



Special Vocabulary Learning Difficulties for EFL Students with Chinese Backgrounds

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Abstract: This paper discussed three important factors related to the special difficulties of EFL learners: coursebooks, language distance, and teachers. EFL students' vocabulary input sources lack real context and socio-cultural context of target language. At this point, efforts cannot be focused on creating a real context for them, which is unrealistic, but to find special methods based on the special difficulties of EFL. For EFL learners, coursebooks, as one of the numerous learning resources, have become the most important way for them to input language. This should be the starting point for finding EFL learners' difficulties and solving them. In addition, the large language distance between Chinese and English causes students to encounter certain difficulties in learning the target language. For the issue of contrasting the differences between NEST and non-NEST, which has been extensively studied, this paper proposed that the focus of researchers should be on providing effective vocabulary learning strategies for EFL students, rather than contrasting the two of them. According to the "knowing a word" proposed by Nation, this paper lastly stated the strengths and weaknesses of EFL coursebooks. After analysis, the strengths of the textbook are that most textbooks provide pronunciation, all textbooks provide written form, but provide contextual meaning. The primary stage textbooks provide explanations of grammatical functions. The main weaknesses are the lack of explanation modules for word parts, related means, concepts and references, settlements and constraints on use.

Keywords: vocabulary learning difficulties, EFL students, EFL coursebooks, language distance, non-NEST

Introduction

This paper investigated the problems faced by EFL learners in learning the vocabulary at Hohhot Minzu College in China. In fact, learners' ability to communicate effectively depends on their good understanding of vocabulary, which continues to expand throughout their lifetime. The research results indicate that EFL students face a series of problems when learning English vocabulary. These issues include the problems inherent in the textbook itself, the language distance between students' mother tongue and English, and the fact that most teachers are non-native speakers. These three aspects are analyzed in detail. When English is taught as a foreign language, coursebooks play a central role as the main teaching resources. The main reason is that they are the largest source of students' language input. From the perspective of researchers, the importance of vocabulary in second language teaching is no longer controversial. Given the role played by vocabulary in EFL textbooks and it is important for teachers and researchers to examine vocabulary teaching strategies. Researchers pay more attention to what words to teach and how to teach them.

In many countries where English is a foreign or second language, improving the vocabulary knowledge of English learners is a challenge faced by many universities. However, comparing some research findings on vocabulary teaching and learning, it is not difficult to find some problems and limitations in EFL Coursebooks, which may directly affect the speed and efficiency of students' vocabulary learning. Some researchers, especially the researchers of foreign language teaching methods, do not have information about the EFL students' learning environment, teacher's mother tongue and learner's native language. The most obvious characteristic of foreign language teaching methods is their universality. The background for this situation is that after the 1950s, the "Universal Grammar view" of generative linguistics almost dominated the world. The viewpoint holds that since language is universal, language teaching methods are of course universal, and language teaching methods derived from one language must also be applicable to any other language. Therefore, it is very noteworthy to discuss the special vocabulary learning difficulties for EFL students and point out whether the universal vocabulary teaching methods used by teachers are suitable for solving these difficulties.

Literature Review

Teaching vocabulary is a complex process. Michael Lessard-Clouston (2021) stated teaching vocabulary was not just about words; it involved multiword expressions, knowledge of English vocabulary, and how to go about learning and teaching it. Nation (2005) stated part of effective vocabulary teaching involves working out what needs to be taught about a word. This is called the learning burden of a word and differs from word to word according to the ways in which the word relates to first language knowledge and already existing knowledge of the second language and or

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other known languages ^[1]. Many research findings on vocabulary teaching focus on effective vocabulary teaching strategies. One factor that cannot be ignored in these effective teaching strategies is the learner's mother tongue factor. Souvannasy Bouangeune (2009) showed the effectiveness of using L1 in teaching vocabulary through translation exercises and dictation ^[2]. Du (2021) pointed out that the use of L1 translations could make English vocabulary teaching more effective since it had been observed that the subjects had better immediate retention and lasting retention when learning new English vocabulary through either Chinese translations or the combination of Chinese and English as compared to learning vocabulary through English-only ^[3].

