

## **Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies in American English File Course Books**

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## Abstract

Language learners make sense of new words as a major index of overall language proficiency by applying vocabulary learning strategies. The current study explores the ways in which a commercial course book, American English File, deals with *planning repetition*, *resource use and recording* as the three key vocabulary learning strategies. The study drew on Ranalli's framework (2003) for data analysis: A framework which measures both strategy use and its training in the material through a five-point Likert scale. The findings of the study revealed that repetition strategies were used more than the two other types in the course book which is not in line with the previous research literature (Baddeley, 1990; Hulstijn, 2001). The results also indicated that strategy training was almost lacking in all the three cases. Generally, the book's treatment of these key vocabulary strategies was not at all satisfactory. This calls for more attention of material developers to invest more in this problematic area. They should alleviate this problem by providing several activities illustrating the use of these key strategies while adhering to explicitness principle in strategy training.

### Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies in American English File Course Books

According to Oxford dictionary, a strategy is a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim. Oxford (2001) defines learning strategies as “operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information, specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (p. 166).

Vocabulary learning strategies are a subset of general learning strategies in the field of language teaching and learning. They could be regarded as “knowledge about the mechanisms” for vocabulary learning, “actions taken by students” to discover the meaning of the new words, to store them in long-term memory, to remember them on students’ own volition and to utilize them in oral and written communication (Catalan, 2003, p. 56).

Vocabulary plays a central role in developing a good command of both receptive and productive skills (Nyikos & Fan, 2007) and because the learners’ interpersonal and academic vocabulary needs outstrip their capability to learn all those required items, VLS (vocabulary learning strategies) research has come to help the learners (Folse, 2006; Hunt & Beglar, 2005; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999;). What is more, it is “not possible for students to learn all the vocabulary they need in the classroom” (Sokmen, 1997, p. 25).

Considering the important role of vocabulary in developing language skills, it seems essential that the learners become able to take the responsibility of their own vocabulary learning through strategy deployment. In addition, several research has indicated a positive relationship between strategy use and successful vocabulary learning. Ahmed (1989) investigated the connection between a cluster of VLS and successful learning. He found that high-achieving learners drew on strategies more often than their underachieving counterparts. Moreover, high-achievers were more

metacognitively aware of strategy use. Lawson and Hogben (1996) also disclosed that the learners who demonstrated a better later recall had used a wider range of VLS more frequently.

From what has been mentioned, VLS instruction seems as an inevitable part of any ELT course and its materials. However, with regard to the effect of training in VLS, the research findings are somewhat contradictory.

Mc Donough (1995) made a research review and concluded that the effect of training on the use of VLS was not significant. On the contrary, Stoffer (1995) argued that training led to VLS use. On the other hand, there exist several studies which indicate the effectiveness of training in keyword strategy (as cited in Hulstijn, 1997) or guessing from the context (Nation, 2001).

Evidently, this contradiction calls for more detailed studies on the topic while considering all potential training variables such as L2 proficiency level, learning context, cultural and educational background, learning style, teacher expertise, practice duration, etc (Ranalli, 2003).

However, with the premise that training will work at least to some degrees, some studies have focused on the analysis of the popular course books in the way they have treated the matter of VLS. One such comprehensive study has been conducted by Ranalli on three popular ELT books (Cutting Edge, New Headway & Innovations). The current study attempts to continue this trend in the analysis of the American English File. It aims at finding out how strong the book is in the treatment of the VLS. More specifically, the purpose is to determine the extent to which the book is helpful in developing certain key vocabulary strategies.

### **The Framework of the Study**

There are many types of VLS but only a few taxonomies have been still developed from among which the Nation's (2001) was selected for this study. The reason is that the Nation's taxonomy

has a teaching basis, clear in concepts and practical for analysis. Therefore, it is the most congruent with this study. Ranalli (2003) and Akbari (2015) have also employed the same taxonomy.

According to Nation, the VLS are divided into three broad categories: planning, sources and processes (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

Nation's Taxonomy of VLS (2001, P. 218)

General class of strategies	Types of strategies
Planning: choosing what to focus on and when to focus on it	Choosing words Choosing the aspects of word knowledge Choosing strategies Planning repetition
Sources: finding information about words	Analyzing the word Using context Consulting a reference source in L1 and L2 Using parallels in L1 and L2
Processes: establishing knowledge	Noticing Retrieving Generating

From this taxonomy a subset of three key strategies were selected for analysis:

- 1) Planning repetition, from the planning class.
- 2) Resource use, from the sources class.

