A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY TO THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH *WORD TIERS* BY INDONESIAN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The present study was aimed to examine English-word tiers acquisition by senior high school students and to identify their strategies to boost their English learning. Its design was cross sectional. To obtain the required data, a test and questionnaire were used. The data were taken from one hundred and five senior high school students who took part voluntarily as the subject of the research. Then, the data were quantified to find frequency and percentage. Furthermore, they were analyzed descriptively. The result of the analysis revealed that the students of the tenth grade tended to acquire the tier I words, followed by tier II and tier III words. In contrast, the order of word-tiers acquisition by students of the eleventh and twelfth grade were tier I, tier III, and tier II respectively. In addition, the data showcased that the majority of the students prefer to use their metacognitive as their strategy to enhance their English learning irrespective of the order of their word tier acquisition.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Second Language Acquisition, Word tiers

A. INTRODUCTION

In second language learning, vocabulary plays a special rule (Schmitt, 2008). Language learners' successfulness is commonly determined by the quality and quantity of the learners' vocabulary knowledge of the target language. Its acquisition development is highly related to the learner's exposure to the language (Kida, 2020; Matusevich, 2017; and Peters, 2019; Schmitt, 2017; Schmitt, 2019; de Wilde and Eyckmans, 2017) and learning strategies (Ellis, 1985; Feng, 2019; Gass and Selinker, 2008).

When language learners learn a language, universal developmental sequences of the language acquisition – including many features of the language – exist (Spada and Lihgtbown, 1999; Hill and Flynn, 2006). Regarding to this, many works have been found such as Clark (1973), Hansen (2004), Matthews (2005), Nicoladis (2011), and Ruiz (2018). However, the acquisition of order of English word tiers by students has been paid less attention, in particular in Indonesian context. Therefore, this study is interested in researching the order of word tier acquisition. Additionally, considering learning strategies used by learner to internalize new L2 knowledge, this study is also interested in investigating the strategies used by Indonesian students during their English learning.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Second language acquisition (SLA) refers to the process of how a second language is acquired by a second language learner (Ellis, 1985; Gass and Selinker, 2008). When students studiy a second language, developmental sequences of the language acquisition exist (Spada and Lihgtbown, 1999). These developmental sequences universally exist in five stages: preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advance fluency (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; cf Hill and Flynn, 2006).

Learners' vocabulary acquisition in a second language is highly related to the learner's exposure to the language (Ellis, 1985; Schmitt, 2017) and learning strategies (Ellis, 1985; Gass and Selinker, 2008). The learners are suggested to be exposed as much as possible to various contexts in order to internalize vocabulary knowledge which is complex and multidimensional (Schmitt, 2017). The complexity and multidimensionality of vocabulary knowledge can be seen from its components: form, meaning, and use. The form area of the knowledge includes spoken, written and the word part. The meaning area covers (a) forms and meaning, (b) concepts and referents, and (3) associations. The use area involves grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use (Nation (2013:49). In addition, in English language, words are hierarchical. Beck and Kucan (2005) found that words possess notion of tiers: tier I, II and III. *Tier I words* are the most basic words. These words are commonly acquired by language learners in various contexts because they are generally used in daily communication. As for examples are the words table, chair, house, garden, book, pencil, bag, etc. *Tier II words* are words that are commonly learned in the classroom through reading or teachers' instruction. They are academic vocabulary, such as the word perspective, generate, initiate, intermediate, calculation, etc. *Tier III words* are words which are associated with a certain field of study or specific domains such as *metacomprehension, plate tectonics, diphthong, fossilization*, etc.

Therefore, rich exposures are necessary for language learners to acquire the language better. Many researches have shown that learners from various countries who are exposed to English longer possess richer English vocabularies than others (Schmitt, 2019), such as de Wilde and Eyckmans (2017), Matusevich et al (2017), and Peters (2019).

On the other hand, language learners are expected to have learning strategies to achieve the success in their second language learning. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are categorized into six main categories: cognitive, memory, metacognitive, compensatory, affective and social. Cognitive strategies facilitate learners to link the new learning materials to their existing knowledge. Memory strategies mediate learners to connect things of their prior knowledge which commonly seen as an initial stage to learn grammar and vocabulary. Metacognitive strategies help learners to manage the learning process and deal with a task. Compensatory strategies facilitate learners to overcome their lack of knowledge when speaking or writing English. Affective strategies facilitate learners to cope with emotions and feelings. Social strategies promote learning with others.

Learning strategies use can help language learners achieve better performance and become more independent and autonomous learners. It has been proved by many works such as BalcI (2018), Feng (2019), Little (1995), and Zhang, (2020). In addition, students' learning strategies

preferences may be related to various factors like cultural background (e.g. Grainger, 2012; Politzer and McGoarty, 1985; Oxford, 1994), and learning conceptions (e.g. Benson and Lor, 1999; Mulyani, 2020; Vettory, 2018).