Going through the review of literature, many researchers have focused on vocabulary learning strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identified metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective learning strategies as the three most basic learning strategies. Oxford (1990) proposed direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory, cognition, and compensation strategies, while indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Gu and Johnson (1996) pointed to metacognitive regulation and cognitive strategies as the two main dimensions of vocabulary learning strategies which covers six sub-categories of guessing, using a dictionary, note-taking, rehearsal, encoding, and activating, all of which were further subcategorized ^[4]. Schmitt (2000) proposed two types of second language vocabulary learning strategies: discovery and consolidation. Discovery strategies refer to determination and social strategies, while consolidation strategies include 40 strategies such as social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies.

Much of the research on learning strategies focuses on strong learners, attempting to summarize the characteristics of their learning strategies. In the field of vocabulary learning, the first stage attempts to convey the strategies of strong learners to weak learners. The second stage shifts to trying to solve the problem of how to successfully use second language learning strategies. In addition, some research hypotheses of Nation (1990) and Schmitt (2000) are not supported by empirical data. For example, teachers appropriately combine high-frequency words in the vocabulary teaching process, and teachers teach students to guess and use word parts based on the context. Cook (2013) believes that the process of vocabulary development occurs in two steps: providing learners with the opportunity to first encounter new words and their meanings, and attempting to retrieve, recall, and use target words in different environments and contexts. Therefore, learners need to engage in higher quality mental activities at the moment of learning to promote retention of vocabulary information for a longer period of time. Khany & Khosravian (2014) pointed out that students who did not have enough vocabulary or vocabulary learning strategies continued to struggle throughout their education career, which led to a cycle of frustration and continuous failure. In addition, Beck & McKeown (2007) stated that the vocabulary level of individuals was regarded as a means to unlock or close information access. Plonsky (2011) pointed out that the focus of vocabulary learning is to try to find out how to successfully use second language learning strategies ^[5]. Nassaji (2006) found that learners with greater depth of vocabulary knowledge were more successful in employing lexical inference strategies as well ^[6].

Many studies have conducted multidimensional analysis and research on vocabulary in coursebooks. Nation (2001) discussed the importance of learner autonomy in vocabulary learning when designing vocabulary components of language courses. Cobb (1995) analyzed the vocabulary coverage of three business textbooks to assess whether they meet the needs of learners taking the Cambridge PET proficiency test. The research results show that no textbook systematically covers high-frequency words. The author subsequently concluded that the series of textbooks did not provide learners with the basic vocabulary required to pass the PET test. Eldridge and Neufeld (2009) analyzed a series of textbooks titled 'Success' and found that it only accounted for 70% of the top 2000 words. Miekley (2005) proposed four questions related to vocabulary issues and stated that classroom teachers spend much time using textbooks in class, so choosing an appropriate one is important.

Description of the Study Area:

Definition of Vocabulary: Fard and Boroujeni (2013) stated that vocabulary is a sizeable component in the learning process. Learners across proficiency levels will encounter situations where they can understand only part of written text or a sentence due to the fact that they don't know all the words^[7]. While Richard and Willy (2002) stated that vocabulary is the core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read and write^[8]. Nation and Coady (1990) stated that vocabulary is clearly an important factor in reading, as readability studies show, but it is only one of a range of factor^[9]. Michael Lessard-Clouston (2021) defined vocabulary as the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words that convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do^[10]. Furthermore Cameron in Aqahtani (2013) stated that vocabulary as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language^[11]. From the definition above, it can be concluded vocabulary plays an absolutely important role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, even in the native language.

