AN INVESTIGATION INTO STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE FIRST-YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the first-year non-English major students' perceptions on vocabulary learning strategies and the effects of these strategies on their vocabulary learning at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry. The research method approach of the study was qualitative method with the main data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview. The major findings of the research showed that the students of Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry were aware of the importance of vocabulary learning; they spent time on consolidating new words and improving retention. Most of them, on the other hand, thought that the strategies they used in discovering and consolidating words had positive effects on their lexical retaining; however, they did not systematically keep track of their learning. It is therefore essential for some implications and recommendations to be suggested for vocabulary learning.

Keywords: *vocabulary learning strategies; non-English major students; Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry; vocabulary learning; perceptions.*

NGHIÊN CỨU NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH CỦA TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NÔNG LÂM - ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG CÁC CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC TỪ VỰNG

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này điều tra nhận thức của sinh viên năm nhất không chuyên tiếng Anh về việc sử dụng các chiến lược học từ vựng và ảnh hưởng của các chiến lược này đến việc học từ vựng của họ tại Trường Đại học Nông Lâm - Đại học Thái Nguyên. Bài báo sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính với các công cụ thu thập dữ liệu chính là phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Những phát hiện chính của nghiên cứu cho thấy các sinh viên của Trường Đại học Nông Lâm - Đại học Thái Nguyên đã nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của việc học từ vựng; họ đã dành thời gian để củng cố các từ mới và cải thiện khả năng ghi nhớ. Mặt khác, hầu hết trong số họ nghĩ rằng các chiến lược mà họ sử dụng trong việc khám phá và củng cố từ vựng có tác động tích cực đến việc ghi nhớ từ vựng của họ; tuy nhiên, họ không duy trì một cách có hệ thống việc học của họ và bắt đầu học một cách tự nhiên. Do đó, thông qua kết quả nghiên cứu này, một số gợi ý và giải pháp được đã được đề xuất cho việc học từ vựng của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: *chiến lược học từ vựng; sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh; Trường Đại học Nông Lâm – Đại học Thái Nguyên; học từ vựng; nhận thức.*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the field of second language acquisition has observed an interest in one area of language study, which is vocabulary. Researchers have viewed vocabulary as an important part of language on which effective communication relies. Schmitt [1], for example believes that meaningful communication in a foreign language depends mostly on words. If learners do not have the available words to express their ideas, mastering grammatical rules does not help. Lewis [2] states that vocabulary should be at the centre of language learning. He points out that the key principle of a lexical approach is that "language consists of grammatical lexis, not lexicalized grammar" (p.95). Therefore, successful vocabulary learning is believed to be essential for learners to make progress in their second language acquisition.

At Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry, vocabulary is a sub-part of a lesson, which is often integrated into other communicative skills and students are left to study words autonomously. Beside the main text book, students also use Vocabulary In Use (Pre-Intermediate level) as a reference book. Due to strict curriculum, teachers do not have time to introduce every topic of this book to students so it is left for study at home. It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of self-studying when the teachers do not have enough time to check students' learning. Therefore, in order to help students improve their vocabulary learning, teachers need to take into account students' perceptions on vocabulary learning strategies in order to integrate suitable vocabulary learning strategies into the curriculum.

2. Subject and methodology

The subjects of the study were first year non-English major students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry. There were totally 10 students in two English classes participating in the research. In this study, qualitative data about students' perceptions on vocabulary learning strategies was collected through a semi-structured interview which give a chance for participants to discuss freely with each other about their perceptions on vocabulary learning strategies [3]. An interview guide of nine questions suggested by [4] was used to collect data.

To give a relaxed atmosphere for students and facilitate clear understanding during their discussion, the interview was held in Vietnamese. Ten students joined the interview randomly. The teachers chose five students from each class to create two groups. Each group had a leader voted by the students and he/she was the interviewer. The teacher trained them to make it as a group discussion. The leader made questions and the other members gave out their opinion respectively. As there was no appearance of the teacher so the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed for all students. A recorder was used to record the interview. The responses of the interview, then, were transcript, coded and analyzed manually, which provided a general picture of the research problem.