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed cross-sectional design. The data were collected from the participants in one point of time and analyzed to identify their differences (Creswell, 2012). The participants were 105 students of a senior high school in West Java, Indonesia, who participated voluntarily. They consisted of 42 students of grade 10, 36 were of grade 11, and 27 were of grade 12.

To gain the needed data, test and questionnaire were used as the instruments. The test was used to gain the data regarding the English *word tiers* (word levels) acquired by the students. The term 'word tiers' meant in this study was the tiers or levels of English words based on Beck et al. (2002). The test contained multiple-choice questions. This type of test was employed because of its practicality in terms of rating and interpreting (Harris, 1969) and high reliability in terms of the scorer (Brown, 2001; Harris, 1969). The number of questions in the test was 45 consisting of 15 questions for each *tier I, II, and III words* respectively. In addition, the questions relating to tier I words were placed in the first section of the test, tier II words in the second section, and tier III words in the third section.

The Questionnaire was used to elicit the data relating to strategies used by the students to boost their English learning. It was adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) then translated into the Indonesian language in order to facilitate students to understand it well.

The gained data were firstly analysed quantitatively including frequency and percentage to identify the students' tendency of the order of word tiers mastery which reflected their word tier acquisition. Furthermore, descriptive analysis was done based on the quantitative data.

FINDINGS ANS DISCUSSION
1. The order of English word tiers acquired by the students

Based on the data from the test, it was found that there were twelve types word tiers acquisition. Those types are $1_a2_a3_a$, $1_a2_a3_b$, $1_a2_b3_a$, $1_a2_b3_b$, $1_a2_b3_c$, $1_a2_c3_b$, $1_b2_a3_a$, $1_b2_a3_b$, $1_b2_a3_c$, $1_b2_b3_a$, $1_b2_c3_a$, $1_c2_a3_b$, and $1_c2_b3_a$. In addition, the occurrences of each type are various. It can be examined in Table 1.

English word tiers were coded using the numbers 1, 2, and 3. Meanwhile, the order of English word tiers acquired by the students was coded using the subscripted letters a, b, and c. Specifically, the subscripted letter a, b, and c represented the first, second, and third acquired word tier respectively. For example, the $1_a2_a3_b$ type means that tier one and tier two words are mastered equally and both are mastered better than tier three words. This means that the number of correct answers in part 1 (which contained tier I words) is the same as the number of correct

answers in part 2 (which contained tier II words), and each of them is higher than the number of correct answers in part 3 (which contained tier III words). Other example, the $1_a2_c3_b$ type indicated that the sequence of word tier acquisition by the students was tier I, III, and II respectively. It was inferred from the number of correct answers to the questions of the test given by the students. The score for tier I words questions was the highest among all tiers, and the score for tier II words was the lowest.

Table 1. The occurrences of word tiers acquired by students from each grade

No	Tier			Grade 10			Grade 11			Grade 12		
	I	II	III	Σ	%	R	Σ	%	R	Σ	%	R
1	1_a	2_a	3_a	1	2.38	5	3	8.33	3	1	3.7	5
2	1_a	2_a	3_b	1	2.38	5	5	13.9	2	5	18.5	2
3	1_a	2_b	3_a	1	2.38	5	2	5.56	4	4	14.8	3
4	1_a	2_b	3_b	5	11.9	2	3	8.33	3	3	11.1	4
5	1_a	2_b	3_c	12	28.6	1	2	5.56	4	3	11.1	4
6	1_a	2_c	3_b	5	11.9	2	17	47.2	1	8	29.6	1
7	1_b	2_a	3_a	4	9.52	3	0	0		1	3.7	5
8	1_b	2_a	3_b	3	7.14	4	2	5.56	4	0	0	
9	1_b	2_a	3_c	1	2.38	5	1	2.78	5	1	3.7	5
10	1_b	2_b	3_a	1	2.38	5	1	2.78	5	1	3.7	5
11	1_c	2_b	3_a	5	11.9	2	0	0	0	0	0	
12	1_c	2_a	3_b	3	7.14	4	0	0	0	0	0	
				42	100		36	100		27	100	

Based on Table 1, the trend of the acquisition process of English word levels (tiers) by tenth graders was type $1_a2_b3_c$ (28.6%). It was followed by $1_a2_b3_b$, $1_a2_c3_b$, and $1_c2_b3_a$ (each of them is 11.9%). Then, they were followed by $1_b2_a3_a$ (9.52%). This acquisition changed significantly when the students were in grade 11. In this grade, the students' tendency in acquiring English words tiers was in $1_a2_c3_b$ type (47.2%). Then, it was followed by $1_a2_a3_b$ (13.9%). The $1_a2_a3_b$ type, then, was followed by $1_a2_a3_a$ and $1_a2_b3_b$ type (each of them is 8.33%). The students' acquisition changed insignificantly when they are in grade 12.

