Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Topic Preferences in Improving Language Competence in a Language Evening Class in HCMC

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Abstract

This research is aimed to find out which learning strategies are most popularly used and most efficient among learners in a pre-intermediate English class at a foreign language center in Ho Chi Minh City. The study is also to provide an opportunity for students to adopt the most appropriate way to learn vocabulary and share their topic interest with their classmates to refresh their learning environment and get some improvement in their language competence in the classroom. Via tests, interviews and observation, the researcher has found out that the students here employed determination, social and cognitive strategies in their learning vocabulary, which are derived from Schmitt's findings (1997) about vocabulary learning taxonomies. Analysis of the data has indicated that the activity has brought some improvement in students' learning as well as created a lot of fun in the learning environment. From this study, it is concluded that more attention should be paid to refresh the learning environment in the classroom so that the students can be motivated to have much better outcomes.

Key words: learning strategies, vocabulary, motivation, topic preference

1. Introduction

In learning foreign languages, building vocabulary is one essential task that needs to be improved day by day. Learning vocabulary requires the use of vocabulary learning strategies which have been receiving much attention in the field of a foreign language. As a matter of fact, psychologists, linguists, and language teachers have been interested in vocabulary learning strategies for a long time (Levenston, 1979). Aimed at learners at a foreign language center, the study was implemented to create an innovation in the class to find the answer to the question "Which vocabulary learning strategies best help students to remember and use vocabulary effectively?"

2. Research Objectives

This research aims to identify the answers to three questions:

2.1. How do students often learn vocabulary? What strategies do they often adopt to learn vocabulary?

2.2. Which strategies can be more effective in assisting student to enrich their vocabulary?

2.3. Does the activity of sharing words from their topic preferences create any fun and help students remember and use the vocabulary more effectively?

3. Literature review

3.1. The importance of vocabulary learning strategies in learning a foreign language

In learning a foreign language, vocabulary is a significant part, or, in other words, it is the centre of language learning. Word knowledge is an essential of communicative competence (Seal, 1991), and in learning a foreign language, it is important for both production and comprehension. Words are building blocks of language since "they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot covey the intended meaning" (Ghazal, 2007, p. 84). Therefore, in teaching a second/foreign language, teaching vocabulary also involves in teaching necessary strategies so learners can find out appropriate ways to expand their vocabulary knowledge efficiently.

Vocabulary learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies which in turn are parts of general language strategies (Nation, 2001). Once students are trained learning strategies, they will be encouraged greater overall self-direction to become better learners, and skill in learning strategies will make them more independent, responsible and later more confident in their learning(Chamot, 1999 cited in Ghazal, 2007). However, research has found out that students are mostly inclined to use basic vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997), so strategy instruction is an essential part of any foreign or second language program (Ghazal, 2007). A lot of research has been conducted to find out if there is a relationship between strategy use and success in second/foreign language learning. For instance, Sanaoui (1995), who carried out a study to demonstrate this relationship, concluded that students who had a structured learning approach were more successful in retaining the vocabulary items taught in their classroom than those with unstructured approach. Another example is the study of Cohen and Aphek (1981, cited in Ghazal, 2007), in which they taught students of Hebrew to remember new words by making paired mnemonic associations and they found out that those who made associations remembered vocabulary more efficiently than those who did not.

3.2. What are the factors affecting vocabulary learning strategies of students?

There are many factors affecting the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies. The following seem to be the most important ones:

- The learner: The learner brings to the language learning situation a wide spectrum of individual differences that will affect the learning rate and the learning result. The most widely reported learner factors include age, sex, language aptitude, intelligence, prior knowledge, motivation, self-concept/image, personality, and

cognitive and learning style (Gu, 2003). In learning vocabulary, motivation for learning the language is an important influence on their choice and use of strategies (Gallo-Crail & Zerwekh, 2002). Besides, learners with high proficiency have different strategies from those with lower one; for example, "advanced students do not need the dictionary so much, while the weak ones cannot use it to their advantage" (Neubach and Cohen, 1988, p.14). Sex differences in vocabulary learning have also been paid attention to. Boyle (1987) found that, despite a female superiority in general proficiency, male students outperformed their female counterparts in listening vocabulary. On the other hand, Oxford, Lavine, Hollaway, Felkins, and Saleh (1996), found out that females were significantly more willing than males to try out new vocabulary learning strategies, a finding that has been corroborated in a few other studies (Gu, 2002; Young and Oxford, 1997).

    - Learning context: Learning context refers to learning environment. It includes the teachers, the peers, the classroom climate, the family support, the social and cultural tradition of learning, the curriculum, and the availability of input and output opportunities (Gu, 2003).Learning contexts constrain the ways learners approach learning task, and in a foreign language setting, students don't have a community where they could interact with others, so the they often work individually, not group work though they are expected to (Gallo-Crail & Zerwekh, 2002).

    - Learning tasks: A learning task is the end product in the learner's mind. Different types of task materials, task purposes and tasks at various difficulty level demand different learner strategies, for example, learning words in a list is different from learning the same word in a passage, or remembering a word meaning is different from learning how to use the same word in the real life situations (Gu, 2003). Therefore, some learners have expressed their uncertainty about which strategy would work best for them. Then, what are the roles of the teacher in helping students learn vocabulary?

