

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter describes the background and the rationale of this study of vocabulary learning strategies. It then states the purpose of the research and the research questions which are then followed by the scope of the study. The chapter then provides the significance of research and the operational definition of key term. Plus, acronyms of important words are provided as well so that readers will find it easy to go through the work. The chapter ends with outlining the organization of the whole thesis.

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

It is generally acknowledged among foreign language teachers and learners that vocabulary is considered by both first-language and second-language researchers as an essential factor in language competence. With great deal of vocabulary knowledge, language users can communicate their ideas with other people well. Decarrico (2001:285) points out that vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition whether it is a second, or a foreign language. It can be inferred that without adequate knowledge of vocabulary, learning a language cannot be easy or smooth. Even in a learner's mother tongue, there is an incessant learning of new words and new meanings for old words (Thornbury 2002:1). Any learner of a foreign language knows very well that words are important, and the lack of them leads to difficulties in communication situations (Maley 1986:3). It is widely accepted that vocabulary is "the heart in learning a second language", but the acquisition of a large number of vocabulary items may be one of the most difficult aspects of learning a second or foreign language for most L2 learners (Meara 1980:221; 1982:100; Read 2000:01; Stöffer 1995:2). These scholars' statements appreciate the importance of vocabulary as a very essential component of any language as well as the core of language learning and communication.

Even though vocabulary has always been a crucial part of language learning and teaching and communication, it is said that vocabulary teaching has not been receptive to problems in the area, and most language teachers have not fully recognized the great communicative advantage in developing an extensive vocabulary (McCarthy 1990:45). Vocabulary often seems to be the least systematized and the least well-catered for of all the aspects of learning a foreign language, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, or even pronunciation. Generally, vocabulary learning and teaching is seen as an integrated skill only in the EFL curriculum, either in Indonesia or non-native speakers of English countries such as Cambodia, Thailand or Vietnam. It is quite difficult to find isolate vocabulary teaching courses. Consequently, vocabulary competence of EFL learners, also resulted from poor vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary teaching time allocation, can be poor and can affect their communicative competence.

In fact, since vocabulary is very necessary in language acquisition, language learners who wish to improve their learning usually employ necessary steps or strategies in learning this micro language skill, particularly through independent vocabulary learning or individual learning strategies due to the limited teaching time in language classrooms. Those strategies play important roles in language learning, as they can increase “active and self-directed” participation as well as high proficiency and self-confidence of learners (Oxford, 1990:1). In broad term, language learning strategies enhance language learning and acquisition and communicative competence through authentic and lively use of language along with active involvement in interaction. Related to communicative competence, language learners or instructors cannot ignore the necessity of words or vocabulary. Meaningful communication will never occur, without vocabulary knowledge, even though learners have mastered good grammar or pronunciation skill in foreign or second language. That vocabulary is a powerful carrier of meaning has attracted a great deal of attention of language

researchers (Scrivener, 1994). English learners are often able to communicate in English by using the accumulative meaning of each single word.

Hedge (2000) affirms that there is usually lack of attention to vocabulary. She gives a notable reason for the neglect of vocabulary that learners themselves do not place considerable significance on vocabulary. Language teachers have been very familiar with new discoveries in English grammar learning and teaching, whilst at the same time they have heard little about good ways to help students learn new words (as cited in Siriwan, 2007:60). Moreover, some past specialists in teaching methodology seemed to believe that the meanings of words could not be adequately taught, so it is better not to try to teach them (Allen, 1983:1-4). This means that EFL learners themselves should learn how to learn English vocabulary on their own, without solely relying on their teachers.

Such misconception that vocabulary teaching should not be prioritized is no longer valid, particularly in this age of communicative approach. The awareness of the advantages of language learning strategies and vocabulary learning and teaching lead to the emergence of new research focus. Meara (1987) points out that the importance of language learning strategies and vocabulary has attracted language researchers since the last 25 years and has led to considerable amount of research combining both aspects – vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). However, not many pieces of research paid much attention to the whole VLS, but to the individual or small number of strategies (Schmitt, 1997). Since vocabulary learning is a part of language learning and teaching, it is worth mentioning in the present investigation that strategies should be indispensable parts of vocabulary learning and teaching. In learning vocabulary items, it is useful and necessary for language learners to be taught vocabulary learning strategies in order that they can learn how to discover the meaning of new words, how to store them in their memory, and how to use them by practicing and expanding their vocabulary. Some scholars, such as Tarone (1983:67); Rubin (1987:22); O'Malley and Chamot (1990:1); Oxford (1990:1); Williams and

Burden (1997:145), point out that strategies are essential tools for developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence. Similarly, regarding vocabulary learning, it is not easy for all language learners to learn and acquire the meanings of new words, to store them in their memory and recall them at will, to use them in appropriate situations, or to expand their vocabulary size. Therefore, in order to help learners to learn vocabulary successfully and become self-directed learners of vocabulary, they must be taught and appropriately trained to use various kinds of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). To be precise, they must learn different appropriate strategies for coping with unknown or unfamiliar words.

