A Diagnostic Study on the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies for English Majors in China

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Abstract: This research utilizes a descriptive research design to investigate the use of vocabulary learning strategies among English majors and identify the potential reasons for their difficulties in learning vocabulary. The study aims to describe the relationship between these reasons and second language vocabulary acquisition. A questionnaire, consisting of 62 items selected from the Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire (VLQ) 6.4 published by Gu and Johnson (1996), was administered to 115 sophomores majoring in English. The questionnaire was used to determine the types of vocabulary learning strategies employed by the participants, as well as the most and least frequently used strategies. The results indicate that English majors surveyed were moderate users of vocabulary learning strategies. Inferencing strategies were found to be the most commonly used, while Encoding strategies were the least used. After analyzing the participants' vocabulary learning strategies, the study proposes to improve their mother tongue competence to enhance their thinking ability, which is an essential factor in learning English vocabulary. Furthermore, the study suggests that the lack of mother tongue competence courses in higher education and the absence of effective vocabulary learning strategy guidance in the learning process are potential reasons for the difficulties experienced by English majors in vocabulary learning.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, English majors, mother tongue competence, guidance of vocabulary learning strategies

Introduction

Mastering vocabulary is the key to language competence, and is one of the central tasks of not only native speakers but also second language learners. Laufer pointed out that communication without words is considered meaningless, so vocabulary acquisition is the core of language learning[1]. Burton said that language learners would feel confident when they can effectively use the acquired vocabulary and have a relatively complete store of vocabulary[2]. However, Haifa H. Alghamdi said that vocabulary teaching and learning was given a second or even little priority in English as a second language classes[3]. Qing Ma obtained from the questionnaire that the systematic guidance of vocabulary learning strategies was basically missing in the language teaching practice of Chinese teachers[4]. Qing Ma added that Chinese learners' English vocabulary acquisition methods can be summarized as "explicit learning"[5]. It was necessary for researchers to investigate the current situation of vocabulary learning strategies of English majors, and detect which learning strategies were used frequently and which were used infrequently through questionnaires. Based on these situations, the potential reasons for the choice of vocabulary learning strategies of English majors were diagnosed, and the relationship between these potential reasons and English vocabulary learning was explored through descriptive research. In the above consideration, it was expected to help students solve their difficulties in English vocabulary learning strategies.

Literature Review

Vocabulary learning strategies are part of language learning strategies, and language learning strategies are part of general learning strategies. So far, the research process of vocabulary learning strategies can be summarized as "2 key words" and "1 turning point".

"2 keywords" were taxonomy and relationship. Cohen (1990), Nation (1990) comprehensively discussed various strategies of vocabulary learning and made a detailed explanation. Researchers concluded the relationship between vocabulary learning and reading, using dictionaries, note taking, various contexts, teaching strategies etc. To discuss the relationship, we need to consider Qian's (2006), Şen's and Kulelim's (2015), and Schmitt's (2014) works. Qian (2006) reported that the vocabulary size or the breadth, the depth and reading comprehension are highly, and strongly, correlated.

"1 turning point" was the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered. However, this shift shows that vocabulary learning strategies still have an important relationship with learners and teachers. The main task of teachers is not to teach vocabulary knowledge one by one, but to convey vocabulary learning strategy knowledge and how to use these

strategies. The main task of students is not to learn which words the teacher teaches, but to master the vocabulary learning strategies and know how to use them, and then actively complete the vocabulary learning task and establish their own vocabulary network.

Schmitt's (1997) experimental researches on organizational strategy mostly carried out using the paradigm of free memory. These studies show that word classification is helpful for memory. In the past three decades, many experts and scholars have studied vocabulary learning strategies. Cohen (1990) and Nation (1990) comprehensively discussed various strategies of vocabulary learning and made a detailed classification. Parry and Luppescu & Day studied the relationship between reading, dictionary searching and vocabulary learning, and believed that extensive reading is beneficial to the improvement of the quality and expansion of vocabulary knowledge. Ahmed conducted a survey on the vocabulary learning methods of successful students and unsuccessful students, indicating that good students tend to learn vocabulary in context. Haynes and Baker (1993) found that the main obstacle for second language readers was the lack of English vocabulary knowledge rather than the lack of reading strategies.

