

Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies of First Year Non-English Majors at University in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Many non-English major students often find it difficult to learn new words, especially first-year students. However, they are required to learn a large amount of vocabulary each day to understand their higher education lessons. Additionally, even if they manage to remember new words, they often struggle to use them effectively in communication. This paper addresses the question: What difficulties do first-year non-English major students at Thu Dau Mot University encounter in learning vocabulary? The hypothesis is that these challenges primarily stem from a lack of effective language learning strategies. To explore this, we conducted ten individual interviews with students to support a discussion regarding the hypothesis. This paper includes a discussion and analysis of the survey results, designed to gather insights into vocabulary learning strategies among first-year non-English majors at Thu Dau Mot University in Binh Duong. The study's final results confirm the hypothesis. At the conclusion, we propose solutions to help students overcome these challenges, improve their vocabulary acquisition, and benefit from more effective learning strategies.

KEYWORDS: vocabulary, learning strategies, non-English majors.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in learning English. The more vocabulary students possess, the better they can understand and use the language. English language learners with slow vocabulary development often struggle to comprehend texts at grade level, falling behind their English-only peers. These students are likely to perform poorly on assessments and may be at risk of being misidentified as learning disabled. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, effective and successful reading is challenging, and students may also find it difficult to express their thoughts in writing or speaking.

For university students, vocabulary aids in reading comprehension, synthesis of other texts, and overall English proficiency across all skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing—particularly in academic contexts. This article reviews research on the vocabulary learning challenges faced by first-year, non-English major students at Thu Dau Mot University, along with methods to enhance their vocabulary acquisition. The students selected for this review represent those at the foundational level in English at this university. The research highlights several valuable strategies, such as utilizing cognates from students' first language (when relevant), ensuring students understand basic English words, and providing sufficient opportunities for review and reinforcement.

We also discuss the challenges in designing effective vocabulary-learning strategies, as many students find remembering new words difficult. Key issues include selecting which words to teach, addressing significant vocabulary gaps in second-language learners, and managing limited time for direct vocabulary instruction. This study reveals a range of strategies each student employs, along with the advantages and challenges of vocabulary learning, and suggests solutions to overcome these difficulties. We hope our research will help students identify effective strategies for learning English vocabulary, as vocabulary acquisition is foundational to English language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What are vocabulary learning strategies?

Learning strategies play a crucial role in the outcomes of the learning process. Effective learning strategies enable learners to achieve their goals within an appropriate timeframe. Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning” (p. 1). More broadly, learning strategies are methods that learners use to support their own learning process. Vocabulary learning strategies, therefore, are a subset of overall learning strategies. Various researchers have proposed their perspectives on vocabulary learning strategies. Ellis (1999) describes them as specific techniques for learning vocabulary. Similarly, Schmitt (2000) defines vocabulary learning strategies as “one approach to facilitating vocabulary learning” (p. 132). In our study, we define vocabulary learning strategies as techniques learners use to acquire new words and apply them in different contexts.

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Classifications of vocabulary learning strategies

A wide range of classifications for vocabulary learning strategies has been proposed by researchers in the field of language learning. Recent studies have established a basis for categorizing these strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies are generally divided into two main groups: strategies for increasing vocabulary and strategies for consolidating vocabulary (Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). Expanding on these classifications, Zhang (2006) introduced a modified framework that includes two primary categories—metacognitive and cognitive strategies—further divided into 16 subcategories.

While various classifications of vocabulary learning strategies have been introduced, this study uses Schmitt's (1997) framework as its basis. In his book *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition, and Pedagogy*, Schmitt categorizes vocabulary learning strategies into two main groups: (1) strategies for discovering a new word's meaning, and (2) strategies for consolidating a previously introduced word. The former involves identifying aspects of a new word, such as its part of speech and meaning. The latter includes reinforcement activities, such as repetition and exercises, to memorize a word's spelling, meaning, and usage, ensuring it can be recalled when needed. To further support this classification, Schmitt (1997) divides vocabulary learning strategies into five subcategories: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies.