The data collected answered two main research questions of the study *"What are the students' perceptions about the use of vocabulary learning strategies?* and *"How do the strategies they used affect their vocabulary learning?"*

3. Results and discussions

The interview was used to collect qualitative data from the respondents. The data included student's opinion about vocabulary learning and the effect of these strategies on their vocabulary learning. The following questions were conducted to find out the importance of vocabulary learning (Question 1 and 2), to explore the notion of knowing a word (Question 3), to know time spend on

vocabulary learning (Question 4, 5), to find out the strategies students used to discover a new word's meaning and the effects of these strategies on students' vocabulary learning (Question 6 and 7), to identify the strategies they employed to consolidate a word once it has been encountered and the effects of these strategies on their vocabulary learning (Question 8 and 9).

3.1. Students' perspectives in vocabulary learning

3.1.1. The importance of vocabulary learning

Question 1: How important do you think vocabulary learning is?

Question 2: How do you rate the importance of vocabulary learning from 1 to 10 in the survey. 1 is the least important and 10 is the most important. How do you rate it?

Due to the interview, all of the respondents agreed that vocabulary was very important in learning English. Ten interviewed students were asked to rank it on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 meaning the most important. Eight of them gave it 10 while the other two ranked it 9 on the scale.

All students reported that having sufficient vocabulary size helped them to have a wide range of vocabulary to express their ideas freely and improve communication skill. Beside understanding the meaning of words, sufficient amount of vocabulary can also help them learn English better and overcome English tests easier. Lastly, English is very popular and it is used everywhere so it is necessary to learn English especially vocabulary. The following excerpts described how the students commented on vocabulary learning.

Excerpt 1:

"I think vocabulary learning is very important because it helps us know diverse meanings of a word and enhance speaking and communication skills. I can improve my English when I have a large amount of words.

I think the rating is 10 because with enough word amounts, I can understand and talk with foreign people. By catching the keywords, I can also get the meaning of the whole sentences when reading or doing the tests." *(Student 2)*

Due to students' perceptions, lexical learning was very urgent because of its effectiveness not only in receptive side but also in productive aspect of a word. With plentiful amount of lexical source, students themselves can understand the target language and know how to produce it effectively. Thus, the more vocabulary students have acquired, the better they can communicate with people.

3.1.2. The notion of knowing a word

Question 3: What does it mean to you when you say you have learnt a word?

In this study, the students were asked to explain in their own opinion of knowing a word. Most of the students mentioned that knowing a word was understanding the meaning, spelling, pronunciation and how to apply that word in real context. Additionally, some of them explained that they knew the diferent word forms, collocation and other meanings of that word. These ideas were described in excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2:

"I think when I learnt a word I knew exactly the meaning of that word because one word does not have only one meaning but it also has another meaning. Moreover, maybe in this situation the word is a noun but in another situation it is a verb so that when learning a word we can extend that word in different word froms such as V-ing, V-ed or adj or adv…" *(Student 5)*

This result came along with the statement of [5] that knowing a word means knowing at least its forms, its meaning and its basic usage in context receptively and productively. Knowing a word requires conscious and explicit learning mechanisms whereas using a

word involves mostly implicit learning and memory. It is believed that words are the tool learners use to think, to express ideas and feeling, as well as to explore and analyze the world around them. Therefore, a limited vocabulary keeps them from expressing their thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, a large, rich vocabulary gives them the right words to use at the right time.

3.1.3. Time spent on vocabulary learning

Question 4: Do you plan your vocabulary learning? How?

Question 5: How much time do you spend on vocabulary learning in and outside class?

Nearly all the interviewees planned their vocabulary learning and spent time reviewing vocabulary in and outside class. Some of the respondents said that before class they spent 10-15 minutes reviewing new words in the lesson, looked them up in the dictionary. During the lesson, most of them listened to the teacher and took note, wrote down the new words, paid attention to the pronunciation and meaning. After class they spent about 30 minutes to one hour learning the words by writing them down many times, saying the word aloud, looking at real object and speaking out, using sticky note and putting it on learning area, using flask cards and bringing them everywhere. The following transcripts showed how the students reviewed vocabulary.

Excerpt 3:

"For vocabulary learning I often write the new word many times on the draft, say it many times or see the real object to speak out the word in English such as a chair, a table… so that I learn the word quickly and easily. I spent 30 minutes to one hour to learn new words every day." (Student 3)

Excerpt 4:

"I have plan for vocabulary learning. My strategy is writing down the words on sticky notes and stick it them around my learning

area so I can look at them anytime. I often use half to one hour a day to consolidate new words." (Student 2)

It proved that TUAF students spent time on learning vocabulary; however, they still employed simple and mechanical technique instead of natural methods in absorbing new words such as interacting in a group, talking with foreigners or exposing with natural materials as no students to be asked had such kinds of method.

