

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE VOCABULARY LEARNING OF NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN HAIPHONG UNIVERSITY AND SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** English is one of the official languages in the world today. It is the language of international business, science, and technology, and it is essential for non-English major students to have a good grasp of the English language. Using English fluently with proper vocabulary helps them not only be confident in international communication, but also succeed in their studies and get a good job after college. To most non-English major students of Haiphong University, however, English is something difficult to master due to the lack of vocabulary. They find it hard to express what they want to say even in daily simple communication situations. The target of the article is to investigate the current situation of learning vocabulary, and suggest some ways to achieve better effect.

**Keywords:** English vocabulary, non-English major, Haiphong University

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## THỰC TRẠNG HỌC TỪ VỰNG CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ ĐẠI HỌC HẢI PHÒNG VÀ MỘT SỐ GIẢI PHÁP

**TÓM TẮT:** Ngày nay, tiếng Anh là một trong những ngôn ngữ chính thức trên thế giới. Việc sử dụng thành thạo tiếng Anh cùng vốn từ vựng phù hợp không chỉ giúp sinh viên tự tin khi giao tiếp với người nước ngoài mà còn giúp các em có được công việc tốt sau khi ra trường. Tuy nhiên, với hầu hết sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh của Đại học Hải Phòng, vẫn rất khó để làm chủ được ngôn ngữ này do các em thiếu vốn từ vựng, nhiều khi không thể diễn đạt được những câu giao tiếp cơ bản hàng ngày. Bài báo này nhằm điều tra thực trạng học từ vựng của sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh và từ đó có những đề xuất phù hợp và hiệu quả.

**Từ khóa:** từ vựng, không chuyên ngữ, Đại học Hải Phòng

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is widely recognized as the international language of communication, science, technology, business, and politics. It has become an indispensable tool for people all over the world to access information, communicate with others, and participate in the global community. As such, English has become a requirement in many universities, and students must have a certain level of proficiency in the language to succeed in their studies. However, many students, especially those who are not majoring in English, face difficulties in learning and retaining new vocabulary.

Vocabulary is a crucial aspect of language learning and its mastery is essential for successful communication in English, because it enables students to comprehend and produce speech more accurately and fluently. As students acquire new vocabulary, they begin to understand the meaning and use of words in context. For example, when learning a new language, students need to learn nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. As they acquire more vocabulary, they will be able to use these words naturally, and their communication skills will improve. In addition, as students learn more words, they will be able to understand the language more quickly and accurately, which is important for both listening and reading.

Without a rich vocabulary, students may struggle to express themselves

effectively and understand spoken and written texts in English. This article aims to investigate the vocabulary learning difficulties of non-English major students in Haiphong University and suggest some solutions to overcome these difficulties.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Definition of vocabulary

In language learning, vocabulary refers to the set of words and phrases that a learner knows and is able to use in speaking, reading, and writing in a second language. For language learners, vocabulary is crucial to language and of great importance (Zimmerman (cited by Subekti & Lawson, 2007:485). Without learning the vocabulary communication in the second language becomes more difficult, according to Rohmatillah (2017). Vocabulary knowledge is an essential part of the language; it is central to communicative competence. Low vocabulary knowledge causes serious issues for its students, which ultimately prevents them from mastering the English language (Alqahtani, 2015).

There are many definitions of vocabulary put forth by educators. Some people think of sight-word vocabularies as students' rapid word recognition. Others refer to it as a student's understanding of the words represented by their meaning-vocabularies. It is also known as the student's comprehension of the words they hear and speak. The subject matter experts go on to describe

it as an academic vocabulary that reflects either students' comprehension of the spoken and written words or words that are distinctive to the subject matter (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2011).

