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Original Research

The Effects of Aligning Vocabulary Teaching Practices with Learners' Learning Strategy Preferences on Vocabulary Achievement: Grade 11 Students in Focus

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the impact of teaching vocabulary strategies on vocabulary accomplishment when they align with learners' preferred learning methods. Data was collected from 75 randomly selected students and eight top 10 students through interviews. A quasi-experimental point scale and a single sample t-test were used to analyze the observed mean, considering identified learning techniques. The results showed that all eighteen distinct language learning strategies had mean scores higher than the predicted mean, indicating that most students liked the methods used to understand the research design. The experimental group received an intervention, while the control group received standard instruction. Vocabulary accomplishment tests were used to compare the groups' vocabulary achievement before and after the intervention. The results showed no significant difference in mean scores before the intervention. However, at the end of the intervention, the experimental group's average mean score was higher than the control group's, indicating that teaching vocabulary in a way that complements students' preferred learning strategies significantly impacts vocabulary achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary has a major role in the development of communication skills in any second or foreign language. In this regard, studying vocabulary is crucial to learning any language, second or foreign, according to Thornbury (2002) and McCarthy (1990). A large and varied vocabulary can help language learners improve their speaking, reading, writing, and thinking abilities (Walters, 2004; Rubin & Thompson, 1994). In a similar vein, Schmitt (1997), referenced in Douglas (2004), notes that people can communicate effectively and understandably even when they merely link words together without giving any thought to grammar rules.

Students' vocabulary skills determine how well they can learn the target language and speak intelligibly. Studying vocabulary is therefore one of the most important aspects of learning a language. But without the assistance of efficient learning techniques,

Oxford (1990) and Schmitt (1997) contend that acquiring the necessary vocabulary skills in the context of learning English as a second language is challenging. In this sense, Schmitt (2000) claims that methods help learning become easier, faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, and more context-adaptive. To be more precise, vocabulary acquisition procedures enable students to acquire a new word, retain it in long-term memory, come up with an automatic definition, and utilise it in written or spoken language (Catalán, 2003).

The talk that was just had makes clear that one of the most important tools for helping students who are having trouble acquiring vocabulary is vocabulary learning strategies. Promoting students' vocabulary acquisition skills is the educational implication. Aligning vocabulary teaching methods with students' preferred learning strategies is one way to do this. According to Cohen and Macaro (2007), learners' learning techniques in language classroom education should receive a lot of attention because pupils seem to succeed in learning the English language regardless of the teaching methods used. In a similar vein, Oxford (1990) asserts that language instruction is more effective when it better aligns with the chosen learning strategies and styles of the students. Based on the students' chosen learning methodologies and learning styles, teachers should choose a framework and instructional tactics that support students' learning (Ghazal, 2007). This proves that when teaching strategies are in line with students' preferred learning strategies, learning happens most efficiently. This is meant to show that teachers should match their teaching methods to their students' preferred learning strategies in order to help them become independent language learners. It does not imply that using one's own preferred modes of instruction is the best way to help students learn a foreign language. Effective teaching and learning style matching can be accomplished, according to Grasha (1996), if teachers are aware of the needs, capacities, potentials, and preferred learning strategies or styles of their students.

Numerous research works (e.g., Ford & Chen, 2001; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009; Fatolah & Aliakbar, 2012) have examined the impact of aligning instructional techniques with learning tactics, specifically with regard to students' academic achievements. The impact of matching teaching and learning styles on students' academic progress and attitude was examined in a study conducted by Ford and Chen (2001). The results showed that, particularly in foreign language training, tailoring teaching approaches to learners' preferences can greatly improve academic accomplishment and student attitudes.

The impact of specific instruction in vocabulary learning tactics on students' performance on vocabulary tests was investigated by Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009). The vocabulary test results indicate that the experimental group did better than the control group. The impact of vocabulary learning technique instruction on the ESP vocabulary achievement of accounting majors at Islamic Azad University in Dareshahr was investigated by Fatolah and Aliakbar (2012). The post-test results demonstrated that teaching vocabulary learning strategies had a beneficial effect on students' ESP vocabulary achievement.

