

## Exploring the Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Italian Learners of English

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, a think-aloud protocol is used to explore the vocabulary learning strategies of ten adult learners of English at a university in the north of Italy. The focus is on discovering the types of techniques that are actually used by learners while performing a deliberate vocabulary learning task. As well as providing details about the strategy use of each participant, the investigation considered the strategies used by more and less successful EFL learners. In general, less attention was awarded to techniques involving deeper mental elaboration, such as complex guessing for meaning or the use of mnemonic techniques, in favour of strategies requiring less mental effort. There was also less emphasis on mechanical repetition than in many previous studies on the topic.

**Keywords:** *vocabulary learning strategies, exploratory, think-aloud, strategy sequences, frequency of use*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The present study is an in-depth exploration of the vocabulary learning strategies of a group of Italian adult learners of English as a foreign language. Information is provided about the types of strategies used and how frequently they are employed on a deliberate vocabulary learning task. The investigation distinguishes between individuals in terms of their strategic behaviour and also considers the relationship between language learning success and strategy use. The hope is that the findings will help inform how English vocabulary is presented and taught to Italian learners of English in the classroom.

Due to the longevity of language learning strategy research, and its sub-set comprising vocabulary learning strategies, which emerged over forty years ago, it is necessary to begin by establishing why this investigation is of value. This is pertinent, given that the traditional approach to such research, which targeted the techniques that learners apply, has been the subject of criticism. Essentially, rather than focus exclusively on the types of strategies used by learners, some researchers (Dörnyei 2005, Tseng et al. 2006, Tseng

and Schmitt 2008) have called for greater attention to be devoted to exploring the forces driving our learning behaviour. The consequence of this is that many experts are seemingly less keen now on examining the types of strategies used by learners. Yet, the position adopted here is that there are still valid reasons for persisting with inquiries of observable learner behaviour. Indeed, in Gao's (2007) view, existing models of strategy use and investigations that look at the initial driving forces are not incompatible, as they are measuring the beginning and end-product of the same event. Rose (2012) also maintains that it is possible to study strategic learning both in terms of what drives a learner to behave in a certain way, but also in terms of the cognitive and behavioural strategies they employ (Rose 2012: 97). More recently, Oxford (2017) and Rose et al. (2018) both assert that investigating learning strategies is still beneficial, notwithstanding recent developments in the field of strategy research. Such views helped establish the theoretical basis of the present study, which was also reinforced by Pawlak and Oxford's (2018: 529) assertion that it is difficult to imagine how any kind of learning, including foreign language learning, could be successfully managed without skilled use of strategies. Consequently, it is anticipated that this exploration of strategy use will prove beneficial, since it presents detailed information about the types of strategies employed and indicates how learners differ in terms of their use.

Since the goal is to present a thorough exploration of strategy use, the emphasis is placed on qualitative rather than quantitative research methods. For data collection, a think-aloud protocol is utilised to tap into the thoughts and actions of a group of learners as they attempt to determine and consolidate ten unknown lexical items. This methodological decision is supported by Takeuchi (2019: 16) who contends that research on language learning strategies should "observe the trend in the direction of qualitative data collection methodologies including narratives, interviews, diaries, journals, portfolios, and think-aloud protocols". Besides functioning as a useful tool for uncovering the strategic moves made by individuals, a think-aloud protocol also enables one to gain some valuable insight into how a group of students differ while undertaking a specific learning task. This is relevant, as research has indicated that a variety of factors may influence the types of learning strategies that are used (Oxford 1990, Macaro 2006). These include, amongst others, age, gender, attitude, motivation, aptitude, learning stage, learning styles, individual differences, cultural differences,

beliefs about language learning, and language proficiency. In this instance, the objective is to contribute to our understanding of the influence of language learning success on strategy use. Though this topic has received research interest, there exists a paucity of research involving Italian adult learners of English. Consequently, rather than select participants randomly for the think-aloud study, the sample comprises an assortment of learners who were either successful or unsuccessful in their most recent university English examination.

The study focuses on:

- Identifying the strategies used by Italian learners of English while discovering and consolidating unknown English words.
- Exploring the relationship between language learning success and strategy use.

## **II. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

The motivation to perform the study came while I was teaching English to a group of undergraduate students at a university in the north of Italy. All members of the class had been unsuccessful in the previous end-of-year written English language exam. The language class, in question, is termed a *recupero* course, and functions as a remedial programme for students who need to improve their level of performance in the end-of-year written exam in English. Hence, the course is very exam-oriented and contains fewer students than traditional English language courses at the university. In class, it struck me how passive many individuals were in terms of how they approached various learning tasks, with many showing a degree of reluctance to engage actively in language learning. With this in mind, I chose to focus exclusively on vocabulary learning, with the aim of learning more about the kinds of strategies used by Italian learners of English to discover and consolidate lexical meaning in English. In so doing, I hoped some useful data would emerge surrounding the strategic behaviour of more and less successful learners.

By contextualising the investigation within a third-level institution in the north of Italy, the findings can be examined alongside studies with participants from different backgrounds. This is recommended by Takeuchi (2019), who claims that future studies

should focus on a specific population in a specific task-setting and context, as strategy use depends to a large extent on learners, tasks, and contexts. Consequently, rather than try to uncover general patterns in the population, which has been the focus of a large proportion of previous research on strategies, the goal here is to collect rich data about strategy use from learners as they actively engage in a deliberate vocabulary learning task. Pawlak and Oxford (2018) highlight the value of doing so, since understanding how strategies are used in specific learning tasks or the different phases of tasks remains a challenge for researchers.

### **III. VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES**

While there has been an interest in language learning strategies for several decades, many investigations have focused broadly on language learning as a whole and tended to ignore vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt 1997). Readers are invited to refer to Cohen and Macaro (2007) for a thorough overview of language learning strategy research, plus a 2018 special issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* that explores past research on the topic and recommends avenues for future research. However, a body of research devoted specifically to vocabulary learning strategies now exists, which has addressed a variety of issues over the years (see Pavičić Takač 2008 for a detailed survey of vocabulary learning strategy research).

