A STUDY OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY STRATEGIES USED BY ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS AT TNUT

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the preferred vocabulary learning stragtegies (VLS) used by English-major students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology (TNUT), Vietnam, and to compare the frequency of VLS use between first-stage and second-stage students. The results indicate that English-major students applied various types of VLS in learning English. It also shows that there is almost no difference in the frequency of use between first-stage and second-stage students at TNUT. The findings of this research will have practical implications for teaching and learning VLS.

Keyword: Vocabulary learning strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, social/affective strategies

1.INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is an essential skill for success in today's globalized world, and vocabulary acquisition is a key component of language learning.

1.1. Definition of vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to knowledge of words, including their meanings, explanations, register, association, expression, grammatical usage, written and spoken forms, and frequency (Schmitt 2000). Understanding a word's meaning involves more than consulting dictionaries, as the context in which it is used can influence its meaning (Carthy 1990). For example, "pet" can refer to a person one likes or loves in informal settings, in addition to its basic dictionary definition.

Word association involves the various ways in which words are related to each other, and every word can belong to a particular word family (Aitchison 2003). This includes coordination, superordination, synonymy, and collocation. Collocation refers to the tendency of two or more words to frequently appear together in speech or writing (Nation 1990). It can be divided into semantic and grammatical collocations (Benson 1985). Futhermore, lexis refers to the typical patterns in which words occur, including word class and morphology (Schmitt 2000; Laufer 1997). Words also have written and spoken forms and varying frequencies of usage.

According to the above-mentioned spects of a word, it is essential for both teachers and learners to have a comprehensive approach to acquiring new vocabulary. This involves using different strategies to fully comprehend a word and its various connotations.

1.2. Definition of learning strategies

Various definitions of learning strategy have been proposed by researchers. According to Stern (1983), "learning strategy" refers to the general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach used by the language learner, while "techniques" should be used to describe specific forms of observable learning behavior. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) define learning strategies as the behaviors and thoughts that learners engage in to influence their encoding process, while Chamot (1987) describes them as the approaches, techniques, and deliberate actions taken by students to promote learning and recall of linguistic information. Rubin (1987) suggests that learning strategies contribute to the development of the language system constructed by the learners and directly affect learning outcomes, and Oxford (1989) views them as the behaviors employed by learners to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable. These definitions highlight the importance of conscious and subconscious actions, behaviors, thoughts, means, steps, techniques, devices, or processes utilized by language learners to improve

their language learning progress. Strategies play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of language learning, aiding learners in acquiring, storing, retrieving, and utilizing information necessary for developing communicative abilities in a second language. These tools enable learners to actively and independently engage with the language, leading to better learning outcomes

1.3. Classification of learning strategies

There are many different definitions of learning strategies, resulting in classification conflicts, especially in the area of vocabulary learning strategies. Cohen and Aphek's (1981) classification distinguishes between language learning strategies (e.g., selecting relevant materials, repeated exposure, committing to memory) and language using strategies (e.g., retrieval, rehearsal, communication). However, it overlooks the significance of metacognitive strategies. Oxford (1989) proposed two types of vocabulary learning strategies: direct (e.g., memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies) and indirect (e.g., focusing, planning, evaluating, controlling anxiety). This more comprehensive classification provides a better understanding of the different types of strategies learners can use to improve their vocabulary learning.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identified three types of language learning strategies: cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective/social strategies, through interviews and theoretical analysis of reading comprehension and problem-solving. Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learned, while meta-cognitive strategies involve controlling learning through planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity. Social/affective strategies involve interaction with others or ideational control over emotions. Cohen and Aphek (1981) also classified learning strategies into three types: meta-cognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies, based on the information-processing model of learning.

1.4. Vocabulary learning strategies

Theoretical concepts of language learning strategies serve as the foundation for vocabulary learning strategies, which are crucial components of language acquisition. In the context of this study, vocabulary refers to the entirety of words comprising a language, and thus, vocabulary learning strategies encompass the methods and techniques that learners employ to effectively acquire new vocabulary.

The classification of vocabulary learning strategies by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) into cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective strategies is deemed by the author to be a sensible one, and as such, this categorization is used consistently throughout their paper.

