

技職學生英文字彙學習策略之探究

A Study of EFL Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Junior College Students

吳伶芳 輔英科技大學語言教育中心

摘 要

英文字學習策略在英語學習中扮演著重要的角色,本研究是探討英語能力與字彙學習策略之關係及專科學生英文字彙學習來源與課後參與英文相關學習活動之情形。研究對象為 476 位五專一年級學生,其中百分之二十一的學生為低成就的學生,百分之五十九為中等程度的學生,百分之二十為高成就的學生。我們很意外的從研究結果中發現,大多數學生不會使用英文字彙學習策略來記憶生字,高成就的學生在英文字彙學習策略的使用並無優於低成就學生,但高成就的學生學習動機較高且投入較多時間。研究結果也發現,學生英文字彙學習來源主要來自於課堂上與課後補習,高程度的學生常收聽英語廣播教學節目,最受學生歡迎的課外學習活動為收看英語電視影集。本研究建議將英文字彙學習策略融入教學中,以激發學生的學習興趣,進而提高英文程度。

關鍵詞: 英文字彙, 學習策略

Lin-Fang Wu, Language Education Center, Fooyin University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate vocabulary learning strategy used by junior college students. The main research questions explored in this study are: (1) How do junior college students approach their vocabulary learning? ; (2) Does vocabulary learning strategy use predict language proficiency? ; and (3) What extracurricular self-initiated learning activities do students engage in? According to the results of this study, vocabulary strategy use isn't a predictive factor of language proficiency. Few students, even among high level students, make use of vocabulary learning strategies. Their primary sources of vocabulary acquisition are

regular English classes or classes in cram schools. Watching English TV programs or movies is the most popular self-initiated learning activities. Results of the study suggest that vocabulary learning strategies should be integrated into classroom activities to enhance learning motivation and language proficiency.

Keywords: vocabulary, learning strategy

I: Introduction

Vocabulary learning is a complicated task that involves linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic aspects. Lexical competence requires various learning strategies training and far more than simply the ability to use a given number of words [1]. Nevertheless, vocabulary teaching has been underemphasized in English language teaching in recent decades. Vocabulary is taught indirectly as part of a wider area of language teaching, such as reading and listening comprehension. Most students learning English as a foreign language feel frustrated by the sheer volume of English vocabulary [2]. The burden of vocabulary learning for learners is that they are not given guidance in this pursuit [3]. Recently, vocabulary acquisition has received more attention in second language teaching. Experienced teachers know the importance of vocabulary. They know that students must learn thousands of words to understand what native speakers speak and write [4]. More and more researchers are investigating the process of vocabulary acquisition and how it relates to L2 learning.

The present study was conducted in the Junior College Division at Fooyin University. Toward the end of the 2004-05 academic year, a placement test written by experienced foreign experts was administered to all of Fooyin students. The test is divided into two sections and is composed of 100 multiple-choice questions. Based on the test results, students were grouped into three different levels for classes and teaching purposes. Students with scores in the top 20% were placed in the high level classes, those in the bottom 20% in the low level classes, while the middle 60% were placed in the mid-level classes.

Subjects comprised about five hundred first-year nursing department students. The breakdown according to levels was roughly one hundred high level students, one hundred low level students and three hundred of mid-level students. At the end of that fall semester, English teachers distributed vocabulary learning questionnaires to the participating students in order to investigate how these students approached their vocabulary learning and whether their learning approaches were predictive of language proficiency.

It also investigated the degree to which outside classroom activities affected their language ability. The questionnaire is composed of three sections: students' background information, vocabulary acquisition strategies and outside classroom vocabulary learning activities. Comparing the differences and varieties of vocabulary acquisition strategies, outside classroom learning activities and motivation for acquiring a second language among students in these three levels were other main objectives.

II: Review of Literature Studies on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies are the basic tools necessary for active involvement in developing L2 proficiency. Research shows that students in all fields of study tend to use learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own goals, needs, and stages of learning [5]. Use of appropriate language learning strategies often results in improved proficiency or achievement in specific skill areas. More proficient learners tend to use a wide range of strategies in a greater number of situations than

do less proficient learners [6]. Important effects of training in the use of language learning strategies have been discovered by a number of researchers [7]. It is clear that students can be taught to use better strategies, and research suggests that better strategies improve language performance. Based on the L2 strategy training research, the following principles have been tentatively suggested [8]:

Training should be integrated into regular L2 activities over a long period of time rather than taught as a separate activity.

