

A Preliminary Study on Freshmen's English Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This study investigates Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) from 167 freshmen at Chung Shan Medical University and makes an attempt to find the relationship between the frequency of using 21 VLSs and the group of participants with higher level of English proficiency. This study indicates that participants in the group with higher English proficiency employ a greater number of strategies than those who are less successful in language proficiency. In addition, the proficiency in English learning is directly related to the frequency of the use of VLSs such as repeating words orally or connecting words with their synonym or antonym. Based on the results of this study, language instructors can relate the consolidation of their students' English vocabulary to the number and variety of VLSs being taught.

Key Words: Vocabulary learning strategies, Taiwanese university students, English learning

Introduction

Language learning strategies (LLSs) have been widely researched not only because language instructors can take them as references for their teaching but also learners can enjoy the language achievements brought by the effective use of LLSs. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on LLSs in recent decades (Chamot, 1989; Cohen, 1998; Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005; Oxford, 1990; Wharton, 2000). Some of the studies suggest that a positive relationship exists between the number or frequency of LLSs and successful second language learners (Bruen, 2001; Griffiths, 2003; Wharton, 2000). Therefore, this preliminary study makes an attempt to find the relationship between the LLSs, especially in vocabulary, and more advanced English learners to see whether there is a positive association in the use of their vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). The VLSs are emphasized in this study. L2 vocabulary is the essential part of language learning because it directly influences the performance of speaking, writing, reading and listening comprehension in the target language.

There is a growing body of research in VLSs (Barcroft & Sommers, 2005; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997; Takač, 2008); however, definite conclusions about VLSs have not been drawn partly because of lacking a satisfactory typology of VLSs (Takač, 2008, p. 59). For the lacking of a comprehensive classification compared to general LLSs created by Oxford (1990), this study mainly adopts Schmitt's VLSs (1997, pp. 207-208) which is based on Oxford's taxonomy (1990) to construct the VLSs in the questionnaire. Four out of five Schmitt's VLS groups are taken as references to interpret the data; they are memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social strategies. The determination strategy is not adopted for the fact that it is primarily for discovering new words. The focus of this study is finding VLSs for consolidating vocabulary after learning new words. The criteria for each group generally follow Oxford's system listed below. However, as Oxford (1990, p. 17) and Takač (2008, p. 68) point out, some strategies are inevitably classified into more than one category depending on its purpose and/or situation.

By investigating the VLSs, this study hopes to find what VLSs are frequently used by advanced English learners to consolidate vocabulary after learning new words, and further providing information to language teachers and students to ease the English learning difficulties resulting from learning additional vocabulary.

Table 1: Classification of memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive and social strategies

1. Memory strategies:	creating mental linkage, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, employing action
2. Cognitive strategies:	practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning
3. Meta-cognitive strategies:	centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning
4. Social strategies:	asking questions, cooperating with others, empathizing with others

Note. The content of Table 1 partially adopts the content of Oxford's strategy system (1990, p. 17)

Study Questions

1. What is the frequency of strategies for consolidating words?
2. Are there any differences in VLSs used by English learners who have achieved higher levels of proficiency compared to lower level achievers?

Method

Participants

This study investigates 167 freshmen in Chung Shan Medical University in the middle of the 2009 fall semester. Thirty-eight are male; 129 are female. Subjects' majors are Speech Language Pathology and Audiology, Physical Therapy, Nursing, or Medical Sociology and Social Work (Table 2). There are 42.6% of the subjects in this study who passed the first stage of General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) at the level of intermediate or above at the time of the survey (Table 3). For those who were successful in the GEPT, two of them passed in 2006 and the remainder passed GEPT within the previous two years. This group of subjects is considered at a high level of English proficiency (hereafter called group A). The subjects who did not pass or participate in any level of GEPT are classified into group B.

