

## Awareness-Raising of Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Does It Make a Difference?

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### Abstract

This study presents the results of the impact of a short training on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). The aim was to raise participants' awareness of a wide range of VLSs and consequently to encourage and motivate them to utilize these strategies in their vocabulary learning. The participants were 29 Saudi male students in their first semester majoring in English as a foreign language in the Department of English and Translation in the College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. The data collection tool was a questionnaire which consists five main categories of VLSs with 8 sub-strategies under each type with a total of 40 sub-strategies. The same questionnaire was administered twice: before and after training. The results showed an awareness-raising impact as reflected in the increase use of VLSs following the training. The increase was in all five strategy categories with statistically significant differences in three categories; Determination, Memory, and Cognitive strategies. Furthermore, the participants of this study reported that they benefited a lot from the training and they not only increased their exploitation of the strategies in this course but this training led them to utilize these strategies in other courses, such as reading and grammar. Although the training was short, the effect was evident, thus it is assumed that longer period of training will be conducive to better results in terms of the use of VLSs and consequently vocabulary knowledge. It is recommended that such intervention should be implemented in other courses as an initial step in understanding learning strategies in general with the goal of enhancing learners' autonomy in different types of learning strategies.

**Keywords:** King Saud University, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Students, strategy training, vocabulary learning strategies

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## Introduction

In the field of applied linguistics in general and in the field of language learning and teaching in particular, no one can deny the important role that language learning strategies (LLS) play in mastering both second and foreign languages (cf. Cohen & Macaro 2007; Nation 2013; O'Malley & Chamnot 1990; Oxford 1990; Schmitt 1997) among others. There is also a wide consensus among researchers on the effectiveness of good vocabulary mastery in successful communication and the vital role that vocabulary plays in language proficiency in all four language skills. However, for learners to master vocabulary and to increase their vocabulary stock, they will need the right tools. Among these tools are vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Schmitt (1997) noticed that the importance of strategies was motivated by the growing interest in the active role of the learner in the language learning process.

## Statement of the problem

Given the rapid advances in the process of language learning and the need for English as a foreign language for many learners around the world including the Saudis, it was noticed that Saudi learners are still weak and poor in utilizing vocabulary learning strategies in a way that will more effectively facilitate their learning of English vocabulary. Results from recent study (Alqarni, 2018) reveal that the overall mean score of the use of the strategies indicates that the Saudi participants are low/poor users of vocabulary learning strategies in general. Such findings should be informative about Saudi English learners' vocabulary learning strategies, and of a particular interest to English language instructors, course designers and developers, as well as the language learners themselves. Consequently, they should guide future planning for vocabulary teaching, vocabulary learning, and most importantly for vocabulary learning strategy training. In this regard, the idea of strategy awareness is worthy of more investigation to make sure that participants are all aware of the set of the VLSs that are available for them and thus can be trained to utilize them in their vocabulary learning which would yield better vocabulary competency. This study will try to fill in this gap in the Saudi context.

## Literature review

Vocabulary studies literature has revealed various vocabulary learning strategies taxonomies and classifications. Many researchers have grouped these strategies into different categories based on their research results (cf. Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation 2013; Schmitt, 1997). The taxonomy proposed by Schmitt (1997), which includes: **Determination**, **Memory**, **Cognitive**, **Metacognitive**, and **Social** strategies, was the most comprehensive and famous one, and consequently has been widely used in many studies for its ease of application and for the ease of coding and analysing the obtained data. Previous research utilized Schmitt's taxonomy to explore participants' vocabulary strategies, and in many cases, with relation to participants' level of proficiency, gender, and language background, among other factors. In the following lines, some relevant studies will be presented.

In his experimental study, Nunan (1997) investigates the effects of strategy training on four key aspects of the learning process, which include student's motivation, knowledge of strategies, the perceived utility of strategies, and the actual deployment of strategies. From the same language program, sixty first-year undergraduate students at the University of Hong Kong participated in this study and were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. The experimental

groups were systematically trained in fifteen learning strategies. Results indicate significant differences in three of the four areas investigated. The experimental groups significantly outperformed the control groups on motivation, knowledge, and perceived utility. However, there was no significant difference in the area of deployment. The author concludes that “the effects were not uniform across all strategies, and, in some instances, were inconsistent and piecemeal” (Nunan, 1997 p. 137).

Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) examined the effectiveness of explicit instruction of VLSs. The participants were 146 female English as a foreign language (EFL) learners from two Japanese universities and the training was conducted during a 10-week semester. Both vocabulary test and questionnaires on VLSs and motivation were administered at the beginning of the course. Based on the vocabulary test results, the participants were then divided into two groups: experimental and control groups where the experimental group received explicit instruction on VLSs during their regular language classes. The same instruments were re-administered at the end of the course to examine the changes in both the questionnaire responses and test scores. The results show that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the vocabulary test. The researchers conclude that the strategy training was effective for both improving the repertoire and the frequency of use of vocabulary learning strategies with different degrees for different strategies. Moreover, learners demonstrated different responses to the strategy instruction.

With the impact of the proficiency level in mind, ÇELİK and TOPTAŞ’s (2010) surveyed the vocabulary-learning strategies of 95 Turkish EFL learners enrolled in Ankara University School of Foreign Languages at three different levels (elementary, intermediate, and upper levels). The results showed that the Determination strategies were utilized very frequently, whereas the Cognitive strategies were the least utilized one in comparison to other strategies. The results also showed that the intermediate level learners regarded the strategy categories as more useful than the other groups. However, the authors conclude that the participants’ overall use of VLSs is somewhat inadequate and there was a gap between their use of strategies and the perception of strategy usefulness.

Rabadi (2016) carried out one of the recent studies in the Arabic context where she investigates the VLSs of 110 undergraduate EFL Jordanian students majoring in English Language and Literature from eight Jordanian universities. She administered a modified version of Schmitt’s (1997) vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire, with a total of forty items under five main categories of VLSs. These categories include: Memory, Determination, Social, Cognitive, and Metacognitive strategies. The results revealed that Memory strategies were the most frequently used, whereas Metacognitive strategies were the least frequently used ones. Rabadi concluded that her Jordanian EFL participants were medium strategy users.

Likewise, another recent study is Fatima and Pathan’s study (2016). They investigate the VLS employed by 180 undergraduate students in two universities in Pakistan. A forty five closed-ended item questionnaire, consisting of four broad VLSs: Metacognitive regulation strategy, Cognitive regulation strategy, Memory strategy, and Activation strategies, was administered to the participants. Results indicated that Cognitive regulation strategy and Activation strategy were the most employed strategies. The authors concluded that their results revealed that there was no

statistically significant difference in practicing VLSs between both groups from the two different universities.

In a most recent study, Agustín-Llach and Alonso (2017) investigated the effects of contextualized training in vocabulary strategy use which was offered to 97 first-year undergraduate EFL learners. The authors stated that their aim was to explore the learners' vocabulary strategy use as well as to foster their autonomy in language learning by means of strategy training. Results showed that the use of vocabulary strategies increased for every particular strategy after the training compared to scarce and occasional use of VLSs prior to training. However, the ranking of preferred strategies did not change. The researchers maintained that "the training resulted in awareness-raising with respect to strategic behaviours, learner empowerment, as well as some improvement in learner autonomy in vocabulary learning" (p.141). They concluded that longer and more sustained training may lead to better results in the development of strategy use.

The literature above reviewed two types of studies: studies that investigated language learners' use of VLSs in general (ÇELİK & TOPTAŞ's; 2010; Rabadi, 2016; and Fatima & Pathan, 2016), and studies that explored the effects of training on either language learning strategies in general (Nunan 1997) or on vocabulary learning strategies in particular (Mizumoto and Takeuchi, 2009; Agustín-Llach and Alonso (2017).

## **The Present Study**

### *Research Questions*

The aim of the current study is to address the following two research questions:

1. What is the impact of strategy training on the levels of strategy employment for the five main categories by the participants? In other words, do they use VLSs more frequently after the strategy training?
2. Does strategy training change the ranking of VLSs use when it comes to the top ten used strategies in pre- and post training?

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were twenty-nine Saudi male students. They were in their first semester majoring in English as a foreign language in the English Department and Translation in the College of Language and Translation at King Saud University. Participation was voluntary.

