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AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT: STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO AND PERCEPTIONS OF TRAINING TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

María Blanco-Hermida

Open Language Programme, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom
m.blanco@westminster.ac.uk

Paloma Úbeda Mansilla

Department of Linguistics Applied to Science and Technology, Technical University of Madrid (UPM), Madrid, Spain
paloma.ubeda@upm.es

Abstract

This article reports on a small-scale action research study aimed at exploring the impact of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) awareness-raising and training sessions on two groups of Spanish as a Foreign Language beginners. The exploration focused on identifying changes to strategy use and students' experience of strategy effectiveness after a series of VLS awareness-raising and training sessions that took place on a Spanish beginners' course. In addition, feedback on the sessions was sought from the students. Data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. Responses from the participants were coded using an adaptation of VLS from Schmitt, N. (1997) classification: additional VLS that emerged from the data was also added. Emergent themes from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed and included in the findings. The results revealed changes in strategy use and suggest that students benefited from the

VLS awareness-raising and training sessions. Furthermore, the results provide insights into factors that affect strategy effectiveness and students' perceptions of what made strategies particularly effective for them when learning Spanish.

Keywords

Vocabulary Learning, Vocabulary Strategies, Learner Strategies, Language Learning

1. Introduction

Findings from research suggest that many words need to be learned to develop a good level of communicative competence (Nation 2006). For example, according to Nation (2006, 63), 98% coverage of a text is needed for unassisted comprehension; a word-family vocabulary of 8,000 to 9,000 is needed for comprehension of written text, and a word-family vocabulary of 6,000 to 7,000 is needed for spoken text. Van Zeeland and Schmitt (2013) suggest that receptive knowledge of 2,000 to 3,000-word families could be enough for listening comprehension where useful but not necessarily complete, comprehension is desired. Furthermore, as Spanish as a Foreign Language teacher will be aware, there are many factors involved in word knowledge (e.g. meaning(s), collocations, register, grammar, spelling, and pronunciation) that are part of an everyday class. All these factors are part of the learning of foreign language students. Students are therefore faced with a major task when it comes to learning large amounts of vocabulary.

In the beginners' courses where our action research took place, students of Spanish were expected to reach CEFR A 2.1 after 40 hours of class contact spread over 20 weeks, with about four hours of independent learning between lessons. Since the students were not studying in a Spanish immersion context, their progress in Spanish was dependent on the effectiveness of their class learning and their independent language learning strategies.

Working in this type of non-immersion context, we often hear students complain about how hard they find it to remember so much vocabulary in such a short period. We have also noticed that even students with a strong motivation to learn to possess a narrow range of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). This is not a surprising fact since most students report that they have never been taught explicitly how to learn a foreign language.

Taking into consideration all the students' challenges mentioned above and our own previous positive experiences of implementing strategy awareness-raising activities in the same educational context (Blanco-Hermida M., Pino M., Rodriguez B. 2010; Blanco 2007), we decided to

conduct a small-scale action research study on strategy awareness-raising and training sessions in VLS with two groups of beginner learners of Spanish.

The study aimed to explore the impact of the sessions on students' strategy use and to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of VLS in increasing their vocabulary knowledge. The exploration was focused on the following questions:

- Impact on strategy use: Did the VLS awareness-raising and training sessions, prompt students, to use strategies they were not using before?
- Strategy effectiveness: What VLS did they find more effective? Why?
- What was students' feedback on the VLS awareness-raising and training sessions?

2. Literature Background

Second and foreign language researchers have made attempts to develop classifications of VLS used by language learners. Examples of such classifications are the taxonomies proposed by Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001). Schmitt compiled a taxonomy of 58 VLS based on his review of the literature, learners' retrospective descriptions of strategy use, and teachers' experiences. He classifies the strategies into five groups: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Determination strategies are those used to discover the meaning of a new word without recourse to another's person's expertise. Social strategies use the interaction with people to improve learning. Memory strategies relate to new material to existing knowledge. Cognitive strategies manipulate or transform the target language. Finally, metacognitive strategies facilitate a conscious overview of the learning process and decision making about planning, monitoring, and evaluating the best way to study. In addition, Schmitt organizes the five groups into two larger categories: a) strategies that are useful for the initial discovery of a word's meaning, and b) strategies useful for consolidating a word once it has been encountered.

