An investigation into Vocabulary Learning Strategies adopted by Third-year English Majors at Vietnam National University of Agriculture

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Abstract: *Vocabulary learning strategies of Vietnamese students has received increasing attention in recent years. This study investigated vocabulary learning strategies adopted by third-year English majors at Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA). The vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire was adapted from Hadi and Guo (2020) for the present study and delivered to 98 third-year English majors at VNUA. Data analysis included caculation of Min, Max, Mean, and Standard deviation. The results showed that the participants generally use dictionary, inferencing, activation, and metacognitive strategies more often than other strategies categories. Some recommendations for the teaching and learning of vocabulary were given for more sucessful learning outcome regarding English vocabulary.*
Keywords: *Vocabulary learning strategies, English majors*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge play a crucial role in the improvement of English learners' language proficiency. According to Wilkins (1972): "without grammar, very little can be conveyed but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Research has shown that the majority of Vietnamese students have rather limited vocabulary knowledge despite many years of learning the language, which should be considered one of the key reasons for their incompetency of the four skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

In Vietnam, the teaching of vocabulary learning strategies has not received enough attention until recently (Duong, 2022; Le, 2021). Nation claimed that teaching students effective vocabulary learning strategies might help them become more autonomous learners (2013). This study attempts to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies adopted by third-year English majors at VNUA. There are two research questions: (1) What are the most and least common strategies for vocabulary learning used by English majors at VNUA? (2) What are some suggestions for the teaching and learning of vocabulary learning at VNUA?

2. Content

The steps in vocabulary learning

According to Payne (1994, as cited in Hashimi & Hadavi, 2015), there are five steps in learning vocabulary: identifying new vocabulary items, understanding words form and meaning, memorizing words form and meaning, and using the words in real situations. Smith (2008), however, identifies seven steps in vocabulary learning: "rhyming words, association and organization, understanding the structure of words, using a dictionary, recognizing word families (prefixes, roots, and suffixes), understanding word's origin, and using analogies". These steps suggest that to learn new words successfully, learners should be able to apply different strategies for different stages of learning them.

Classification of vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies are defined as "the process by which an EFL learner obtains, stores, retrieves, and uses vocabulary items when encountering a word for the first time" (Schmitt, 1997).

There are different classifications of vocabulary learning strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990); planning, source, and processes (Nation, 2001); discovery strategies and consolidation strategies (Schmitt, 1997); beliefs, metacognitive and cognitive strategies (Gu, 2013). While the metacognitive strategies include selective attention and self-initiation, the cognitive strategies include

inferencing, using dictionary, note-taking, rehearsal, encoding, and activation (Gu, 2018).

In the present study, we adopted the classification of Gu (2018) and added the affective strategies (Hadi and Guo, 2020) because affective strategies are considered important for vocabulary learning (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Schmitt and Schmitt, 1993). Therefore, three broad categories of strategies were included in the survey: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and affective strategies.

Research methodology

Participants

Participants of the study were 105 third-year English majors at VNUA. Following data cleaning, 7 questionnaires were omitted, so 98 surveys were retained for data analysis (73 females, 25 males). The majority of the students has studied English for more than 10 years. Their current levels of English proficiency might range from B1 to B2 levels in the Common European Framework of Reference.

Instruments

The vocabulary learning strategies survey (VLSS) (Hadi and Guo, 2020) was adapted for the present study because this is more comprehensive compared to other vocabulary learning strategies questionnaires. There were two parts to the survey: (1) participants' background information, and (2) vocabulary learning strategies – 55 items (metacognitive – items 1-7, cognitive – items 8-49, and affective strategies – items 50-55). Cognitive strategies include six subcategories: inferencing (items 8-13), using dictionary (14-20), note-taking (21-26), rehearsal (27-35), encoding (36-45), activation (46-49). Participants were asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and piloted with some students before being finalized for official data collection. The value for Sronbach's Alpha for the survey was $\alpha = 0.942$.

Data analysis

The data collected were analysed quantitatively using SPSS 29. The authors obtained descriptive statistics (Min, Max, Means, and Standard Deviations) from the questionnaires to examine the participants' use of the groups of strategies. The score of the negative items (items 5, 6, 7, and 50) in the questionnaires were reversed before calculating the descriptive statistics.

Findings and Discussions

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the three groups of VLS: (1) cognitive strategies, (2) metacognitive strategies, and (3) affective strategies. Because the cognitive strategies include six subcategories with different items, the results of these subcategories are presented separately for better understanding of the use of distinct kinds of VLS.

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of different categories of VLS

Categories of Vocabulary learning strategies	N	Min	Max	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Using Dictionary	98	2.86	5.00	4.1210	0.51050
Inferencing	98	2.83	5.00	3.9915	0.46490
Activation	98	2.00	5.00	3.9490	0.71071
Metacognitive	98	2.14	4.86	3.8003	0.54224
Note-taking	98	1.33	5.00	3.6599	0.79117
Encoding	98	1.60	5.00	3.5214	0.72086
Rehearsal	98	1.11	5.00	3.5068	0.72362
Affective	98	2.00	4.83	3.4932	0.50366
Valid N (listwise)	98				

The table shows that all groups of VLS have a Mean of higher than 3.41, which means that in general, the students use all kinds of the VLS. Metacognitive strategies and the three cognitive strategies of using dictionary, inferencing, and activation are most frequently used by the students with the mean values of higher than 3.8. Using dictionary strategies come top with M = 4.121 (SD = 0.51050), which shows the fact that this group of strategies is the most common among English majors at VNUA. It is notable that inferencing, and activation strategies come second and third, but these categories have mean values of just under 4.0 (M = 3.9915, SD = 0.46490; and M = 3.9490, SD = 071071), which are relatively close to the mean value of the leading category.

The least frequently used strategies include the three other cognitive strategies of note-taking, encoding, and rehearsal with mean values of lower than 3.7. It is interesting that affective strategies receive the lowest mean of M = 3.4932 (SD = 0.50366). This result is in stark contrast to the study

on vocabulary learning strategies of Afghanistan students (Hadi & Guo, 2020) in which affective strategies lead the range of vocabulary learning strategies categories. This shows that the majority of English majors at VNUA is not fully aware of the significance of the strategies related to emotion regulation when learning vocabulary.

The relatively high mean values of all strategies indicate that vocabulary learning strategies are quite common among English majors at VNUA. However, these results are just provisional because of the limited number of participants. Moreover, future study using more data collecting instruments to investigate the frequency of use as well as to examine how these strategies are adopted, especially the effectiveness of the strategies is needed to shed more light on the students' use of vocabulary learning strategies.

Conclusion

This study found that the most commonly used strategies among English majors at VNUA are using dictionary, inferencing, activation, and metacognitive.; the least commonly used strategies include note-taking, encoding, rehearsal, and affective strategies. Teachers should give students instructions on how to apply effectively a wide range of strategies which should ensure the favourable conditions for vocabulary acquisition including spaced repetition, retrieval and recall, as well as creation (Nation, 2013; Webb, 2007) taking learners' current vocabulary knowledge into consideration. The vocabulary learning strategies instructions should be detailed, systematic, and imbedded in all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as other courses throughout the curriculum so that the students can understand the importance of vocabulary learning in their goals of improving English proficiency.

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