Factors Determining Saudi Learners' Difficulties in Attaining EFL Vocabulary

Mohammed Abdulaziz Albousaif
MA in Applied Linguistics
(Newcastle, Australia)

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle, Australia

September, 2011
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Mohammed Albousaif

(Signed): ................................................................................................... (Candidate)

Date: 30 September, 2011
Dedication

To my mother, Mariam Addesmal, and my father, Abdulaziz Albousaif
whose prayers and encouragement have given me the hope
and strength to pursue my professional dreams.

To my lovely wife and my best university colleague, Athari Almuraikhi
who never lost hope and patience, but unselfishly sacrificed
her time and pleasure to support me
throughout this journey.

To my two sons, Abdulaziz and Abdurrahman,
whose patience and understanding
inspired me to stay focused.
Acknowledgments

To the supervisors, mentors, colleagues and family members who played a role in my professional journey, I offer my heartfelt and warmest thanks and love to you all.

I am incredibly grateful to my principal supervisor and supportive mentor, Dr Jean Harkins. Dr Harkins, you have been by my side through everything. But much more than that, you are the person who has taught me all that is important regarding research and how to succeed in this field. I cannot express how grateful I am for the time you have invested in me. Thank you for all you have done and still do for me.

I am also thankful to Dr Mark Harvey who offered help in his own special way. My greatest appreciation to Dr Silvia Ratcheva, who helped in editing my thesis and who guided me throughout the methodology and data analysis chapters. Dr Silvia, thank you for your ceaseless support.

I am thankful to Dr Christo Moskovsky, with whom I studied a couple of helpful research courses during my study in the master level. I have learned many things from you, Dr Christo. Thank you. Many thanks to Dr Anita Berghout, my first supervisor, who gave me the primary guidelines to a successful thesis. Dr Anita, thank you for pushing me to become a better writer and researcher. This thesis was professionally edited by Dr Maria Freig. Many thanks, Dr Maria.

I am also grateful to the Human Research Ethics Committee for the helpful feedback and guidance in my professional work. Many thanks to the School of Humanities and Social Science and the Faculty of Education and Arts at the University of Newcastle.

To the many friends, colleagues and family members, who supported me to achieve my educational goals, I thank you with all my heart.
# Contents

Declaration ................................................................................................................................. II
Dedication ..................................................................................................................................... III
Acknowledgments ...................................................................................................................... IV
Contents .......................................................................................................................................... V
List of tables .................................................................................................................................. IX
List of figures ............................................................................................................................... XI
List of appendices ...................................................................................................................... XII
Abstract .......................................................................................................................................... XIII

## 1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

1.1 Overview of the thesis ........................................................................................................... 1
1.2 Background: Why study English vocabulary learning? ....................................................... 3
1.3 EFL teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia ......................................................................... 5
1.4 The problem of EFL vocabulary learning in Saudi Arabia ............................................... 12
1.5 Significance of the study ....................................................................................................... 13
1.6 Objectives and research questions ....................................................................................... 14
1.7 Scope of the study ................................................................................................................. 15
1.8 Definition of terms ............................................................................................................... 16

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................................................... 18

2.1 Vocabulary knowledge in L2 learning ................................................................................. 18
   2.1.1 Defining vocabulary knowledge .................................................................................. 18
   2.1.2 Aspects of L2 vocabulary knowledge .......................................................................... 21
   2.1.3 Current state of EFL vocabulary research ................................................................... 25
   2.1.4 EFL vocabulary learning in Saudi Arabia .................................................................... 33

2.2 The importance of vocabulary for L2 learners .................................................................. 38
   2.2.1 Teaching and learning vocabulary .............................................................................. 38
   2.2.2 How many words do L2 learners need to know? ....................................................... 42
   2.2.3 Importance of autonomous vocabulary learning ....................................................... 43
   2.2.4 Stages of learning new vocabulary ............................................................................ 45
2.3 Stage 1: Encountering new words ................................................................. 46
  2.3.1 Using guessing strategies ................................................................. 46