### *Instrument*

Due to its suitability for the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs), this study utilized an adopted version of the questionnaire that was designed by Rabadi (2016) in her study with Jordanian students, which was based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLSs. The adoption of this questionnaire was motivated by its tailored design for the Jordanian students in an educational setting similar to the context of this study in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire consists of five main categories of VLSs with eight sub-strategies under each type with total of forty sub-strategies (See appendix 1). The main five categories include: Determination strategies (DET), Memory strategies (MEM), Cognitive strategies (COG), Metacognitive strategies (MET), and Social strategies (SOC). A five-point scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always) was used to measure the frequency of use of the vocabulary learning strategies.

### *Procedures*

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher to twenty-nine participants twice. That is, in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> week (pre-training) and in the middle of week 14 (post-training) of the first semester. Oral instruction was given in Arabic to the participants before filling out the questionnaire and there was no time limit to complete the questionnaire in both administrations.

After the first administration of the questionnaire, participants undertook five-week training on VLSs beginning from week five. The class meet each Sunday for 2 hours, where the first half of the class time was allocated/devoted for the training (awareness raising of the strategies) for five weeks. Each week one category of the five main VLSs categories was focused on. The training phase focused on raising participants' awareness of VLSs where the instructor (The researcher) explicitly introduced the target strategies and demonstrated briefly how to apply them. Participants were given the chance to apply them to learning vocabulary while discussing their options and practice with classmates. They were also asked whether they used such strategies when learning new vocabulary items and how they would possibly employ such strategies in future learning. Participants were requested to submit a weekly dairy (every Thursday) for nine weeks, where they had to write down their thoughts about the training they received in the first five weeks and how the training had affected their vocabulary learning behaviour in the consecutive weeks, and whether their VLSs use had changed. In week fourteen, the same questionnaire was re-administered to the same group.

### *Data Analysis*

This study employed a five-point rating scale, ranging from **never** (0 point) to **always** (4 points). Therefore, the scoring system of strategy used can be valued from 0.00 to 4.00. Any overall mean score for VLSs valued from 0.00 to 1.99 is looked at as low use of strategy, from 2.00 to 2.99 as medium use, and from 3.00 to 4.00 as high use. Data collected from this study was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), by applying the t-test to the data to get the means and standard deviations for the use of the strategies. Participants' dairy entries were also looked into and participants' responses were analyzed in order to find answers to the main research questions of the present study.

### *Findings*

To answer the first research question: "***What is the impact of strategy training on the levels of strategy employment for the five main categories by all participants, do they use VLSs more after the strategy training?***", the overall mean scores for each category in the pre- and post administrations were compared. The results showed, with no exception, higher mean scores after training for all the five main categories included in this study: Determination strategies (DET), Memory strategies (MEM), Cognitive strategies (COG), Metacognitive strategies (MET), and Social strategies (SOC) with statistically significant differences in three categories DET ( $p < 0.01$ ), MEM, and COG ( $p < 0.05$ ) strategies. Table 1 below shows the overall mean scores and standard deviations for all the five main categories of VLSs in the pre- and post training administrations. See figure 1 below, too.

Table 1. Overall mean scores from both administration of the same questionnaire for all the five main VLSs

Strategy	Test mode	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig
Determination strategies	Pre-training	29	1.7543	.64042	4.130	0.000**
	Post-training	29	2.2155	.53022		
Memory strategies	Pre-training	29	1.5991	.69788	2.666	0.013*
	Post-training	29	1.9883	.78515		
Cognitive strategies	Pre-training	29	1.4052	.67203	2.579	0.015*
	Post-training	29	1.7321	.79870		
Metacognitive strategies	Pre-training	29	2.1320	.75334	1.884	0.070
	Post-training	29	2.3935	.79487		
Social strategies	Pre-training	29	2.0338	.68588	1.823	0.079
	Post-training	29	2.2500	.75077		

