

LEXICAL LEARNING STRATEGIES: HOW DO THEY VARY BY GENDER AND AGE?

Sofia Oliveira DIAS*

- **ABSTRACT:** Throughout the teaching-learning process of a foreign language, students are expected to develop their linguistic competence in order to learn how to communicate and express themselves. The lexicon is one of the key elements in this learning process since it is the basis of the communicative act, without which there is no communication. In the development of the lexical competence, speakers, consciously or unconsciously, make use of a series of learning strategies with the objective of positively promoting their lexical knowledge. This paper presents the results of a questionnaire, which was handed out to learners of Portuguese who have Spanish as their first language. The aim was to explore how these students learn vocabulary, what strategies they make use of, and which factors make their learning process more difficult. The findings shed light on the strategies most widely used by students of three Language Schools, how those strategies differ between men and women, and if they change according to their age.
- **KEYWORDS:** Portuguese foreign language. Learning strategies. Lexicon.

Introduction

The interest in the role of lexicon in foreign language classes has been increasingly gaining ground in research carried out in the teaching and learning of a foreign language (FL). In this sense, the development of students' lexical knowledge in FL classes represents a challenge for both teachers and students. The former seeks to apply a variety of strategies to facilitate the learning of new words, while the latter strive to memorize and use these new words in communication contexts.

Thus, and with the aim of getting to know the strategies used by our students when learning the FL lexicon, in 2012, a study was carried out (see OLIVEIRA DIAS, 2012), which consisted of the application of a questionnaire that served as a reflection on the subject. For this study, fifty-two students of Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL), Beginner Level, all with Spanish as their mother tongue, participated. The processing of

* Universidade de Salamanca (USAL), Faculdade de Filología. Salamanca - Espanha. sofiadias@usal.es. ORCID: 0000-0002-4451-4092

the data allowed us to prove that the strategies most used by the students in the learning of the foreign language were, essentially, memorization and cognitive strategies. Thus, among the most frequently mentioned techniques are word repetition (writing and listening to the word repeatedly), association with images, its use in communicative contexts, and the association between words and students' personal experiences.

This article intends to continue the study carried out in 2012, increasing the number, the knowledge level and the type of informants, as well as to verify how the strategies used by the students vary according to gender and age. Thus, it is our aim to find out if there are differences concerning the strategies used in lexicon learning between men and women and if this selection varies significantly according to their age. For that, we surveyed 96 PFL students from three official language schools in Spain (non-university schools), with four levels of knowledge - A1, A2, B1 and B2-, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

The first part of the article will be essentially theoretical, discussing what to know a word means (NATION, 2001), and the most cited types of strategies (FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004). The second part will be dedicated to the study itself, which is divided into two phases: collection of data and analysis of the results obtained.

What to know a word means

Clark (1993) says that words are the starting point of language and that we need them to communicate and talk about ideas, feelings, and everything around us:

Words come first in language acquisition. Once children have some words, they begin to make generalizations about kinds of words – words for persons, places, and things, say, compared with words for actions and states. [...] Without words, there would be no sound structure, no word structure, no syntax. The lexicon is central in language, and central in the acquisition of language. (CLARK, 1993, p.1).

Similarly, a FL student goes through a process identical to the one which occurs with a native speaker. Like the child, the FL student needs words to communicate. And what does it mean to know or learn a word?

For Nation (2001), knowing a word means knowing its form, its meaning, and its use. For this author, knowing a word means recognizing it according to two types of knowledge: receptive (or passive) knowledge and productive (or active) knowledge. Receptive knowledge means the recognition and understanding of the input received through listening or reading; and productive knowledge means the recovery and proper use of lexical units in both oral and written practice. It is a dynamic proposal that, as a novelty, conceives learning from the perspective of the four language skills (MORANTE VALLEJO, 2005).

Additionally, words are units that take on meaning and significance when they are part of meaningful contexts. Nation (2001, p.23)¹ states that knowing a word involves several stages and levels of knowledge: “Words are not isolated units of language but fit into many interlocking systems and levels. Because of this, there are many things to know about any particular word and there are many degrees of knowing.”

The knowledge of a word is not only built from exposure to it. To master the knowledge of a word, the student must expose him/herself to the same word(s) several times and repeatedly. This knowledge is gradually built up throughout the learning process, where the student is responsible for making decisions about how to learn new words and how to develop his/her lexical competence.

According to the investigations carried out in the field of psycholinguistics, it is known that, of all the information that the human being retains, 80% is lost in a brief period of time, only 24 hours, and, consequently, the more time passes without this information being used, the greater its forgetfulness will be (GAIRNS; REDMAN, 1986; CERVERO; PICHARDO CASTRO, 2000; NATION, 2001). Thus, it will be essential to repeat, review and recycle the vocabulary learned, especially right after when it is presented, i.e., before forgetfulness begins to intrude.

Next, we will present a summary of the main learning strategies typologies, which have been cited, relying on the authors Cervero and Pichardo (2000) and Fernández López (2004).

Learning Strategies

By learning strategies, we mean

[...] mental operations, mechanisms, techniques, procedures, plans, concrete actions that are consciously carried out and that mobilize resources to maximize effectiveness in both learning and communication. (FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004, p.412, our translation).²

In general, the main types of learning strategies (RUBIN, 1975, 1981; OXFORD, 1990; O’MALLEY; CHAMOT, 1990) include not only cognitive and metacognitive, but also social and affective aspects, differing in the framing of some general mechanisms and in more concrete aspects typical of each one.

According to Fernández López (2004),³ Rubin (1989, *apud* FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004, p.424) proposes a classification that follows the process of information treatment,

¹ Paul Nation (2001), in his book *Learning Vocabulary in a Another Language*, on pages 26 and 28, presents a list of characteristics about what to know a word means according to the type of knowledge (receptive or productive).

