

A Survey of Strategies of English Vocabulary Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract

Learning vocabulary is one of the best ways to master a target language. While language learners employ a variety of strategies, this article focuses on how Thai university students develop their English vocabulary skills. We investigated their vocabulary learning strategies through a voluntary survey conducted in October 2023. Of the 59 participants, 26 students willingly shared their approaches to learning English vocabulary in response to the prompt "How do you learn English vocabulary?" This research provided a deeper understanding of the diverse methods employed by Thai students, encompassing both traditional and modern approaches. Recommendations for future studies and classroom teaching are also provided.

Keywords: Vocabulary acquisition; Vocabulary learning strategies; Thai university students

Introduction

Language learning is a multifaceted journey, and understanding the diverse strategies employed by students in learning English vocabulary is pivotal for effective language instruction (Brown, 2007; Nation, 2001). Similarly, Ghalebi, Sadighi, and Bagheri (2020) emphasized that learning a foreign or second language is a dynamic and intricate process that thrives when learners adopt strategic approaches to aid their learning. This can include, among other methods, actively seeking opportunities to develop language learning strategies. This article presents a survey conducted in October 2023, exploring the approaches university students undertake in their pursuit of enhanced English vocabulary. Drawing insights from 26 out of 59 participants who voluntarily responded to the query, "How do you learn English vocabulary?", the study aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between traditional and modern methods in language learning.

One may ask what is meant by 'vocabulary'. According to the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985), vocabulary refers to " a set of lexemes, including single words, compound words, and idioms (p. 307)." A strategy is simply



a way of doing things, a way to reach one's goal. A vocabulary learning strategy can be perceived as a subset of a language learning strategy, involving both conscious and unconscious processes.

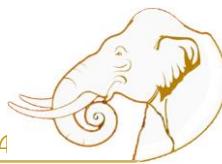
Our commitment to supporting students' vocabulary development stems from the shared understanding, reinforced by both experience and research, that vocabulary constitutes a foundational skill for language acquisition. Abundant research, particularly focused on EFL (English as a foreign language) and ESL (English as a second language) learners, has consistently demonstrated a strong positive correlation between learners' vocabulary knowledge and their overall language proficiency (e.g., Qian & Lin, 2020). Vocabulary helps students speak better English. Seffa (2015) investigated the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and oral competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner. Their findings emphasized the significance of strong vocabulary knowledge for learners' ability to effectively express themselves in spoken English.

In this study, we examined the English vocabulary learning strategies of Thai university students. We identified thematic patterns and determined their preferred methods through an analysis of their responses.

Literature Review

Vocabulary learning strategies are methods or techniques that learners use to learn new words or expressions and improve their vocabulary skills in general. Vocabulary learning is an essential component of language learning, as it enables learners to communicate effectively and comprehend various texts and genres. The long-held belief is this - the more vocabulary you know the better it is for you. However, vocabulary learning is not a straightforward process; it involves many cognitive, affective, and social factors that influence how learners acquire and use words in different contexts (Nation, 2001; Takač, 2014).

According to Nation (2009), there are four main types of vocabulary learning strategies: 1) encoding strategies, 2) retrieval strategies, 3) elaboration strategies, and 4) metacognitive strategies. Encoding strategies are those that help learners encode new words into their long-term memory by using various cues such as word parts, synonyms, antonyms, associations, and images. Retrieval strategies are those that help learners recall previously learned words from their memory by using various cues such as word lists, word maps, word games, etc. Elaboration strategies are those that help learners connect new words with their existing knowledge by using various cues such as examples, explanations, comparisons, contrasts, etc. Metacognitive strategies are those that help learners monitor and regulate their own learning process by using various cues such as goals, plans, feedback, and self-evaluations.



Nation (2009) also distinguishes between two types of vocabulary learning: explicit instruction and implicit instruction. Explicit instruction is a systematic and explicit teaching method that involves presenting new words with clear definitions or examples followed by practice exercises or activities that require learners to use the words in meaningful contexts. Implicit instruction is a more naturalistic and incidental teaching method that involves exposing learners to new words through authentic texts or situations without providing direct explanations or examples.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Taking Oxford's groundwork a step further, Schmitt (1997) classified vocabulary learning strategies into two pillars: independent learning, where students detective-work meanings solo, and collaborative learning, where they leverage social interaction. These then branch into five key subcategories: the self-driven detective work of determination, the peer-powered learning of social strategies, the knowledge association of memory strategies, the rote repetition of cognitive strategies, and the self-awareness-driven optimization of metacognitive strategies.

