Review Article

A Survey of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Non-English Majors in Changzhi University

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Abstract

Vocabulary has been playing an important role in language learning. However, to most students in China, vocabulary is the main problem they have met when they learn English. In order to improve their vocabulary learning skills, a study is needed to find out definitions and classifications of English learning strategies used by college students in Changzhi University. Further more, students' different employment of language learning strategies and the related results are essential to be explored. This thesis aims to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by non-English majors by means of questionnaires. The subjects are 238 non-English majors from Changzhi University. Both similarities and differences of application of language learning strategies are explored. The correlation between vocabulary learning strategies and test scores is conducted as well. Further more, some suggestions for lexical learning will be put forward.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies; non-English majors; lexical learning; application of language learning strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

English becomes more and more important in cross-cultural communication, which results in higher requirement for language learners. During the process, vocabulary is seen as solid foundation. Therefore, today so many people in the world pay more attention to vocabulary learning. And the related vocabulary learning strategies are more and more important.

1.1 The Importance of Vocabulary in Second language learning

Language consists of three parts: vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (Cowie, 1997:2247), vocabulary is regarded as total number of words that can be used to make up a language. So in this thesis, vocabulary refers to the total number of words that can be used to make up English. According to Wilkins, "Without grammar little information can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972:11).Mc Carthy holds the idea that learning vocabulary is the experience of most language teachers. Vocabulary is the single, biggest component of any language course. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successful the sounds of second language are mastered, without

words to express a wide range of meanings, successful communication in second language just cannot occur in any meaningful way (Mc Carthy,1990:10).

In learning a language, it is very important for language learners to learn as many words as possible. All second language learners and their teachers agree with the idea that learning a second language is an important process which involves the learning of a large number of words. Vocabulary can be seen as the building material of a language, just as a building cannot be constructed without the building material, and a language is impossible without vocabulary.

According to Laufer, vocabulary plays an important role in reading. It is believed that the importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension is well established. Text comprehension will be impossible without understanding the vocabulary in the text either in one's native language or in a foreign language (Laufer, 1997:98). This is not to say that reading comprehension is equal to vocabulary comprehension, or that the quality of reading is totally determined by vocabulary alone. Reading comprehension is also affected by other factors which involve textually relevant background knowledge and

the application of general reading strategies, such as predicting the main idea of the text, making inferences, guessing the meaning of unknown words in context, recognizing the type of text and the organization of the text, and grasping the main idea of each paragraph. And yet, it has been consistently demonstrated that reading comprehension has a close relationship with vocabulary knowledge. This relationship is closer than that with the other components of reading. As students become more and more proficient in a second language, problems which are caused specifically by syntactical variation become less and less significant. Advanced students who regard English as a second language (ESL) considered an inadequate vocabulary to be the main cause of problems occurring in academic reading. Vocabulary is an important component of language. It has critical importance for the typical language learners. According to Nation, "Vocabulary knowledge is generally considered an important factor in the comprehension of language; the number of known words is related to skillful language use" (Nation, 1993:84.

In brief, vocabulary plays a vital role in all aspects of language learning which consists of various aspects such as, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. Hence, it can be say that great importance should be attached to vocabulary learning.

1.2 The Development of Research in Vocabulary Learning Strategy
Vocabulary learning takes great efforts both of teachers and learners. It is an essential component in second language learning. Yet for a long period of time, insufficient attention has been paid to vocabulary learning. The learning of vocabulary has always been seen as a natural and arduous process of language acquisition by many teachers and students. As a result, not enough related researches have been done until the 1980s and 1990s, which has witnessed the growth of interests in vocabulary learning. And nowadays, with the further study in the second language acquisition, more and more attention has been paid to the students' vocabulary learning strategies.

1.3 Significance of this Study
With the development of globalization and the further opening up to the outside world in China, the important role of English is more and more evident. However, as for the most students in China, English vocabulary is the main problem they have met in the process of learning. In order to solve this headache, it is essential to find out what learning strategies they use in learning English.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
This part will give the review of literature on learning strategies in the process of vocabulary acquisition. In this part, definition, characteristics and classifications of language learning strategies will be discussed.

2.1 Historical Background of Vocabulary Study
There exists a general agreement that lexical learning is the heart of language learning. Having a good command of vocabulary will lay solid foundation for language learning. However, in the past days, vocabulary was always neglected. The low status of vocabulary study is partly due to language teaching methods used in class.

