

A Study of Vocabulary Learning Strategies of the First and Second Year Students from English Department at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University

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Abstract

This research aims to study vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) employed by the first and second-year students from English Department at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University. The questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and think-aloud method were used as the instruments to study what VLS that 100 students at the university frequently used to discover the meaning of English vocabulary. The participants were 54 first-year students and 46 second-year students. There were 16 students (8 first- and 8 second-year students) volunteered to participate in the interview and think-aloud sessions.

The results, concerning the use of *Determination Strategies*, indicated that the majority (98.1%) of the first-year students most frequently consulted an English-Thai dictionary to find the meanings of words, but the use of an English-English dictionary was reported as the least frequently used (5.6%). However, all (100%) second-year students employed the strategy 'analyse affixes and roots', in *Determination Strategies*, to understand the meanings of words most often, while the least often used strategy was the strategy of 'listen to a tape of word lists' in *Cognitive Strategies* (10.9%). In general, the use of VLS reported by the first- and second-year students was significant difference at $p < .05$.

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษากลวิธีในการเรียนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 และ 2 ภาคภาษาอังกฤษ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏเพชรบุรี เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัย ได้แก่ แบบสอบถาม แบบสัมภาษณ์ปลายเปิด และวิธีถ่ายทอดความคิดเห็นเป็นคำพูด (Think-aloud) จากการอ่านเนื้อเรื่องภาษาอังกฤษ เพื่อศึกษาว่านักศึกษานำกลวิธีใดในการเรียนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษมากที่สุด จำนวนนักศึกษาที่ใช้ในการวิจัย คือ นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 จำนวน 54 คน และนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 2 จำนวน 46 คน และมีนักศึกษาจำนวน 16 คน (8 คน ต่อหนึ่งชั้นปี) ที่ได้ตอบแบบสัมภาษณ์และอ่านเนื้อเรื่องโดยถ่ายทอดความคิดเห็นเป็นคำพูด

ผลการวิจัยพบว่า นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 (98.1%) ใช้พจนานุกรมภาษาอังกฤษ-ไทย ในการค้นหาความหมายของคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษมากที่สุด แต่มีการใช้พจนานุกรมภาษาอังกฤษ-อังกฤษน้อยที่สุด (5.6%) ส่วนนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 2 (100%) เรียนคำศัพท์จากการสังเกตวิภัติปัจจัย (Affixation) มากที่สุดในขณะที่กลวิธี 'การฟังเทปคำศัพท์' เป็นกลวิธีที่ใช้กันน้อยที่สุด คิดเป็น 10.9% โดยสรุปแล้ว การใช้กลวิธีในการเรียนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 และ 2 ต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญที่ 0.05

Introduction

The study of second language vocabulary learning is a challenge since several problems still exist. One of the main problems in learning vocabulary is that of forgetting vocabulary which students learned earlier. Secondly, the number of words in a language is enormous and includes specific terms, jargon, and slang. Then, it may be a must that learners should achieve their goals by dealing with a great number of lexical items. If people know how to use words, they will find it easier to achieve their aims. Thirdly, difficulty in learning vocabulary may discourage students while learning English both inside and outside the classrooms. Many Thai students get anxious when they see unfamiliar words in texts. One suggestion from Nation (1990) is that teaching learners the strategies for dealing with low frequency words is far better than spending time on repeating individual words. Fourthly, language teachers pay less attention to techniques for teaching vocabulary. Sometimes, many of the words that are most needed by students have never been learned. Thus, many teachers need more help with vocabulary instruction, so that the teacher can help students learn better. The researcher believes that people can improve their word power if they have effective strategies for learning vocabulary to help them comprehend the meanings of words.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To study VLS which the university learners actually use.
- 2) To compare VLS of students between the first- and second-year students.

Research Questions

- 1) What VLS do the first-year students frequently employ to learn English vocabulary items?
- 2) What VLS do the second-year students frequently employ to learn English vocabulary items?
- 3) Are there any significant differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies between the first-year and the second-year students?

Review of Literature

1. Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Schmitt (1997) develops the extensive taxonomy proposed by Oxford (1990).