² Original: “[...] *operaciones mentales, mecanismos, técnicas, procedimientos, planes, acciones concretas que se llevan a cabo de forma consciente y que movilizan los recursos para maximizar la eficacia tanto en el aprendizaje como en la comunicación.*” (FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004, p.412).

³ See also Cervero and Pichardo (2000), Suau Jiménez (2000), Ainciburu (2007).

which can be equated to the learning process, according to cognitive psychology, which begins with obtaining data and understanding them, going through the storage and recovery of information. In this way, the author identifies four general processes, in which learning strategies are included:

1. Process for obtaining information:
 - 1.1. Clarification/ verification strategies:
 - 1.1.1. Requesting confirmation of information.
 - 1.1.2. Requesting confirmation of own production.
 - 1.1.3. Defining or expanding information.
 - 1.1.4. Asking for repetition, paraphrases, explanations, examples.
 - 1.1.5. Watching the speaker's mouth for pronunciation.
 - 1.2. Inductive strategies:
 - 1.2.1. From L1/L3 onwards.
 - 1.2.2. From knowledge of the world or the communication process.
 - 1.2.3. Relating new information to physical actions.
 - 1.2.4. Using keywords.
 - 1.2.5. Differentiating relevant information.
 - 1.3. Deductive strategies:
 - 1.3.1. Inferring, by analogy, the regularities of the language.
 - 1.3.2. Activating the schemes.
 - 1.4. Information collection strategies.
2. Information storage process:
 - 2.1. Memorization strategies:
 - 2.1.1. Associating, grouping.
 - 2.1.2. Using keywords and semantic maps.
 - 2.1.3. Using mechanical means (papers, lists).
 - 2.1.4. Paying attention to specific details.
 - 2.1.5. Contextualizing.
 - 2.1.6. Using images.
 - 2.1.7. Mentally rehearsing.
3. Process of use and recovery:
 - 3.1. Practice strategies:
 - 3.1.1. Repeating, rehearsing, experimenting, imitating, repeating sentences.
 - 3.1.2. Consciously applying rules.
 - 3.1.3. Answering questions initially addressed to others.
 - 3.1.4. Using context to maximize contact with language, etc.

- 3.2. Self-regulatory strategies (also known as metalinguistic in other classifications):
 - 3.2.1. Defining the problem.
 - 3.2.2. Determining the solutions.
 - 3.2.3. Self-correction.
- 3.3. Social strategies:
 - 3.3.1. Joining a group and pretending understanding.
 - 3.3.2. Getting help among the members.
 - 3.3.3. Creating opportunities to practice.
 - 3.3.4. Cooperating with members to get information and reaction.

(FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004, p. 424-425, our translation).

Rebeca Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as “[...] *specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations.*” (OXFORD, 1990, p.8).

The author, in her classification, distinguishes between direct strategies and indirect strategies:

1. Direct Strategies:
 - 1.1. Memory strategies:
 - 1.1.1. Creating mental linkages (group, associating with what is known, contextualizing).
 - 1.1.2. Applying images and sounds (drawings, semantic maps, key words, phonetically close).
 - 1.1.3. Reviewing weel.
 - 1.1.4. Employing action (physical response, following orders, etc.).
 - 1.2. Cognitive strategies:
 - 1.2.1. Practicing (repeating, recognizing and using structures, rehearse, etc.).
 - 1.2.2. Receiving and sending messages (removing the main idea, using various resources to communicate).
 - 1.2.3. Analyzing and reasoning (applying rules and knowledge to new situations, contrasting languages, translating, etc.).
 - 1.2.4. Creating structure for input and output (taking notes, summarizing, underlining, etc.).
 - 1.3. Compensation strategies:
 - 1.3.1. Guessing intelligently (from linguistic or extralinguistic explanations).
 - 1.3.2. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (changing language, asking for help, using gestures, inventing words, using synonyms or paraphrases, etc.).

2. Indirect Strategies:
 - 2.1. Metacognitive strategies:
 - 2.1.1. Centering your learning (overviewing, focusing attention, giving priority to understanding, etc.).
 - 2.1.2. Arranging and planning your learning (explaining how to learn, organizing the study, formulating the objectives, etc.).
 - 2.1.3. Evaluating your learning (monitoring the problems themselves, seeking solutions and evaluating progress).
 - 2.2. Affective strategies:
 - 2.2.1. Lowering your anxiety (relaxation techniques).
 - 2.2.2. Encouraging yourself (thinking on the bright side, taking a cautious risk and rewarding yourself).
 - 2.2.3. Taking your emotional temperature (listening to one's own body, writing a diary about one's motivation to learn, talking to others about feelings and attitudes in learning).
 - 2.3. Social strategies:
 - 2.3.1. Asking questions.
 - 2.3.2. Cooperating with others.
 - 2.3.3. Empathizing with others (try Empathizing to understand the culture, thoughts and feelings).

(FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004, p. 423-424, our translation).

In the first - direct strategies - the language is directly manipulated, and mental processes are activated. These are related to the process of vocabulary acquisition and include resources whose objective is comprehension, retention, recovery or use of words.

On the other hand, indirect strategies are those that support and organize learning in general. Each of the above groups includes specific strategies, as it can be seen in the scheme above.

Finally, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classify strategies into three categories according to the type of operations that are active in each case: metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective. The first - metacognitive – implies some reflection on the learning process. The cognitive strategies operate directly on the data received and result in the practice of a series of mechanisms that facilitate the internalization of this information. Finally, socio-affective strategies, so that they can prompt learning and the control of the affective dimension, imply interaction and cooperation. For these authors, language learning is seen as a complex cognitive ability, in which the student processes knowledge, that is, he/she moves from declarative knowledge (knowing things) to procedural knowledge (knowing how to use them) (FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004).