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Table 2: The number of students in this study

Department	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Nursing	0	26	26
Physical Therapy	20	26	46
Medical Sociology and Social Work	8	43	51
Speech Language Pathology and Audiology	10	34	44
Total	38	129	167

Table 3: The number of students who passed GEPT in this study

Level	Tests	Frequency	Percentage
Group A	GEPT: 1 st stage of Intermediate	31	18.6
	GEPT: 2 nd stage of Intermediate	35	21.0
	GEPT: 1 st stage of high-intermediate	3	1.8
	GEPT: 2 nd stage of high-intermediate	2	1.2
Group B	Not passing or not participating at any level of GEPT or any language tests	96	57.4
Total		167	100

Materials

The questionnaire comprises two parts. The first part is about the subjects' demographical information. The second part of the questionnaire was used to investigate the frequency of English vocabulary strategies used by the participants. This study takes Schmitt's VLSs and taxonomy of VLSs (1997, pp. 207-208) as references to construct the second part of the questionnaire. For the VLSs, some of Schmitt's strategies are directly translated into Chinese and some of them are modified and then translated into Chinese as being more suitable for the subjects' background in the questionnaire (Appendix). Some of the strategies listed are from the authors' observation. L2 learners in Taiwan would engage English activities to enhance their English ability. Activities such as watching English movies, listening to English learning programs, or practicing English in an English club are ways for L2 learners to familiarize themselves with the English vocabulary previously learned. Thus, "watching English movies," "using English media to practice their English," and "organizing or participating in an English study group" are also listed as strategies to learn

English vocabulary in the questionnaire. There are total of 21 VLSs in the second part of the questionnaire. The Schmitt's classification of VLSs is not the only source for interpreting data because of the fact that one strategy might be classified into more than one category (Oxford, 1990, p. 17; Takač, 2008, p. 68). Subjects' responses to each of these 21 items on the same five-point Likert scale range from 1 "never" to 5 "always." The internal consistency reliability of these 21 questions was measured using Cronbach's value at 0.81.

Data Collection Procedure

Subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire in their Freshman English class. Before they filled out the questionnaire, this researcher had explained the aim of this study, which is to know the frequency of VLSs that they used to consolidate the English vocabulary they learned. It took about 5 to 10 minutes for them to fill out the questionnaire.

Statistical Results

Research Question 1

The Frequency Distribution of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The mean scores are calculated for each VLS for the two groups of subjects. Mean scores and standard deviations are shown in Table 4. Both groups obtained a mean score over four in the strategy of "repeating words orally." For the subjects who were in group A, the strategies that have mean scores between three and four are detailed in Table 4. The mean scores of the remainder strategies are all below three.

The strategies employed by those in group B had mean scores between three and four namely: 1, 6, 8, 17 and 20 as mentioned in Table 4.

Research Question 2

Differences in VLSs between Group A and Group B

An independent-samples t-test was used to determine whether there were differences in

the frequency of VLSs between the two groups of subjects. The results of the independent-samples t-test show that there are significant differences in strategies 4, 5, 7, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 ($p < .05$) listed in Table 5. Subjects in group A have significantly higher mean scores than the other group in these strategies.

Table 5: Differences in the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies between group A and group B

No.	Strategies	M		t-test	Sig. (2-tailed)
		GroupA	GroupB		
4.	Connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms	3.070	2.583	-3.084	.002
5.	Using English media to practice their English, e.g. listening to English learning programs or English news on the radio	3.056	2.583	-3.097	.002
7.	Repeating words orally	4.394	4.010	-2.645	.009
14.	Finding opportunity to talk to foreigners	2.394	1.906	-3.280	.001
15.	Reading English magazines or newspapers	2.746	2.396	-2.714	.007
16.	Grouping English words to study them	2.789	2.385	-2.519	.013
17.	Watching English movies	3.479	3.073	-2.632	.009
18.	Organizing or participating in an English study group	1.803	1.542	-2.015	.045

Discussion

Strategies involved with mechanical memorization, "repeating words orally," and "committing words to memory by repetitive writing," are the first two most frequently used VLSs by the two groups of subjects. Nevertheless, group A significantly uses this strategy more frequently than the other group. Gu and Johnson (1996) stated that mechanical memorization is not as popular as expected among English learners of Chinese; however, strategies of mechanical memorization for English vocabulary learning are "generally" used among subjects in this study, according to Apeh (1981) and O'Malley *et al.* (1985).

Besides the two VLSs mentioned in the previous paragraph, both groups of subjects have similar frequencies of using an additional four VLSs for keeping familiar with English vocabulary (Table 4). These four strategies are 1) "connecting words with their collocation," 2) "reading aloud English words," 3) "watching English movies" and 4) "self-help textbook exercises." The frequency of using these strategies is between "sometimes" and "generally."

