Young learners' vocabulary strategies employment in a foreign language

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Résumé : *Cet article essaie d'éclaircir un peu le champ de l'apprentissage du vocabulaire en langue étrangère par de jeunes apprenants. Il examine les stratégies employées par les élèves du primaire lors de l'apprentissage de l'anglais comme langue étrangère, mais aussi les problèmes rencontrés pour la compréhension et la production du vocabulaire anglais. Notre groupe d'enquête se composait de 238 élèves hellénophones de 12 ans, apprenant l'anglais en classe de sixième, dans des écoles publiques au Nord-Ouest de la Grèce, la sixième étant une classe de l'école élémentaire en Grèce. Dans notre recherche nous avons utilisé une combinaison de méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives : des questionnaires complétés par les élèves pour collecter des informations sur les stratégies et leurs difficultés. De plus, pour avoir des indications plus complètes et comprendre du vocabulaire, nous avons utilisé des remarques orales personnelles « de vive voix » (Think-aloud process) et des interviews rétrospectives. Les données ont fourni des informations riches et intéressantes sur l'approche lexicale des jeunes apprenants, leurs besoins variés, les types des stratégies utilisées, en relation avec l'apprentissage du vocabulaire et les problèmes rencontrés.*

Mots-clés : *Jeunes apprenants, Stratégies, Vocabulaire, Apprentissage, Langue étrangère*

Abstract: *The present study was an attempt to throw some light into the area of young learners' vocabulary learning, since it was concerned with identifying the strategies employed by primary school students while learning vocabulary in EFL (English as a Foreign Language), as well as exploring the problems they encountered in comprehending and producing English language vocabulary. The sample consisted of 238 Greek speaking students, aged 12, and enrolled in 6th grade of state primary schools in North-Western Greece, who learn English as a foreign language. The study, utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: self-report questionnaires were used to gather information about the participants' strategy use and their difficulties. In order to obtain a more complete indication and understanding of the vocabulary learning process verbal reports (Think-aloud process) and retrospective interviews were used.The data provided rich and interesting information on the lexical approach of young learners, their different needs and the types and the range of strategies used, in relation to vocabulary learning, as well as the difficulties they face.*

Keywords: *Young learners, Strategies, Vocabulary, Learning, foreign language*

Introduction

In the present paper, an attempt was made to investigate the strategies employed by L2 learners to understand contextual clues in text for the comprehension of vocabulary. It offers a framework for discussion of the various individual learning techniques and strategies L2 learners employ to facilitate not only comprehension of vocabulary but also to promote retention of these words. Vocabulary learning has been considered as an integral and significant area of language teaching as "words are the basic building blocks of language, the units of meaning from which larger structures such as sentences, paragraphs and whole texts are formed" (Read, 2000:1). Vocabulary is more complex than knowledge of words and word meanings in both oral and print language and it is related to their reading comprehension and academic success (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003). Conventionally, when we talk about knowing a word, we mean knowing its definition (Cook, 2001: 60-61). However, knowing a word by sight and sound and knowing a word's definition are not the same as knowing how to use the word correctly, as well as being able to use that word in speech and writing, and understanding it when it is heard or seen in various contexts (Miller & Gildea, 1987).

Nagy and Scott (2000) identified several dimensions that describe the complexity of what it means to know a word. First, word knowledge is *incremental*, which involves many encounters with both spoken and written words in varying contexts (Nagy, Anderson & Herman, 1987). Second, word knowledge is *multidimensional*, because many words have multiple meanings and serve different functions in different contexts. Third, word knowledge is *interrelated* in that knowledge of one word connects to knowledge of other words. Nation (1990: 31) proposes the following list of the different kinds of knowledge that a student must master in order to know a word: a) the meaning(s) of the word, b) the written form of the word, c) the spoken form of the word, d) the grammatical behaviour of the word, e) the collocations of the word, f) the register of the word, g) the associations of the word, and h) the frequency of the word.

Research on vocabulary instruction (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003; Ellis, 1994) indicated that children learn most of their vocabulary indirectly by engaging daily in oral language, listening to adults read to them, and reading extensively. Moreover vocabulary could be taught directly; this can be done by introducing specific words before reading, providing opportunities for active engagement with new words, and repeating exposure to the vocabulary in many contexts. Vocabulary development involves children's coming to understand unfamiliar words and being able to use them appropriately. It also involves teachers' helping them to model how to use a variety of strategies.

