

AN INVESTIGATION INTO TOEIC VOCABULARY LEARNING AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS-TECHNOLOGY FOR INDUSTRIES

Dang Thi Thanh Huong^{*}, *Tran Thi Quynh*^{*†}
Email: ttquynh@uneti.edu.vn

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Abstract: *Vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role in second language (L2) learning, particularly in the TOEIC exam, where reading and listening comprehension skills are heavily dependent on vocabulary knowledge. However, non-English major university students often struggle with effective vocabulary learning due to inconsistent study habits and heavy reliance on teacher guidance. This study investigates the vocabulary learning practices of 50 non-English major university students, focusing on their study frequency, preferred learning methods, and perceived effectiveness. The findings reveal that only 15 out of 50 students engage in self-study at home, with 6 students maintaining a daily learning routine. Most students depend on teacher-assigned vocabulary, and their study habits lack consistency. The most commonly used method is rote repetition (writing each new word multiple times), while a smaller group integrates listening and contextual learning strategies. Moreover, 86.7% of students express dissatisfaction with their vocabulary knowledge, emphasizing the need for additional support and structured learning plans. These findings suggest that teachers should adopt more consistent instructional approaches, encourage independent vocabulary acquisition, and incorporate evidence-based learning strategies, such as spaced repetition, contextual learning, and thematic organization. The study provides implications for improving vocabulary instruction, promoting autonomous learning, and enhancing TOEIC preparation for non-English major students.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary learning, TOEIC preparation, second language acquisition, self-study habits, teaching strategies.*

I. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role in second language (L2) learning, particularly in standardized English proficiency tests such as the Test of English for International Communication

(TOEIC). Strong vocabulary knowledge is essential for mastering reading and listening comprehension, the two primary skills assessed in the TOEIC exam. According to Wilkins (1972), “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed;

*University of Economics - Technology for Industries

† Corresponding author

without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.” This statement highlights the indispensable role of vocabulary in effective communication and language comprehension. Despite its importance, vocabulary learning remains a challenge for many non-English major university students, as their study habits and methods vary significantly.

Previous research has emphasized the need for systematic and self-regulated learning strategies to enhance vocabulary retention (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). However, in many university settings, students often rely heavily on teacher guidance rather than engaging in consistent, independent study. As a result, their vocabulary learning tends to be irregular and dependent on classroom instruction, which may not be sufficient for TOEIC success. Additionally, common vocabulary learning methods, such as rote memorization (writing words repeatedly), may not be the most effective approach for long-term retention and practical application (Laufer & Nation, 1999).

This study aims to examine the current vocabulary learning practices of non-English major university students in preparation for the TOEIC exam. Specifically, it seeks to investigate:

- Students’ daily study habits, including the time and frequency they dedicate to learning new words.
- The methods they use to acquire vocabulary and their effectiveness.

By analyzing these aspects, the study provides insights into the strengths and weaknesses of students’ vocabulary learning approaches and offers pedagogical implications for enhancing vocabulary instruction and self-study habits. The findings will contribute to the development of more structured and effective vocabulary learning strategies to support students in achieving higher

TOEIC scores and improved English proficiency.

II. Theoretical background

2.1. *The Importance of Vocabulary in Second Language (L2) Learning*

2.1.1. *Vocabulary as a Key Factor in Communication*

According to Wilkins (1972) cited in Elyas and Alfaki (2014), “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” This statement highlights that while grammar is essential, without an adequate vocabulary, communication becomes impossible. Even if learners have a strong grasp of grammar, a lack of vocabulary significantly hinders their ability to express themselves effectively.

2.1.2. *The Influence of Vocabulary on Reading Comprehension and Writing*

Laufer and Nation (1999) cited in Sakai (2009) assert that possessing a sufficient vocabulary is a prerequisite for understanding written texts and developing writing skills. Their research indicates that a learner must know at least 3,000 - 5,000 words to be able to comprehend basic English texts. This suggests that vocabulary size directly impacts reading proficiency and written expression.

2.1.3. *The Relationship Between Vocabulary and Listening-Speaking Skills*

Vocabulary is crucial for TOEIC success, impacting all language skills. Nation (2005) highlights that a strong vocabulary enhances listening and conversation, while a limited one hinders comprehension. Wilkins (1972) asserts that communication is nearly impossible without sufficient vocabulary, which is essential for workplace interactions in TOEIC. Laufer and Nation (1999) state that 3,000–5,000 words are needed for reading and writing, which is vital for TOEIC tasks like emails and reports.