According to study, vocabulary learning is a dynamic process. In other words, dynamic development is one of the most important features of vocabulary learning strategies. During the four years in college, the vocabulary learning skills aren't stable but change from time to time. And what kind of learning strategies they will use is greatly influenced by languages learners and learning environment. Ellis holds the idea that to some degree the choices and application are major factors which can lead to successful language learning (文 ,1996:57, cited from Ellis, 1994:35).

2.2 Different Definitions of Language Learning Strategies
In defining language learning strategies, we can find the fact that the terminologies are not always uniform, with some using the term "learning strategies" and others using "language learning strategies." The term "learning strategies" is a more general one which involves all learning: language, biology, mathematics and many other subjects. So it covers much broader areas than "language learning strategies". Provided that this thesis only emphasizes on language learning, the term "language learning strategies"is preferred.

Different definitions of language learning strategies have been given by different researchers. The following statement will show some of them.

Tarone defines a language learning strategy as an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competence (Tarone, 1983:67).

Cohen defines the learning strategies as the learning process that is consciously chosen by the learners either to improve the second language acquisition, the use of the learning strategy, or both of them (Cohen, 1987:317).

Nunan believes that learning strategy is the mental communicative process that learners employ in order to learn and make use of language (Nunan, 1999:116).

According to the Ellis' definition of learning strategies, this thesis tends to give the definition of learning strategies as "Learning strategies are the

particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn an L2" (Ellis, 1994:89). They may be behavioral or they may be mental. They are typically problem-oriented. That is to say, learners will employ certain learning strategies when they are faced with problems during learning.

2.3 Different classifications of Learning Strategies

It is believed that learning strategy is used as means or steps for the development of interlanguage. Thus the researches on learning strategies count. And learning Researches of learning strategies can reveal the way the language learners learn a second and foreign language (Ellis, 1994:32). Vocabulary learning strategy is one branch of learning strategies. In order to have a better understanding and command of vocabulary learning strategies, it is essential to explore some important learning strategies which will be classified into different aspects according to different perspectives.

Researchers in the field of second foreign language employ a number of different definitions of language learning strategies (LLS). Since the early 1970's, researchers have become more and more interested in how students learn rather than what they learn. Thereby they refocus their investigations from the results to the process of second language acquisition. This change has produced a number of studies that aim at examining the strategies that students use when learning a second or foreign language or when using the language in communicative contexts.

And as there are various ways of defining language learning strategies, there are also different ways of categorizing learning strategies. One of the most popular classification is provided by Tarone who has made a distinction between three kinds of strategies: production, communication, and learning. Production strategies are utilized through the way of advanced preparation or rehearsal. Communication strategies are used to overcome problems in communicating messages due to limitation of knowledge in real communication. Examples include: switching to mother tongue, using gestures, and adjusting or approximating messages. Language learning strategies consist of attempts to promote linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. It can be analyzed from three aspects: repetition(practicing a language model either out loud or silently), elaboration(relating new knowledge to the information that has been already existed in human mind),and inferencing (guessing some useful information about unknown target language items) (于,2006:6 cited from Ellis,1994:76).The following are some well-known classifications.

2.3.1 Oxford's classification

Ellis states that the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies is that provided by Oxford(王 ,2005:12 cited from Ellis,1994:167). A fundamental feature of this classification is that it draws a distinction between "direct" and "indirect" strategies. According to Oxford, the direct class consists of memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing language, and compensation strategies for using the language in spite of gaps. The indirect strategy is consisted of meta-cognitive strategies for coordinating the different learning process, affective strategies for regulating emotions, and social strategies for learning with others. The direct class can be regarded as performers of a play at the stage, while the indirect class can be seen as the director of the play.

2.3.2 O'Malley and Chamot's Classification

According to O'Malley and Chamot, in accordance with the information-processing model, which their research is based on, three types of strategies are distinguished. These three types are meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social strategies. Meta-cognitive strategies make use of knowledge about cognitive process and attempt to regulate language learning by means of planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or operations used in problem-solving that requires directive strategies listed as repetition, note-taking, and elaboration. Social strategies emphasize on the way that learners tend to select to interact with other learners and other native speakers(O'Malley, Chamot, 2002:289).

As far as the author is concerned, based on these three dimensions of language learning strategies namely: meta-cognitive, cognitive and social strategies (O.Malley, Chamot, 1994:531), the definitions of LLS can he exposed as follows:

In terms of meta-cognitive strategies, the language learning strategy can be seen as macroscopic blueprint of the whole process of language learning which consists of entrenching reasonable concepts, setting up goals, planning lime and self-management, etc.