Vocabulary learning strategies are a subcategory of language learning strategies and constitute knowledge about what students do to find out the meaning of new words, retain them in long-term memory, recall them when needed in comprehension, and use them in language production (Ruutmets, 2005). They are classified into a) strategies for understanding the meaning of words, such as making deductions from the word-form, linking to cognates, guessing from the context and using dictionary, and b) strategies for acquiring words, such as

repeating the word over and over again, organising words in the mind, linking to background knowledge.

Schmitt (1997), developing Oxford's (1990) taxonomy for vocabulary learning strategies, goes a step further dividing vocabulary learning into two main phases: 'discovering new word meanings' and 'consolidating new word forms and meanings'. During these phases, students apply different strategies: *Cognitive,* which are the strategies which accomplish the process of using or converting the language material. *Social*, which develop interaction either amongst students or teacher and students. *Memory,* that is recalling the meaning word based on its decoding and connection with the student's background knowledge. They can be enriched gradually by the students themselves, depending on their individual preferences and learning style. *Metacognitive* are the strategies which help students to monitor and evaluate their process of learning and to use consciously certain techniques that improve performance in the target language.

Metacognitive and cognitive strategy use is a main 'key' for students to become more independent and responsible for their own learning; therefore, learners should be encouraged to individualize their strategy use, which may vary based on educational, linguistic or cultural background and learning style (Jones, 1998; Yamato, 2000). Moreover, Nation (1990) suggested that teaching strategies for handling unknown words, which included guessing through context, memorization and analyzing the word morphologically, is better that teaching the words.

1. The study

The present study was concerned with identifying the strategies employed by primary school students while learning vocabulary in EFL (English as a Foreign Language), as well as exploring the problems they encountered in comprehending and producing English language vocabulary. The basic research questions were the following: a) what strategies do students employ to acquire new words or to retain them? b) to what extend do they have awareness of strategy use? c) how do they combine different strategies and how does this affect their learning? d) what difficulties do they encounter as regards vocabulary learning? e) what are the major lexical problems faced by learners in text comprehension?

1.1. Participants

238 Greek-speaking students (107 female and 131 male), enrolled in the 6th grade of state primary schools in North- Western Greece, participated in the study.
All students have had a four years' EFL learning experience in state primary schools. The participants' language level was estimated to range between high level (55%) and low level (45%) language learners based on the results of an English test administered to them and teachers' assessment records. The test was based on London Tests of English for Children (Breakthrough), equivalent to the A2 Level of Common European Framework.

In addition, twenty two students (11 competent language learners and 11 less competent learners) were selected from the total number of the participants, according to their high or low scores in the test, in order to participate in the thinking aloud process and in retrospective interviews.

1.2. Instruments – Procedures

Self-report *questionnaires* were used to gather information about a) the participants' attitudes to vocabulary learning, b) their aspects on strategy use and c) vocabulary learning difficulties. Provision was made to include questions of the closed form or restricted types (Brown, 2001; Wallace, 2000), using a three point Likert-type scale. The participants had to rank the 40 items of the questionnaire in a) frequency scales (frequently-sometimes-rarely) and b) difficulty scales (most difficult-fairly difficult- least difficult).

In order to obtain a more complete indication of a learner's written ability and strategy use, verbal reports (*think-aloud protocols)* and retrospective individual *interviews* were used. *Verbal report* data was collected from 22 students. A task was given at the beginning with the intent of observing how each child would approach the task. Each student was exposed to two texts (a narrative and an informative text), which were followed by four reading comprehension open-ended questions and two closed type vocabulary tasks: word-form recognition, translating and multiple-choice tasks. The narrative text, entitled "The day at school", consisted of 282 words and the informative text, entitled "Greek festive", consisted of 265 words.

While reading, the students were asked to think aloud all the techniques and strategies used to understand the meaning of certain words and to overcome possible difficulties. All their thinking aloud was done in L1 (Greek) in order to promote as much verbalizing of thoughts as possible. After the think-aloud sessions, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the twenty two students to gain further insight.

1.3. Data analysis

Data derived from the *questionnaires* were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items of the questionnaires were obtained. Moreover, Chi-square-test (X^2) was used to test possible differences between male and female students and between more proficient and less proficient language learners.