A rich vocabulary improves understanding, expression, and test performance, making it key for professional communication.

2.2. Effective Vocabulary Learning Methods for Second Language (L2) Learners

- Contextual Learning (Brown, 2007): Learning words in real-life contexts aids retention better than isolated lists.

- Spaced Repetition (Ebbinghaus, 1885): Reviewing at intervals combats forgetting and reinforces memory.

- Dual Coding (Paivio, 1986): Combining words with images or sounds (e.g., flashcards, videos) improves recall.

- Thematic Learning (Nation, 2001): Grouping vocabulary by themes strengthens associations and retention.

- Communicative Approach (Krashen, 1982): Learning through real interactions enhances natural acquisition.

To improve TOEIC vocabulary retention, learners can use effective methods: Contextual Learning (Brown, 2007) for real-life usage, Spaced Repetition (Ebbinghaus, 1885) for long-term memory, Dual Coding (Paivio, 1986) for visual-audio support, Thematic Learning (Nation, 2001) for topic-based organization, and the Communicative Approach (Krashen, 1982) for interactive practice. These strategies enhance vocabulary acquisition and test performance.

2.3. Previous Studies

Phung (2012) showed that over the past 50 years, second language acquisition (SLA) research has extensively explored vocabulary learning strategies. Studies have debated the effectiveness of contextualized versus decontextualized vocabulary learning. Oxford and Scarcella (1994) found that learning vocabulary in context enhances retention compared to word lists, while McCarthy (1990) argued that meaningful contextualization leads

to longer retention. Other studies have investigated students' preferred vocabulary learning strategies. Cohen and Aphex (1981) observed that students frequently rely on rote memorization, and O'Malley et al. (1985) found repetition to be the most commonly used method. Meanwhile, Ellis (1995) emphasized deep processing techniques, where learners engage with words both semantically and structurally, leading to better retention. Additional research has examined the differences in vocabulary learning strategies between high and low-achieving students. Ahmed (1989) noted that more proficient students employ a greater variety of strategies, while Sannoui (1992, 1995) found that structured learners outperform those without a systematic approach. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension, as highlighted by Ho and Lien (2010), who found that a richer vocabulary enhances reading proficiency.

Moreover, studies conducted in Vietnam, such as the research at Hai Duong Medical Technical University by Diem and Tran (2023), indicate that students often underutilize effective vocabulary learning techniques, such as dictionary use and context-based learning. However, these studies do not offer comprehensive intervention strategies to improve students' vocabulary learning outcomes.

III. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study involved a total of 15 second-year students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at UNETI. The participants were non-English major university students who were actively preparing for the TOEIC exam. To ensure diversity, participants were selected from multiple classes, with three students randomly chosen from each class.

The selection process did not consider differences in gender, region, or initial English proficiency level, as the study aimed to provide a general overview of TOEIC vocabulary learning strategies among non-English major students. The sample size of 15 students was determined based on both practical feasibility and research validity. Given the constraints of time and resources, this number was sufficient to capture a range of learning experiences and strategies while still being manageable for in-depth data collection and analysis. Additionally, previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies among university students have used similar sample sizes, suggesting that this number is adequate to identify trends and patterns in learning behavior.

3.2. Data Collection and Procedure

The data was collected through a structured interview process. Each participant was asked a series of questions related to their vocabulary learning habits and the perceived importance of TOEIC listening and reading comprehension.

Interview Procedure

The interview followed a step-by-step approach:

Initial Question:

How important do you think vocabulary learning is for TOEIC listening and reading comprehension?

Screening Question:

How much time do you spend learning new words daily?

If the participant responded that they did not spend time learning new words, the interview was terminated. Otherwise, the interview continued with additional questions.

Follow-up Questions (For Those Who Study Vocabulary Daily):

How many new words do you learn each day?

Which methods do you use to learn new words?

In your opinion, how effective is your vocabulary learning process?

3.3. Data Analysis

The responses were categorized and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify common themes in students' vocabulary learning habits, preferred methods, and perceived effectiveness. The frequency and patterns in responses were also examined to gain insights into the overall vocabulary learning practices among non-English major students.

IV. Findings and discussion

Research Question 1: How do non-English major university students structure their daily vocabulary learning habits when preparing for the TOEIC exam?