In this context, the most cited research on vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) is that of Gu and Johnson's (1996) study on Chinese EFL learners by comparing the frequency of their VLS use with their belief of vocabulary learning, level of vocabulary development and learning success. The results were obtained from 91-statement Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire (VLQ, version 3) formulated by Gu and Johnson. The findings revealed that Chinese EFL learners see vocabulary learning as active, requiring and conscious, as opposed to presupposition that they prefer mechanical memorization strategy. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as guessing from context and using dictionary for learning were found as the most useful among those learners, whereas strategy of retention was regarded as least useful. Furthermore, they also found out that there were five groups of learners due to their favorite approaches or strategies: readers, active strategy users, non-coders, coders and passive strategy users.

In 1997, Schmitt conducted another VLS questionnaire research on English language learners in Japan. The results revealed that the most frequently used VLS among Japanese EFL learners are: use of bilingual dictionary, guessing meaning from context, study of spelling and pronunciation of words, asking each other and saying new words aloud, whereas the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) is checking for L1 cognates due to the fact that both

languages are very different. His achievement from the study and examination of Oxford's (1990) work and of Stöffer's (1995) study is the development of comprehensive 53-strategy VLS questionnaire which is then divided into two main categories: Strategies for discovering new words and strategies for consolidating words. His VLS questionnaire taxonomy was adapted and used as a tool in a survey study of VLS of Thai gifted EFL students by Riankamol (2008).

Although several studies have been conducted concerning VLS of EFL learners in many countries such as Iran, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan Japan, and Thailand, the researcher, to the best of his knowledge, could hardly encounter research targeting VLS of Indonesian EFL students, but the findings which show the obstacles in using English among some high school graduates and college students owing to poor vocabulary competence (Lengkanawati, 2005; Ivone, 2005; Lie, 2007; Marcellino, 2008 and Mattarima & Hamdan, 2011). These researchers claimed that Indonesian EFL learners, though taught English since secondary school level till tertiary educational level, still have problems in using this language productively and communicatively. One of the roots of such challenges is the lack of potential vocabulary knowledge. These students often make mistakes regarding forms of words, choices of formal or informal words as well as how to use words appropriately. As a consequence, their products of language, either spoken or written, can convey vague meaning or messages (Lengkanawati, 2005).

In contrary to what was described as poor vocabulary knowledge by Indonesian EFL learners in the aforementioned studies, the researcher was impressed by vocabulary ability and word play by many EFL undergraduate students majoring in English education and English literature programs at one state university in Bandung, where frequent daily interaction with them usually took place. Though vocabulary teaching is integrated in other four macro skills, their use of vocabulary was highly interesting. According to Meara (1987), it is said that language learning strategies and learning vocabulary are interrelated. It

means that vocabulary competence of an EFL learner cannot be achieved by chance, but rather it results from any individual strategy use in learning English vocabulary. Therefore, this study aimed to conduct an investigation on vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by high achieving Indonesian EFL undergraduate students in the purpose of finding out what strategies frequently used by this group of participants and reasons behind their use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS).

The research findings were meant to contribute, to some extent, to raise an awareness of importance of English vocabulary as well as vocabulary learning strategies in the conditions that there is no enough time allocation in language classroom for vocabulary learning and teaching and that EFL students should be independent vocabulary learners and to serve a good example for low-achieving learners by means of illustrating the strategies frequently employed by high achievers. As such, the study aimed to revealing the VLS frequently employed by the targeted respondents.

## **1.2 Objective of the Study**

As clearly stated in the aforementioned background of the study, the study aimed at investigating the vocabulary learning strategies which are frequently used by high achieving (good) Indonesian EFL undergraduate students who were majoring in English literature and English education programs at one state university in Bandung by following Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS).

## **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

In the field of English language learning, there are many factors that have an effect on EFL learners or Indonesian students' English language proficiency: students' learning styles, teachers' teaching styles, students' background and so on. One of the most difficult problems of unsuccessful English instruction in

Indonesian is that students lack particular vocabulary knowledge which can influence students' reading comprehension. According to Granowsky (2002), many researchers have agreed upon the importance of vocabulary knowledge in students' reading comprehension, and therefore in their school success (cited in Riankamol, 2008). Also, having limited vocabulary knowledge, students are not able to express well and communicate fluently. To overcome such challenges in building up vocabulary ability, researchers such as Meara (1987), Rubin (1987), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) contended with learning strategies shall be taught to learners in order that they can learn independently, as a complement to classroom learning.