Nation (2001, 328) takes a different approach. In his taxonomy, vocabulary knowledge is separated from the sources of vocabulary knowledge and the learning processes. He organizes vocabulary learning strategies into three main categories: planning, sources, and processes, each covering a subset of key strategies. 'Planning' includes strategies for: a) choosing words, b) choosing the aspects of word knowledge, c) choosing strategies, and d) planning repetition and spending time. 'Sources' includes strategies for: a) analyzing the word, b) using from the context, c)

consulting reference sources in L1 or L2, and d) using connections with L1 or other languages. 'Proces' includes strategies for a) noticing, b) retrieving and c) generating.

On the topic of strategy effectiveness, Gu (2003) argues that the choice, use, and effectiveness of VLS depend on three major factors: the learning task at hand, the learners themselves, and the learning environment. He sees the task as a product in the learner's mind. Also, Gu (2003, 15) concludes that: 'Good learners seem to be those who initiate their learning, selectively attend to words of their own choices, studiously try to remember these words, and seek opportunities to use them.'

The learning task at hand can be broad or specific e.g. mastering a second language or remembering the meaning of one word. The learner-dependent factors are the individual differences that influence the process and result of learning e.g. age, sex, language aptitude, motivation, prior knowledge, and learning styles. Finally, the learning context refers to the socio-cultural-political environment where learning is taking place. This context involves teachers, peers, classroom climate, curriculum, cultural traditions of learning, and availability of input and output opportunities.

More insights into the effectiveness of language learning strategies and VLS have also emerged through studies conducted with both good language learners and underachievers especially in the field of EFL Dardjito, H. (2019), Atifnigar, et al (2020), however, these studies have been around for a long time. For example, in a study carried out with 300 Sudanese EFL students, Ahmed (1989) found that, in contrast with underachieving learners, good language learners were more aware of what they could learn about new words, paid more attention to collocation and spelling, were more able to connect new words to those they already knew, and used other learners as a resource for learning vocabulary. Underachieving learners were more passive (e.g. they did not use dictionaries, they ignored unknown words) and treated each word as a discrete item: they did not make connections with words they had previously learned. Ahmed found that, overall, good language learners not only used VLS more consistently; they also used a wider variety of VLS than underachieving learners.

Sanaoui (1995) analyzed the diaries of English and French learners and identified two distinctive approaches to learning vocabulary in an L2: structured and unstructured. Learners using a 'structured' approach engaged in independent study, initiated learning activities, recorded and reviewed the vocabulary they were learning, and practice the vocabulary items outside the class. In

contrast with good learners, weaker students had an ‘unstructured’ approach: they did not use any of the strategies used by good learners, or they did not use them consistently.

Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) found that students with good levels of achievement had more frequent and elaborate strategy use. They also found that success correlated with the capacity to learn independently and with time spent on the task (e.g. students initiated more opportunities for practicing vocabulary and getting exposed to the target items).

Several researchers in the field also argue that good language learners have a wide range of language learning strategies available, use them more frequently, and are flexible regarding strategy use (Cohen and Apeh 1981; Fan 2003; Moir and Nation 2002; Sanaoui 1995; Wu and Wang 1998; Zhang et al. 2003).

The effects of strategy training have been the subject of some research in the past 30 years. There have also been several reviews of studies on language strategy training (Cohen and Macaro 2007; Hassan et al. 2005; McDonough 1999; Oxford 2001, etc.). For example, Loewen (2014, 173) suggests that strategy training can have positive effects on aspects of the learning process, such as improvements in performance, increased motivation, and development of lifelong learning skills. Plonsky (2011), after reviewing 61 studies on the effects of language learning strategy training, found a small-to-medium effect on strategy training. He also found the training to be more effective when it was focused on teaching one or two strategies over a long period. On a similar note, Moir, and Nation (2002, 32) state:

‘Learners need to know not only about strategies and understand what they involve, but they need to become comfortable with their use. Until they reach a satisfactory level of comfort with a strategy, it is unlikely that they will truly experience its effectiveness or find it as easy to use as their default strategy. Reaching this level of comfort with a strategy involves a considerable investment of time and effort.’