4.1. Students' daily study habits

4.1.1. The Frequency of Students' Self-Learning New Vocabulary

The findings from the interview indicate that out of 50 students surveyed, only 15 students (30%) reported engaging in self-study of new vocabulary at home, while the majority-35 students (70%)-did not actively practice vocabulary learning outside of class. The fact that only 30% of students dedicate time to vocabulary learning at home suggests a lack of independent study habits among non-English major students. Many rely on passive exposure to English, such as classroom instruction or incidental learning through media, rather than structured vocabulary acquisition. Besides, the 70% who do not study vocabulary at home may face obstacles such as: Lack of motivation or discipline in independent learning, Time constraints due to academic workload or other commitments, Unawareness of effective vocabulary learning methods, leading to inefficient or discouraging study attempts.

These findings support the previous studies: Nation's (2001) claim that deliberate and systematic vocabulary learning is essential for L2 proficiency; Ebbinghaus's (1885) Forgetting Curve suggests that without regular review, students are likely to forget newly learned words quickly, further emphasizing the need for spaced repetition techniques; and Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis highlights the importance of meaningful exposure to vocabulary in context, which could explain why some students do not prioritize rote memorization.

4.1.2. *Students' Time Spent on Learning Vocabulary*

The findings indicate that out of 15 students who reported studying vocabulary at home, there are two distinct groups:

- **Self-Motivated Learners** (6 students – 40%): These students engage in daily self-study, with the most diligent spending 30 minutes per day on vocabulary learning.

- **Teacher-Guided Learners** (9 students – 60%): These students only study vocabulary twice a week, typically when assigned by their instructors.

For the broader sample of 50 students surveyed, this means that:

- Only 6 students (12%) are self-directed learners with a strong habit of studying vocabulary daily.

- A majority of 44 students (88%) rely on teacher-guided study, suggesting that independent learning is not a common habit.

It is seen that these students demonstrate intrinsic motivation, meaning they study vocabulary out of personal initiative rather than external pressure. Their 30-minute daily study habit aligns with Ebbinghaus's (1885) Forgetting Curve, which shows that frequent review helps prevent memory loss. They are likely to adopt active learning strategies, such as: Spaced Repetition Systems (SRS)

(Nation, 2001) to reinforce retention; and Contextual learning (Brown, 2007), where words are learned through meaningful exposure (e.g., reading, listening), as well as Multimedia-based learning (Paivio, 1986), using flashcards, apps, or videos to enhance memory. Their consistent efforts likely lead to better TOEIC performance, as Laufer and Nation (1999) state that a strong vocabulary base is critical for reading comprehension and listening accuracy.

In terms of the other students, Teacher-Guided Learners (9 Students – 60% of Home Learners, 18% of the Total Sample): These students study vocabulary only when assigned, typically twice a week, reflecting extrinsic motivation (learning due to external requirements rather than personal interest). Their study habits are inconsistent, meaning they may not retain new words effectively over time. They primarily follow traditional classroom-based methods, such as: Memorization from word lists provided by teachers rather than contextual learning; and Cramming before tests instead of engaging in long-term vocabulary retention techniques; Limited application of new words, leading to passive rather than active vocabulary knowledge. According to Schmitt (2000), passive learning results in weaker recall and lower practical application, which may negatively impact TOEIC performance.

Research Question 2: What vocabulary learning methods do students use, and how effective are these methods in improving their TOEIC performance?

4.2. *Students' methods of self-learning vocabulary*

4.2.1. *Students' Daily Vocabulary Acquisition*

Among the 15 students who study vocabulary at home, their learning quantity is divided into two distinct groups:

- **Self-Directed Learners** (4/15 – 26.7%): These students consistently learn

5 new words per day, maintaining a steady learning habit.

- **Teacher-Guided Learners (11/15 – 73.3%):** These students do not have a fixed number of words to learn daily. Instead, their vocabulary learning is entirely dictated by classroom instruction, meaning that some sessions may require learning 15-20 words, especially when the teacher assigns vocabulary-heavy tasks. On other days, they may not study any new words if there are no assignments.

Connecting with Self-Directed Learners (4/15 – 26.7%): These students display autonomous learning behaviors, meaning they take responsibility for their own vocabulary acquisition. Their approach aligns with Spaced Repetition Theory (Ebbinghaus, 1885), where consistent exposure to small amounts of information improves long-term retention. According to Schmitt (2000), learning 5 words per day is an effective strategy because it allows students to focus on deep processing, including pronunciation, meaning, and usage in different contexts. This habit is more beneficial for TOEIC preparation, as students gradually build their vocabulary instead of relying on last-minute cramming.

