

## The Relationship Between Iranian EFL Learners' Motivation and the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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**Abstract.** Motivation is an important affective variable, which has an impact on language learning. Besides, vocabulary is the building block of any language. Therefore, learners should be motivated to learn vocabulary learning strategies in order to upgrade their learning. Moreover, whether motivation affects learners' performance in language components in particular is in question. Knowing this importance, and a few studies conducted on the relationship between learners' motivation and vocabulary learning strategies in Iranian EFL setting, this study attempted to investigate the relationship between motivation of Iranian

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EFL learners and their using vocabulary learning strategy in effective learning of Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Afterwards, the types of vocabulary learning strategies used by high and low motivated learners were illustrated. To accomplish the purpose of this study, a descriptive quantitative method was designed. Fifty advanced EFL learners from 3 classes of an English language institute filled out two questionnaires adopted from Gardner (AMTB) (1985) and Schmitt (VLS) (1997). To analyze the data obtained from participants, descriptive and inferential statistics was used. The results of data analysis, then, showed that there was a positive correlation between motivation and using vocabulary learning strategies. Moreover, high motivated learners used more social, memory, cognitive, and meta-cognitive strategies than low motivated learners. Bearing the importance of motivation in learning, this study attempted to introduce the effectiveness of motivation in language learning, in particular vocabulary learning strategies. The findings provide helpful suggestions for EFL teachers, administrators, and material developers concerning students' learning.

**Keywords:** Motivation, vocabulary learning strategies, EFL learners

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks in a language and most researchers believe that they are at the heart of language learning. By learning the lexical items, the individual starts to develop knowledge of the target language and can convey the intended meaning of a conversation to one another. Based on the above fact, since vocabulary learning is an essential part of second or foreign language learning, there is no hesitation in recognizing the importance of vocabulary in L2 learning. According to Lotfi (2007) language learners need a wide array of target language words to be able to tackle successfully both production and comprehension activities in the second or foreign language. Therefore, one way to help learners to enhance their knowledge of L2 vocabulary is through equipping learners with a variety of vocabulary learning strategies such as determination, social, memory, cognitive, and meta-cognitive strategies. The main benefit gained from all learning strategies, including strategies for vocabulary learning, is the fact that they enable learners to take more control of their own learning so that learners can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation.2001; Scharle & Szabo,

2000). Consequently, the strategies foster “learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction” (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p.293).

A good knowledge of the strategies and the ability to apply them in suitable situations might considerably simplify the learning process of new vocabulary for students; independence which words to study results in better recall of the words than when the words are chosen by someone else (Ranalli, 2003). Gu and Johnson’s (1996) state the importance of vocabulary learning strategies on foreign language learning. It has been suggested that one way to accelerate the learning of a second or a foreign language is to teach learners how to learn more efficiently and effectively.

As a case in point, Brown (1987, p.114) said that “countless studies and experiments in human learning have shown that motivation is a key to success in foreign language learning. This means that motivation is very important to stimulate learners to learn vocabulary learning strategies eagerly and plays an importance role for supporting learners’ learning.

Motivation was defined by Oxford and Shearin (1994) as determination of the extent of active and personal involvement in L2 learning. They also indicated that motivation affects learners’ use of L2 learning strategies, how to interact with native speaker, general proficiency, and the perseverance of L2 skills after instruction and so on and so forth.

Brown (1941) stated that motivation is an affective variable that influences language learning success. It affects learners’ autonomy, attention, effort, persistence, the frequency of using learning strategies, and their learning achievement, etc. Motivation has a direct effect on learning a language. It means that, according to Lennartsson (2008), motivation and the will to learn a second language are the factors that were considered much more important than the social ones.

