

Factors Affecting Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Synthesized Study

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) plays a key role in vocabulary learning. For ESL or EFL learners, lack of vocabulary knowledge may have an effect on the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in the target language. VLS helps facilitate learners' vocabulary learning process and helps them to become more self-directed in vocabulary learning. A number of research studies on learners' VLS use keep increasing every year where various factors affecting learners' VLS use are taken into consideration. This paper focuses on synthesizing previous VLS research works, in which the different factors affecting learners' VLS use had been analyzed. 45 research works carried out in Thailand and in other countries during the last two decades or more were selected and synthesized. The findings of this paper draw together the results from previous studies and discuss 3 main factors affecting learners' VLS use. The implications for VLS teaching and learning in the context of English as a second (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL) are pointed out.

Keywords: ESL, EFL vocabulary learning strategies, factors affecting vocabulary learning strategies

Introduction

In the sphere of second language or foreign language learning, it is widely acknowledged that vocabulary is an indispensable part of the four language skills. For second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) learners, vocabulary is one of the important language elements that supports the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing as McCarthy (1990) points out that "no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way" (p. viii). However, in Asian countries, vocabulary seems to be given little emphasis in the university curriculum (Fan, 2003). Vocabulary teaching in several classrooms is largely incidental (Fan, 2003; Catalan, 2003). In other words, language teachers may incorporate vocabulary learning into other language learning tasks, such as listening to stories, learning the meaning of words through contexts and information gap activities (Coady & Huckin, 1997). Consequently, learners incidentally gain knowledge of words in small increments. The learners' vocabulary learnability is normally influenced by two major types of factors; intralexical and extralexical factors. Intralexical factor refers to a factor that stems from the word itself, such as orthography, length, and semantic features of the word (Laufer, 1997). Extralexical factor

refers to a factor which is not directly related to the internal properties of a word, such as the role of memory in vocabulary learning, the influence of first and other languages, and the individual learners' differences (Takac, 2008). Acquiring an extensive vocabulary skill in a target language seems to be a big challenge for second language learners. To language learners, vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) help facilitate their vocabulary learning. A large and rich vocabulary items can be acquired with the help of VLSs (Nation, 2001). VLS has been increasingly recognized as essential to language learning as can be seen from the increasing body of research studies on VLSs, particularly in the last two decades (Khatib & Hassandeh, 2011). Some researchers in the area of VLS studies attempt to explore and describe learners' VLS without taking any factors into consideration while others have taken factors affecting learners' VLS use into account. A number of their research works have grown progressively every year. Despite the popularity of VLS research in connection with factors affecting learners' VLS use, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no published research synthesis has examined the research studies in this area. This paper aims to synthesize the findings of the empirical research works carried out in Thailand and in other countries during the last two decades or more and present the overview of factors that may affect learners' VLS use.

Definitions of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)

Different researchers propose varied definitions of VLSs based on their different perspectives. Some of them are as follows:

Cameron (2001) defines VLSs as “the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items” (p. 92).

Catalán (2003) explains her working definition for VLSs as “knowledge about the mechanisms (processes and strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students to (a) find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode” (p. 56).

Intaraprasert (2004) sees VLSs as “any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners reported using in order to discover the meaning of a new word, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to expand their knowledge of vocabulary” (p. 9).

Hamzah, Kafipour and Abdullah (2009) view VLSs from three different angles. First, it can be any actions the learners take to aid the learning process of new vocabulary. Second, these actions must be able to improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning. Third, VLSs are conscious actions taken by the learner in order to study new words.

With reference to the definitions of the term ‘vocabulary learning strategies’ above, we can conclude that the term ‘VLSs’ has been used to refer to the purposeful steps, actions or mental processes that the learners employ, more or less consciously, with the purpose to facilitate vocabulary learning. These processes lead the interventions that enhance vocabulary skills in the target language.

The Importance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

It is known that mastery of vocabulary is a gradual process and needs an effort invested by the learners. To the second language learners, learning new vocabulary has always been challenging for them. It may not be possible for students to learn all new vocabulary items only in the classroom setting. It is imperative for the teacher to help students learn how to acquire new vocabulary on their own (Sokmen, 1997). Learner independence has long been recognized important by a number of linguists in the process of vocabulary acquisition (Hamzah et al., 2009). Oxford and Nyikos