Students should have plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes. Strategy training should be somewhat individualized, as different students prefer or need various strategies for particular tasks.

Lexical Collocation

A lexical unit is the union of a lexical form and a single sense. As to the form, this means that it is more than just a group of letters [9]. Lexical units can help learners memorize vocabulary more effectively. Lexical units mean the learning of new vocabulary for well-known words or for combination of well-known words that are not predictable on the basis of the already known meanings [10]. Lexical units can be better used than words to describe the process of vocabulary learning in a second language. Vocabulary learning by means of lexical units imply that leaning the usual collocation, learning semantic and morphological units. According to Boggards' experiments, multiword expressions containing known words are easier to learn than completely unknown words and they are better

retained after a delay of three weeks.

Lexical collocations are essential to English learners when they want to write or speak naturally. It's a kind of native experience for frequent expressions in given circumstances that contribute to lexical collocations [11]. Many Chinese students have a low level competence in collocations. However, collocation competence isn't acquired by memorizing vocabulary and must be specifically taught. The followings are the suggestions for teaching them. A number of typical collocations should be presented from the beginning of second language acquisition, especially "the verb noun" type, for example fly a kite, set an alarm, break a code, etc. Emphasis should be placed on lexical collocations with high frequency of occurrence rather than on those figurative uses. The use of collocation dictionaries will also help Chinese students have a good command of lexical collocations [12].

Classroom Activities

Classroom activities play an important role while teaching vocabulary to ESL learners. It covers a wide range of ideas for presentation, testing, practice, and revision.

Visual aids

Visual aids, including vocabulary cards, wall charts, and commercially-produced cards, are all useful to help students have long-term memory. Teachers can have students make their own vocabulary cards. For beginners, on one side of the card, show an illustration of the target item [13]. On the other side of the card, write the name of the item and the phonemic. The advanced learners can write some associations about this word on the other side of the card. According to

learners' familiarity, these vocabulary cards can be categorized into different sections.

Dictionary

Although dictionaries for language learning have been largely ignored by many linguistic scholars, they still play an important role to learn a foreign language. Many of us believe that teaching words in some systematic ways would be helpful whether in semantic sets, by collocation or semantic feature matrices. To help students to get the skill of scanning and skimming while teaching reading classes in classroom, many teachers discourage the use of bi-lingual dictionaries [14]. Nevertheless, dictionaries are still the most useful learning tool to get the knowledge of word's morphology, etymology, and even phonology. The use of dictionaries is generally expected and actively encouraged in most native-speaker schools in USA and UK. Training in dictionary skills is less common in ELT, as teachers assume such training has already been given for the mother tongue [15]. Skill training in making best use of dictionaries will be given much more emphasis in the English language teaching classes.

III: Methodology

Subjects

The subjects involved in this study comprised 476 students enrolled in the Junior College Division at Fooyin University. The respondents consisted largely of females with an average of 16-17. They were all first-year students in the nursing department. It was stressed that the results would not affect their English course grades. The distribution of the respondents is listed in table 1.

Table 1 Student Level Distribution

Placement	Frequency	Percent
Low	99	20.8 %
Middle	280	58.8%
High	97	20.4%
Total	476	100 %

Research Questions

1. How do students approach their vocabulary learning?
2. Does vocabulary strategy use predict language proficiency?
3. What extracurricular self-initiated learning activities do students engage in?

Instruments

1. The placement test

The Test of English Language proficiency was written by experienced foreign experts in testing. Placement of students into different levels was based on the test results. The test is composed of 100 multiple-choice questions and divided into two sections. The first section of the test is listening comprehension and includes twenty-five questions. The second section covers reading and grammar, and makes up the other seventy-five questions.