In terms of focus, research has been done on various topics, including classifying vocabulary learning strategies (Stoffer 1995, Schmitt 1997, Gu 2003, Zhang and Li 2011), examining frequency of strategy use (Cohen and Aphek 1981, Gu and Johnson 1996, Lawson and Hogben 1996, Barcroft 2009; O'Malley et al. 1985a, Schmitt 1997, Schmitt and Schmitt 1993, Fan 2003, Kafipour et al. 2011, Arjomand and Sharififar 2011, Rabadi 2016), and considering the effect of strategies on vocabulary retention (Atkinson and Raugh 1975, Brown and Perry 1991, Rodríguez and Sadowki 2000, Zahedi 2012, Wei 2015). On top of that, many studies have been conducted on learners from different cultural backgrounds and at various stages of education. In the last decade alone, numerous publications have appeared concerning the vocabulary learning strategies of English learners from many countries, including Malaysia (Asgari and Ghazali 2011), Turkey (Çelik and Toptaş 2010, Kirmizi and Topcu 2014, Yigit and

Aykul 2018), Iran (Hamzah et al. 2009, Davoudi and Chavosh 2016), Indonesia (Bakti 2018, Noprianto and Purnawarman 2019), Poland (Nosidlak 2013), Croatia (Roguli and Čizmić 2018), Romania (Cusen 2009) and China (Zou and Zhou 2017). The hope is that this study of Italian learners of English will contribute to the field by providing another contextualized investigation of strategy use.

Several key investigations of vocabulary learning strategies by prominent experts in the field are outlined below. Quite a few of them were published more than two decades ago, when interest in strategy research was at its peak. Yet, due to the nature of this study, which explores the types of strategies actually used, how learners differ in terms of strategy use, and the relationship between learning success and strategy use, they remain relevant and will be referred to while discussing the findings.

### **III.1. Types and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies**

Gu and Johnson (1996) surveyed the vocabulary learning behaviour of 850 Chinese university learners of English. Participants reported greater use of meaning-oriented strategies than rote-learning strategies. It also emerged that “contextualised guessing, skilful use of dictionaries for learning purposes (as opposed to looking up for comprehension only), note-taking, paying attention to word formation, contextual encoding, and intentional activation of new words all positively correlated” (Gu and Johnson 1996: 668) with vocabulary size. Conversely, visual repetition was the strongest negative predictor of learning outcome. In another survey, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) asked 600 Japanese learners of English to indicate whether they used a particular strategy or not, as well as whether they thought it was helpful or not. There was a strong preference for a bilingual dictionary, while most respondents also guessed for meaning frequently and asked classmates for help with deciphering lexical meaning. As for consolidation strategies, some form of repetition was the most popular strategy, while focusing on a word’s spelling or connecting a word with synonyms or antonyms were also common. In terms of helpfulness, a bilingual dictionary was considered most beneficial, while asking a teacher for a paraphrase or synonym also ranked highly. Forming an image of a word, or using the Keyword Method, were both considered unhelpful.

While obtaining perceptions of strategy use lends itself to descriptive analyses, Lawson and Hogben (1996) believed more could be understood about learner behaviour by exploring the kinds of strategies they actually use rather than those they think they use. To do so, they adopted a think-aloud protocol to explore the behaviour of 15 foreign language learners as they attempted to acquire the meaning of several new words. Their study design proved instrumental when choosing a data collection tool for the present investigation. In terms of findings, the most frequently used strategy involved some form of repetition of words and their meanings. Such findings supported an earlier investigation by O'Malley et al. (1985a), which also highlighted the recurring use of repetition and reported actions requiring active manipulation of information to be far less frequent. In Lawson and Hogben's study, participants largely ignored the physical or grammatical features of words, and overlooked more elaborate acquisition procedures, such as the Keyword Method. Barcroft (2009) expanded on Lawson and Hogben's work by exploring the relationship between strategy use and vocabulary learning performance. With respect to shared features across both studies, three actions emerged: repetition, testing, and mnemonic use. Though such findings attest the value of mechanical strategies to learners, techniques requiring deeper mental elaboration resulted in greater recall of words. This supports an earlier study by Cohen and Aphek (1981), who highlighted the benefit of strategies requiring complex mental elaboration for learning vocabulary.

### **III.2. The relationship between language learning success and strategy use**

Early research on the topic of language learning strategies focused on the topic of what defines a good learner, with Rubin (1975: 42) postulating that "if we knew more about what the 'successful learners' did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record" (1975: 42). A study by Ahmed (1989) on vocabulary learning strategy use revealed that good learners are more aware of what they can learn about new words and words' collocation, spelling and context. In contrast, poor learners refuse to use the dictionary and almost always ignore new words. They are generally characterised by their apparent passiveness in learning. Gu (1994) performed an in-depth analysis of the vocabulary learning strategies of a 'good' and

‘poor’ Chinese learners of English. In a similar vein to the present study, a think-aloud protocol was employed to tap into the types of strategies used by learners. Gu reported that the poorer learner used a narrower range of strategies than the good learner and used them ineffectively. In his view, poorer learners need to learn how to monitor and evaluate their strategy use as well as the learning process. Moreover, they need to understand that there is more to learning a language than remembering the target equivalents of all native language words. In an excellent review of research on ‘good’ and ‘poor’ language learners, Griffiths (2008) deals with the issue in view of current thinking in the field and examines the implications for language teaching. With regard to vocabulary size and strategy use, Fan (2003) revealed that learners with a greater knowledge of English vocabulary were more self-initiated, used more sources, and employed guessing and dictionary strategies more often than individuals with lower proficiency, which supports some earlier studies (Ahmed 1989, Barcroft 2009, Gu and Johnson 1996, Lawson and Hogben 1996, Sanaoui 1995). Finally, Teng (2015), in a study of 145 Chinese EFL learners, reported that participants’ scores in strategy use correlated significantly and positively with breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge.

