

A Study of Factors Affecting College Students' Use of ESL Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate: How do learner variables, including language proficiency, motivation, effort, and family background affect college students' ESL vocabulary strategy use? Subjects in this study were around 450 first grade students at Fooyin University. Results of the study showed that the variable that had greatest effect on learners' vocabulary strategy use was motivation. Another important factor affecting vocabulary strategy use was family background, including family involvement and years of study. Results of the study suggested that, 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.

Key Words: vocabulary learning strategy, language proficiency, family background

1. Introduction

With dawning of the electronic age, the importance of English proficiency has gained much more attention in recent years. Effective second language acquisition and learning strategies have been a major focus of researchers, while little emphasis has been given to the vocabulary learning strategies. Researchers indicated that the greatest obstacle for acquiring a second language is limited vocabulary size. According to Schmitt and Meara's (1984) study of L2 university students, lexical errors outnumbered grammatical errors by 3:1 or 4:1. A similar survey of L2 students taking university courses found that they identified vocabulary as a major factor that held them back in academic writing tasks (Leki & Carson, 1994). Although vocabulary has recently attracted increased interest since the 1980s, language researchers and teachers continue to give less attention to it than syntax and phonology (Clece-Murica, 1997). However, factors affecting vocabulary learning is very complicated, including individual and contextual factors. Oxford (1990) proposed that many factors affect choice of learning strategies: degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality, ethnicity, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, and purpose for learning the language

In the light of the need for information about the factors affecting vocabulary learning strategies, the major research question explored in this study is: how do learner variables, including motivation, language proficiency, years of study, effort, family tutors, and extracurricular learning activities affect students' ESL vocabulary strategies use? A total of 450 first-year students in Fooyin University participated in this study. After a placement test, they were grouped into different levels classes for teaching purposes and answered a vocabulary learning questionnaire during their regular English classes. After answering the questionnaire, collection was conducted by the author with the assistance of several English teachers and then underwent a series of statistical analysis by using the Statistical Packages for the Social Science. The results of this study will be beneficial for both participating teachers and students. The participating Fooyin English teachers will learn more about their students, encourage their use of vocabulary learning strategies, and then adapt vocabulary teaching to students' need more effectively.

Research Questions

1. How do learner variables, including language proficiency, motivation, effort, years of study, and cram school attendance affect their ESL vocabulary strategy use?
2. Is there a relationship between extracurricular self-initiated learning activities and vocabulary strategy use?

2. Review of Literature

(1) Motivation

As Oxford (1990) indicated, factors affecting language learning are very complicated, including motivation, attitudes, language anxiety, self-confidence, language aptitude, family size, and personality variables. Motivation is one of the most important factors which affect students' language learning achievement. According to Gardner and Smythe (1981), integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situations, and motivation are separate but correlated constructs, and motivation has direct effect on second language achievement. Gardner (2001) also proposed that the variable, integrativeness, reflects a genuine interest in learning the second language. A low level of integrativeness would indicate no interest in learning language in order to identify with the group, while a high level would indicate considerable interest. He also proposed that attitudes toward the learning situation, involves attitudes toward any aspect of the situation in which the language is learned, these attitudes could be directed toward the teachers, the course, the classmates, the course materials, extra curricular activities associated with the course. In addition, integrative motivation is hypothesized to be a complex of attitudinal, goal directed and motivational attributes (Gardner, 2001). Dornyei (2001) mentions another variable for affecting language learning motivation is instrumental motivation. Instrumental motivation is an interest in learning the second language for pragmatic reasons. In conclusions, studies suggest that the retention of motivation to language achievement whether instrumental motivation or integrative motivation, persistence in language learning, activities in the classroom which all have a significant impact on second successful language acquisition.