Strategies to Vocabulary Teaching: Graves (2006) defines vocabulary as the entire stock of words belonging to a branch of knowledge or known by an individual ^[12]. Generally speaking, vocabulary can be taught in different ways, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. Learning vocabulary from context or "incidental learning" and "direct intentional learning" are two different ways of vocabulary learning strategies. Krashen (2019) stated most skill-

building vocabulary teaching methodology begins with a list of words that will appear in the story or text, with translation into the first language, followed by vocabulary building activities that could come before, during or after the story [13]. According to Nation (2001), extensive reading contributes to vocabulary growth, which is called incidental learning. Oxford and Scarcela (1994) observed that although "de-contextualized learning", that is, word lists, can help students memorize test words, students are likely to quickly forget words remembered from the lists. Craik and Tulving (1975) mentioned that according to the "Depth of Processing Hypothesis", the more cognitive energy a person exerts when manipulating and thinking about a word, the more likely they are to recall and use it later.

Principles of Teaching English Vocabulary: To Nation (2005), six principles in the teaching vocabulary are (1) keeping teaching simple and clear without any complicated explanations, (2) relating present teaching to past knowledge by showing a pattern or analogies, (3) using both oral and written presentation, (4) giving most attention to words that are already partly known, (5) telling learners if it is a high-frequency word that is worth noting for future attention, and (6) not bringing in other unknown or poorly known related words like near synonyms, opposites, or members of the same lexical set.

Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Teaching: Nation and Newton (1997) argued that there are four levels of vocabulary: highly- frequent, academic, technical, and low-frequency words [14].

Level	Number of Words	Text Coverage (%)
High-frequency words	2,000	87
Academic vocabulary	800	8
Technical vocabulary	2,000	3
Total to be learned	4,800	98
Low-frequency word	123,200	2
Total	128,000	100

Table 1: Number of vocabulary to learn (Nation & Newton, 1997)

According to Shen (2008), the depth of vocabulary knowledge is termed as the learners' understanding of various aspects of a given word, or how well the word is comprehended.

Statement of the Problem

Recognizing and identifying EFL students' problems with regard to vocabulary learning strategies they use are essential steps in creating more efficient and successful environments for learning English vocabulary. This information will also help to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and language achievement within the EFL context. The problems of EFL students are shown in Table 2.

Sources of L2 vocabulary input	Society and culture	Less real target language context Less target language social context Less target language cultural context
	School	Mostly coursebooks
	Linguistic distance between L1 and L2	greater
Teaching	Teachers	Mostly non-native speakers
	"Knowing a word"	No clear guidance

Table 2: The characteristics of EFL students (in China)

Objective of the study

The main purpose of this study is to discuss EFL students' special vocabulary learning difficulties, and point out whether the general vocabulary teaching methods used by teachers are suitable for solving these difficulties.

Research Questions

1. What are the problems with sources of EFL vocabulary input?
2. What is the linguistic distance between Chinese and English?
3. Does studying the strengths or weaknesses of non-NEST address EFL learning difficulties?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of EFL coursebooks in terms of "Knowing a word"?

Research Methodology

In this study, a descriptive qualitative method was used to implement the characteristics of a case study. The author investigated students' difficulties in vocabulary learning and the factors that caused them. The data collecting technique used in this study were questionnaire and interview. By means of questionnaires and interview, the types and influencing factors of students' vocabulary learning difficulties are understood. In this research, the researcher took two classes, which consisted of 87 students of Hohhot Minzu College. The samples in this study were randomly selected

from a clustered population, which is commonly referred to as cluster random sampling. The samples were selected by drawing lots.

Research Results and Discussion

The result of interview and questionnaire are as follow:

Factors of difficulties: First, from the result of interview and questionnaire, it was found that almost all of the students have difficulties in lacking the target language environment. Second, when they apply their mother tongue or first language structure to a foreign language structure that is different from their mother tongue, they often face interference. Third, students are looking forward to encountering native English teachers (NESTs) in English speaking and listening courses, but not all courses. The reason is that they need teachers to have the ability to convert to L1 when needed, as well as the ability to explain complex grammar. The last, according to Nation's "knowing a word", the display of vocabulary knowledge in EFL textbooks is not comprehensive, especially for learners who lack real context and use the textbook as the main language input. This phenomenon can lead to learners not knowing all the tasks and effective methods of vocabulary knowledge learning.