Each speaker, in the learning process, can activate a variety of strategies that not only vary with respect to the content to be learned, but also with respect to factors such as level of knowledge, age, learning style and culture (CERVERO; PICHARDO, 2000; FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004).

Subject of study

To make students aware of the vocabulary learning process, an activity of reflection was carried out in class through the questionnaire format. On the one hand, this questionnaire aimed at getting to know the students' opinion regarding the factors that hinder vocabulary learning, and, on the other, at knowing what kind of learning strategies students use when acquiring vocabulary. The data in this study will be analyzed according to two variables, namely gender and age of informants.

Methodology

Characterization of the group

For this study, we surveyed 96 PFL students from three Official Language Schools in Spain (non-university education), Salamanca, Valladolid and Zamora, with four levels of knowledge (A1, A2, B1 and B2).

The A1 group consisted of 14 informants, three male and 11 female aged 22-63 years. The informants in this group had been PFL students for four or five months.

The A2 group consisted of 18 informants, eight male and ten female aged 18-40 years. The informants in this group had been PFL students for less than one year (between 7 and 12 months).

The B1 group consisted of 42 informants, 15 male and 27 female aged 21-77. The informants in this group had been PFL students from two years to four years.

The B2 group consisted of 22 informants, 9 male and 13 female aged 20-62. The informants in this group had been PFL students for five years.

Research tools

The data collection phase consisted of the circulation of a classroom questionnaire, which took place during the academic years 2013 and 2014, during the last weeks of the first four months of Portuguese language classes, at the Official Language Schools of Salamanca, Valladolid and Zamora. The questionnaire was circulated during the last 30 minutes of each class.

In order to obtain a homogenous corpus of informants' mother tongue, each informant completed a general data sheet (mother tongue, qualifications, age, gender and how long they had been studying Portuguese), which made it possible to determine their profile (see Appendix 1).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three groups of questions (as mentioned above) plus a series of general questions on the student profile (see Appendix 1).

The main questions were:

1. Do you think that while you are studying the lexicon (vocabulary) there are factors that hinder its learning?
 - 1.1. List them.
 - 1.2. What do you do to memorize new words in a foreign language?
2. How do you best learn words?
3. To learn vocabulary about food, what strategies do you use? (practical example)

The answer to question number 1 in the questionnaire was free. In the case of questions 2 and 3, they should be answered by choosing an available criterion. These two groups of questions are part of the proposal in Cervero and Pichardo Castro (2000, p. 106-107), in which, in the case of Question 2, we introduced a new answer criterion. Specifically, to the initial criteria (very well, well, reasonable and bad) we have added a fifth, I do not know. In the case of question 3, we have maintained the author's initial criteria: yes, no, sometimes (see Appendix 1).

Analysis of data

This phase of the study — data analysis — consisted of the manual counting and computerized recording of all responses obtained. In the first step, we focused the count on knowledge level and recorded the results considering the two variables under study: gender and age. In the second step of the analysis, we counted the results obtained for each one of the variables, and finally, we selected and registered the answers obtained in the questionnaire with the following positive criteria: answers with very well and well. The total results are presented in terms of percentage in Appendix 1.

Question 1: Difficulty factors

- 1.1. Do you think that while you are studying the lexicon (vocabulary) there are factors that hinder its learning?
- 1.2. What do you do to memorize the new words of a foreign language?

This first group of questions in the questionnaire aims to induce learners to reflect, in advance, on the lexical learning process, more precisely on the difficulty factors and the solutions they find. In this way, and since the intention was to get learners' opinion, the questions were freely answered.

These were the results:

Table 1 – Factors that make it difficult to learn the lexicon

| Factors that make it difficult to learn the lexicon | |
|--|--|
| Men | Women |
| - false friends | - the similarities with the mother tongue |
| - the similarities with the mother tongue | - the differences with the mother tongue |
| - the differences with the mother tongue | - false friends |
| - the interference from the mother tongue | - the interference from the mother tongue |
| - lack of time/ memory | - lack of time/ memory / prior knowledge/ practice - fatigue |

Source: Author's elaboration.

Cervero and Pichardo (2000) state that learning vocabulary, although it is an enriching task for any speaker, may present some difficulties related to three factors: size, systematization and mobility of the lexicon itself (OLIVEIRA DIAS, 2012). In addition to these factors, we also add the lexical proximity between the two languages (Portuguese and Spanish), which is referred to as a difficulty factor by our informants.

Our results demonstrate that both men and women have the same perception of the factors that make it difficult to learn the vocabulary of a foreign language, in this case, Portuguese. The first four factors mentioned are related to the proximity between Portuguese and Spanish. From this perspective, they state that both the similarities and differences between the FL and the mother tongue (MT), as well as the interference of the MT itself in the FL process learning are factors of difficulty. Thus, informants say that the fact that the two languages share many words similar, or sometimes coincidental, in form, makes it difficult to detect the differences that separate them, leading to doubts and uncertainties. This is how two informants commented on, the first at level A1 and the second at level B1: “*Sometimes I don't know if I say it in Spanish*”, “*The similarity in the language makes me unable to differentiate which words I know from Portuguese and which I don't*”.

According to Almeida Filho (1995, p.14-15, our translation): “The canonical order of prayer in the two languages is highly coincident, the major source of the lexicon is basically the same, and the cultural foundations on which it is based are largely shared.”⁴

⁴ Original: “*A ordem canônica da oração nas duas línguas é altamente coincidente, a fonte maior do léxico é basicamente a mesma e as bases culturais onde se assentam são em larga medida compartilhadas.*” (ALMEIDA FILHO, 1995, p.14-15).

