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Exploring the Vocabulary Size and Vocabulary Strategies for EFL Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

One cannot learn a language without vocabulary (Krashen, 1989; Nation, 1990). Vocabulary learning has become an important issue in vocational high school. However, less attention has been paid to vocabulary size and learning strategies for EFL students in Taiwan. To explore the vocabulary learning of high school students, a survey was conducted in this study. Specifically, there are two parts in this study, including a vocabulary test and vocabulary learning strategies. According to the results, most of the students were leveled in about 3000 words, and they prefer to do functional practice in their vocabulary learning strategies. Based on the result of the survey, students may realize the importance of vocabulary since it has played a significant role in our life. The teachers can assist students of practicing vocabulary either by holding a spelling bee contest or doing vocabulary quizzes. Last but not least, it is always important for the students to plan their study strategies in a regular and effective way.

Keywords: vocabulary size, EFL, vocabulary learning strategies

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I. Introduction

One cannot learn a language without vocabulary (Krashen, 1989; Nation, 1990). To be specific, many studies support the claim that the learning of new words requires enormous concentration and effort (Miller, G.1987; Nation 1990). As a matter of fact, many language learners have difficulties in reading due to their insufficient knowledge of vocabulary (Meara, 1980; Nation, 1990). Generally speaking, second language learners learn the vocabulary at school; however, when they no longer receive instruction in that language, their lexicon may become limited and hence self-study seems to be vital. In other words, second language learners should discover the method of learning as well as performance abilities. Accordingly, it is useful to make a difference between direct and indirect vocabulary learning. In direct vocabulary learning, the learners do exercise and activities on vocabulary. Such exercises contain word building exercises, guessing words from context when this is done as a class exercise, learning words in lists, and vocabulary games. In indirect vocabulary learning the learners' attention focus on some other characteristic, usually the message that is conveyed by a speaker or writer. What's more, learners are also required to extend their consciousness about what can be done through the use of vocabulary, most language learners are required to keep vocabulary notebooks or word lists at school. This vocabulary strategy plays a major role in language learning. As a result, to adopt the effective and suitable strategies is essential in the domain. According to Lawson and Hogben (1996), they suggest that foreign language learners frequently encounter unknown words in text material and need to learn and maintain the meanings of some of these words for later use. In this situation they might write the word's meaning in the margin of the text or add the word to a personal word list, or perhaps they enter the word and its meanings into a card system. Undoubtedly, the best known is the key word approach. The kind of associating can be very productive when a new word is connected to some already house association. The key word approach involves the use of a mnemonic device, which is generally used in the vocabulary memorization.

Prior studies did little research concerning why some people can memorize new words easily, but others cannot. Due to this reason, this study assumes that the learning strategy might have an influence on the vocabulary size. The purpose of this study aims to investigate L2 learner's actual vocabulary recording practices, learning strategy and vocabulary size.

II. Literature Review

During classroom second language learning, second language learners often lack enough, highly situation input in the target language, this often makes it extremely difficult for a second language learner to create semantic, syntactic and morphological standards about a word. Krashen (1997) argues strongly for exposure, and Grabe and Stoller (1997) shows that exposure alone can lead to large vocabulary improvement. In terms of using vocabulary records, it is likely to be useful in that second language learner can focus on the form and increase consciousness of the words; whereas, it is usually not enough to make a note of unknown words. Craik and Lockhart (1972) proposed the key insight in the memory of vocabulary and found that depth and diversity of dealing rather than frequency of repetition in the preservation of learning material were supposed to be crucial. Thus, by means of L1-L2 word association it is not easy for learners to remember a word if they are not conceptualized in some ways. Besides, influenced by previous experiences as language learners, or shaped by their own backgrounds, second language learners often hold different concepts about language learning (Horwitz, 1987). Many researchers have further suggested that learners' preconceived beliefs about language learning could probably affect the way they use their learning strategies to learn a second language (Abraham and Vann, 1987; Norwitz, 1987; 1988; Wenden, 1986 ;1987). Lawson and Hogben (1996) showed that the strategy of repetition is also frequently employed to learn the lexical system of foreign languages. Yet, learning vocabularies by L1-L2 linking word is not sufficient to gain meaning. Some linguistic writers recommend that the way of studying and learning word-fields, example sentences, and L2 synonyms should be considered. Gairns and Redman (1986) also criticized that the traditional way of listing vocabulary items is too limited and inflexible without giving pronunciation, or sentence practicing. Therefore, it would be better to give a L2 definition or translation plus an example so that L2 learners could draw the conceptual chart or tree for indicating the variety and complexity of meaning of a word. Furthermore, some writers like Lewis (1993) posed many learning facilities for recording lexical items such as collocation boxes, discourse structure and so on. Such facilities might offer a much greater awareness of usage of a word for L2 learners.