In addition to the six VLSs mentioned in the previous two paragraphs, group A has

another five VLSs whose frequency is between "sometimes" and "generally," which shows that they use more VLSs while they consolidate English vocabulary compared with group B. This result is in accordance with the studies which suggest that successful language learners use more LLSs or a higher frequency of LLSs compared with less successful language learners (Bruen, 2001; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kim, 2001; Wharton, 2000). These five strategies are 1) "relating words to his/her personal experience," 2) "connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms," 3) "linking English words with the sounds or semantic meaning of their mother tongue," 4) "using English media to practice their English, e.g. listening to English learning programs or English news on the radio" and 5) "having mental pictures of the meaning of the word."

The results of the independent-samples t-test show that group A has a significantly higher frequency of using some VLSs than the other group (Table 5). They are strategies 4, 5, 7, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 ($p < .05$).

The frequency of interacting with foreigners (strategy 14) is low for both groups; however, the frequency of interacting with friends for practicing English (strategy 18) is even lower. Although these two groups differ significantly in strategy 18, these two groups of subjects have the mean score below two, which indicate that they never or rarely use this strategy. Overall, compared with the strategies that are not involved with others, they tend to have a higher frequency than strategies involved with interacting with others (Tables 4 and 5).

Limitations of This Study

This study also looks at whether male and female L2 learners employ different VLSs. There are 38 male and 129 female participants in this study (Table 2). However, the statistical results suggest that there are no significant differences found between genders in terms of all VLSs except for Strategy 12, "Making vocabulary cards."¹ The unequal number of L2 learners in different gender groups may influence the statistical results. Future study will look for the equal number of L2 learners in gender groups and investigate the role of gender on VLSs.

¹ The results of the independent-samples t-test show that there was a significant difference in Strategy 12 between male ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.97$) and female ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.14$); $t(165) = -2.590$, $p = 0.010$.

Table 4: Frequency distribution of vocabulary learning strategies

No.	Group A	M	SD	No.	Group B	M	SD
7	Repeating words orally	4.394	0.870	7	Repeating words orally	4.010	0.968
1.	Committing words to memory by repetitive writing	3.577	1.091	1	Committing words to memory by repetitive writing	3.719	1.121
8	Connecting words by their collocation	3.549	0.997	8	Connecting words by their collocation	3.323	1.051
17	Watching English movies	3.479	0.998	20	Reading aloud English words	3.188	1.145
20	Reading aloud English words	3.408	1.129	6	Self-help textbook exercises	3.156	1.127
6	Self-help textbook exercises	3.239	1.007	17	Watching English movies	3.073	0.976
2	Relating words to his/her personal experience	3.113	0.949	2	Relating words to his/her personal experience	2.917	0.981
4	Connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms	3.070	1.033	11	Having mental pictures of the meaning of the word	2.896	1.051
9	Linking English words with the sounds or semantic meaning of their mother tongue	3.056	1.132	9	Linking English words with the sounds or semantic meaning of their mother tongue	2.885	1.085
5	Using English media to practice their English, e.g. listening to English learning programs or English news on the radio	3.056	0.969	3	Making word lists	2.656	1.122
11	Having mental pictures of the meaning of the word	3.014	1.089	4	Connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms	2.583	0.991
21	Making a notebook for English words	2.930	1.150	5	Using English media to practice their English, e.g. listening to English learning programs or English news on the radio	2.583	0.981
16	Grouping English words to study them	2.789	1.107	21	Making a notebook for English words	2.583	1.139
3	Making word lists	2.789	0.955	13	Reviewing words regularly outside the classroom	2.552	0.961
15	Reading English magazines or newspapers	2.746	0.806	12	Making vocabulary cards	2.521	1.105
13	Reviewing words regularly outside the classroom	2.563	0.937	15	Reading English magazines or newspapers	2.396	0.840
12	Making vocabulary cards	2.437	1.143	16	Grouping English words to study them	2.385	0.956
14	Finding opportunity to talk to foreigners	2.394	1.089	19	Listening to CDs/tapes for the pronunciation of English words	2.292	1.065
19	Listening to CDs/tapes for the pronunciation of English words	2.169	1.000	10	Having their own physical movements when studying	2.271	1.110
10	Having their own physical movements when studying	2.169	0.910	14	Finding opportunity to talk to foreigners	1.906	0.834
18	Organizing or participating in an English study group	1.803	0.856	18	Organizing or participating in an English study group	1.542	0.807

Note. SD = standard deviation

In addition to gender effect, this study also examines whether L2 learners from different departments use the same VLS with different frequency. Although L2 learners from four different departments differ significantly in the frequency of using the same VLS, only L2 learners from Speech Language Pathology and Audiology differs from L2 learners of the other three departments in Strategy 4, "Connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms," ($p < .05$)² and differs from L2 learners from Nursing in Strategy 1, "Committing words to memory by repetitive writing" ($p < .05$)³. Only four departments were included in this preliminary study. More L2 learners from different departments may be included for thorough investigation of whether L2 learners' majors play a role on VLSs.