As implied from the above text, this study attempted to investigate the relationship between motivation and the language components in particular. Therefore, the relationship between learners’ motivation and vocabulary learning strategies used by them has been investigated by this study. That is, whether motivation affects the use of vocabulary learning strategies is the issue under investigation in the present study. Moreover, this study aimed at indicating the type of strategies,

which were used by low and high-motivated learners.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The role of vocabulary in language learning

Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks in a language and most researchers believe that they are at the heart of language learning. By learning the lexical items, an individual starts to develop knowledge of the target language and can convey the intended meaning of a conversation to one another. Based on the above fact, there is no hesitation in recognizing the importance of vocabulary in L2 learning.

In the case of the importance of vocabulary, Brown and Payne (1994) cited in Hatch & Brown, (1995) have identified five steps in learning a new word: (a) having sources for encountering new words, (b) getting a clear image either visual or auditory or both of the form of the new words, (c) learning the meaning of the words, (d) making a strong memory connection between the forms and the meanings of the words, and (e) using the words. Accordingly, there are many approaches, techniques, exercises and practices which have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary (Hatch & Brown, 1995). It has been suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge (Hulstijn, 1993).

Knowing the importance of vocabulary learning, it is very helpful to help learners to improve the way they learn how to acquire vocabulary. Therefore, to find a way to help learners, several research studies have been carried out by a number of scholars (Cunningworth, 1995; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 1997). Sockmen (1997) disputed for helping learners how to acquire vocabulary on their own, noting “it is not possible for students to learn all the vocabulary they need in the classroom” (p.239). Cunningworth (1995) regarded helping learners develop their own vocabulary learning strategies as “a powerful approach”, which can be sensitive to the systems of vocabulary learning, based on encouragement of sound dictionary skills and reflection of effective learning techniques.

## 2.2. Vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary learning is the process in which information is obtained, stored, retrieved, and used (Rubin, 1981). And (VLS) are one part of language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies (Nation, 2001). According to Pavicic (2008, p.51-2) language learning strategies means “specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that learners use (often deliberately) in order to improve their progress in development of their competence in the target language”. Another definition is that vocabulary learning strategies should include strategies for using as well as simply knowing a word. Each strategy a learner uses will determine to a large extent how well a new word is learned. Schmitt (1997) also remarked, “vocabulary learning strategies could be any action which affects this rather broadly-defined process” (p. 203). Similarly, Cameron (2001) defined VLS as “actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary” (p. 92). Nation (2001) stated that “Vocabulary learning strategies as language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies” (p. 217). Therefore, vocabulary learning strategies can contribute successfully to learning. Gu (2003) argued that the choice, use, and effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies depend on the tasks, the learner, and the learning context.

The main benefit gained from all learning strategies, including strategies for vocabulary learning, is the fact that they enable learners to take more control of their own learning so that students can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation, 2001; Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Consequently, the strategies foster “learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction” (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989, p.293). Equipped with a range of different vocabulary learning strategies students can decide upon how exactly they would like to deal with unknown words. A good knowledge of the strategies and the ability to apply them in suitable situations might considerably simplify the learning process of new vocabulary for students; independence which words to study results in better recall of the words than when the words are chosen by someone else (Ranalli, 2003).

### 2.3. Definition of motivation

Motivation involves the learners' reasons for attempting to acquire second language and also motivation plays an importance role for supporting student learning. Motivation has always been considered as an important factor so it plays an important role in learning. Vallerand et al. (1992, p.1004) also defined that "motivation is one of the most psychological concepts in education". This term was defined by Oxford and Shearin (1994) as determination of the extent of active and personal involvement in L2 learning (Vahedi, 2011). Turner (1995) considered motivation to be synonymous with cognitive engagement, which he defined as "voluntary uses of high-level self-regulated learning strategies, such as paying attention, connection, planning, and monitoring" (p. 413).

As mentioned above, motivation is a kind of affective variable which is associated with other concepts and notions. For example, Clarizio, Craig, and Mehrens (1987) juxtaposed it with persistence and vigor. They believed that "motivation is a general term for factors and conditions that cause a person to being an active and follow it eagerly" (p.304).