Leeke and Shaw (2000) have identified optimal vocabulary procedures by finding what learners do. The results showed that two-thirds of the learners had given up making vocabulary list; only a few made lists of various kinds, which differed according to their attitudes. Although they described the learners' independent records of vocabulary, for the topics, they investigated 120 overseas graduate students which lead to the results of the survey being illegibility and can only give a very broad

outline; they didn't propose what strategies learners use that might be correlated to memorize the vocabulary. In addition, the selection of subjects was not methodically random and, therefore; it is a series of case study rather than an effective sample. Though previous studies (Nae Dong Yang, 1999) investigated the relationship between L2 learners' learning strategies and belief and in 1989, Oxford and Nyikos had executed the relationship between motivation and strategy use in the region of second language acquisition; however, their studies did not discuss the interaction between vocabulary size and learning strategy. Hence, further research is still needed in the field of second language acquisition to systematically investigate the relationship of vocabulary size on strategy use. Based on the above-mentioned literature, this current study tries to explore L2 learner's actual vocabulary recording practices, learning strategy and vocabulary size.

III. Methods

III.1 Instrumentation and procedure

In this study, questionnaires were collected information on English learners' individual background and learning strategies. The vocabulary questionnaire and test were divided into two sections. In the first section, the participants were asked to choose the most suitable words. The second section included six factor analyses for learners' English learning strategies. The six strategy factors were: functional practice strategies, cognitive-memory strategies, metacognitive strategies, formal oral-practice strategies, social strategies and compensation strategies. The subjects are required to select the use of learning strategies as always, usually, sometimes, seldom, hardly or never do.

III.2 Subjects

One hundred senior high school students in Taiwan were recruited in the study. Most of the participants had studied English for at least 6 years in junior and senior high schools, the participants who had lived abroad or visited foreign countries will be excluded from this study.

III. Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data analysis was used in this study. The quantitative analysis involved several statistic procedures: Descriptive statistics, including frequencies were calculated to summarize the information. The research design of the learning

strategies was measured by Likert scale. For the scoring of the learning strategy frequency, 5 points are for ‘always’, 4 points for ‘sometimes’, 3 points for ‘seldom’, 2 points for ‘hardly’, and 1 point for ‘never’. The most and less frequently used were calculated to probe whether they were related to the vocabulary size. In addition, if the participants got 1-30 correct means one has the vocabulary size of 2000, 31-60 correct means 3000 vocabularies and 61-90 correct means 6000 vocabularies.

IV. Results and Discussions

The statistical results of the subjects’ vocabulary size and the use of vocabulary learning strategies were shown in *Figure 1*, *Figure 2*, and *Figure 3*. In *Figure 1*, students prefer to use compensation strategy in 2000 vocabulary level. In terms of 3000 level, the majority of students use the strategy of formal oral-practice. Similarly, students with 5000 level frequently use the formal oral-practice.