Against this background, is it reasonable to assume that less successful learners will improve if they pursue the vocabulary learning strategy use of better learners? While this may often be the case, Gu (1994) cautions against doing so, as many less successful learners use a high number of strategies but remain poor learners. Moreover, the literature shows the findings of previous studies often vary in terms of the importance awarded to rote-learning and meaning-oriented strategies. Consequently, investigating actual strategy use may shed light on the priority awarded to such techniques. It may also help explain why less successful Italian EFL learners struggle and what can be done to improve their language learning performance.

#### **IV. PARTICIPANTS**

Ten individuals took part in the study (See Table 1 and Table 2). At the time of the investigation, they were all attending the second year of a three-year undergraduate degree programme in foreign languages at a university in the north of Italy. A structured sample was chosen to increase the likelihood of the sample containing a mix of more

and less successful learners of English. Thus, five individuals had all previously failed the end-of-year written examination in English on, at least, three occasions. As a result, they were attending a remedial English language programme, or a *recupero* course as it is defined at the university in question, which prepares students to retake the written exam. Another five individuals were randomly selected from a regular second year course and had not yet attempted the end-of-year exam. As well as selecting the participants from different types of EFL courses, the productive vocabulary knowledge of each learner was also assessed.

To test productive vocabulary knowledge, a paper and pencil version of Lex30 (Meara and Fitzpatrick 2000) was used (researchers can access the Lex30 test at [www.lognostics.co.uk/tools/index.htm](http://www.lognostics.co.uk/tools/index.htm)). This is a tool designed for testing the productive vocabulary of non-native speakers of English. It is a word association task, in which learners are presented with thirty stimulus words, and are required to produce at least three responses to each word. Thus, we are left with a short text generated by each testee, which typically contains about 90 different words. The stimulus words are selected so that they elicit unusual, infrequent words in native speakers. In terms of evaluation, Lex30 awards one point to every response word, which does not appear in the most frequent 1,000 words of English. The assumption is that learners with a lower level of vocabulary knowledge will struggle to produce low frequency responses in this task, and that the presence of low frequency words in a test taker's response set indicates that they have an extended productive vocabulary. The developers of Lex30 claim that the test has considerable potential as a quick productive vocabulary test and can also be successfully used to identify cases where the vocabulary development of learners may be abnormal. The results indicated that the group of learners attending the *recupero* course possessed a lower level of productive vocabulary knowledge than those attending the regular second year course.

Table 1. Participants involved in the study

Participant	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Age</i>	24	22	22	22	22
<i>Gender</i>	F	F	F	F	F
<i>Course study</i>	2nd year <i>recupero</i> EFL	2nd year <i>recupero</i> EFL	2nd year <i>recupero</i> EFL	2nd year <i>recupero</i> EFL	2nd year <i>recupero</i> EFL

	course	course	course	course	course
Score on Lex30	7	28	38	28	38

Table 2. Participants involved in the study

Participant	6	7	8	9	10
Age	19	20	20	20	22
Gender	F	M	F	F	M
Course study	2nd year EFL course	2nd year EFL course	2nd year EFL course	2nd year EFL course	2nd year EFL course
Score on Lex30	45	46	53	54	80

## V. METHODOLOGY

The experimental set up is a variation on the work of Lawson and Hogben (1996), who also used a concurrent think-aloud procedure in their investigation of vocabulary learning strategies. As in their study, participants were presented with twelve English sentences, with each sentence containing an unknown word (this will henceforth be referred to as the target word). Their task was to think aloud as they discovered and consolidated the meaning of the words by whichever means they chose. Each learner was instructed to report on the thoughts that were in the focus of their attention, and, were not required to describe or explain what was being done. Unlike in Lawson and Hogben's study, they were also allowed to use a bilingual and monolingual dictionary.

### V.1. Selecting the target words for the think-aloud task

The following criteria were used in the selection of the twelve words. This was partially in keeping with Lawson and Hogben's (1996) selection criteria, with the main difference being that while they focused exclusively on nouns, my study included other parts of speech.

1. Eight words were nouns, three words were adjectives and one target word was a verb.

2. Each word had to be one for which the students did not know the meaning. This was established prior to commencing the task.
3. Each word had to represent a familiar object, concept or emotion.
4. Three words had to contain suffixes.

To cover the possibility of some words being familiar to participants, some reserve items were selected that also fulfilled the above criteria. If a learner knew the meaning of a word on the standard list, one of the reserve items of the same type would substitute it. The complete list of words is shown below.

**Target Words**

COT

LATCH

MUZZLE

SHOVEL

REFURBISHMENT

LUMBER

SEASONING

UNDERDOG

GOBSMACKED

BLISSFUL

GUTLESS

GRIEVE

**Reserve Target Words**

PAVING

PERISHABLE

UNASSAILABLE

LEAFLET

OUTSKIRTS

Each word was presented in context, with each sample sentence selected from the British National Corpus (See Table 3). Every effort was made to check that each sentence provided a clue to the word's meaning.

Table 3. Sentences used in the think-aloud study.

