EFL Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Comparison Study of Various Age Group Learners in A Community University in Taiwan

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Abstract

The main goal of this study is to investigate community university students’ English vocabulary learning strategies and to compare students in different age groups (20-60 years old) in terms of their English vocabulary learning strategies. A total of 103 participants participated in this study. An EFL vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire was adopted for data collection. The one-way ANOVA analysis results revealed that social strategies were used most frequently and memory strategies were used with the least frequency with respect to their English vocabulary learning strategies in overall groups. In addition, the results of this study also showed that the factor of “age” had an influence on various age group learners in view of their English vocabulary strategy uses. The ultimate purpose is to encourage elderly foreign language learners to learn English vocabulary wisely and effectively both inside and outside of class for more productive English learning outcomes.

Keywords: EFL vocabulary learning strategies, various age groups, elderly foreign language learners

1. Introduction

The term language learning strategy (LLS) has been defined by many researchers. Wenden and Rubin (1987) define learning strategies as “…any sets of operations, steps, plans routines used by learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage and retrieval and use of information (p.19).” Oxford (1990) explains learning strategies as, “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations (p.8).” Oxford (1990) mentions that a popular view that learning strategies are concerned with how learners employ their brains consciously and purposefully to handle their learning and make it more effective. Learning strategies are involved in all kinds of learning, and language learning strategies are the often-conscious procedures or behaviors employed by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information. According to Oxford (1990), she emphasizes her perspectives of language learning strategies by mentioning the following features: 1) Language learning strategies could be expanded by the role of language teachers; 2) Language learning strategies are problem-oriented; 3) Language learning strategies can be taught; 4) Language learning strategies are flexible; 5) Language learning strategies are impacted by a variety of factors, and 6) Language learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed.
An important part of the descriptive research on language learner strategies has been the linking of self-reported strategy use with learners’ levels of language proficiency. The relationship between language learning strategies and the student’s proficiency level is clearer. Good learners use various kinds of language learning strategies, or specific behaviors to help them learn languages. Their strategies differ greatly, at least in part because their general learning styles are so different (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Besides this, there is research evidence that the use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency. Successful language learners have a tendency to use learning strategies that are suitable to the material, the task, and to their own objectives and needs of learning. More proficient learners use a variety of strategies in a greater number of situations than do less proficient learners (Wharton, 2000). It is claimed that high achieving students have their own style of learning. They can orchestrate strategy use and also take control of the number and range of frequencies. In addition, higher levels of language proficiency have also been associated with less anxiety and more confidence, indicating that affective factors in addition to learning strategies can impact performance on a task (Wharton, 2000).

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have been explored qualitatively and quantitatively by some researchers, and the results have shown that readers’ proficiency levels are indicated to be correlated with the use of vocabulary learning strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies research has attempted to identify the methods that proficient and non-proficient learners use in their approach to vocabulary learning (Fan, 2003; Gu, 2003). In the area of VLS taxonomy development, the most notable efforts in terms of range of strategies considered have been done by Schmitt (1997). Compared to other classification schemes, Schmitt’s taxonomy is probably the most extensive, and has the advantage of being organized around an established scheme of language learning strategies. More recently, one study (Wu, 2005) concentrates on the studies of vocabulary learning strategies are published in Taiwan, they also adopt Schmitt’s questionnaire to explore the findings. Basically, Schmitt’s taxonomy groups VLS into five main categories (social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, and determination) with 58 individual strategies in total.

Currently today, people are entering the Earth village and the world is moving towards globalization. English ability already has become an essential ability to avoid elimination. In view of this, the conception of lifelong learning in recent years has emphasized adult English education importance. Because of lifelong study theory to the community university’s development, community universities can be the best places to grow people’s worldview and to teach English learners of various age groups in Taiwan.

In the last 25 years, the field of second language (L2) acquisition has seen renewed interest in vocabulary learning and acquisition. Enormous amounts of research carried out in the past two decades have been devoted to the part of vocabulary in L2 reading and vocabulary learning and acquisition. Although in the 1970s and 1980s the teaching and learning of vocabulary was viewed as largely secondary to the instruction of other L2 skills, currently a great deal more is known as to the connections and relations between L2 reading and vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001). In other words, vocabulary learning plays an important role in L2 reading acquisition.

Vocabulary and language have mutual influence on each other. Vocabulary knowledge enables language use and language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 1993). Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner. The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in foreign language learning has been increasingly recognized (Gu, 2003). Based on this reason, there is a need to explore the current situation of Taiwanese English learners’ use of vocabulary learning strategies in terms of various age groups. To design better and more efficient English vocabulary curriculum and instruction requires a deeper understanding of readers’ vocabulary learning strategies used by various age groups’ learners. Finally, we can then find ways to help and train students to become more efficient and autonomous language learners.

