A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Narimanova Jamola

jamola.narimanova@mail.ru

Kholboeva Durdona

xolboyevadurdona02@gmail.com

Uzbekistan State World Languages University (UzSWLU)

Abstract: *The acquisition of vocabulary is essential for achieving proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly at the university level where students are expected to master both general and academic language. This study investigates and compares the effectiveness of direct and indirect vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) employed by EFL university students. Direct strategies involve explicit learning techniques such as memorization, word lists, and translation, while indirect strategies include contextual inference, language exposure, and social interaction. Using a mixed-method approach involving surveys, vocabulary tests, and classroom observations, this research explores how these strategy types influence vocabulary acquisition and retention. The findings indicate that while direct strategies often lead to faster short-term vocabulary gains, indirect strategies contribute more significantly to long-term retention and contextual usage. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of integrating both types of strategies to accommodate diverse learner preferences and enhance vocabulary development. These insights offer practical implications for EFL instructors, curriculum designers, and learners aiming to improve vocabulary acquisition in university contexts.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary acquisition, direct strategies, indirect strategies, EFL university students, language learning strategies, academic vocabulary, learner autonomy, retention.*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary forms the backbone of effective communication in any language. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, especially at the university level, a rich and functional vocabulary is essential not only for everyday communication but also for academic success. Without sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to comprehend texts, express ideas fluently, and engage in meaningful academic discourse. As such, improving vocabulary acquisition has become a central concern for educators and researchers alike.

Numerous studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have highlighted the critical role that vocabulary plays in overall language proficiency. Researchers such as Nation [1] and Schmitt [2] have long emphasized the need for strategic vocabulary instruction that goes beyond rote memorization and promotes deeper cognitive processing. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are defined as conscious techniques employed by learners to acquire, store, and retrieve new vocabulary [3]. These strategies are commonly categorized as either direct or indirect. Direct strategies include intentional learning practices such as repetition, translation, and use of word lists. Indirect strategies, by contrast, encompass more implicit and incidental techniques such as reading extensively, inferring meaning from context, and engaging in communicative activities.

While both strategy types aim to enhance vocabulary knowledge, their mechanisms and long-term effectiveness differ. Direct strategies often appeal to students seeking immediate results, while indirect strategies are more closely tied to naturalistic language acquisition and deeper retention [4]. However, there is still insufficient consensus regarding which set of strategies yields better outcomes for EFL learners, particularly in higher education contexts where academic vocabulary demands are significantly higher.

In Uzbekistan and many other EFL settings, university students are frequently exposed to both strategy types, either through formal instruction or informal practice. Yet, the integration of vocabulary strategies into curricula remains inconsistent. Moreover, learners are rarely taught how to choose and apply strategies that match their cognitive style, language proficiency, or learning goals. This study seeks to compare

the effectiveness of direct and indirect vocabulary learning strategies among EFL university students. It aims to explore how each approach impacts vocabulary acquisition, learner autonomy, and long-term retention. By employing a comparative lens, the research provides practical insights for teachers and curriculum designers aiming to optimize vocabulary instruction in higher education.

2. Theoretical Background

Vocabulary learning has been a prominent area of focus within second language acquisition (SLA) studies, with researchers consistently emphasizing that vocabulary development is foundational to language competence . In recent decades, the exploration of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) has gained momentum, particularly in relation to how learners engage with and internalize new lexical items. This section provides a theoretical overview of the two main categories of vocabulary learning strategies: direct and indirect, as well as their pedagogical significance and relevance to university-level EFL learners.

2.1 Definition and Role of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies refer to the specific techniques or actions learners use to facilitate the acquisition, retention, and retrieval of vocabulary. According to Schmitt, these strategies are part of the broader domain of language learning strategies and play a crucial role in promoting learner autonomy. Oxford categorizes strategies as deliberate attempts to control one's learning process, especially when faced with unfamiliar language input. Effective strategy use can lead to more efficient vocabulary learning by encouraging learners to actively process language rather than passively memorize it. As Nation points out, vocabulary acquisition is most successful when learners are exposed to repeated, meaningful encounters with words, ideally through both intentional and incidental learning.