(1989) remark that strategies foster “learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction” (p. 291). In vocabulary learning, VLSs are considered important and have received much attention in the area of second language learning (Schmitt, 2000). The merit of all learning strategies including VLSs is to facilitate learners to take control of their own learning so that they can take responsibility for their own studies. Furthermore, for students of any languages, a large number of new vocabulary items can be acquired with the assistance of VLSs (Nation, 2001). VLSs help stimulate explicit vocabulary learning which involves many aspects, such as making conscious efforts to notice new vocabulary items, selective attending, and storing into long-term memory (Ellis, 1994). Gu and Johnson (1996) point out that learners who employ selective attending strategies may know which words are important and necessary for them to learn so that they are able to comprehend the passage. Learners who employ self-initiation strategies may use a variety of means to understand the meaning of vocabulary items. If learners are equipped with a range of VLSs, they may be able to deal with the new or unfamiliar vocabulary items without difficulty as VLSs help simplify the new vocabulary learning process for them. However, VLSs may not be considered inherently good. The effectiveness of the strategies may depend upon a number of factors, such as proficiency level, context of learning and learners’ characteristics, etc. (Schmitt 1997). There are many factors that may affect the learners’ VLS use in terms of their choice and frequency.

Materials and Methods

Previous research works on learner’s VLS use that are affected by different factors, carried out during the last two decades or more were collected. The total of empirical 45 research works derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, theses and dissertations was selected and synthesized. A number of factors arising out were grouped and presented under Ellis’s framework (1994). The factors affecting learners’ VLS use are elaborated in the subsequent section.

Factors Affecting Vocabulary Learning Strategies

A number of research works on VLS have pointed out several factors that constitute a source of variation in learners’ VLS use. The frequency and type of VLS employed by learners has been found to vary depending

on such factors. The factors affecting learners' VLS use discussed in this paper have been grouped under Ellis's framework (1994). Three broad categories are presented as follows.

1. Learner Individual Difference Factors

Learner individual difference factors constitute one sort of the variation in the use of VLSs. These factors include belief, attitude, motivation and language learning experience.

1.1 Belief

Belief has been singled out as one of the clear factors affecting learners' VLS use. A study done by Gu and Johnson (1996) found that Chinese university students devalued rote memorization strategies and they employed more meaning-oriented strategies than rote strategies. Recently, Sixiang and Srikhao (2009) discovered that Miao students (an ethnic group in China) who believed that words should be studied and put to use, employed a wide range of VLSs. According to Gu and Johnson's and Sixiang and Srikhao's, learners' strategy use seems to relate to what they believed. On the contrary, Wei (2007) discovered the opposite results indicating that what students believed did not yield their actual VLS use. That is, students believed that knowing a word means the ability to use such words in appropriate context. However, they concentrated too much on isolated short-term retention of form and meaning.

1.2 Attitude

Among individual learner difference factors, attitude does appear to positively correlate with learners' VLS use. Apart from belief, Wei (2007) took attitude into account as another factor influencing learners' VLS use. The findings showed that Chinese college students with positive attitudes towards vocabulary learning employed VLSs more frequently than those with negative attitudes in four categories, i.e. dictionary, activation, guessing and management. The findings were consistent with Zhi-liang's (2010) study revealing that Chinese students with positive attitudes tended to employ a large variety of VLSs either to discover the meaning of the new words or to consolidate the use of the words.

1.3 Motivation

Students' motivation seems to positively correlate with their VLS. For example, Fu's (2003) study revealed that inherent interest motivation (learners' inherent interest in vocabulary learning) positively correlated with student's VLS use. The other research work that confirms the relationship between motivation and learners' VLS use is Marttinen's

(2008), indicating that Finnish ESL students with high motivation employed a wider range of VLSs than those with low motivation.

1.4 Language Learning Experience

In addition to motivation, language learning experience is considered as a factor that affects learners' VLS use. For example, Porte (1988) discovered that EFL students studying in language schools in London used the VLSs they had used at schools in their native countries. More recently, Stoffer (1995) found that EFL students' VLS use was significantly related to their previous language learning experience. Regarding the Thai context, Siriwan (2007) examined the students' VLS use and their language learning experience indicating that the more experienced students made more use of VLS than the less experienced ones.

2. Social and Situational Factors

Social and situational factors are other sources that influence the learners' VLS use. Social and situational variables comprise the field of study, course type, class level, gender and language learning environment.

2.1 Field of Study

Considerable evidence supports the relationship between learners' field of study and their VLS use. For example, Gu's (2002) findings revealed the difference in strategy use between science and arts students in which science students tended to employ strategies such as relying on visual coding more frequently than arts students. The findings in this study were consistent with Mingsakoon (2002) who discovered that science students employed VLS differently from the arts students. The VLS use of English and non-English major students are also examined. For example, Liao (2004) found that students studying in English and non-English employed VLS differently. The results were consistent with Chiang's (2004) and Zhang's (2009) studies. In addition, the VLS use of students in other disciplines was also investigated. In the study done by Bernardo and Gonzales (2009), it was found that the use of determination and social VLSs was significantly different among the Filipino students across five disciplines; Liberal Arts and Education; Computer Science and Engineering; Business Education; Hospitality Management and Allied Medical Science.