On the other hand, according to the principles of contrastive analysis, it is argued that what is different between the two languages makes learning difficult. In this case, informants refer to differences in written form, for example, between *bairro* (pt) e *barrio* (sp); differences in phonetics, for example *me/z/a* (pt) e *me/s/a* (sp); and differences in meaning, specifically, in relation to the so-called “false friends”. The latter are the most problematic factor in the opinion of men, and the third in the case of women.

With respect to the interference from the MT, or other FL, referred to as a fourth factor for all informants, this is closely related to the previous factors.

Finally, informants also refer to affective issues as difficulty factors, which are more diversified in the case of women (Table 1).

Table 2 – Strategies used to memorize words

| Memorizing new words in FL | |
|---|---|
| Men | Women |
| - constant repetition | - association (context, similar words, images...) |
| - association (context, similar words, images...) | - constant repetition |
| - writing | - writing / reading/translation |

Source: Author’s elaboration.

According to the analysis of the previous results, we can see that both men and women use similar strategies to memorize new words; however, women show greater diversity in the type of activity. In fact, they not only resort to repeated writing exercises of word lists, but also to reading, for the recognition and memorization of words in context, as well as to translation, using dictionaries to retain the meaning of the word in question.

Analysis of data according to the variable “gender”

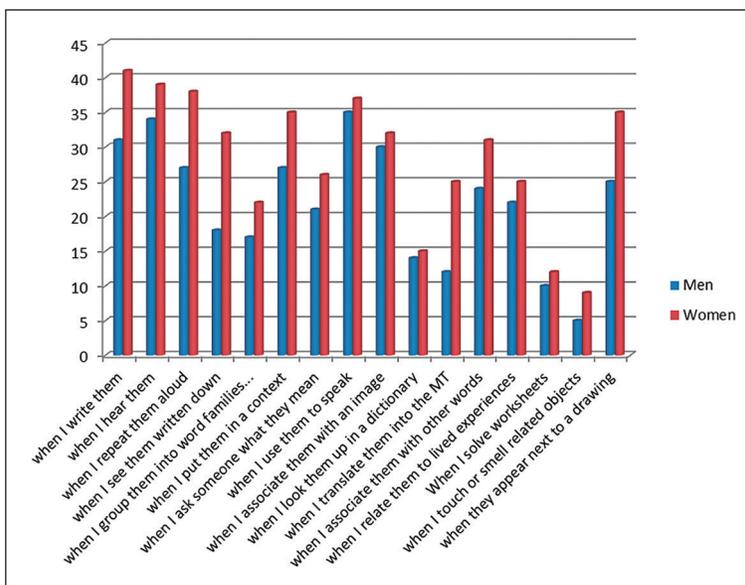
Question 2: How do you best learn words?

As previously mentioned, this group is formed by a main question (How do you best learn words?), which is followed by a series of possible strategies (see Appendix 1). The informants responded to each of these possibilities according to the following scale of values: very well, well, reasonable, bad and I don’t know. The different strategies will be commented on according to the gender of the informants - men and women - and age.

In the following graph, we present the results obtained:

Graph 1 – Variation of data according to gender

How do you best learn words?



Source: Author's elaboration.

From the analysis of the results, we observed that the five strategies most used by informants, except for one of them (4th option for men), coincide between the two genders; however, in different positions. This is illustrated in Table 3:

Table 3 – The five strategies most used by informants according to the variable “gender”

How do you best learn words?...

| | Women | Men |
|----|------------------------------|--|
| 1° | when I write them | when I use them to speak |
| 2° | when I hear them | when I hear them |
| 3° | when I repeat them aloud | when I write them |
| 4° | when I use them to speak | when I associate them with an image |
| 5° | when I put them in a context | when I repeat them aloud/ when I put them in a context |

Source: Author's elaboration.

We can observe that, for women, the most effective strategy is writing (when I write them), 3rd option for men; while, for men, the most used strategy is the context of use (when I use them to speak), 4th option for women.

“When I hear them” is the second most used strategy by both genders. In option 3, women say *“when I repeat them aloud”* (this would be option 5 for men) and men say *“when I write them”*. The fourth option for men - *“when I associate them with an image”* - does not appear among the first five learning strategies for women. The fifth option - *“when I put them in a context”* - is the same for both genders. In general, we conclude that women prefer to use memorization and repetition strategies (writing and repeating) and men compensatory or communication strategies (talking and listening), according to Oxford’s classification (1990).

In relation to less effective strategies, we observed that those that informants selected with the “reasonable” and “poor” criteria are common to both genders, namely: *“when I touch or smell related objects”* and *“When I solve worksheets”*.

On the other hand, the more numerically balanced ones between both genders are *“when I use them when to speak”* and *“when I associate them with an image”*. The first strategy is among the most frequent ones, second for men and fourth for women (Table 3); the second strategy is the fourth option for men and sixth for women. In contrast, the strategy *“when I look them up in a dictionary”* is among the least frequent among both men and women.

Question 3: What strategies do you use to learn vocabulary related to food?

The answers, regarding the most used learning strategies, previously presented (question 2), could be confirmed with the third question of the questionnaire, which aimed to induce the informants to recreate a real communication situation (see Appendix 1).

In this group of questions, the men state that reading or listening to the words in a store would be the most favorable strategies to learn that same vocabulary. In the case of women, the most favorable strategies are the use of writing (*“writing down the name of the food”*) and repetition (*“repeating the word aloud”*). These results confirm the answers presented in Table 3, as well as the results presented in Table 2, concerning the group of free answers.