The *verbal* data underwent the procedure of data reduction, which involved first and second level coding as well as pattern coding. Codes resulted in groups of categories, 'labelled' by a specific name Miles & Humberman, 1994), which were developed from theories based on relevant literature (Cook, 2001; Ellis, 1994; Gu & Johnson,1996; Nation, 2001) and strategy classification (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997).

2. Questionnaire results

2.1. Difficulties

Most of the students, regardless of their language level, identified some difficulties and problems related to vocabulary learning. The frequency

distribution of the data showed that the most difficult sub-skills/ aspects are considered to be the following:

'Spelling words' was of medium (40%) and high difficulty (21%) for the majority of the students, and of less degree of difficulty for a significant percentage of the participants (39%) (Table1). There was a significant difference between the competent students, who rated 'spelling words low in difficulty (45.5%) and the poor writers who declared that they faced a medium degree of difficulty (47%) ($X^2 = 10.413$, df = 3, p<0.005).

Concerning the 'translation of words into L1', 28.1 % of the students declared that they face great difficulty, a significant number considered 'translation of words into L1' of medium difficulty (34.5%); however, it is worth mentioning that an important part of the students (37.4%) declared it is an easy task for them. For female students it was a significant problem (37.1%) as opposed to males, who declared no difficulties in translating words (41.2%) ($X^2 = 8.548$, df = 3, p<0.05).

It is noteworthy that the participants were partly in agreement when facing difficulties in 'treating with infrequent words' (37.8 %,) most difficult, and (37.4 %,) fairly difficult. In addition, the students were also partly in agreement when facing difficulties in 'recalling words', (37%) fairly difficult and 34.4% less difficult; however, only 18.7% thought of it as most difficult. 'Recalling words' after some time constitutes a major difficulty for the low level students (33.3%) compared to better students who declared that they face a few difficulties (39%) ($X^2 = 15.062$, df = 3, p= <0.005).

'Using words in sentential context' was considered to be a medium difficulty process, as 25.7% of the students ranked it as 'most difficult' and 25.2% ranked it as 'fairly difficult'. The rest of the participants (49.1%) regarded it as an easy process. Most of the efficient language learners (54.3%) had no difficulties in combining a sentence using new words; however, only 31.7% of low level students faced no difficulties ($X^2 = 12.894$, df = 3, p= <0.01).

Table 1. Students' difficulties

Difficulties encountered	Most difficult		Fairly difficult		Less difficult	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Spelling words	50	21	95	40	93	39
Translating	67	28.1	82	34.5	89	37.4
Infrequent words	90	37.8	89	37.4	59	24.8
Recalling words	68	28.6	88	37	82	34.4
Using words in sentential context	61	25.7	60	25.2	117	49.1
Compound words	60	25.2	88	37	90	37.8
Polysyllables	51	14.2	84	35.3	103	43.3
Using noun words	30	12.6	50	21	158	66.4
Using adverbials and prepositions	54	23.7	100	42	84	35.3

Regarding the difficulties the students encountered with learning and using various types of words, the frequency distribution of the data showed the following:

As regards 'compound words', a significant number of the participants declared either high degree of difficulty (25.2%) or medium degree of difficulty (37%). However, a non negligible percentage of the sample (37.8%), reported no difficulties. There were significant differences between less sufficient language learners and more sufficient ones, who faced no difficulties with oral and written form of compound words (40.8%) (X^2 = 11.655, df = 3, p= <0.01).

Less difficulties were encountered with 'polysyllable words', as a great number of students faced either a law degree of difficulties (35.3%) or no difficulties (43.3%). Poor learners struggled to a higher degree with 'polysyllable words' (38.3%) than good learners who declared they had no difficulties (49.4%), (X^2 = 18.580, df = 3, p= <0.001).

Although the majority of the students faced no difficulties 'Using noun words' in written or oral speech (66.4%), there were significant differences between poor and good learners (X^2 = 16.287, df = 3, p= <0.005), as the great majority of good language learners agreed on having no difficulties (91.4%).

However, 'using adverbials and prepositions' was regarded as a more demanding process, as the majority of the students encountered either high (22.7%) or medium degree of difficulty (42%). Poor students struggled to a higher degree with 'using adverbials and prepositions' (36.7%) compared to good ones (17.8%), (X^2 = 19.510, df = 3, p= <0.001).

2.2. Strategy use

The students were asked to rank certain strategies and sub-processes that they prefer using while learning new vocabulary, in a frequency scale (Table 2).