These subcategories, briefly summarized below, provide a foundational framework for identifying the stages of vocabulary learning. As outlined by Schmitt (1997), vocabulary learning strategies fall into two primary groups: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. The first two subcategories—determination and social strategies—are primarily associated with discovery, while the last three—memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies—mainly relate to consolidation.

Determination strategies represent the initial stage of vocabulary learning, where learners independently deduce a word's meaning by analyzing its part of speech, affixes and roots, word class, or by guessing from context, and consulting monolingual or bilingual dictionaries (Schmitt, 1997). Social strategies also aid in discovering a new word, as learners seek help from teachers or classmates for translations, meanings, synonyms, antonyms, and so forth (Schmitt, 1997). This summary suggests that discovering new words can be either an individual or interactive process, depending on learners' backgrounds, attitudes, or even interests.

Lui (2010) found that while third-year students often motivate themselves in learning vocabulary, freshmen lack personalized vocabulary learning strategies and often rely on teacher support. Most students seek assistance from others only when they lack other resources for learning new words (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011). This indicates that students' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies may need to be enhanced. Additionally, studies by Lui (2010) and Zhang (2006) report that learners frequently use bilingual dictionaries to check new word meanings but rarely attempt to guess meanings from context (Zhang, 2006). Lui's (2010) study further highlighted limited use of strategies such as analyzing parts of speech, affixes, and roots to infer meanings. These findings suggest that students may not yet fully employ all discovery strategies, showing a strong dependence on dictionaries.

The second stage of vocabulary learning focuses on consolidating what learners have acquired. Progress in vocabulary learning is assessed by how well learners memorize words and recall them over time. To support this, consolidation strategies—namely, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies—are essential.

Memory strategies involve creating mental associations that link new words to existing knowledge or real-life experiences, helping learners to "learn faster and recall better" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 219). For example, learners may study new words with corresponding images or connect them to personal memories (e.g., learning the word "snow" by recalling a childhood experience of playing in the snow). Additionally, new words can be grouped by characteristics such as synonyms, antonyms, phonology, or context to enhance retention. Structural analysis of words and incorporating physical actions during learning can also strengthen word meanings and improve recall.

Cognitive strategies are similar to memory strategies, combining repetition with mechanical methods for vocabulary acquisition. Learners frequently use written and verbal repetition to memorize new words (Sinhaneti & Kyaw, 2012; Lui, 2010; Lawson & Hogben, 1996), with repetition often viewed as rote learning. Recitation, a memory strategy, involves repeatedly reading or writing a word to reinforce retention. This method, popular among learners (Sinhaneti & Kyaw, 2012; Zhang, 2006), is simple yet effective. Additionally, learners may use word lists and flashcards to introduce and review new vocabulary. Personal study aids, such as note-taking, vocabulary notebooks, or structured tools, also support this process.

Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, involve evaluating learning progress. These strategies enable learners to check and assess what they've retained, using methods like English-language media, self-testing, review scheduling, and skipping less essential words. While metacognitive strategies are crucial for successful vocabulary learning, Zhang (2006) found that none of the observed learners applied them. Conversely, a study by Asgari & Mustapha (2011) indicated that university students in Malaysia made significant progress by incorporating newly learned words into daily conversations and using English-language media more frequently.

This study aims to explore the advantages of vocabulary learning strategies employed by first-year non-English majors at a college in Binh Duong City. Additionally, factors influencing vocabulary learning will be examined through a survey. To achieve the study's objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What strategies do first-year non-English majors at the selected university use to learn English vocabulary?
- 2) What advantages do they have in vocabulary learning?

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3) Do they encounter any difficulties in vocabulary learning? If so, what are they?