2.2 Direct Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Direct strategies are those that involve conscious, intentional efforts to learn vocabulary. These include rote memorization, use of bilingual word lists, vocabulary notebooks, flashcards, and mechanical repetition. Learners employing direct strategies typically focus on specific lexical items, aiming for accuracy and retention. One of the

main advantages of direct strategies is their suitability for short-term vocabulary gain, especially for learners preparing for exams or learning technical terminology. Research by Laufer and Hulstijn [6] suggests that direct strategies are particularly effective when tasks require high cognitive involvement, such as form-focused practice or intentional word study.

However, direct strategies can be limited in their capacity to foster contextual understanding or promote deeper lexical processing. Learners may remember the form of a word but struggle to use it appropriately in varied contexts if their learning is restricted to translation-based methods.

2.3 Indirect Vocabulary Learning Strategies

In contrast, indirect strategies refer to incidental or subconscious methods of vocabulary acquisition. These include reading extensively, listening to authentic materials, using context clues, and engaging in meaningful interaction. Rather than focusing on isolated words, indirect strategies emphasize natural language exposure and inferencing skills. Indirect strategies have been widely praised for promoting long-term retention and contextual awareness. Krashen's Input Hypothesis [5] underscores the importance of exposure to comprehensible input for language development, while Nation highlights that vocabulary learned through extensive reading tends to be more deeply integrated into a learner's productive language repertoire.

The downside, however, is that indirect strategies may not yield immediate vocabulary gains and often require higher language proficiency and motivation. Learners who lack sufficient reading or listening fluency may find it difficult to deduce word meanings from context without support.

2.4 Strategic Integration and Learner Autonomy

Most scholars now advocate for a balanced and integrative approach to vocabulary strategy instruction, combining both direct and indirect methods to accommodate diverse learner needs. Learner factors such as cognitive style, motivation, prior knowledge, and goal orientation all influence strategy effectiveness. Zimmerman [4] emphasizes that strategic learners tend to monitor their progress, adjust

their methods, and take greater control of their learning process—a quality particularly valuable at the university level.

Chamot and O'Malley [7] further argue that strategy training should be explicitly taught within language programs. When learners are aware of the variety of strategies available and are given the tools to reflect on their learning habits, they are more likely to become self-regulated and successful language users.

2.5 Summary of Theoretical Perspectives

In summary, both direct and indirect strategies offer distinct advantages and limitations. While direct strategies facilitate intentional learning and short-term gains, indirect strategies promote retention, contextual fluency, and language use in real-life settings. The key lies in understanding when and how to apply each strategy type effectively, and how to scaffold learners toward independent strategy use. In university-level EFL contexts, where both academic and communicative vocabulary are critical, a well-balanced strategy instruction framework becomes essential.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a comparative design to evaluate the effectiveness of direct versus indirect vocabulary learning strategies among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students. The methodology was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data through structured instruments, enabling a comprehensive analysis of strategy impact on vocabulary acquisition.

3.1 Research Design

A quasi-experimental approach was utilized, consisting of two student groups: one that received instruction focused on direct strategies, and another that engaged with indirect strategy tasks. Both groups were exposed to equal time frames, instructional materials, and vocabulary targets. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to measure vocabulary gains, while a questionnaire and classroom observations were used to gather learner feedback and engagement levels.

3.2 Participants

Participants were first-year undergraduate students majoring in English Philology and English Education. All participants had comparable English proficiency

levels (B1–B2 CEFR level), confirmed through institutional placement tests. The study involved a total of 48 students, randomly assigned into two groups of 24.

3.3 Instruments and Materials

➢ ***Vocabulary Test (Pre- and Post-Test):*** A 40-item multiple-choice test evaluating receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge.

➢ ***Questionnaire:*** Adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) [3], focused on self-reported strategy use.

➢ ***Observation Checklist:*** Used to record student behavior related to strategy engagement, participation, and peer interaction.

➢ ***Instructional Materials:*** Word lists, reading passages, digital flashcards, and peer dialogue activities.