Table 2. Strategy Use

Strategy use	Frequently		Sometimes		Rarely	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Written repetition	81	33.25	78	32.8	78	32.8
Repeating orally	116	48.8	76	32	45	18.9
Using a synonym	29	12.2	87	36.6	122	51.2
Associating with already known words	63	26.5	96	40.3	79	33.2
Translating in mother tongue	110	46.2	73	30.7	51	21.4
Placing new words in sentential context	80	33.6	92	38.7	64	26.9
Underlining the words in the text	72	30.2	90	37.8	76	32
Looking up the words in the dictionary	108	45.4	68	28.6	61	25.6
Using imagery	66	27.7	102	42.9	70	29.4
Using word parts	61	25.6	86	36.1	88	37
Switching to mother tongue (check for L1 cognate)	65	27.3	92	38.6	80	33.6
Guessing from context	79	33.2	102	42.9	57	23.9
Cooperating with peers	27	11.3	93	39.1	116	48.7
Asking teacher for clarification	89	37.4	111	46.7	36	15.1
Grouping words in patterns	43	18.1	82	34.5	111	46.6
Self-evaluating in word learning	79	33.2	98	41.2	61	25.6

An important number of young learners - regardless of their language level - reported that they liked repeating the new words in order to learn them either orally (48.8%) or in a written form (33.2%). It is worth mentioning that a lower percentage (33.2%) declared that they rarely rewrite a word in order to learn it. In addition, the majority of the participants (51.2%) declared that they rarely employ the strategy of 'using a synonym or a circumlocution', a strategy which is preferable by more competent learners (55.7%) rather than the less competent ones (43.3%)' ($X^2 = 7.912$, df = 2, p<0.05).

'Associating a word with already known words' attracted most students' preference irrespective their language level or gender, as it is ranked either 'often' (26.5%) or 'sometimes' (40.3%). 'Translating vocabulary in mother tongue' was viewed of highest importance for the majority of students, since they use this technique either frequently (46.2%) or in some cases (30.7%). There were significant differences between the more competent students, who used it frequently (49.7%), and the less competent ones who declared that they sometimes preferred using this technique (45.8%) ($X^2 = 8.288$, df = 2, p<0.05).

'Underlining the words in the text' was viewed of low importance for the majority of students, irrespective of their language level, since 37.8% of the sample stated that when reading a text, they sometimes pinpoint and underline unknown words and 32% of the participants stated they rarely employ this strategy. On the other hand, 'looking up the words in the dictionary' was ranked as a favorite strategy as 45.4% of the participants declared that they frequently consult a dictionary to find the meaning of a word and 28.6% of the participants declared they use it sometimes.

Furthermore, a considerable number of the participants (42.9%), regardless of their language level, reported that they sometimes like using images to understand the meaning; for a certain number of the students (27.7%) it is a frequently used strategy. It was revealed that a certain number of students (25.6%) frequently use the parts of a word (e.g. base word, suffix, prefix) in order to understand its meaning and a greater percentage (36.1%) declared they sometimes follow the specific strategy.

In addition, a significant percentage of the students stated they check for a cognate in mother tongue and associate it with the English word in order to understand its meaning, either frequently (27.3%) or in some cases (38.6%). It is worth mentioning that a significant part of the students showed preference in using the strategy of 'guessing from context'. More precisely, 33.2% of the students frequently try to guess the meaning of a word by reading the sentence or the whole paragraph and 42.9% of the students declared they sometimes follow the specific sub-process. It is worth mentioning that 'grouping the words in patterns' was revealed of low frequency for a significant number of students (46.6%). However, it was revealed that 'self-evaluation' is a favourite strategy for a significant number of students who declared that they frequently (33.2%) or sometimes (41.2%) get involved in evaluating themselves in vocabulary learning. It is remarkable that a limited proportion of the sample (11.3%) declared they often try to cooperate with peers in order to clarify the meaning of unknown words. Nevertheless, they showed preference to asking the teacher for clarifying certain words (37.4%).

2.3. Students' preferences on vocabulary teaching techniques

Concerning students' preferences on vocabulary learning, an important part of the participants showed preference for flashcards as a teaching technique (frequently 27.7%, sometimes 43.7%). Statistically significant differences (X^2 = 9.597, df = 4, p<0.05) were revealed between high level learners and low level learners who showed a greater preference for the specific technique (36.7%). In addition, half of the total number of the participants (54.6%), irrespective of their language level, stated they frequently prefer having the list of words translated in mother tongue on the board by the teacher, while 30.7% of the students stated that they sometimes preferred this technique. Female students (63.8%) were especially interested in the specific technique compared to males (48.5%) (X^2 = 6.747, df = 2, p<0.05).