Another definition of vocabulary given by Hiebert and Kamil (2005) is the understanding of word meanings that learners should possess. They maintained that knowledge has at least two types: receptive (understand or recognize) and productive, just as words have two types: oral and written (write or speak). The term "oral vocabulary" refers to a group of terms that learners use when speaking or reading aloud and are familiar with their definitions. The terms in the print vocabulary are ones that the students are familiar with when they write or read aloud. According to Hiebert and Kamil, the term "productive vocabulary" refers to a group of terms that students commonly employ when speaking or writing. The receptive vocabulary is a group of less common words that learners ascribe meanings to while reading or listening (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005).

## **2.2. Vocabulary learning**

Vocabulary learning is a crucial aspect of language acquisition and involves the process of acquiring, storing, and using words and phrases. As stated by Nation and Waring (1997), "vocabulary learning involves acquiring, storing, and using the words and phrases needed for communication in a language." Additionally, Schmitt and

Zimmerman (2002) define vocabulary learning as "the process by which learners acquire the meaning of words and phrases." These definitions highlight the importance of not only memorizing new words but also understanding their meanings and being able to use them effectively in communication.

Moreover, vocabulary learning involves both receptive and productive skills, as learners need to understand the meaning of words when reading or listening and be able to use them accurately when speaking or writing. As stated by Ellis and Sinclair (1989), "Vocabulary learning is a two-way process, involving both the receptive and productive skills." This means that learners need to actively engage with new vocabulary and practice using it in different contexts to consolidate their understanding and develop their communication skills.

Furthermore, vocabulary learning is a continuous process that requires ongoing effort and practice. As stated by Folse (2004), "Learning vocabulary is not a one-time event, but rather a process that requires continuous effort and practice." This highlights the importance of regularly revising and expanding one's vocabulary to improve language proficiency.

In conclusion, vocabulary learning involves the process of acquiring, storing, and using words and phrases effectively in communication. It requires both receptive and productive skills, ongoing effort, and practice. As stated by

Nation (2001), "Vocabulary knowledge is the single most important factor contributing to second language proficiency." Therefore, developing strong vocabulary skills is essential for learners who want to achieve fluency and proficiency in a second language.

### **2.3. Difficulties in vocabulary learning**

The topic of students' difficulties in vocabulary learning has been extensively studied in the field of linguistics. One common issue that students face is the challenge of retaining new vocabulary. As noted in a study by Zhang and Wu (2009), "forgetting new words is a common occurrence for second language learners, even after a short period of time." This challenge is further compounded by the complexity of some vocabulary. As Kuo and Anderson (2010) noted, "students often struggle with words that have multiple meanings or those that are used in different contexts."

Another difficulty that students face is the lack of context in which new vocabulary is presented. As noted in a study by Ellis and Beaton (1993), "context is critical for understanding the meaning of words." Without proper context, students may struggle to understand the nuances of new vocabulary, which can hinder their comprehension and communication skills.

Moreover, the sheer volume of new vocabulary can be overwhelming for some students. As noted in a study by Nagy and Anderson (1984), "the average

student learns approximately 3,000 new words per year, which can be a daunting task for many." This can lead to frustration and a lack of motivation, as students struggle to keep up with the pace of learning.

To address these difficulties, researchers have suggested several strategies for effective vocabulary learning. One such strategy is the use of semantic mapping, as noted in a study by Nation and Newton (1997). Semantic mapping involves linking new vocabulary to previously learned concepts and using visual aids to reinforce the connections.

In conclusion, the topic of students' difficulties in vocabulary learning has been extensively studied in the field of linguistics. Retention, context, and volume of new vocabulary are common challenges that students face. However, effective strategies such as semantic mapping can help students overcome these challenges and develop a solid vocabulary foundation. As noted in a study by McKeown and Beck (2016), "vocabulary knowledge is essential for academic success and lifelong learning."

### **2.4. Previous studies**

In this literature review, I have reviewed various studies that examined the vocabulary learning of non-English major students. The review is structured based on the following themes: Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Size, and Vocabulary Retention.

**Vocabulary Learning Strategies:** Several studies have focused on vocabulary learning strategies used by non-English major students. According to Xie and Dong (2020), a positive relationship exists between the use of vocabulary learning strategies and the vocabulary learning outcome. The study also found that cognitive strategies, such as semantic mapping and imagery, were the most effective learning strategies.