Analysis of data according to the variable “age”

In order to ascertain whether the selection of learning strategies varies significantly according to the age of the informants, we divided the corpus into five groups according to age group. The three main groups comprise a ten-year period and the remaining two groups establish, on the one hand, a maximum period (those under-20s) and, on the other, a minimum period (those over-51s). This was the distribution:

Chart 1 – Informant groups according to age group

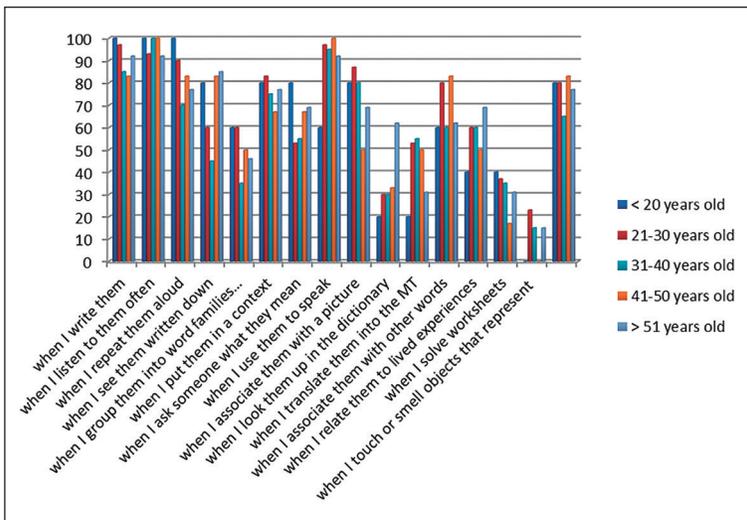
| Informant groups | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Age | < 20 years old (18-20) | 21 - 30 years old | 31 - 40 years old | 41 - 50 years old | > 51 years old (51- 62) |
| Number of informants | 5 | 30 | 20 | 6 | 13 |

Source: Author's elaboration.

In the following graph we present the results obtained:

Graph 2 – Variation of data according to the variable “age”

How do you best learn words?



Source: Author's elaboration.

By making a general comparison between question 1 and question 2, we conclude that there is a greater diversity and greater number of strategy options depending on age. Thus, we found out that informants in the age groups between 20 and 41 years old use a greater number of strategies. Regarding the number of strategies used, in the first three options, the number varies between 10 for informants under 20 and 3 for informants between 31 and 40.

From a detailed analysis of the data (Table 4), we observe that the strategies of writing and listening to words (“when I write them”, “when I hear them often”) are mentioned by all the informants between the first two options. The strategy of using

words in speech contexts (“*when I use them to speak*”) appears as the first option for groups 2, 4 and 5; as the second option for group 3 and as the third option for group 1. The strategy of repeating them aloud (“*when repeating aloud*”) appears in first place for informants under 20, second for informants aged 41-50 and third for informants aged 21-30 and over 50.

On the other hand, we find that the strategy of obtaining information (“*when I ask someone what they mean*”) appears in second, third and fourth options for groups 1, 4 and 5, respectively, but not mentioned among the first six options in groups 2 and 3.

As regards memorization strategies, such as association ones (“*when I associate them with a picture*”), these appear in second place concerning the group of informants under 20 and as the fourth option for the others. However, the “*when I associate them with other words*” strategy appears as second option for group 4, third option for group 1, fifth option for group 5 and sixth option for group 2, but it is not mentioned among the first six options in group 3.

Association strategies, memorization strategies, according to Oxford’s and Rubin’s classifications, also vary according to each informant’s preferences. Thus, the strategy “*when they appear next to a drawing*” is the second option for groups 1 and 4, the third option for group 5 and the sixth option for group 2. However, group 3 does not include this strategy in its first six options. On the other hand, and still within the association strategies, the contextualization one (“*when I put them in a context*”) is not mentioned among the first six options in group 1 (under 20). However, it is mentioned as a third option for informants over 41 years old (groups 4 and 5), and as the fifth option for informants between 21 and 40 years old (groups 2 and 3). Finally, the strategy related to the creation of mental maps (“*when I group them into word families...*”) is referred to as the third option for the group of informants under 20 years old and as the fourth option for group 4 (ages 41-50). Also for the latter group, as well as for group 5, the strategy “*when I relate them to lived experiences*” also appears as option number four, which belongs to the group of memorization strategies according to Oxford’s (1990) classification, but belongs to the inductive strategies for Rubin (1989, *apud* FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, 2004, p.424).

Concerning translation strategies (“*when I translate them into the MT*”) or dictionary use (“*when I look them up in the dictionary*”), these are only mentioned by informants over 41 years old. For Group 4, the translation strategy is mentioned in fourth place and the use of dictionaries appears in fifth place for Group 5.

Table 4 – Strategies most used by informants according to the variable age

| | | How do you best learn words?... | | | | |
|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|--|
| Strategies \ Ages | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 | Group 5 | |
| | < 20 years old | 21- 30 years old | 31- 40 years old | 41- 50 years old | > 51 years old | |
| <i>when I write them</i> | 1 st | 1 st | 3 rd | 2 nd | 1 st | |
| <i>when I listen to them often</i> | 1 st | 2 nd | 1 st | 1 st | 1 st | |
| <i>when I repeat them aloud</i> | 1 st | 3 rd | 6 th | 2 nd | 3 rd | |
| <i>when I use them to speak</i> | 3 rd | 1 st | 2 nd | 1 st | 1 st | |
| <i>when I see them written down</i> | 2 nd | | | 2 nd | 2 nd | |
| <i>when I ask someone what they mean</i> | 2 nd | | | 3 rd | 4 th | |
| <i>when they appear next to a drawing</i> | 2 nd | 6 th | | 2 nd | 2 nd | |
| <i>when I group them into word families...</i> | 3 rd | | | 4 th | | |
| <i>when I associate them with a picture</i> | 2 nd | 4 th | 4 th | 4 th | 4 th | |
| <i>when I associate them with other words</i> | 3 rd | 6 th | | 2 nd | 5 th | |
| <i>when I put them in a context</i> | | 5 th | 5 th | 3 rd | 3 rd | |
| <i>when I relate them to lived experiences</i> | | | | 4 th | 4 th | |
| <i>when I translate them into the MT</i> | | | | 4 th | | |
| <i>when I look them up in the dictionary</i> | | | | | 5 th | |

Source: Author's elaboration.