(2) Family background, siblings size and achievement

As the literature suggested, family background is one of the important factors affecting foreign language proficiency. Number of siblings, father's social economic status, and birth order are all included in family background factors. Blake(1989) indicated that learning resources will be diluted in the large families, including parental interaction and attention. Nonetheless, the sibsize effects decline as the social status increases which accord with the dilution hypothesis. The advantaged parental socioeconomic status should mitigate the negative effects of increasing sibsize. According to Blake's research, men come from privileged families with large sibsize would suffer less educational loss than men from less privileged families with large sibsize.

Sewell and Shah (1967) mentioned that the educational aspirations among young people are positively related to socioeconomic background. Blake(1989) indicated that high socioeconomic status results not only in more intellectual ability and better performance in school, but that high status parents provide more encouragement and support for postsecondary education than do low status parents. According to the model proposed by Swell and Shah (1967), parents' background will affect grades positively because higher-educated parents will place more emphasis on academic achievement and create home situations that are conducive to study and concentration. In sum, parents' educational attainment, and socioeconomic status, and number of siblings have a significant effect on second language acquisition.

(3) Vocabulary learning strategies

One of the most important things in learning vocabulary is to remember words, or more precisely to store words in memory. Memorizing vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. In this paragraph, some characteristics of the relationship between vocabulary and memory will be introduced. The discussed various strategies will aid learners to storage vocabulary. It includes pair association and mnemonic devices. Research suggests that words are stored and remembered in a network association. These associations can be of many types and be linked in a network association. This memory device called paired associate which links two words of similar sounds and meanings has proved effective (Stevick, 1976). Word family means many words built about a particular root are gathered so that the associations among them can be seen. Word family is similar to word formation, such as "part", "partition", "partly", "partner", "participant", etc. The key word method is that a reader learns a word in the target language by associating it with similar sound or meaning in the native language. Pair association will be a good way to memorize vocabulary effectively, for example the paired words of "fridge" and "bridge", "eight" and "night"(Hsueh, 1997).

(4) Language Learning strategies

Learning strategies are the basic tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability (O'Malley & Chamot,1990).

Research has shown that more effective language learners use more and better learning strategies than do poorer language learner (Rubin, 1975; Stern 1983). In addition, research also showed that more effective language learners in each of the four language skills (Tracke & Mendelsohn, 1986). Rubin suggested that the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser; has a strong persevering drive to communicate and willing to make mistakes in order to learn or communicate; focuses on form by looking for patterns; takes advantages of all practice opportunities; monitors his or her own speech and that of others; and pay attention to meaning.

Oxford (1990) indicated that language learning strategies can be classified, explained, and exemplified in six coherent groups. The six strategy groups are labeled memory, cognitive, comprehension, metacognitive, affective, and social. The first three groups are known as “direct” strategies, because they directly involve the subject matter, in this case the target language to be learned; the last three groups are called “indirect” strategies, because they don’t directly involve the subject matter itself, but are essential to language learning nonetheless. Chamot and Kupper (1989) mentioned that successful learners tend to select strategies that work together well in a highly orchestrated way, tailored to the requirement of the language task. These learners can easily explain the strategies they use and why they employ them (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990).

3. Methodology

(1) Participants & Context

The subjects involved in this study compromised 450 students enrolled at Fooyin University in Southern Taiwan. The respondents consisted largely of females with an average age of 19-22 and their first language is Mandarin Chinese. They place at a low-medium level in language ability. At the time of this research project, they were taking one required English course- two hours per week. This project was implemented in the general required English course which aims to enable students and teachers to teach and learn vocabulary more effectively. It was stressed that the results would not affect their English course grades.

(2) Instruments

1. The placement test

TOEFIC BRIDGE (The Test of English for International Communication) was used as an English language proficiency test. Placement of students into levels was based on the test scores. The test is composed of 100 multiple-choice questions divided into two sections. The first part of the test is listening comprehension, including fifty questions. The second section covers reading and grammar and makes up the other fifty questions.

2. The questionnaire

A questionnaire that was designed by the researcher was used to discover factors affecting students’ vocabulary learning strategies. The questionnaire was divided into three parts (1) students’ background information, (2) students’ vocabulary learning strategies and student’s self-initiated outside classroom vocabulary learning activities.