According to the findings of the aforementioned research, it is feasible to draw

the conclusion that when teaching methods align with students' chosen learning methodologies, vocabulary proficiency and academic performance can both increase. If this is the case, it would be beneficial to look into the possible impacts of this alignment, especially in the context of EFL vocabulary development in Ethiopian high schools. It is important to review the vocabulary requirements included in the English curriculum for grade eleven, which is the subject of this study. According to the syllabus, as English is the language of instruction in high schools and above, one of the language elements that students should acquire is vocabulary. This will help them succeed in their academic studies and meet the language's communication expectations. This necessitates that the pupils expand their vocabulary using a range of learning techniques. Additionally, teachers are urged to assist pupils in their learning processes as much as they can. Above all, as the syllabus states (the revised English syllabus for grades 11–12, 2016), vocabulary instruction should focus on providing students with tools that enable them to accomplish the target language vocabulary and acquire the necessary information. (The 2016 updated English curriculum for grades 11 and 12)

However, to the best of the researcher's teaching experiences at various high schools and universities, the majority of Ethiopian students showed unpromising vocabulary knowledge and achievement. The inconsistency between learners' preferred learning strategies and teachers' methods of teaching vocabulary may be one of the causes. This gap is indicated by a few local research (Kibire, 2017; Yonata, 2020, for example). For instance, Kibire's exploratory study evaluated the vocabulary teaching techniques used by EFL instructors of grade 11 at Felege Birhan General Secondary and Preparatory School. The results showed that teachers' methods for teaching vocabulary did not take learners' preferred vocabulary learning strategies into account. Yonata's descriptive study evaluated how well grade 10 students at Ginchi Secondary School aligned their preferred vocabulary learning strategies with the way their teachers taught vocabulary. The results showed that learners' preferred vocabulary learning methodologies and teachers' instruction of vocabulary were out of sync. The studies' findings also showed that students' achievement and lexical understanding were lacking.

The results of the above-mentioned local studies unequivocally show that learners' learning strategies and teachers' methods for teaching vocabulary are at odds. As a result, it was challenging to acquire the desired vocabulary and accomplishments. The researcher conducted this investigation as a result of this research gap and his findings. In light of this, the investigation addressed the following research questions:

1. Which English vocabulary study method do students in grade 11 prefer?

2. Does students' vocabulary achievement significantly change when vocabulary teaching methods are in line with their learning strategies?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Research Paradigm and design

There were two phases to this research project. First, a descriptive survey study

approach was used to ascertain the students' favourite vocabulary acquisition strategies. Quantitative information was gathered through a questionnaire, and qualitative information was gathered through interviews. A quasi-experimental study methodology was then used to investigate the effects on learners' learning motives of matching their preferred learning strategies with vocabulary teaching methodologies. This inspired the researcher to use a pragmatic research paradigm in combination with different sample techniques, data sources, data collection tools, and research designs.

Research Setting, participants, and Sampling Techniques

The Ambo Town Administration's Ambo Preparatory School served as the study's site. The country's capital, Addis Ababa, is roughly 120 kilometres away from this school, which is situated in the west. Students in grade 11 from the 2022 entrance were the contestants. 75 students who were selected at random to participate in the descriptive phase of the study were given the questionnaire to complete. Specifically, eight of the top 10 students were chosen and interviewed. Since they are thought to produce more accurate and valid information than students in the middle and lower grades, students in the top 10 grades were chosen for the interview. Two sections of grade 11 students were randomly selected using a lottery system from among the 15 sections of the year for the second quasi-experimental phase of the study. They were divided into the experimental and control groups at random.

Data Gathering Tools, Procedures, and Method of Analysis

Takac's (2008) vocabulary learning approach questionnaire was modified in order to gather pertinent data for the study's initial descriptive phase. 34 questionnaire items were created and categorised into five groups based on vocabulary acquisition strategies. A zero–five point scale was used to quantify respondents' responses to the questionnaire items. The typical response in this instance was 3, which corresponds to the study's anticipated mean. To determine whether the observed mean of a sample substantially deviated from the expected mean of the population, the one-sample t-test was utilised. Ultimately, in order to triangulate the findings of the questionnaire data, interview guides were created and information was gathered.