3) Recording, from the processes class.

### **Planning Repetition**

There are many reasons why repetition is essential in vocabulary learning. One reason is the need for retaining the lexis or the need for its fluent access (Hulstijn, 2001).

Another reason is that repetition allows for a gradual collection of the knowledge of various kinds about the words (Nation, 2001).

Research in the field of ELT is generally in favor of distributed repetition rather than massed repetition (Baddeley, 1990; Bahrick, 1984; Bloom & Shuell, 1981). As the most forgetting occurs just after the primary learning, the first repetition should be planned for a time soon after that learning (Ranalli, 2003). The review intervals should then increase by correct retrievals (Hulstijn, 2001).

### **Resource Use: Dictionaries**

While dictionary use is widespread among learners, they do not use it efficiently in all the cases (Ranalli, 2003).

Research reveals that in fact many learners overuse the dictionaries especially for comprehension purposes (Hulstijn, 1993; Knight, 1994). They are also inclined to use bilingual dictionaries (Baxter, 1980; Schimitt, 1997). Additionally, learners do not usually draw on the all information provided in entries for their productive purposes (Bejoint, 1981).

### **Recording**

Recording strategies like those of maintaining a lexis notebook or words cards fall under the processes class of Nation's taxonomy. It is due to the fact that they are a subset of noticing type of strategies.

Many scholars advise on the benefits of keeping vocabulary notebooks. Likewise, they recommend training for more efficient use of the notebooks (Fowle, 2002; Lewis, 1997; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).

Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) suggest keeping a loose-leaf binder or index cards to allow for appropriate organization of increasing information.

The analytical framework developed by Ranalli (2003) based on the Nation's taxonomy (2001) has been employed for this study. The framework consists of two parts: research recommendations and the learner training guidelines. It is made practical in a five-point rating scheme as follows:

0 = Strategy not addressed, or mentioned only in passing

\* = Minimal attention given, or treatment at variance with recommendations in related research

\*\* = Moderate attention given, more or less appropriately

\*\*\* = Substantial attention given, more or less appropriately

\*\*\*\* = Thorough attention given, more or less appropriately

## **Method**

### **Material**

The American English File was selected for the VLS analysis since it is one of the most common ELT books in Iran's English institutes. The book has been first published in 1996 by Oxford University Press authored by Clive Oxenden and Christina Latham- Koenig. It is a general, main

course book intended for adults and young adults. Then, the elementary level (starter) of the book was randomly selected and became the target of investigation.

### **Student's book.**

The student's book was analyzed thoroughly and meticulously. It has 119 pages.

### **Workbook.**

Workbook was analyzed in the study because the workbooks often include vocabulary exercises. Furthermore, workbooks have been prepared for students' independent use, so they could be assessed as a site of strategy manifestation.

The American English file's workbook was also entirely analyzed in this exploration. It is a seventy-two page book. One more author, Jane Hudson, has also contributed to the workbook.

### **Other supporting material.**

The books are accompanied by a MultiROM (self-study CD-ROM and audio CD), a DVD and a supporting website. There is also a two-hundred and six page teacher's book.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study employs qualitative method in the form of content analysis. Content analysis concentrates on the analysis and interpretation of the recorded material to gain an understanding of the human behavior. It usually follows an initial research question which is supposed to be best answered by analyzing the documents (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen & Razavieh, 2006).

In order to answer the question of how certain vocabulary learning strategies are treated in American English File, the material was scrutinized within this research model. To this end,

Ranalli's framework (2003) was applied to figure out the required information on planning repetition, resource use and recording as the key strategies of focus.

The strategy use or the number of activities in which it occurs was calculated for each type of strategies. The most cases of vocabulary strategy use in each lesson were around the lexical focus of the same lesson but not restricted to that. It would appear from the statistics that repetition is by far the most dominant type of key strategies used in activities and exercises (see table 2). The number of times the resource strategy is used then sharply decreases and surprisingly the recording key strategy is non-used (table 2).

It is illuminating to emphasize that table 2 only concentrates on the first element of the analytical framework i.e. it shows the number of times the material uses research recommendations in its activities and exercises. The table does not provide any data on the second element of the framework; namely, strategy training. To illustrate more, the column headed as consulting a dictionary, glossary or the teacher reflects the number of activities which ask the learners to use such skills but it does not include the number of pronunciation activities since pronunciation activities are a few sites where training takes place but where there is no reference to a dictionary.