3. Context and Pedagogical Intervention

The participants were two groups of students attending Spanish beginner courses in the University Open Language Program of London University, where undergraduate students can take Spanish as an optional module in their degree. The majority were non-native speakers of English, and they had already learned at least one foreign language to proficiency level.

All the VLS awareness-raising and training activities were conducted in English, not Spanish, as English was the language shared and spoken at an advanced level by both students and lecturer. The choice of L1 or L2 for learner strategy training has been a source of debate in the literature. However, we believe, as Grenfell and Harris (2017, 154-55) argue, that using the shared language is justifiable, particularly at beginners' level and when engaging in 'awareness-raising' activities, as it allows students to discuss in depth their learning, strategies, needs, and goals.

The two groups underwent four short VLS awareness-raising and training sessions (15-20 minutes each) delivered within their Spanish lessons throughout the academic year. A similar sequence of awareness-raising activities had already been piloted successfully in the same educational context with three groups of Spanish beginners (Blanco-Hermida, M., Pino, M. and Rodriguez, B. 2010).

The first two sessions took place in Weeks 5 and 6 of the 20-week Spanish course and were focused on introducing effective VL principles and strategies. In the first session, students were asked to discuss in pairs and then share with the whole class, why they thought it was important to learn vocabulary and what had helped them learn it effectively. The lecturer then introduced key principles for effective learning and strategies for the deliberate learning of vocabulary such as multisensory associations, grouping vocabulary, use of pictures, and spaced practice. The second session focused on the importance of 'spaced practice' i.e. spreading the revision of vocabulary over a long period of time instead of cramming before the exams. Students were also introduced to the concept of the 'forgetting curve' i.e. how humans lose the memory of learned knowledge over time unless the learned knowledge is consciously reviewed time and time again. They were given suggestions as to how to carry out effective, spaced practice when learning vocabulary, and were encouraged to explore the application of these principles and strategies for effective learning in and out of the class.

The third session took place in Week 15. It was focused on reviewing the VL principles and strategies discussed in Weeks 5 and 6; time was also allocated to the design of flashcards. Students were asked to design flashcards using paper or a mobile application such as Quizlet. At the end of the session, they were again encouraged to apply the principles and strategies discussed as well as to use flashcards for learning key vocabulary from the topics covered in the course.

The final session took place in Week 19 and was fully dedicated to the design of flashcards. Some students brought along electronic and paper flashcards that they had been using for studying

Spanish. During the session, they designed electronic or paper flashcards for their exam revision. Students were given the choice to work individually or with others.

It is important to note that this is an action research project, and ‘action research is conducted by or in cooperation with teachers for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of their educational environment and improving the effectiveness of their teaching’ (Dörnyei 2007, 191). Hence, although no major generalizations can be made, the findings can provide useful information for the education context where the study took place and for similar contexts.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were administered in class during Week 20, and the interviews took place shortly after that.

The choice of the semi-structured format was due to the fact that the study was an exploration of the broad experience of the participants, and, as Cohen (2011, 70) mentions, the semi-structured format has the advantage of ‘allowing the researcher and learners to pursue topics of interest which may not have been foreseen when the questions were originally drawn up.’ Semi-structured interviews also provide the freedom to ask further questions in order to clarify and explore comments made by the participants.

The questionnaires elicited information relating to our three main questions. Participants were asked to confirm whether they had changed their strategy use as a result of the VLS awareness-raising and training activities. If they gave a positive answer, they were asked to give examples of the VLS they had tried, and to state which one had been the most effective and why. They were also asked to provide feedback on the sessions. Consent to use the data for a research purpose was obtained from the participants, and their privacy is protected in this publication using pseudonyms.

The questionnaires were answered by 18 students who were taking a wide range of degrees at university e.g. Business, Biomedical Sciences, International Relations, Architecture, Law, and History. They spoke a wide variety of mother tongues: 5 English, 3 Romanian, 2 Russian, 1 Albanian, 1 Dutch, 1 German, 1 Greek, 1 Hungarian, 1 Italian, 1 Polish; there was 1 blank questionnaire.