1.5. Research on vocabulary learning strategies

Rezvan Ghalebi, Firooz Sadighi and Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri (2020) conducted a research with the goal of comparing the preferences of vocabulary learning strategies among undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate (MA & Ph.D.) students in the English language department of a private university in Iran. He found out that Metacognitive strategies were the first most frequently used strategy for postgraduate students and cognitive strategies were the second used strategy by Iranian postgraduate EFL students. In addition, his study also revealed determination and memory strategies as the most frequently used strategies by undergraduate students.

According to the research "Use of language learning strategies in ESP and EGP: Perspectives from Saudi Arabia" conducted by Fazle Ramzan, students studying EGP were found to use more language learning strategies than their counterparts from ESP. Moreover, there are also differences among the choice of learning strategies mostly used. Students studying ESP made more use of Compensation, Social and Cognitive strategies whereas those studying EGP made more use of Memory, Cognitive and Social strategies. However, the Metacognitive and the Affective strategies were the least used by students from both ESP and EGP.

Akhbari and Tahririan (2009) conducted research with 137 undergraduate medical and paramedical students enrolled in ESP I at a university in Iran. They used a combination of observation, interview, and questionnaire to gather data on vocabulary learning strategies in an ESP context. According to the results of the questionnaire, there was no significant difference in the major strategies for learning specialized and non-specialized vocabulary among ESP students in different fields of study. The most commonly used

comprehension strategy was using bilingual dictionaries, and the most frequently used learning strategy was oral and/or written repetition..

In a recent study, My. D (2022) investigated the use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) among Vietnamese tertiary students using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The study aimed to determine the frequency of VLS usage among technical students at an institution in Vietnam and resulted in several key findings. The results showed that ESP students preferred metacognitive strategies over other types of VLS, including memory, determination, social (discovery), cognitive, and social (consolidation) strategies. Additionally, the use of VLS for ESP was influenced by factors such as the perceived usefulness of strategies, learner psychology, and opportunities for practice.

Finally, Petra. K (2018) initialized a research that investigated differences in the use of VLS between learners of general English and learners of business English. The results of the study did not reveal any differences in the use of VLS between learners of general English and business English.

Although previous research has investigated the effectiveness of various vocabulary learning strategies, little attention has been paid to the differences in strategies used by students in different stages of English learning. It is important to understand these differences, as students' needs and abilities may change as they progress through their studies.

Additionally, students in different stages of English learning may face unique challenges that could impact their vocabulary learning strategies. For example, first and second-year students may be focusing on building their foundation in English, while third and fourth-year students may be working on mastering more specialized vocabulary related to their fields of study.

Given these gaps in the existing literature, the present study aims to investigate the English VLS used by English-major students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology in different stages of their English learning, specifically first and second-year students and third and fourth-year students. We will compare the types of strategies used by students in different stages as well as the factors that influence their use and effectiveness, such as language proficiency, motivation, and cultural background. Thus, the study tried to answer the following questions:

1) What vocabulary learning strategies do English-major students use and how frequently are they used?
2) What differences in VLS use between the first-stage and second-stage students?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Subjects

The participants in this study were 31 English-major students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology ranging from first to fourth year. The subjects were divided into 2 groups. Group 1 included 11 subjects from the third and fourth-year students, who, after two years of learning General English, were in the process of learning ESP and translation in some specific fields such as information and communication technology, transportation mechanical engineering, construction and environmental engineering, science and technology, and the higher level of 4 basic skills, ... Group 2 included 20 first and second-year students, who were studying general English as their main subjects.

2.2 Instruments

The quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this study in order to identify the frequency of VLS used by English-major students at TNUT in general and English-major students at different stages of their study in particular.

The questionnaire and interview were utilized in this research. The questionnaire contained 4 questions, of which 1 question consisted of 25 statements concerning vocabulary learning strategies; each had 5 scales based on the Likert scale (Likert, R. 1932), ranging from never, seldom, sometimes, often, and always. And these 25 statements were divided into 3 parts and 16 categories. The questionnaire was conducted in the form of a survey.