4) What can be done to address these difficulties and support students in improving their vocabulary learning?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The research was conducted with first-year non-English major students at ABC University in Binh Duong Province. A total of 10 students from both Business Management and Business Administration classes in the Economics Department participated in the study. They engaged in the first 20 periods of the Basic English program over a span of 14 weeks, attending 5 periods per week. The classes were conducted in a structured and serious manner.

Interview and Instruments

The interviews were conducted with 10 students immediately after their class session, following 5 periods of instruction on that day. Although a range of interview questions was prepared in advance, the majority of the discussion focused on the four research questions outlined above.

The instrument used to collect data from the interviewees in class aimed to provide the researcher with genuine insights into the challenges faced by first-year non-English majors in learning vocabulary. It also sought to explore and identify strategies to address these difficulties and enhance their vocabulary learning effectively.

Self- assessment

Using a self-assessment sheet, the students were required to complete it within 60 minutes before leaving the class. The purpose of this exercise was to gather information regarding their actual difficulties in learning English vocabulary in their Basic English classes after 4 weeks. Through this self-assessment, students could articulate their strengths and weaknesses in their vocabulary learning, providing valuable insights into their learning experiences.

Data collection procedure

During a 60-minute interview with 10 students from two classes, the researcher concentrated on exploring the difficulties these students faced in vocabulary learning. The interactions between the researcher and the interviewees were recorded in detail on the interview sheet. Following the interviews, the researcher provided the students with a self-assessment sheet to complete. Subsequently, the researcher compiled all the gathered information to analyze and find answers to the overall research questions.

Limitations through the interview

During the interviews, the researcher encountered several challenges. Firstly, the timing of the interviews was not ideal, as the students were tired and hungry after five periods of class that day, despite being aware of this schedule beforehand. Secondly, some students were slow to understand the questions, even after the researcher provided clear explanations. Thirdly, many of the participants were shy and lacked the self-confidence to articulate their thoughts and share their perspectives openly.

Moreover, conducting interviews with 10 students within a 60-minute timeframe posed limitations regarding the depth of discussion and the number of participants. Had the research allowed for a longer duration and a greater number of interviewees, the insights gathered could have been more comprehensive and refined. These limitations have provided the researcher with valuable experiences in designing and executing research that addresses the complexities of English vocabulary learning effectively.

RESULTS

This section presents the data from our survey, focusing on four primary areas: strategies, advantages, difficulties in vocabulary learning, and potential solutions for overcoming these difficulties. Within each area, we examine and highlight fundamental findings based on the respondents' input.

Out of the study population, ten participants completed and returned the questionnaire. The majority of respondents acknowledged that learning vocabulary plays a crucial role in mastering the English language. Many expressed that the more words they know, the better they can understand what they hear and read, as well as the more effectively they can express themselves in speaking and writing.

However, selecting the right learning strategies is essential for building a strong foundation in vocabulary. Over half of those surveyed reported struggling to identify useful vocabulary learning strategies, often resorting to traditional methods to learn new words. While they noted that they benefited from improved support compared to previous students, they faced various difficulties in applying effective vocabulary learning strategies, and they had not implemented key solutions to address these challenges..

Sixty percent of respondents reported spending significant time learning vocabulary but not achieving their desired results, primarily due to the inefficiency of using outdated approaches. Only a small number indicated that they were employing appropriate vocabulary learning strategies.

When asked about the strategies they use to learn English vocabulary, a larger proportion of respondents mentioned traditional methods, such as listening to English songs, playing games, watching films with or without subtitles, and reading comic books.

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While these methods can inspire learners and make vocabulary acquisition more enjoyable through real contexts and entertainment, most learners expressed a need for more effective and practical solutions for acquiring vocabulary.

A few respondents shared that they remembered vocabulary by writing words repetitively and reading them aloud to improve their pronunciation skills simultaneously. Some even wrote new words on stickers and placed them on walls, doors, and windows to keep the words visible and easily accessible. Notably, one student, Trung (age 19, a first-year non-English major), mentioned that he used an advanced English-English dictionary for his vocabulary studies. He emphasized the importance of highlighting words and memorizing them with contextual examples, which he then recorded in his own notebook for regular review. Trung explained that he avoided using an English-Vietnamese dictionary because he found it lacking in good examples, making it difficult to remember word meanings without precise contexts and clear definitions.