2.2 Course Type

Other than field of study, course type is considered a key factor affecting learners' VLS use. Course type refers to 'regular' and 'part-time' programs. In a study made by Siriwan (2007), the relationship between students' course type and their

VLS use was explored. The findings revealed that Thai university students studying in regular programs reported greater use of VLSs than students studying in part-time programs. Correspondingly, Al-Shuwairkh (2001) examined the VLSs employed by learners learning Arabic as a foreign language. It was discovered that learners studying in the morning courses reported higher use of VLSs than evening-course learners.

2.3 Class Level

Class level emerges as a clear factor affecting the way the VLSs are used. For example, Doczi's (2011) findings indicated that as the level of Hungarian ESL students improved the number of strategies to practice on regular basis and use word lists for consolidation decreased, strategies like skipping a new word were used more when students became more advanced. Along the same line, Mongkol's (2008) findings revealed that the second year Thai EFL university students tended to use VLS to analyze affixes and roots to understand the meaning of words more as compared to the first year students. In the same study, however, the first year students used VLSs more when learning new words by remembering parts of speech or paraphrasing the word's meaning.

2.4 Gender

Among the situational and social factors, gender seems to receive the widest attention from the researchers. However, the results are still inconclusive. For example, Catalán's findings (2003) revealed that Spanish female and male students differ significantly in strategy employing. The findings are consistent with Jones's (2006), Siriwan's (2007) Marttinen's (2008) and Seddigh's (2012). On the other hand, Chang Tsai and Chen Chang (2009) discovered the opposite results in which Chinese female and male students showed no significant difference of their VLS use. The findings were consistent with Fatemeh's (2009), Khatib and Hassandeh's (2011) and Arjomand's (2011) which indicated that gender had no significant difference on students' VLS use.

2.5 Language Learning Environment

Language learning environment seems to receive less attention from previous researchers. According to the available research works, this factor can be categorized into formal and informal language learning environment. With regard to this factor, Kameli et al. (2012) discovered that the role of teachers, peers and classroom environment affected Malaysian ESL students' VLS use. For example, a teacher's encouragement could influence the learners' VLS use in which learners were

encouraged to learn new words by focusing on the pronunciation of a word. Regarding informal language learning environment, Asgari and Mustapha's (2011) findings indicated that the role of supportive and unsupportive parents affected Malaysian ESL students' VLS use differently. For example, students living with supportive parents employed more variety of strategies to learn new words than those living with unsupportive parents who tended to lack the motivation in learning a language.

3. Learners' Learning Outcomes

Different researchers use different means as a predictor of learners' learning outcomes, such as students' language achievement, language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge.

3.1 Language Achievement

The relationship between students' language learning achievement and their VLS use is supported by some studies. For example, Gidey's (2008) findings revealed that the high achievers had greater use of VLS than the low achievers. The results were consistent with Suppasetsee and Saitakham's (2008) which showed the difference between high and low achievers among EFL Thai university students majoring English.

3.2 Language Proficiency

Attempts have been made to examine the students' language proficiency in connection to their VLS use. For example, in Loucky's (2003) findings revealed that Japanese college students with high language proficiency made higher use of VLSs than those with low proficiency. The results corresponded with Kung and Chen's (2004), Nemati's (2008), Chang Tsai and Chang's (2009) and Celik and Toptas's (2010) which revealed that students' VLS use positively correlated with their language proficiency level. In addition to the frequency of strategy used, the high and low proficient students employed the types of VLSs differently. For example, Lachine's finding (2008) revealed that some types of VLSs, such as "creative" highly correlated with the participants' proficiency levels. The results were consistent with Mizumoto and Takeuchi's (n.d.) which demonstrated that some types of VLSs highly correlated with students' TOEIC scores.

3.3 Vocabulary knowledge

Many researchers use vocabulary size as a basis for vocabulary knowledge. There is considerable evidence available to support the link between students' vocabulary size and their VLS use. For example, Tilfarlioglu and Bozgeyik's (2012) findings, showed that student's VLS use positively correlated with their

vocabulary size. The findings corresponded to the previous research works, such as Ahmed's (1989), Gu and Johnson's (1996), Lawson and Hogben's (1996), Fan's (2003), Cusen's (2005), Hamzah, Kalifpour and Abdullah's (2009), Kafipour, Yazdi, Soori and Shokrpour's (2011), Komol and Sripetpun's (2011) and Waldvogel's (2011).

Discussions, Conclusions and Implications

This paper reviews previous research works on VLSs and attempts to synthesize the results of these studies into a set of cohesive conclusions. The research participants can be classified into two groups; 1) the non-native speakers of English learning English as either a foreign language or a second language (e.g. Siriwan, 2007, Doczi, 2011), and 2) the native speakers of English learning a foreign language (e.g. Waldvogel, 2011). With respect to the investigated factors, they have been classified into 3 broad groups; 1) learner individual difference factors, 2) situational and social factors and 3) learners' learning outcomes.