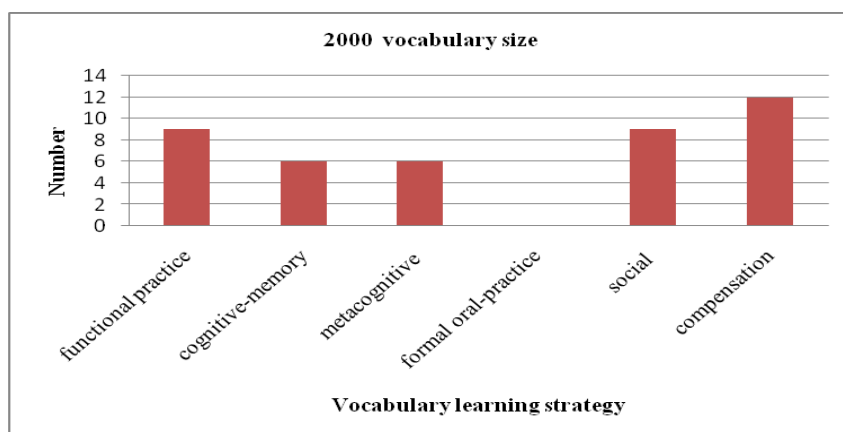


Figure 1 The subjects’ use of vocabulary learning strategy in 2000 vocabulary size

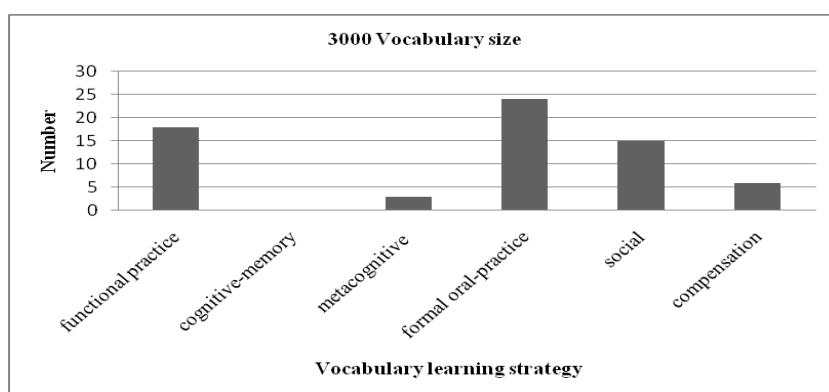


Figure 2 The subjects’ use of vocabulary learning strategy in 3000 vocabulary size

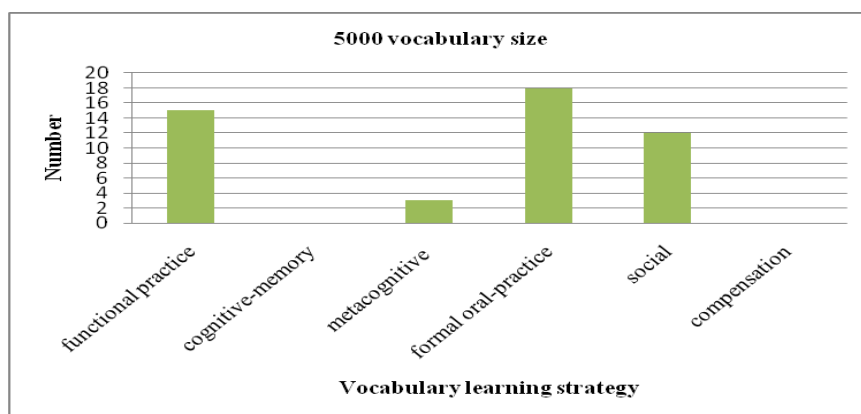


Figure 3 The subjects' use of vocabulary learning strategy in 5000 vocabulary size

So as to explore the effect of different vocabulary size groups on learning strategies use, analyzing the variance of the subjects' learning strategies. Moreover, we present statistical table by ranking order of the strategy factors according to the mean that was shown in Table 1. Specifically, the functional practice strategy was the most frequently used. The use of learning strategies in response to the rank order was discussed as follows.

Table 1 Rank ordering of the strategy factors according to the mean

Factor number	Factor name	Mean Rank order of usage	
1	Functional practice	3.70	1
2	Cognitive-memory	3.58	3
3	Metacognitive	3.25	6
4	Formal oral-practice	3.69	2
5	Social	3.54	4
6	Compensation	3.27	5

4.1 Functional practice strategies

Functional practice strategies involve actively seeking or creating opportunities to use oral practice English functionally. The strategies enable learners to increase their exposure to the second language outside the formal classroom.

