

Thai Business English Students' Receptive Vocabulary Size and Its Relationship to the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This research investigated business English students' receptive vocabulary size and their use of vocabulary learning strategies. The study also aimed to examine the relationship between the students' receptive vocabulary size and their vocabulary learning strategies. The units of analysis were 59 second-year business English students who were attending a university in Trang Province, Thailand. Two research instruments were utilized i.e. an English-Thai receptive vocabulary size test and a questionnaire regarding vocabulary learning strategies. Findings revealed that the students' average receptive vocabulary size was approximately 4,897 words, which was insufficient for effective listening. The students used the vocabulary learning strategies at a moderate level. Determination strategies were the type most frequently employed by the students. Furthermore, 11 out of 39 vocabulary learning strategies were highly employed by them to acquire vocabulary. The achievers with a high vocabulary size employed two strategies contributing to their receptive vocabulary size while their counterparts with a low vocabulary size used only one such strategy. The students' receptive vocabulary size was positively and significantly ($p < 0.05$) correlated with vocabulary learning strategies ($r = .241-.470$).

Key words: Receptive vocabulary size, vocabulary learning strategies, Thai business English students

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Introduction

In this age of globalization, English has been considered a lingua franca for international communication. This international communicative tool has played an essential role in several contexts, including those pertaining to business and education (Crystal, 2003). Therefore, Thai students, especially those in the business field, need to have sufficient English proficiency to effectively conduct business in global markets.

For foreign language learners, listening skill has been recognized as a basic language skill and one of the most significant skills needed to master other skills, particularly speaking. If one understands and recognizes spoken utterances, one can interact naturally and effectively in spoken communication (Nunan and Miller, 1995). Consequently, listening plays an important role as a tool for English communication.

According to Mecartty (2000), one of the factors which causes learners' ineffective listening comprehension is a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Sufficient vocabulary knowledge, particularly receptive vocabulary knowledge (receptive vocabulary size [RVS]), the type required for understanding a word when heard, will lead to effective listening comprehension (Nation, 2006). For

spoken discourse, Nation (2006) also pointed out that a level of 6,000 to 7,000 words was an adequate RVS for effective listening. However, Nirattisai and Chiramanee (2014) found that the RVS of Thai university students was below 6,000 words, which was insufficient to comprehend effectively. Anandapong (2011) also found that Thai business English students had a problem understanding when encountering unfamiliar words.

To enlarge learners' RVS for effective listening, researchers have attempted to find out ways to develop learners' vocabulary knowledge. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are powerful tools used to enhance vocabulary knowledge. In fact, helping learners improve their VLSs has been recognized as one of the effective approaches to enlarge their repertoire of vocabulary (Cunningsworth, 1995). The main advantage of using VLSs is that learners can monitor their learning. Thus, students can be more responsible for their vocabulary learning by using their own strategies to acquire vocabulary (Nation, 2001; Scharle and Szabó, 2000).

As discussed above, it is useful and valuable to investigate the RVS of second-year university business English students who have problems in listening

comprehension. This group of students is required to spend a year in Malaysia as part of their curriculum. Thus, a large RVS and effective VLSs are fundamental to their success. Thus, this study was designed to explore their VLSs and to examine the relationship between their RVS and their VLSs. The results of the study can help both business English students and teachers become aware of the importance of RVS and the use of VLSs. Furthermore, it is beneficial for business English programs to design suitable learning activities to develop their students' RVS, thus enhancing the students' listening skill.

Research Objectives

This research served three main purposes as follows: (1) to investigate the RVS of second-year business English students, (2) to explore the students' frequently employed VLSs, and (3) to examine the relationship between the students' RVS and their VLSs.

Literature Review

Vocabulary Size

In second language (L2) learning, it has long been recognized that vocabulary size, or knowledge, is a crucial communicative tool. Learners need to have sufficient vocabulary to convey meaning in a foreign language (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). According to Nation (2006), adequate

vocabulary size can assist L2 learners to comprehend and use spoken and written language effectively. Fan (2003) also confirmed that L2 learners' lack of sufficient vocabulary causes ineffective language performance.