The effectiveness of different vocabulary learning strategies depends on various factors such as the learner's age level, proficiency level, motivation level, learning style, genre preference, and more. Therefore, it's important for teachers to assess their students' needs and preferences before selecting appropriate vocabulary learning activities for them.

One of the challenges in vocabulary acquisition is how to teach vocabulary in another language (L2) compared to one's native language (L1). Takač (2014), for example, argues that L2 vocabulary learning requires more attention than L1 vocabulary learning because L2 has fewer cognates with L1 than L1 has with itself. Thai students can use L1 cognates to their advantage when learning new vocabulary. For instance, when they encounter the word “ประชาธิบัติ” (Thai: Pracha Thippatai), meaning “democracy”, they can draw connections to familiar words like “ประชาชน” (Thai: Prachachon) meaning “people” and “อธิปไตย” (Thai: Athipatai) meaning “sovereignty”. This strategy of tapping into existing language knowledge can significantly enhance their comprehension of new terms. Cognates are words that share a common origin or meaning across languages such as "brother" in English and "Bruder" in German (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985). Takač (2014) also suggests three main principles for effective L2 vocabulary instruction: providing explicit instruction on word meanings; providing opportunities for learners to use words in meaningful contexts; providing feedback on word usage; monitoring progress and adjusting instruction accordingly.

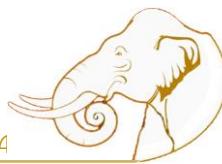


Link between vocabulary learning strategies and language acquisition

This is a topic that has been explored by many researchers in the field of second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learning. Vocabulary acquisition strategies are methods or techniques that learners use to learn new words and improve their vocabulary skills. Language acquisition is the process by which learners acquire the ability to communicate effectively in a given language.

A student's vocabulary acquisition is not a one-size-fits-all journey. Factors like age, proficiency, motivation, learning style, and even genre preference (Brown, 2007; Thornbury, 2002) all play a role. So, before choosing vocabulary activities, teachers should carefully assess each student's individual needs and preferences. Previous research indicates that the adoption of specific vocabulary learning strategies positively impacts vocabulary size and depth, both of which are critical indicators of language proficiency. This robust relationship between vocabulary knowledge and English language proficiency has been well-established by researchers such as Laufer (1998) and Nation & Meara (2002). This fundamental role of vocabulary in language acquisition can be attributed to its foundational nature as the building blocks of communication. Lending further weight to this connection, Kılıç (2019) established a statistically significant positive correlation between vocabulary knowledge and spoken language proficiency. Moreover, Qian (2019) explored how both the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge in ESL affect reading comprehension, focusing on young adults with a solid vocabulary base. The study revealed strong positive correlations between all vocabulary measures and reading scores. Importantly, beyond simply knowing more words, understanding those words more deeply (depth of knowledge) emerged as a unique predictor of reading comprehension. This emphasizes the crucial role of reading itself in building not just vocabulary breadth, but also depth, for ESL learners. Reading exposes them to rich language contexts, fostering deeper understanding and application of vocabulary, ultimately leading to stronger reading comprehension.

Seffa (2015) investigated how Moroccan EFL learners struggle with speaking fluency. This study suggested integrating explicit vocabulary learning strategies into the curriculum, allowing learners to explore various strategies and choose the most effective ones. Teachers should cultivate independent learners by making them aware of their existing and missing strategies. Practicing a variety of strategies equips learners for diverse conversational situations. It was recommended that overcoming the fluency challenge lies in accessing and practicing a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies, with teacher guidance on implementation.



Studies in Thailand

A study by Nirattisai et al. (2014) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies of Thai university students (N=257, across 6 fields). Results indicated that although students utilized a diverse range of strategies, their overall engagement was moderate. While the relationship between strategy use and vocabulary size was generally modest, 17 specific techniques were found to be significantly correlated with greater vocabulary knowledge.

