

AN INVESTIGATION INTO VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT THE SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 10/11/2023</p> <p>Revised: 18/01/2024</p> <p>Published: 18/01/2024</p> <p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Investigation</p> <p>Learning strategies</p> <p>Vocabulary learning strategies</p> <p>Vocabulary learning</p> <p>Vocabulary learning strategy use</p>	<p>The research attempts to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by English major students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The data collection instrument is a questionnaire developed from the model of Schmitt (1997). The study was conducted with the participation of 150 first-year and second-year English major students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The results of the study indicate that all the vocabulary learning strategies listed in the questionnaire were used by the participants. However, the participants used vocabulary learning strategies at the “medium used” level. In conclusion, it is suggested that teachers should make learners aware of their responsibility in vocabulary learning and expose them to different approaches to enhance vocabulary acquisition. Teachers should also create the environment and give students opportunities to practice vocabulary learning strategies.</p>

KHẢO SÁT CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC TỪ VỰNG CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG NGOẠI NGỮ - ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
<p>Ngày nhận bài: 10/11/2023</p> <p>Ngày hoàn thiện: 18/01/2024</p> <p>Ngày đăng: 18/01/2024</p> <p>TỪ KHÓA</p> <p>Khảo sát</p> <p>Chiến lược học tập</p> <p>Chiến lược học từ vựng</p> <p>Học từ vựng</p> <p>Sử dụng chiến lược học từ vựng</p>	<p>Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu chiến lược học từ vựng của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Thái Nguyên. Công cụ thu thập dữ liệu là bảng câu hỏi được phát triển từ mô hình của Schmitt. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện với sự tham gia của 150 sinh viên chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất và năm thứ hai tại Trường Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Thái Nguyên. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng các sinh viên tham gia nghiên cứu sử dụng tất cả các chiến lược học từ vựng trong bảng câu hỏi. Tuy nhiên, các chiến lược học từ vựng được sử dụng ở mức độ “trung bình”. Tóm lại, giáo viên nên giúp người học nhận thức được trách nhiệm của mình trong việc học từ vựng và đưa ra những cách tiếp cận khác nhau để tăng cường khả năng tiếp thu từ vựng. Giáo viên cũng nên tạo môi trường học từ vựng và tạo cơ hội để người học thực hành các chiến lược học từ vựng.</p>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.9177>

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. The importance of vocabulary has been proved by many researchers. Wilkin [1, p.111] stressed the importance of vocabulary by stating that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. The statement shows that without lexis, someone’s attempt to communicate will surely fail. However, the message could still be understood if he or she uses suitable vocabulary in spite of grammatical mistakes. Nation [2] emphasized the importance of vocabulary in developing general language competence as well as four learning skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, learning vocabulary is really challenging for many language learners. The major reason for this may be due to a lack of knowledge about vocabulary learning strategies which are very important in learning a language in general and in learning vocabulary in particular. In Oxford’s [3] viewpoint, employing appropriate language strategies is of great help in the improvement of language proficiency and self-confidence.

Since vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are crucially important, there has been different research on this field over the last three decades. Gu and Johnson [4] investigated the VLSs used by Chinese university learners of English. The descriptive statistic indicated that students use a wide range of VLSs and they tend to combine the strategies rather than using single ones. Khatib and Hassanzavdeh’s [5] study examined the VLSs employed by Iranian upper-intermediate EFL students. The results revealed that the three most popular strategies were authentic language use, self-motivation, and word organization. The research by Nguyen, Tran, and Nguyen [6] studied the strengths and weaknesses in the VLSs of first-year English major students at Lac Hong University. According to the study results, there were a variety of strategies used by the students to learn vocabulary, the strategies that are most often used by students as well as those that are not used to their full potential. Thiendathong and Sukying [7] investigated the VLSs used by Thai high school students. The results showed that the most frequently used strategies were determination strategies while the least frequent ones were memory strategies.

In Vietnam, studies conducted on vocabulary learning strategies employed by students appear to be limited, especially by the students at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL), Thai Nguyen University (TNU). In reality, the lack of vocabulary is a very common trouble for the SFL students at TNU, which may be one of the main reasons for their failure in speaking, listening, reading or writing tests. Many students, especially the first-year ones, complain that they find it really difficult to memorize new words or identify the meaning of unknown words in context. One of the main reasons could be that they do not know VLSs. Therefore, they may not apply any strategies when learning vocabulary.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, the present study is conducted to explore the VLSs employed by the English language major students at SFL, TNU. In addition, from the results of the study, the researcher would like to give suggestions and pedagogical implications to English learners in general and English major students in particular. The study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What vocabulary learning strategies are used by the first-year and the second-year English major students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University?
2. How frequently are these vocabulary learning strategies used by the first-year and the second-year English major students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University?