Sentences containing the twelve target words	
1.	GOBSMACKED - The loyal workers were <i>gobsmacked</i> to find two months later their ex-boss had bought all his ex-machinery at an auction for next to nothing and started up in business again under another name in the same building. (Source: Trade Union Annual Congress (1985-1994). Rec. on 6 Jun 1993.
2.	COT - 'I have put your daughter in a <i>cot</i> in your room,' Mrs Barnet continued. (Source: Ruth Appleby. Rhodes, Elvi. London: Corgi Books, 1992, pp. 109-226, 3427 s-units)
3.	REFURBISHMENT - We have undergone in the last year a major <i>refurbishment</i> of all our guest and public rooms and now offer the comforts so necessary for a mini-break. (Source: Short breaks - Brighton and Hove 1992, 829 s-units)
4.	SHOVEL - Tom dug frantically with the <i>shovel</i> , lifting the heavy rain-soaked clods of earth with difficulty. (Source: Saigon. Grey, Anthony. London: Pan Books Ltd, 1983, pp. 9-128. 2513 s-units)
5.	LATCH - I can still remember the click of the <i>latch</i> as she shut the door behind her. (Source: Part of the furniture. Falk, Michael. London: Bellew Pub. Ltd, 1991, pp. 1-146. 3416 s-units)
6.	UNDERDOG - The Welsh team arrived in Edinburgh last night keen to exploit the <i>underdog</i> tag for tomorrow's rugby international at Murrayfield, a ground where they have not won since 1985. (Source: Scotsman. Leisure material, 6963 s-units)
7.	LUMBER - All along the riverbank, for a distance of 200 metres, piles of <i>lumber</i> are burning. (Source: Volcanoes. Francis, Peter. London: Penguin Group, 1979, 1432 s-units)
8.	GRIEVE - Yes, we <i>grieve</i> when tragedy strikes in such awful forms as we have seen recently. (Source: I believe. Carey, George. London: SPCK, 1991, pp. 32-131. 2205 s-units)
9.	SEASONING - There are indeed times when a lemon as a <i>seasoning</i> seems second only in importance to salt. (Source: An omelette and a glass of wine. David, Elizabeth. London: Penguin Group, 1987, pp. 156-274. 1944 s-units)
10.	MUZZLE - But you have to admit, it's for the dog's own protection to wear a <i>muzzle</i> , as they can pick up all sorts of things in the street which can poison them. (Source: Dogs Today. Windsor: Burlington Pub. Ltd, 1992, 1478 s-units)
11.	BLISSFUL - Once the winter rains have passed, Delhi experiences two months of weather so perfect and <i>blissful</i> that they almost compensate for the climatic extremes of the other ten months of the year. (Source: City of djinns. Dalrymple, William. London: HarperCollins, 1993, 2329 s-units)
12.	GUTLESS - I should have had the support of my team but they are <i>gutless</i> . (Source: Today.

11230 s-units)

**Additional sentences containing the reserve words**

1. PAVING - A short path led along cracked **paving** to a front door with coloured glass set into its wood. (Source: Hide and seek. Potter, Dennis. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1990, 2403 s-units).
2. PERISHABLE - Moreover, if the retailer has too much stock of **perishable** goods, items may deteriorate or pass their 'sell by' date before they are sold. (Source: Retailing: a manual for students. Leach, Helen. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989, pp. 45-160. 3291 s-units).
3. UNASSAILABLE - When, just as Kylie ended her ten-date tour, the UK's top pop magazine Smash Hits held its annual awards ceremony, her position as music's No 1 female star was **unassailable**. (Source: Kylie Minogue: the superstar next door. Stone, Sasha. London: Omnibus Press, 1989, pp. 4-96. 2055 s-units).
4. LEAFLET - Criticism was made of his publicity **leaflet**, which featured a photograph not only of the candidate, but a Family ensemble complete with children. (Source: High risk lives: lesbian and gay politics after the Clause. ed. Lincoln, Paul and Kaufmann, Tara. Bridport, Dorset: Prism Press, 1991, pp. 126-248. 1766 s-units).
5. OUTSKIRTS - He switched the engine on and swung the Audi out of the car-park, down Yorkstrasse towards the **outskirts** of the city. (Source: The Lucy ghosts. Shah, Eddy. London: Corgi Books, 1993, pp. 321-452. 4235 s-units).

**V.2. The interviews**

Each participant was provided with a sheet of paper, listing the twelve target words, and was asked in English to mark any word whose meaning he/she knew. If any of the words were familiar, the cards for those words were replaced with a card from the reserve set. The objective of the study was explained to the participants, i.e. to obtain some information on ways Italian learners go about learning the meaning of new English words. This was followed by each learner listening to a brief description of the think-aloud protocol, as well as observing the researcher run through the think-aloud method with a practice card. They were told to feel free to use the monolingual and bilingual dictionaries provided as often as they felt necessary. Having completed the demonstration, each learner progressed through the twelve cards featuring the target words. All ten interviews were recorded with the average duration being 46 minutes.

**VI. DATA ANALYSIS**

The following section describes how the think-aloud data was analysed and coded.

### VI.1. Analysis of the recordings and coding of data

The ten recordings were transcribed and analysed for different types of strategic moves. A chart was created for each learner, which included the strategies they used, as well as the sequences in which they were used. Each strategy was coded and assigned to one of five higher-level categories (See Table 4), which was largely based on the procedure used by Lawson and Hogben (1996). A category describing dictionary use was added. The first four categories represented the kinds of actions used to discover the meaning of a new word, while the fifth category described the techniques used to consolidate the meaning of a new word. Categories 1 and 2 involved transformation of the features of the word and/or the meaning, with strategies demanding more complex mental elaboration occupying the former category and those requiring less mental elaboration the latter. Regarding the use of context as a way of providing clues to word meaning, the decision was made to split this strategy between Categories 1 and 2. Hence, more complex speculation on the meaning of a word, using knowledge of other constituents of the sentence, occupied Category 1, while quickly guessing the meaning of a word using English, or providing a translation, fell into Category 2. Translating a sample sentence or producing a literal translation of a target word were viewed as demanding a lower degree of mental elaboration and were, thus, assigned to Category 2. This category also included techniques analysis of physical features of a word, such as its appearance or its sound as a basis for identifying its features. By contrast, the production of synonyms of the target word before consulting a dictionary was viewed as demanding greater mental effort, and, thus, occupied Category 1. Category 3 reflected some form of word feature analysis. This included the analysis of affixes, or other grammatical features of a word, such as its part of speech. Category 4 included strategies employed while consulting a dictionary, while Category 5 represented consolidation strategies based upon note-taking, rehearsal of the word and/or the meaning, or some form of self-testing.