### 2.4. Vocabulary and motivation

To truly understand vocabulary learning processes, the researcher attempted to address the relation between motivation and L2 learning in general. According to Tseng and Schmitt (2008, p.358):

Among the factors that could influence the outcome of L2 learning, motivation has been widely embraced by both practitioners and researchers as a critical determinant of success in language learning, and this belief is strongly supported by a wide range of studies on L2 motivation in the past three decades (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977; Clement & Kruidenier, 1985; Csizer & Dornyei, 2005; Dornyei & Csizer, 2002; Elley, 1989; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Lukmani, 1972; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 1999; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

Hence, it is logical to assume that motivation also facilitates vocabulary learning; however, it has been noted that neither the theoretical nor the empirical literature of motivation has so far shed enough light on the field of L2 vocabulary learning (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Thus

far, only a small number of studies have attempted to examine the role of motivation in vocabulary learning (Elley; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991). These studies provided both indirect and direct evidence of the motivation/vocabulary link. For instance, Elley (1991) found that teaching materials are very important to raise learners' interest and motivation which led to better word learning. Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) demonstrated that both types of motivation (integrative and instrumental) can facilitate vocabulary learning. In fact, given the significant role showed that motivation plays an important role in language learning, further research needs to be undertaken to systematically examine its effect on vocabulary learning processes.

### **3. Research Questions**

There are two research questions postulated in this study:

1. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' motivation and their use of vocabulary learning strategies?
2. What types of vocabulary learning strategies have been used by high and low motivated learners?

### **4. Method**

#### **4.1. Participants**

The participants for this study were EFL learners majoring in different fields of study in an English language institute in Shiraz, Iran. Only advanced learners based on their performance on proficiency test were selected. They were all adults aged between 19 to 26. The participants were both males and females. In order to gather data related to research questions two questionnaires which were adopted from Gardner (1985) and Schmitt's taxonomy (1997) developed and administered to 100 EFL learners from three classes.

#### **4.2. Instruments**

The researchers used two questionnaires to conduct the present study, namely, Gardner's AMTB and Schmitt's VLS (see appendices). The former measured the participants' motivation and the latter estimated

the Vocabulary Learning Strategies used by the participants. The questionnaires provided quantitative data for the study. Moreover, because of the nature of applied questionnaires and the objectives of this study, there was no need to apply the other techniques for triangulating and validating data collection.

### **4.3. Data analysis procedure**

After collecting the data, items were carefully coded and analyzed by SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Version 16 was used for the quantitative data analysis. For understanding the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and motivation, the researcher used Person Product Moment Correlation. This technique is useful to describe and find out the significance of the correlation between those two variables. Besides, the researcher distinguished between high and low motivated learners. In this regards, to make a distinction between low and high motivated learners, the researcher used the total score of motivation each learners obtained from MATB. Then independent t-tests, mean score and standard deviation demonstrated the learners' differences in using vocabulary strategies.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

As mentioned before, all the participants took Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). The 'Cronbach's alpha' was used to check the reliability of the survey questionnaire tool. It shows that the overall internal consistency estimated is .957, highlighting the instrument to be highly reliable in measuring learner's motivation towards English language learning.

Analyzing the data, the researcher used Pearson product moment correlation and independent t-test. The results are shown as following:

With respect to the first research question, results are presented in Table 1.



**Table 1.** Correlation between motivation and VLS

		Correlation	
		Motivation	Vocabulary
	Pearson correlation	1	.503
Motivation	Sig(2-tailed)		.000
	N	50	50

As Table 1 shows, the Pearson Product Moment correlation was .503 and the significance level was .000. Thus, it can be concluded that the correlation coefficient was significant, that is, there was a positive correlation between motivation and vocabulary learning strategy scores.

Meanwhile, with respect to the second research question, the mean score and the standard deviation of the motivation were calculated for the purpose of classification and interpretation. Based on this, motivation scores higher than mean plus one standard deviation were interpreted as showing high motivation scores; while scores less than mean minus one standard deviation were considered as low motivation scores.