2. Methods

2.1. The participants of the study

The participants of the research were 150 English major students at SFL, TNU. Of the total participants, seventy-five are the first-year students and the rest are the second-year ones. Most of them were from 18 to 20 years old and have learned English for 8 to 12 years. They had never been given any training in vocabulary learning.

2.2. Data collection instruments

The data collection instrument of the study was a questionnaire. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit the VLSs used by the participants. The questionnaire is written in English and consists of two parts. The first part called personal data includes name, age, class, and experience in learning English. The second part includes 50 VLSs based on the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by Schmitt [8]. A five-point Likert scale to rate the participants' response was applied to define the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies used by the subjects: 5 – “always”, 4 – “often”, 3 – “sometimes”, 2 – “rarely”, 1 – “never”.

2.3. Data collection procedures

The questionnaire was distributed to the students by the researcher. To make sure that the students answered the questionnaire by themselves, they were asked to complete the questionnaire in the classroom after an English lesson. To avoid misunderstanding, the researcher explained and gave very clear instructions as well as the purpose of the questionnaire. In addition, the researcher was with the students during the time they filled out the questionnaire to give necessary help.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Overall strategies use

Table 1 describes the holistic mean frequency score across the vocabulary strategy questionnaire administered to 150 English major students at SFL, TNU.

Table 1. *Frequency of students' reported overall strategy use*

Students' strategy use	Number of students	Mean frequency score
Overall strategy use	150	2.99

It can be seen from table 1 that the mean score of 150 participants' strategy use is 2.99. This means that 150 English major students use vocabulary learning strategies at “sometimes used” level.

Table 2. *Frequency of use of vocabulary learning strategy category*

Strategy category	Number of students	Mean frequency score
Cognitive (COG)	150	3.39
Metacognitive (MET)	150	3.19
Determination (DET)	150	2.95
Memory (MEM)	150	2.95
Social (SOC)	150	2.59

Table 2 reveals that 150 first year and second year English major students at SFL – TNU used strategy category at “sometimes used” level. Two categories received a mean over 3, none was often and always used. As can be seen from Table 2, COG strategies got the highest use average ($M = 3.39$), followed by MET strategies ($M = 3.19$), then DET and MEM strategies ($M = 2.95$). SOC strategies was used least ($M = 2.59$). It was revealed from the result that the participants did not prefer learning vocabulary through activities involving other people.

3.1.2. Frequency of use of individual vocabulary learning strategies

On average, 23 out of 50 strategies were employed sometimes to often (mean over 3), 24 rarely to sometimes and 3 rarely (mean over 2) to never or rarely (mean over 1). MET1 – “use English language media” ($M = 3.95$) was most frequently used (see table 7) closely followed by COG5 – “take notes in class” ($M = 3.92$). Other popularly used were COG2 – “written repetition” ($M = 3.89$) and COG1 – “verbal repetition” ($M = 3.87$) (see table 6). Three least frequently used strategies were MEM 13 – “underline initial letter of the words” ($M = 1.86$), MEM8 – “group words together within a story line” ($M = 1.89$), and MEM5 – “use semantic maps” ($M = 1.95$) (see table 5).

As shown in Table 3, most of the determination strategies were used at “sometimes” and “rarely” level. The most frequently used strategy was DET6 – “using bilingual dictionary” (M = 3.77), followed by DET5 – “guess from context” (M = 3.48), DET 1 – “Analyze part of speech” (M = 3.11) and DET8 – “Word lists” (M = 3.06). The least frequently used strategy was DET3 – “check for L1 cognate” (M = 2.16).

Table 3. *DET category descriptive statistics*

Individual strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
DET6	150	3.77	1.130
DET5	150	3.48	0.857
DET1	150	3.11	0.913
DET8	150	3.06	0.884
DET4	150	3.04	0.989
DET7	150	2.99	1.129
DET2	150	2.65	0.963
DET9	150	2.37	1.102
DET3	150	2.16	1.050

Table 4. *SOC category descriptive statistics*

Individual strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
SOC4	150	3.36	0.971
SOC1	150	2.91	0.979
SOC2	150	2.68	0.929
SOC5	150	2.57	1.071
SOC6	150	2.53	0.895
SOC3	150	2.33	1.008
SOC7	150	2.33	1.026
SOC8	150	2.03	0.908

As can be seen from Table 4, most of social strategies were sometimes used by the students, none was used often. The students preferred “ask class mate to find out meaning of unknown words” – SOC4 (M = 3.36) to “ask teacher for L1 translation” – SOC1 (M = 2.91) and “ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word” – SOC2 (M = 2.68). They rarely consolidated meaning of words by “interacting with native speakers” – SOC8 (M = 2.03) and “asking teachers to check students’ flash cards or word lists accuracy” – SOC7 (M = 2.33).