The interviews elicited information about the students’ experiences of strategy effectiveness. Interviewees were asked to comment on the strategy they found most effective, to give examples of use, and to explain how it had helped them to learn vocabulary.

The interviewees were 6 students who spoke different mother tongues: 2 Albanian, 1 English, 1 Japanese, 1 Romanian, 1 Russian. They were taking university degrees in International Relations, International Business, Business Management, and Architecture; one was a member of the academic staff. All interviewees had an average score of 70% or above in the Spanish beginners’ course and, according to the lecturer, had been strongly focused to perform well during the academic year.

Data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed and coded using relevant strategies mentioned in Schmitt’s (1997) VLS classification. Some strategies had to be added and some adapted in order to reflect the actual responses given by the participants. For example, the following strategies were added: color-coding, use of language learning exercises (online, printed workbooks), mental repetition, and planning. Other strategies had to be slightly amended: e.g. ‘group words together to study them’ was changed to ‘group words/phrases together to study them’; ‘check for L1 cognate’ was changed to ‘check for cognates’; ‘listen to the tape of word lists’ was changed to ‘listening to recordings of words’; ‘cooperate with others’ was changed to ‘cooperate /interact with others’.

In addition, emergent themes related to strategy use, effectiveness, and feedback on VLS awareness-raising activities sessions were identified from both questionnaires and interviews and were analyzed with the rest of the data.

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Questionnaires

All the 18 participants who completed the questionnaire said they had tried out some new strategies as a result of the sessions on VLS. They gave examples of use and mentioned which one they had found most effective. The table below shows the students’ evaluation of their strategies.

Table 1: *Quantifies Participants’ Answers*

		New Strategies Tried	Most Effective
<i>COG</i>	Flashcards	15	10

<i>MET</i>	Use Spanish language media (songs, movies, YouTube videos)	9	3
<i>COG</i>	Use language learning exercises (online, printed books)	5	2
<i>COG</i>	Colour coding	4	1
<i>MET</i>	Use spaced word practice	4	0
<i>MEM</i>	Group words/phrases together to study them	3	1
<i>MEM</i>	Say the new word aloud when studying	2	1
<i>COG</i>	Listen to recordings of words	1	1
<i>MEM</i>	Use new words in sentences	1	1
<i>COG</i>	Written repetition	1	0
<i>COG</i>	Record new vocabulary and listen to it	1	0
<i>MEM</i>	Study word with pictorial representation of its meaning	1	0
<i>DET</i>	Dictionary	1	0
<i>MEM</i>	Associations	1	0
<i>COG</i>	Writing	1	0
<i>COG</i>	Repeating	1	0
<i>MET</i>	Stays in a Spanish speaking country	1	0

Some respondents gave the reasons why they had found a strategy most effective. The most frequent reason mentioned was that the strategy had helped them to remember better or to remember more: ‘Before I have just put all the new words in the dictionary, one by one, and I used to forget a lot. Now I have words for each topic in different pages and I can remember it better.’; ‘Spanish songs because it is easier for me to remember if I enjoy a song.’; ‘YouTube video because I have auditory memory and more exposed to new vocabulary I remember more. Also because is used in a sentence which makes it easier to understand.’

Most comments on effectiveness were related to the use of flashcards. Respondents said that flashcards were effective because: they were convenient to carry and use; the format facilitated regular spaced practice; they helped them to remember better, and they allowed for practicing writing and adding pictures. One participant mentioned the contrast between using and not using

flashcards: ‘Quizlet has been extremely effective. I am taking the Spanish class alongside working full time and managing several other commitments. As a result, I have not always been able to enter my weekly learning into Quizlet. I have noticed a significant difference in my recollection of learning in weeks that I have used Quizlet vs. weeks where I have not.’

One respondent noted how listening to recordings available in the virtual learning environment while at the same time reading the transcript, as well as repeating out loud, had helped with improving pronunciation. Another respondent noted how associating questions and answers helped with vocabulary recall.