Receptive Vocabulary Size

Receptive vocabulary size refers to word knowledge frequently employed in listening and reading (Nation, 2005; Schmitt, 2010). Nation (1990) clearly proposed an explanation of word knowledge which has been widely accepted by many researchers, namely that receptive vocabulary knowledge involves knowing: (1) a word form—being able to recognize a word when it is heard or read, (2) a word position—knowing grammatical patterns and collocation knowledge, (3) a word function—knowing word frequency and appropriateness, and (4) a word meaning—being able to recall a word by means of other words which have the closest meaning.

Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are the actions which language learners use in L2 acquisition to achieve their language learning goals. Learners use language learning strategies as tools to enhance the enjoyment of their language learning, resulting in more self-

direction and more beneficial outcomes, with new vocabulary acquired more easily and more rapidly.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies are a subset of language learning strategies (Nation, 2001). Many researchers, such as Sokmen (1997) and Cameron (2001), have proposed definitions for VLSs. According to Sokmen (1997), VLSs are defined as language learners' actions employed to assist them in understanding a word's meaning. They are also described as the actions which language learners perform in order to help themselves comprehend and memorize new words (Cameron, 2001).

Classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies have been classified differently by various researchers, such as Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt and McCarthy (1997), and Nation (2001). According to Nation (2001), VLSs are classified into three general classes: planning, sources, and process. Moreover, Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) proposed a classification of VLSs, which has become widely accepted by scholars in the field of vocabulary acquisition, e.g., Hamzah et al. (2009), and Kalajahi and Pourshahian (2012). Schmitt's taxonomy is comprised of five main

VLSs: (1) *memory strategies*—associating a newly-acquired word with previous knowledge, (2) *cognitive strategies*—similar to memory strategies but focusing on repetition and the use of mechanical means, (3) *metacognitive strategies*—learning and decision-making processes involving planning, controlling, and evaluating effective ways of learning, (4) *determination strategies*—those strategies employed by individuals to understand a word's meaning without asking other people, and (5) *social strategies*—ways to study a new word by consulting or interacting with other people (Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997).

Research Methodology

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis of this research were 59 second-year business English students who were attending a university in Trang Province, Thailand.

Research Instruments

An English-Thai Receptive Vocabulary Size Test

An English-Thai RVS test was employed to measure students' RVS. This test was adapted from a vocabulary size test in English, the multiple-choice version proposed by Nation and Beglar (2007), which was later translated into Thai. This test consists of 130 items, divided into 13 separate one-thousand

word-family levels. Each level has 10 items. The English-Thai version of the test has the same features as the English version, except for the options used in the multiple-choice answers (alternatives). Based on Nirattisai and Chiramanee (2014), a fifth alternative answer, “I don’t know,” was added to the test to prevent guessing. In this test, the students had to select the closest meaning to the key word used in the question. Based on Nation (2008), each correct definition was awarded one point, for a total of 130 possible points. The total score attained by each of the students was multiplied by 100 to calculate the RVS. An example, item 6 from the first thousand-word level, is as follows:

6. admissible: That is not admissible.

- a. สามารถเชื่อถือ
- b. อนุญาต
- c. สามารถบรรยายได้
- d. เห็นชอบ
- e. ไม่ทราบคำตอบ

Questionnaire Regarding Vocabulary Learning Strategies

A questionnaire was used as a tool to explore the students’ use of VLSs. It was mainly adapted based on Schmitt and McCarthy (1997), and Nirattisai and Chiramanee (2014). The 39 items used in this questionnaire were VLSs consisting

of five categories: (1) *memory* strategies (MEM), e.g., the process of saying new words aloud when studying, (2) *cognitive* strategies (COG), e.g., learning words through verbal repetition, (3) *metacognitive* strategies (MET), e.g., watching English movies or English television programs, (4) *determination* strategies (DET), e.g., guessing the meaning of words from written context, and (5) *social* strategies (SOC), e.g., asking classmates for the meaning of words. A six-point scale from 0 (never employed) to 5 (most frequently employed) was provided so that the students could rate the frequency of VLSs used. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire, by means of Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.96.