The students with $1_a2_b3_c$ type of word tier acquisition are the students whose basic-words mastery are the best, academic words are the second best, and specific fields of study are the third best. The fact that number of the occurrences of $1_a2_b3_c$ type acquired by the students was the highest is reasonable. First, tier I words are the words that most frequently used in daily conversation in a variety of encounters and contexts. In addition, this kind of words are taught first before any other word levels (Beck et al., 2002). Therefore, it is logical that this group of words were acquired best by the students. Second, tier II words are academic words. They are most frequently used and taught in schools during teaching and learning process in the classrooms. They are also generally found in reading texts in different kind of contexts (Beck et al., 2002). Hence, it is acceptable that academic words – tier II words – are as the students' second best acquired words level. Third, tier III words are the words which are highly

connected to a specific field of study and profession; therefore, they are most unfrequently found and used (Beck et al., 2002). In other words, the students' tendency in acquiring English words is that the most basic words are mastered best/earliest among their vocabulary; whereas the academic/instructional vocabulary is the second, and the technical/specific field vocabulary is the weakest/last vocabulary that they master.

The students' acquisition in grade 11 has two similarities to the students' acquisition in grade 12. *First*, the eleventh graders' and the twelfth graders' tendency in acquiring English word tiers is in the type of $1_a2_c3_b$. The difference is in their percentage of occurrences; in grade 11 the occurrences of 1_a2c3_b type (47.2%) is bigger than twelfth graders (29.6%). This probably means that in grade 11 and 12, the students mostly learn tier III words or technical words, but this tendency declines when the students are in grade 12 even though the position of the $1_a2_c3_b$ type is still in the first rank. *Second*, the second rank of the eleventh graders' and the twelfth graders' tendency in acquiring English word tiers is in the type of $1_a2_a3_b$. The difference is in their percentage of occurrences; in grade 11 the occurrences of the type $1_a2_a3_b$ (13.9%) is lower than that of twelfth graders (18.5%). This means that the second tendency of the eleventh and the twelfth graders' acquisition of English word tiers is in the type of $1_a2_a3_b$, but this tendency increases when the students are in grade 12 even though the position of the $1_a2_a3_b$ type is still in the second rank. This is probably because the students in grade 12 have already learned more academic words which lead them to acquire more tier II words better. Therefore, in grade 12, the occurrences of $1_a2_a3_b$ increases but the $1_a2_b3_c$ decreases.

As it has been stated earlier that tier I words are the words that are most frequently used in daily communication in a variety of situations and are taught first before any other word levels (Beck et al., 2002); therefore, it is logical that these words were acquired best by the students. Then, that the tier III words are as the second best acquired words by the students are also logical since the words of this tier are the words or terms which are generally used in a particular profession or specific fields of study and are included into technical terms (Beck et al., 2002). They are parts of potential vocabulary which can be recognized by language learners although they have not yet found the term in the target language (Berman, Buchbinder, and Beznedeznych, 1968). Finally, that the tier II words were as the third best acquired words by the students are also logical. One of the reasons is that tier II words are academic words which are generally exposed to students in classrooms when the teaching and learning processes take place, including the reading texts discussed in a language class. In contrast, the words of tier III, are frequently found in various school subjects and Indonesian news. In other words, the students' tendency in acquiring English words is that the most basic words are acquired best/earliest by the students; whereas the technical/specific field vocabulary is acquired after the most basic words; while academic/instructional vocabulary is weakest/latest vocabulary that they mastered. It is probably because both students of eleventh and twelfth grade studied more specific topics and learning materials within specific school subjects than the students of grade tenth did; thus, their exposure to specific words was greater than the tenth graders'. This is in line with Cameron (2003) that students' interaction with the target language (language exposure) is a very essential aspect in the process of acquiring a language since the core of

foreign language learning is the quantity and quality of the learners' exposure to the target language during the learning process.

2. Learning strategies used by the students

The students' answers to the SILL questions were scored to obtain the average score of each strategies group. The highest average score is the focus of this study.

There are six terms used in this section. They are MS, CgS, CmS, McS, AS, and SS. These six strategies are actually the Oxford's SILL six strategy categories: memory related strategy, cognitive strategies, compensatory strategy, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

The participants of this research were categorized into three groups: (1) students with tier I words as their best acquired tier, (2) students with tier I words as their second best acquired tier, and (3) students with tier I words as their third best acquired tier. The data about these three types of students (of all grades) in relation to their language learning strategies is showcased in table 2.

