeal to a dictionary* are considered the most popular and helpful strategies. In Schmitt's corresponding research, the "teacher's seek" cannot be marked as a popular category (in contradistinction to the "use of dictionary"). We believe that this antinomy can be explained via the conclusions of another relevant research:

> "The interpretation of this antinomy, I believe, can be attributed to the fact that in the researches that have been carried on so far in international literature, the supporting strategies of learning are being studied in a clearly local (non-framed) level." (Κωστούλη 2001: 364–365)

On the other hand, *appeal to a dictionary* is rather low, but it displays a higher grade of effectiveness in students' opinion, an antinomy which is present in both researches. Dictionary use offers important advantages (Γαβριηλίδου 2001: 57–58): it is quick, precise, doesn't require "exposure" to the school environment (as "social" strategies do), is less laborious than metacognitive strategies—at least for a non-initiate—is a support strategy by defi-

nition, and finally is more automated, hence more popular (Schmitt et al. 2000: 201).

The *appeal the peers* strategy indicated dissimilar percentages in both researches, but more or less the same subdued percentages of effectiveness. Consequently the co-operation with the other student sitting side by side is rather more popular among Greek students. This behaviour could appear due to specific homogeneous social and educational conditions in Greece (Χατζησαββίδης 1993: 390–394, Ιορδανίδου 1995: 521; Παπαδημητρίου et al. 1996: 353–354) in comparison to Japan.

The leading role of the element of automated solution is also indicated in the difference between the strategies *asking the person sitting next to me* and *observing my classmates during lesson.* We consider this difference to be delicate but rather important. Even if the first one is a *definition* strategy (Schmitt et al. 2000), the latter is actually a metacognitive strategy, analogous to extraction of meaning via context. The effectiveness of this strategy is also graded low among students.

Finally, *family environment* also summons high selection proportions, exactly the same to *asking the person next to me* (88.7%), a result which can be easily interpreted in terms of prestige, automation and availability.

Furthermore teacher's effectiveness is even higher than Schmitt's research (61%), despite the fact that nation-wide scale Greek professors are rated below average from their students (PISA 2004: 223). The higher teacher's effectiveness is not questioned in any case by students and the fact that *question towards the teacher* greatly differs in the two researches is a phenomenon for further examination.

Quite interesting are classmates' markings from the students themselves, as a strategy for learning words. While they are considered to be popular strategies, their effectiveness is seriously questioned. Among others, this particular lack of confidence is blocking learning process (Kambakis 1992).

The lack of other strategies for unknown lexemes in all students' answers—there was not even a single suggestion—requires further analysis. The lack of responses indicates, as far as we are concerned, a lack of methodology and imagination regarding the "arsenal" of strategy use on behalf of the students. On a second level of analysis this lack might be attributed to the absence of relevant attention in educational goals. We believe that an inclusion of teaching learning strategies would greatly help lexical and cognitive students' improvement (Mendoza et al. 1997: 481–490, Μαρμαρινός et al. 1999: 328–332).

6 Conclusion

The general conclusions from our research can be summarized as following:

i. Mainstream students' approach: Institutional speech is considered the best lexical source.

ii. Confusion in lexical quantity: less is difficult, thus more.

iii. Identification between "written" vocabulary and "good" vocabulary.

iv. Identification between lexical knowledge and school success.

v. No real, personalized distinction between strategies.

vi. More popular are the immediate strategies: asking the teacher, using dictionary than texts.

vii. Teacher is considered a protagonist in vocabulary teaching by students.

References

Αρχάκης, Α., & Μ. Κονδύλη. 2004. *Εισαγωγή σε ζητήματα κοινωνιογλωσσολογίας*. Αθήνα: Νήσος.

Αρχάκης, Α. 2005. *Γλωσσική διδασκαλία και σύσταση των κειμένων*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Πατάκη.

Chamot, U.A. 2005. Language Learning Strategy Instruction: Current issues and research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 25.112–130. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Γαβριηλίδου, Ζ. 2001. Η καλλιέργεια του λεξιλογίου με τη βοήθεια των τάξεων αντικειμένων. 3η Επιστημονική Ημερίδα Νέας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας με θέμα *«Η καλλιέργεια της γραπτής γλωσσικής έκφρασης στο σχολείο: αρχές, προβλήματα, προοπτικές και διδακτικές προσεγγίσεις»*, 55–70. Αλεξανδρούπολη.

Γεώργα, Δ. 1999. *Κοινωνική ψυχολογία*. Τόμος Β′. Αθήνα: Ελληνικά Γράμματα.

Gee, P.J. 1995. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Hasan, R. & G. Williams (eds.). 1996. *Literacy in Society*. London- New York: Longman.