Due to above mentioned statement of problem, importance of vocabulary in English language acquisition and the advantages of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), the study tends to find out the vocabulary learning strategies frequently used by good Indonesian EFL undergraduate students by answering the research questions which have been formulated as follows:

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies frequently used by high achieving Indonesian EFL undergraduate students?
2. What are the reasons for the preferences of those VLS?

#### **1.4 Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on the use of vocabulary learning strategies used by high achieving (good) Indonesian EFL undergraduate students who freshly started their tertiary English education at one university in Bandung, during the second semester of 2014. The categorization of the research subjects was mainly based on the overall performance in semester 1 ( $GPA \geq 3$ ). These students were questioned about their preference in choosing vocabulary learning strategies following Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of VLS questionnaire and open-ended questions.

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

As mentioned above, it is expected that the findings of this study are most likely to provide both theoretical and practical significances in terms of students' VLS and vocabulary learning/teaching process.

1. Theoretically, the research can reveal the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies employed by the targeted English majoring students along with the reasons behind their choices of VLS use. Having knowledge of their preferred VLS use enables future researchers to conduct more in-depth or comparative studies concerning VLS use by EFL learners in Indonesia or other countries where English is considered as a foreign language.

2. Pedagogically, the teachers can benefit from the findings of this study in order to support the vocabulary learning of the students, as it is a core component to mastering the four macro language skills. Having the knowledge of frequently used vocabulary strategies by high-achieving students, teachers can set examples for low-achieving students through peer learning of vocabulary strategies or teacher's training of how to use vocabulary learning strategies properly and effectively. Plus, encouraging and training learners to use VLS can help motivate Indonesian EFL learners to be independent in vocabulary learning and to enhance their linguistic competence, which is in accordance with what Schmitt (2000) claim that teachers cannot afford to allocate enough time to teach students all aspects of vocabulary items and that students have to independent word learners through training of VLS use.

3. Practically, the revealed frequently used vocabulary learning strategies by high-achieving (good) learners are meant to be a good model for low achievers, for they can learn from the success story of their more capable peers. Oxford (1990) mentions that learning strategies support language learning, enhance communicative competence and make learners become more autonomous. Therefore, low-achieving students can seek help from high achievers and teachers



or learn to use those vocabulary learning strategies by themselves. The more they practice, the more they can become self-directed learners.

### **1.6 Definition of Key Term**

Vocabulary learning strategies: a process or technique that students use to help them succeed in vocabulary learning (Cameron, 2001: 92) and in building up vocabulary knowledge which refers to ability in translating and interpreting the meanings of words, as well as, the ability in using those words. In this study, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) refers to “any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners reported using in order to discover the meaning of a new word, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to broaden one’s knowledge of vocabulary” (Intaraprasert 2004:53). In the context of the present investigation, “VLS” will sometimes be used as the abbreviation for vocabulary learning strategy.

### **1.7 Acronyms**

- |        |   |                                |
|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| 1. SOC | : | Social strategies              |
| 2. MEM | : | Memory strategies              |
| 3. DET | : | Determination strategies       |
| 4. MET | : | Metacognitive strategies       |
| 5. COG | : | Cognitive strategies           |
| 6. LLS | : | Language Learning Strategies   |
| 7. VLS | : | Vocabulary Learning Strategies |

### **1.8 Concluding Remark**

This chapter of thesis has portrayed the brief study background related to the chosen topic as well as the main objective of the research. Additionally, the limitation of the study, research questions and operational definition of key term were provided. Last but not least, abbreviations of some key words which will be

used throughout the thesis were also shown in this chapter, for readers can understand better the concepts of this work.

## **1.9 Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis was organized into five chapters:

Chapter one introduces the research background, and explains the importance and the purpose of the present study. It also provides information about the research questions, acronym and definitions of key term used in the whole work

Chapter two is a review of the most recent literature in the field of vocabulary learning. More importantly, it explains the importance of the vocabulary, vocabulary learning and teaching as well as taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by Oxford (1991), Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001).

Chapter three of this thesis discusses the research methodology which encompasses the approach and method used, research site, participants, instrument and data analysis methods.

Chapter four presents and discusses the results of questionnaire, with regards to frequently used vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by the respondents and their accompanying reasons for the chosen VLS.

Chapter five of this thesis focuses on the conclusions and suggestions for vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) teaching and further research in this field of study.