The study's primary findings were taken into consideration while creating the vocabulary instruction materials for the intervention. Pre-vocabulary accomplishment tests were used to gather data from the experimental and control groups in order to compare the outcomes of their prior vocabulary exams and look for patterns. To determine if the intervention had a substantial impact on the groups' vocabulary achievement, data were gathered from the participants using the post-vocabulary achievement exam after the intervention. The pre- and post-data outcomes of the two groups were analysed and compared using the independent sample t-test. Version 25 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse quantitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Preferences for Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The goal of the study's initial descriptive survey phase was to determine which vocabulary learning techniques the majority of students preferred. This was accomplished by gathering relevant data via interviews and a questionnaire. The tables below display one sample t-test result.

Table 1

Students' Presences of Determination Vocabulary Learning Strategies Results

Strategy	Mean	SD	Ex. mean	T-value	Sig
I prefer to imagine the context in which the new word is used to guess the meaning of a word.	3.8	1.105	3	10.518	0.000
I prefer to guess the meanings of new words using synonym clues	4.04	0.979	3	13.627	0.000
I prefer to guess the meanings of new words using antonyms, clues	3.3.	1.189	3	6.068	0.000
I prefer to guess the meanings of new words using definition clues	3.59	1.306	3	7.207	0.000
I prefer to guess the meanings of new words using example clues	3.97	1.00	3	12.764	0.000
I guess meanings of new words using punctuation clues	3.99	0.862	3	14.936	0.000
I prefer to analyse a word's parts to guess the meaning.	4.05	0.820	3	16.400	0.000
I prefer to analyze the parts of speech of a new word by guessing the meaning.	4.05	0.943	3	14.267	0.000
I prefer to guess the meanings of new words based on my knowledge of word forms	3.53	1.288	3	6.951	0.000
I prefer my knowledge of the world (my own. experience) to guess the meaning of the new word I find while reading or listening	3.45	1.200	3	6.879	0.000
I prefer to learn unfamiliar words using dictionaries	4.33	0.777	3	20.436	0.000

The findings of a one-sample t-test revealed that, of the eleven distinct determination vocabulary acquisition strategies evaluated, as indicated in Table 1, all of the strategies' observed means exceeded their expected means. This suggests that most students favoured methods like looking up new vocabulary terms in dictionaries, evaluating words and parts of speech, visualising the situation, and using definitions, instances, synonyms, antonyms, and punctuation hints. The findings are corroborated by the interview's outcomes. Student 6 utilised the following, for instance:

> *S6: Whenever I come across a word I'm not familiar with, I like to look for any hints that will help me understand it, such as synonyms, antonyms, and punctuation. Since a term belongs to a specific portion of speech, I always prefer to infer its meaning by dissecting its constituent pieces. I always prefer to deconstruct new words into their component pieces and then estimate their meaning if I am unable to understand them and I know they have multiple meanings. Sometimes, I look up a new word's meaning by looking at its shape. I usually prefer to use a dictionary if I am unable to learn new words by other methods, such as picturing the context and applying contextual clue procedures.*

According to the above sample interview results, practically every determination or discovery vocabulary acquisition strategy that was evaluated was preferred by the students.

Eleven distinct determinations, or discovery, learning strategies, such as contextual cues, dictionaries, examining word parts and parts of speech, etc., were evaluated based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews, and it was discovered that these were the learning strategies that most students preferred. The results align with the majority of academics who have debated learners' choices for various exploratory vocabulary acquisition approaches. Contextual clues, for instance, are defined as clues like definitions, examples, synonyms, antonyms, and punctuation that are pedagogically or naturally added to the texts to support students in understanding the meaning of novel words. These are regarded as crucial strategies that aid students in deducing the meanings of unknown words (Nagay and Scott, 2000; Robb, 2013). According to Nation (2013), students should use dictionaries, whether bilingual or monolingual, as they can be used for a variety of reasons and provide information about a term. This will help them grasp the word in great detail. Nation (2013) goes on to say that prefixes and suffixes can alter the form and meaning of content words in a variety of languages. Therefore, being aware of prefixes and suffixes might help pupils understand the meaning of new vocabulary words.