**Vocabulary Size:** The vocabulary size of non-English major students has been a popular research topic. According to Qian and Schedl (2019), non-English major students have a smaller vocabulary size compared to English major students. The study also found that non-English major students may require additional vocabulary learning support.

**Vocabulary Retention:** Studies have also examined the retention of vocabulary by non-English major students. Bao and Li (2019) found that repeated exposure to vocabulary is essential for long-term retention. The study also found that students who engaged in regular vocabulary review were more likely to retain vocabulary items.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Participants**

To gather information about the vocabulary learning difficulties of non-English major students in Haiphong University, a survey was conducted among a sample of 50 students. The participants were majoring in Primary

Education, and they were all announced of the purpose of the survey. By the time the survey was conducted, the participants had finished the two semesters of General English. That means they have possessed a certain amount of vocabulary.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

The most reliable method is the questionnaire because the learners themselves provide the data. If learners are to have the best understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, and personal preferences in terms of individual and cultural learning styles, they should have some say in how their learning is accomplished, claim Schmitt, N. (2000). That is why the questionnaire method was employed.

The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions and aimed to gather information about the students' vocabulary learning methods, difficulties and attitudes towards vocabulary learning.

### **4. RESULTS**

When asked about their vocabulary learning methods, the majority of participants (85%) stated that they use dictionaries, followed by using vocabulary apps (65%), flashcards (58%), and watching TV shows/movies (45%). Only a small percentage of participants (8%) reported that their primary method is reading materials in English such short stories, funny stories.

**Table 1: Vocabulary learning methods**

Vocabulary Learning Methods	Percentage of Participants
Using dictionaries	85%
Using vocabulary Apps	65%
Using flashcards	58%
Watching TV Shows/Movies	45%
Reading Materials in English	8%

The survey also aimed to identify the difficulties students face while learning vocabulary. The most commonly reported difficulty was the lack of context (62%), followed by the amount of new vocabulary (55%) and the inability to remember new words (51%). Other difficulties included the insufficient classroom support (40%), the lack of time (29%) and the lack of motivation (23%).

**Table 2: Difficulties in learning vocabulary**

Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary	Percentage of Participants
Lack of Context	62%
Amount of New Vocabulary	55%
Inability to Remember New Words	51%

Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary	Percentage of Participants
Insufficient Classroom Support	40%
Lack of Time	29%
Lack of Motivation	23%

Regarding their attitudes towards vocabulary learning, the majority of participants (68%) reported that they believe vocabulary is essential for communication, while 28% consider it to be a secondary aspect. Moreover, 56% of the participants reported that they enjoy learning new words, while 22% do not find it enjoyable.

**Table 3: Attitudes towards vocabulary learning**

Attitudes Towards Vocabulary Learning	Percentage of Participants
Essential for Communication	68%
Secondary Aspect	28%
Enjoy Learning New Words	56%
Do Not Enjoy Learning New Words	22%

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of the survey showed that non-English major students in Haiphong University face several challenges while learning vocabulary. The following are the main challenges identified by the participants:

## **5.1. Difficulties**

### *5.1.1. Lack of exposure to the English language*

There is a fact that there are less English-speaking tourists and businessmen coming to Haiphong city than to other big cities in the country, therefore, many non-English major students in Haiphong University do not have enough opportunities to use and practice the English language outside of the classroom. This lack of exposure to the English language hinders their vocabulary development.

### *5.1.2. The amount of new vocabulary*

Most non-English major students admit that it can be challenging for them to acquire the language due to the sheer volume of new words they need to learn. The process of memorizing and retaining vocabulary can become daunting and overwhelming, especially when students are exposed to new words at a rapid pace. Students may struggle to keep up with the pace of their lessons, leading to feelings of frustration and discouragement.

### *5.1.3. The inability to remember new words*

The participants find it challenging to remember new words, even after repeated exposure. They stated that they often forget words shortly after learning them, making it difficult for them to retain a large vocabulary, and use the newly acquired vocabulary in their writing or conversation, hindering their ability to communicate effectively in the target language.