Regarding Teacher-Guided Learners (11/15 – 73.3%): These students do not have a structured, independent learning plan and instead depend on teacher instruction. When assigned, they may learn 15-20 words in one session, which can lead to cognitive overload and poor retention. On days without assignments, they do not engage in vocabulary learning at all, which disrupts the learning process. This learning pattern contradicts Nation's (2001) recommendation, which suggests that vocabulary acquisition should be gradual and consistent rather than irregular.

Forgetting Curve (Ebbinghaus, 1885): Large, infrequent vocabulary

sessions lead to faster forgetting, as words learned in bulk are harder to retain over time.

4.2.2. *Current Methods of Learning Vocabulary*

Among the 15 students who reported studying vocabulary at home, the study revealed two key learning approaches:

- **Repetitive Writing Method (15/15 students – 100%):** All students followed the practice of writing each new word 10 times as their primary technique for memorization.

- **Multimedia-Based Learning (4/15 students – 26.7%):** In addition to writing, these students also incorporated listening activities, such as watching English movies and news, followed by writing down new words and practicing sentence formation.

In terms of the Repetitive Writing Method (15/15 Students – 100%): This method is based on rote memorization, where students reinforce new words by repeatedly writing them. While this technique can help with short-term retention, research suggests that it is less effective for long-term vocabulary acquisition (Schmitt, 2000). However, a lack of contextual understanding means students might recognize words in isolation but struggle to use them in real-life situations.

In the context of Multimedia-Based Learning (4/15 Students – 26.7%): These students engaged in contextual learning, which involves listening to authentic English content (e.g., news, movies) and recording new words. It can enhance listening comprehension, which is crucial for TOEIC test performance; encourage natural exposure to word usage, reinforcing meaning through real-life contexts (Brown, 2007), supports Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986), which states that learning is more effective when verbal information is paired with visual

or auditory input. The additional practice of writing and creating sentences fosters active recall, leading to better long-term retention (Nation, 2001).

4.2.3. The effectiveness of methods of learning vocabulary from Students' perspectives

Among the 15 students who study vocabulary at home, their levels of satisfaction can be categorized as follows:

- Dissatisfied Students (13/15 – 86.7%): These students feel their vocabulary is insufficient and believe they need additional support from their teachers.

- Confident Students (2/15 – 13.3%): These students feel comfortable with their vocabulary level, likely due to consistent learning habits.

It can be seen that Dissatisfied Students (13/15 – 86.7%) lack confidence in their vocabulary, which suggests that their current learning methods are not yielding the desired results; while most students (11/15) rely on teacher-assigned vocabulary, they may feel they are not learning enough independently. According to Laufer and Nation (1999), learners need to know at least 3,000–5,000 words for basic comprehension of English texts, and TOEIC preparation often requires an even larger vocabulary size. The dissatisfaction may stem from a feeling that their vocabulary is not growing fast enough to meet their needs. As seen earlier, most students use rote memorization (writing words repeatedly), which is not the most effective method for long-term retention and practical application (Nation, 2001).

For Confident Students (2/15 – 13.3%), these students likely engage in self-directed learning and maintain consistent daily vocabulary acquisition (5 words per day). Their confidence suggests they have found a study method that works—potentially active recall techniques, spaced

repetition, or contextual learning methods (Schmitt, 2000). They may also have a strong motivation for TOEIC preparation, setting personal learning goals beyond classroom requirements.

The findings of this study highlight several key issues related to students' vocabulary learning habits, their dependence on teacher guidance, and the effectiveness of different learning strategies. Based on these results, the following pedagogical implications should be considered to enhance vocabulary acquisition among non-English major university students preparing for the TOEIC test.

Promoting Consistency in Teaching Methods and Assignments

- Students' inconsistent learning routines and reliance on teacher-assigned vocabulary highlight the need for a structured approach:

- Standardized Plans: Implement uniform vocabulary strategies to develop consistent study habits.

- Balanced Practice: Design a progressive syllabus for daily learning instead of cramming.

- Autonomous Learning: Encourage application through sentence writing, context-based tasks, and digital tools (e.g., Anki, Quizlet).

Enhancing Self-Regulated Learning Strategies

Students' passive learning and lack of structure call for improvement:

- Spaced Repetition: Train students to review vocabulary at intervals to prevent forgetting.

- Contextual Learning: Encourage learning through reading, news, and media instead of isolated lists.