Hosenfeld, C. 1976. Learning about learning: Discovering our students' strategies. *Foreign Language Annals* 9.117–29.

Ιορδανίδου, Α. 1996. Η «λεξιπενία» των μαθητών: ερευνητική προσέγγιση. *Μελέτες για την ελληνική γλώσσα* 16.517–528. Thessaloniki.

Kambakis-Vougiouklis, P. 1992. Native and non-native readers' accuracy and confidence when guessing meanings of unknown words. PhD dissertation, University of Wales, UK.

Καρακατσάνης, Γ. 1994. *Θέματα εκπαιδευτικής αξιολόγησης*. Art of Text. Θεσσαλονίκη.

Κασσωτάκης, Ι. 1981. *Η αξιολόγηση της επιδόσεως των μαθητών. Μέσα, Μέθοδοι, Προβλήματα, Προοπτικές*. Αθήνα: Γρηγόρης.

Κοντογιαννοπούλου-Πολυδωρίδη, Γ., Ι. Σόλομων & Γ. Στάμελος. 2000. *Ανιχνεύοντας την επίδοση στην ελληνική εκπαίδευση*. Αθήνα: Μεταίχμιο.

Κωστούλη, Τ. 2001. Η γλώσσα της σχολικής τάξης στο πλαίσιο της εγγραματοσύνης των γλωσσικών ειδών: κειμενικές στρατηγικές και οικοδόμηση της γνώσης. *Μελέτες για την ελληνική γλώσσα 21*, 359–370. Θεσσαλονίκη.

Laufer, B. 1998. The Development of Passive and Active Vocabulary in a Second Language: Same or Different. *Applied* Linguistics 19.255–271. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mendoza de Hopkins, N., and R. Mackay. 1997. Good and Bad readers: A look at the high and low achievers in an ESP Canadian Studies Reading

and Writing Course. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 53.473–490. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Μαρμαρινός, Ι., Ε. Παπαδημητρίου, Β. Μπαλάση & Ε. Ρένζουλα. 1999. Ο ρόλος των μεταγνωσιακών στρατηγικών στη βελτίωση της ικανότητας για παραγωγή επεξηγηματικών κειμένων από μαθητές της δευτεροβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης. *Μελέτες για την Ελληνική Γλώσσα 20*, 325–335. Θεσσαλονίκη.
Μπασλής, Ι. Ν. 2006. *Εισαγωγή στη διδασκαλία της γλώσσας. Μια σύγχρονη ολιστική και επικοινωνιακή προσέγγιση*. Αθήνα: Νεφέλη.
Oxford, R. L. 1990. *Language Learning Strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Newbury House.
Peacock, M. 1998. Beliefs about language learning and their relationship to proficiency. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 9.247–265. Oxford: Blackwell Ltd.
Pinker, S. 1995. *Το γλωσσικό ένστικτο*. Αθήνα: Κάτοπτρο.
Παπαδημητρίου, Ε. & Σ. Βοσνιάδου. 1996. Η ανάπτυξη της ικανότητας των παιδιών για απόδοση της σημασίας των λέξεων. *Μελέτες για την Ελληνική Γλώσσα* 17, 342–356. Θεσσαλονίκης: Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο.
Παπάς, Α. 1990. *Σύγχρονη θεωρία και πράξη της παιδείας*. Τόμος Α′. Αθήνα: Δελφοί.
Read, J. 2000. *Assessing vocabulary. Cambridge Language Assessment Series*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rubin, J. 1987. Learner Strategies: theoretical assumptions, research history and typology. In *Learner strategies in language learning*, ed. by A. Wenden and J. Rubin. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall International.
Savignon, J.S., and W. Chaochang. 2003. Communicative language teaching in EFL contexts: Learner attitudes and perceptions. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching (ALPSP)* 41.223–249.
Schmitt, N., and M. McCarthy. 2000. *Vocabulary Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Stoffer, I. 1995. University Foreign Language, Students' choice of vocabulary learning strategies as related to individual difference variables. PhD diss., University of Alabama.
Τοκατλίδου, Β. 1986. *Εισαγωγή στη Διδακτική των Ζωντανών Γλωσσών*. Αθήνα: Οδυσσέας.
Τοκατλίδου, Β. 2003. *Γλώσσα, επικοινωνία και γλωσσική εκπαίδευση*. Αθήνα: Πατάκης.
Τζιμώκας, Δ. 2003. Προβλήματα εκπαίδευσης. Αθήνα: Εθνικό και Καποδιστριακό Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών.
Yongqi Gu, P. 2003. Vocabulary learning in a second language: person, task, context and strategies. *TESL-EJ* 7.1–31.
Weinstein, C., and R. Mayer. 1986. The teaching of learning strategies. In *Handbook of research on teaching*, ed. by M.C. Wittrock, 315–327. New York: Collier Macmillan.
Wells, C.G. 1981. *Learning through interaction: The study of Language Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Choice: *Schooling Environment*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	1	1,6	1,6
1	1	1,6	3,2
2	2	3,2	6,5
3	6	9,7	16,1
4	10	16,1	32,3
5	42	67,7	100,0
Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *home*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	3	4,8	4,8
1	0	0	0
2	10	16,1	21,0
3	22	35,5	56,5
4	17	27,4	83,9
5	10	16,1	100,0
Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *other*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	30	48,4	48,4
1	4	6,5	54,8
2	10	16,1	71,0
3	7	11,3	82,3
4	1	1,6	83,9
5	10	16,1	100,0
Total	62	100,0	