(3) Procedure

The placement test was administered to all of the Fooyin freshmen who were taking the general English courses as a requirement. Then the students were assigned to different ability groups based on the scores of the English Ability Test, and then received different instructions in the new coming semester. The survey of students’ vocabulary learning strategies was conducted at the end of the fall semester. Six middle-level classes, two lower-level classes and two high-level classes were randomly selected to serve as the subjects.

(4) Data Analysis

Data collection was conducted by the author, with the assistance of several English teachers in Fooyin University. A vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire was distributed to the participating students during their regular English classes at the beginning of the fall semester. The researcher then conducted a series of statistical analyses on the collected data by using the Statistical Packages for the Social Science. One way ANOVA was performed to examine the significance of differences among the three ability groups. Results were considered statistically significant at .05 level.

4. Results and Discussion

(1) Students' Vocabulary Strategy Use

One of the purposes of this study is to investigate how the students learn and memorizes vocabulary. The results of the study reveals that the most popular vocabulary learning strategy is looking up words in a dictionary, followed by vocabulary application in daily life, mental lexicon, contextual clues, key words methods, and associations.

(2) Extracurricular vocabulary learning activities & Vocabulary strategies use

Table 1 indicates that proficient learners were much more devoted to extracurricular self-initiated vocabulary learning activities than the less proficient learners. The most popular self-initiated vocabulary learning activities were watching English TV programs, whereas listening to English radio programs, reading English newspaper or books and playing computer games in English were also popular activities. Proficient learners participated in a wide range of learning activities than did less proficient learners. Nevertheless, it is surprising to find that respondents rarely participated in Internet vocabulary learning activities.

Table 1 Extracurricular vocabulary learning activities

Rank of order	Self-initiated vocabulary learning activities	Average Frequency of participation	P ^a
1	Watch TV programs, movies in English	Medium to High (M=3.95)	.009*
2	Listen to English programs on the radio	Low to Medium (M=2.94)	.001*
3	Read English newspaper and magazines regularly	Low to Medium (M=2.96)	.009*
4	Play computer games in English	Low to Medium (M=2.83)	----
5	Internet vocabulary learning activities	Low(M=2.37)	----

a: when p-value < 0.005, that means there is a significant difference among these three levels students.

(3) Factors Affecting Vocabulary Strategy Use

Motivation& Language Proficiency

Nearly ninety percent of the respondents express that the most important reason for leaning English is to pass the examination in the classes. Generally speaking, these subjects participating in this study didn't have stronger motivation for learning English. Results of the study show that students with stronger motivation participated in self-initiated learning activities than did the less motivated. Table 2 presents the information that learning motivation is found to be the paramount factor for affecting the use of vocabulary learning strategies, followed by family involvement, language proficiency, years of study, and effort.

Effort

Table 2 indicates that the degree to which students spent their time and effort in learning English just didn't make a significant effect on the vocabulary strategy use. The results also reveal that the students who reported spending much time in learning English didn't use vocabulary learning strategy more frequently than those spending less effort.

Family background

According to the results of the study, motivation had a paramount effect on vocabulary learning strategy use, followed by family tutors, language proficiency, years of study and effort. Generally speaking, proficient learners had family members tutoring them than did less proficient learners. Moreover, they made better use of vocabulary learning strategy than the less proficient learners. Another finding is that the relationship between years of study and vocabulary strategy use for language learners didn't have a significant difference. In addition, proficient learners participated in a wider range of self-initiated learning activities than do the less proficient.