Table 2

Students' Preferences of Social Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Strategy	Mean	SD	Ex. mean	T-value	Sig
I prefer to ask my teacher to explain the meaning of the new word.	3.15	1.343	3	4.171	0.000
I asked my classmates and friends to explain the meaning of the word.	3.39	1.355	3	5.669	0.000
I prefer to ask members of my family such as my father, mother, brothers, or sisters to learn the meaning of the new words.	1.69	0.822	3	-8.503	0.000
I prefer to ask some fluent speakers of English to learn the meaning of the new words.	1.31	.596	3	-18.167	0.000

Table 2 above depicts the results of data regarding the four different social vocabulary learning strategies preferred by the majority of students. As shown in the table, the mean score of two of the strategies asked by their teachers and classmates (X = 3.39 and X = 3.15) was above the expected mean. This suggests that most students prefer strategies to learn new vocabulary items. The results are consistent with the interview data. For example, student 5 responded as follows:

> ***S5****: When we are in class, I usually prefer to discuss the meanings of newly learned words with nearby classmates. I also prefer to ask my teacher about new words. But there is one in my family who could tell me the meanings of new words.*

This interview data indicates that students usually prefer to ask their teacher and classmates about new words' meanings. Thus, the questionnaire and interview results complement each other.

However, as the data in Table 2 above indicates, the observed means of two of the strategies (i.e., asking for the meanings of the newly acquired words of their family members and some fluent speakers of English) were found to be below the expected group mean value. This indicates that strategies were rarely preferred by students to learn the meaning of newly adopted words. Similar results were also obtained from the interview data, in which almost all of the respondents replied that asking their family members and some fluent speakers of English the meanings of newly acquired vocabulary items was not the strategy they preferred to master. Although Oxford (1990) acknowledged the role of families in helping learners learn the meanings of various English words, the findings of the present study showed that learners are not assisted by their families.

Table 3

Students' Preferences of Memory Vocabulary Learning Strategies Results

Strategy	Mean	SD	Ex. mean	T-value	Sig
I prefer to write the meaning of new words in my mother tongue to remember them.	1.209	1.068	3	-3.299	0.00
I prefer to link the new words to visual images (pictures) to remember their meaning	1.69	0.771	3	-9.065	0.00
I prefer to link new vocabulary items to real objects and remember the meanings.	2.16	1.209	3	-2.436	0.00
I prefer to make a mental picture of a new word's written form to remember the meanings.	1.59	0.680	3	-11.637	0.00
I prefer to link the new words to other English words that have similar beginning letters (e.g. prank: pray, pretty, prod).	2.08	1.94	3	-3.046	0.00
I prefer to say the meaning of new words out loud repeatedly to remember them.	1.52	0.704	3	-12.048	0.00

As displayed in Table 3 above, the results of the one-sample t-test revealed that the observed mean of six different memory learning strategies explored through the questionnaire was lower than the expected mean (X = 3). This indicated that the memory vocabulary learning strategy was not preferred by the majority of the 11 students. Interview data collected in this regard was also similar to these findings. For instance, student 4 responded as follows:

> ***S4****: When I was in lower grades (i.e., grades 1, 2, etc.), I sometimes preferred to learn the meaning of various words by linking them to visual images (pictures) or real objects. Our teachers also let us say some words loudly to remember their*

meanings. However, I do not normally prefer these strategies since they are more appropriate for elementary students than high school students.

As interview data showed, although students used different memory vocabulary learning strategies to learn the meanings of new vocabulary items when they were in kindergarten and elementary school, they have not preferred them since then. As far as participants of this study were high school students, the data results of both the questionnaire and interview coincide with Takač (2008) who argues that memory vocabulary learning strategies like visual aids and pictures are more effective with beginners or young learners.