Table M1: Distribution of grades given by students in question 3a.

Choice: *books*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	1	1,6	1,6
1	0	0	1,6
2	2	3,2	4,8
3	4	6,5	11,3
4	10	16,1	27,4
5	45	72,6	100,0
Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *Friends*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	4	6,5	6,5
1	9	14,5	21,0
2	13	21,0	41,9
3	21	33,9	75,8
4	8	12,9	88,7
5	7	11,3	100,0
Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *Newspapers/ magazines*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	5	8,1	8,1
1	9	14,5	22,6
2	22	35,5	58,1
3	9	14,5	72,6
4	12	19,4	91,9
5	5	8,1	100,0
Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *Television/ radio*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	3	4,8	4,8
1	10	16,1	21,0
2	13	21,0	41,9
3	18	29,0	71,0
4	9	14,5	85,5
5	9	14,5	100,0
Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *Other*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	46	74,2	74,2
1	1	1,6	75,8
2	2	3,2	79,0
3	2	3,2	82,3
4	1	1,6	83,9
5	10	16,1	100,0
Total	62	100,0	

Table M2: Distribution of grades given by students in question 3b.

Choice: *dictionary*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	4	6,5	6,5
1	2	3,2	9,7
2	7	11,3	21,0
3	8	12,9	33,9
4	3	4,8	38,7
5	38	61,3	100,0
Total	62	100,0	

Choice: *Asking the teacher*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	2	3,2	3,2
1	2	3,2	6,5
2	3	4,8	11,3
3	12	19,4	30,6
4	16	25,8	56,5
5	27	43,5	100,0
Total	62	100,0	

Choice: *Asking the person sitting next to me*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	7	11,3	11,3
1	14	22,6	33,9
2	21	33,9	67,7
3	10	16,1	83,9
4	7	11,3	95,2
5	3	4,8	100,0
Total	62	100,0	

Choice: *Asking my classmates during the lesson*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	9	14,5	14,5
1	15	24,2	38,7
2	16	25,8	64,5
3	10	16,1	80,6
4	10	16,1	96,8
5	2	3,2	100,0
Total	62	100,0	

Choice: *Home*			
Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
0	7	11,3	11,3
1	1	1,6	12,9
2	5	8,1	21,0
3	18	29,0	50,0

	4	19	30,6	80,6
	5	12	19,4	100,0
	Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *Through reading the school texts*				
	Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
	0	8	12,9	12,9
	1	5	8,1	21,0
	2	5	8,1	29,0
	3	21	33,9	62,9
	4	13	21,0	83,9
	5	10	16,1	100,0
	Total	62	100,0	
Choice: *Other*				
	Grades	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Cumulative %**
	0	59	95,2	95,2
	1	2	3,2	98,4
	2	1	1,6	100,0
	Total	62	100,0	

Table M3: Distribution of grades given by students in question 4.

Question	Choices	Average	Median	Standard deviation
3a	A, “school”	4,4	5,0	1,1
3a	B, “home”	3,3	3,0	1,2
3a	C, “other”	1,6	1,0	1,9
3b	A, “books”	4,5	5,0	1,0
3b	B, “friends”	2,7	3,0	1,4
3b	C, “magazines”	2,5	2,0	1,4
3b	D, “television”	2,8	3,0	1,4
3b	E, “other”	1,0	0	1,9
4	A, “lexicon”	3,9	5,0	1,6
4	B, “teacher”	3,9	4,0	1,3
4	C, “person sitting next to me”	2,1	2,0	1,3
4	D, “schoolmates”	2,0	2,0	1,4
4	E, “home”	3,2	3,5	1,5
4	F, “reading the school texts”	2,9	3,0	1,6
4	G, “other”	1	0	0,3

Table M9: Averages in students’ assessments from the corresponding questionnaire

Notes:

A. Regarding question 3b, minimal statistically significant deviation is 1.4.

B. Regarding question 4, minimal statistically significant deviation is 0.7.

C. There is no statistically significant deviation in question 3a.