Table 4. Categories of strategies used for coding

<b>1. Complex elaboration (C.E)</b>
<i>Complex use of context:</i> the individual made a serious attempt to derive the target word meaning from the sentence, by referring to the meaning or features of other words in the sentence.

<i>Paraphrase</i> : the individual suggested synonyms of the target word before consulting a dictionary.
<b>2. Simple elaboration (S.E)</b>
<i>Simple use of context</i> : the individual attempted to explain the <i>meaning</i> of the target word (in English or Italian) without making specific reference to any other word(s) in the sentence.
<i>Simple use of context</i> : the individual suggested a possible Italian <i>translation</i> for the target word without making specific reference to any other word(s) in the sentence.
<i>Literal translation</i> : the individual attempted to translate <i>literally</i> the target word into Italian.
<i>Physical appearance</i> : the individual commented on the target word's similarity to a word in the L1 or L2.
<i>Sentence translation</i> : the individual attempted to translate the sample sentence into Italian.
<b>3. Word feature analysis (W.F)</b>
<i>Word classification</i> : the individual commented on the part of speech of the new word.
<i>Use of affixes</i> : the individual used his/her knowledge of prefixes or suffixes.
<b>4. Dictionary use (D.U)</b>
<i>Bilingual dictionary</i> : the individual referred to a bilingual dictionary to find the meaning of the target word or another word in the sentence.
<i>Monolingual dictionary</i> : the individual referred to a monolingual dictionary to find the meaning of the target word or another word in the sentence.
<b>5. Consolidation strategies</b>
<i>Note taking (NT)</i> : the individual took a note of various features of the new word (meaning, translation, pronunciation, grammatical properties, sample sentence, other uses of the word).
<i>Simple word rehearsal (REH)</i> : the individual used repetition, or other kinds of learning strategies, to help remember the meaning of the target word.
<i>Cumulative rehearsal (REH)</i> : the individual not only repeated the word and/or meaning but also returned to previous words and rehearsed these in a sequence.
<i>Self-testing (ST)</i> : the individual engaged in self-testing by covering the Italian/English meaning of the new word and tried to generate the other part of the pair.

## VII. FINDINGS

In this section, the strategies used by the group to discover and consolidate the meaning of the lexical items in the vocabulary learning task are discussed (Table 4), with

reference also made to the types of strategies used while consulting dictionaries during the task (See Table 5 and Table 6). This is followed by a description of the strategies employed by each participant. The subsequent discussion section reflects on the strategy use of the sample of learners, and considers the strategy use of those who were described as being less successful learners.

### **VII.1. The types of strategies used to discover and consolidate lexical meaning**

The most popular strategy involved the use of a bilingual dictionary, which was consulted to a greater or lesser extent by all ten individuals. While a monolingual dictionary was used less often, it was still popular with only one participant choosing not to use it. Guessing for meaning through English, or coming up with a translation of a word, were also common. Similarly, sentence translation was prominent, with seven individuals doing so at some point during the task. By contrast, examples of more complex guessing for meaning were less prevalent. With regard to word feature analysis, half of the sample attended to the affixes of several target words, with a similar number focusing on grammatical properties of words. Finally, though the majority of participants commented on a physical similarity between a target word and a known word, only two individuals highlighted synonyms of a word.

There was also variation in terms of the use of consolidation strategies. Repetition, in particular, was less frequent than expected. Indeed, only three participants engaged in simple word repetition, albeit doing so on several occasions. There were instances of cumulative rehearsal, though this was only popular with four individuals. On the other hand, note taking was much more evident, with most learners writing a target word and one, or more, translations of a word. Fewer individuals chose to write the meaning of a word in English, though they did so consistently. In general, the sample failed to take written notes of grammatical or pronunciation features, and they chose not to write an example sentence to help remember a word. Finally, there was only one case of self-testing.

### **VII.2. The types of strategies used to discover and consolidate lexical meaning**

Most participants sought more than one translation of a word in a bilingual dictionary. Many also looked for more than one meaning of a word in a monolingual dictionary, though they did so less frequently. Similarly, their attention was only occasionally drawn to sample sentences in a monolingual and bilingual dictionary. In terms of word feature analysis, while half of the sample attended to grammatical information of, at least, one target word, only three individuals considered pronunciation features. The same number paid attention to different parts of speech of, at least, one target word, or looked for synonyms in a monolingual dictionary. Finally, only two learners searched for further information about a word they found in a dictionary definition (See Table 7).

All ten participants matched a dictionary entry to the context in which a target word was originally used (See Table 8). There was also a strong desire to translate, with most of them trying to guess a translation of a target word found in a monolingual dictionary. Indeed, half of the sample also translated the definition of a word found in a monolingual dictionary. When English was used to guess for meaning, learners were more likely to search for information about a word in a monolingual dictionary. Similarly, after providing synonyms of words, they were more likely to use a monolingual dictionary. On the other hand, upon translating a sentence, a bilingual dictionary was used more often.