In terms of cognitive strategies, the definition of language learning strategy refers to the command of language learning activities and the understanding of it such as resourcing materials, well reviewing knowledge, elaborating and summarizing information, etc.

In terms of social strategies, the language learning strategy provides learners with numerous opportunities with which language learners can work with peers and clarify information from teachers.

2.3.3 Cohen's Classification of Learning Strategies

According to different objectives of strategies language learners use, language learning strategies can

be divided into language learning strategies and language use strategies (Cohen, 1998, 256). Language learning strategies refer to those learning processes that are consciously selected by the students who aim at learning a language. Those learning processes consist of several aspects, such as identifying material for learning, distinguishing it from other material, grouping it for easier learning, repeatedly engaging oneself in contact with the material, and remembering it with efforts. Language using strategies aim to use a language, which includes retrieval strategies (to call up language material from storage), rehearsal strategies (to rehearse target language structures), cover strategies (a special type of compensatory or coping strategy) and communication strategies (to convey message in interaction). Taken together, both language learning strategies and language use strategies are described by Cohen as the steps or actions which are consciously selected by students either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it both through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about that language.

3. The Survey of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Non-English Majors in Changzhi University

This part will make an introduction about the survey which is carried by means of questionnaires. The subjects of the questionnaires are 238 non-English majors from Changzhi University. These students are freshmen and sophomores. Among them,118 students are freshmen and 120 students are sophomores. The length of their English learning experience ranges from 6 years to 10 years. Thus we can assume that they have formed certain vocabulary learning strategies. 128 of the subjects are males, and 110 subjects are females. In questionnaires, students will make choices among several questions according to their way of learning vocabulary.

After administration of questionnaires, the author conducts an interview about the opinions of vocabulary learning strategies used by participants, in order to attain further information, confirm the results of the questionnaire and provide a complementation to the questionnaire. Altogether 32 typical subjects, sixteen most proficient and sixteen least proficient, are chosen for the interview according to their performance in CET 4 scores. They are asked for the reasons why they select specific strategies, what are the difficulties in using these strategies and what is the best way to learn English vocabulary, etc. Every participant lasts about 20 minutes on average.

3.1 Application of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

According to the results of the survey, the first three most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies are cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, and social strategies. The application of vocabulary learning strategies differ from male students to female students, differ from good students to poor students.

3.2 The Differences in the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies between Male and Female Students

Among the 238 non-English majors from Changzhi University, 128 of the subjects are males, and 110 subjects are females. According to the survey, females do better than males in vocabulary learning. 57% of female students are better at word memorization. Female students were differentiated from male students in the use of guessing and contextualization strategies. Females use vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than males. Male students are willing to use translation strategies than females.

There exists no great difference between favored and disfavored strategies used by female and male students. The strategies favored by males are always the same with female students. Both of them are found of cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, and social strategies. Only the degree of favor may vary from strategy to strategy, which is caused by the diligence of the students. Female students may spend more time on learning while males resort to short time revision before examination.

3.3 The Differences in the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies between Good and Poor Learners

First of all, the author would definite the notion of "good students" and "poor students" in the thesis. It is believed that students' main tasks in the first two years of college English study are dealing with CET-4 and CET-6 examination. Some of the students who can not pass the term examinations are poor-students, while others are good students.

According to the survey, among the 238 subjects, 138 students are good students and 200 students are poor students. About 60% of good students use many kinds of vocabulary learning strategies in language acquisition. That is to say, good students have high motivation and a keen interest to learn English for their goal, which demonstrates that they can use vocabulary learning strategies skillfully and thoroughly. About 62% of poor students lack the knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies. In other words, poor students are not aware of employing vocabulary learning strategies in language acquisition, which is not beneficial for their study. This is due to lack of training and bad habits in English study.

4. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study are considered to have clear implications for both vocabulary learning and teaching.
1) Vocabulary learning strategies are helpful to

autonomous vocabulary development. Language learners actually do most of their learning of new words independently, which makes sense to utilize personal plans to expand their vocabularies over time and develop their own personal learning styles in memorizing and retaining new words. Due to this fact, the proper application of the vocabulary learning strategies might facilitate the learning process and help language learners acquire the target vocabulary much more successfully. For according to Oxford, "memory strategies are clearly more effective when the learners can simultaneously use meta-cognitive strategies themselves"(Oxford,1990:38).