According to the table, the common method that high school students use in Taiwan is functional practice strategy; this strategy includes writing notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. Students are willing to ask the questions for clarification

and verification about English when they learning vocabularies. Furthermore, using the English words in different ways, and learning from English mistakes make them do better in vocabulary learning.

4.2 Formal oral practice strategies

Formal oral practice strategies focus on formal practice for speaking English, for instance, learners would say or write new English words several times, trying to imitate native speakers, and they adopt a synonym or similar phrase when they could not think of the exact word.

The strategy emphasizes practicing the sound of English vocabulary. If one can't think of an English word, he or she may use the synonym to come up with other words related to it. From the table above, we can learn that is also a quite useful method for senior high students.

4.3 Cognitive-memory strategy

Cognitive-memory strategy involved in direct analysis, transformation, association, or synthesis of the target language. Sometimes, making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used, creating associations between new material and what you already know, grouping them into categories (e.g. synonym, antonym, noun, verb), or rhymes. Properly, the memory process may be simple.

4.4 Social strategies

Social strategies are actions that involve other people. For instance, ask for help from English speakers with unfamiliar words, practice English vocabulary with other students.

4.5 Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies focus on reading English without looking up every new word, trying to understand unfamiliar English words by making guess, using flashcards to remember new English words for aid. The majority of the subjects who has the larger vocabulary size would apply this strategy.

4.6 Metacognitive strategy

Metacognitive strategies involve exercising “executive control” over one’s language learning through planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Some effective strategies also included this metacognitive group because these strategies would generally assist learners to gain control over their emotions and push related to language learning. As we can see, planning schedule for studying English vocabulary isn’t a habit for senior high students.

In order to understand vocabulary knowledge vocational high school EFL learners possess, standard deviations and the means for all participants’ performance on the assessments were calculated and the overall outcome was shown in Table 2. The total score vocabulary test was 90.

Table 2 Results from three levels of vocabulary size

N=100	Level	Mean	SD	%
	2000	24.34(81.1%)	5.98	43.1
	3000	20.87(69.5%)	6.84	28.1
	5000	18.13(60.4%)	6.49	22.3
	Total	63.3(70.4%)		30.2

Three levels of vocabulary size were identified, from 1 to 30 were refer to 2000 vocabulary size, 31 to 60 were refer to 3000 vocabulary size, and 61 to the last were for 5000 vocabulary size. The mean of the vocabulary test is 63.3. The majority of students performed better in 2000 level than in 3000 and 5000 level ($M = 24.34 > M = 20.87$; $M = 24.34 > M = 18.13$).

V. Conclusion

In summary, this study provided an understanding of the independent record of vocabulary and learning strategy use of the senior high school students in Taiwan. It was found that different learning strategies would have an impact on the vocabulary size. In the first section, the participants were asked to choose the most suitable words from the sections; the second part, participants were asked to rank the order of strategies they use, from the often to the rare.

According to the test, senior high students have vocabulary size in 2000 level; In

addition, for learners with larger vocabulary size groups, they tended to employ the functional practice strategy and the smaller vocabulary size group frequently used the metacognitive strategy. As suggested by the study results, learners' learning strategies of vocabulary are imperative decisive factors of their vocabulary size in ESL/EFL learning process.

As suggested by the study results, the learner's approach of memorizing vocabulary is crucial determinants in second language learning since the vocabulary development must be viewed as both a cause and a consequence of reading activities. The study provided a valuable insight for EFL teachers to understand the effective learning strategy use and help EFL students shorten the time in memorizing vocabulary.

In this study, it might reveal two sections of pedagogical implication. One is the awareness of learning strategy. That is to say, if students would like to have a better performance in the vocabulary test, they need to choose the most effective learning strategy in the learning process. The other is the relationship between the learning strategy and vocabulary size. The outcome might benefit ESL teachers who could teach them systematically.

The more vocabulary students learn, the easier they can understand. It will have a lot of advantages if students enhance their vocabulary size. For example, they can do well on their reading. On the other hand, they can develop better reading comprehension.

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