Table 5. *MEM category descriptive statistics*

Individual strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
MEM10	150	3.78	1.022
MEM11	150	3.77	0.998
MEM9	150	3.65	1.087
MEM18	150	3.59	0.991
MEM4	150	3.41	1.897
MEM7	150	3.31	0.948
MEM16	150	3.27	1.008
MEM1	150	3.24	0.988
MEM12	150	3.15	0.841
MEM3	150	2.95	0.922
MEM17	150	2.95	0.933
MEM6	150	2.95	1.048
MEM19	150	2.80	1.049
MEM20	150	2.76	1.072
MEM15	150	2.68	0.965
MEM14	150	2.63	1.127
MEM2	150	2.43	1.077

Individual strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
MEM5	150	1.95	0.968
MEM8	150	1.89	1.000
MEM13	150	1.86	0.905

Table 5 describes the use of memory strategies in learning vocabulary by 150 students. The most frequently used strategy was “study the sound of a word” – MEM10 ($M = 3.78$) closely followed by “say new word aloud when studying” – MEM11 ($M = 3.77$), “study the spelling of a word” – MEM9 ($M = 3.65$), “use cognates in study” – MEM18 ($M = 3.59$) and “connect words to its synonyms and antonyms” – MEM4 ($M = 3.41$). The least frequently used strategy was “underline initial letter of the word” – MEM13 ($M = 1.86$) followed by “groups words together within a storyline” – MEM8 ($M = 1.89$) and “use semantic map” – MEM5 ($M = 1.95$). The mean scores of other strategies were rather even ranging from 2.43 to 2.95.

Table 6. *COG category descriptive statistics*

Individual strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
COG5	150	3.92	0.993
COG2	150	3.89	1.011
COG1	150	3.87	0.902
COG9	150	3.74	0.901
COG3	150	3.47	1.127
COG6	150	3.33	1.014
COG8	150	2.89	1.188
COG7	150	2.78	1.175
COG4	150	2.57	1.131

As shown in Table 6, half of cognitive strategies were used at “often” level. The other ones were used at “sometimes” level. Compared to other strategy categories, the means of frequency of memory strategies are rather high and even ranging from 2.57 to 3.92. “Taking notes in class” – COG5 was exploited most ($M = 3.92$) while “using flash card” was used least ($M = 2.57$). “Written repetition” – COG2 and “verbal repetition” – COG1 ranked the second and third place ($M = 3.89$ and $M = 3.87$ respectively) followed by “keep a vocabulary notebook” – COG9 ($M = 3.74$) and “word list” – COG4 (3.47).

Table 7. *MET category descriptive statistics*

Individual strategy	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
MET1	150	3.95	0.995
MET4	150	3.52	1.079
MET3	150	2.71	1.113
MET2	150	2.60	1.129

As described in Table 7, the participants often used English language media to consolidate the words once encountered ($M = 3.95$). “Continue to study words over time” – MET4 received the second highest mean ($M = 3.52$). The least frequently used was “testing oneself with word tests” – MET2 ($M = 2.60$) and “skip or pass new words” – MET3 ($M = 2.71$).

3.2. Discussion

From the results of the questionnaire, it is clear that the participants did not use all the strategies listed in the questionnaire in their vocabulary learning. Additionally, the statistics of the overall strategy use showed that they used VLSs at sometimes use level or medium level.

As for Determination strategies, DET6 - “bilingual dictionary” was most frequently used, followed by DET5 “guessing from context”. The result of the present study supported Schmitt’s [8] study in which bilingual dictionary was employed the most by 600 Japanese students. It is a fact that using dictionary is one of the most useful ways for vocabulary enlargement because dictionaries certainly provide rich resources of vocabulary knowledge. The advanced technology

has brought online dictionaries of different languages with convenient and fast access, which helps the students a lot in checking not only the meaning of a word but also pronunciation, synonyms and antonyms. Therefore, it was no doubt that using dictionary was the most commonly used by the students. However, the result revealed that the students placed heavy reliance on a dictionary to confirm a word's meaning in L1 compared to other strategies. DET5 – “guessing from context” was not used as frequently as “bilingual dictionary” which showed that whenever encountering an unknown word, the students did not try to guess its meaning but used the dictionary right away. This habit made them less active and sometimes caused them troubles especially in the exams in which dictionaries are not allowed. The learners should try to negotiate the unknown word's meaning with the context before checking the meaning in the dictionary.