3.2.   The effects of VLS on students' vocabulary learning

3.2.1. The strategies employed by TUAF students to discover the meaning of new words and the effects of these strategies on their vocabulary learning

Question 6: What do you do to discover the meaning of a new word?

Question 7: Do you think the method(s) is/are effective to discover a new word meaning?

The very first strategy that students gave out to discover the meaning of an unknown word during an interview was using dictionary. Besides, some strategies they also preferred were asking teachers or friends, using picture to guess the meaning, finding the word in the word list, using vocabulary notebook, imaging with real objects and finding down the synonym. Some of the students' responses are followed:

Excerpt 5:

"I often use dictionary to check the meaning of a word such as T-flat, Lac Viet, Google translate… Beside dictionary, I use image to guess the meaning of the word, this way helps me remember the word longer. I think these strategies are very useful in finding the meaning of a word because it is very popular among students. Everyone can buy a dictionary or use electric dictionary on the internet from their smart phone." (Student 4)

All the respondents, furthermore, confirmed that the strategies they used have positive

effects on their word learning. In term of discovery strategies, they thought that using bilingual dictionaries both hard and soft books, asking teachers or friend for meanings and guessing the meaning from context were a convenient and efficient way in finding the meaning of a word. It is likely that TUAF students prefer processing words at superficial levels and concentrate on employing shallow vocabulary learning strategies includes wordlists, flashcards, labels and social strategies.

3.2.2. The strategies employed by TUAF students to consolidate new words and the effects of these strategies on their vocabulary learning

Question 8: What do you do to study and remember a new word?

Question 9: Do you think the method(s) is/are effective to help you remember a new word?

From the interview, the most favored strategies that students used to remember the words were learning the spelling by writing down the word many times on the draft, saying the word aloud, listening to the teacher and taking note and making sentences with that word. In addition, some of them liked to use sticky notes and label them on learning area, use flash cards and write the words on a vocabulary notebook. One of the asked students reported *"Every day I write five words on my hand and learn it everywhere. Moreover, I like to write word on a study and stick it on real objects so every time I look at that object, I can remember that word."* (Student 10)

While many students tended to employ mechanical strategies such as repetition, memorization and note-taking, there were a small number of them used strategies that involve deep processing such as guessing, imaginary, using new word in an English sentence, using a monolingual dictionary, relating the word to its part of speech,

paraphrasing the word's meaning and the keyword method. The following statements were one of student's responses for vocabulary consolidation.

Excerpt 6:

"I often write down new words and explain their meaning and part of speech on a notebook with alphabet arrangement from A to Z. I use it as a mini dictionary of my own so I can find and learn words easier. I think this strategy is very useful for me." (Student 5)

Excerpt 7:

"After noting down new word in class and listening to teacher's explanation about its pronunciation and usage, at home I often read the word again, and then read it in the whole sentence and reading text. After that, I make sentences in English with that word or put it in real dialog. By using these strategies, I can remember the words longer." (Student 9)

For words' retention, repetition strategies were applied the most, students thought that with these strategies, they could remember the spelling and pronunciation even long and complicated words, however, it is quite mechanical to learn with these methods. Besides, some strategies involving deeper processing such as guessing, imaginary, using new word in an English sentence, using a monolingual dictionary, relating the word to its part of speech, paraphrasing the word's meaning and the keyword method is necessary to introduce to students to consolidate new words and enhance retention.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

The findings from the study showed that TUAF students were aware of the importance of vocabulary learning and they had plan for vocabulary learning. According to their opinion, most of them spent ten to thirty minutes before and after the lesson to review new words. Besides, they stated that learning

a word means that they know the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of that word. Almost all of the students said that the strategies they used to discover new words like using dictionary, asking teachers or friends, etc. and consolidate lexis such as learning the spelling, saying the word aloud or making sentences have positive effects on their word learning. However, most strategies they used are shallow strategies which are popular among new learners.

4.2. Recommendations

By knowing students' perceptions and their ways of learning vocabulary, English teachers can integrate suitable vocabulary learning strategies into the curriculum to improve students' lexical learning. Such new techniques can also motivate students' self-studying process and help them have more fun and interest in their learning.

Besides, researchers can conduct a study to compare students' lexical performance between their traditional ways of learning and some other modern techniques in learning vocabulary to determine which strategies performs better and help students find out the best solutions for their vocabulary learning.

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