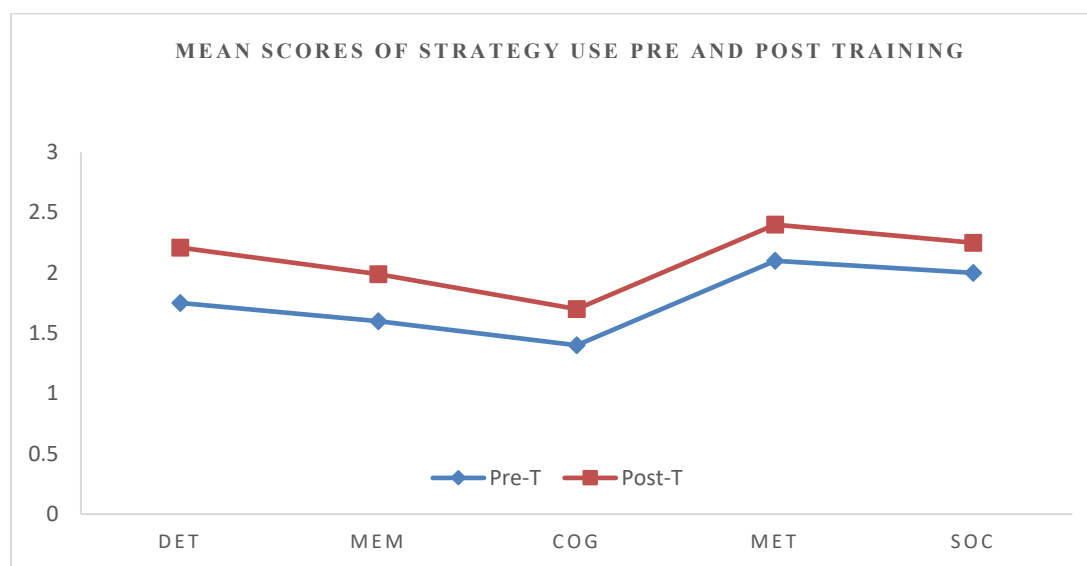


Figure 1 Strategy use before and after training

To answer the second question: “*Does strategy training change the ranking of VLSs use when it comes to the top ten used strategies in pre- and post training?*”, the ranking of the VLSs was looked into, and the ten most used strategies with their mean scores were extracted from both pre- and post training questionnaires. This extraction shows different strategies distributions with different mean scores frequencies. See table 2.

Table 2. VLSs and mean scores of the top ten strategies in both administrations

Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Pre-training</b>	<b>MET2</b> 3.07	<b>DET4</b> 2.66	<b>MET1</b> 2.57	<b>COG2</b> 2.41	<b>MEM4</b> 2.31	<b>SOC6</b> 2.25	<b>MET3</b> 2.18	<b>SOC3</b> 2.18	<b>SOC7</b> 2.14	<b>SOC1</b> 2.11
<b>Post-training</b>	<b>MET2</b> 3.45	<b>DET3</b> 3.14	<b>MET4</b> 3.14	<b>MET1</b> 3.00	<b>COG2</b> 2.93	<b>DET1</b> 2.66	<b>SOC6</b> 2.66	<b>MET3</b> 2.59	<b>MEM7</b> 2.59	<b>MEM4</b> 2.41

The list of the top ten used VLSs from the pre- and post-training data shows that these strategies come from all the 5 main categories of VLSs presented in the questionnaire. In the pre-training, they include 1 COG, 1 MEM, 1 DET, 3 MET, and 3 SOC strategies. The highest mean score is 3.07 (MET 2), while the lowest mean score is 2.11 (SOC1).

Similarly, the top ten used VLSs in the post-training data belong to the all 5 categories of VLSs, though with different distributions. They include 1 COG, 1 SOC, 2 MEM, 2 DET, and 4 MET strategies. However, the list shows different ranking for these strategies with higher mean scores, with no exception. 3.45 (MET 2) was the highest mean score and 2.41 (MEM4) was lowest one.

### Discussion

As shown by the results presented above, strategy training and awareness-raising of VLSs had an evident impact on increasing the participants' awareness of VLSs and consequently an increase of the employment of these strategies. It is assumed that this short training not only enhanced the participants' knowledge of these strategies but also increased the use of all five strategy categories with statistically significant differences in three categories; DET, MEM, and COG strategies. These results are in conformity with Nunan's results (1997) in that strategy training significantly affect strategy use and deployment. They are also in line with results obtained from Mizumoto and Takeuchi study (2009). Likewise, recent results from Agustín-Llach and Alonso (2017) affirm such results showing that the use of vocabulary strategies increased for every particular strategy after the training compared to scarce and occasional use of VLSs prior to training.