On the opposite side, that is, the least used or least effective strategies, taking into account the results with a percentage below 50%⁵, are the following strategies presented in descending order:

⁵ Within the strategies considered as the least effective ones, the highest value was registered in group 6 with 46%.

Group 1: *When I relate them to lived experiences/ When I solve worksheets, When I look them up in the dictionary/ When I translate them into the MT (the strategy When I touch or smell objects that represent them is not mentioned).*

Group 2: *When I solve worksheets, When I look them up in the dictionary and When I touch or smell objects that represent them.*

Group 3: *When I see them written down, When I solve worksheets/ When I group them into word families..., When I look them up in the dictionary and When I touch or smell objects that represent them.*

Group 4: *When I group them into word families..., When I look them up in the dictionary and When I solve worksheets (the strategy When I touch or smell objects that designate them is not mentioned).*

Group 5: *When I solve worksheets / When I translate them into the MT and When I touch or smell objects that represent them.*

Conclusions

As already mentioned, learning the lexicon is a gradual and continuous process that should not be limited to classroom learning alone. However, it is in this environment, the classroom, that one should analyze the strategies that students use in learning the FL and promote strategies favorable to this process.

On the one hand, the classroom questionnaire served as a reflection and awareness activity for learning the lexicon and, on the other hand, it allowed us to prove that students know and use strategies in learning a FL, and that their preferences vary according to gender and age. This data is of great relevance to teachers as it will allow them to select, present and promote strategies according to their target audience. Thus, if a teacher has a homogeneous group regarding one of the variables, he or she will be able to promote, in class, the most effective strategies according to that same variable; otherwise, if he or she has a heterogeneous group, he or she should opt for a more personalized selection.

In general terms, and according to Oxford's classification (1990), the strategies most used by Spanish-speaking PFL students are essentially cognitive practice strategies (recognizing, repeating, formal practice), followed by memorization strategies, such as contextualization, associations and groupings. These results confirm the results obtained in the 2012 study (OLIVEIRA DIAS, 2012), in which most informants considered the strategies "*When I write them*", "*When I associate them with an image*", "*When I listen to them often*" and "*when I use them when to speak*" as the most profitable ones.

Nevertheless, taking into account the variable "gender", we find that women, compared to men, consider a greater number of learning strategies as effective. Despite this general finding, data analysis reveals that both men and women coincide in the selection of the most effective strategies. Thus, the difference is not in the type of

strategy, but in its priority in the learning process, that is, while women, in order of priority, refer to writing, listening, repetition, use and context; men, in turn, refer to use, listening, writing, association, repetition and contextualization.

Among the less mentioned techniques are the use of the dictionary, solving worksheets and the strategy related to multi-sensory learning (*“When I touch or smell objects that represent it”*).

With regard to the variable “age”, in general, we see a greater variety of strategies among the first options by informants under 20 and by the ones over 41. Thus, in the first three positions of group 1, with percentages above 60%, there were ten different strategies. Group 4 presents thirteen strategies, with percentages above 50% among the first four options and in group 5, with a value equal to 62%, twelve strategies appear among the first five options. However, in the groups of informants aged between 21 and 40, we see a decrease both in the number of strategies and in their relevance to the learning process.

Strategies referred to as the most effective ones at younger ages, i.e., those that appear as the first option, are mentioned again in older groups (see Table 4 for strategies for writing, repeating aloud and associating with images).

On the other hand, we find that some strategies are maintained throughout the learning process, such as the use of words in speech contexts. Others are specific to an age group, such as their connection to lived experiences, which is in fourth place in the group aged 41 and over, the use of translation, which also appears in the same position in the group aged 41-50, or the use of the dictionary, which is in fifth place in the group aged 51 and over.

According to these results, and from the point of view of the teacher, we see that there is an implicit relation between the strategies referred to as the most effective and their most common application or use in the classroom. In general terms, it is easier for a teacher to resort to the use of writing, listening or repetition strategies than to strategies involving the use of dictionaries or the handling of real objects in the classroom.

For the transmission and learning of the different strategies, continuous work in the classroom is necessary so that the student uses them autonomously: “The transmission of strategies must therefore build a substantial part of our class programs and language textbooks.” (CERVERO; PICHARDO, 2000, p.119, our translation).⁶

In this continuous work in the classroom, it is essential that the teacher dedicates some time to reflection on the use and type of strategies, as well as on the transmission of new ones to be incorporated.

For Cervero and Pichardo (2000), there are no good or bad strategies, only more and less effective strategies, they must, above all, be relevant or productive for the student.

⁶ Original: *“La transmisión de estrategias ha de construir, por tanto, una parte sustancial de nuestros programas de clases y de los manuales de idiomas.”* (CERVERO; PICHARDO, 2000, p.119).

DIAS, S. Estratégias de aprendizagem de léxico: como estas variam segundo o sexo e a idade? *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.64, 2020.