Table 2

#### Frequency of Strategy Types across Book Segments

Strategy	Vocabulary Focus	Repetition	Resource Use					
			Consulting a dictionary, glossary or the teacher	Using Context	Noticing		Retrieving	Generating
					Noticing	Recording		
1 A	Numbers 0-10 Simple Greetings	15	0	0	4	0	1	2
1B	Countries	17	0	0	6	0	1	2
1C	Nationalities Numbers 11-20	14	0	0	5	0	2	1
1 PE	The alphabet	12	0	0	4	0	4	1
Review		4	0	0	3	0	1	1
2 A	Small things	9	0	0	5	0	4	1
2 B	People & family	13	0	0	5	0	4	2
2 C	adjectives	9	0	1	11	0	3	4
2 PE	Personal information Numbers 21-100	10	0	0	5	0	2	2
Review		3	0	1	5	0	3	1
3 A	Common verbs 1	12	0	0	4	0	1	2
3 B	Food & drink	13	0	1	3	0	2	4
3 C	Jobs & places of work	12	1	1	4	0	3	3
3 PE	Telling time Days of the week	12	0	0	2	0	3	0
Review		5	0	0	2	0	3	1

4 A	A typical day	12	2	1	3	0	2	4
4 B	Common verbs 2 Part A	5	0	0	2	0	1	1
4 C	Common verbs 2 Part B Can: possibility & permission	10	0	1	2	0	4	1
4 PE	Understanding prices	15	0	0	2	0	1	0
Review		4	1	1	3	0	3	2
5 A	In, at, on: places	8	0	0	1	0	3	1
5 B	Review of daily routine verbs	11	2	1	3	0	1	2
5 C	Common verbs 3 Part A	8	0	2	3	0	3	2
5 PE	Ordinal numbers & months	11	0	0	1	0	2	3
Review		3	1	1	4	0	2	1
6 A	Hotels; in, on, under There is/there are	8	0	2	4	0	3	4
6 B	places	7	0	0	1	0	2	4
6 C	Common verbs 3 part B	8	0	0	3	0	3	1
6 PE	Asking for & giving opinions	6	0	0	2	0	0	2
Review		4	1	1	3	0	4	1
7 A	Verbs & verb phrases	7	1	1	5	0	2	1
7 B	Future time expressions	12	0	0	3	0	1	3

7 C	Weather Review: verb collocation	5	0	0	4	0	0	2
7 PE	Asking where places are	6	0	0	3	0	2	3
Review		5	1	1	4	0	2	1
N		364	10	16	124	0	78	66

Note. PE= practical English; Review= pages titled as *what do you remember?* and *what can you do?*

### Planning Repetition

Rating=\* (Minimal attention given, or treatment at variance with recommendations in related research)

Generally, vocabulary is regarded as being a crucial part of teaching/learning activities in both the student's book and the workbook since there is a vocabulary section in all five segments of every unit of both books. That is, there is a separate part dedicated to vocabulary in every two pages or we can say for every session of classes.

Repetition is attended vastly in many different tasks and activities.

In vocabulary bank which is at the end of the student's book and is referred to frequently in almost every session, we usually observe listen and repeat activities. Then, simple repetition activity is almost always followed by retrieval practices which ask the learners to cover the words, look at the pictures and say the things from memory.

Additionally, the last two pages of each unit – whose title is *what do you remember?* and *what can you do?* – help learners with review and retrieval of what has previously learned.

The page *what can you do?* , serves another function as well. That is, it develops kind of metacognitive strategy in one's evaluating his/her own gains.

New words are also repeated during listening, speaking, reading and writing activities and exercises.

Communication sections are another place where the new lexicon are repeated and practiced.

New words and phrases once again appear under the title of words and phrases to learn at the end of segments A, B, C and practical English of each unit. This is in fact another evidence of repetition in the material.

Finally, there is frequent advice for more practice of new lexicon on the MultiROM and the website.

Similar structure and organization applies to vocabulary management in the workbook.

From what has been mentioned, it can be concluded that repetition is performed in numerous ways via the material. However, this is not the ideal type of repetition which can lead to retention and fluent access of the lexis. The reason is that the repetition here is very regular and mostly occurs at the very session of learning the new items. This is not in agreement with the fact that early repetition after initial learning should be followed by recycling activities at longer intervals thereafter. Therefore, spaced repetition is neither observed nor brought to the learners' attention in the books.