In response to Question 2, "What advantages do you have in learning vocabulary?" the majority of those surveyed indicated that expanding and improving their vocabulary significantly benefited all four skills: reading comprehension, listening, speaking, and writing. They noted that a strong vocabulary allowed them to express their ideas more clearly and engage in effective communication. Additionally, they found it easier to understand challenging textbook material and to make a positive impression on writing assignments.

However, nearly ten percent of the participants mentioned that mastering English vocabulary also helped improve their test scores. Only one participant, Quang (age 19, a first-year non-English major), shared that learning vocabulary increased his confidence in using words and engaging in conversation, which in turn fueled his passion for learning English.

Approximately two-thirds of the participants answered "yes" to the question, "Do you encounter any difficulties in vocabulary learning?" Among the ten subjects who completed the questionnaire, over half reported facing various challenges, including issues with spelling, word stress, pronunciation, and long words. Very few participants mentioned that the sheer number of words in English was a significant obstacle.

Additionally, they identified specific problems such as difficulty remembering words, infrequent usage of vocabulary in appropriate contexts, and a lack of exposure to these words in reading materials. Multiple participants expressed that they struggled to remember the parts of speech for various words. A small minority, consisting of two students, Hoa and Duy (age 19, students of the Faculty of Economics), described feeling confused and overwhelmed by the many synonyms in English, each with different usages depending on context. This difficulty made it hard for them to remember vocabulary for an extended period and use words effectively, which contributed to their frustration with learning vocabulary.

When asked about the key factors in learning vocabulary, the majority emphasized that memory is the most critical element influencing their vocabulary acquisition. Thao (age 19, a student of the Faculty of Business Management) highlighted that "time is also considered a powerful factor that positively contributes to vocabulary learning strategies."

Participants were asked via a 4-point scale, "What solutions can be implemented to eliminate the obstacles to vocabulary learning and help learners improve?" The overall response to this question was surprisingly positive. They recommended that extensive reading on a variety of topics is an effective method for expanding English vocabulary. Encountering words repeatedly in their reading can help them learn and use these words in their own speaking and writing.

Engaging in additional reading from diverse sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and their favorite materials, was seen as an excellent way to learn new English words. They also noted that regular revision is essential for consolidating previously learned vocabulary, suggesting that learners set aside specific times for vocabulary practice.

Furthermore, participants provided valuable insights into how to manage their vocabulary learning by dedicating more time to challenging words. They recommended creating a list of commonly used target words while removing those they already know, allowing them to focus on improving their vocabulary skills.

The majority of respondents indicated that they regularly used words in their speaking and writing tasks to remember their meanings and appropriate contexts. Only a small number of participants mentioned that they learned words by repeatedly writing them and constructing sentences with those words. Additionally, some engaged in English-speaking clubs to immerse themselves in a communicative environment where they could practice using these words in real-life situations.

A notable insight from the data came from Nam (age 19, a student in the Faculty of Economics), who stated, "I focus on learning the words that are important to the subjects I am studying, specifically in the field of business management." He emphasized that he preferred to learn words he believed he would frequently use, as he felt that this approach would enhance his interest and motivation in acquiring the language.

Overall, with a few exceptions, the results confirm the evidence of vocabulary learning strategies among first-year non-English majors at the university. Notably, the findings offer further support for the most effective solutions and potential strategies for vocabulary learning as identified by the participants.

DISCUSSION

Implications and applications

Based on the research findings, several implications can be drawn:

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To assist first-year non-English majors in employing effective strategies for learning English vocabulary, teachers should introduce various effective vocabulary learning techniques at the beginning of the academic year. Educators should discourage students from relying on traditional methods for acquiring new words until they are familiar with more effective strategies. Additionally, teachers should communicate the advantages of vocabulary acquisition to motivate students.