Mungkonwong & Wudthayagorn (2017) highlighted a potential disconnect between the standardized vocabulary goals of Thai basic education and the actual proficiency of students. Their study involving 484 freshmen revealed an average vocabulary size of 4,200 word families, while demonstrating a statistically significant but weak correlation between years of study and vocabulary knowledge. This finding suggests the need for further investigation into factors beyond formal education that may influence language acquisition.

A study by Chumworatayee & Pitakpong (2017) revealed a gap between the perceived value and actual use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) among Thai English majors. Analyzing data from 72 students, the researchers found moderate VLS engagement but high perceived usefulness. Most VLS categories and subcategories exhibited positive correlations between use and perceived benefit, except for specific techniques like seeking translation or letter highlighting. These findings suggest that incorporating explicit VLS instruction into teaching could significantly enhance English vocabulary acquisition for Thai students.

Boonnoon (2019) examined the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) employed by Thai EFL students (n=267) enrolled in an academic reading course across four academic disciplines. The study revealed moderate overall VLS usage, with dictionary and note-taking strategies emerging as the most frequently adopted. Notably, selective attention was the least frequently used strategy. One-way ANOVA further indicated significant differences in VLS use across academic majors ($p<.05$), with health science students demonstrating the highest levels of engagement. This finding suggests a potential relationship between academic field and VLS preference.

Thiendathong and Sukying (2021) conducted a multifaceted investigation into the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) employed by Thai high school students across diverse academic programs (n=491). Employing a mixed-methods approach, they identified the frequency and preferred types of VLSs, exploring potential program-specific variations and the influence of learning context. Through quantitative (47-item questionnaire) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews with 21 students) data collection, the study revealed a nuanced picture of VLS usage. "Determination strategies," focused on independent meaning construction, were the most ubiquitous, while "memory strategies" emphasizing rote memorization were the least favored. Notably, program affiliation and learning



environment emerged as significant factors influencing the repertoire of VLSs favored by students. These findings emphasize the dynamic and context-dependent nature of VLS adoption, highlighting the need for a personalized approach to vocabulary instruction that caters to individual student needs and program-specific orientation.

Method

In October 2023, we collected data through a voluntary survey administered to 59 university students via Google Classroom. A total of 26 students participated, sharing their insights on English vocabulary learning strategies. The data collection follows the university's ethics committee guidelines. The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to unravel patterns and themes inherent in the participants' responses.

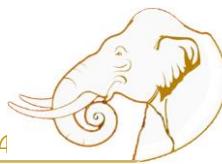
Results and Discussions

The findings reflect a diverse range of strategies employed by university students for English vocabulary acquisition. Traditional methods, such as reading books and engaging with teachers and friends, continue to hold prominence. However, modern approaches, including the use of videos, films, social media, and technology, also play a significant role in shaping students' language learning experiences.

Reading - Useful but still popular?

It was found that a considerable number of students highlighted the importance of reading in their language learning journey. Ten students out of 26 (38.462%) explicitly cited reading as a way to learn English vocabulary. The following quotes illustrate the various ways students incorporate reading into their vocabulary acquisition. Reading books was explicitly mentioned by several students, underscoring its enduring relevance in language learning: "Read English books." Other students highlighted their engagement with novels and movies for language development: "I learned English from reading English novels and watched movies." - Another student expressed a preference for reading English books and watching movies in their free time. Reading and analyzing articles of interest were mentioned: "Read the article that interests me, select the word that I do not understand, and then memorize its meaning."

While numerous studies highlight reading as a powerful predictor of overall language progress (Qian, 1999; Nation, 2001), a surprising finding emerged from a recent survey of language learners. In our study, less than half mentioned reading as a preferred method for achieving their goals, potentially hinting at a shift in learning habits among this group. Could traditional reading be losing its appeal in the face of modern learning tools and platforms? Could it be that students' reading comprehension strategies differ from those of previous generations?



Use of Videos and Films for Language Learning

The incorporation of videos and films emerged as a prevalent method for language learning among the surveyed students: A student outlined a comprehensive approach: "I always learn English vocabulary by watching video clips, listening to music, and playing video games." Another student advocated for diverse activities, including watching movies: "Learn from everyday activities such as listening to music, watching movies, reading books, or reading foreign news." Moreover, a student revealed their preference for visual media: "I learned vocabulary by watching movies, dramas, or playing games. When there are some words I don't know, I usually pause and Google the meaning."

