Introduction

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The objective of this chapter is to highlight where the study fits within the general context of L2 literature. It also points out the reasoning behind focusing on the domain examined and determines the significance of this study in this field. In addition, it addresses other preliminary concerns.

I.1 Motivation for the study

The underlying motivation for embarking on research on test-taking strategies (TTS) and vocabulary, the central point of this study, arises from a number of general theoretical foundations and the academic experience of the researcher.

I.1.1 Test-taking strategies

Leaving aside the issue of whether or not an innate part of language competence is accessible directly or indirectly to the L2 learner, as proponents of the UG Theory suggest (see Flynn, 1987¹; Cook and Newson, 1996²), or whether language is a cognitive act, as ACT advocates claim (see Anderson, 1985³), it seems clear that the way the human mind handles language is a very complicated process and that this complexity is likely to influence the level of success of language learning and use. The scholar’s task, therefore, is not simply to develop language programmes without considering the learners’ mental capabilities but also to discover how the human mind works, so as to be better able to facilitate mastery of the complexities of a new language system. One method of doing this, which has been used for the past two and a half

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¹ She argues that “the essential faculty of language evidenced in L₁ acquisition [UG] is also critically involved in L₂ acquisition” (Flynn, 1987: 29).
² They claim that the evidence goes in favour of indirect access as the L₂ setting of parameters seems to be transferred from the L₁.
³ He believes that L₂ acquisition is an entirely cognitive skill.
decades, is to reveal the learners’ deliberate strategies used in handling language tasks.

Many applied linguistic researchers (e.g. Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1987; O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; McDonough, 1995; Wen and Johnson, 1997; Cohen, 1998) have contributed to a growing awareness in language research of the role that the learners’ more or less conscious strategies play in learning the L2. This reflects the shift from an exclusive focus on the enhancement of teaching to an increased concern for how learners go about learning, as Purpura (1997) states:

> Since the 1970s, research and theory in second language education have shifted from examining the methods of teaching to investigating the processes of learning. This refocusing has created an explosion of research aimed at investigating learner characteristics […]. It has also stirred considerable interest in the learning process itself (Purpura, 1997: 290).

Giving reasons for this shift of research focus, Schmitt (1997) claims:

> There was awareness that aptitude was not the governing factor in language learning success implying that language achievement depends quite heavily on the individual learner’s endeavours. This led naturally to a greater interest in how individual learners approach and control their own learning and use of language (Schmitt, 1997: 199).

As a result of this shift, various studies have identified and generated taxonomies of learning strategies types and strategies of processing language in the four skills, to exploit individuals’ methods of processing language, rather than viewing learners as simply adapting themselves to the taught materials and the input. This movement has been growing in the light of the theory that

> Students provide the first input into instruction in the form of learner strategies and teaching consists of adapting to this input. (Hosenfeld, 1977: 52).

At the outset of this movement to discover the learner’s L2 processing system, the researchers’ emphasis was placed on identifying the strategies that ‘good learners’ use, to reveal what they had in common (e.g. Rubin, 1975, 1981; Stern, 1975; Hosenfeld,
1976; Naiman et al., 1978; Jimenez et al, 1986) in order to create a body of theory to explain what makes successful learners achieve and perform language activities. This approach was prompted by the finding of cognitive psychologists that “competent individuals are effective because of special ways of processing information” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990). The importance of learners’ strategies has steadily become established in the field of applied linguistics and L2 acquisition and the growing movement towards investigating the effect of training learners in ‘good’ strategies has further increased in importance (O’Malley et al., 1985a and 1985b; Barnett, 1988; Green and Oxford, 1995; Nunan, 1997).