It is crucial for students to learn how to tackle difficult and lengthy words, including understanding the different parts of speech for various English vocabulary items. They should be able to identify whether a word is a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb. Knowing synonyms and antonyms is also important; for example, understanding that "poor" relates to "rich," and "big" connects to "small." Moreover, when studying vocabulary, students should explore prefixes and suffixes, as these can modify or expand the meanings of root words. For instance, learning the word "train" should be accompanied by understanding "retrain," while "correct" pairs with "incorrect." Recognizing suffixes can also clarify whether a word functions as a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb; for example, understanding that "govern" relates to "government," or "care" connects to "careful."

Additionally, students should be encouraged to recognize word families—groups of related words that share the same root but have different suffixes. For instance, when studying "depend," they should also consider "dependence," "dependent," "dependable," and "dependably."

Finally, to broaden their vocabularies, students should engage in extensive reading across a variety of materials. When reading, they should aim to read continuously without pausing to look up every unknown word, instead focusing on guessing the meanings from context. They should only consult the dictionary for key terms to enhance their understanding without interrupting the flow of reading.

LIMITATIONS

Although the study successfully achieved its initial aims, several limitations should be noted. First, the researchers faced constraints in both time and funding, which hindered the ability to interview a larger number of students for more comprehensive and accurate results. Second, some participants were unwilling to respond to the questions, leading to significant time spent identifying suitable respondents. Additionally, while some students volunteered to participate, their answers often lacked depth and value. Lastly, despite being part of a research group, some members showed limited interest in this particular field, preferring more practical topics that have direct financial applications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the present study cannot encompass all aspects of vocabulary learning strategies, highlighting the need for further research on similar topics. Since this study focuses exclusively on first-year non-English majors, the researchers faced limitations in obtaining comprehensive responses during interviews. It would be beneficial and essential for future researchers to expand their scope by including a larger and more diverse participant group, particularly those with higher levels of English proficiency. This approach would likely yield richer insights into vocabulary learning strategies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, vocabulary is essential not only for language learning but also for effective daily communication, as students cannot express themselves without a solid understanding of new words. This paper has examined the challenges faced by first-year students in learning vocabulary and identified potential solutions to overcome these difficulties. Reading and writing with academic vocabulary can be particularly daunting for university students, who often struggle with new words.

Common issues reported by learners include insufficient study time, which hinders their ability to acquire new vocabulary, and the use of inappropriate learning strategies that impede progress. Approximately sixty percent of respondents indicated that despite dedicating significant time to vocabulary study, they achieved unsatisfactory results, primarily due to reliance on outdated methods. Only a small fraction of participants reported employing effective vocabulary learning strategies.

Most respondents mentioned that they learned vocabulary through engaging activities such as listening to English songs, playing games, watching films (with or without subtitles), or reading comic books. These methods can inspire students and enhance their interest in learning new words within real contexts while also providing entertainment. However, many participants expressed difficulty in finding useful strategies, often resorting to traditional methods without adequate support.

Approximately two-thirds of the participants acknowledged encountering various difficulties in vocabulary learning, including challenges with spelling, word stress, pronunciation, and long words.

Overall, with a few exceptions, this study confirms the significance of exploring vocabulary learning strategies among first-year non-English majors at Thu Dau Mot University. The findings emphasize the importance of university support and lecturer guidance in equipping students with effective vocabulary learning strategies. To assist students in overcoming their challenges, lecturers should introduce practical tips and techniques for vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, it would be beneficial to compile suitable materials that include a range of exercises, progressing from basic to more complex vocabulary in the curriculum, allowing students to gradually review and enhance their vocabulary.

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Furthermore, if Thu Dau Mot University were to organize regular English-speaking clubs or seminars, freshmen would become more aware of the importance of vocabulary learning. This could serve as a significant motivation for them to develop and implement effective vocabulary learning strategies.

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