Description of the Study Area:

Vocabulary Learning Strategies: The study of vocabulary learning strategies has generally studied the process of vocabulary learning and the vocabulary learning strategies used by learners. But there were two problems that few researchers have studied. First, there were a few studies on the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary teaching strategies. Pan (2020) said that "learning method" was main and "teaching method" was auxiliary[6]. Second, most of the studies of vocabulary learning strategies (Cohen 1998, O'Malley & Chamot 1999, Oxford 1990) were conducted with English as the mother tongue. However, there were a few studies on other languages as the first language.

Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Although vocabulary learning strategies have long been recognized, compared with language learning strategies, the impact of vocabulary learning strategies on second language acquisition is still quite limited. Oxford (1990) divided vocabulary learning strategies into direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory, cognition and compensation, while indirect strategies include metacognition, emotion and society. Gu and Johnson (1996) believed that learners tend to combine various learning strategies. An extensive taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies based on Schmitt (1997) and Oxford (1990) is divided into three groups: (1) strategies employed in choosing what vocabulary is to be learned; (2) strategies used to find information about the word itself; and (3) strategies aimed at establishing words already known[7]. Schmitt (1997, 2000) identified the overlap of cognitive, metacognitive, memory and social functions in 58 vocabulary learning strategies. He added strategies to determine the meaning of words and divided vocabulary learning strategies into two categories: strategies to discover new meanings of words and strategies to consolidate words once they are encountered. Among all the researches on vocabulary learning strategies, there are four important categories that focus on metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, memory strategies and activation strategies. It is very important to understand these concepts because they form the basis of any research in this field. Ghazal (2007) pointed out that in addition to finding new words, learners need to adopt various strategies to practice and retain vocabulary. In order to adapt to this, learners use various social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to consolidate their vocabulary knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

Vocabulary learning is crucial to the professional development of English majors. Many English majors have problems and difficulties in vocabulary learning, which are related to the choice of vocabulary learning strategies, the correct diagnosis, guidance of teachers, the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. If teachers can't diagnose the problems existing in students' vocabulary learning, they can't give correct guidance. If students can't choose correct and effective vocabulary learning strategies, they will not be able to extract words quickly and accurately when expressing. Second language vocabulary acquisition has a cross-cultural nature, so Chinese and Chinese context must have a profound impact on second language vocabulary acquisition. This study aims to find out more suitable vocabulary learning strategies for Chinese English majors.

Objective of the study

The key purpose of this study is to measure students' vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) according to Gu and Johnson and make decisions on vocabulary teaching. In addition, it finds out the potential reasons for the existing problems on the premise that students' vocabulary learning problems have been found.

Research Questions

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) used by Chinese English majors?

2. What are the most and least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) among Chinese English majors?

3. What are Chinese English majors' potential reason for the problems of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs)?

4. How to improve Chinese English majors' vocabulary competence by exploring more useful vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs)?

Research Approach

Participants: 115 sophomores majoring in English participated in the study. Most of them come from Inner Mongolia, China. Among the 115 participants, 107 female students (93%) and 8 male students (6.9%) were aged between 19 and 21. They had been learning English as a foreign language for at least ten years.

Instrument for the Study: The instrument used to collect data for this research was English as a second language (ESL) version of the Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire (VLQ) by Gu and Johnson (1996). VLQ 6.4 (Gu, 2018) is most suitable for those who are studying or preparing to study at the tertiary level. VLQ 6.4 is used to reveal two problems. First, at the beginning of the course, teachers quickly measure students' VLS and make decisions on vocabulary teaching. Second, on the premise that students' vocabulary learning problems have been found, researchers and teachers use it to find out the potential reasons for the existing problems. VLQ 6.4 contained a metacognitive component (belief and self-regulation) and a cognitive component. It followed the natural stage of vocabulary learning, from initially processing a new vocabulary (i.e., guessing, using a dictionary, taking notes) to consolidating and strengthening (i.e., rehearsing and coding), and finally to activating and using the newly learned vocabulary. However, the VLQ6.4 was adjusted according to the learning environment and level of participants. VLQ6.4 online version contains 62 items with a 100-point slider bar. The online questionnaire was composed of three sections. The first section considered the participants' personal data, while the second section was 10-item questionnaire to record the participants' beliefs about vocabulary learning, and the third section was 52-item questionnaire to record the participants' vocabulary learning strategies. VLQ6.4 is a largely reliable instrument. Only one of the 15 strategies, namely visual repetition, has an alpha value of .638. Other strategies were all above .70.