Problems with sources of EFL vocabulary input: Ellis and Shintani (2014) pointed out that second language learners require a large amount of listening and reading input. In second language acquisition research, input is considered to provide opportunities for incidental and intentional learning. We obtain meaning through conversational interaction, which follows many social norms and rules. To help dialogue play a meaningful role, we have learned social norms and internalized them. Our various social roles influence the meaning and way we speak. For example, a person may say, "As a teacher in this school..." or "As a student..." which can guide others into the personal and social context in which we speak, which helps them better understand what we mean. Crystal (2005) pointed adjacency pairs are related communication structures that come one after the other in an interaction^[15]. For example, questions are followed by answers, greetings are followed by responses, compliments are followed by a "Thank you", and informative comments are followed by an acknowledgment.

The notion that language shapes our view of reality and our cultural patterns is best represented by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – or linguistic relativity – suggests that a language and its overarching categories or structures used to classify the world directly shape one's perceptions, so much so that speakers of distinct languages are likely to view the world differently. Yusuf, N. (1998) stated language is the major instrument through which knowledge, values, norms and capabilities of a social group are passed on to new members^[16].

Society and culture influence what we say, and what we say affects society and culture. The essence of learning a foreign language is to enter another social and cultural context based on an existing social and cultural context, and its original context will inevitably have an impact on the process of foreign language learning. Shu Dingfang (1994) argued that foreign language and second language can be distinguished based on the language environment, language input, and affective factors that affect the learning process^[17]. EFL is usually learned in communities and schools where the language is not English. Therefore, as seen in Table2, EFL students' vocabulary input sources lack some important factors in language learning, such as real context and socio-cultural context of target language.

Meanwhile, as their primary input resource, the role of EFL textbooks is limited. Ellis and Shintani (2014) stated course books: Learners usually read and listen materials available in their course books. Yet, it can be claimed with confidence that if the only input students receive is in the context of a limited number of weekly lessons based on some course book, they are unlikely to achieve high levels of L2 proficiency. Therefore, coursebooks have both positive and negative aspects for foreign language learning. They are best regarded as one of the many sources for achieving the goals and indicators set for specific learners. For EFL learners, teaching coursebooks, as one of the numerous learning resources, has become the most important access for them to input language.

Linguistic distance between Chinese and English: Crystal (1987) in The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language writes regarding linguistic distance: "The structural closeness of languages to each other has often been thought to be an important factor in FLL (foreign language learning). If the L2 (the foreign language) is structurally similar to the L1 (the original language), it is claimed, learning should be easier than in cases where the L2 is very different^[18]. He added it is impossible to directly link language differences with learning difficulties in any way, and even the basic task of quantifying language differences has been proven to be very complex, as it involves many variables. Barry R. (2005) found empirically that the greater the distance between immigrants' mother tongue and English, the lower their English proficiency when other relevant variables are the same. Barry R. added the language distance metric developed here can be used for other purposes. For example, it can be used for research, evaluation, planning, and diagnostic analysis to understand the general or specific determinants of non-English speaking individuals' English proficiency.

A larger linguistic distance can cause students to encounter certain difficulties in learning the target language. For example, English has articles, Chinese does not, and Chinese has modal particle, and English does not. For example, both English and Chinese have nouns, which can be divided into proper noun and common nouns, countable nouns and uncountable nouns. However, because the former is related to articles, and the latter is related to verbs, it is not easy for Chinese students to learn.

Wu (2006) stated that if speakers of different mother tongues make different mistakes, and if these mistakes do appear to be related to structures in the mother tongue. A Chinese learner might produce the question in the following sentence order and with perfect tense ^[19].

A: I'm looking for Bob. You have seen him?

B: Yes. I have seen him half an hour ago.

English and Chinese orthography

English is categorized as alphabetic language while Chinese is categorized as morpho-syllabic language. In alphabetic language, letters are meaningless symbols that represent sound. In Chinese, morpho-syllabic language, semantic radicals imply the meaning of characters. English and Chinese have different writing systems. Therefore, teaching and learning English and Chinese requires different processes and skills.