The strategies shown in Table 1 are based on Schmitt's study in 1997:

Table 1 A Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Categories	Strategies
Determination Strategies (DET)	1) Analyse parts of speech, 2) Analyse affixes and roots, 3) Check for L1 cognate, 4) Analyse any available pictures or gestures, 5) Guess from textual context, 6) Bilingual dictionary, 7) Monolingual dictionary, 8) Word lists, 9) Flash cards
Social Strategies (SOC)	1) Ask teacher for an L1 translation, 2) Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word, 3) Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word, 4) Ask classmates for meanings, 5) Discover new meaning through group work activity, 6) Study and practise meaning in a group, 7) Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy, 8) Interact with native-speakers

Categories	Strategies
Memory Strategies (MEM)	1) Study word with pictures, 2) Image word's meaning, 3) Connect word to a personal experience, 4) Associate the word with its coordinates, 5) Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms, 6) Use semantic maps, 7) Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives, 8) Peg Method, 9) Loci Method, 10) Group words together to study them, 11) Group words together spatially on a page, 12) Use new word in sentences, 13) Group words together within a storyline 14) Study the spelling of a word, 15) Study the sound of a word, 16) Say new word aloud when studying, 17) Image word form, 18) Underline initial letter of the word, 19) Configuration, 20) Use Keyword method, 21) Affixes and roots (remembering), 22) Parts of speech (remembering), 23) Paraphrase the word's meaning, 24) Use cognate in study, 25) Learn the words of an idiom together, 26) Use physical action when learning a word, 27) Use semantic feature grids
Cognitive Strategies (COG)	1) Verbal repetition, 2) Written repetition, 3) Word lists, 4) Flash cards, 5) Take notes in class, 6) Use the vocabulary section in your textbook, 7) Listen to tape of word lists, 8) Put English labels on physical objects, 9) Keep a vocabulary notebook
Metacognitive Strategies (MET)	1) Use English media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.), 2) Testing oneself with word tests, 3) Use spaced word practice, 4) Skip or pass new word, 5) Continue to study word over time

Source: Schmitt (1997: 207)

2. Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

2.1 Determination Strategies (DET)

Determination Strategies are strategies that use learner's own knowledge and ideas. In other words, they comprise strategies used by individual when discovering new words' meanings without asking for the help of a person's expertise (Schmitt, 1997).

2.2 Social Strategies (SOC)

Social Strategies are one way to discover a new meaning by asking someone else. This is a way to interact with other people to improve language learning. Mostly, teachers are always in this position to assist students (Schmitt, 1997).

2.3 Memory Strategies (MEM)

Thompson (1987) gives more information about mnemonics concerning memory in language learning:

“...Mnemonics means aiding memory. It is often referred to as a “memory trick”. Mnemonics work by utilising some well-known principles of psychology: a retrieval plan is developed during encoding, and mental imagery, both visual and verbal, is used. They help individuals learn faster and recall better because they aid the integration of new material into existing cognitive units and because they provide retrieval cues. Learners need to experiment with different kinds of mnemonic techniques in order to see which ones work best for them.”

2.4 Cognitive Strategies (COG)

From Schmitt's point of view (1997), *Cognitive Strategies* include repetition and using mechanical means to study vocabulary. Written and verbal repetitions, repeatedly writing or saying words over and over again, and the keeping of vocabulary notebooks, are common strategies used in many parts of the world.

2.5 Metacognitive Strategies (MET)

Learners can utilise *Metacognitive Strategies* for controlling and evaluating their own learning by having an overview of the learning process. These strategies are techniques in which learners should be aware of their goals and levels of vocabulary knowledge. The learners need to be aware of their word knowledge levels in order to select a suitable strategy in learning vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000).

3. Significance of Vocabulary in Language Learning

Vocabulary is a crucial tool for people to think, to express ideas and feelings, and to learn about the world. Moreover, students' vocabulary knowledge is strongly connected with academic accomplishment, because a rich vocabulary is necessary for students to successfully comprehend texts while reading. Limited vocabulary prevents students from comprehending a text. The lecturers and students at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University strongly agree with the importance of vocabulary in language learning. If learners have

inadequate vocabulary knowledge, they may not be able to use the language (McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 2001). More importantly, learners need to have a good amount of vocabulary to speak and write naturally and effectively. Finally, vocabulary is now playing an important role in English language learning and teaching. Language trainers should understand learners' desires, problems, and attitudes for vocabulary learning to help learners learn more effectively and happily.