In the next step, the difference between high and low motivated learners based on the use of vocabulary learning strategies was investigated. To achieve this goal, independent t-test was run on vocabulary learning strategies separately.

The first strategy or determination as a vocabulary learning strategy is evaluated by nine items in Schmitt's VLS. The results of independent t-test analysis on determination for high and low motivated learners are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that the significance level for the effect of motivation level is .070. This implies that there is no significant difference between low and high motivated learners based on using determination as a vocabulary learning strategy.

**Table 2.** Determination strategies scores for high and low motivated learners

		T-test for Equality of Means				
		Sig(2- tailes)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95/ Interval Difference	Confidence of the Difference
					Lower	Upper
Determination	Equal Variances assumed	.070	-2.76364	1.44200	-5.78177	.25450
	Equal Variances not assumed	.074	-2.76364	1.45481	-5.82427	.29700

Table 3 shows the results of independent t-test analysis for the second strategy or social strategy for high and low motivated learners.

**Table 3.** Social strategies scores for high and low motivated learners

		T-test for Equality of Means				
		Sig(2- tailes)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95/ Confidence Difference	Interval of the Difference
					Lower	Upper
Social Strategy	Equal Variances assumed	.000	-9.34545	1.67830	-12.85817	-5.83274
	Equal Variances not assumed	.000	-9.34545	1.72156	-13.03706	-5.65385

As shown in Table 3, the mean difference was significant ( $sig = .000, p < .05$ ). Mean scores of low and high motivated learners for social strategy indicate that high motivated learners ( $mean = 22.54$ ) did significantly better than low motivated learners ( $mean = 13.20$ ) in using social strategy. (See figure 1)

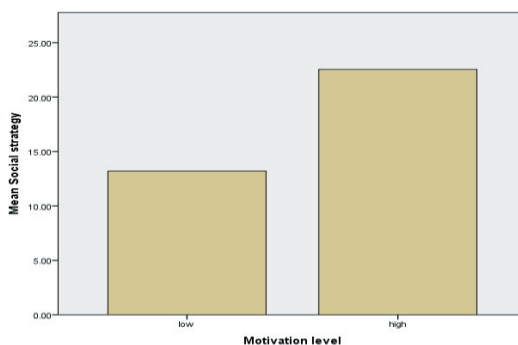


Figure 1. Low and high motivated learners score in using social strategy

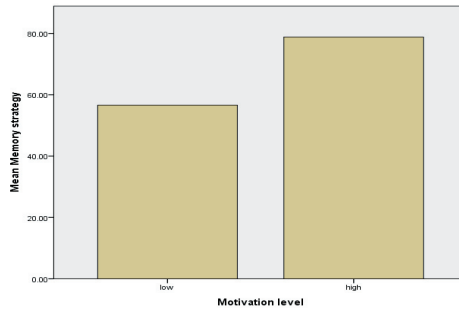
Table 4. Memory strategies scores for high and low motivated learners

T-test for Equality of Means						
	Sig(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
				Lower	Upper	
Equal Variances assumed	.000	-22.21818	5.28140	-33.27228	-11.16408	
Memory Strategy						
Equal Variances not assumed	.001	-22.21818	5.39408	-33.71215	-10.72421	

In order to find out the difference between low and high motivated learners based on using memory strategy in vocabulary learning, independent t-test was run. Memory strategy is investigated by twenty-five items in AMTB. Table 4 summarizes the results of the t-test.

Based on Table 4, the significance level reported for the memory strategy is .000. It shows that there is a significant difference between low and high motivated learners. Based on the results, high motivated learners (mean= 78.81) used memory strategy in their vocabulary learning more than low motivated learners (mean= 56.60).