In the light of this re-conceptualisation, enormously promising work has been conducted on a variety of native and foreign language areas. The following are examples of this:

- Communication strategies (e.g. Raupach 1983; Ellis 1984; Scholfield, 1987b; Bialystok 1990; Dornyei, 1995; Kasper and Kellerman 1997; Chimpaganda, 2000; Littlemore, 2001; Derwing and Rossiter, 2002).
- Learning strategies (e.g. Rubin, 1981; O'Malley et al. 1985a, 1985b; Wenden, 1991; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995; Schmitt, 1997a; Medo, 2000; Wakamoto, 2000).
- Listening comprehension strategies (e.g. O'Malley, Chamot and Küpper, 1989; Bacon, 1992; Vandergrift, 1992; Young, 1996; Goh, 1998; Yi’an, 1998); research in this area is still scant, though.
• Writing Strategies (e.g. Hayes and Flower, 1980, 1983; Winograd, 1984; Whalen and Menard, 1995; Bosher, 1998; Scholfield and Katamine, 1999; Young, 2000; Zimmermann, 2000; Hemmati, 2002).

However, research into learners’ test-taking strategies is rather scarce and the area is relatively under-explored. The literature reviewed in Chapter II will indicate that very little is known about what test-takers do in their language tests, how they tackle test problems and whether they have certain strategies that affect the outcome and so damage test validity. This shortcoming exists despite the vital importance of testing that can be seen from the many ways in which tests are used nowadays to make decisions about academic degrees, to evaluate curricula and to present information to external establishments. For example, examinations play a fundamental role in the education system in Saudi Arabia; more details are given in Chapter II. In addition to the many achievement tests that learners have to take throughout their language courses, other international proficiency language tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL are a very real part of the language learners’ lives. One of the earliest calls for more attention to be paid to the test-takers’ processes of strategy use was made by Lohman and Kyllonen (1983). They claimed that

The challenge for future research is to devise experiments that reveal the solution strategy for each subject on each item type, or better still, on each item. Only by knowing how subjects solve items can the investigator know what it is that the task measures (Lohman and Kyllonen, 1983: 122).

In short, the lack of information available in the field of test-taking strategies has prompted the researcher in this study to pay particular attention to this area of research, as it is still developing and needs more exploration.
I.1.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is widely acknowledged by both first language and second language researchers to be an essential component of language and of great significance to language proficiency (Read, 1997; Laufer and Nation 1999; Schmitt, Schmitt and Clapham 2001; Qian, 2002). However, the present researcher’s experience from his academic work at King Saud University has led him to the conclusion that despite the high standard of achievement in the English language examinations, the actual level of proficiency in English of the majority of Saudi university students is rather low because of their limited vocabulary. A study by Al-Hazemi (1993) supports this conclusion; he found that the size of the English vocabulary of students from King Abdulaziz Military Academy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, measured by an international vocabulary proficiency test (Meara), was 50% below expectation. This was in spite of the fact that among the criteria for admission into this academy are the achievements of reasonably good scores in the tests at secondary school, including the tests in the English language. Sharing the same point of view, Al-Akloby (2001) claims that

Saudi Arabian students in public schools leave school with a very low vocabulary level after six years of English language instruction (Al-Akloby, 2001: 1)

Several other studies have established evidence that vocabulary is one of the greatest global problems in learning the L2. It has been found that vocabulary size can be a predictor of success in other language skills. As Schmitt (2000) points out, vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important factors in reading ability. Yorio (1971) found that vocabulary was the main source of difficulty for Spanish speaking subjects in reading English texts. Sim and Bensoussan (1979) discovered that scores on an EFL reading test taken by Israeli subjects were affected markedly by their limited knowledge of content and function words. Arnaud (1982) and Saville-Troike (1984) concluded that vocabulary knowledge has a higher correlation with achievement in EFL reading than
other linguistic aspects. Qian (2002) found that, for university ESL speakers, depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge are closely and positively associated with performance in reading tasks for basic comprehension. It appears also that a wide vocabulary leads to higher accomplishment not only in reading (Laufer, 1992), but also in writing (Laufer and Nation 1995). Politzer (1978) found that, in contrast to other linguistic aspects, lexical errors were judged by native-speakers of German as the most serious errors made by foreign learners of German. Furthermore, Meara (1984) claims that most collections of learner errors showed that lexical errors outnumber grammatical ones by three or four to one.