3.4 Instructional Procedures

Group	Instructional Focus	Example Activities
Direct Strategy	Memorization, repetition, drills	Word lists, bilingual flashcards, quizzes
Indirect Strategy	Contextual use, inference, tasks	Reading texts, discussions, storytelling

Instruction was conducted over four weeks, with three 90-minute sessions per week. Each group followed a curriculum targeting the same 120 vocabulary items, taught using their respective strategies.

3.5 Data Collection

Data collection occurred in three phases:

1. ***Pre-test:*** Administered in week 1 to establish a baseline.

2. ***Instruction:*** Conducted during weeks 2–4.

3. ***Post-test and Questionnaire:*** Conducted in week 5 to assess vocabulary gains and strategy perception.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the tests were analyzed using mean comparison and gain score analysis. Questionnaire results were analyzed using Likert scale frequency

distribution. Qualitative observation data were categorized into key themes of strategy use and engagement.

3.7 Comparative Pre/Post-Test Results

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Test Mean Scores

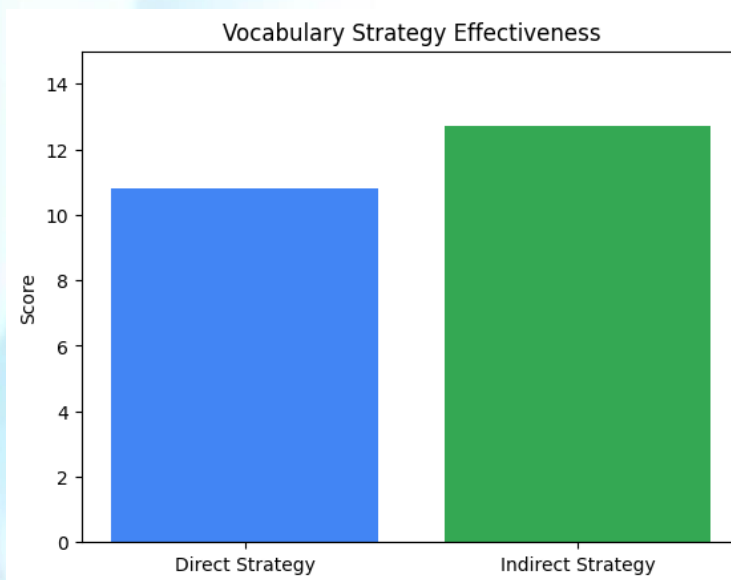| Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Gain Score
Direct Strategy	21.5	32.3	10.8
Indirect Strategy	22.1	34.8	12.7

Figure 1: Vocabulary Gain Comparison

These results show that both groups improved, but students using indirect strategies achieved slightly higher vocabulary gains.

3.8 Questionnaire Summary

Most students in the indirect strategy group reported higher enjoyment and confidence during vocabulary tasks. Those in the direct strategy group appreciated the clarity and structure of learning but noted difficulty in applying words in context.

Table 2: Selected Questionnaire Results (Agree/Strongly Agree %)

Statement	Direct (%)	Indirect (%)
I feel confident using new words after learning them	68%	85%

I enjoy the vocabulary learning activities	70%	91%
I find the strategies helpful for long-term retention	59%	87%

These data reinforce the notion that indirect strategies, though more implicit, promote deeper engagement and lasting vocabulary growth.

4. Results and Discussion

This section interprets the findings derived from the data presented in Chapter 3. Both the direct and indirect strategy groups demonstrated improvement in vocabulary knowledge; however, the degree and nature of that improvement varied, indicating important pedagogical implications.

4.1 Vocabulary Gains: Quantitative Outcomes

As illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1, students who were instructed using indirect strategies achieved a higher mean gain score (12.7) compared to those who received direct strategy instruction (10.8). While both groups benefited from focused instruction, the indirect strategy group's performance suggests that vocabulary learned in context may be more deeply retained and accessible.

This finding supports Krashen's [5] theory of comprehensible input and Nation's [9] emphasis on repeated, meaningful exposure. Indirect strategies, which often involve incidental learning through authentic reading and discussion, may foster stronger semantic networks and long-term retention.