In addition to the survey, structured interviews were employed to gather data. The subjects were chosen from group 1 (subjects 3 and 4) and group 2 (subjects 1 and 2). The interview questions, which contained 6 questions, were predetermined and open-ended, centered around the interviewees' vocabulary learning behaviors and experiences. An interview schedule was developed to ensure the questions were systematic and relevant. To ensure the interview's reliability, the

interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order. The interviews were recorded for accuracy, and the resulting data was transcribed.

2.3 Data analysis

The gathered data were analyzed through SPSS Version 20 (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) in order to achieve statistical findings. Descriptive statistics and a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were employed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Vocabulary learning strategies used by English-major students

According to table 2, in the meta-cognitive strategies, strategy 4 "reviewing words" was used most often by the subjects (M = 3.19, SD = .910). It might be because Vietnamese students have been taught to review new words since little and that habit carried on till college. Also, strategy 3 "paying attention to frequently appearing words" was sometimes used by them (M = 3.16, SD = 1.036). On the other hand, strategy 1 "planning a schedule" was the least often used strategy by the subjects (M = 2.61, SD = .919). This result shows that English-major students at TNUT is not used to scheduling in VLS.

In the cognitive strategies, strategy 7 "remembering words by reading repeatedly" and strategy 8 "Remembering words by writing repeatedly", which belong to the same self-monitoring category, were most often used by English major students, which is in line with Akhbari and Tahririan research. Strategy 13 "memorizing words in context" (M = 3.10, SD = 1.093), strategy 20 "Visualizing picture associated with the words" (M = 3.13, SD = 1.118), and strategy 22 "remembering words by deduction" (M = 3.10, SD = .944) was used slightly more often than other strategies. On the contrary, strategy 12 "memorizing collocations" was the least often used cognitive strategy (M = 2.87, SD = .922).

In the social/affective strategies, the most frequently used strategy by the subjects is strategy 25 "Ask teacher or others the meaning of the words" (M = 3.13, SD = .885).

Classification	Strategies	Specific strategies	Mean	SD
Meta-cognitive strategies	a. Advanced organizing	1. Planning a schedule	2.61	0.919
	b. Selective attention	3. Paying attention to frequently appearing words	3.16	1.036
	c. Self-monitoring	4. Reviewing words	3.19	.910
	d. Self-evaluation	6. Summarizing the errors	3.06	1.181
Cognitive strategies	e. Repetition	7. Remembering words by reading repeatedly	3.16	1.128
		8. Remembering words by writing repeatedly	3.16	1.098
	h. Transfer	13. Memorizing words in context	3.10	1.076
	m. Imagery	20. Visualizing picture associated with the words	3.13	1.118
	o. Deduction	22. Remembering words by deduction	3.10	0.944
Social meditation	u. Questioning for clarification	25. Ask teachers or others the meaning of the words	3.13	0.885

Table 2: VLS used by English-major students

By looking at the result above, we can conclude that English-major students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology occasionally applied VLS in learning English.

3.2. Comparison of VLS used by groups 1 and 2

3.2.1. Meta-cognitive strategies

The table below shows the meta-cognitive strategies used by 2 groups of English-major students at TNUT. The result indicates that the subjects in group 1 rarely used strategy 4 "reviewing words" while group 2 sometimes used this strategy (M = 2.73, SD = .467 vs M = 3.45, SD = .999). Strategy 5 "Self-testing words" was rarely used by group 1 while group 2 sometimes used it (M = 2.45, SD = .522 vs M = 3.25, SD = 1.164). vs M = 3.10, SD = 1.210). Opinions of the two groups on these two strategies were significantly different (Sig = 0.32 < .05 and Sig = 0.41 < .05).

Item	Group 1 N = 11		Group 2 N = 20		Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1	2.36	.505	2.75	1.070	.270
2	2.73	.905	3.10	1.210	.380
3	3.09	1.044	3.20	1.056	.784
4	**2.73**	**.467**	**3.35**	**1.137**	**.095**
5	**2.45**	**.522**	**3.15**	**1.089**	**.057**
6	3.00	1.183	3.10	1.210	.826

Table 3: Meta-cognitive strategies used by groups 1 and 2

This result indicates that group 1 students did not initiate enough self-studying, which is the same as the current self-study stratus of Vietnamese students. According to many research, Vietnamese college students still have many difficulties in self-studying. Thu. T and Bao. C stated that there are many reasons that lead to the current self-studying status of Vietnamese college students such as: First of all, students have not built an image of themselves as an engineer, or a teacher with the necessary knowledge and skills for the future. Secondly, most students do not know the concept of "self-study". Specifically, students do not know How to self-study, what to do during self-study, as well as what are the benefits of self-study. Moreover, many students have not found their passion and interest in studying and researching. Learning is a task, but if both passion and excitement is existing, efficiency will increase and the learners can expect to reach the pinnacle of education. Passion and enjoyment will be the driving force to help students overcome all obstacles and be determined to reach their goals. Finally, another reason that also significantly affects the problem of self-studying is poor living conditions. Because of their circumstance, some students spend a lot of their time (self-study time) working part-time to pay for their living and school (Thu. T and Bao. C, 2011). With the result of group 2, we can say that they showed more interest in self-studying.

3.2.2 Cognitive strategies

The table below shows the cognitive strategies used by two groups of English-major students at TNUT. Strategy 7, 8, and 9 belong to the same repetition category and have no differences in the frequency of usage (Sig =

.215, .683, and .496 respectively). The gap in strategy 10 between groups 1 and 2 is not big (Sig = .441). Strategy 11 has no statistical difference (Sig = .923). Strategy 12 and 13, which belong to the transfer category, show little sign of the difference in the rate of use (Sig = .148 and Sig = .717). Strategy 14 also has a slight difference between the two groups (Sig = .685). Moreover, in the same inferencing category, strategy 15, 16, and 17 respectively have no or small aberration between two groups (Sig = 1.000, Sig = .807, and Sig = .907). Strategy 18 has almost the same frequency of use by both groups (Sig = .827). The same can be said for strategy 19, 20, 21, and 22, which respectively belong to reading, imagery, auditory representative, and deduction.

Item	Group 1 N = 11		Group 2 N = 20		Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
7	2.82	1.079	3.35	1.137	.215
8	3.27	1.009	3.10	1.165	.683
9	2.73	.786	3.00	1.170	.496
10	2.73	1.191	3.05	1.050	.441
11	2.91	1.044	2.95	1.146	.923
12	2.55	.688	3.05	.999	.148
13	3.00	1.183	3.15	1.040	.717
14	2.91	1.136	3.10	1.294	.685
15	3.00	.775	3.00	.973	1.000
16	3.00	1.095	3.10	1.071	.807
17	3.00	1.000	3.05	1.191	.907
18	3.09	1.136	3.00	1.076	.827
19	3.00	1.095	2.90	1.021	.801
20	3.00	1.265	3.20	1.056	.642
21	3.09	.944	2.95	1.099	.723
22	3.09	1.044	3.10	.912	.980

Table 3: Cognitive strategies used by groups 1 and 2

The result shows in the table 3 indicate that there are no statistically differences in the frequency of cognitive strategies used by both groups. However, in general, group 2 use the strategies more often than group 1.

3.2.3. Social/affective strategies

The result of social/affective strategies used by groups 1 and 2 appear at the table below. By looking at it, we can see that strategy 23 "Remembering words by cooperating with others" was sometimes used by both groups (M = 3.18, SD = 1.168 vs M = 3.05, SD = .999 - Sig = .901) with a slight difference in favor of group 1. Strategy 24 "Practicing words by converse with yourself" has the frequency of use in favor of group 2 (M = 3.00, SD = 1.095 vs M = 3.10, SD = 1.021 – Sig = .636). Strategy 25 "Ask teacher or others the meaning of the words" was used by group 1 slightly more often than group 2 (M = 3.18, SD = .982 vs M = 3.10, SD = .852 – Sig = .810).

Item	Group 1 N = 11		Group 2 N = 20		Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
23	3.18	1.168	3.05	.999	.901
24	3.00	1.095	3.10	1.021	.636
25	3.18	.982	3.10	.852	.810

Table 4: Social/affective strategies used by groups 1 and 2

The analysis indicate that group 1 tends to be a little more open, more of the extrovert kind. They have little or no hesitation to ask or talk to teachers. They also participate in group activities like studying in groups or participating in school events. On contrary, group 2 tends to focus on self-improvement activity slightly more often than group 1. It might also be because group 2 is still freshman, they are still acquainting themselves in the new environment of college.

Regarding the information gathered form the interviews, Subject 1 and Subject 2 used a mix of meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies to learn vocabulary. They acknowledged that learning new words could be tedious, but they tried to make it more engaging by using techniques such as flashcards, watching TV shows or movies with English subtitles, and playing word games. They also mentioned using techniques such as summarizing errors, memorizing collocations, and verifying the different meanings of a word, which were examples of cognitive strategies. Additionally, Subject 1 mentioned reviewing words, which was another cognitive strategy, and both Subject 1 and Subject 2 used self-testing as a meta-cognitive strategy.

On the other hand, Subject 3 and Subject 4 also used a mix of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. They used techniques such as reciting word lists, memorizing words in context, and guessing words meaning through context to learn new vocabulary. These all belonged to cognitive strategies. Subject 3 and Subject 4 also used techniques such as reviewing words and self-testing words, which were examples of meta-cognitive strategies.

All four subjects seemed to use techniques such as visualizing, practicing, and guessing word meaning through context, which were examples of cognitive strategies. They also seemed to use techniques such as reviewing words, summarizing errors, and practicing with others, which were examples of meta-cognitive and social/affective strategies.

In conclusion, all four subjects used a combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies to learn new vocabulary. However, subjects 3 and 4 tended to focus more on cognitive strategies, while others tended to focus more on meta-cognitive strategies.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the frequency of VLS used (Vocabulary Learning Strategies) by English-major students at TNUT, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The study also aimed to compare the rate of VLS used between first-stage students (Group 2) and second-stage students (Group 1).

According to the results of the quantitative survey, English-major students at TNUT occasionally utilized most of the meta-cognitive strategies, except for "planning a schedule," which was infrequently used. The use of certain meta-cognitive strategies, such as "Reviewing words" and "self-testing words," differed statistically between the two groups, with group 1 showing lower statistics than group 2. Additionally, the results indicated that cognitive strategies were used occasionally by the participants, and there was no discernible difference in their frequency of use between the two groups. The same applied to social/affective strategies. The qualitative data, gathered from interviews with the subjects, revealed that they employed various strategies to learn vocabulary, displaying their meta-cognitive, cognitive, and

social/affective abilities. The findings also suggest that all four subjects used diverse vocabulary learning strategies and acknowledged the significance of developing a strong vocabulary to improve their English proficiency.

4.2. Suggestions

If English-major students at TNUT want to gain a large vocabulary and memorize the words they have tried to remember well enough, they should employ a large number of learning strategies that are suitable for their learning style, including metacognitive, cognitive, and social mediation under the framework of learning vocabulary. They should also try to use meta-cognitive strategies such as "planning a schedule" more often to maximize the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition. They should also consider using cognitive strategies they may not typically use, such as "memorizing colocation" or "extensive reading after class". Additionally, students could utilize social/affective strategies such as "Remembering words by cooperating with others" or "Asking teachers or others the meaning of the words" to enhance their communication skills and build positive relationships. Finally, students should aim to use a combination of meta-cognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies to improve their vocabulary acquisition and overall English skills.

What's more, vocabulary learners should be aware that different strategies should be used while coping with different tasks, rather than attempting to use the "one strategy fits all" approach.

Unquestionably, teachers play a crucial role in guiding students to effectively learn and retain new vocabulary. To achieve this, teachers should encourage their students to utilize a variety of vocabulary learning strategies, while also providing them with guidance on meta-cognitive, cognitive, and social/affective approaches to vocabulary learning. Teachers can also help to popularize these strategies by emphasizing their importance and encouraging their application in the classroom.

In addition, teachers can employ various vocabulary games to make learning more enjoyable and interactive for students. Activities such as crossword puzzles, word searches, and matching games can help students to better internalize new vocabulary and its meanings. These games can be incorporated into classroom activities or assigned as homework. Furthermore, teachers can foster group discussions and pair work to facilitate the learning process. Collaborative learning not only helps students to build their vocabulary but also enhances their speaking and listening skills and promotes learning from different perspectives. By incorporating these strategies and games, teachers can help their students become more effective learners and achieve greater success in vocabulary acquisition.

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