    It's obvious that students who know vocabulary learning strategies can do better in the vocabulary level test than those who don't (Sener, 2003). Moreover, the significance of strategy training is pointed out even by scholars who believe that context is a major source of vocabulary learning. Thus, it's necessary that English teachers should provide a wide range of instructional ideas in the classroom and introduce specific learning strategies to students so that they can learn effectively from the context (Coady, 1997). Teachers need to decide what framework and strategies they should choose to focus on based on the students' needs, learning styles, proficiency level as well as the task's requirements (Ghazal, 2007). Research studies have revealed that students who believe vocabulary should be picked up through natural exposure and careful studying are more successful (Gu & Johnson, 1996). Teachers should then encourage students to learn more words through reading, listening to English programs, and looking for opportunities to use English beyond the classroom environment to enlarge their vocabulary (Sener, 2003). Moreover, students often apply different strategies in learning different new words, so they should be given opportunities to examine the effectiveness of their vocabulary learning strategies so that they can

"discover which one feels right for them" (Ghazal, 2007, p. 89). Besides, teachers should think of the ways to provide less successful learners with vocabulary learning strategies by making them aware of the need to be independent learners to recognize what strategies they possess and what they lack. With such teachers' help, students can overcome the challenge of learning vocabulary of a foreign language and they can benefit a lot in their learning.

3.3. Classifications of vocabulary learning strategies

Second and foreign language researchers have made great attempts to classify the taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies, among who mis Schmitt (1997). He compiled comprehensive classifications of students' strategies and distinguished them into two groups: strategies that determine the meaning of new words when encountered for the first time and strategies that consolidate the meaning when encountered again. Based on this distinction, he gave a list of vocabulary learning strategies including a variety of strategies which are important skills in the learning process:

- *Determination strategies*: are individual strategies used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without resource"(p. 205).
- *Social strategies*: engage learners in interaction with their peers, their teachers to find the meaning of the words.
- *Memory strategies*: are the ones which proceed learners in learning new words through mental processing by associating their existing knowledge with the new words in the form of imagery or grouping.
- *Cognitive strategies*: are similar to memory strategies but don't engage learners in mental processing but focus on more mechanical means such as word lists, flash cards, vocabulary notebooks or repetition.
- *Metacognitive strategies*: relate to the processes involving monitoring, decision-making, and self-evaluate one's learning progress. Metacognitive strategies help learners in determining appropriate strategies for learning new words.

Learning vocabulary is a difficult skill that students need to improve in their studying, but once they are equipped with a number of the strategies mentioned above, they can deal with a variety of words on their own and as a result have access to a large number of target language words (Ghazal, 2007, p.87).

3.4. How to measure the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies?

Learning vocabulary is not only remembering the words but also using them automatically in a wide range of language contexts when the need arises (Mc Carthy, 1984). Vocabulary learning strategies, therefore, should include strategies for "using" and "knowing" a word as well. As a result, it's necessary to measure how effective a vocabulary learning strategy is. In their study, Erten and Williams (2008) presented two ways to measure the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies: percentages and correlation coefficients, and they did research to find out which is better. As the finding of their study, they found out that employing percentage calculation as an indicator of strategy effectiveness can be a more realistic measure of the effectiveness because "it

allows researchers to treat discreet cases of vocabulary learning separately as opposed to the holistic treatment in correlation coefficients" (Erten & Williams, 2008, p. 69). In this research, the writer will apply percentage calculation strategy in measuring the effectiveness of the innovation the students employed in their learning.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Participants

The innovation was implemented in a pre-intermediate class in the Foreign Language Center, Branch 1 of HCMC University of Pedagogy. The number of students here was 35, most of them were high school and college students. Their course took 2 months, from early November of 2015 to early January of 2016. Every week, they had three days to come to class (on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday). Their learning material was pre-intermediate International Express. Most of them were rather hard-working and they showed their real interest when hearing about the change in their learning in the classroom.

4.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this innovation was two vocabulary tests delivered in the middle and at the end of the course, a six - question interview for five students, who were randomly chosen in the class, and the teacher's observation through lessons and games played on some occasions. All the names of the interviewees were not mentioned in order to keep the private information confidential.

4.3. Procedure

The students were divided into 4 groups, each of which followed a different kind of vocabulary learning strategies. Each week, the four groups changed the strategy with one another. This process lasted four weeks till they found the suitable strategies for themselves. The aim of this task is to make them share their feelings and experience of different strategies with their friends. During this process, the students also simultaneously joined in a presenting schedule in the class. Every day, there would be three students who spontaneously volunteered to present five new from a topic they found interesting. They had to use English, their body language or some other kinds of visual aids to help them describe or explain the words so that their friends and teacher could guess the meaning. No mother tongue was accepted. The words presented needed to be practical, accurate, chosen from a familiar or hot topic in their life and always accompanied by transcriptions and word forms. At the end of the week, the students would vote for the most impressive presentation of the week, and at the end of the month, there would be also an election for the best presentation of the month. All the best presenters based on the highest vote would get the rewards from the teacher.