Table 4

Students' Preferences of Cognitive Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Strategy	Mean	SD	Ex. mean	T-value	Sig
I prefer to write the meanings of new vocabulary items in a separate notebook and study them	3.77	0.994	3	6.7360	0.000
I prefer to group newly learned words according to the similarity of pronunciation to remember them	1.60	0.637	3	-19.042	0.000
I prefer to group newly learned words according to the similar spelling to remember them	1.59	0.699	3	-17.503	0.000
I prefer to group newly learned words according to opposite meanings to remember them	1.65	0.744	3	-13.671	0.000
I prefer to group newly learned words according to the similarity of meanings to remember them	1.53	0.622	3	-20.407	0.000
I prefer to group newly learned words according to word families to remember their meaning	3.32	1.307	3	2.121	0.037

Table 4 above shows the results of different cognitive vocabulary learning strategy preferences of students to learn and remember new words. The observed mean of two of the cognitive strategies investigated, writing the meanings of newly acquired vocabulary items in a separate notebook and grouping them according to word families (X = 3.77 and 3.32, respectively), was found to be greater than the expected mean. This implies that most students always write new vocabulary items in separate notebooks. They also prefer to group newly discovered words according to word families to remember their meanings.

The results of the data obtained from the majority of students during the interview support these results. Most respondents noted that they always preferred writing the meanings of new words in a separate notebook and grouping them according to word families. This was to remember the words' meanings. The results were complemented by the findings of Schmitt (1997), who reported that taking notes in class invites learners to create their structure for newly learned words and also affords additional exposure during reviews.

Table 4 shows that each observed mean score of four of the strategies (i.e., grouping

newly learned words according to their similarity in pronunciation, spelling, meanings, and their opposite meanings) was, however, below the expected mean. The findings indicate that most students prefer not to learn and remember the words' meanings. Most respondents' interviews support these questionnaire results. For example, student 1 said:

> *When I come across new words, I usually write their meanings at the back of my exercise book and read them later. I also prefer to group newly learned words according to their word families so that I am more likely to remember them. However, I never enjoy grouping newly discovered words according to their similarities in pronunciation, spelling, meanings, and opposite meanings. This is to learn them and recall them later.*

The results obtained from the questionnaire and the interview show that the majority of students prefer very limited cognitive learning strategies to enhance their vocabulary skills. However, Hedge (2000) suggests that learners need a range of cognitive strategies to learn the meanings of many more unfamiliar words to meet the language's communicative demands.

Table 5

Students' Preferences of Meta-cognitive Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Strategy	Mean	SD	Ex. mean	T-value	Sig
I prefer to do different vocabulary activities/tasks after class to learn more vocabulary items	3.31	1.335	3	5.232	.000
I prefer to read novels and short stories to remember newly learned words	1.64	.816	3	-9.125	.000
I prefer to read newspapers and magazines to remember newly learned words by	1.44	.620	3	14.797	.000
To remember the newly learned words, I prefer to use them when I speak in English	3.29	1.388	3	4.782	.000
I prefer to construct my sentences using newly learned words to remember their meaning.	3.47	1.329	3	6.300	.000

Table 5 above shows data collected regarding students' preferences for five different meta-cognitive vocabulary learning strategies. The observed mean score of three of the strategies, such as constructing own sentences using newly learned words, using the words while speaking English, and doing different vocabulary activities after class (X = 3.47, 3.29, and 3.31, respectively), was found to be greater than the expected mean of this study (X = 3). This indicates that the majority of the students usually prefer strategies to remember the meanings of newly learned words.

Among the strategies investigated, the observed means of strategies like reading novels or short stories and newspapers or magazines (X = 1.64 and 1.44, respectively) were found to be lower than the expected mean, which implies that most of the students rarely preferred these strategies to learn the meanings of new words.

Results from both the questionnaire and interview indicate that doing different vocabulary activities after class and constructing sentences using newly learned words were the strategies preferred by the majority of students. The findings are compatible with those of Webb (2005), who argues that students learn new words more when they can use them in their speaking or writing or when they become part of their active vocabulary. Schmitt (1997) further stated that strategies help learners control and evaluate their learning and enable them to achieve communicative goals despite limited vocabulary knowledge.