Data Collection

The RVS test was first administered to 59 second-year business English students, followed by their completion of the questionnaire regarding the VLSs.

Findings and Discussion

Receptive Vocabulary Size

Table 1 shows that the students’ average RVS was approximately 4,897 words (SD=892). The largest group (42%) of students had a receptive vocabulary level of 4,000 words. The highest receptive vocabulary level attained, which only 3% of the students could achieve, was 7,000

words. The lowest receptive vocabulary level, a level which 2% of the students had not surpassed, was 2,000 words.

The 59 students were divided into a high group and a low group, based on the criterion that knowledge of 6,000 words was sufficient for effective listening (Nation, 2006). Thus, five students with vocabularies of more than 6,000 words were classified as the high group, and 54 students with vocabularies lower than 6,000 words were classified as the low group. Therefore, most of the students failed to have a sufficient vocabulary size for effective listening. This finding was consistent with Nirattisai and Chiramanee (2014), who found that Thai university students' RVS was inadequate for effective listening.

The averages of the RVS of the high and low groups were 6,720 words (SD=460), and 4,728 words (SD=715), respectively (Table 1). Two of the five students in the high group had a receptive vocabulary level of 7,000 words while the other three had a level of 6,000 words. The largest segment (46%) of the low group had acquired a receptive vocabulary level of 4,000 words, with one student in the low group having a receptive vocabulary level of only 2,000 words.

As mentioned above, the findings showed that the RVS of most of the students was below the adequate vocabulary size for effective listening. Therefore, 92% of the students would have listening problems while only 8% of the students would be able to listen effectively

Table 1: Second year business English students' receptive vocabulary size

Vocabulary size (words)	Number (%) of students		
	High Group n1 = 5	Low Group n2 = 54	All students N = 59
8000-13999	-	-	-
7000-7999	2 (40%)	-	2 (3%)
6000-6999	3 (60%)	-	3 (5%)
5000-5999	-	21 (39%)	21 (36%)
4000-4999	-	25 (46%)	25 (42%)
3000-3999	-	7 (13%)	7 (12 %)
2000-2999	-	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
Below 2000	-	-	-
\bar{X}	6720	4728	4897
SD	460	715	892

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Table 2 illustrates that all 59 students moderately employed the overall VLSs, with a mean score of 3.28 (SD=0.60).

With regard to the individual strategy categories, the students employed most frequently the DET (\bar{X} =3.37, SD=0.79), followed by the MET (\bar{X} =3.32, SD=0.73), the SOC (\bar{X} =3.29, SD=0.75), the COG (\bar{X} =3.29, SD=0.63), and the MEM (\bar{X} =3.18, SD=0.69), respectively.

These findings were in line with previous studies by Komol and Sripetpun

(2011), and Nirattisai and Chiramanee (2014), which found that Thai university students used the DET most frequently.

Among the 39 VLSs, 11 strategies were highly employed by the students. These included one MEM, two COG, two MET, four DET, and two SOC. The strategy that was employed the most among the students was *listening to English songs or English news* (\bar{X} =4.12, SD=0.95), as shown in Table 3.

After studying each group of vocabulary achievers, the findings revealed that those in the high group highly employed the nine learning strategies from the four categories which

are listed in Table 4. The strategies of *listening to English songs or English news*, *looking up words in an English-Thai dictionary*, and *guessing the meaning of words from written context* were the strategies employed the most by the high achievers ($\bar{X}=4.40$).

In the low group, on the other hand, 13 VLSs were highly employed to enlarge vocabulary knowledge in the

following categories: two MEM, two COG, two MET, four DET, and three SOC (Table 5).