The following graph shows the memory strategy mean scores for two motivation levels (See Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** Low and high motivated learners score in using memory strategy

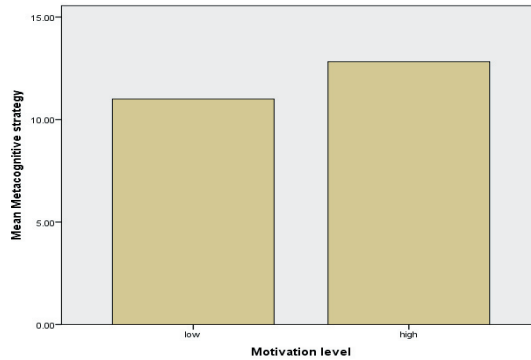
To compare low and high motivated learners based on the use of cognitive strategy, t-test was applied.

**Table 5.** Cognitive strategies scores for high and low motivated learners

		T-test for Equality of Means				
		Sig(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Cognitive Strategy	Equal Variances assumed	.000	-14.77273	2.92361	-20.89192	-8.65353
	Equal Variances not assumed	.000	-14.77273	2.92829	-20.90897	-8.63649



high motivated learners in using meta-cognitive strategy for vocabulary learning ( $sig. = .027, p < .05$ ). Based on the results, high motivated learners had higher mean score than low motivated learners. (See Figure 4)



**Figure 4.** Low and high motivated learners score in using metacognitive strategy

The first research question was about the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' motivation and their use of vocabulary learning strategies. To answer the research question, a significant correlation between motivation and vocabulary learning strategies was concluded ( $sig = .000$  and  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ). This finding supported the important belief about the positive influence of motivation on vocabulary learning, which is widespread among practitioners and researchers (Clement, Gardner, & Smythe, 1977; Clement & Kruidenier, 1985; Csizer & Dornyei, 2005; Dornyei & Csizer, 2002; Elley, 1989; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Lukmani, 1972; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 1999; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; cited in Tseng & Schmitt, 2008) in this research area (Tseng & Schmitt, 2008).

The findings indicated that many researchers and practitioners have accepted the sensitive role of motivation on learning vocabulary. Ushioda (1996) remarked, "[a]utonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners" (p. 2). Then they carried out different research studies in order to find the importance of motivation in VL. In this case, Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) demonstrated that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation can facilitate vocabulary

learning. This supported that the researchers tended to find this importance and conducted different studies in these variables. Moreover, this relationship may lead the researchers to believe that learning vocabulary is not apart from affective variables. Tseng & Schmitt (2008) stated, "In the 1990s, researchers furthered the understanding of L2 motivation by referring to mainstream motivational theories that are essentially cognitively oriented" (p. 359).

Since motivation and vocabulary learning strategy are interrelated features, this study concluded that less-motivated learners used VLS less than high-motivated learners. This showed that they are less effective learners in learning foreign language especially in vocabulary due to their less motivation. According to Vann & Abraham (1990) the less effective second language learners would grab at any learning strategies desperately and randomly, but ignored the relationship between learning strategies and language tasks. Those low-achieved language learners might not use English learning strategy appropriately or they might not learn enough strategies from different language tasks (Chen, 1984; Hosenfeld, 1979; Yang, 1993; Zeng, 1984).

In general, as it is obvious from the above text, the results of this study in relation to correlation between vocabulary learning strategies and motivation were compatible with the findings of different research studies (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Tseng & Schmitt, 2008) mentioned above.

The second research question was about types of vocabulary learning strategies used by high and low motivated learners. The result of the study indicated that high-motivated learners used social, memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive strategies more than low motivated learners did. However, there was no significant difference between high and low motivated learners in using determination strategy. It seems clear that motivation might influence not only the frequency of strategy use (Gardner et al., 1997; MacIntyre & Noels, 1996) but also the types of strategy use (Biggs, 1988, 2003; Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001), (cited in Tseng & Schmitt, 2008). Specifically, Schmidt and Watanabe (2001) found that cognitive and metacognitive strategies were most strongly affected by learners' motivational factors, such as value and intention. Besides, types

of strategies may correlate with learners' motivation. For instance, Ri-ankamol, (2008) claimed that "Meta-cognitive strategies facilitate learning with many English sources and it can interest and motivate learners. Some examples of these strategies are listening to English songs and news, and memorizing words from English magazines". (p.31).