Procedures: In order to achieve the research purpose, the following procedures were followed. The questionnaire was conducted among sophomores majoring in English in a college in Inner Mongolia, China. 115 The participants received oral guidance from the questionnaire before starting the test, and these instructions were also written at the beginning of each section. They were told that the questionnaire had no time limit.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics were used to find mean to answer the above research questions.

Problems of VLSs used by Chinese English majors: The overall use of vocabulary learning strategies adopted by Chinese English majors participating in the survey was analyzed from the data, without considering any specific patterns of various vocabulary learning strategies of the participants. The slider bar version made use of a slider bar with 0 at one end and 100 at the other, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure1: A slider bar item

Gu (2018) gave a rough guide is to add or delete 20 from the arithmetic average (Table 1). The average standard deviation of all the strategies in VLQ6.4 for this sample is 18.28. Gu (2018) said the sample can still be a reasonable guide for quick diagnostic purposes.

Strategy	Mean	SD	Low strategy use	Moderate strategy use	High strategy use
Memorize	41	18	23 or below	24-58	59 or above
Learn	79	12	67 or below	68-90	91 or above
Selective	56	16	40 or below	41-71	72 or above
Self-Initiate	53	20	33 or below	34-72	73 or above
Guessing	67	14	53 or below	54-80	81 or above
Dictionary	65	15	50 or below	51-79	80 or above

Note What	67	18	49 or below	50-84	85 or above
Note Info	51	21	30 or below	31-71	72 or above
Wordlist	42	20	22 or below	23-61	62 or above
Repeat Oral	59	18	41 or below	42-76	77 or above
Repeat Vis	53	19	34 or below	35-71	72 or above
Coding Vis	50	21	29 or below	30-70	71 or above
Coding Aud	57	20	37 or below	38-76	77 or above
Coding Str	60	19	41 or below	42-78	79 or above
Coding Cntxt	55	21	34 or below	35-75	76 or above
Activation	53	20	33 or below	34-72	73 or above

Table 1: Interpreting VLQ6.4 scores (slider bar version, 0-100) (quoted from Gu, 2018)

According to the existing research results, it is necessary to think about the problems in the vocabulary learning strategies of the surveyed students.

1. The cognition of vocabulary learning strategies was not clear enough. Students didn't have an explicit understanding of the definition, purpose and usage of vocabulary learning strategies.

2. The ways for learners to understand vocabulary learning strategy knowledge were not clear. The students used general learning strategies to guide and complete vocabulary learning tasks. This result showed that there was no difference between the vocabulary learning strategies they used and the general learning strategies.

3. Teachers' support for students' vocabulary learning strategies was very insufficient.

4. There was few specialized textbooks on vocabulary learning strategies that systematically introduce important knowledge and information related to vocabulary learning strategies.

The Most and Least Frequently Used VLSs: Table 2 represents the mean frequency scores of 16 individual vocabulary learning strategies adopted by the English majors in China. Table 2 showed that English majors surveyed by the questionnaire were "medium" strategy users overall. With regard to strategy categories, the result revealed that Inferencing strategies were the most frequently employed by the English majors and Encoding strategies were the least frequently used strategies among them. This is consistent with Qing Ma's (2009) research results, which was administered to 109 Chinese first year university students. Qing Ma (2009) pointed students often try to guess the meaning from the context (3.62). Less frequently they will attend to other types of information, affixes and roots (2.73), making mental images of words (2.95), associating words with similar forms (2.83). They rarely draw pictures (2.01) to help memorize words and acting out the word meaning (2.05). Kees De Bot (1997) pointed the most important strategy by far was inferencing, involving 80% of all strategies used.

Strategy	Mean	Frequency Category
Memorize	49.36	Medium use
Learn	85.56	Medium use
Selective	67.85	Medium use
Self-Initiate	47.07	Medium use
Guessing	72.47	Medium use
Dictionary	67.79	Medium use
Note What	72.95	Medium use
Note Info	59.36	Medium use
Wordlist	53.47	Medium use
Repeat Oral	64.75	Medium use
Repeat Vis	55.14	Medium use
Coding Vis	55.81	Medium use
Coding Aud	58.81	Medium use
Coding Str	65.78	Medium use
Coding Cntxt	58.62	Medium use
Activation	61.69	Medium use

Table 2: 16 frequently used strategies adopted by the English majors

Chinese English majors' potential reason for the problems of VLSs: The result revealed that inferencing strategies were the most frequently and encoding strategies least frequently employed by the English majors. Many researches on vocabulary learning strategies always end with the results of the survey. The results of these studies only show which problems exist, but not why. However, frequently used learning strategies sometimes provide researchers with a new perspective, especially when most research results are consistent. Several keywords *logical development*, *common sense*, *knowledge of the world*, *background knowledge*, *explanation*, *grammatical structure* and *the part of speech* were summarized in these items from Table 3. From the above statements, the reasons for the two problems can be analyzed,

why they use inferencing strategies more frequently and encoding strategies least frequently: absence of mother tongue competence courses in higher education and absence of guidance of effective vocabulary learning strategies in vocabulary learning process.