Overall, learners' awareness of what they do – the process of learning - is significantly disregarded in the two books. In other words, all repetition is embedded and there is no explicit training for the

learners on repetition; they are not given any comments on how to plan their repetition outside the classroom to become autonomous learners.

### **Dictionary Use**

Rating=0 (Strategy not addressed, or mentioned only in passing)

There are some scattered notes asking students to consult a dictionary or check the meanings in a dictionary and some glossaries have been provided for some of the reading texts, but this reference to dictionary is only confined to the definitions or denotational meanings; it does not include many other aspects of word knowledge such as collocation, usage, register, style, etc.

Furthermore, training in dictionary skills is only restricted to pronunciation i.e. phonetic symbols and the way of their coding is systematically taught and practiced in the books, but there is no training in how and when to use what kind of dictionary. Similarly, there is no warning of the times when the learners should not refer to a dictionary while they read.

Appealing to an authority or asking the unknown words from a teacher was seen under the resource use strategy in this study. Guessing from context was also included in resource use key strategy.

Totally, the material does not pay much attention to dictionary use in activities and exercises nor does it provide the required training in the skills.

### **Recording**

Rating=0 (Strategy not addressed, or mentioned only in passing)

There is no activity using recording strategies in the material (table 2, N=0) and nothing has ever been said about keeping a vocabulary notebook or index cards. In spite of this entire absence, other types of noticing and processing strategies have been treated implicitly.

For example, in most of the reading texts, the new words and phrases are highlighted and brought to learners' attention.

Other cases such as matching exercises, ordering exercises, writing antonyms, listening for specific lexicon, true/false activities and recognizing similar forms all exploit the noticing strategy.

Finally, there are activities which require students to exemplify the meaning of the new words by making novel sentences. This is an example of a generative strategy and is especially seen when the themes are made personalized in speaking and writing activities.

Although generative and retrieving strategies fall under the processes class of the strategies, they are not considered as a kind of noticing or recording strategies; that is, recording strategies remain untreated in the material.

### **Conclusion**

From the findings of the study, it is revealed that the recording strategy is totally ignored in both use and training, the resource use is treated minimally in these regards and planning repetition is the one whose use is considerable but not consistent with the literature recommendations. Training is not provided for repetition as well.

Although noticing, retrieving and generating strategies were not the focus of the study, they can be seen as the side products of this study. While the strategies were not taught in the material, their frequency of occurrence was higher than resource use and recording strategies. These three strategies are important in that they help with vocabulary retention. As Nation mentions, noticing is "giving attention to an item" (2001, p.63), so it is the first step in learning any vocabulary item and then keeping it in mind for subsequent recalls. Retrieving enhances the chance of future

successful recalls (Baddeley, 1990). Generating which is based on elaboration principle is a determining factor in vocabulary retention (Hulstijn, 2001).

Within the material there are several instances of explicit training in vocabulary knowledge, but this should not be misunderstood as training in vocabulary learning strategies. For example, there are notes on the use of the article *the* before specific country names or on some collocations, but no training is provided in checking this type of information in a dictionary or the ways one can learn and recall this more effectively.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), presenting strategies implicitly can reduce the chances of strategy maintenance and its transfer to new ESL/EFL tasks.

In addition, lack of explicit training might be demotivating for strategy deployment on the part of learners. That is to say, when the learners are not justified on efficiency and the rationale behind the strategy use, they may feel reluctant or even resistant to use them. Therefore, the element of metacognition should be an integral part of any ESL/EFL material.

This study has been carried out only on the elementary level of the book, so the results may not be generalizable to other levels in the series. This limitation could even be more applicable to dictionary use at high levels of proficiency. It is likely that the authors provide more dictionary training for those levels as elementary learners are not able to exert all dictionary strategies, especially if monolingual dictionaries are intended.

The scope of the study is also limited in that it does not encompass the teacher's book and other supporting material. It is feasible that some guidance or commentary be provided within teacher's notes.

Material developers should pay more attention to the provision of metacognitive strategies in their materials; learners need to know about the psycholinguistic process of learning the new words.

Lack of metacognitive strategies is a chronic problem in the field as similar results have been usually obtained in most studies from the time Sinclair and Ellis (1992) first reported it.

Materials writers can also think about providing VLS and explicit commentary in workbooks because the workbooks are meant for independent use of the learners and are more flexible in their space and format.

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