It was found that several students expressed their affinity for audio-visual content, such as English songs and movies, for language enhancement. Another student detailed a method involving movies and subtitles: "Watch the movie while listening to English or reading the subtitles. Write down any words you don't know and practice saying them."

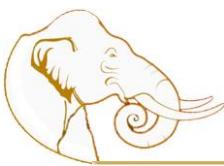
Use of Social Media for Language Learning

The impact of social media on language learning was evident in the responses: A student outlined a multimedia approach, incorporating social media platforms: "I learn English from listening to music, watching videos about teaching English on Facebook and Instagram pages. Sometimes, I learn it from playing games." A student specifically mentioned learning vocabulary from reading quotes on social media and subtitles of movies.

The integration of social media platforms for language learning was highlighted by a student: "Study in the app and various clips on the Facebook page." An additional student emphasized the role of social media in vocabulary acquisition: "I always learn the vocabulary by watching variety shows on social media, English channel, series, and movies in the soundtrack or etc. Moreover, not just watching but I enjoy repeating after them to practice my pronunciation too."

Reading Books and Taking Notes as Learning Methods

Reading books and taking notes emerged as prevalent methods among the participants. A student highlighted the significance of books: "Learn from everyday activities such as listening to music, watching movies, reading books, or reading foreign news." Reading books as a standalone method was explicitly mentioned: "I learn English vocabulary by reading books and watching series." Several students explicitly mentioned reading English books as part of their language learning routine. A student detailed a method involving note-taking as part of vocabulary acquisition: "I write down the new vocabulary on GoodNotes. Next, I use a dictionary to know the meaning, part of speech, and the meaning. Then I use it in a sentence. Finally, speak with yourself."



Community and Group Learning

The analysis of provided quotes did not reveal instances where students explicitly mentioned joining a community or forming a group to learn English. The focus of the comments predominantly centered on individual activities, such as watching videos, listening to music, playing games, reading books, and utilizing various media sources. Past research revealed that students learning in groups scored better on vocabulary tests than those learning alone. Interestingly, those who thought carefully before acting did even better. Working together improved vocabulary, especially for reflective learners (Shafiee & Khavaran, 2017).

AI and Vocab Learning

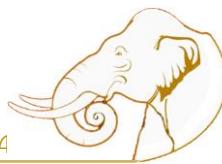
The booming presence of AI-based applications in language learning seems curiously absent in university students' experiences. Surveys suggested a disconnect between AI's potential and its actual use (Cui, 2023). In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), this gap likely arises from a combination of factors, including existing curricula that overlook AI tools, teachers' reluctance to adopt new technologies, and institutions dealing with technological limitations (Dakhie, 2017). To bridge this gap, language programs need a three-pronged approach: equipping teachers with AI training, weaving these tools into updated curriculums, and investing in modern infrastructure. By embracing AI innovation, programs can empower students with effective tools and prepare them for a technologically infused future of language learning.

Summary and Conclusion

The survey conducted among university students aimed to shed light on the various strategies employed in English vocabulary acquisition. A diverse range of 26 out of 59 participants voluntarily shared insights into their language learning practices, responding to the question, "How do you learn English vocabulary?" The study revealed that the students used both traditional and modern methods, encompassing activities such as watching videos, listening to music, playing games, reading books, and engaging with teachers.

While the survey did not reveal explicit mentions of AI or AI-related applications, it uncovered a wide variety of language learning strategies. Traditional methods, including reading books and interacting with teachers, coexisted with contemporary approaches such as using multimedia and social media platforms. The absence of AI references suggests a potential gap in awareness or integration within the surveyed cohort.

The findings of the survey underscore the multifaceted nature of English vocabulary acquisition among university students. The coexistence of traditional and modern methods highlights the importance of accommodating diverse learning preferences. The absence of



explicit mentions of AI tools points to a potential opportunity for educational institutions to enhance awareness and integration of these technologies within language learning programs.

Educators and language program designers can leverage the insights gained from this survey to inform curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. By embracing a holistic perspective that integrates both traditional and modern strategies, language programs can better cater to the evolving needs of students. Additionally, efforts to enhance awareness and support for AI applications in language learning may contribute to a more technologically enriched and effective language education environment. This study serves as a stepping stone for further research and exploration into optimizing English vocabulary acquisition strategies in higher education settings.

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