The low achievers most frequently used the strategy of *listening to English songs or English news* in the MET category ($\bar{X}=4.09$, $SD=0.98$), as shown in Table 5.

Table 2: Frequently employed vocabulary learning Strategies

Categories of vocabulary learning strategies	\bar{X}	SD	Rank	Level of use
Memory	3.18	0.69	4	Moderate
Cognitive	3.29	0.63	3	Moderate
Metacognitive	3.32	0.73	2	Moderate
Determination	3.37	0.79	1	Moderate
Social	3.29	0.75	3	Moderate
Overall strategies	3.28	0.60		Moderate

Table 3: Most frequently employed vocabulary learning strategies by all students

Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	\bar{X}	SD
Memory	Saying new words aloud when studying	3.88	1.12
	Learning words through verbal repetition	3.76	1.01
Cognitive	Taking notes of the newly-learned words in class	3.51	1.09
	Listening to English songs or English news	4.12	0.95
Metacognitive	Watching English movies or English TV programs	3.95	0.97
	Looking up words in an English-Thai dictionary	4.02	0.97
Determination	Guessing the meaning of words from textual context	3.64	1.01
	Looking up words in an English-English dictionary	3.58	1.30
	Looking up words in an Thai-English dictionary	3.53	1.22
	Asking classmates for meaning	3.64	1.23
Social	Asking teacher for a sentence including the new word	3.53	1.22

Table 4: Most frequently employed strategies by the high vocabulary achievers

Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	\bar{X}	SD
Memory	Saying new words aloud when studying	3.87	1.12
	Studying word with pictorial representation of its meaning	3.56	1.02
Cognitive	Learning words through verbal repetition	3.76	1.11
	Taking notes of the newly-learned words in class	3.50	1.11
Metacognitive	Listening to English songs / English news	4.09	0.98
	Watching English movies / English TV programs	3.93	0.99
Determination	Looking up words in an English-Thai dictionary	3.98	1.00
	Looking up words in an English-English dictionary	3.70	1.27
	Guessing the meaning of words from textual context	3.57	1.00
	Looking up words in a Thai-English dictionary	3.57	1.25
Social	Asking classmates for meaning	3.72	1.17
	Asking teacher for a sentence including the new word	3.61	1.20
	Asking teacher for an L1 translation	3.50	0.95

Table 5: Most frequently employed strategies by the low vocabulary achievers

Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	\bar{X}	S.D.
Memory	Paraphrasing the word's meaning	4.00	0.71
	Saying new words aloud when studying	4.00	1.22
Cognitive	Learning words through verbal repetition	3.80	1.01
	Taking notes of the newly-learned words in class	3.60	0.89
Metacognitive	Listening to English songs or English news	4.40	0.55
	Watching English movies or English TV programs	4.20	0.84
	Using English websites	3.80	0.84
Determination	Looking up words in an English-Thai dictionary	4.40	0.55
	Guessing the meaning of words from textual context	4.40	0.98

Relationship between the Receptive Vocabulary Size and the Vocabulary Learning Strategies

There was a significantly positive and low correlation between the participants' RVS and their use of MET ($r=.259$, $p<.05$). It could be inferred that the students who employed more MET to acquire receptive vocabulary would have a higher RVS, as shown in Table 6.

Of the 39 VLSs, four had a significantly positive and moderate correlation with the participants' RVS, i.e., *paraphrasing the word's meaning* was correlated most highly with the participants' RVS ($r=.470$, $p<.01$),

followed by *using online exercises to test vocabulary knowledge*, *remembering the word from its part of speech*, and *using spaced-word practice* ($r=.393$, $p<.01$; $r=.310$, $p<.01$; and $r=.306$, $p<.01$, respectively), as shown in Table 7.