Conclusion

There are three findings in this study. First of all, the most frequently used six strategies are the same in both groups (Table 4). Secondly, it is clear from the above discussion that group A employed a greater number of strategies to consolidate their English vocabulary than group B (Table 4). Finally, group A has a significantly higher frequency of usage in eight out of twenty-one VLSs than the other group (Table 5). Based on these results, the implication of this study is that language teachers may adopt more strategies to help students learn vocabulary such as connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms, or grouping words with the same semantic meaning. Of the other strategies, language learners may adopt strategies which are helpful to them as language learning habits. Some VLSs are used infrequently, which does not mean they are not effective learning aids. There are insufficient opportunities for Taiwanese to converse with foreigners. In this case, language learners are encouraged to participate in English Corner held by the university or join in the English club.

² One-way ANOVA was used to examine whether L2 learners from four different departments have different frequency of using the same strategy. Mean values for each strategy were compared in post-hoc pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni's adjustment for multiple comparisons. The results indicated that L2 learners from four different departments use Strategy 4 with different frequency, $F(3, 163) = 7.05, p < .05$.

³ The results indicated that L2 learners from four different departments use Strategy 1 with different frequency, $F(3, 163) = 3.59, p < .05$.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

A: Demographic Information

1. Gender Male Female
2. Age _____
3. Which department are you in? _____
4. Please check the following English proficiency test that you have passed and write the date that you passed. If you have not passed any English proficiency test, please check the last item in Question 4.

<input type="checkbox"/> GEPT: 1 st stage of Intermediate	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> GEPT: 2 nd stage of Intermediate	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> GEPT: 1 st stage of high-intermediate	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> GEPT: 2 nd stage of high-intermediate	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Others (please specify _____)	Date: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Not passing or not participating at any level of GEPT or any language tests	

B: Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Please circle the number to indicate the frequency of using that strategy.

No.	Questions	never	seldom	sometimes	generally
1.	Committing words to memory by repetitive writing	1	2	3	4
2	Relating words to his/her personal experience	1	2	3	4
3	Making word lists	1	2	3	4
4	Connecting words with their synonyms or antonyms	1	2	3	4
5	Using English media to practice their English, e.g. listening to English learning programs or English news on the radio	1	2	3	4
6	Self-help textbook exercises	1	2	3	4
7	Repeating words orally	1	2	3	4
8	Connecting words by their collocation	1	2	3	4
9	Linking English words with the sounds or semantic meaning of their mother tongue	1	2	3	4
10	Having their own physical movements when studying	1	2	3	4
11	Having mental pictures of the meaning of the word	1	2	3	4
12	Making vocabulary cards	1	2	3	4
13	Reviewing words regularly outside the classroom	1	2	3	4
14	Finding opportunity to talk to foreigners	1	2	3	4
15	Reading English magazines or newspapers	1	2	3	4
16	Grouping English words to study them	1	2	3	4
17	Watching English movies	1	2	3	4
18	Organizing or participating in an English study group	1	2	3	4
19	Listening to CDs/tapes for the pronunciation of English words	1	2	3	4
20	Reading aloud English words	1	2	3	4
21	Making a notebook for English words	1	2	3	4

C. Please advise any other vocabulary learning strategies that you have used.

Taiwanese University Students' Attitudes toward Freshman English and English Learning

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Abstract

This survey investigates the views and the attitudes of Taiwanese university students towards English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning in general, and their Freshman English (FE) course in particular. 163 Non-English majors Taiwanese university students at a Taiwanese university participated in the study. The data collection method employed in the study is questionnaire survey. The questionnaire covers three kinds of information, each in a different section: the participants' personal background; their English learning information; and their opinions and attitudes towards Freshman English. It contains 19 questions of these three types: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank completion, and open-ended brief comment. Several major findings on the participants' overall attitudes towards Freshman English are discussed. Implications for teaching FE are also discussed.

Key Words: Taiwanese university students, Attitudes, Motivations, EFL, ESL, EAP, ESP, Freshman English, FE, English learning, Survey, Questionnaire.