Krashen (1981), however, asserted that even though scholars have pointed out the importance of vocabulary in L2, in spite of the foregoing, the teaching profession that paid only limited attention to vocabulary in order to focus on syntax. Wilkins (1972), for instance, states that “while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972: 11). It is only recently, however, that vocabulary has attracted some attention, as Alderson and Bachman (2000) comment: “After many years of neglect, the study of vocabulary in applied linguistics is now flourishing”. (Read, 2000: preface).

Despite the difficulties that language learners have with L2 vocabulary, they still have to deal with this problem in their examinations as “vocabulary has traditionally been one of the language components measured in language tests” (Schmitt, 1999: 189) . For example, the majority of international EFL tests, like TOEFL, the Cambridge examinations (KET, PET, FCE, CPE) and the Michigan examinations (ECC, ECPE, MTELP, EPT, MELAB), involve sections aimed at examining knowledge of vocabulary. This is apart from the fact that vocabulary is relevant in the reading and
writing sections as well. Our preliminary investigation, Chapter III, shows that testing vocabulary knowledge is also an essential part of the vast majority of EFL teacher-made tests in Saudi Arabia. The question which arises from this is: given the learners’ problems with mastering L₂ vocabulary, how will they handle vocabulary sections in the L₂ examinations? As far as it has been possible to discover, to date there have been no studies that have specifically examined ‘vocabulary test-taking strategies’. This is another fundamental reason for focusing on this particular area.

I.1.3 Summary of motivation behind the study

The researcher has been motivated to focus on vocabulary and test-taking strategies by a number of factors. These factors can be concluded in:

- The shift in language research from input to focusing on the learners’ strategies.
- The general shortage of information in the area of test-taking strategies.
- L₂ researchers’ neglect of vocabulary, despite its vital role in language competence.
- The lack of previous investigation of vocabulary test-taking strategies, even though vocabulary is one of the main language components measured in most language tests.
- The discrepancy between the high scores achieved by Saudi students in English tests and their limited vocabulary.

I.2 Objectives of the study

This work is an attempt to access the EFL learners’ conscious strategies when working on multiple-choice vocabulary test items. It seeks, for example, to reveal what sort of clues they employ to arrive at the answers; how they go about handling the gap in the
stem; how an answer is picked when it is unknown; whether high proficiency test-takers are more strategic than less proficient ones; and above all, which strategies test-takers activate when confronted with test problems. Specifically, the study attempts to reveal the following:

- The test-taking strategies used in tackling the multiple-choice filling-in-the-gap vocabulary (MCFGV) test item format.
- The impact of the test-takers’ general English proficiency levels on their TTS.
- The effect of the level of the test-takers’ English lexical proficiency on TTS.
- Whether or not testees could use TTS to arrive at the correct response even if they do not possess the knowledge intended to be measured.
- The differences between the TTS used in professionally made tests (PMT) and teacher-made tests (TMT) in the test format mentioned above.

The focus of this study will be on the knowledge of vocabulary meaning rather than other word knowledge, because meaning is undoubtedly the first thing thought of when considering a word and the most often tested. “It is also likely that most specialists would agree that meaning is the primary word knowledge” (Schmitt, 1997 p. 310).

I.3 Significance of the study

It is hoped that this study will contribute substantially to a number of applied and theoretical domains of the L₂. The following are some of the areas that this study could enrich.

As I.1.1 and I.1.2 of this chapter emphasise, the theme of test-taking strategies has been under-explored and research on vocabulary is still developing. This study aims mainly to explore the TTS that the testees might have developed to handle a vocabulary test effectively or to compensate for the deficiencies in the L₂ lexical knowledge tested. It
will be, therefore, a valuable contribution to the exploration of both neglected areas. It will highlight a range of strategies that can occur in test situations, which will provide L\textsubscript{2} literature with crucial information about vocabulary test-taking strategies. Furthermore, since the series of strategies specifically used by high proficiency students, as opposed to low proficiency students, is still not clear in L\textsubscript{2} research, this study will contribute towards clarifying this issue. The study will reveal the impact of both L\textsubscript{2} general proficiency levels and vocabulary proficiency levels on the learners’ usage of strategies. Both lines of exploration, the generated test-taking strategies taxonomy and the exposure of the influence of proficiency level on strategy usage will be a vital input contributing to the knowledge of researchers, test designers and test-takers, corresponding with Cohen’s (1998) view of the consequences of such research.