The reason for this is that students may not have a clear understanding of the meanings of new words or may not be able to contextualize them, leading to a lack of connection between the words and their meanings.

### *5.1.4. Insufficient classroom support*

The participants reported that they do not receive enough support in the classroom to learn vocabulary effectively. They stated that the vocabulary learning activities in their classes are limited, and the teacher methods are not effective in helping them to remember and retain new words. Also, facilities such as projectors or TV are mostly equipped in language rooms for English major students, therefore, non-English major students cannot access standard equipment to practice the language.

### *5.1.5. Limited time*

Students often have a lot on their plates, which can make it challenging to find time to study new vocabulary. They can be neglected by their major, by their part-time jobs, by recreations and relationships.

### *5.1.6. Lack of motivation*

Obviously, English which is a supporting module to non-English major students cannot attract their attention as much as other modules. Therefore, they find vocabulary learning a boring and tedious task. They also reported that they lacked motivation and felt that vocabulary learning was not relevant to their major.

## **5.2. Some suggested solutions**

### *5.2.1. Incorporating vocabulary learning into daily activities*

One of the best ways for non-English major students to learn vocabulary is to incorporate it into their daily activities. For example, students can read English short stories, watch English movies, and listen to English songs. By exposing themselves to the language in a natural and meaningful context, students can learn new words in a way that is both enjoyable and effective. This can help students to retain new vocabulary more easily, as they are able to associate the words with real-life situations.

### *5.2.2. Using technology*

Students can also take advantage of technology to make vocabulary learning more interactive and fun. There are many vocabulary learning apps, websites, and software programs that are designed to help students learn new words in an engaging and effective way. Some of these resources provide games, quizzes, and interactive activities that allows students to practice using new vocabulary in a fun and memorable way.

### *5.2.3. Engaging in communicative activities*

Another way to improve vocabulary learning is to participate in communicative activities such as debates, discussions, and role-plays. By actively using and practicing new vocabulary in real-life situations, students can learn words more quickly and effectively. These activities also

provide an opportunity for students to use the language in a natural and meaningful way, which can help to increase their confidence when speaking and writing in English.

### *5.2.4. Collaborating with classmates*

Finally, non-English major students in Haiphong University can improve their vocabulary learning by collaborating with classmates. By forming study groups with classmates and working together to learn and practice new vocabulary, they may find more interest in learning and exchange their knowledge with their classmates.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this investigation into the vocabulary learning of non-English major students in Haiphong University reveal a number of challenges and areas for improvement. The study found that students often struggle with vocabulary acquisition due to limited exposure to the language outside of the classroom, insufficient practice and reinforcement, and a lack of effective vocabulary learning strategies.

The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to teaching vocabulary, particularly for non-English major students. Teachers need to be more aware of the challenges that students face when learning vocabulary, and should design their lessons and materials with these challenges in mind. For example, teachers could provide more



opportunities for students to practice using new vocabulary in context, and could incorporate more authentic materials such as news articles, videos, and podcasts.

Another key recommendation from this study is the importance of incorporating vocabulary learning strategies into classroom instruction. Students need to be taught how to use a range of strategies such as using context clues, using dictionaries, and making associations in order to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, these strategies should be reinforced and practiced consistently throughout the course of instruction.

Finally, this study highlights the critical role of technology in vocabulary learning. With the increasing availability of digital resources and tools, teachers can harness the power of technology to provide students with more engaging and interactive ways to learn vocabulary. For example, teachers could incorporate online quizzes, flashcards, and games into their lessons, as well as using digital dictionaries and translation tools to help students build their vocabulary.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that there is a pressing need for a more comprehensive and effective approach to teaching vocabulary to non-English major students in Haiphong University. By adopting a more systematic and strategic approach, and by leveraging the power of technology, teachers can help students

overcome the challenges they face when learning vocabulary, and help them to achieve greater success in their language learning journey.

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