2) Some students perform better than others in vocabulary level test. This may be a result of using of more effective learning strategies. Students who are taught to use strategies and are provided with adequate practice in using them will learn more effectively than students who don't have experience with learning strategies. Teachers can provide strategies-based instruction to students as a part of the foreign language curriculum. Strategies-based instruction is a learner-centered approach to teaching. And this kind of instruction can help students become more aware of: a) the way how they can learn most effectively; b) the way how they can continue to learn on their own after they leave the language classroom. It assists learners to become more responsible for their efforts in learning. Once students have become used to using learning strategies, they will use them in future. Suggestions to the teachers for strategy training consist of several points. For example, selective attention should be taught when students are faced with unknown words. And suggestions to the language learners for strategy learning also consist of several points. For example, language learners should use a variety of cognitive strategies to understand and remember them. Such examples are making inferences by using context clues, grouping words according to function or semantic category, and elaboration by using the words in new sentences.

3) Vocabulary learning strategies make up a subclass of the language acquisition process, which are applicable to a wide variety of language learning tasks, ranging from the more isolated (synonym, antonym, pronunciation and etc.) to the more integrative tasks (oral communication and reading comprehension). If possible, the study can go deeper in exploring vocabulary learning strategies when they could summarize the memory category. Hence, the corresponding taxonomy can be established for facilitating the target vocabulary learning process. The deeper analysis of vocabulary learning strategies will ensure the designer with a greater degrees of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic involvement. Thus it will lead to a result that language learners have a better long-term memory retention and a more flexible application of newly learned target vocabularies.

5. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary learning strategies are effective techniques that can empower students' learning ability. In the research, a review of research literature, a well-structured questionnaire, and an in-depth analysis of the survey have yielded answers to predefined research questions concerning the use of learning strategies reported by 238 participants. The present study tends to improve English vocabulary learning of non-English major college students. In the course of the study, a comparative study of vocabulary learning strategies is done between good students and poor students, between male and female students by handing out the relevant questionnaire and analyzing data, interviews and the observation. Thus, the conclusions can be drawn as follows:

1. It is found that five vocabulary learning strategies are usually adopted by non-English major college students. Some of the subjects like to remember the new words through writing them repeatedly. So strategies calling for deeper cognitive processing are used less frequently than those that require only shallow cognitive processing. In the course of studying and remembering new English words, students can adopt some strategies to learn English vocabulary efficiently, which is in agreement with Schmitt and Mc Carthy (Schmitt, Mc Carthy, 2000:94). It is believed that many students do use strategies for learning vocabulary, especially when they in the process of finishing integrated tasks. The strategies of writing the words repeatedly, reciting word lists and planning a schedule (advance-organizers)etc. are commonly used in their daily study. But most of the participants do not have enough knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies. The most frequently used strategies are shallower strategies. Cultural heritage, age, gender, learning environment, and language proficiency are potentially factors that have influence on the frequency of strategies use.

2. There are similarities and differences in vocabulary acquisitions between good students and poor students. College students tend to utilize a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. They use different strategies to remember new words and enlarge the amount

of their vocabulary. Unlike poor students, the good students have the following characteristics: they are able to self-monitor their leaning, take part in deeper learning activities, focus on productive vocabulary, and acquire second language information in context. Obviously, good students are different from poor students in using the meta-cognitive strategies and cognitive strategies. And they tend to use the vocabulary learning strategies efficiently and flexibly.

Judging from the study on vocabulary learning strategies used by non-English majors. It can be seen that meta-cognitive strategies are rarely used. Some cognitive strategies are quite old, and traditional. For example, language learners try to remember words by memorizing the words mechanically but seldom remember words by guessing the meaning of it, in which they can learn and remember words in a relaxing and flexible way and atmosphere. These language learners need some effective vocabulary learning strategies.

There are some critical points to consider in interpreting and applying the findings.

First, strategy use can be regarded as only one factor affecting the learning process. Other factors may differ from the teaching and learning context to the personal characteristics of learners.

Second, it is easy to overstate the commonalities of the more frequently used strategies among good language learners. As is mentioned at the individual strategy level, the pattern of variation is complex. Although the group of good students frequently use certain items, which the poor students don't use, negative variations can be found. Both students seldom use cooperation. There are substantial similarities between the two groups considering the most frequently used strategies. Thus, teachers should teach students according to their learning aptitude, namely, the students' branch of learning.

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