2.4 Stage 2: Getting the word form .............................................................. 53
  2.4.1 Using dictionaries to learn the form of a new word .................... 53
  2.4.2 Doing spoken and written repetition ........................................... 55

2.5 Stage 3: Getting the word meaning ....................................................... 58
  2.5.1 Using monolingual dictionaries .................................................... 58
  2.5.2 Taking advantage of picture dictionaries ................................... 62

2.6 Stage 4: Consolidating word form and meaning in memory .............. 66
  2.6.1 Using memory strategies ......................................................... 66
  2.6.2 Using verbal/written repetition in many varied examples .......... 72

2.7 Stage 5: Using the word ....................................................................... 75
  2.7.1 Using the new word with all its possible collocations ............... 75

2.8 Framing the research .............................................................................. 80

3. METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................... 84

3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................. 84

3.2 Research design ...................................................................................... 85
  3.2.1 Pilot study .................................................................................. 85
  3.2.2 The questionnaire .................................................................... 86
  3.2.3 The semi-structured interviews .............................................. 88

3.3 Recruiting procedure ............................................................................ 92

3.4 The sample ............................................................................................ 94

3.5 Data-collection procedure .................................................................... 94

3.6 Data-transfer procedure (from questionnaires to data sheets) .......... 95

3.7 Data coding and analysis ....................................................................... 96

4. ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE DATA ............................................. 98

4.1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 98
4.2 Participants’ academic achievement ................................................................. 99
4.3 Questionnaire data analysis .............................................................................. 102
  4.3.1 Stage one: Encountering the word ......................................................... 102
  4.3.2 Stage two: Getting the word form ......................................................... 111
  4.3.3 Stage three: Getting the word meaning ............................................... 118
  4.3.4 Stage four: Consolidating word form and meaning in memory .......... 124
  4.3.5 Stage five: Using the word ................................................................. 133
  4.3.6 Summary of the results of the questionnaire analysis ..................... 136

5. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS .............................................................. 140
5.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 140
5.2 Interview-data analysis .............................................................................. 142
  5.2.1 Stage one: Encountering the word ..................................................... 142
  5.2.2 Stage two: Getting the word form ................................................... 151
  5.2.3 Stage three: Getting the word meaning ....................................... 156
  5.2.4 Stage four: Consolidating word form and meaning in memory .... 161
  5.2.5 Stage five: Using the word ............................................................. 165
5.3 Summary of the results of the interviews ................................................ 168

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS ................................................................. 172
6.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 172
6.2 Stage one: Encountering the word .......................................................... 173
6.3 Stage two: Getting the word form .......................................................... 175
6.4 Stage three: Getting the word meaning ................................................ 177
6.5 Stage four: Consolidating word form and meaning in memory .......... 180
6.6 Stage five: Using the word ................................................................. 182
6.7 Summary of the findings ......................................................................... 184

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ........................................ 189
7.1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 189
7.2 Class time provided for English instruction ........................................... 190
7.3 Design of curricula and teaching materials ............................................. 192
List of tables

1. Table 4.2.1: Distribution of Respondents by English and Overall Academic Grade and Level of Education ................................................................................................................................. 101