Furthermore, five VLSs were significantly correlated at a low level with the participants' RVS: *guessing the meaning of words from written context* ($r=.285$, $p<.05$), followed by *using cognates in study*, *reading English magazines or English newspapers*, *studying the spelling of a word*, and *grouping words together to study them* ($r=.257$, $p<.05$; $r=.252$, $p<.05$; $r=.245$,

$p < .05$; and $r = .241$, $p < .01$, respectively). The finding that *guessing the meaning of words from written context* was significantly correlated with the students' RVS was in line with Fan (2003), who found that the guessing strategy was beneficial for acquiring English words.

The findings also showed that the achievers in the high group highly employed two strategies which significantly contributed to their RVS: *paraphrasing the word's meaning* and

guessing the meaning of words from written context (Tables 4 and 7). Therefore, this result could indicate that those with more frequent use of *paraphrasing the word's meaning* and *guessing the meaning of words from written context* would have a higher RVS. In the low group, only one strategy which was significantly correlated with the RVS, *guessing the meaning of words from written context*, was highly employed (Tables 5 and 7).

Table 6: Pearson's correlation coefficient between Vocabulary learning strategies and students' receptive vocabulary size

Categories of Vocabulary Learning strategy	r	p-value
Metacognitive	.259	.02
Overall	.114	.19

Table 7: Pearson's correlation coefficient between vocabulary learning strategies and to students' receptive vocabulary size

Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Vocabulary Learning Strategies	r	p-value
Memory	Paraphrasing the word's meaning	.470	.000
	Remembering from its part of speech	.310	.008
	Using cognates in study	.257	.025
	Studying the spelling of a word	.245	.031
	Grouping words together to study them	.241	.033
	Reading English magazines / English newspaper	.252	.027
Metacognitive	Using online exercise to test vocabulary knowledge	.393	.001
	Using spaced word practice	.306	.009
Determination	Guessing the meaning of words from textual context	.285	.014

The research findings demonstrate the following:

1. The students' average RVS was approximately 4,897 words, which is insufficient for effective listening (Nation, 2006). The largest group of students (42%) had a receptive vocabulary level of 4,000 words. This reflects the fact that the majority of students' RVS was at the low level, which is inadequate for effective listening. Thus, these students encounter problems with listening.

2. Students in this research employed the overall VLSs at the moderate level. The DET were the most frequently employed. Furthermore, 11 out

of the 39 VLSs were highly employed to acquire vocabulary. The achievers from the high group highly employed two VLSs which were significantly correlated with their RVS: *paraphrasing the word's meaning* and *guessing the meaning of words from written context* while the achievers from the low group highly employed only one VLS, i.e., *guessing the meaning of words from written context*. According to Schmitt and McCarthy (1997), *paraphrasing the word's meaning* was one VLS that language learners employed. They also stated that students employed this MEM strategy by linking new words with English words already known. Moreover,

the result that the strategy of *guessing the meaning of words from written context* significantly contributed to students' RVS was consistent with Fan (2003), who found that the guessing strategy was an effective means to acquire new words. This was because written context could help students discover unknown word meaning (Nation, 2001; Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997).

3. There was a significantly positive correlation between students' RVS and their use of MET at a low level. Four out of the 39 VLSs had a significantly moderate and positive correlation with RVS. Moreover, five out of the 39 VLSs were significantly correlated with the subjects' RVS at a low level. This finding reflects the fact that those students who used more of the five VLSs mentioned in Table 7 would have a higher RVS. This finding was in agreement with Fan (2003), who stated that language learners who frequently

employed more VLSs would be more successful in vocabulary learning because they could expand the size of their vocabulary.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study aimed to investigate RVS and VLSs and to examine the relationship between the two. The study was conducted with second-year university business English students, limited to a particular group of business English students at a single university. Further studies should be conducted with other groups of business English students of different backgrounds and with differences in RVS. To obtain in-depth information about the students' use of VLSs, further studies could include other research instruments, such as detailed interviews and observation of the students' daily use of VLSs.

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