Furthermore, almost half of the respondents (47.9%), regardless of their language level, stated that they frequently prefer to underline the unknown words in the text and then have these words translated in L1 (mother tongue) by the teacher. However, female students (60.4%) showed greater preference than males (43.8%) (X^2 =11.289, df =2, p<0.05) (Table 3).

It is also worth mentioning that the participants were willing to have the new words presented in a sentential context or be interpreted by a circumlocution or synonym. More precisely, the children showed a major preference (37.4% frequently and 36.5% sometimes) for having the opportunity to listen to the teacher explaining the word in English by giving a circumlocution or synonym. It was revealed that the more competent learners showed a greater preference, by ranking it 'often' (48.3%) compared to less competent learners (41.6% 'sometimes') (X^2 =6.414, df =2, p<0.05).

Table 3. Students' preferences on teaching techniques

Preferences on teaching vocabulary	Frequently		Sometimes		Rarely	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Using pictures/ flashcards	66	27.7	104	43.7	68	28.6
Using extralinguistic / paralinguistic elements	38	16	65	27.3	134	56.7
Translating in L1	130	54.6	73	30.7	32	13.4
Underlined by the student and explained by the teacher	114	47.9	86	36.1	36	15.1
Presented in a sentential context	62	26	110	46.2	66	27.8
Consult dictionaries	92	38.7	80	33.6	66	27.7
Cooperating with classmates	52	21.8	91	38.2	95	40
Using a circumlocution or synonym	89	37.4	87	36.5	61	25.6

It is noteworthy that nearly half of the total number of the participants (46.2%), irrespective of their language level, frequently preferred to having presented a new word in a sentential context in order to guess its meaning. Furthermore, the majority of the participants, irrespective of their language level, were willing to consult a dictionary for unknown words (frequently 38.7% and sometimes 3.6%). Giving students the opportunity to cooperate with a classmate in order to clarify the meaning of some words was recorded as a less favourite technique,

since only 21.8% of the total sample declared that they would often like to have such an opportunity. However, it seemed to have a higher incidence of use preference with the male students (36.6%) than female students, who in their majority preferred using it scarcely (45.8%) (X^2 =7.332, df =2, p<0.05).

3. Interview results

Rich insights to the vocabulary strategies were provided through think-aloud process and retrospective interviews. The data, after being coded, resulted into thirty –two (32) codes (included 305 instances), which were grouped into five (5) categories (types of words, language aspects, cognitive strategies, memory strategies, metacognitive strategies) classified into two basic themes: a) vocabulary learning difficulties, b) strategy employment (Table 4).

Table 4. Thematic areas, Categories, Codes and References

THEMES - CATEGORIES	CODES	OCCURRENCES
A.VOCABULARY LEARNING DIFFICULTIES		
1. Types of words	Polysyllable words (POLYSLL)	4
	Multiple meaning words (MULMEAN)	9
2. language aspects	Meaning of Unknown words (UMUNKNO)	20
	Spelling (SPELL)	10
	Pronunciation (PRONUN)	10
	Translation of the words in L1 (TRANSL1)	6
B.STRATEGY EMPLOYMENT		
3. Cognitive strategies	Guessing from context (GUECON)	20
	Consult dictionaries (CONDICT)	16
	Switching to mother tongue (check for L1 cognate) (SWIMOTO)	18
	Analysing contrastively (ANALCONTR)	9
	Written repetition (WRITREP)	9
	Translating (TRANSL)	18
	Rereading (REREA)	4
	Skipping the unknown words (SKIPUNKNOWOR)	7
	Using the linguistic clues (USLINGCL)	12
	Written and Verbal repetition (WRITVERREP)	8
	Using word lists (USWORLIS)	13
	Underlining (UNDRL)	12
	Reading and rereading (READREAD)	5
	Oral repetition (ORLREPEA)	6
4. Memory strategies	Using imagery (USIMAGR)	18
	Creating mental images (CRMENIMAG)	8
	Word association (WORASSC)	8
	Link to personal experience, background knowledge (LINPEREXP)	9
	Using word parts (USWORPAR)	6
	Grouping in patterns (GRPATT)	6
5. Metacognitive strategies	Self – correction (SELCORR)	10
	Conscious contact with L2 (CONCONT2)	20
	Self – evaluation (SELEVAL)	10
	Practicing and revising (PRACREV)	11
	Self-monitring – SELFMON	11
	Total of instances	315