The main goal of this study, thus, is to investigate a community university students’ English vocabulary learning strategies and to compare different students’ age groups in terms of their English vocabulary learning strategies. The main research questions are as follows:

1. What are the most frequently used English vocabulary learning strategies used by community university students in general?

2. What are the least frequently used English vocabulary learning strategies used by community university students in
general?

3. Are there any differences in use of English vocabulary learning strategies between students’ various age groups?

2. Methods

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of this study were 103 English learners at a Community University in the middle of Taiwan. According to the various age classifications, all English learners were divided into four groups: 1) 20-30 year old learners (n=35), 2) 31-40 year old learners (n=32), 3) 41-50 year old learners (n=15), and 4) 51-60 year old learners (n=21).

2.2 Instrument

Schmitt’s (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies was partly adopted in this study. The questionnaire was translated and revised into Chinese (see Appendix A). They were a total of 50 items included. The Five-Likert scale was adopted (1=never used, 2=rarely used, 3=sometimes used, 4=often used, 5=always used). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was tested (Alpha=.85).

With respect to the structure of the questionnaire, five groups of vocabulary learning strategies included: determination strategies (choosing the meaning of a new word by oneself), social strategies (related to interaction with people), memory strategies (involving new material to existing knowledge), cognitive strategies (manipulation of the language by the learner), and metacognitive strategies (concerning decision-making as to the learning process). With respect to the dimensions of the questionnaire, questions 1 to 9 belong to determination strategies; questions 10 to 16 are classified into social strategies; questions 17 to 37 are categorized into memory strategies; questions 38 to 46 are related to cognitive strategies, and questions 47 to 50 are relevant to metacognitive strategies.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher gave a brief explanation on the purpose of the survey and instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire before the students answered their surveys. Students were told to ask questions any time during the process, and they were asked to complete the questionnaire survey within one hour during the regular class.

The students were assured that their information would remain confidential.

2.4 Data Analysis

The resulting data from a questionnaire survey was used to assess what English vocabulary learning strategies were used by community university students. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 11.0) was used for statistical analysis to analyze students’ English vocabulary learning strategies in various age groups.

3. Results

3.1 Answers to Research Questions

Research questions 1 and 2: What are the most frequently used English vocabulary learning strategies used by community university students in general? and What are the least frequently used English vocabulary learning strategies used by community university students in general?

Based on the one-way ANOVA statistical analysis, it showed that there is statistical significance among these five English vocabulary learning strategies (determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies), due to F (4, 510)=31.888, \( p < .01 \) (See Table1). According to the result of descriptive statistics, students used social strategies (M=3.49, SD=.66) most frequently and used memory strategies least frequently (M=2.59, SD=.35) among these five learning strategies in overall groups (See Table2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>48.02</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>31.89</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>191.99</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>240.01</td>
<td>514</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( *p<.01 \)
Table 2: Descriptive Statistics (Five vocabulary learning strategies used by community university students in general)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determination Strategy</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Strategy</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Strategy</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategy</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Strategy</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question 3: Are there any differences in their use of English vocabulary learning strategies between students of various age groups? The ANOVA analysis results of the above question were summarized as follows: They showed that there are significant differences among the four different age groups (20-30 year old, 31-40 year old, 41-50 year old, and 51-60 year old learners) in each of the five English vocabulary learning strategies (determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies). Specifically, the four different age groups in each of the five English vocabulary learning strategies were significantly different: determination strategies (F (3, 99)=68.948, p<.01); social strategies (F (3, 99)=150.309, p<.01); memory strategies (F (3, 99)=64.003, p<.01); cognitive strategies (F (3, 99)=246.795, p<.01); metacognitive strategies (F(3, 99)=5.800, p<.01) (See Table3). In other words, there is interaction with statistical significance between the English vocabulary strategies and age groups. Below is a series of descriptions illustrating the relationship between the use of English vocabulary strategies and various age groups. The 41-50 year old age group most frequently used determination strategy as their English vocabulary learning strategy, and it is higher than other three age groups with statistical significance. The 20-30 year old age group used the determination strategy the least frequently as their English vocabulary learning strategy, and was used less than the other three groups with statistical significance. The 20-30 year old age group used the social strategy as their English vocabulary learning strategy, and they used it more than the other three age groups with statistical significance. The 41-50 year old age group used the social strategy the least frequently as their English vocabulary learning strategy; they used it less than the other three age groups with statistical significance. The 20-30 year old age group most frequently used metacognitive strategy as their English learning strategy, and they used it more than the other three age groups with statistical significance. The 51-60 year old age group used the metacognitive strategy the least frequently as their English learning strategy, and was used less than the other three age groups with statistical significance.