2. The questionnaire

A questionnaire designed by the researcher was used to determine what vocabulary learning strategies the students use. The questionnaire was divided into three parts :(1) students' background information; (2) students' vocabulary learning strategies; and (3) student's extracurricular self-initiated learning activities. The second part of the questionnaire investigate how much time

they spend learning English each day, how they memorize vocabulary and what their motivation for learning English is among these three levels students. The last part of the questionnaire is a self-report instrument that assesses the frequency of extracurricular self-initiated learning activities after classes.

Procedures

At the end of July, 2004, the placement test was administered to all incoming freshmen at Fooyin University. They would also be taking the required general English courses. Students were then divided into three different levels based on the test results, and then received different instructions in the new coming semester. Students completed the questionnaires at the end of fall semester. Four hundred ninety (490) questionnaires were distributed to the participating students, while 476 completed questionnaires were returned, completed and evaluated.

IV: Results

Comparison vocabulary learning strategies among these three levels students

Comparing vocabulary learning strategy among students among these three levels is another main topic the researcher will focus on. Table 2 presents the information that the only significant difference among these six strategies is practical applications. Apparently, high level students have much more ability to apply vocabulary into daily conversation than do middle and low level students. Looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary is the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategy, followed by mental lexicon. Almost all of the

students use dictionaries while learning English even among low level students. More than fifty percent of the subjects know how to memorize vocabulary by mental lexicon. The frequency of using other learning strategies is lower than fifty percent. Generally speaking, vocabulary strategy use among these three groups is almost the same. We can get a conclusion that the relationship between language proficiency and vocabulary strategy is doubtful. Lack of training probably may be the reason and also be an obstacle to students' language performance.

Table 2 Cross-tabulation of vocabulary learning strategy & groups (N=476)

Items/Groups	Low	Middle	High	P ^a
Instantly review	16.2%	16.4%	17%	0.910
Mental lexicon	71.7%	70%	64.9%	0.553
Application	23.2%	30%	43.3%	0.009*
Context Clues	24.2%	19.9%	21.6%	0.570
Key words	27.3%	35.7%	25.5%	0.101
Association	10.1%	17%	17.5%	0.193
Look up words in a dictionary	81.2%	81.4%	82%	0.929

Note: Table 2 is the results of multiple-responses.

a: p* < .05

Self-initiated vocabulary learning activities

Watching TV programs or movies in English were the most common self-initiated vocabulary learning activities, while listening to English radio programs, reading English newspaper or

books, and playing computer games in English were also popular activities. Results indicate that there was no statistical significance about extracurricular learning activities among the three groups, except for writing English letters. Nevertheless, proficient learners spend more time in self-initiated learning activities than do less proficient learners.

Sources of vocabulary acquisition among these three levels students

Many people are curious about if there are any differences about sources of vocabulary acquisition among these three levels students. Table 3 presents the information 97% of respondents express that their primary sources of vocabulary acquisition are their regular English classes, followed by classes in cram schools, listening to radio programs, reading English newspaper and then by Internet. Though nowadays surfing the net is very popular among the young people, few students learn English through Internet. All of the subjects that have ever learned English through Internet are below 15%. It is surprising that high level students learn English through Internet less than do low level students. We can probably conclude that Fooyin students are all lack of training for on-line English learning. The analysis of the data shows that high level students have more interest and ability to learn new vocabulary by reading English newspaper and listening to English radio teaching programs. They participate in wider varieties of learning activities to enhance their language proficiency than do less proficient learners, except for on-line learning. We can get the conclusions that encouraging our students to participate in different learning activities will be an important issue of the future.

Table 3 Cross-tabulation of vocabulary acquisition sources & Groups (N=476)

Item/groups	Low	Middle	High	P ^a
English classes	79%	97.1%	96.9%	0.991
English newspaper	8.1%	20.4%	20.6%	0.009*
Radio programs	10.1%	22.9%	29.9%	0.001*
Cram schools	25.3%	23.9%	30.9%	0.405
Internet	11.1%	14.3%	9.3%	0.375

Note: Table 3 is the results of multiple-responses. The percentage of each item means different source vocabulary acquisition for each group.