Furthermore, by looking at the overall mean scores of the use of VLSs, as shown in table 3 below, results show an increase of the overall mean score in the post-training results: 1.77 in the pre-training compared to the overall mean score of 2.11 in the post-training results. It is evident here that the participants' category of strategy use moved up from low/poor users of strategies in the pre-training administration to medium strategy users (similar to Rabadi's results, 2016) in the post-training administration.

Table 3. Results from both administration of the same questionnaire

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig
Pre-training	29	1.776	0.555	3.43	0.002*
Post-training	29	2.11	0.624		

One can claim here that the participants' improved utilization of VLSs was an effect and a reflection of the training, though somewhat minimal.

Unlike results from Agustín-Llach and Alonso (2017) where the ranking of preferred strategies does not change, the analysis of the top ten used strategies in both administrations revealed different distributions and ranking of VLSs. All the five main categories of the VLSs were represented in both lists occupying different hierarchy in the ranking scale with higher mean scores for results generated from the post training administration (see table 2 above). Moreover, there was an increase in the number of the representative strategies from three main VLSs categories after training: Metacognitive strategies (3 vs. 4), Determination strategies (1 vs. 2), and Memory strategies (1 vs. 2). Only Cognitive strategies kept the same occurrence in both list (COG 1 vs. 1), while the number of Social strategies has witnessed a dramatic drop in the list after training (3 vs. 1) in favour of other strategies as mentioned above. That is, 3 Social strategies in the pre-training list compared to 1 strategy in the post training list. The scarcity of the Cognitive strategies in both lists is in line with results from ÇELİK and TOPTAŞ's (2010), however, it contradicts the findings of Fatima and Pathan's study (2016), where they found Cognitive strategies as the most used strategies by all participants.

Additionally, the advantages of strategy training are even more evident in the post training list, where the top four strategies have high mean scores, three and above, moving the participants up to the high users category in regards of these strategies.

It should be mentioned here that the MET2: "Learn new words by watching English-speaking movies with subtitles", was the favoured/used strategy by all participants in both administrations with slightly higher mean score after training (3.07 vs. 3.45). This is in conformity with results from ÇELİK and TOPTAŞ's (2010), but in reverse with results from Rabadi's study (2016), where she found Metacognitive strategies being the least frequently used strategies. For the participants in this study, this could be attributed to the high value participants give to learning input from watching movies with the added help they are getting from subtitling. And this option is also favoured for the easy access learners have to movies and similar materials in their smart phones wherever they go. Unexpectedly, none of the Memory strategies has accoupled any higher ranking in the list of the top ten used strategies.

Finally, by analyzing the dairy entries submitted by the twenty-nine participants, interesting observations have emerged. Participants indicated in the initial training session that many of the introduced strategies were new to them and they lacked the knowledge of them and how to use them. During and after the training weeks, participants expressed their happiness of being exposed to these strategies and they showed appreciation for the training they had received. Furthermore, their willingness to exploit these strategies in different vocabulary learning contexts was expressed and was then evident in their responses in the collected dairies. It was clear that participants had a good pattern of using these strategies in weekly bases as they tried utilizing a wide range of VLSs with different words in different learning contexts. Moreover, some participants stated that they extended the use of these strategies in other learning subjects, such as reading and grammar. In general, participants were keen to try these new strategies, with no



exception as reflected in their dairies. Moreover, they were keen to test their effectiveness in learning new vocabulary items. One participant reported that:

*“I was happy to know different strategies each week and in fact every week I tried different strategies with new words. I was trying to see which ones are more effective for me so I can keep using them.”*

Another participant reported that:

*“The number of strategies was large, however that gave me options to choose from and to test their impact on my memorization and recall of vocabularies.”*

And a third participant stated that:

*“Knowing the wide range of vocabulary learning strategies made me a bit worried at the beginning and maybe confused about which one to use. But I remembered the instructor telling us that we don’t have to use all of them but to choose from them what suits our learning needs. I concentrated on some of them and I used them repeatedly.”*

All the excerpts above and other diary entries indicate clearly that participants’ knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies has increased after training sessions and participants became more aware of such strategies and consequently use them more frequently. In the same vein, Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) conclude that the strategy training was effective for both improving the repertoire and the frequency of use of VLSs.

As a result, adding a strategy training component to English courses in general and vocabulary courses in particular is highly recommended.