3.1. Vocabulary learning difficulties

Most of the students, especially the higher English language level ones, were aware of the fact that vocabulary learning is a complex task that may require different strategies and techniques. It is amazing that all students, irrespective of their language level, faced difficulties in understanding the meaning of 'unknown words' met in a reading text and especially in a listening text.

a) comprehending a text with a lot of unknown words, causing them a lot of uncertainty and lack of confidence;
b) pronunciation; *"It is so difficult to pronounce certain words and to understand the meaning of some words......"* (student 1);
c) reading comprehension and translation;
d) making mistakes and being reprimanded by the teacher.

They believed that, although a certain amount of anxiety sometimes might help learners to reach their peak performance levels, too much anxiety blocks language learning. Few children adopted some strategies to reduce anxiety, such as 'self-encouragement', 'rewarding themselves' and 'having positive self-concepts'.

As regards the types of words the students find most difficult, a certain number of students (9 instances), particularly the less competent ones, encountered difficulties with using multiple meaning words in the appropriate context with the right meaning.
"......for example ...I have a problem...I do not know when to use 'litter' or 'rubbish'...and in which case to select either 'well' or 'fine'......" (student 12).
In addition, a few less competent language learners had trouble with pronouncing some polysyllable words.

3.2. Cognitive strategies

The students appeared to be able to articulate their processes reasonably fully and it was revealed that more than half of the young learners tried to devise certain *memory*, *cognitive* and *compensation* strategies to overcome some limitations and problems of vocabulary learning. Some outstanding differences were highlighted between more and less competent learners. The more competent ones employed and utilized a greater number of strategies than the less competent ones, and followed rather more elaborate ones like 'analyzing contrastively', 'using the linguistic clues', 'using word lists'. On the other hand, students with lower language level preferred using strategies such as 'translating', 'frequent dictionary use', 'written and oral repetition'.

Concerning *cognitive* strategies, 'guessing from the context' occurred with greater frequency (19 instances). Word-for-word 'translation' from mother tongue was a frequent occurrence among students (18 instances), irrespective of their FL level. A considerable number of participants (18 instances) declared that they apply knowledge of words and structures from L1 to English in order to produce an expression in the new language. Some other students (9 instances) relied on the strategy of 'written repetition' or 'oral repetition' (6 instances) in order to learn a word.

Most of the children (regardless of their language level) followed the technique of reading a sentence or part of a text more than once to understand its meaning more completely, or to extract the meaning of a word, declaring that *"...... when I cannot understand a sentence, or a word, I reread it"* (student 2). A student reported that *"I read the whole paragraph of a text or sentence to grasp the gist, and then I reread it underlining the unknown words ......"* (student 18). Another one pointed out *"I read and reread the words silently.... Then I repeat them orally......"* (student 9).

It is worth mentioning that 'guessing from the context', 'translating' and 'checking for L1 cognate' were the most frequently used strategies employed by the vast majority of the participants irrespectively their language level. Twenty students claimed that they guess word meaning from context clues (contextualisation); *"... ...I am trying to pinpoint the unknown words and to understand them by the context..."* (student 7). Particularly, a student declared: *"I am so confused with multiple meaning words.....however, when I read the whole sentence I manage to extract their meaning......"* (student 11). Another one stated that *"when I face some difficulty in understanding a word I reread the part in order to imagine its meaning"* (student 5), or when *"... ... I do not a sentence or a part, and go on reading the next sentence trying to imagine the meaning from the rest of the text......"* (student 7).

Moreover, underlining was a frequently used strategy; they usually underlined some difficult or unknown words: *"I underline the words I do not understand and I reread them......"* (student 5), because *"...... I do not understand them"* (student 10). On the other hand, some less competent students skipped a word pinpointing that they considered it difficult, *"If I face a difficulty in understanding a word/some words, I skip it/them and go on...."*. (student 4); Or they considered it unimportant: *"I skip some small words...because I think they are unimportant......"* (student 16).