Table 5. The types of strategies used by each participant to discover and consolidate lexical meaning

<b>A. Frequency of strategies used to determine lexical meaning</b>											
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>										<b>Total freq. of use</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	
<b>W.F:</b> Checked the part of speech of the target word	1	1	0	0	4	6	5	0	0	2	<b>19</b>
<b>W.F:</b> Checked the affixes of the target word	1	2	1	0	1	3	0	0	0	1	<b>9</b>
<b>S.E:</b> Tried to translate the sentence into Italian	2	7	2	10	0	2	0	2	2	0	<b>27</b>
<b>S.E:</b> Tried to translate literally the target word	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	<b>3</b>
<b>S.E:</b> Guessed a translation of the word without referring to other items	1	5	0	3	0	3	0	4	1	1	<b>18</b>
<b>S.E:</b> Guessed the meaning of the word without considering other items	1	1	4	4	3	3	2	3	3	5	<b>29</b>
<b>S.E:</b> Commented on the similarity of the	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	0	1	1	<b>8</b>

target word to an L1 or L2 word											
<b>C.E:</b> Guessed the meaning of the word by considering other items in the sentence	0	0	0	0	6	3	2	0	0	3	<b>14</b>
<b>C.E:</b> Suggested possible synonyms of the target word	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	<b>4</b>
<b>D.U:</b> Used a bilingual dictionary to look up the target word	12	11	3	10	4	10	12	10	7	8	<b>87</b>
<b>D.U:</b> Used a bilingual dictionary to look up a non-target word in the sentence	0	3	0	5	0	2	2	2	6	0	<b>20</b>
<b>D.U:</b> Used a monolingual dictionary to look up the target word	7	1	12	5	12	0	6	4	11	11	<b>69</b>
<b>D.U:</b> Used a monolingual dictionary to look up a non-target word in the sentence	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Total frequency of strategy use per student</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>35</b>	

Table 6. The types of strategies used by each participant to discover and consolidate lexical meaning

<b>B. Strategies used to consolidate lexical meaning</b>											
<i>Strategy</i>	<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>										<b>Total freq. of use</b>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote the target word and one or more translations in Italian	12	12	1	10	0	12	12	12	11	0	<b>82</b>
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote the target word and its meaning in English	0	0	11	0	12	0	0	0	9	12	<b>32</b>
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote the IPA of the target word	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	<b>7</b>
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote some grammatical information about the target word	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote a sentence or phrase to help remember the word	4	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	<b>8</b>
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote a sentence or phrase to help remember a non-target word	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>N.T:</b> Wrote information about other uses of the target word	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>4</b>
<b>REH:</b> Simple word rehearsal	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	0	<b>12</b>
<b>REH:</b> Cumulative rehearsal	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	<b>4</b>
<b>S.T:</b> Self-testing	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Total frequency of use of consolidation strategies</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>12</b>	

Table 7. Types of dictionary consultation strategies

Strategy	PARTICIPANTS										Tot
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Read more than one <u>translation</u> of a target word in a <i>bilingual</i> dictionary	12	9	2	5	0	10	6	6	5	8	<b>63</b>
Read more than one <u>definition</u> of a target word in a <i>monolingual</i> dictionary	2	0	4	1	6	0	2	0	3	1	<b>19</b>
Read a <u>sample sentence</u> containing a target word in a <i>bilingual</i> dictionary	3	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	2	1	<b>11</b>
Read a <u>sample sentence</u> containing a target word in a <i>monolingual</i> dictionary	0	0	1	3	2	0	0	0	1	1	<b>8</b>
Considered the <i>IPA</i> of a target word	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	<b>7</b>
Considered the <i>grammatical properties</i> of a target word	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	2	<b>8</b>
Looked up <i>synonyms</i> of a target word	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	<b>7</b>
Looked at the meaning of another <i>part of speech</i> of a target word	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	<b>4</b>
Related the target word's meaning to the <i>context</i> in which a word was originally found	10	4	6	2	10	5	11	3	4	8	<b>63</b>
Guessed an <i>Italian translation of a target word</i> after reading a definition in a monolingual dictionary	0	0	2	2	7	0	3	3	5	3	<b>25</b>
Translated a definition of a target word found in a monolingual dictionary into Italian	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	<b>6</b>
Looked up the meaning of an unknown word found in the definition of a target word in a monolingual dictionary	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
Took note of another new word that was of interest	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	<b>4</b>

### **VII.3. The types of strategies used to discover and consolidate lexical meaning**

#### *VII.3.1. Participant 1*

This individual actively used a bilingual dictionary to discover word meaning. Her reliance on a bilingual dictionary was shown by the fact that it was consulted thirteen times throughout the task. This feature really distinguished her from the other participants. While a monolingual dictionary was also used, it merely functioned as a tool to consolidate something she had found in a bilingual dictionary. She infrequently guessed for meaning through English or tried to come up with an Italian translation of a word. Similarly, she seldom engaged in word feature analysis. With regard to consolidation, she took a lot of written notes, which included writing the target words, a possible translation of each word, and a sample sentence illustrating the use of several target words. Finally, she engaged in simple word repetition with half of the target words.

#### *VII.3.2. Participants 2 and 4*

Both individuals focused heavily on guessing translations of words, as well as making numerous attempts at sentence translation. They also frequently consulted a bilingual dictionary. While participant two only used a monolingual dictionary once, participant four used one regularly to confirm something she had read in a bilingual dictionary. Both learners failed to examine the surrounding words to derive lexical meaning. In terms of consolidation, they took a written note of target words and, at least, one translation of each word. They also employed a vocabulary learning technique, with participant 2 using cumulative rehearsal and participant 4 engaging self-testing.

#### *VII.3.3. Participants 3 and 5*

These participants were characterised by their use of English while determining word meaning. Hence, they frequently referred to a monolingual dictionary and guessed for meaning through English. While participant 3 chose not to engage in complex guessing for meaning, participant 5 focused heavily on the surrounding words in several sample sentences before guessing. In terms of consolidation, they both took written notes of target words and the meaning of each word in English.

#### VII.3.4. *Participants 6 and 7*

Both individuals awarded a lot of attention to the grammatical properties of words. There were also instances of quick guessing for meaning, plus more complex guessing involving prior knowledge of other sentence components. A bilingual dictionary was consulted frequently to check the meaning of both target and non-target words. On several occasions, participant 7 also made use of a monolingual dictionary. Finally, they took written notes of the meaning of each target word in Italian.

#### VII.3.5. *Participant 8*

This individual used both Italian and English frequently to determine lexical meaning. Thus, she combined translation (i.e. guessing a translation of an item, sentence translation, or using a bilingual dictionary) with several strategies involving English (use of a monolingual dictionary and guessing for meaning). With regard to consolidation, she took a note of a translation of each word and engaged in both simple and cumulative rehearsal of words.