- Personalized Goals: Help students set realistic targets (e.g., 5 words/day) for consistency.

Addressing the Gap Between Self-Directed and Teacher-Guided Learning

With only 26.7% of students studying independently, teachers can encourage autonomy by:

- **Providing Resources:** Recommend reading materials, apps, and online exercises.
- **Class Integration:** Use peer quizzes, discussions, and storytelling to apply vocabulary.
- **Monitoring Progress:** Track learning through journals, quizzes, and feedback.

Addressing Student Dissatisfaction with Their Vocabulary Knowledge

With 86.7% of students dissatisfied with their vocabulary, teachers should:

- **Scaffold Learning:** Introduce vocabulary in manageable chunks with reinforcement.
- **Use Active Recall:** Promote retrieval practice, writing, and speaking exercises.
- **Provide Support:** Offer workshops, tutoring, or targeted coaching for struggling learners.

Reforming Homework Assignments for Better Vocabulary Retention

To promote self-driven vocabulary learning, homework should include:

- **Daily Logs:** Track vocabulary progress for accountability.
- **Thematic Tasks:** Learn words by themes (e.g., business, travel) for better retention.
- **Gamification:** Use flashcards, quizzes, and competitions to enhance engagement.

V. Conclusion

This study underscores the need for a more structured and balanced vocabulary learning approach that combines both teacher guidance and student autonomy.

The current reliance on teacher-assigned vocabulary, irregular study patterns, and ineffective memorization techniques highlight significant gaps in TOEIC vocabulary acquisition. To address these issues, teachers should adopt a more uniform teaching methodology, introduce evidence-based learning strategies, and encourage independent vocabulary acquisition. By implementing these improvements, students can develop stronger, more sustainable vocabulary learning habits, ultimately enhancing their TOEIC performance and overall English proficiency.

This study offers insights into vocabulary learning but has limitations. With a small sample of 15 interviewees and a focus on final-year translation students at UNETI, findings may not be widely applicable. Future research should use larger samples and mixed methods for broader, more reliable results.

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NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ VIỆC HỌC TỪ VỰNG TOEIC CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KINH TẾ - KỸ THUẬT CÔNG NGHIỆP

Đặng Thị Thanh Hương[‡], Trần Thị Quỳnh[§]

Tóm tắt: Việc học từ vựng đóng vai trò quan trọng trong quá trình học ngoại ngữ thứ hai (L2), đặc biệt là trong kỳ thi TOEIC, nơi mà kỹ năng đọc hiểu và nghe hiểu phụ thuộc nhiều vào vốn từ vựng. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh thường gặp khó khăn trong việc học từ vựng hiệu quả do thói quen học tập không đồng nhất và sự phụ thuộc quá mức vào hướng dẫn của giảng viên. Nghiên cứu này khảo sát thực trạng học từ vựng của 50 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh, tập trung vào tần suất học, phương pháp học tập ưa thích và hiệu quả cảm nhận của họ. Kết quả cho thấy chỉ có 15/50 sinh viên tự học từ mới tại nhà, trong đó 6 sinh viên duy trì thói quen học hàng ngày. Phần lớn sinh viên phụ thuộc vào từ vựng do giảng viên giao và có thói quen học tập thiếu tính nhất quán. Phương pháp học phổ biến nhất là chép từ lặp lại nhiều lần, trong khi một nhóm nhỏ áp dụng phương pháp nghe tin tức, xem phim và học từ trong ngữ cảnh. Ngoài ra, 86,7% sinh viên bày tỏ sự không hài lòng với vốn từ vựng của mình và mong muốn có thêm sự hỗ trợ từ giảng viên. Những phát hiện này gợi ý rằng giảng viên nên áp dụng các phương pháp giảng dạy đồng đều hơn, khuyến khích sinh viên tự học và tích hợp các chiến lược học tập dựa trên khoa học, như lặp lại ngắt quãng, học từ theo ngữ cảnh và phân loại từ vựng theo chủ đề. Nghiên cứu cung cấp những gợi ý quan trọng nhằm cải thiện phương pháp giảng dạy từ vựng, thúc đẩy học tập tự chủ và nâng cao hiệu quả ôn luyện TOEIC cho sinh viên không chuyên.

Từ khóa: Học từ vựng, luyện thi TOEIC, tiếp thu ngôn ngữ thứ hai, thói quen tự học, chiến lược giảng dạy.

[‡] Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp

[§] Tác giả liên hệ