Mostly non-native English speaking teachers: From a historical perspective, society, parents, and institutions have generally favored native English teachers (NESTs) because they are considered the best teachers for EFL due to their language fluency, accuracy, and cultural awareness. Braine (2010) found a view in English teaching majors in East and Southeast Asia that native English teachers (NESTs) are the ideal model for language production. On the contrary, studies conducted in Europe (Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Lasagamaster & Sierra, 2005), the United States (Liang, 2002; Mahboob, 2003), Hong Kong (Cheung & Braine, 2007), and the United Kingdom (Pacek, 2005) have shown that ESL or EFL learners place greater emphasis on certain pedagogical, linguistic, and personal qualities compared to teachers' language backgrounds.

Ian Walkinshaw, Duonghi Hoang Oanh (2014) showed that despite the comprehensibility issues in higher education institutions in Vietnam and Japan, NESTs were considered the model of authentic and natural pronunciation. Non-NESTs' pronunciation was considered untrue, limited knowledge of English-speaking cultures and their language was not as fluent as native speakers, but respondents appreciate their ability to convert to L1 when needed. In addition, the ability of non-NESTs to interpret complex grammar was also valued.

Moussu, L., & Llorca, E. (2008) stated when attempting to compile most of the works related to NNS ESL/EFL teachers and student teachers, it was noted that most of the literature discussed issues related to the North American situation and ESL background. Moussu, L., & Llorca, E. added we believe that in the future, there will be increasingly complex and inspiring research perspectives that can form many aspects of (non-native) language teachers. Pan Wenguo (2020) stated teaching English as a native speaker is different from teaching foreigners. Teaching Europeans, Arabs, and Africans should also be different from teaching Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. Even for teaching Chinese students, teaching by British and Chinese teachers is different, and teaching in the UK is also different from teaching in China. Therefore, it is unrealistic to believe that language teaching methods have universality and are absolutely effective once developed. Therefore, from the perspective of contrastive linguistics, a truly good foreign language teaching method should first consider the learner's language background and its relationship with the target language. Secondly, it is necessary to fully consider the "learning methods" of different learners and make the "teaching methods" serve the "learning methods"^[20].

In addition, not all native speakers can become good language teachers. So, the advantages of native English teachers include high-quality pronunciation and writing, as well as a reserve of native cultural knowledge are important parts for foreign language learners, but these are definitely not all they need when learning a foreign language. Considering the strengths or weaknesses of non-NESTs does not solve the learning difficulties of EFL. On account of the so-called "disadvantages" of non-NESTs cannot be solved by finding solutions. Especially if there is no difference in pronunciation between non-native speakers and native speakers, the differences between languages will disappear and the world will no longer be diverse. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1823) said: "The differences of languages have the meaning of world history. Different types of linguistic characteristics converge, endow new forms of thinking, and are inherited by subsequent generations." Also, this is the fact that English is taught in the context of non-native countries. The fact that most of EFL students' English learning is taught by non-NESTs is a universal phenomenon in the world. Thus, the focus of researchers should be on providing effective learning strategies for EFL students, rather than comparing the differences between NESTs and non-NESTs.

Strengths and weaknesses of EFL coursebooks in terms of "Knowing a word": Nation (2013) pointed out part of effective vocabulary teaching involves working out what needs to be taught about a word. This is called the learning burden of a word and differs from word to word according to the ways in which the word relates to first language knowledge and already existing knowledge of the second language and or other known languages^[21].

According to Nation (2001), the form of a word involves its pronunciation (spoken form), spelling (written form), and any word parts that make up this particular item (such as prefix, root, and suffix)^[22]. When teachers teach vocabulary to cultivate students' knowledge of words and phrases, helping them learn any and all of these different components can help them improve their knowledge and ability to use English vocabulary. Nation also explains that part of effective vocabulary teaching includes identifying what a word needs to be taught. This is referred to as the learning burden of words, and there are differences between words based on their connection with knowledge of the

first language and existing knowledge of the second language or other known languages. It is obtained a clear understanding from the Table 3 and Table 4.