- *RESUMO: Ao longo do processo de ensino-aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira (LE) espera-se que o aluno adquira e desenvolva as suas competências linguísticas com o fim de aprender a comunicar. Nesse processo, o léxico é um dos elementos fundamentais de aprendizagem pelo fato de ser a base do ato comunicativo, sem o qual não há comunicação. No desenvolvimento da competência lexical, os falantes recorrem, consciente ou inconscientemente, a uma série de estratégias de aprendizagem com o propósito de promover positivamente o seu conhecimento lexical. Com o objetivo de conhecer como os alunos de português como língua estrangeira, cuja língua materna é o espanhol, aprendem palavras, que estratégias usam e que fatores dificultam a sua aprendizagem, realizamos, em contexto de aula, um questionário que serviu de reflexão sobre o tema. O tratamento dos dados permitiu conhecer as estratégias mais usadas pelos alunos de três Escolas Oficiais de Idiomas e comprovar as diferenças existentes entre homens e mulheres relativamente às estratégias usadas na aprendizagem do léxico e se essa seleção sofre variações significativas segundo a idade dos informantes.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Português Língua Estrangeira. Estratégias de aprendizagem. Léxico.*

REFERENCES

AINCIBURU, C. **La adquisición del léxico en las lenguas afines:** el aprendizaje de cognados, falsos amigos y palabras nuevas por alumnos italianos de Español como lengua extranjera. Madrid: Universidad Nebrija, 2007.

ALMEIDA FILHO, J. C. Uma metodologia específica para o ensino de línguas próximas? *In: ALMEIDA FILHO, J. C. (org.). Português para estrangeiros interface com o Espanhol.* Campinas: Pontes, 1995. p.13-21.

CERVERO, M. J.; PICHARDO CASTRO, F. **Aprender y enseñar vocabulario:** programación de autoformación y perfeccionamiento del profesorado. Madrid: Edelsa, 2000.

CLARK, E. **The lexicon in acquisition.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, S. Las estrategias de aprendizaje. *In: SÁNCHEZ LOBATO, J.; SANTOS, I. (dir.). Vademécum para la formación de profesores: enseñar Español como Segunda Lengua (L2)/ Lengua extranjera (LE).* Madrid: SGEL, 2004. p.411-433.

GAIRNS, R.; REDMAN, S. **Working with words:** a guide to teaching and learning vocabulary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

MEARA, P. The classical research in L2 vocabulary acquisition. *In: ANDERMAN, G.; ROGERS, M. (ed.). Words, words, words: the translator and the language learner.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1996. p.27-40.

- MORANTE VALLEJO, R. **El desarrollo del conocimiento léxico en segundas lenguas**. Madrid: Cuadernos de Didáctica de Español/LE; Arco/Libros, 2005.
- MORENO DE MUSSINI, E. **Conhecimento metacognitivo das estratégias de aprendizagem do Espanhol como Segunda Língua**. 2002. 161f. Dissertation (Master in Letters) – Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba. 2002.
- NATION, P. **Learning vocabulary in a another language**. Cambridge: CUP, 2001.
- OLIVEIRA DIAS, S. Aprendizagem de léxico: estratégias usadas pelos alunos de PLEFE. **Estudios Portugueses y Brasileños**, Salamanca, n.12, p.139-160, 2012.
- OXFORD, R. L. **Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know**. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1990.
- O'MALLEY, M.; CHAMOT, A. **Learning strategies in language acquisition**. Londres: CUP, 1990.
- RUBIN, J. Study of cognitive processes in second language learning. **Applied Linguistics**, Oxford, v.11, n.2, p.117-131, 1981.
- RUBIN, J. What the good language learner can teach us. **Tesol Quartely**, Malden, v.9, n.1, p.41-51, 1975.
- SUAU JIMÉNEZ, F. **La interferência léxica como estratégia cognitiva: aplicação al discurso escrito en lengua inglesa**. València: Facultad de Filología, Universitat de València, 2000. (Cuadernos de Filología Anejo, 37).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALVAR EZQUERRA, M. **La enseñanza del léxico y el uso del diccionario**. Madrid: Cuadernos de Didáctica del Español/LE; Arco/Libros, 2003.
- BARALO, M. Adquisición de palabras: redes semánticas y léxicas. *In*: FORO DE ESPAÑOL INTERNACIONAL: APRENDER Y ENSEÑAR LÉXICO, 2007. **Anais [...]**. Madrid: Universidad Antonio Nebrija, la editorial SGEL y el Instituto Cervantes, 2007. p.39- 61.
- CARRASCO GONZÁLEZ, M. **Manual de iniciación a la lengua portuguesa**. Barcelona: Ariel Lenguas Modernas, 2003.
- GÓMEZ MOLINA, J. R. El léxico y su didáctica: una propuesta metodológica. **REALE**, Madrid, n.7, p.66-93, 1997.
- GÓMEZ MOLINA, J. R. La subcompetencia léxico-semántica. *In*: SÁNCHEZ LOBATO, J.; SANTOS, I. (dir.). **Vademécum para la formación de profesores: enseñar español como segunda lengua (L2)/ lengua extranjera (LE)**. Madrid: SGEL, 2004. p.491-510.

HENRIQUES, E. R. Intercompreensão de texto escrito por falantes nativos de português e de espanhol. **Delta**, São Paulo, v.16, n.2, p.263-295, 2000.

MEARA, P. Vocabulary acquisition: a neglected aspect of language learning. **Language teaching and Linguistics Abstract**, London, v.13, n.4, p.221- 246, 1980. Available in: <http://www.lognostics.co.uk/vlibrary/meara1980.pdf>. Access on: 3 maio 2018.

MOIR, J.; NATION, P. Learners' use of strategies for effective vocabulary learning. **Prospect**, [s.l.], n.17 (1), p.15-35, 2002.

NATION, P. Teaching Vocabulary. **Asian EFL Journal**, [s.l.], 2005. Available in: http://docenti.unior.it/doc_db/doc_omp_05-12-2013_52a0ad91366e4.pdf. Access on: 3 maio 2018.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE: HOW DO YOU BEST LEARN WORDS?