2. Table 4.3.1.1: Frequency of Responses to Q1/1 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 103

3. Table 4.3.1.2: Frequency of Responses to Q2/1 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 105

4. Table 4.3.1.3: Frequency of Responses to Q3/1 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 106

5. Table 4.3.1.4: Frequency of Responses to Q4/1 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 107

6. Table 4.3.1.5: Frequency of Responses to Q5/1 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 109

7. Table 4.3.2.1: Frequency of Responses to Q1/2 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 111

8. Table 4.3.2.2: Frequency of Responses to Q2/2 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 113

9. Table 4.3.2.3: Frequency of Responses to Q3/2 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 115

10. Table 4.3.2.4: Frequency of Responses to Q4/2 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 116

11. Table 4.3.3.1: Frequency of Responses to Q1/3 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 119

12. Table 4.3.3.2: Frequency of Responses to Q2/3 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 121

13. Table 4.3.3.3: Frequency of Responses to Q3/3 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 122

14. Table 4.3.4.1: Frequency of Responses to Q1/4 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 125

15. Table 4.3.4.2: Frequency of Responses to Q2/4 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 126

16. Table 4.3.4.3: Frequency of Responses to Q3/4 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 128

17. Table 4.3.4.4: Frequency of Responses to Q4/4 by Level of Education and Grades in English ........................................................................................................................... 130
18. Table 4.3.4.5: Frequency of Responses to Q5/4 by Level of Education and Grades in English ................................................................. 131

19. Table 4.3.5.1: Frequency of Responses to Q1/5 by Level of Education and Grades in English ................................................................. 134

20. Table 4.3.6.1: Distribution of Strategies in Order of Preference and Use by Educational Level ........................................................................... 138
List of figures

1. Figure 1.5: Map of Saudi Arabia ................................................................. 8
2. Figure 2.3.1.2: A Mini Conversation from the Saudi English Curriculum ............ 50
3. Figure 2.7.1: An Example of How to Present the New Word with All its Possible Collocations ......................................................................................................................... 79
4. Figure 3.2.2: A Sample Question from the Questionnaire .................................. 87
5. Figure 4.3.6.1: Frequency (number) of all Agree and Disagree Responses by Grades in English ......................................................................................................................... 136
List of appendices

Appendix A: Students’ questionnaire ............................................................... 239
Appendix B: The questions of the interview ..................................................... 245
Appendix C: Students’ questionnaire (Arabic) ................................................... 249
Appendix D: The questions of the interview (Arabic) ....................................... 255
Appendix E: Certificate of approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee... 259
Appendix F: Information statement for the research project ............................. 263
Appendix G: Information statement for the research project (Arabic) ............... 267
Appendix H: Invitation to educational institutes ............................................... 271
Appendix I: Invitation to educational institutes (Arabic) .................................... 272
Appendix J: Adult students’ consent form for the research project ................... 273
Appendix K: Parents’ consent form for the research project ............................. 274
Abstract

Vocabulary learning is one of the fundamental parts of acquiring any language. Almost all L2 learners start their L2 education by learning primary words without which they cannot communicate using the L2 language. Vocabulary learning is a major challenge for foreign language learners. This research concentrates on the difficulties encountered by Saudi EFL learners in their vocabulary learning, which weaken their general EFL performance. Practically, it investigates what vocabulary learning strategies are most effective and the reasons for using or not using those strategies in each stage of vocabulary learning.

The main aim of this study is to explore which strategies Saudi EFL learners use at each stage of vocabulary-learning (Encountering new words - Getting the word form - Getting the word meaning - Consolidating word form and meaning in memory - Using the word). This study also gives special attention to the ways learners can be made more aware of the significance of autonomous vocabulary learning. The research aims to generate findings that could encourage Saudi EFL educators and authorities to support the use of more efficient vocabulary learning strategies.

The study employs two methods for collecting information: a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The research investigates Saudi learners’ experiences via a structured questionnaire, which was administered to 200 Saudi EFL students. This was followed up with interview sessions involving 20 of the participants. The purpose of the study is to identify the vocabulary learning strategies that Saudi EFL students do and do not use in every academic grade and the actual reasons for using or not using those strategies in every stage of the five essential vocabulary-learning stages; to measure how eager those students are to learn more effective vocabulary-learning strategies; and to explore the extent to which Saudi EFL teachers encourage their students to use more effective vocabulary learning strategies.

It is hoped that the results of this study can be beneficial to all ESL/EFL learners worldwide and to the field of linguistics in general since the issues Saudi EFL learners encounter are similar to those encountered by ESL/EFL learners worldwide.

Key words: Saudi EFL learners, EFL vocabulary, vocabulary-learning strategies, vocabulary autonomous learning