## Conclusion

The present study implemented a short and light training on VLSs. The aim was to raise participants’ awareness of a wide range of VLSs and consequently to encourage and motivate them to utilize these strategies in their vocabulary learning. The results showed an awareness-raising impact as reflected in the increase use of VLSs following the training. The increase was in all five strategy categories with statistically significant differences in three categories; Determination, Memory, and Cognitive strategies. Participants of this study reported that they benefited a lot from the training and they not only increased their exploitation of the strategies in this course, but this training led them to utilize these strategies in other courses, such as reading and grammar. Although the training was short, the effect was evident, thus it is assumed that longer period of training will be conducive to better results in terms of the use of VLSs and consequently vocabulary knowledge. It is recommended that such intervention should be implemented in other courses as initial step in understanding learning strategies in general with the goal of enhancing learners’ autonomy in different types of learning strategies.

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**Appendix A**

<b>Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire VLSQ</b>	
<b>Determination strategies: DET</b>	
DET1	Use an English–Arabic dictionary to discover the meaning of new words.
DET2	Use an Arabic–English dictionary to discover the meaning of new words.
DET3	Use an English–English dictionary to find the meaning of new words.
DET4	Guess the meaning from context to discover the meaning of new words.
DET5	Guess the meaning from word classes, such as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, to discover the meaning of new words
DET6	Guess the meaning by analyzing the structure of words (prefixes, roots, and suffixes) to discover the meaning of new words.
DET7	Guess the meaning from grammatical structure of a sentence to discover the meaning of new words.
DET8	Guess the meaning from aural features, such as stress, intonation, pronunciation, to discover the meaning of new words.
<b>Memory strategies: MEM</b>	
MEM1	Categorize new words according to their synonyms and antonyms.
MEM2	Group new words in relation to similar pronunciation and spelling.
MEM3	Group new words together to learn new vocabulary.
MEM4	Connect pictures to the meanings of new words.
MEM5	Observe the parts of speech of the new vocabulary items.
MEM6	Examine the new words' affixes (prefixes and suffixes).
MEM7	Use new vocabulary items in sentences repeatedly.
MEM8	Use semantic maps to learn new words.
<b>Cognitive strategies: COG</b>	
COG1	Use a new lexical item by writing it repeatedly in sentences.
COG2	Repeat orally a single word with its meanings to learn it.
COG3	Revise previous English lessons and take notes in class to learn the new vocabulary items.
COG4	Practice orally new words with their lexical sets.
COG5	Keep a notebook for a vocabulary list with meanings and examples to learn the new vocabulary items.
COG6	Associate new vocabulary items with physical objects to learn the lexical items.
COG7	Listen to vocabulary CDs to learn new vocabulary items.
COG8	Write new lexical items with meanings on flash cards to learn them.
<b>Metacognitive strategies: MET</b>	
MET1	Expand the knowledge of lexical items by listening to English songs.

MET2	Learn new words by watching English-speaking movies with subtitles.
MET3	Study new vocabulary items from advertisements, written signs, written notices, etc.
MET4	Learn new lexical items by reading articles from several sources as magazines, newspapers, brochures, etc.
MET5	Expand the knowledge of vocabulary items by testing your vocabulary knowledge with word lists.
MET6	Learn new words by listening to English radio programs
MET7	Expand the knowledge of lexical items by doing extra curriculum exercises from different sources, such as articles, texts, internet, etc.
MET8	Learn new words by relating newly-learned words with previously learned ones.
<b>Social strategies: SOC</b>	
SOC1	Ask instructors of English for Arabic translation of new lexical items.
SOC2	Communicate with instructors of English in English to use a new lexical item in a sentence to increase the knowledge of vocabulary.
SOC3	Communicate with instructors of English in English to ask for a synonym of a new word or to explain it.
SOC4	Look for extra English information through the Internet to learn new vocabulary items.
SOC5	Discuss in English with classmates to know and expand the meaning of a new vocabulary item.
SOC6	Communicate with foreigners in English through different types of media to develop new vocabulary.
SOC7	Play English games, such as scrabble, crossword puzzles to find meaning of a new vocabulary item through group work activity.
SOC8	Study and practice meaning of new vocabulary items in-group to expand lexical knowledge.