Aspect	Component	Receptive knowledge	Productive knowledge
Form	Spoken	What does the word sound like?	How is the word pronounced?
	Written	What does the word look like?	How is the word written and spelled?
	Word parts	What parts are recognizable in this word?	What word parts are needed to express the meaning?
Meaning	Form and meaning	What meaning does this word form signal?	What word form can be used to express this meaning?
	Concepts and referents	What is included in the concept?	What items can the concept refer to?
	Associations	What other words does this make us think of?	What other words could be used instead of this one?
Use	Grammatical functions	In what patterns does the word occur?	In what patterns must this word be used?
	Collocations	What words or types of words occur with this one?	What words or types of words must be used with this one?
	Constraints on use (register, frequency ...)	Where, when, and how often would we expect to meet this word?	Where, when, and how often can this word be used?

Table 3: What is involved in knowing a word (Adapted from Nation 2001)

Component	Strengths of EFL Coursebooks	Weaknesses of EFL Coursebooks
Spoken	Most coursebooks provide pronunciation	
Written	All coursebooks provide	
Word parts		Few coursebooks provide assistance and explanations English Lexicology
Form and meaning	All coursebooks provide the meaning of the context.	One meaning of a word is repeated, but there is no opportunity for other meanings.
Concepts and referents		What is included in the concept? Coursebooks rarely provide explanations, 1. Students rely more on their first language 2. Mother-tongue competence and foreign language competence have a close relationship here 3. Some Chinese concepts are difficult to render into English 4. Some English concepts are difficult to render into Chinese
Associations		Lack of enough practice: paraphrase exercise
Grammatical functions	Primary stage	
Collocations		Few
Constraints on use (register, frequency ...)		Few

Table 4: Strengths and weaknesses of EFL coursebooks in terms of "Knowing a word"

Conclusion

More Berne & Blachowicz (2008) stated few research indicate that teaching vocabulary can be considered as problematic, as some teachers are not really sure about the best practice in the teaching and sometimes not really aware

how to start forming an instructional emphasis on the vocabulary learning. The biggest problem for EFL learners is that they do not have the indispensable socio-cultural context of the language itself. There are some problems with textbooks as the primary source of language input for EFL students. Among these issues, vocabulary teaching can become an important variable factor in improving students' vocabulary proficiency. Because in the previous study, it was mentioned that the objective state of language input is immutable. The language distance between students' first language and English also objectively exists. This issue can be addressed to a certain extent by comparing the two languages. But this comparison cannot solve all the problems. So, for vocabulary teaching, most teachers are non-native speakers, so they have both their own advantages and some disadvantages. Researchers or textbook writers can make efforts to provide effective guidance for learners in the field of vocabulary learning.

Alpino Susanto (2017) pointed out that there is still a long way to go for students to understand the concept of unfamiliar words, gain more words through their own efforts, and successfully use these words for communication purposes. Rinaldi et al. (2013) and Liu (2016) both suggest that language learners explore more vocabulary skills methods, such as vocabulary learning strategies and more independent learning. Aiming at these problems, Pan (2020) pointed out, from the perspective of contrastive linguistics, a truly good foreign language teaching method should first consider the language background of the learner and its relationship with the target language, and second, fully consider the "learning methods" of different learners, so that the "teaching methods" serve the "learning methods". From the perspective of contrastive linguistics, a really good foreign language teaching method should first take into account the language background of learners and their relationship with the target language, and second, fully consider the "learning methods" of different learners, and let "teaching methods" serve "learning methods". However, Chinese students' English vocabulary learning methods and teaching methods should consider their own characteristics, and should not blindly follow the so-called "universal" teaching methods. Therefore, the next step of this research will propose effective vocabulary learning strategies for EFL learners with Chinese backgrounds from the perspective of the contrastive linguistics in China.

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