It is noteworthy that the students in their vast majority consulted a dictionary to find out the meaning of a word they met while reading. A student claimed: *"I try to understand a word from the context; if I can not manage to do it I consult a dictionary......"* (student 11). In fact, 'looking every word up in a dictionary', was considered to be the most useful technique and a favourite strategy in order to encounter comprehension problems by a great number of students, irrespectively their language level. A student stated: *"... ... I would use a dictionary whenever the word is considered important or appears more than once in the text"* (student 14). Another one stated that he followed that subprocess, because he encountered some difficulty with certain types of words: *"......I look up the significant words in the dictionary....., that is the most difficult words, the polysyllable ones"* (student 15). Some others used a combination of underlining and dictionary consulting strategies *"... ...ok I underline the unknown words when reading a text and then I look them up in an English – Greek dictionary"* (student 10).

Furthermore, the students used some strategies to overcome vocabulary limitations in a foreign language, such as 'using the linguistic clues', 'analyzing contrastively' in order to understand the meaning of a word and 'switching

to mother tongue'. The most competent students preferred identifying the linguistic clues from the context to understand the unknown words or difficult sentences in a text. They preferred comparing elements of the foreign language with elements of native language to identify similarities, claiming: *"I switch to my mother tongue, as some letters assimilate with those in English…"* (student 10)*,* or declaring: *"some English words assimilate with the equivalent Greek words"* (students 9 and 12). Four children frequently switched to their L1 and analysed contrastively the words, when they came across unknown vocabulary, as *"……some English words assimilate with some Greek ones …and sometimes with Albanian words…"* (student 4); Or because *"I can easily understand the words that assimilate in pronunciation with a relative Greek one, as ομπρέλα -umbrella, ball - μπολ"* (student 8).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a certain number of students wrote and rewrote, copied and recopied the new words in order to learn them. One student stated: *"I can remember a word by copying it again and again…"* (student 2). Two other students clarified that they *"….. copy again and again, I write and rewrite the English words with the meaning in Greek"* (student 13).

3.3. Memory strategies

The most frequently *memory* strategy used was 'using imagery' (18 instances); 'decoding' and 'linking to personal experience-background knowledge' followed. Nearly half of the participants (9 instances), especially the competent ones, drew upon previous experience to facilitate new vocabulary.

A considerable number of students, regardless of the English language level, used imagery to imagine the unknown words or phrases. They declared that *"pictures are very useful for comprehending an unfamiliar word…"* (student 14); or *"looking at the pictures included in the text I can grasp the meaning of the word…....."* (student 3), since *"…..some pictures 'narrate' the whole story…"* (student 19) .Only two children did not make use of imagery, claiming that *"….. pictures do not contribute to the comprehension of a phrase or an unclear part"* (student 6). It is worth mentioning that five children associated a word with a known one in order to determine meaning by *"looking at the pictures because they help me and then trying to link some things with the already material"* (student 20). Another one mentioned: *"If I do not understand anything, I reread it in order to identify/ remember a word trying to link it with something already known"* (student 7) .

Some students tried to guess a new word either by "associating it with a familiar word Greek in order to determine its meaning" (student 4), or by *"associating the difficult words with images in mind…....."* (student 8). Only six students, five of them were competent, broke down a new word into its component parts. Those who followed this strategy explained that they divide an unknown word into parts to make it comprehensible. A student declared that *"I am trying to use the parts of a word – root, suffix, prefix – in order to clarify its meaning… the teacher of first language makes us follow the same process in Greek too "* (student 19).

A strategy frequently used by the majority of the readers was 'elaborating', that is drawing upon previous, schema-experience about topics knowledge to facilitate new vocabulary learning in the target language. Moreover, a significant part of the students 'created' mental images, by following the '*look-cover-write-check'* technique, in order to learn and recall a word later. More precisely, five students stated: *"I look, read silently, repeat, cover and write the word"* (student 20). Another low level student mentioned: *"I can learn the words by seeing them in a written form not just listening to them and then I keep it in mind……"* (student 18).

3.4. Metacognitive strategies

With reference to *metacognitive strategies,* most students, especially the more competent ones, showed some understanding of the control they have over their own cognition. However, the data showed that metacognitive strategies were underused compared to cognitive strategies. They were aware of the ways of developing English vocabulary and for this purpose they declared they seek for improving English language through communicating with native speakers, watching films, listening to the radio, playing L2 language games (20 instances).