The results of the questionnaire always provide the next teaching plan to strengthen the students' overall vocabulary learning strategy. However, after asking students to strengthen the strategies they seldom used, the overall result was that they still continued to choose high-frequency strategy and to ignore low-frequency strategy. Therefore, further analysis cannot be omitted. What were the general characteristics behind students' favorite vocabulary learning strategies, and what were these characteristics related to? These answers may be the important factors in learning foreign languages.

Categories	Strategies	Items
Inferencing	Guessing strategies	18. I make use of the logical development in the context (e.g., cause and effect) when guessing the meaning of a word.
		19. I use common sense and knowledge of the world when guessing the meaning of a word.
		20. I check my guessed meaning in the paragraph or whole text to see if it fits in.
		21. When I don't know a new word in reading, I use my background knowledge of the topic to guess the meaning of the new word.
		22. I look for explanations in the reading text that support my guess about the meaning of a word.
		23. I make use of the grammatical structure of a sentence when guessing the meaning of a new word.
		24. I make use of the part of speech of a new word when guessing its meaning.

Table 3: Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire: Inferencing Version 6.4 (quoted from Gu, 2018)

Absence of mother tongue competence courses: Humboldt (1836/1988), a 19th century German philosophical linguist, said that there is a unique world view hidden in every language. Pan Wenguo (2013) concluded mother tongue competence is the "glass-ceiling" over the study of foreign languages. Pan Wenguo (2013) stated different mother tongue backgrounds formed different ways of thinking, which was formed from childhood. There is no absolute distinction between good and bad, right and wrong, but there are different emphases. When comparing the ways of thinking between China and the West, the Chinese people prefer image thinking, while the Westerners prefer logical thinking; Chinese people emphasize dialectical logic, while Westerners emphasize formal logic; Chinese people prefer systematic thinking, while Westerners prefer atomic thinking, and so on. Mohammad Amiryousefi (2015) Unlike students, teachers believe that if learners try to connect English words with Farsi words and pay attention to the available pictures and clues, they can better understand their meanings. However, most students do not think so. Dr. Manoj Kumar Yadav (2014) stated that mother tongue is an indispensable tool for developing the intellectual, physical and moral aspects of education. People's habits, behaviors, values, virtues, customs and beliefs are all formed through their mother tongue. Weakness of mother tongue means paralysis of all thinking and power of expression. He also mentioned in his research that fluency and literacy of mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning other languages. Dr. Manoj Kumar Yadav (2014) pointed when grammar problems bring trouble to students, translation practice may also be a perfect exercise. He laid emphasis on use of L1 must be adjusted through effective target language teaching, taking into account the learners' mother tongue and cultural background, and use them as much as possible. Mother tongue assists in the transfer of literacy and critical thinking skills from the mother tongue to the new language being learned. The previous studies showed that the basis of thinking ability was given by native language learning, and the experience of native language learning can provide the basis for learning a foreign language or a second language.

From the data of this research, especially in item 18, item 19, item 20, and item 21 (see Table 3), it can be seen that students rely on their mother tongue competence when learning English vocabulary. Students often try to make use of the logical development in the context (75.3), use common sense and knowledge of the world (73.66), check guessed meaning in the paragraph or whole text to see if it fits in (75.54), to use background knowledge of the topic (72.95), to look for explanations in the reading context that support guess (75.64), to make a note (75.23) and to check the dictionary (72.26). Although the surveyed students were "medium" strategy users overall, the statistics from the above data can indirectly diagnose the characteristics of their vocabulary learning strategy use.