Research Methodology

1. Data Collection

In selecting samples of the study, 100 Thai undergraduate students from English Department at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University were selected. There were 54 first-year students and 46 second-year students. In collecting data to answer the three research questions, the questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and think-aloud method were employed to draw out the students' VLS.

The data was collected based on the procedures as follows:

The Questionnaire

All students were asked to complete the questionnaires. The researcher spent twenty minutes explaining the instructions of how to fill out the questionnaire. The students were allowed to ask about the questions that they did not understand. In total, this session took fifty minutes finishing the questionnaires. Then, the completed questionnaires were collected.

The Semi-structured Interview

The 16 students (8 first-year students and 8 second-year students) were interviewed on the next day from morning to late afternoon. They were interviewed individually in order to obtain more specific data involving students' use of and opinions about vocabulary learning strategies.

The Think-aloud session

The English text, "British Food Best in the World", was prepared for the students. The text was approximately 250 words long with 32 difficult words. These 32 difficult words came from different students in a pilot group who believed these words were difficult for them. Moreover, bilingual and monolingual dictionaries were provided on the student's

table to observe whether they used these reference books to find the meanings of words or not. They were allowed to use dictionaries, translate or speak in Thai out loud. A tape recorder was put on each table to record student's verbal reports, what they said and what they thought when they were reading the text. While the students were reading the text, they could take short notes about how they understood the meanings of the words or phrases found in the text. The students' verbal reports were recorded and the verbatim transcripts were then translated into English.

2. Data Analysis

The data in the questionnaire was analysed by using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The frequencies of the use of VLS will be presented first, and then percentages of each VLS are calculated. Mean (\bar{X}) and standard deviation (SD) were used to give a descriptive rating scale for each strategy in the questionnaire. The mean value would produce a range of the participants' use and opinions and the standard deviation would present the significant difference of participants' use and opinions from the mean value. Moreover, the VLS used in the study were analysed by using the T-test to see the differences of VLS use between the first- and second-year students. The data were calculated to indicate the statistically significant differences between the students in the two groups.

The data obtained from the semi-structured interview and think-aloud sessions were analysed by categorising the frequencies of the strategies reported as being employed by the 16 students.

Results

Research Question 1: What VLS do the first-year students frequently employ in order to learn English vocabulary items?

In response to research question 1 posed to the participants, the results obtained from the questionnaire are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Most- and less-used VLS of the first-year students obtained from the questionnaire

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)	%	\bar{X}	SD	Result
Determination Strategies (DET)				
Look up a word in English-Thai dictionary	98.1	5.44	0.744	Usually used
Look up a word in English-English dictionary	94.4	1.46	0.884	Seldom used
Social Strategies (SOC)				
Ask classmates for meanings	94.4	4.78	0.925	Usually used
Ask the teacher to check their word lists for accuracy	81.4	2.20	1.035	Seldom used
Memory Strategies (MEM)				
Paraphrase the word's meanings	90.7	4.63	0.938	Usually used
Use physical actions when learning a word	74.1	2.40	1.284	Seldom used
Cognitive Strategies (COG)				
Learn words through written repetition	88.9	4.85	1.017	Usually used
Listen to a tape of word lists	83.3	2.09	1.154	Seldom used
Metacognitive Strategies (MET)				
Use English media (e.g. news, songs, advertisement)	88.9	4.63	0.917	Usually used
Speak or describe things in English	81.5	2.28	1.379	Seldom used

Additionally, eight first-year students participated in the interview session. The data indicated that some first-year students who are considered good learners, based on their English proficiency level, preferred English media such as movies, songs, newspapers, and magazines for learning English vocabulary. Moreover, these students frequently consulted an English-Thai dictionary to find the meanings of words and they stated that noticing signboards or instructions on products was another way to learn vocabulary. However, some weak learners liked singing and listening to English songs and talking with native speakers to learn words.

Research Question 2: What VLS do the second-year students frequently employ in order to learn English vocabulary items?