Table 2. Student' groups of the acquired word tiers in each grade related to the most frequently used learning strategies

Grade 10	MS	CgS	CmS	McS	AS	SS	Σ	MS	CgS	CmS	McS	AS	SS	T
Type	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ		%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1a	5	2	2	13	6	2	30	17	6.7	6.7	43.3	20	6.67	100
1b	0	3	1	5	0	0	9	0	33	11	55.6	0	0	100
1c	1	1	1	4	1	0	8	13	13	13	50	13	0	100
Σ	6	6	4	22	7	2	47	13	13	8.5	46.8	15	4.26	100
Grade 11	MS	CgS	CmS	McS	AS	SS	Σ	MS	CgS	CmS	McS	AS	SS	T
Type	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ		%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1a	2	3	1	19	11	6	42	4.8	7.1	2.4	45.2	26	14.3	100
1b	0	1	1	3	0	1	6	0	17	17	50	0	16.7	100
1c	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	##						
Σ	2	4	2	22	11	7	48	4.2	8.3	4.2	45.8	23	14.6	100
Grade 12	MS	CgS	CmS	McS	AS	SS	Σ	MS	CgS	CmS	McS	AS	SS	T
Type	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ	Σ		%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1a	1	1	4	17	3	4	30	3.3	3.3	13	56.7	10	13.3	100
1b	0	0	1	2	0	0	3	0	0	33	66.7	0	0	100
1c	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	##						
Σ	1	1	5	19	3	4	33	3	3	15	57.6	9.1	12.1	100

Based on table 2, all groups (1_a, 1_b, and 1_c) in grade 10 employed metacognitive strategies most frequently. This group of strategies was applied by thirteen students out of thirty students of group 1_a (43.3%), by five students out of nine students of group 1_b (55.6%), and by four students out of eight student of group 1_c (50%). Thus, it revealed that all groups chose metacognitive strategies as their favorite strategy group.

Similarly, in grade 11, both groups (1_a and 1_b) mostly used strategy metacognitive strategies. Group 1_a (the students with tier I words are acquired best) and group 1_b (the students with tier I words are acquired second best) mostly employed metacognitive strategies. Their occurrences were 19 times (45%) and 3 times (50%) respectively. Finally, group 1_c (the students with tier I words are acquired third best) who use learning strategy were not found because 1_c group did not exist in this grade.

Like in the previous grades, the twelfth graders also mostly used metacognitive strategies. Among students of group 1_a (the students with tier I words are acquired best), the occurrence of metacognitive strategies use was 17 times (56.7%) which signaled that this type of strategy was the most frequently applied by the students. Similarly, among group 1_b (the students with tier I words are acquired second best) the emergence of language learning metacognitive strategies use was twice (66.7%). Finally, in group 1_c (the students with tier I words are acquired third best), metacognitive strategies use was not found.

Based on the finding above, metacognitive strategies were employed most frequently by almost all student groups from all grades. Therefore, it can be inferred that the acquisition of word tiers does not relate to language learning strategies use. This is astonishing since second language acquisition are influenced by the way of how students learn the language including learning strategies use (Ellis, 1985). In addition, the finding of this study is different from previous studies which showed that secondary students of different grades use different language learning strategies (e.g. Tragant & Victori, 2011) and students' language learning strategies change from year to year (e.g. Perea, 2021). It seems that some factors which were not investigated in the present research affected the result of this study. Some of the factors are the students' cultural background/national origin, and language tasks which are homogenous. It is because (1) the students lived in the same area, located in a sub-district which close to the school, (2) they studied in the same school, (3) they are from the same ethnic group. This is in line with previous researches which showcased that learning context, cultural background, and national origin are of significant factors affecting learning strategies use (e.g. Grainger, 2012; Griffiths, 2003; Huang, 2016; Sung, 2011). In addition, since the participants are the students of the same school, it seems that they got similar learning experience and language tasks and therefore use the same language learning strategies (*see* Oxford, 2001).

D. CONCLUSION

Among the 10th grade students, the tendency of word tier acquisition type is the $1_a2_b3_c$, meaning that their best mastered words are the words of tier I word group, followed by tier II and III groups respectively. On the contrary, among the the 11th and 12th grade students, the tendency is $1_a2_c3_b$, which means that their best mastered words are the words of tier I group, followed by tier III, finally by tier II. Most students of all grades, regardless of their type of word tier acquisition, prefer to employ metacognitive strategies to enhance their English learning. This indicates that word tier acquisition does not relate to preference for employing a particular language learning strategy type.

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