Generally, the results of data obtained through administering questionnaires and interviews in the first descriptive survey part of the study revealed that the majority of students tended to prefer eleven different determinations: two social, two cognitive, and three meta-cognitive, for a total of eighteen vocabulary learning strategies to determine and consolidate the meanings of new vocabulary items. Based on the key findings identified in the descriptive phase of the study above, vocabulary lessons were prepared for intervention. Then, the second quasi-experimental phase of the study was conducted to check the potential effects of aligning the learning strategies preferred by the majority of students on their vocabulary achievement.

Students' Vocabulary Achievement

As stated above, based on the strategy preferences of the majority of the students, vocabulary lessons for intervention were prepared, and the second quasi-experimental phase of the study was conducted to investigate if the intervention had any significant effects on learners' vocabulary achievement by collecting data through pre- and post-vocabulary achievement tests. The following table reveals the results of the independent sample t-test.

Table 6

Comparison of Experimental and Controlled Groups Means of Pre- and post-vocabulary Achievement Results

Test	Group	Respondents	No. of items	Mean	Std. Dev.	T-value	sig
pre-test	Experimental	63	35	42.76	8.018	-114	.909
	Control	65	35	42.92	7.938	-114	.909
Post-test	Experimental	63	35	76.24	9.281	19.044	.000
	Control	65	35	45.22	9.147	19.040	.000

Table 6 above illustrates the pre-and post-intervention vocabulary test results of the control and experimental groups. As the table shows, the mean pre-vocabulary achievement results of the experimental group were 42.76, and those of the control group were 42.92 with standard deviations (SD = 8.018 and 7.938, respectively). The mean scores of the two groups were not statistically significant since $p > 0.05$ before the intervention, which implied that the two groups had similar vocabulary achievement results, which in turn confirmed

the null hypothesis and rejected the alternative hypothesis.

The post-test mean scores of both groups are also shown in the table above. As can be seen from the table, the mean score of the experimental group was 76.24 and that of the control group was 45.22, with standard deviations of 9.28 and 9.147, respectively. The mean scores of the groups are statistically significant at alpha level 0.05 since there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the groups in the post-test. Students in the experimental group made a significant improvement in their post-vocabulary achievement results compared to those in the control group.

The finding, thus, seems to indicate that the alignment of vocabulary teaching practices with students' learning strategy preferences makes a considerable contribution to improve students' performance in their vocabulary achievement results. This finding is harmonious with Mizumoto and Takeuchi's (2009) study result, which examined the effectiveness of explicit instruction of VLSs in Japanese universities on the vocabulary test result, and the results of the study show that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the vocabulary test.

CONCLUSIONS

The result of one sample t-test indicated that the observed mean score of each of the 18 different vocabulary learning strategies was greater than the expected mean score. This indicated that the majority of the students preferred the strategies to learn the meanings of new vocabulary items.

The results of the independent sample t-test revealed that the average mean scores of vocabulary achievement of students in both experimental and control groups were not statistically significant at alpha level 0.05 before the intervention, which implied that the two groups scored similar results in their vocabulary achievement test. After the intervention, however, the mean scores of the groups were statistically significant (P 0.05). That is to say, the average mean score of students in the experimental group was higher than (x = 76.24) that of students in the control group (x = 45.22). This signifies that the alignment of vocabulary teaching practices with students' learning strategy preferences makes a considerable contribution in improving students' vocabulary achievement. Based on the key findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- As far as vocabulary learning strategies enable learners to learn the meanings of various vocabulary items and help them develop their vocabulary skills and achievements, every student should know the importance of using different strategies.
- Some learners may be uncertain about which strategy works best for them. Therefore, teachers should provide a wide range of instructional support so that students can use their learning strategies more effectively.
- To improve learners' vocabulary skills and achievement, instead of focusing solely on conventional methods of presenting vocabulary to students, aligning vocabulary teaching practices with

learners' learning strategies would be worth considering.

- Teachers should be given different seminars and workshops on the current principles and theories of vocabulary teaching to enhance their students' vocabulary skills and achievement.

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DECLARATION

The authors declare that there is no competing interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings are available within the article materials

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