The strategies shown in Table 3 were reported to be employed by 46 second-year students in order to discover the meaning of English vocabulary that they frequently encounter while studying English in class and outside class. The following are the major results obtained from research question 2.

Table 3 Most- and less-used VLS of the second-year students obtained from the questionnaire

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)	%	\bar{X}	SD	Result
Determination Strategies (DET)				
Analyse affixes and roots	100	5.52	0.658	Usually used
Look up a word in English-English dictionary	87	2.26	0.976	Seldom used
Social Strategies (SOC)				
Ask teacher for translating the meaning of a word	87	4.57	0.981	Usually used
Ask the teacher to check their word lists for accuracy	76.1	2.22	1.191	Seldom used
Memory Strategies (MEM)				
Remember affixes and roots to know the meanings	91.3	4.67	0.896	Usually used
Use physical actions when learning a word	87	2.37	0.974	Seldom used
Cognitive Strategies (COG)				
Learn words through written repetition	91.3	4.76	1.037	Usually used
Listen to a tape recorder and pronounce words	89.1	1.93	1.181	Seldom used
Metacognitive Strategies (MET)				
Use English media (e.g. news, songs, advertisement)	87	4.93	1.041	Usually used
Translate the meaning of word from Thai into English	84.8	2.09	1.208	Seldom used

Eight second-year students participated in the interview session. Some good learners reported that they used English media as a way to learn English vocabulary (e.g. watching English movies or news, reading newspapers or magazines) which is under *Metacognitive Strategies*, and took notes in class in *Cognitive Strategies*. However, some weak students preferred noticing signboards or instructions on products to learn words, which can be

considered as *Metacognitive Strategies*, and using an English-Thai dictionary in *Determination Strategies* to find the meaning of English words.

Research Question 3: Are there any significant differences in the use of VLS between the first- and the second-year students?

To respond to research question 3, essential statistical confirmation, such as the T-test and the Pearson Product Moment Correlation, were utilised to compare the students' answers from the questionnaires. As for the expectations of this study, the significant difference of the results is less than .05 ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4 Comparison of significant differences of VLS use between the first- and second-year students, based on the T-test

Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Sig.(2-tailed) *Significant
1. Analysing affixes and roots (DET)	.000*
2. Guessing from textual context (DET)	.000*
3. Using Thai-English dictionary (DET)	.000*
4. Asking the teacher for synonym or (SOC)	.497*
5. Remembering words from parts of speech (MEM)	.233*
6. Remembering affixes and roots (MEM)	.000*
7. Learning a word by paraphrasing the word's meaning (MEM)	.149*
8. Using physical actions while learning or remembering a word (MEM)	.741*
9. Doing exercises to learn a word (MET38)	.901*

It was found that all second-year students tried to analyse affixes and roots to understand the meanings or words more than the first-year students did. Also, guessing the meanings of words from textual context was reported being most employed by the second-year students, but a little over a third (33.3%) of the first-year students reported using this strategy. The second-year students reported that guessing the meanings of words from context clues was a worthwhile strategy for them since it saved time in reading texts. Moreover, as for the use of Thai-English dictionaries, the results showed that the second-year students (37%) employed this strategy more often than the first-year students (7.4%). Additionally, the second-year students were more likely to ask their teacher for a synonym of a new word than the first-year students. However, learning words by remembering parts

of speech was a most-used strategy for the first-year students. With respect to the strategy of remembering affixes and roots to get the meanings of words, it was the most-used strategy of the second-year students. Conversely, learning a word by paraphrasing the word's meanings was another strategy that was most frequently employed by the first-year students (90.7%). Moreover, the first-year students (25.9%) tended to use physical actions while learning a new word more than the second-year students did (13%). For example, they did not dance while learning the word 'dance'. Lastly, the first-year students (59.3%) made use of the strategy of doing vocabulary exercises, such as cloze tests, multiple choice exercises or making a sentence, to discover the meanings of words more frequently than the second-year students (47.8%).