#### VII.3.6. *Participant 9*

This learner relied heavily on a bilingual and monolingual dictionary to discover meaning. Indeed, she consulted her bilingual dictionary thirteen times and a monolingual dictionary on eleven occasions. Compared with the other participants, she used a monolingual dictionary used more extensively and did so not only to confirm the meaning of a word previously found in a bilingual dictionary. With regard to consolidation, she frequently engaged in repetition, which included both simple repetition of words and cumulative rehearsal of all ten words. Finally, she took many written notes in both Italian and English.

#### VII.3.7. *Participant 10*

This individual consistently used both types of dictionary, with a monolingual dictionary being his preferred choice. Indeed, although a bilingual dictionary was used seven times, its use was confined to consolidating the meaning of a word previously sourced in a monolingual dictionary. He guessed for meaning in English six times, as

well as guessing several synonyms of words. He also showed determination to work out the meaning of unfamiliar words through English. Thus, instead of quickly seeking a translation of a word, he generally guessed for meaning before looking for further information in a monolingual dictionary. Upon doing so, he then frequently sought confirmation in a bilingual dictionary. In terms of consolidation, he chose not to focus on rehearsal or self-testing strategies and wrote each target word and its meaning in English.

## **VIII. DISCUSSION**

The principle objective was to investigate the strategies used by a group of ten Italian learners to discover and consolidate the meaning of twelve English words. From the outset, it was hoped the investigation would provide some useful information about the types of strategies that were actually used by Italian learners of English on a deliberate vocabulary learning task. As well as shedding some light on the types of techniques commonly employed, the hope was that more could be learned about the way individuals differ in relation to vocabulary learning behaviour. From this standpoint, a special focus was placed on uncovering details about the relationship between language learning success and strategy use. The above-mentioned points are discussed below, while time is also taken to consider how the results could help inform how English vocabulary is taught to Italian learners of English in the classroom.

- The strategies used by Italian learners of English while discovering and consolidating unknown English words

When faced with the task of determining lexical meaning, many participants chose to translate. This involved either guessing a translation of an English word/phrase or consulting a bilingual dictionary. The desire to translate supports earlier investigations of strategy use by Lawson and Hogben (1996) and Barcroft (2009), which also reported that learners translated items frequently. While the former noted instances of sentence translation, there was no evidence of this in Barcroft's study. In my study, sentence translation was popular with several individuals. Guessing for meaning typically involved learners coming up with a translation or providing a brief description of the

meaning of a word in English. Consequently, there were few instances of the kind of guessing that requires careful examination of contextual clues in a sentence to help derive word meaning. Such findings support Barcroft (2009), who claimed that his participants spent little time examining the sentence context as a means of generating cues for word meaning. In light of this, it is recommended that more needs to be done to teach Italian learners how to use context as a word learning method. This is particularly pertinent, given that guessing for meaning is an important skill for promoting vocabulary development in learners. Moreover, with the swing in language learning research towards producing more active and independent language learners, it makes sense to equip them with the tools that will enable this to happen. Thus, rather than resort to a dictionary or ask a teacher for assistance, learners should be shown how to look out for contextual clues, such as synonyms, antonyms, cognates, definitions, parts of speech, pronunciation clues.

Dictionaries were frequently used throughout the task. While several individuals prioritised a monolingual dictionary, there were more instances of bilingual dictionary use. This confirms earlier studies by Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) and Loucky (2003) who also revealed a preference among students for a bilingual dictionary. This is a cause for concern, as a study by Ali (2012) on dictionaries as learning tools revealed that a monolingual dictionary was more effective than a bilingual dictionary. This is because a monolingual dictionary requires more effort and supplies sufficient contexts in their definitions of new words and expressions. By doing so, they assist learners to learn new words and vocabulary items and to produce them in similar contexts. As expected, the present study also indicated that guessing for meaning and dictionary use are closely related. Thus, those who guessed translations of words or sentences were much more likely to consult a bilingual dictionary. On the other hand, those who used an English medium to guess the meaning of a word were more inclined to access a monolingual dictionary. The findings regarding dictionary use once again highlight the fact that greater attention should be devoted by teachers to contextualised vocabulary learning. Indeed, while consulting a dictionary, few participants paid attention to contextualised sentences or information about grammar, pronunciation, or synonyms. Hence, more could be achieved by showing Italian EFL learners how to use a bilingual and

monolingual dictionary effectively, as well as providing them with information about the benefits that can be derived from learning words in context.

There was also variation in terms of the level of attention devoted to word parts. While several participants ignored word parts almost completely, others actively examined the grammatical and physical form of words to help derive lexical meaning. Hence, unlike Lawson and Hogben's (1996) who reported that participants largely ignored the physical or grammatical features of unknown words, my findings support Schmitt and Schmitt (1993), who highlighted the popularity of this strategy with their learners. From a pedagogical perspective, Schmitt (1997) stresses the importance of teaching word parts to students, as those who are familiar with them can guess meaning faster. As well as focusing on physical components of words, more should be done to direct students towards pronunciation of words. This stems from the fact that little attention was paid to pronunciation features of words in this study. This may be due to a lack of time devoted towards pronunciation by EFL teachers in Italy. According to Harmer (2001), most English language teachers get students to study grammar and vocabulary, yet little attempt is made to teach pronunciation. Gilbert (2008) also argues that teachers often find that they do not have enough time in class to give proper attention to this aspect of English instruction. Considering that pronunciation is a challenging aspect of learning English for Italian learners, teachers should devote more time to teaching this skill. Shoostari et al. (2013: 463) provide some useful guidelines for teachers about how this may be achieved.