1. The learner individual difference factors presented in this study include belief, attitude, motivation and language learning experiences. Beginning with belief, the findings are still inconclusive. Some researchers indicate that students seem to adopt VLSs based on their belief about vocabulary learning. Other reflects different findings in which students' actual strategy use do not rely on students' beliefs. For example, students believe that the ability to use a word is to use it in real communication appropriately. However, the students rely too much on word form. This implies that students may lack the opportunities to use vocabulary in their real language situation. This is consistent to Maesin, Mansor, Shafie and Neyan (2009, p. 71) who state that "in second language learning, students find difficulties to utilize the language skills outside the classrooms as there are fewer opportunities to do so due to poor language environment." This seems to hinder their goal in vocabulary learning. Regarding attitude, motivation and language learning experience, all these factors seem to positively correlate with learners' VLS use. For example, students with positive attitudes towards vocabulary may employ a large variety of VLSs and use them frequently. The more highly motivated students also employ a wider range of VLSs than the less motivated ones. We may conclude that attitude, motivation and language learning experience appear to affect learners' VLS use in the same manner. This may

suggest that the use of VLSs should be taught to students with negative attitudes, or those with low motivation and less experience. These students need to develop the skill of using VLSs so that they can make full use of these skills to deal with new or unfamiliar vocabulary items.

2. The situational and social factors mentioned in this paper include field of study, class level, course type, gender and language learning environment. Starting with the field of study, it is possible to conclude that it has been found to be related to the strategy preferences of students. This implies that students in different fields of study are likely to have different styles of learning vocabulary. Learning style refers to "stable and pervasive characteristics of an individual expressed through the interaction of one's behaviors and personality as one approaches a learning task" (Garger & Guild 1984, p. 11). It might be explained that students with different learning styles and those learning in different fields of study are likely to use different choices of VLSs. In this respect, it will be very beneficial if the learners are able to take advantage of their learning style by applying VLSs that suits such style. In addition, it is important for learners to recognize their strengths and expand their vocabulary learning potential.

With respect to course type, students studying in regular and morning courses reported higher use of VLSs than students studying in part-time programs and evening courses. It could be explained that most students studying in regular and morning courses are young and active, while students studying in part-time and evening courses are adult learners. Most of them already have a job and they may have time limitations to put effort on vocabulary learning. It is imperative for language teachers to take course type into serious consideration when introducing or training students to use VLSs.

Regarding class level, it emerges as a clear factor affecting learners' VLS choice. The findings seem to reflect the fact that the higher class level the students are in, the lesser rote memorization method they use. Therefore, it is important for language teachers to know what type of VLSs do the students in the lower classes lack so that the teachers can promote VLSs to them and encourage them to use a wider range of VLSs. Brown (1993) suggests that teachers can help empower students by providing what the strategies are and how to develop them for their own usage.

Arising out of the research findings, gender exhibits a strong relationship with the students' choice of strategy use. However, in some other learning contexts, gender

fails to make a significant difference in VLS use. We may come to the conclusion that the relationship between students' choices of VLS use and gender is still complex. This may suggest that language teachers in some learning contexts should take gender into account when teaching VLS use to the students, as female and male students in their contexts may differ in the type of VLS they employ.

With regard to language learning environment, the findings seem to reflect that both formal and informal language learning environment can either encourage or discourage students' vocabulary mastery. This may suggest that language teachers should provide a pleasant learning atmosphere and fruitful guidance to support the students' vocabulary learning. Furthermore, parents should give warm encouragement to their children so that they can fully develop the essential skills for their vocabulary learning.

3. Learners' learning outcomes are dealing with language achievement, language proficiency, and vocabulary knowledge. The findings from previous research works seem to indicate that successful learners employ a larger number and a wider range of VLSs than the less successful language learners. Successful language learners often apply VLS in quite intricate ways to help them acquire new vocabulary items. However, it seems quite risky to infer that the higher language learning outcomes are the result of a larger number and a wider range of learners' VLS use. The relationship between learners' learning outcomes and learners' VLS use may be described as bi-directional. In other words, it can either be that the learners' VLS use resulted from their learning outcomes or that their learning outcomes can be the result of their VLS use.

Limitations

Since this study is limited to synthesize 45 research works relating to factors affecting learners' VLS use carried out during the last two decades or more, the findings and implications cannot be generalized to all research works in which factors affecting learners' VLS use have been taken into consideration. Nevertheless, the synthesis of some previous research studies may provide insights to better understand the students' VLS use as well as the factors that may affect their choices and frequency of strategy use. It could also awaken the awareness of the students' strategy use in vocabulary learning.

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