The insight gained from looking at the test taking strategies used by L\textsubscript{2} learners can help both to improve the assessment instruments themselves and improve the success the learners have in responding to these instruments. (Cohen, 1998: 215)

The use of TTS is affected, however, by at least two factors: (a) the instrument itself: for example, flawed items that provide clues to the right response and so enable TTS to be used and (b) the characteristics of an individual’s cognitive strategic competence that s/he may employ in any test situation regardless of the content measured.

Furthermore, although the main scope of this investigation is the test-taking strategies used in multiple-choice vocabulary tests, the use of verbal protocols to monitor the testing processes may supply evidence for the use of introspective analysis report as a testing ground for the validity of multiple-choice vocabulary tests. The commonly used approach to testing tests’ validity is founded on a product-based methodology. Test scores do not always tell the whole story (Kiester and Kiester, 1989), however. Students may select an incorrect answer by using legitimate reasoning, or select a correct answer.
without having any actual knowledge by applying certain strategies (Cohen, 1984; Birenbaum and Tatsuoka, 1993). To tackle this problem, Green (1995) suggests that

Students may be asked to generate verbal protocols as they work through a series of test items. The protocols are then analysed in order to identify the cognitive processes involved in carrying out the task. If there is a close match between the processes that are actually used and those the test constructors predicts will be used, then the test may be said to measure what it purports to measure (Green, 1995 : 127)

In our case, the protocols may reveal the degree of correspondence between the response behaviour expected by the test developer, the targeted lexical knowledge and the real response of the test-taker.

Finally, this study will be of importance to foreign language test-taking trainers as well as to test-makers. The process-based method used in this study may indicate points of both strength and weakness in the construction of a multiple-choice test that product-based studies cannot observe. Numerous courses are run to train students to achieve high scores in their intended language examinations (e.g. preparation courses for Cambridge test battery, and the Michigan examinations). Moreover, much material is being produced that is aimed at improving TTS for a specific test battery (e.g. Sharpe, 1982; Witt, 1997) or that examines TTS in general (e.g. Orr 1994; Boon 1996; Jasmine 1999). Both the successful and unsuccessful strategies detected by this research may contribute valuable information for such projects, either by suggesting ineffective strategies, which should be avoided or by identifying the productive ones. In addition, this research could help EFL testees to learn effective test-taking strategies from which they could benefit, in order to achieve high scores in their foreign language tests.
I.4 Definitions of relevant terms

When talking about vocabulary test-taking strategies, two primary terms need to be identified, namely, vocabulary and strategy. Other relevant terms which will also be specified are: professionally-made test, teacher-made test, and verbal protocol analysis.

Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) claim that vocabulary is a set of words. Some linguists (Cruse, 1986; Bogaards, 2001) prefer to use the term "lexical units/items" instead of "words". Scholfield (1991) states that

One needs to be clear what one wishes to count as a “word”. Clearly compounds, phrasal verbs and idiomatic phrases will most usefully be counted as equivalent to separate single words for the present purpose: i.e. one really documents new ‘lexical items’ rather than ‘words’ (Scholfield, 1991: 44)

However, the terms ‘words’ and ‘lexical items’, which denote single words or fixed groups of words, will be used interchangeably in this study. Another related term that should be mentioned is mental lexicon (ML), that is all the information the test taker knows about ‘words’, comprising phonological, grammatical, morphological orthographical, pragmatic, collocation, semantic features, etc.