In terms of consolidating lexis, mechanical repetition was less prominent than in some previous studies of vocabulary learning strategies (Lawson and Hogben 1996, O'Malley et al. 1985a, Barcroft 2009). My findings are, thus, more reflective of an earlier investigation by Gu and Johnson (1996) who also reported how respondents generally avoided rote-learning strategies. While the use of repetition as a learning strategy is often overlooked in favour of more meaning-centred techniques, a recent study by Altalhab (2018) on the effects of repetition on vocabulary retention shows that it may be worth spending more time on this strategy, particularly with difficult words or collocations. In terms of the use of mnemonic strategies, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) reported that their respondents found them unhelpful, while O'Malley et al. (1985a) also described such techniques as being infrequently used. In Lawson and Hogben's (1996)

study, there was no evidence of the Keyword Method, while only a small proportion of learners used mnemonic strategies, which were similar to some component of the Keyword Method. Barcroft (2009) also reported very little evidence of strategies requiring manipulation of information to consolidate lexical meaning. My data largely reflects such studies, with no evidence of the Keyword Method found or, indeed, any form of imagery being used. With regard to self-testing of word meaning, there was only one instance of this learning technique in my study, which contrasts with Lawson and Hogben (1996) and Barcroft (2009) who reported frequent instances of its use in their studies. On the other hand, note taking was very common here, with some individuals writing a translation in Italian, while others took notes exclusively in English. Most learners, however, failed to take note of any features related to pronunciation, grammar or collocation. The popularity of note taking supports a recent study by Boonnoon (2019) who also identified this strategy as one of the most frequently used by respondents.

- Exploring the relationship between language learning success and strategy use.

A good deal of variation was found in terms of the types of strategies used by the learners. Consequently, it was not possible to identify an underlying trend linking them all. Typically, learner differences resulted from either focusing on the use of translation or making use of their English knowledge to determine lexical meaning. Alternatively, several individuals combined translation with other strategies, such as guessing for meaning, analysis of word parts and use of a monolingual dictionary. While it was also impossible to determine a marked difference between the types of strategies used by the five most (1-5) and the five least successful learners (6-10), some features are referred to here. For instance, while several participants sought, once in a while, to translate a sample sentence containing a target word, participants 2, and 4 relied almost exclusively on this strategy with the target words in the learning task. Such determination to translate was not so evident with the other learners. Also, in terms of frequency of strategy use, the individual with the smallest vocabulary size (participant 1) ended up using the most strategies in the vocabulary learning task. In particular, she used an extensive range of strategies while consulting a dictionary and consolidating lexical meaning. This type of strategy use was somewhat unexpected, as research findings often indicates that less successful learners are generally characterised by the limited number

of strategies they employ. Thus, it conflicts with Fan (2003) who revealed that learners with a greater knowledge of English vocabulary employed guessing and dictionary strategies more often than individuals with lower proficiency. It also lends support to Gu's (1994) observation that many less successful learners use a high number of strategies but remain poor learners. Another observation related to participants 3 and 5 who predominantly used a monolingual dictionary, with participant 5 also carefully examining sentence context to help derive meaning. Once again, it was anticipated here that this type of strategy use would typically be associated with more proficient or successful learners.

## **IX. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

With regard to limitations of the study, it should be noted that research on the validity of think-aloud reports in SLA is only in its infancy stage (Bowles 2010). One of the criticisms of using think-aloud protocols relates to the validity of such reports, with researchers unsure as to whether verbalising while completing a task acts as an additional task and alters cognitive processes rather than providing a true reflection of thoughts. Upon analysing studies that have investigated reactivity in the L2 literature, Bowles (2010) claimed that while thinking aloud only has a small effect on post-task performance, it increases time on a task. Aside from potential issues with the validity of my think-aloud data, another limitation of my think-aloud study may relate to the fact that I failed to specify which language the learners should use while verbalising their thoughts. According to Bowles (2010: 115) not specifying the language(s) of verbalisation introduces variability into the research design of the study and creates a situation in which some participants may think aloud entirely in the L1, while others may force themselves to think aloud entirely in the second language and might therefore be unable to communicate some of their thoughts as effectively as they could in the L1. Finally, a potential pitfall of using think-aloud reports lies in the fact that learners might report what they perceive they ought to know or do while learning new vocabulary in English, what they think ideal learners know and do, and not what they in fact know or do (Ericsson and Simon 1980).

## X. CONCLUSION

This study suggests that it is possible to gain a good understanding of Italian EFL learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies by encouraging them to think aloud while performing a deliberate vocabulary learning task. Detailed information about the types of strategies used and their frequency of use were reported and discussed. Moreover, it was possible to identify the types of strategies used by individual learners. Whilst it was not possible to provide clear-cut evidence of major differences in strategy use between more and less successful learners, some differences were revealed. Above all else, the study highlighted the marked variation that exists among a group of Italian learners of English in terms of how they approach the task of vocabulary learning in English. It indicated that while they may differ in terms of the types of strategies they use, the same strategies are often repeatedly employed by an individual with each new word.

It is hoped this information will be of use to teachers when planning vocabulary teaching programmes. They are advised to discover more about the vocabulary learning behaviour of their students, and to identify the types of strategies that are not being used, or not being employed effectively. This information could then be passed on to learners with details about new strategies they could employ to improve their ability to learn words. For instance, it emerged that contextualised guessing for meaning, which involves looking for clues within a sentence, is rarely attempted by most learners. Instead, they prefer to make a quick guess at a translation or to seek help from a bilingual dictionary. It would also be beneficial to educate learners on ways of improving the effectiveness of certain strategies. This could, for example, include showing them how to maximise dictionary use, and informing them about the various merits of each type of dictionary. Similarly, they could be instructed on ways of improving their note taking skills. This study reported that there is often a failure to include useful information about words, with the focus placed exclusively on writing a translation or the meaning of a word in English. In terms of future research, it is felt more could be learned about the topic by analysing some of the underlying driving forces behind learner motivation, such as learner beliefs about vocabulary knowledge and learning, followed by an examination of the relationship between such driving forces and the types of strategies used by learners.

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