The think-aloud Results

Table 5 The differences in the use of VLS between the first- and second-year students drawn from the think-aloud session

The first-year students	The second-year students
<p>The overall use of strategies reported in think-aloud method:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use English-Thai dictionary 2. Identify parts of speech of words 3. Remember words from media (e.g. The Internet, advertisements, TV programmes) 4. Skip unknown words 5. Translate the meanings of words into Thai 6. Look at individual words 	<p>The overall use of strategies reported in think-aloud method:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use English-Thai dictionary 2. Analyse affixes and roots 3. Remember words from media (e.g. The Internet, advertisements, newspaper, brochures) 4. Skip unknown words 5. Translate the meanings of words into Thai 6. Read the whole sentences to get the meanings of words 7. Guess the meanings of words from surrounding words, and context clues 8. Scan specific details of interest

Regarding Table 5, about half (44.64%) of the first-year students employed an English-Thai dictionary to find the meanings of words, and only 33.48% of the second-year students employed this technique. Moreover, it is clear that the majority of the first-and

second-year students preferred translating the meanings of words into Thai (54.94% and 54.51%, respectively). As for the skipping technique, all students would similarly skip the unknown words if they saw them as inessential, and in some cases, they would skip the words if they could guess the meaning of the word from textual context; 12.02% made use of this technique.

When focusing on the chief differences in terms of strategies used in reading texts between the first- and second-year students, it was found that the first-year students rarely (3.80%) employed the strategy of guessing the meanings from surrounding words, but the second-year students employed this strategy more often, nearly 10%. With regard to the strategy of noticing the context clues, more second-year students utilised this strategy than did first-year students; they were 10.30% and 3.43%, respectively. As for reading the whole sentence to get the meanings of words, the second-year students (28.76%) preferred this technique more than the first-year students (14.16%). In terms of the use of techniques for translating word by word, the first-year students preferred using this technique for 60.52%, more than the second-year students; they used this strategy for only 40.78%. Regarding the scanning for specific details, the second-year students used this technique for approximately 4.00%, while no one in the first year used such a technique.

Conclusion

In a general sense, the results of this study are consistent with the previous studies in terms of the strategies used in learning English vocabulary by university students (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997; Pajonsak Mingsakoon, 2003).

The VLS of the students should be regarded as a needed aspect of lexical learning that deserves future consideration. Understanding the students' natural learning patterns contributes to a better understanding of how they come to learn the words of the target language, particularly English. Through this study, it is hoped that lecturers at the university will better understand the vocabulary learning behaviors of students so that they can more effectively train and lead their students to greater achievement in learning vocabulary. Certainly, the results of this study can offer great benefits to English language lecturers and students in terms of dictionary use. The results show that using English-Thai dictionaries is the most-used strategy for students at the university. therefore, the students should be encouraged to make extensive use of dictionaries regardless of what kind of dictionaries

they are. Lecturers can design tasks for the students in order to improve their skills in using dictionaries. However, besides the use of dictionaries, these results imply that learners can see merit in strategies which they do not presently use. Seventy percent of the students at the university revealed that they would be willing to try new strategies if they were trained how to use them effectively.

Recommendations for Further Study

The students differ greatly in the skill with which they use strategies. So, it is important to train the students in the use of the strategies, especially dictionary use which is reported to be a strategy widely used by language learners, and likewise by the students at Phetchaburi Rajabhat University. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies should focus on training of both monolingual and bilingual dictionary use.

This study examines only Schmitt's (1997) framework and the 43 VLS listed in the questionnaire. However, further studies could study more about students' use of LLS in relation to VLS (training strategies). This would be to develop new categories of VLS to suit the next researcher's home situation.

However, the results of this study cannot actually be generalised to other university students. Therefore, it is highly recommended that further research involving VLS should investigate a larger sample group. This means that a researcher should consider more than one university in selecting subjects of the study. Ideally, the researcher should compare students who study in a metropolitan area and also in a provincial area to explore any differences in how they use the strategies. Moreover, there are other related issues of LLS and VLS that are interesting to investigate further.

Finally, it is expected that the recommendations offered in this study would be fruitful for English language lecturers or other academics as well as language learners who are interested in studying L2 VLS. Also, the recommendations which are based on the results of this study, have been stated in order to encourage researchers, language lecturers, and interested people to conduct further investigations and take steps to help learners improve their L2 vocabulary learning strategies. The researcher strongly believes in the merits of strategy training, which can help the students learn L2 words confidently and successfully.

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