Informant Profile

| |
|--|
| Degree: _____ |
| Age: _____ |
| Birthplace: _____ |
| Gender: M F |
| How long have you been studying Portuguese?: |

1. Do you think that in the study of the lexicon (vocabulary) there are factors that hinder its learning?

1.1. List them.

- 1-
- 2-
- 3-
- 4-
- 5-

1.2. What do you do to memorize the new words of a foreign language?

2. How do you best learn words? (Results according to gender)

| <i>Strategies</i> | Very Well | | Well | | Reasonable | | Bad | | I do not know | |
|---|-----------|-------|-------|-------|------------|--------|------|------|---------------|----|
| | M | W | M | W | M | W | M | W | M | W |
| When I write them | 51,4% | 51,2% | 37,1% | 44,2% | 11,4% | 4,7% | | | | |
| When I listen to them often | 48,6% | 48,8% | 48,6% | 41,9% | 2,9% | 9,3% | | | | |
| When I repeat them aloud | 25,7% | 30,2% | 51,4% | 58,1% | 17,1% | 9,3% | 5,7% | | | |
| When I see them written down | 20% | 18,6% | 31,4% | 55,8% | 42,9% | 23,35% | | 4,7% | | |
| When I group them into word families, semantic fields, according to the category they belong to, etc. | 14,3% | 9,3% | 34,3% | 41,9% | 34,3% | 32,6% | | 4,7% | 14,3% | 7% |

| <i>Strategies</i> | Very Well | | Well | | Reasonable | | Bad | | I do not know | |
|---|-----------|-------|-------|--------|------------|-------|-------|------|---------------|-------|
| | M | W | M | W | M | W | M | W | M | W |
| When I put them in a context | 31,4% | 30,2% | 45,7% | 51,2% | 22,9% | 18,6% | | | | |
| When I ask someone what they mean | 22,9% | 9,3% | 37,1% | 51,2% | 28,6% | 34,9% | 8,6% | 2,3% | 2,9% | |
| When I use them to speak | 54,3% | 60,5% | 45,7% | 25,65% | | 11,6% | | | | 2,3% |
| When I associate them with a picture | 45,7% | 41,9% | 40% | 32,6% | 11,4% | 23,3% | | | | 2,3% |
| When I look them up in the dictionary | 17,1% | 11,6% | 22,9% | 23,35% | 51,4% | 60,5% | 8,6% | 2,3% | | 2,3% |
| When I translate them into the MT | 8,6% | 9,3% | 25,7% | 48,8% | 57,1% | 32,6% | 2,9% | 7% | 2,9% | |
| When I associate them with other words | 8,6% | 11,6% | 60% | 60,5% | 28,6% | 23,3% | | 2,3% | | 2,3% |
| When I relate them to lived experiences | 20% | 39,5% | 42,9% | 18,6% | 31,4% | 32,6% | 2,9% | 2,3% | 2,9% | |
| When I solve worksheets | | 4,7% | 28,6% | 23,3% | 40% | 46,5% | 8,6% | 7% | 17,1% | 11,6% |
| When I touch or smell objects that represent them | 2,9% | 11,6% | 11,4% | 9,3% | 31,4% | 30,2% | 11,4% | 9,3% | 34,3% | 32,6% |
| When they are presented with a drawing, graph, etc. | 28,6% | 34,9% | 42,9% | 46,5% | 22,9% | 16,3% | 2,9% | | | |

Legend: M= Men; W= Women

3. How do you best learn words? (Results according to the variable age)

| | < 20 years old | 21-30 years old | 31-40 years old | 41-50 years old | > 51 years old |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| When I write them | 100% | 97% | 85% | 83% | 92% |
| When I listen to them often | 100% | 93% | 100% | 100% | 92% |
| When I repeat them aloud | 100% | 90% | 70% | 83% | 77% |
| When I see them written down | 80% | 60% | 45% | 83% | 85% |
| When I group them into word families, semantic fields, according to the category they belong to, etc. | 60% | 60% | 35% | 50% | 46% |
| When I put them in a context | 80% | 83% | 75% | 67% | 77% |

| | < 20 years old | 21-30 years old | 31-40 years old | 41-50 years old | > 51 years old |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| When I ask someone what they mean | 80% | 53% | 55% | 67% | 69% |
| When I use them to speak | 60% | 97% | 95% | 100% | 92% |
| When I associate them with a picture | 80% | 87% | 80% | 50% | 69% |
| When I look them up in the dictionary | 20% | 30% | 30% | 33% | 62% |
| When I translate them into the MT | 20% | 53% | 55% | 50% | 31% |
| When I associate them with other words | 60% | 80% | 60% | 83% | 62% |
| When I relate them to lived experiences | 40% | 60% | 60% | 50% | 69% |
| When I solve worksheets | 40% | 37% | 35% | 17% | 31% |
| When I touch or smell objects that represent them | 0 | 23% | 15% | 0 | 15% |
| When they are presented with a drawing, graph, etc. | 80% | 80% | 65% | 83% | 77% |

4. You need to learn food-related vocabulary: You think it will be easier for you...

| Situation | Yes | | No | | Sometimes | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | M | W | M | W | M | W |
| If you buy them, read or hear their name in a store? | 76,5% | 62,8% | 5,9% | 7% | 17,9% | 30,2% |
| If you read or hear their name in class? | 59% | 62,8% | 2,9% | 11,6% | 38,2% | 25,6% |
| If you can also touch them, smell them and taste them? | 40% | 36,6% | 34,3% | 39% | 25,7% | 24,4% |
| If you write them down? | 51,4% | 73,2% | 17,1% | 2,4% | 31,1% | 24,4% |
| If you repeat their name out loud? | 51,4% | 71,4% | 14,3% | | 34,3% | 28,6% |
| If they are foods you already know in your native language? | 62,5% | 69% | 12,5% | 7,1% | 2,5% | 23,8% |
| If you relate them to a situation or a person? | 38,2% | 40,5% | 26,5% | 26,2% | 35,3% | 28,6% |

Received September 8, 2018

Approved on June 3, 2019