Table 3: One-way ANOVA (Five vocabulary learning strategies used by community university students comparing various age groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determination Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>17.247</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.749</td>
<td>68.948</td>
<td>*.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>8.133</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.502</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>37.042</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.347</td>
<td>150.309</td>
<td>*.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>8.133</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45.175</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>8.354</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.785</td>
<td>64.033</td>
<td>*.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>4.306</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12.660</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>64.814</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.605</td>
<td>246.795</td>
<td>*.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>8.607</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73.481</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>5.257</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.752</td>
<td>5.800</td>
<td>*.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>29.910</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>.302</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35.167</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.01
4. Conclusions

On the average, students used social strategies most frequently and used memory strategies least frequently among these five learning strategies in overall groups. Specifically, the 20-30 year old age group most frequently used social and metacognitive strategies as their vocabulary learning strategies; the 20-30 year old age group used the determination strategy the least frequently as their vocabulary learning strategy. As the above stated, we can find that younger learners tend to use more interactive and social methods to learn English vocabulary, such as asking teachers or peer groups for word meanings, using songs, movies, and newscasts. Younger learners are inclined to use few traditional methods to learn English vocabulary, such as using dictionary and analyzing affixes to discover a new word’s meaning. The 31-40 year old age group most frequently used cognitive strategies as their vocabulary learning strategy; the 31-40 year old age group least frequently used memory strategies as their primary vocabulary learning strategy. In other words, the 31-40 year old age group learners adopt manipulation of the language by themselves rather than use schemata (prior knowledge) to learn English vocabulary. The 41-50 year old age group most frequently used determination and memory strategies as their vocabulary learning strategies; the 41-50 year old age group least frequently used social and cognitive strategies as their vocabulary learning strategy. In terms of these middle-age learners, they are apt to use their memory capabilities and their own methods to explore word’s meanings. When it comes to the elderly group learners, the 51-60 year old age group least frequently used metacognitive strategy as their English vocabulary learning strategy. It is obvious that the elderly learners does not adopt non-traditional methods to learn English vocabulary, such as using English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.), testing themselves with word tests and so on.

Based on the results of this study, we find that English vocabulary strategies used by language learners are various in terms of the learners’ age, especially in the 51-60 year old age group. As stated earlier, elderly learners does not usually use metacognitive strategies to learn English vocabulary, and they tend to use more traditional methods to learn English vocabulary. In Taiwan in a typical EFL environment, vocabulary is primarily taught through decontextualized activities in English classes. A considerable amount of instructional time is devoted to presenting, explaining, and defining vocabulary. In addition, students are usually expected to learn vocabulary on their own, mostly by mechanical memorization, without much guidance from teachers. Little effort has been made to teach students vocabulary strategies to improve their vocabulary learning. It is significant for EFL curriculum designers for elderly foreign language learners, and a balanced and interactive teaching approach is important, particularly for elderly foreign language learners in input-poor EFL learning environment. The ultimate purpose is to encourage elderly foreign language learner autonomy so that they can learn vocabulary wisely both inside and outside of class for more productive learning outcomes.

References

learning strategies employed by EFL learners in Taiwan. 
*Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 1*(2), 7-13.

Appendix A: English Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire

*(Chinese Version)*

A: 遇到生字時，我如何發現它的意義?
1. 分析詞性
2. 分析字根字首
3. 利用單字旁邊有的圖畫或文字
4. 從上下文中猜測
5. 查英漢字典
6. 查英英字典
7. 查電子字典
8. 查單字表
9. 用老師秀的字卡或海報猜測
10. 請老師提供解釋或同義字
11. 請老師用新字造句
12. 閱讀單字表
13. 閱讀課本
14. 與同學討論

33. 我記憶單字的字根字首
34. 我記憶單字的同義字
35. 我將字的意思按自己的話再想一遍（譯義）
36. 遇到生字我會將之視為一個字一起記憶
37. 我利用動作來學習新字
38. 我會重複唸出生字，以幫助記憶
39. 我會將字寫出來，以幫助記憶
40. 我記單字表
41. 我利用字卡
42. 我上課會做關於生字的筆記
43. 我將字本上的「單字」部分
44. 簡單字的練習
45. 我在東西上貼上英文的說法
46. 我有列生字表
47. 我聽英文廣播或電影加深對單字的印象
48. 用考字彙的方式
49. 我通過生字，忽略生字的存在
50. 我不定時複習單字