Table 2: Significant F-Tests of Background variables on Vocabulary Strategy Variables

Dependent variables	Independent Variables				
	Motivation	Effort	Year	LP	FI
Strategy 1	F=6.40	F=3.85	F=6.435	-----	F=5.37
Strategy 2	-----	----	-----	-----	----
Strategy 3	F=22.8	-----	F=4.927	F=13.24
Strategy 4	F=15.36	-----	F=5.747	F=6.42
Strategy 5	F=12.57	-----	-----	F=4.872	F=7.31
Strategy 6	F=14.40	-----	-----	-----	----

- Strategy 1 represents instantly review ; strategy 2 represents mental lexicon;
- strategy 3 represents daily Application; strategy 4 represents contextual clues; strategy 5 represents key words method; strategy 6 represents association.
- Only significant F-values are shown in this table. $P < .005$
- Effort = Time spent in learning English, Year =years of English study, LP=Language proficiency
FI= Family involvement

4. Conclusion

To conclude the discussion of the findings, some implications that revealed from this study will be outlined. The analyses of the data show that motivation, self-initiated learning activities and several other factors definitely have an important impact on vocabulary learning strategies. It will be discussed in the followings:

As suggested in literature, motivation plays an important role while learning a second language. Motivation is the most significant factor for learning the second language because it determines the extent of the learners' active involvement and attitude toward leaning. The respondents with high motivation used vocabulary learning strategies more often than did the less motivated. Moreover, proficient learners devoted much time to participate in extracurricular learning activities. The data from this case study showed that most of the subjects participating in this study didn't have high learning motivation as we expected. The low learning motivation definitely has a negative effect on students' language proficiency. Instructional strategies to enhance student motivation will be an important task for English teachers. They should design learning activities focusing on the accuracy and appropriateness of application in various contexts of use, and learners must be given opportunities to participate as languages users. Then, motivation for learning vocabulary will be enhanced.

Another important factor affecting students' use of vocabulary learning strategies is family background. According to Wu (2004), family involvement plays an important role in foreign language learning. Proficient learners had more family members tutoring them in English than did less proficient learners. The results of the study indicated that those who have family members tutoring them in English made use of vocabulary learning strategies than did the less proficient learners. In addition, proficient learners were good at using vocabulary learning strategies with high motivation than the less proficient learners. They often participated in self-initiated learning activities for the vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, the years of learning English didn't show a significant impact on vocabulary strategy use. The training for the vocabulary learning can motivate both the proficient learners and less proficient learners. According to Oxford's vocabulary acquisition approach (1990), careful analysis of students' need, personalized instruction, providing practice in using vocabulary strategies, and a variety of vocabulary strategies should be woven into the regular classroom activities. In conclusion, motivation and family background are the main factors for affecting not only academic achievement, foreign language proficiency, but also vocabulary learning strategy. Though learners' family background can't be changed by English teachers or educational practitioners, they can provide authentic materials, and set up good language learning policy to enhance students' learning motivation.

Limitation of the study

In interpreting the findings of this research, some limitations should be taken into account. The results are based on a sample of college nursing students. Therefore, the results should not be generalized to other students with different educational backgrounds. Another limitation is lack of subjects with various kinds of vocabulary strategies. Subjects with different educational background and family background should be obtained and various kinds of vocabulary learning strategies should be discussed in the future study.

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Appendix A

Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire

A: Background Information

1. Birth Year _____
2. Department _____
3. Years for learning English _____
4. Who can teach you English at home? (You can choose more than one answer)
1. grandfather 2. grandmother 3. mother 4. father
5. brother 6. sister 7. brother
9. others (_____), please name it.
0. Nobody

B: Please answer the following questions with a Likert scale.

(5 Strongly agree 4 Agree 3 Moderate 2 Disagree 1 Strongly disagree)

1. I often watch TV programs in English.
2. I often listen to English programs on the radio.
3. I often read English newspaper and magazine regularly
4. I often play computers games in English.
5. I often participate in online vocabulary learning activities.
6. I often spend a lot of time studying English. (more than one hour per day)
7. I often review English vocabulary instantly right after classes
8. I often memorize vocabulary by key word methods.
9. I often memorize vocabulary by mental lexicon.
10. I often memorize vocabulary by associations.
11. I often recognize vocabulary by context clues.
12. I often apply English vocabulary into daily lives.