a: *p<.05

V: Conclusions

Lack of training about using vocabulary learning strategies is one of the important findings in this study. Results show that less than fifty percent of the above listed vocabulary learning strategies (Table 2) used by the participating respondents. Only a few of the high level respondents listen to the radio teaching programs or Internet English teaching programs to acquire their vocabulary. There is no significant difference among these three levels students for using vocabulary learning strategy. Most of them didn't know how to employ the vocabulary learning strategy. Oxford mentioned it is clear that students can be taught to use better strategies, and research suggests that better strategies improve language performance [5]. Important effects of training in the use of language learning strategies have been discovered by a number

of researchers. Therefore, the training about vocabulary learning strategies to the students will be the main task for Fooyin teachers. Oxford and Crook suggest, teachers should present students with many different vocabulary learning strategies and encourage them to adopt and practice those that are most successful for them as individuals [8]. It has been confirmed that vocabulary learning strategy is more effective when integrated into regular classroom activities than when presented as a separate strategy course.

As found in this study, watching English TV programs and movies is the most popular extracurricular self-initiated learning activities students engage in. Respondents in this research rarely acquire vocabulary through the Internet, even among the high level students. It is a pity that few students have interests about on-line learning activities. They spend a lot of time getting on line regularly just to chat for fun. As the Internet has transformed communication around the world, it is natural that on-line learning should play a major role in the second language acquisition. English teachers should make the best use of the Internet vocabulary learning resources that correspond to the topics of the foreign language curriculum through Internet, and then integrate into daily classroom activities.

Additionally, this study found that students' vocabulary learning approaches weren't predictive of their language proficiency. Research data indicate that vocabulary learning strategies among these three levels students had no significant differences. As suggested in the literature, ESL and other language instructors need to

recognize that a student's approach to vocabulary learning doesn't necessarily predict his or her language proficiency [3]. Nevertheless, investigations with language learners frequently show that the most successful learners tend to use learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own goals, needs, and stage of learning [8]. More proficient learners appear to use a wider range of strategies in a greater number of situations than do less proficient learners [16]. Research indicates that language learners at all levels use strategies [6], but some or most learners are not fully aware of the strategies they use or that strategies that might be the most beneficial to employ. Although the relationship between the strategy use and language proficiency is complex, teachers' encouragement to the students for adopting the most useful and effective vocabulary learning approaches will definitely have a positive effect on students' learning motivation and language performance.

VII: References

- [1]C.B. Zimmerman, Do reading and interactive vocabulary instruction make a difference? An Empirical Study, *TESOL Quarterly* 31: 121-140, 1997.
- [2]L. Hsueh, Teaching English Vocabulary and Reading in an EFL Classroom. *國立屏東商專學報* 5: 221-240, 1997.
- [3]M. Lessard, ELS vocabulary learning in a TOEFL preparation class: A case study. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 53: 1, 97-119, 1996.

- [4]V.F.Allen, Techniques in teaching vocabulary. New York: Oxford, 1993. What every teacher should know. New York: Newbury House, 1990.
- [5]R. Oxford, Language Learning Strategies: A synthesis of studies with implications for strategy training. *System*12: 2, 235-247, 1990.
- [6]A. U. Chamot and L. Kupper, Learning strategies in foreign language instruction. *Foreign Language Annuals* 22: 13-14, 1989.
- [7]Y. Bejarano, A cooperative small-group methodology in the language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* 21: 2, 483-503, 1987.
- [8]R. Oxford and D. Crookall, Vocabulary learning: A critical analysis of techniques. *TESL Canada Journal* 7: 9-30, 1986.
- [9]D. A. Cruse, Lexical semantics. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- [10]P. Boggards , Lexical units and the learning of foreign language vocabulary, *Studies in Second Language Learning* 23: 1, 321-343, 2000.
- [11]D. Bolinger and D.A. Sears (3rd edition). *Aspects of Language*. New York: Harcord, Brace and World, 1981.
- [12]W. Wu, Lexical Collocations: One way to make passive vocabulary active, 第十一屆英語文教學研討會論文集：461-478, 1996.
- [13]R. Grains and S. Redman, Working with words: A guide to teaching and learning vocabulary. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- [14]D. Summer, The role of dictionaries in language learning. *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. New York: Longman, 1988.
- [15]J. Whitcut, Learning with LODGE. New York: Longman, 1979.
- [16]R. Oxford, Language learning strategies:

