A Study of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Non-English Major College Students

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an empirical study about vocabulary learning strategies possessed by non-English major sophomores' using situations of vocabulary learning strategy in the Chinese context. With 100 students from China West Normal university as the subject, this research is tended for a quantitative research into Non-English Majors' preference for vocabulary learning strategies. Data is collected and processed by means of SPSS. Based on the results, this paper suggests that Non-English majors should manage to grasp more useful vocabulary learning strategies and then make appropriate adjustments to improve their vocabulary learning. As for teachers, they should help learners to build positive motivation, integrate more strategy training into English classes and encourage students to systematize their own learning strategies instead of using these strategies unconsciously or unsystematically.

Key words: English vocabulary; Learning strategies; Non-English major college students

INTRODUCTION

As the basis of language learning, vocabulary takes a significant part in the four language skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as a difficult learning process or task for language learners all the time. Clearly, vocabulary to a language is what brick to a house. Only when learners grasp enough vocabulary and knowledge can they conduct language activities, and that is why it is necessary for English learners to lay a solid vocabulary foundation in every language learning period. Especially for Chinese second language learners, who are mostly accustomed to recognize and using the Chinese hieroglyphic to remember vocabulary, it is difficult to find a suitable and effective vocabulary learning strategy to improve their English learning capability, even more to enlarge their vocabulary size.

Learning strategies as a foreign language acquisition with a side of the field of study, both psychology and education workers are very concerned about the research topic, but also aroused the interest of language education researchers. They use learning strategies to explain the learner, to promote the automation of knowledge of foreign languages. At the same time, an integral part of the learning strategy is the overall development of students. The fundamental goal of education is not just "learn" and, more importantly, should be "how to learn effective learning strategies".

English vocabulary learning strategies are one aspect of English learning strategies. Learning vocabulary is the basic part to learn the language. McCarthy once said, vocabulary learning in today is still the most important factor for language learners to learn a new language (Ellis, 1994). Many Chinese English learners mostly find vocabulary is the most difficult part, and always forget to learn English vocabulary learning if you do not pay attention to learning strategy, the result is often less effective.

1. RELATED CONCEPTS OF THIS STUDY

1.1 Definitions of Language Learning Strategies

In the past few decades, many language scholars explore learning strategies from different aspects. Stem

(1983) pointed out: "Learning strategies are most suitable methods for the language learner use trends or characteristics". Rubin (1987) believes that "Learning strategies are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affects learning directly." Chamot (1987) defined learning strategies are "techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take to facilitate the learning, recall of both linguistic and content area information." Oxford (1990) made a definition of learning strategies: "Language learning strategies are behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable." Ellis (1994) believes that learning strategy is a mean or a step for the development of interlanguage, learning strategy research can reveal how learners learn a second or foreign language. The famous Chinese Scholar Wen (1995) holds that "learning strategy is the action taken by the learners to solve the learning problem effectively." This definition implies two points: (a) the use of the learning strategy is driven by the learner's purpose to improve the learning efficiency, in most cases it is a conscious action. (b) The nature of learning strategy is how the learner acts but not how he or she thinks, and this action is either external or internal, it can be the general approach or the concrete technique.

From the above description, it can be concluded that learning strategies refer to the methods，rules, approaches, steps and actions used by learners to improve the efficiency of language learning. Learning strategies have the following three characteristics: (a) It is to be seen as both conscious and intentional; (b) it is to be both general approaches and specific actions used by second language learners; (c) it is to involve both linguistic behaviors and non-linguistic behaviors; and to be flexible for different learners.

1.2 Models of Language Learning Strategies

As the classifications of learning strategies, researchers classified strategies from different angles, transported with different names; they are also of variety since different scholars insist on their different opinions of learning strategies.

Rubin (1981) put forward a classification plan that learning strategies under two main groupings and numbers of subgroups. He distinguished the strategies into two primary groups: direct learning strategies and indirect learning strategies. The first type includes strategies that directly affect learning, which involve in clarification/ verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/ inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning and practice. The second type contributes indirectly to learning, including creating practice opportunities and using production tricks such as communication strategies. He claimed that

cognitive strategies refer to the steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that requires direct analysis,

transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Metacognitive refers to knowledge about the cognitive process and regulation of cognition or executive control or self-management through such process as planning, monitoring and evaluating.

Oxford's framework of learning strategies draws a clear distinction between direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies mean "strategies that directly involve the target language", in the sense, they "require mental processing the language" (Oxford, 1990). To be brief, direct strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies. On the other hand, indirect strategies "provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means" (Ibid.). In a word, learning strategies are divided into metacognitive strategies, social strategies and affective strategies.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) distinguished three major types of learning strategies based on the information processing theory: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. The first ones are those that think about the learning process and make use of knowledge about cognitive processes, and evaluating. The second ones are those which appear to be directly related to the performance of specific learning tasks, such as repetition, note-taking and memorization while the last ones refer to those strategies that learners use to adjust their feelings, attitudes, motivation and so on.

Comparing the above classifications, O'Malley and Chamot's framework of classification appears more justifiable since it demonstrates the inter-relationships of the three levels and has a reasonable theoretical basis. Therefore, this framework is adopted in this research. Namely, the metacognitive refer to the strategies for overviewing the process of vocabulary learning, for taking steps to efficiently plan and regulate the learning process, for attending to the key words. In addition, cognitive strategies are directly involved in learning activities while social/affective strategies involving learners' social activity and transaction.

1.3 Classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Nation (1990) pointed out that the frequency of use vocabulary; vocabulary is divided into two types: low-frequency words and high frequency words. He divides low-frequency vocabulary learning strategies into "guess the meaning through context" and "the use of mnemonics and use of word infix"

O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Gu and Johnson (1996) divided learning strategies into three levels: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. Table 1 is shown the specific classification.

Table 1
The Specific Learning Strategies in O'Malley and Chamot's Classification

Vocabulary learning strategies	Metacognitive strategies	Advanced organizers
		Directed attention
		Selective attention
		Self-management
		Advanced preparation
		Self-monitoring
		Delayed production
		Self-evaluation
		Self-reinforcement
	Cognitive strategies	Context
		Wide reading
		Guessing
		Dictionary
		Grouping
		Rote-learning
		Doing-exercise
		Association
		Passage-reciting
		Application
	Social/affective strategies	Affective control
		Cooperation

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Questions

The study was an investigation of the non-English majors' English vocabulary learning. It aimed to reveal the real situation of their vocabulary learning strategies. The whole study was made up with two parts: a questionnaire and an interview. The questions it tried to answer are as follows:

(a) What is the situation of English vocabulary learning strategy used by non-English majors as sophomores?

(b) What vocabulary learning strategies or models can be applied by college students to improve their English vocabulary acquisition?

2.2 Participants of This Study

The researcher selected 100 students randomly whose major are in Chinese and Biology. They are requested to complete a survey questionnaire, and 20 students are selected randomly from the above 100 students to participate in the interviews.

2.3 Instruments

In the present study, the researcher used questionnaire and interview as two instruments to collect quantitative data and qualitative information, attempting to find out the

answers to the above two questions. And then, based on the analysis of the results of the study, related suggestions for English vocabulary teaching and learning are proposed accordingly. The brief descriptions of each instrument are presented as follows:

2.3.1 Questionnaire of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies

This questionnaire is mainly from the following two sources: Studies on the classification of learning strategies from O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Wen (1996). Some quantitative and qualitative research on vocabulary learning, including Polizter and McGroart (1985); Ahmed (1989); Gu (1994); Wu (1998). It contains three sections: Section 1 involves instructions in the questionnaire and asked about every respondent's demographic information including gender; age and how many years they have learned English. Section 2 constitutes the main body of the questionnaire that involves various English vocabulary learning strategies. It contains 58 behaviors clustered into three major parts: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies include: Organizational Planning, Self-monitoring, Self-evaluation and Selective Attention. Cognitive strategies were divided into Rote-learning, Grouping, Context (Contextual Encoding), Dictionary, Guessing (Contextual Guessing), Doing-exercises, Application, Association, Wide-reading and Passage-reciting, each of which was again subdivided into several specific micro strategies. To each statement, the participants are also asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale with"1" means "Never or almost never true", "2" stands for "Usually not true", "3" means "sometimes true for me", "4" stands for "Usually true for me" and "5" represents "Always or almost true" .And the average of the choice indicates which kinds of vocabulary strategies students tend to use.

Metacognitive strategies include four items, the former two items "Organizational planning" and "Self-monitoring" refer to organize vocabulary study, make, monitor the study plan, check and review regularly what has learned. The third and the fourth items are "Self-evaluation" and "selective attention", which stands for judging and evaluating how well you have carried out your plan as well as paying special attention to some words, especially some key words, interesting words, and high frequency words respectively. Cognitive strategies involve 10 items and each of these items contains some subcategories. Social/ affective strategies include two categories: "Affective control" and "Cooperation". Section 3 consists of two open-ended questions relating to their vocabulary learning strategies: (a) What kind of strategies works best for you? (b) Besides the above strategies, do you use any other ones?

2.3.2 Interviews

After the questionnaire survey, the related interviews are conducted with 20 randomly-chosen students. The

interview consists of five questions related to the students' response to the questionnaire such as "Have you ever made any vocabulary study plan?", "What kind of strategies do you usually adopt in learning words?"

2.4 Data Collection

The study was conducted in April 2015. The questionnaires were delivered in Chinese so as to avoid the possibility of misunderstanding. Students were informed that this survey was just to collect useful and reliable data for research in VLS and their choices had no connection with their English examination scores, which require them to give their choice conscientiously that really reflect their vocabulary learning. All the questionnaires were distributed during the participants' regular English classes and their teacher was also informed of the procedures of distribution before the survey. Students were given 30 minutes to finish the questionnaire. During the process, teachers had emphasized the written instructions, especially for the five-points rating scales stands for. All the questionnaires were collected within the set time.

The data in this study were collected through a questionnaire survey on their reports on actual use of vocabulary learning strategies. After all the data were collected, they were put into computer and processed by SPSS. The results are to be discussed later

3. THE RESULTS AND ANALYSES

Table 2 provides statistics on each category of vocabulary learning strategies, together with some specific microstrategies adopted by the subjects.

Table 2
Frequency of Strategy Used in Individual Strategy Items

Items	Mean	SD
Organizational planning	3.28	0.92
Self-monitoring	3.07	0.87
Check vocabulary learning methods to find the weak points	3.11	1.00
Adapt to effective vocabulary learning methods	3.27	0.96
Review newly-learned words in a set time	3.20	1.10
Check the mastery of the words	3.02	0.97
Self-evaluation	3.16	0.97
Evaluate through vocabulary learning methods' analyses	2.98	0.93
Evaluate through self-summarizing	3.01	0.86
Selective attention	3.47	0.71
Pay attention to key words	3.55	0.92
Pay attention to high-frequency words	3.52	0.96
Pay attention to interesting words	3.36	0.97

To be continued

Continued

Items	Mean	SD
Context	3.56	0.75
Memorize emotional coloring of the words in the context	3.23	1.08
Memorize related sentences in the context	3.37	1.11
Memorize related phrases in the context	3.41	0.97
Wide-reading	3.24	1.01
Read newspapers and magazines	3.56	1.12
Read original words	3.07	1.13
Read simplified words	3.25	1.04
Read on lines	3.11	1.12
Watch movies and songs	3.33	1.17
Guessing	3.67	1.00
Guess by analyzing word parts or structures	3.38	1.05
Guess according to the meaning of the related sentence	3.52	0.99
Guess by interrelationship of sentence	3.28	1.09
Combine guessing with looking-up dictionary	3.00	1.13
Dictionary	3.09	1.18
Use English-Chinese Dictionary	3.14	1.08
Use English-English Dictionary	2.43	0.93
Use English-English-Chinese Dictionary	2.82	1.00
Use Electronic Dictionary	3.04	1.27
Look up the dictionary to know the meaning of the word in the related passage	3.15	1.02
Look up the dictionary to know various meaning of this word	2.94	1.06
Look up the dictionary to know the usage of this word	2.89	1.02
Grouping	2.64	1.02
Group by affixes and roots	2.82	1.06
Group by semantic feature	2.55	1.04
Group by usage	2.36	0.95
Group by word form and pronunciation	2.78	1.04
Do exercises	2.71	0.82
Do multiple-choice vocabulary exercise	3.19	1.25
Use words to make up sentences	1.97	0.92
Use words to write diaries or compositions	2.92	1.08
Rote-learning	2.71	0.82
Use both oral and visual repetition	3.19	1.25
Use visual repetition	1.97	0.92
Use oral repetition	2.92	1.08
Memorize high-frequency words	3.04	1.03
Memorize interesting words	2.88	1.14
Memorize word-lists in the textbook	2.18	0.99
Memorize self-made word-lists	2.62	1.03

To be continued

Continued

Items	Mean	SD
Memorize the words from the dictionary	1.97	1.01
Association	2.67	0.94
Associate by word structure	2.63	1.01
Associate by using keyword method	2.43	0.93
Associate by form and spelling	2.49	1.11
Passage-reciting	3.11	1.06
Recite well-written passages	3.09	1.13
Recite sentences	2.97	1.10
Application	2.87	0.90
Talk with native speakers	2.76	0.90
Participate in English corners	2.61	0.80
Participate in group-discussion in class	1.82	0.84
Use words to make up a story	1.95	0.99
Apply words in conversation and composition	3.35	1.20
Affective control	2.80	1.10
Regulate emotion through talking with teachers	1.77	1.03
Regulate emotion through talking with parents or relatives	2.36	1.32
Regulate emotion through talking with friends	3.12	1.29
Encourage myself when meeting with troubles in vocabulary learning	3.56	1.16
Cooperation	1.76	0.85
Communicate with classmates to practice new words	1.87	0.92
Listen to and imitate words used by high-proficiency classmates	1..66	1.06

Table 2 shows that selective attention (*M*=3.47, *SD*=0.71) ranks the most popular of the four metacognitive strategies, which suggests that the subjects are all positive with regard to identifying important to-be-learned words and thus arousing their consciousness to acquire these words. Organizational Planning (*M*=3.28, *SD*=0.92) is the next popular one which illustrates that most students used to make vocabulary learning plan in advance. Self-evaluation (*M*=3.16, *SD*=0.97) ranks the third and followed by Self-monitoring (*M*=3.07, *SD*=0.87).

With regard to cognitive strategies, according to Table 2, it is clearly that Guessing (*M*=3.67, *SD*=1.00) ranks the highest among all the cognitive strategies. Students prefer to guess words according to the meaning of the related sentence (*M*=3.52, *SD*=0.99) and to guess by analyzing word parts and structures (*M*=3.38, *SD*=1.00) than guess by interrelationship of sentence (*S*=3.28, *SD*=1.09) or combine guessing with looking-up dictionary (*M*=3.00, *SD*=1.13).

The next preferred strategies is Context (*M*=3.56, *SD*=0.75). Learners like memorizing related phrases in the context (*M*=3.41, *SD*=0.97) and memorizing related sentences in the context (*M*=3.37, *SD*=1.11) as well

as memorizing emotional coloring of the words in the context (*M*=3.23, *SD*=1.08). As Gairns and Redman (1986) mentioned: "The meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language". Learners often know a common meaning of a word, but somehow it does not fit into the language situation in which it is operating. This is because a word that is correct in one situation may not be correct in another. Moreover, to let working memory function to help learning, "'new' language presented must include in a context which connects with knowledge already present in the learner's long-term memory…" (Brumfit & Roberts, 1983). Learning a word in different context, we can not only learn the conceptual meaning of the word, but also learn its connotative, social, affective, reflective, collocative even thematic meaning. Hereby, learners are more likely to use the word appropriately in different context.

The college students widely employ wide-reading strategies. (*M*=3.24, *SD*=1.01). The most popular materials for them are newspapers and magazines (*M*=3.56, *SD*=1.12). The reason is that these two kinds of materials are easily found in their daily life and they choose watching movies and listening songs (*M*=3.33, *SD*=1.17) because this is a recreational way for young learners to acquire words. Simplified works (*M*=3.25, *SD*=1.04) are also favored by college learners. More and more simplified works are available now which makes students contact with English literature and help them understand the English language better. Reading on line (*SD*=3.11, *M*=1.12) and reading original works (*S*=3.07, *SD*=1.13) are less used by them.

Association Strategy is also favored by the students (*M*=3.11, *SD*=1.06). They prefer to associate words by word structure (*M*=3.09, *SD*=1.13) and by using Keyword method (*M*=3.02, *SD*=1.18). On the other hand, much of them do not like associating by form and spelling (*M*=2.97, *SD*=1.10).

They seem to use Dictionary strategies (*M*=3.09, *SD*=1.18) to know the meaning of the word in the related passage (*M*=3.15, *SD*=1.02), know various meaning of the word (*M*=2.94, *SD*= 1.06) and to know the usage of this word (*M*=2.89, *SD*=1.02). As for the type of dictionary, English-Chinese Dictionary (*M*=3.14, *SD*=1.08) ranks the first place followed by Electronic Dictionary (*M*=3.04, *SD*=1.27), English-English-Chinese Dictionary (*M*=2.82, *SD*=1.00) while English-English Dictionary ranks the last (*M*=2.43, *SD*=0.93). According to the interview, the students like another kind of book, in which lists all the words or phrases required in the CET-4 and CET-6 and almost everyone has at least one in hand whereas real dictionaries such as Oxford Dictionary, is less used by them. Because for most of the non-English majors, their purpose of learning English is just for passing the CET-4, only few of them want to learn this language for the practical use.

Different from the most popular belief that "word should be learned through application", in the practice, college learners do not like use Application strategies (*M*=2.87, *SD*=0.90) frequently. The most widely used strategy in this category is "Apply words in conversation and composition" (*M*=3.35, *SD*=1.20) for their English teachers require them to write a composition twice a week and the score will affect their final English scores. As for other strategies, Talk with native speakers (*M*=2.76, *SD*=0.90), Participate in English corner (*M*=2.61, *SD*=0.80), Use words to make up a story (*M*=1.95, *SD*=0.99), Participate in group-discussion in class (*M*=1.82, *SD*=0.84), the mean scores are rather low, which suggests that these strategies are not much adopted by them. Based on the author's teaching experience, group-discussion in class is a difficult step in the college English class, for most students do not want to speak at all. What they accustomed to learn English is just to listen to the teacher and write what the teacher emphasized. Although they have the desire to speak, they do not know how to express themselves, therefore fewer and fewer students actively take part in the discussion in English class. According to the interview, many students reported that when they were freshman, they participated in English corner frequently, but they found that many students in English corner were from English department and spoke English fluently, so they felt embarrassed when they expressed themselves by "Chinese English", therefore, most of them gave up English corner.

The mean score of other four strategies Rote-learning (*M*=2.71, *SD*=0.82), Doing exercise (*M*=2.67, *SD*=0.94), Passage reciting *(M*=2.54, *SD*=0.68) and Grouping (*M*=2.64, *SD*=1.62) are all below 3.00, which means that these strategies are not widely used by college learners. Of rote-learning strategies, the strategy of "both oral and visual repletion" (*M*=3.19, *SD*=1.25) are much more preferred among others. Besides, they like "memorize high-frequency words" (*M*=3.04, *SD*=1.03).

Obviously, the rank order of cognitive strategies based on the mean scores could explicitly show the most and the least popular strategies adopted by college learners: Guessing (*M*=3.67), Context (*M*=3.56), Wide-reading (*M*=3.24), Association (*M*=3.11), Dictionary (*M*=3.09), Application (*M*=2.87), Rote-learning (*M*=2.71), Doing exercise (*M*=2.67), Passage Reciting (*M*=2.54) and Grouping (*M*=2.64).

As far as Social/ Affective strategies are concerned, the mean scores of Affective control (*M*=2.80, *SD*=1.10) and Cooperation (*M*=1.76, *SD*=0.85) are lower than 3.00, which indicates that social/affective strategies are not much adopted by college learners. Among all the microstrategies, self-motivation, namely, encourage oneself when meeting with troubles (*M*=3.56, *SD*=1.16) ranks much higher than other activities. It suggests that when encountering difficulties or failures in English vocabulary learning process, college learners depend more on themselves to develop self-confidence, self-encouragement. On the one hand, they like to regulate emotion through talking with friends (*M*=3.12, *SD*=1.29) more than talking with parents or relatives (*M*=2.36, *SD*=1.32) or with teachers (*M*=1.77, *SD*=1.03), on the other hand, Cooperation Strategies are not favored by them (*M*=1.76, *SD*=0.85). The mean scores of the two actives are even lower than 2.00: Communicate with classmates to practice new words (*M*=1.76, *SD*=0.92), Listen to and imitating words used by high-proficiency classmates (*M*=1.66, *SD*=1.06).

The interview indicated that though most of the subjects do like English learning, only a few of them like English Vocabulary learning. Obviously, English words and expressions are too different to memorize. One interviewee reported, for instance, she had spent one half an hour on vocabulary learning every day, but she could not remember all the newly learnt words. With fuzzy idea of metacognitive strategies, most of the college students are lack of clear objectives or plans for vocabulary learning, the interview revealed. Particularly, English teachers in college seldom mentioned the effective ways or methods to learn vocabulary, hereby, they just learn it mechanically. Despite the strong desire of learning English well, the outcome is barely satisfactory.

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is so important to language and naturally, vocabulary learning becomes an essential and pivotal part in language learning. In fact, vocabulary needs vary with different stages of learners, thus learners of higher level will certainly have a higher need for vocabulary. Conversely, sometimes those learners who spend less time achieves more in vocabulary learning, thus it is important to adopt a proper vocabulary strategy.

It can be found out from the questionnaire in this study that most students do not know much effective learning strategies in English vocabulary acquisition. Students frequently apply rote learning to English vocabulary, which wastes much learning time on vocabulary memorization, and without a enough, solid and well-founded vocabulary base, students could not master English skills really and further the better performance, or higher score in all kinds of English tests.

Therefore, it, firstly, is urgent for English teachers in college to develop students' awareness of using vocabulary learning strategies, to encourage them to make plans for vocabulary learning and to help them develop strategies to evaluate and check their learning outcomes, stimulating students to become autonomous English learners. On the other hand, just as Oxford (1990) argued that learners should be taught how to continue to improve their vocabulary on their own by reaching them appropriate vocabulary learning strategies in contrast to simply letting students learn the vocabulary learning

strategies, hereby, in course instruction, English teachers are advised to use frequently-used and effective learning strategies to help students with their vocabulary learning.

To sum up, vocabulary learning result is directly related to students' own effort. It's even more important for students to enhance the ability of vocabulary learning. Now as the science and technology is developing, many a useful learning methods coming into being. For these reasons, getting familiar with the vocabulary learning strategies and making them useful in their actual vocabulary learning activities, both in and out of class is of top priority.

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