The term ‘strategy’, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter II, seems to have a broad range of applications in the applied linguistics literature. Different researchers have given different definitions that have very much depended on their research objectives. Wenden (1987) summarised the actual problem of defining this term as follows:


For the purpose of this study, the term ‘strategy’ will be specifically defined as ‘the mental or behavioural cognitive and affective metacognitive activities that the test taker
employs consciously to help in taking the test’. With regard to the whole phrase ‘test-taking strategies’, Nitko (1983) proposes that TTS is

> a student’s ability to use the characteristics of both the test and the test situation to attain a higher score (Nitko, 1983: 326)

However, this definition rather implies a limitation of the term to successful strategies. Even though one of the objectives of this study is to examine if some strategies lead to greater success, the main aim is to explore the strategies used regardless of their success in enabling test-takers to arrive at the correct answer. It should be clearly stated that this study does not specify ‘good’ and ‘bad’ TTS, because it is not a straightforward task to label strategies as successful/unsuccessful ones. Carrell (1998) pointed out that there is no simple correlation between any particular strategy and a successful or unsuccessful result.

Professionally-made tests (PMT): international proficiency tests that are constructed by official and professional establishments qualified to make language tests, and used to demonstrate proficiency in the English language. They are piloted and have undergone procedures of validation and reliability checking and may have been standardised on a large sample of typical test-takers. The PMT used in this study were made by the Cambridge and Michigan Universities.

Teacher-made test (TMT): a local achievement test that is constructed by non-native-speaker EFL university language teachers who are not consultants or professionals in language testing. TMT has not been piloted or checked in terms of validity and reliability as PMT has.

Finally, the terms ‘verbal report’, as used by Cohen (1998) and Orr (2002), or ‘verbal protocol’ (VP), as used by Kahney (1993) are used in this study as being identical to
‘think-aloud’. Concurrent VP will be called ‘introspective protocol/report’ and 'retrospective protocol/report’ will refer to postponed VP.

1.5 Overview of the study

In order to fulfil the objectives of this investigation, five basic steps were necessary:

1. An adequate theoretical framework and a methodological approach had to be determined.
2. The type of test-item format through which data could be collected had to be specified
3. Vocabulary tests had to be designed and the data gathering method for the study had to be specified in details and the data had to be gathered.
4. The data had to be analysed in order to arrive at a result.
5. The study questions could then be addressed.

The basis for the initial step will be set out in Chapter II, which will also shed light on the assessment system the subjects of the study are familiar with. Various issues relevant to testing will also be reviewed. This will be followed by a discussion of the nature of ‘strategy’. The model of presage, process and product (PPP) will be introduced as a general framework for the study. Assumption about how information is processed will also be explored and a framework model for exploring strategies will be suggested. This chapter will provide the background to the verbal protocol data gathering as an investigation tool, providing a possible solution to the problems that can arise when using this approach. Finally, the chapter will review previous relevant studies and examine their methodologies with an aim to identifying the positive aspects to be exploited and the shortcomings to be avoided in the present study to make the research relevant to our own situation.
The second step will be reported on in Chapter III, which will answer the question: what is the most frequently utilised vocabulary test format to measure vocabulary knowledge in EFL achievement tests in Saudi Arabia? In other words, this is a preliminary foundation study aimed at identifying which test format the main study should rely on to investigate test-taking strategies. The objective is to avoid choosing an unfamiliar test format for the subjects of the main study.

The third step will be covered in Chapter IV. It will include the research questions, and report on the aims of the pilot study carried out in order to try out the instrument and procedures planned for the main empirical study. The chapter will also provide background information on the subjects and an account of the instruments deployed. This will involve a detailed explanation of the measures taken to insure that the items of the two tests used for the study are of a similar level of difficulty. It will also explain the methodological design of this research and the procedures applied.

The theoretical foundation of the study and the data gathering procedures having been explained, the final practical stages for achieving the goal of this study will be discussed in Chapter V, which will shed some light on the data analysis. The results of the study relevant to the research questions will be presented in the following four chapters. Chapter VI will comprise the results of the EFL tests used for the study. In Chapters VII, VIII and IX the qualitative and quantitative findings of the study will be presented and interpreted to meet the objectives of the study.