The overall feedback for the VLT awareness-raising and training sessions was positive. Most of the comments referred to the positive impact the sessions had on the language learning process and knowledge of how to learn. Respondents said that the sessions: helped them to improve their learning; made learning more interesting and fun; expanded their vocabulary; gave them guidance on how to revise; showed them new techniques and strategies which were also transferable to other subjects and non-academic contexts; helped them prioritize learning activities; widened their repertoire of strategies; taught them how to memorize more effectively and how to combine the visual and hearing senses. One respondent also noted the positive effect of group discussions: ‘We could share our insights about how to improve.’

On the feedback questions about the sessions, there were comments about how flashcards were ‘effective’, ‘helpful’, ‘make revision easier and quicker’, and ‘summarize well the topics’. Two respondents highlighted the creative aspects of this strategy. One said: ‘As we write the flashcards, we practice the topic and with the little drawing we can make them more personal and therefore we will remember and learn quicker.’ The other noted: ‘The revision cards give us space to be creative on the way it emphasizes strong point from our personal, adding small pictures makes it easier to remember. I start using them more and more every day.’ In contrast, another respondent commented on not liking to use the revision flashcards because s/he liked them to look nice, and it took too much time to make them.

On the question about suggestions for improving the sessions, only one respondent mentioned specifically ‘more classes in learning strategies and encouragement in these techniques.’ The rest of the respondents made the following suggestions about teaching methodology: watching short videos in Spanish with subtitles; watching a movie without subtitles; limiting the time spent watching videos; more singing; more music with lyrics; specific revision for all the topics; and extra

help. Three of the respondents commented positively on the teacher’s enthusiasm, her teaching strategy, and the good structure of the lessons. Two respondents said they had no suggestions, and three left the answer blank.

4.1.2. Interviews

The main purpose of the interviews was to explore in more depth students’ experience of the strategies they considered to be most effective. The following table shows the most effective strategies mentioned by interviewees.

Table 2: Students’ Experience of Strategies

		Most Effective Strategies
<i>DET</i>	Flashcards	Lara, Jane, Emma, Mandy
<i>MEM</i>	Group words/phrases together to study them	Mandy, Jane, Martha
<i>COG</i>	Listen to recordings of words	Martha, Jane, Emma
<i>MET</i>	Use spaced word practice	Mandy, Martha, Emma
<i>COG</i>	Written repetition	Mandy, Martha
<i>MEM</i>	Study word with pictorial representation of its meaning	Mandy, Lara
<i>MEM</i>	Connect word to a personal experience	Mandy, Emma
<i>COG</i>	Use language learning exercises (online, printed books)	Jane, Emma
<i>COG</i>	Colour coding	Lara, Emma
<i>MET</i>	Use Spanish language media (songs, movies)	Mandy, Emma
<i>MET</i>	Testing oneself	Mandy, Emma
<i>DET</i>	Check for cognates	Greta
<i>MEM</i>	Use new words in sentences	Jane
<i>COG</i>	Mental repetition	Mandy
<i>COG</i>	Verbal repetition (singing)	Emma
<i>MET</i>	Planning ahead	Mandy
<i>SOC</i>	Cooperate/Interact with others	Emma

Mandy found watching movies the most effective strategy, followed by listening to music with the lyrics. She explained that she watched movies without having any translation and that she saw the same episodes two or three times until she could understand everything.

Other strategies that she had found effective for learning Spanish were revising and planning whilst travelling home on the underground. She mentioned how she normally tried to recall vocabulary that she had learned watching movies, listening to music, or during the lesson. She then mentally repeated the new vocabulary until it ‘just sticks’ in her head. She also tested herself on the Spanish questions practiced in class and tried to remember the answers. She said that, when recalling the answers, she ‘sees’ them as if they were inside her head.

Another effective strategy for Mandy was to write questions taught in class on flashcards. She kept the flashcards in a bowl at home, and she would often pick up several questions and test herself by trying to answer them before going to sleep. Mandy did not add any drawings to her notes or flashcards because she did not think she was good at drawing, although sometimes she used pictures to support the process of recalling vocabulary.

In addition, she wrote down short phrases, connected the vocabulary to her personal experience, and grouped the phrases by topic in her notebook. ‘It’s like personalized notes,’ she said.

Mandy mentioned the positive impact of learning about the forgetting curve and spaced practice: ‘You showed us some graph and to be honest, before, I used to in one week I would like study five or six hours just to spend in one day, but now I am not doing that anymore I am doing like 30 minutes, 20 minutes every day. It’s much easier like that.’

Lara used to learn vocabulary mostly by writing down words, repeating them aloud, and revising them, that is, until she tried the strategy that she has found the most effective: flashcards. She tried the Duo Lingo and Quizlet electronic flashcards but preferred, and ended up studying with, paper flashcards (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Lucy's set of Flashcards

Lara explained that she used color coding to differentiate the two languages and also to differentiate gender. She made flashcards more fun by writing the content diagonally across the cards and drawing some pictures next to the questions.

Jane found using the flashcard application Quizlet the most effective strategy.

She started by making flashcards with individual words grouped by topic. Additionally, she started writing the vocabulary in sentences for describing things. When the exams got closer, she designed flashcards with phrases that she thought would be useful for the oral and written exams (see Figure 2).

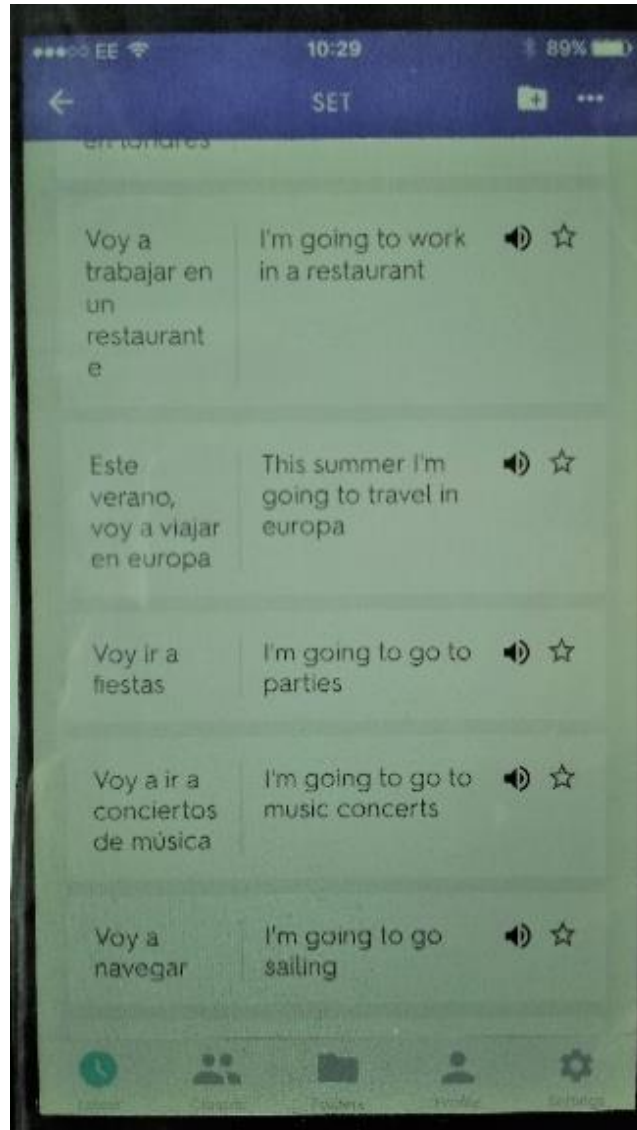


Figure 1: Example of Jane's Flashcards

She also designed flashcards with verb conjugations and found them helpful for learning the verbs.

Jane also found useful the interactive language learning activities on the Quizlet application.

Greta found the use of cognates her most effective strategy. She called this learning strategy *pattern*. She explained that she learned best by making connections between the new words in Spanish and the English she already knew because, for most Spanish words, she could find an English word that had some kind of connection with the new Spanish term. She also gave an example of how Spanish had sometimes helped her to learn new words in English: ‘...I don’t have a very large English vocabulary, but recently I see a word in English tranquil and the minute I thought

like, OK, *tranquila* in Spanish. Because I had never seen this English word before.’ Greta’s mother tongue was Japanese.

Martha’s most effective strategy was grouping vocabulary into topics in her notebook and then transferring them to Quizlet. This, she said, ‘is already almost enough ... to memorize the majority of the words and also ... with the new function in Quizlet that I can listen to the words, it was very useful to me because I didn’t try it before.’ Martha also did space practice, often whilst walking to the shops.

Emma found the most effective combination of three strategies: paper flashcards, electronic flashcards, and videos that teach vocabulary.

She liked using music when she started learning a new language like Spanish: ‘I do it without the lyrics because I probably won’t know the things that would confuse me more. Firstly, I just want my get my ear used to the sound and I connect it more to the video. After a certain level, that is when I put the lyrics to get the right pronunciation also the way it is written. I think at first with the lyrics I would get confused because I would try to see how it is written at the same time and I want to practice the new word at the same time. I don’t think I can cope with that at the beginning.’

Once she had made some progress, Emma started using the lyrics and singing the songs. She sang, paused, and repeated, and sometimes she sang to someone willing to listen, even if they did not understand what she was singing about. It helped her to hear herself singing. She would then practice listening again without looking at the lyrics, and then sing the same song many times over until she knew it by heart. After that, she built sentences based on some of the languages she had learned in the song and sentences that connected to personal experiences that could be used for talking in daily life. She thought that this was also a useful writing exercise.

Emma said that, when she wanted to make more progress, she felt the need to learn “proper grammar’. In order to learn grammar, she used what she called in the interview ‘learning videos’ from YouTube. She had done that when learning English and was now doing it with Spanish.

For Emma, it was important to try to learn the correct form and pronunciation of new words from the start, to avoid the fossilization of errors. For that reason, she liked listening to the recording of a new word several times until she could pronounce it well. Then she checked how it was written, made a sentence that helped her to use the language in real life, and repeated the sentence several times. Finally, she created a flashcard which she connected to something that made sense to her.

Emma used the content of the learning videos to produce her paper flashcards too. She color-coded the flashcards, using yellow for grammar, pink for new vocabulary and phrases, and white when she wanted to draw pictures on them.

She mentioned that she also liked to keep her grammar flashcards simple e.g. to record the conjugation of an irregular verb.

She did space practice and engaged in self-monitoring regularly. For example, she revised the cards on the train after the class, and at home the following weekend. She also tested herself or asked somebody else to test her, two weeks later.

Emma found it useful to interact with others in the process of self-monitoring her progress. When she heard herself talking to others, she felt that she could correct herself and ‘learn it the proper way again’.

Regarding the rationale for effectiveness, the interviewees were asked to comment specifically on how they thought the strategies were helping them to learn vocabulary. The main points mentioned were that the strategies facilitated and/or made easier things such as multisensory learning, spaced practice, self-testing, making associations, recalling vocabulary, and repeating; the strategies also made learning more fun. One of the interviewees also mentioned her positive experience of transferring some of the strategies learned in the Spanish lessons to the study of her accounting course. Applying the use of flashcards to the study of this subject had helped her to test herself, engage in the spaced practice, improve her comprehension of the subject, and get better grades.

5. Discussion

References to some of the person-task-context factors that influence VLS effectiveness (Gu 2003) appeared in the responses of Greta, Emma, Lara, and Jane. Greta, the only participant whose mother tongue was Japanese, found cognates her most effective strategy. Emma discussed how her language aptitude (‘mostly auditory’) affected her decisions on strategy use, and also how she modified her strategy use depending on whether she was just starting to learn a language or whether she wanted to make further progress (then she needed to learn ‘the proper grammar’). Jane, Lara, and Emma also referred to how exams affected their strategy use.

Another emergent pattern in the data analysis was the similarities between the strategy use processes reported by the interviewees and those identified in a previous research study on VLS. For

example, all the interviewees except for Greta described a wide variety of ways in which they engaged in independent study, recorded and reviewed vocabulary, and practiced items outside the class. These patterns of strategy use were found by Sanaoui (1995) in the successful language learners of her study. The students interviewed also give many examples of noticing, retrieval, and generation processes, which, according to Nation (2011), are important for remembering words.

The interviews also provided examples of actions taken by the participants in the pursuit of strategy effectiveness. For example, Mandy mentioned that she did not add drawings to flashcards because she considered that she was not good at drawing; instead, she used photos for revising vocabulary. Lara made flashcards more fun by writing the text diagonally across them and drawing some pictures too. When discussing spaced practice, some of the interviewees made references to different social spaces where they were engaging in revision e.g. home, the underground, the train, and walking to the shops.

Emma's account portrayed a systematic approach to learning not just vocabulary but a language. She articulated in detail her independent language learning principles and strategies, and the management of her cognitive, social, and affective learning processes. For example, she described how she carefully scaffolded the process of using songs for learning: first by listening without looking at the lyrics, just to become familiar with the sounds of the language, only later working with the lyrics and singing the song until she knew the lyrics by heart. After that, she used some of the vocabularies learned in the song to produce flashcards containing sentences that could be used for daily life. She also described another way in which she actively sought effectiveness: making the effort to learn from the beginning the correct form of the written and spoken form of new vocabulary.

One interviewee described briefly only one strategy: the use of cognates. She explained how she used it and why she found it effective. It is interesting to note that the interviewee's mother tongue was Japanese, and that, of all the interviewees' mother tongues, this was the mother tongue that differed most from Spanish.

The overall feedback of the participants in the VLS awareness-raising and training sessions was positive. Participants reported a positive impact on their language learning process, strategy use, and knowledge of strategies. The sessions helped them to: expand their Spanish vocabulary; make the process of learning more interesting and fun; better prioritize their learning activities; memorize more effectively; get guidance on how to revise; learn how to integrate visual and

auditory senses; and increase their repertoire of strategies, including strategies which were transferable to other subjects and contexts.

6. Conclusions

Data from the research instruments revealed that a good number of students decided to try out new strategies as a result of the VLS awareness-raising and training sessions and that all of them found the sessions beneficial. Most of the interviewees (4 out of 6) found flashcards one of their most effective strategies, and a significant number of respondents to the questionnaires (10 out of 18) also found flashcards to be their most effective strategy. The results suggest that students benefited from the VLS awareness-raising activities and training sessions, and, notably, from the use of flashcards.

Participants considered most effective strategies that helped them to remember ‘more’ or ‘better’, to test themselves, to do spaced revision, and those that were convenient to use. Participants valued the opportunities that the strategies provided for engaging in writing, using pictures, and making more personal the process of studying vocabulary.

Data from the interviews suggest that a wide variety of factors affect VLS effectiveness. Examples mentioned by the students highlighted mother tongue, language aptitude, and tasks as factors that had made certain strategies more effective for them. Furthermore, strategy use descriptions given by the interviewees revealed similar VLS patterns to those found in successful language learners. The most prominent case was Emma, who described in detail the use of a very wide range of strategies, as well as a sophisticated metacognitive approach to her study of vocabulary and languages.

Despite the fact of being a small-scale action project and understanding that the scope of this study is limited; the findings of the study provide encouraging signs of the positive effects that VLS awareness-raising and training sessions can have on students’ strategy use. We have found ‘that by encouraging learners to reflect on how they, as individuals learn and the strategies that do and do not work for them, we are already going some way towards meeting their needs.’

The study also provides evidence of VLS use and perceptions of strategy effectiveness of students who achieve good results in their Spanish beginners’ courses. The overall picture has given us encouragement to carry on refining and implementing the sessions for the students in our educational context. In particular, if the aim is to support the development of the students’ range of

VLS, which is one of the features of autonomous learners, explicit vocabulary learner training is necessary. Hence, we would recommend further action research on VLS learner training in a variety of educational settings.

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ANNEXURE

Semi-Structured Questionnaire

Vocabulary Learning Strategies – Research Project

As a result of our discussions on vocabulary learning strategies: I am trying out some strategies I had not used before YES ___NO ___
2a. If YES, please give examples of the vocabulary learning strategies that you have tried out as a result of our discussions. 2b. Of all the strategies you have just mentioned, which one has worked best for you? Why?
3C. If NO, please give details of the vocabulary learning strategies you were already using. 3D. You have not changed these strategies because....

Feedback on introduction to vocabulary learning strategies

Please comment on the information you have received on vocabulary learning strategies and the sessions dedicated to designing vocabulary revision cards.

The positive aspects were...
My suggestions for improvement are ...