It is necessary to add mother tongue competence courses to the curriculum of English majors, of course, at a high level. In conclusion, the main purpose of vocabulary learning is to understand the target language by combining the meaning of each vocabulary and the grammatical knowledge of the target language. Understanding is inseparable from thinking, and mother tongue can provide the basis for thinking ability in foreign language vocabulary learning strategies. Therefore, this was the key purpose of this study is to measure students' vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) according to Gu and Johnson and make decisions on vocabulary teaching. The purpose of English teaching is not to

change students' way of thinking, but to learn another way of thinking on the basis of mother tongue thinking and world view.

Absence of guidance of effective vocabulary learning strategies: The data from the questionnaire also provided encoding strategies were the least frequently used strategies among them. Several keywords (act out, create a picture, "see" the spelling, put words that sound/spelled similar, pay attention to prefixes/roots/suffixes, word form, put words in sentences, remember a new word together with the context) were summarized in these items from Table 4. The lack of linguistic knowledge and vocabulary knowledge of the surveyed students was consistent with the findings of Qing Ma (2009). She investigated three factors that affect vocabulary learning difficulties, namely cultural differences, language distance and confusion of vocabulary forms. In her research, she also mentioned that lexical errors occurred when the meaning or form of the word is not learned or partially learned, and the target word was misunderstood or produced.

Categories	Strategies	Items
Encoding	Visual encoding	47. I act out some words in order to remember them better (e.g., jump).
		48. I create a picture in my mind to help me remember a new word.
		49. To help me remember a word, I try to "see" the spelling of the word in my mind.
	Auditory encoding	50. I put words that sound similar together in order to remember them.
		51. When words are spelled similarly, I remember them together.
		52. When I try to remember a new word, I link it to a sound-alike word that I know.
	Use of word-structure	53. When I learn new words, I pay attention to prefixes, roots, and suffixes (e.g.,inter-nation-al).
		54. I intentionally study how English words are formed in order to remember more words.
		55. I memorize the commonly used roots and prefixes.
	Contextual encoding	56. When I try to remember a word, I also try to remember the sentence in which the word is used.
		57. I put words in set expressions or sentences in order to remember them.
		58. I remember a new word together with the context where the new word appears.

Table 4. Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire: Encoding Version 6.4 (quoted from Gu, 2018)

Some strategies have been missing in students' long English learning process for about ten years. Qing Ma (2009) found out why students did not make full use of strategies, just lack of awareness. First, teachers usually fail to incorporate systematic vocabulary learning strategies into teaching. Second, they may not have enough strategy use or training knowledge. It is generally believed that teaching strategies can greatly affect students' learning. Different teaching strategies can promote students' different types of learning. Therefore, teachers' teaching methods can directly affect students' learning strategies. Especially in the process of learning without the context of the target language, most of the students' language learning strategies come from the teaching guidance of the teachers.

Dunn and colleagues declared that not all students learn through whichever strategy the teacher prefer to use. So far, one of the main concerns of educational researchers is to find the best match between teaching strategies and students' learning preferences in order to improve the learning effect.

Abrudan Cristina (2010) approached the idea that in order to make students become qualified language users, it is necessary to emphasize vocabulary teaching and learning. Vocabulary is not only acquired accidentally through indirect contact with words, but also acquired intentionally through explicit teaching and word learning strategies of specific words. The most important finding in the research was discovery techniques: students must make their own rules and meanings instead of being given everything by the teacher, especially at intermediate levels and above.

Wang (2014)'s research showed that implicit teaching based on meaning is more conducive to language features based on meaning, while explicit teaching based on rules is more conducive to language features based on form. This finding means that vocabulary teaching through implicit teaching can help language learners better understand the meaning of words. It also shows that clearly teaching vocabulary use and rules is more likely to improve learners' ability to master spelling and understand vocabulary parts, such as root, root, suffix, infix, prefix, etc. It is generally believed that teaching strategies can greatly affect students' learning. Different teaching strategies can promote students' different types of learning. Teachers need to make learners aware of the need to develop an independent and structured vocabulary learning method, which has been proved to be related to the success of vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

Therefore, our vocabulary teaching decision is to help students find approaches to learn English vocabulary well. More importantly , it suggests that the vocabulary teaching and learning is associated with students mother tongue competence to strengthen their thinking ability, which has an absolutely non-negligible factor on second language vocabulary learning. Besides, students need to improve their cognition of vocabulary learning strategies. Furthermore, it suggests that teachers give clear guidance to students on vocabulary learning strategy knowledge. Finally, teachers and researchers are suggested to compile professional vocabulary learning strategy textbooks to systematically introduce important knowledge and information related to vocabulary learning strategies.

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