4.2 Affective and Motivational Responses

According to the questionnaire data presented in Table 2, learners in the indirect group reported higher levels of confidence and enjoyment. These affective responses are significant because they suggest that strategy type impacts not only performance but also learner engagement.

Indirect strategy learners were more likely to rate their vocabulary learning experience as motivating and contextually relevant. This is consistent with Chamot and

O'Malley's [7, 8] claim that strategy-based instruction enhances learner autonomy and involvement.

Direct strategy learners, by contrast, appreciated the structured, exam-oriented nature of their instruction but expressed some frustration with the mechanical nature of the activities. Several students noted that while they could recall words for the test, they struggled to apply them in conversations or writing.

4.3 Observational Themes

Classroom observations also revealed behavioral differences. Students in the indirect group:

- Engaged more in peer interaction.
- Asked clarification questions about word usage.
- Used vocabulary journals more consistently.

In contrast, the direct strategy group tended to work individually and relied more on teacher confirmation. Although their focus levels were high, their strategy use was less dynamic.

These patterns suggest that indirect strategy environments promote a more communicative and reflective learning culture.

4.4 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The triangulation of test results, questionnaire responses, and classroom observations confirms a consistent trend: indirect strategies, while less structured, offer broader cognitive and motivational benefits. Direct strategies provide immediate results and clarity, especially for exam contexts, but may not support deeper lexical fluency [10].

Table 3: Summary of Comparative Observations

Feature	Direct Strategy Group	Indirect Strategy Group
Vocabulary Test Gain	10.8 points	12.7 points
Enjoyment of Activities	70%	91%
Confidence Using New Words	68%	85%

Strategy Use in Peer Interaction	Minimal	High
Use of Vocabulary Journals	Occasional	Frequent

4.5 Pedagogical Implications

These findings have practical applications for curriculum design in EFL programs at the university level. Educators should:

❖ Integrate both strategy types into instruction.

❖ Encourage contextual learning through authentic materials.

❖ Provide students with opportunities for collaborative vocabulary use.

It is also recommended that instructors explicitly teach strategy selection based on learning goals—direct strategies for precision and review, indirect strategies for usage and depth. Ultimately, a hybrid approach that scaffolds learners through both intentional and incidental learning activities may yield the most comprehensive vocabulary development outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the comparative effectiveness of direct and indirect vocabulary learning strategies among university-level EFL students. The research demonstrated that both strategy types positively impacted vocabulary development, but with distinct advantages depending on the dimension of learning emphasized. Direct strategies facilitated quick memorization and clarity, while indirect strategies fostered deeper contextual understanding, learner autonomy, and long-term retention.

The quantitative analysis showed that the indirect strategy group outperformed the direct strategy group in vocabulary gain scores. Additionally, qualitative insights gathered from questionnaires and classroom observations highlighted that learners exposed to indirect strategies exhibited higher motivation, stronger engagement, and more collaborative behaviors. These findings affirm the multidimensional nature of language learning and emphasize the importance of matching instructional techniques to learner needs and educational contexts.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the results suggest that instructors should not treat direct and indirect strategies as mutually exclusive. Instead, a blended approach that strategically incorporates both can yield the most robust outcomes. Teachers should model both types of strategies, encourage students to experiment with various techniques, and foster an environment where learners feel empowered to reflect on and adjust their vocabulary learning processes.

Moreover, curriculum designers are encouraged to embed explicit strategy training into EFL syllabi. This includes integrating authentic materials, task-based instruction, and opportunities for peer interaction. As university students are expected to navigate increasingly complex academic texts and produce sophisticated written and spoken outputs, equipping them with flexible and effective vocabulary strategies becomes a crucial component of their language education.

In conclusion, vocabulary learning is not solely a matter of acquiring words— it is a process that requires strategic awareness, cognitive effort, and contextual application. By understanding the unique contributions of both direct and indirect strategies, educators can more effectively support EFL learners in developing a powerful and enduring vocabulary repertoire that extends well beyond the classroom.

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