Most of the students found that films could help them to learn and consolidate English vocabulary. A student stated: *"…… while watching a film, I listen to the words and read the meaning in the subtitles……I learn them in this way……"* (student 21). Another student declared *"… …I can understand some words and learn them while watching TV……"* (student 16). Some others said that they find songs useful in learning vocabulary. Precisely, a student verbalised: *"While listening to songs, I try to imitate the spelling of words and then I try to translate the rimes in order to understand the song……"* (student 21).

Moreover, half of the students showed positive attitude towards evaluating their own progress in vocabulary learning, and an important proportion of them (especially the more efficient learners) got involved in the process of identifying difficulties and problems, and self-correcting. It is remarkable that the more competent students tried to monitor their difficulties (11 instances). More precisely, a lot of the participants felt they did not read or speak English sufficiently: *"I am not a good reader……I would like to read more quickly"* (student 6), or *"I would like to pronounce some words better"* (student 12). However, the more competent ones had a fairly positive self –concept as readers; a sufficient learner declared *"I dare to say I read and comprehend the words sufficiently…… generally, I dare to say I am a good English language learner"* (student 7).

Half of the students (11 instances) got involved consciously in the process of 'practicing' and 'revising' in order to learn new vocabulary. They believed that they *"….practice in order to learn new words and to recall whenever needed in the future…"* (student 22), or *"the more I meet the same words, the better I can learn them. The English films, without subtitles, can help me because I can practice the familiar words in a pleasing way…"* (student 7).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to establish an understanding of young learners' vocabulary learning strategies and their strategies for comprehending and using vocabulary. Questionnaire data indicated that most of the students, especially the higher English language level ones, were aware of the fact that vocabulary learning is a complex task that may require different strategies and techniques. They stressed some difficulties associated with recalling and using words, as well as with the pronunciation and spelling of compound words. Comprehending a text with a lot of unknown words and treating with infrequent words cause them a lot of uncertainty and lack of confidence. According to Nation and Coady (1988), the presence of low frequency vocabulary in a text has negative effects on comprehension. Chall (1983) made a clear distinction between the two types of vocabulary needed for reading comprehension: a) word recognition vocabulary (the words a student can pronounce when seen in print) and b) meaning vocabulary (words a student can define or attach appropriate meaning).

Concerning the approaches to learning vocabulary, young learners showed preference for visual techniques such as flashcards, pictures, photos etc. In addition, they stated that they frequently prefer having the list of words translated in mother tongue on the board by the teacher. This is probably because they are accustomed to being taught vocabulary in this way. It is also worth mentioning that the participants were willing to have the new words presented in a sentential context or be interpreted by a circumlocution or synonym.

Overall verbal data revealed that students seem to adopt a variety of strategies in the field of vocabulary, taking into consideration that they appear to consider vocabulary to be predominant in their language learning. They tried to devise certain memory, cognitive and compensation strategies to overcome some limitations and problems associated with vocabulary learning. The more competent language learners employed and utilized a greater number of strategies than the less competent ones, and followed rather more elaborate ones like 'analyzing contrastively', 'using word lists', 'analyzing contrastively', 'switching to mother tongue', 'identifying the linguistic clues from the context' in order to understand the unknown words or difficult phrases in a text.

On the other hand, students with lower language level showed dependence on bottom-up decoding strategies and preferred using strategies such as 'translating', 'frequent dictionary use', 'written and oral repetition'. However, their spontaneous preference for frequent strategy use –such as repetition or writing down a word- in relation to some more complicated strategies, according to Schmitt (1997), could lead to better decoding of the vocabulary and, consequently, promote learning. In relation to the metacognitive strategies, it was indicated that they were underused – particularly from the part of the less competent students – compared to cognitive strategies.

The data of the present research suggested that effective vocabulary development is a complex process which requires a combination of instruction and encouragement of learning strategies use. It requires techniques of

teaching vocabulary effective in helping students to deal with complexity of word knowledge, such as multiple exposures to vocabulary items, teaching how to effectively use a dictionary, teaching students word structure, the meaning of prefixes, suffixes and root words, meaning of words in a sentence and word relationships, and developing students' ability to infer word meaning in the context. Students' strategic training of vocabulary (Cook, 2001; Nagy & Scott, 2000; Graves Watts-Taffe, 2002) could enable them to be flexible and strategic learners (Griva, Alevriadou & Geladari, 2009), that is to be consciously aware of vocabulary strategy use, so that "they can use strategies on their own to determine the meaning of unknown words" (Burns, 1999: 201).

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