Regarding to Social strategies – the strategy category with the lowest mean ($M = 2.59$), SOC4 – “asking classmates for meaning” was the students' first choice” followed by SOC1 – “asking a teacher for an L1 translation”. SOC5 – “discover meaning through group work activities” was the least frequently used in the purpose of discovering the meaning of new words. The results were really surprising because in the university environment, group work was a familiar activity for all students. However, they did not try to discuss with their friends on the new word meaning, but they asked for the meaning instead. The results were also an evidence of the students' heavy reliance on other people. They had many other choices such as asking for synonyms or sentences including the new words from the teachers or friends. Nevertheless, they wanted to know a word's meaning instantly. In addition, SOC8 – “interact with native speakers” had the lowest mean score in SOC category ($M = 2.03$). After interacting with the students, two main reasons were found. The first was that Thai Nguyen is not a common destination for foreigners compared to other big cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, so it is not easy to find a foreign friend to talk and practice English with. The second reason was the students' lack of confidence. They could make use of social network like Facebook or Skype to interact with native speakers. However, they were afraid that their English was not good enough to do that. They should be encouraged to use this strategy in the vocabulary learning process.

For memory strategies, the traditional strategies were preferred. The most commonly used strategy was MEM10 – “study the sound of a word” followed by MEM11 – “say a new word aloud when studying” and MEM9 – “study the spelling of a word”. These strategy preferences might derive from their learning habits from high school. According to the students, when they were at high school, they were usually required to learn by heart new words as one of the most important and regular homework. Their teacher checked homework by asking them to write new words on the board and read them loudly in front of the class. In addition, MEM 18 – “use cognate in study” was also commonly used because since they started learning English there was a common belief that knowing a word means knowing its meaning and pronunciation.

The cognitive category was the most frequently used compared to the other 4 categories. The explanation for this is that there are a lot of similarities between these strategies and their traditional studying style, so these strategies were so familiar with the students. That the strategy with the highest mean score was COG5 – “taking note in class” was not surprising because note-taking was a very common skill to not only the 150 participants but most Vietnamese students when learning any subjects. Thus, this skill was applied to learning English vocabulary. Once more, written repetition (COG2) and verbal repetition (COG1) were given preferences. This might be because verbal repetition can be used at any time for vocabulary consolidation. The spelling of the target words were divided into syllables because this strategy was useful for enhancing retention and facilitating communication in daily life. The result of the present study was in accord with the findings by Gu and Johnson [4] and Schmitt [8] in which the students were in favor of processing vocabulary through grouping and word form.

For the metacognitive category, MET1 – “use English language media” ranked the first place. The possible reason for this was that listening to English songs or watching movies were very

popular free time activities among young people now. Using this strategy, the students could study and entertain at the same time. MET4 – “continue to study word over time” ranked the second place because as English major students, they are involved in English activities every day, which gives them chances to strengthen their English vocabulary. MET2 – “testing oneself with word tests” was the least frequently used because it takes time and requires really serious sense of self-study.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of the current study was to investigate VLSs used by the first-year and the second-year English major students at SFL, TNU. The results of the study revealed that the first-year and the second-year students at SFL, TNU were medium users of VLSs. The most frequently used category of strategies was metacognitive while the category of social strategies was the least frequently used. However, some individual strategies were used above the medium used level and some were under the medium used level. The participants seemed to focus on a number of familiar strategies such as “bilingual dictionary”, “take note in class”, “verbal repetition”, and “written repetition”. The findings of the present study indicated the limited use of VLSs by the students. In order to improve the students’ use of VLSs, some suggestions are given as follows:

Firstly, more vocabulary learning strategies should be introduced to the learners. The results of the study revealed that a number of traditional VLSs such as bilingual dictionary, written repetition and verbal repetition were frequently used while other useful strategies were not used often. The reason might be that the students’ awareness of VLSs was limited. The students could not use certain VLSs as they did not understand how to use the strategy and did not know its usefulness. Therefore, teachers and students should spend more time on VLSs. Because each VLS benefits students in different ways, students should be trained to use different VLSs effectively.

Secondly, practical actions should be taken in order to help students familiar with the newly-learned strategies. In addition, it can be said that lack of practice is one of the reasons that make learners forget the newly-learned items. Vocabulary learning is not an exception. Practice could, therefore, make students’ use of vocabulary learning strategies become a natural reaction in language learning.

Last but not least, it is advisable for language teachers to evaluate their textbook and materials they have been using to see if VLSs and VLS training are included. Besides using the current materials, the curriculum designers, material developers and language teachers need always study and apply new textbooks or other teaching materials which may help their students employ different VLSs that are appropriate to different instructional tasks and activities.

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