Finding of the study showed that high-motivated learners used different types of VLS strategies. They employ direct and indirect strategies, like cognitive strategy which have a direct impact on processing information, meta-cognitive which influence on language learning, social strategy which let them to interact with other English speakers, and memory which elaborate mental processing. Therefore, it may be helpful to increase the learner's vocabulary size. Nacera (2010) cited that the learners with higher vocabulary size use specific strategies more often than the learners with lower vocabulary size. It means that they use an image or picture to remember the word, try to talk native speaker, use it in different ways, make summaries, guesses when they do not understand unfamiliar word, look for opportunities to read English and ask for help.

Some research found high-motivated learners were successful language learners because they use the proper strategy in order to help them learn language more quickly, and the use of learning strategy could explain learners' excellent language performance (Naiman, Frohlich & Todesco, 1975; Rubin, 1975, 1987; Sheorey, 1999; Wenden, 1985). In other words, learners with high proficiency levels have high motivation than low proficient learners; therefore, they used different types of vocabulary learning strategies. According to Oxford and Nyikos, (1989) research study, proficiency of students had some effect on the use of VLS. As student's proficiency level increased, they made more use of VLS especially those strategies that were cognitively deeper, while, Clarkia del Rio's (2001) research showed that the less proficiency learners used higher and more varied VLS. Then, as motivation and proficiency correlated to each other based on the above text, the findings of this study is to some extent, in line with the findings of Oxford and Nyikos (1989), different from those of Clarkia del Rio's (2001). Zare (2010) also found that the proficiency of students had some effect on language learners'



overall use of vocabulary strategies. As learners' proficiency level increased, they made more use of vocabulary strategies especially those strategies, which were cognitively deeper.

In general, the findings of this study shows that using different types and frequencies of vocabulary learning strategies depended deeply on learners' motivation. Moreover, according to the above fact, motivation not only affects learners' using VLS, but also learners' proficiency level. It means that the learners with high proficiency level are more motivated than learners with low proficiency level. As a result, the learners with high proficiency level use more VLS and there are differences between both group using VLS. Finally, the findings of this study supported the findings obtained from studies conducted by Naiman, Frohlich & Todesco (1975), Nyikos (1989), Rubin (1975, 1987), Sheorey (1999), Wenden (1985), and Zare (2003).

## 7. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the researchers drew the following conclusions. First, there was a positive correlation between motivation and the use of vocabulary learning strategies. In particular, learners with high motivation use more vocabulary learning strategies. Second, via independent t-tests, the differences between high and low motivated learners in the use of different types of VLS were presented. In this regards, the results of independent t-tests showed that the high-motivated learners employed social, cognitive, memory, and meta-cognitive more than low motivated learners. However, both groups used the determination strategy similarly.

Accordingly, this study provided some implications for teachers and instructors, learners, and material developers. First, teacher should motivate learners to use different types of vocabulary learning strategies. The study helps teachers teach different strategies directly and deductively based on learners' needs, learning styles, proficiency level as well as the task's requirements. Besides, teachers will be able to guide learners to be better language learners by training them in using the right strategies or appropriate strategies that suit their levels. Seconds, EFL learners need to practice strategies to become fluent and comfortable in using

strategies since we know practice makes perfect. Third, for material developers, it is advisable to construct and develop interesting materials, which stimulate learners' motivation in order to apply different vocabulary strategies for enhancing language learning for their future education and occupational plan. Moreover, school and university administrators can refer to such findings to prepare the ground for such programs.

Carrying out the present study, the researcher encountered with some limitations in the case of instrument, context, and participants. To complement the limitation of this study, some further research studies were presented to other researchers by the researcher of the present study. For example, the other researchers can conduct some experimental and qualitative studies on motivation and vocabulary learning strategy, compare vocabulary learning strategies with other affective variables, investigate this topic in the other fields and disciplines can also upgrade the level of learners' interest towards language acquisition in other fields and teaching vocabulary learning strategies deductively to the learners.

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