The phase of innovation was carried out from early November of 2015 to early January of 2016, including 8 weeks, following this schedule:

From early November 2015 to early January 2016

Week 1	Finding materials about vocabulary learning strategies, introducing some strategies with the students and making them familiar with the strategies.
Week 2-4	Students were divided into groups to follow different ways to learn vocabulary.
	Students started the presenting schedule.
Week 5	Mid-term Test
	Analyzing the result
	Students continued their presentations
Week 6 - 7	Students continued their presentations
	Holding a day of games on the occasion of Christmas. Students joined the guessing games of what they had learnt
	Observing the students' performance in the games.
	Analyzing the observation
Week 8	Final test
	Interviews. They took place in private and were carefully recorded.
	Analyzing the results of the test and interviews
	The students ended their presenting schedule.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1. The mid-term test and final test

The result coming from the mid-term test was not as good as expected. On the day of the mid-term test, only 30 students were present in the class. The scores were so low as the following:

Table 1
The result of the mid-term test

Terms of score	The number of paper/30	Percent (%)
< 3	12	40%
3 - < 5	12	40%
= 5	4	13.33%
< 7	2	6.67%
≥ 8	0	0%

The result coming from the final test looked different. The scores were improved. At that time, the number of test papers was still 30 due to some students' absence.

Table 2
The result from the final test

Terms of score	The number of paper/30	Percent (%)
< 3	9	30%
3 - < 5	10	33.33%
= 5	1	3.33%
< 7	0	0%
≥ 8	10	33.33%

From the results in table 1 and table 2, some obvious change can be seen in the quality of the students' outcomes. In the mid-term test, the highest numbers lays on the number of papers under average marks, but three weeks later, the result in the final test showed a clear improvement based on the high number of papers over 8, which didn't appear in the previous test. Moreover, the percentage of the papers under average marks has reduced (from 40% to 30% of the papers under 3 marks, and from 40% to 33.33% of the papers from 3 to fewer than 5). The number of the papersmarked 5 has also reduced from 4 to 1.

5.2. The observation

On the occasion of Christmas, a party in the classroom was held with some games, a guessing game. They were divided into three groups. Each group had to prepare some things put in a covered box. The things were what they learnt from presentations. Each group would send a representative to touch the things inside the box and use the words to describe them for their partners to guess. According to the observation of the researcher, most of the students could say quite well what the thing was, except some very shy students. They were excited to recall the words they had learnt and tried to show their knowledge. At the end of the game, two groups were the winners because both of them were so excellent.

According to the observation during lessons, the time students used the words was not much, normally they just used the words they had to encounter in their reading. In their speaking, most of them had difficulty pronouncing the words they wanted to express. Sometimes they could recall the words they had learnt but when they were asked to write them down, they then found it difficult, so they refused.

5.3. The interviews

The interviews were constructed for the purposes of discovering more about students' vocabulary learning strategies and their opinions about the innovation. The following are the main assertions from the analysis of the interview data

Question 1: How often do you learn vocabulary? How much time do you spend on it?

When they were asked about the time they spent on vocabulary, 3 out of 5 students said that they just looked at the vocabulary on the day before their lessons of English in the classroom, sometimes they forgot, and they normally spent about froma quarter to half an hour on it. They often reviewed all the words before the tests. One student said that she always learnt vocabulary right in the classroom when she had free time between the sections and the practice exercises and she thought it was efficient because she could remember and make herself familiar with the words right away. At home, she often spent little time reviewing the words, normally a half hour. The rest student said he studied English every day and often spent one or more hours exploring new words. .

Question 2: How can you get the meaning of a new word?

4 of 5 students preferred to use dictionaries when they first met a word because, they said, they couldn't understand the sentence if they didn't check the word meaning. The rest said that she often guessed the meaning first based on the context, after that she would look it up to be sure about its meaning and also found out if her guessing was correct.

Question 3: What do you often pay attention to when you learn vocabulary? (meaning, word class, transcription, collocation, examples..)

3 out of 5 students committed they just paid attention to the meaning, the transcription and the word class when they learn a new word. The rest said that they often looked at the examples in the dictionary to find out the use of the word and learn about its collocation. They thought that was a good way to use the word correctly and it was necessary because learning a new word is not only learning its meaning but also learning how to use it.

Question 4: What vocabulary learning strategies have you applied in your learning? Which do you like the most? Why?

The common strategy that all the students mentioned was writing down the words into a notebook with three columns: one for English words, one for transcription, and the rest for Vietnamese meaning. 3 of them chose this the strategy they loved the most because it is portable and easy to learn; furthermore, it doesn't take them a lot of time to make such a notebook. Though they agreed it is some kind of boring strategy but they were familiar with it, and found it acceptable. Some other strategies they listed were drawing word maps and using flash cards. One of the students liked to use flash cards and stick them every where in her room and her house so that she could be familiar with them by seeing them every day. The colors of the cards would stand for the form of the words and the transcription was written below the word on the card. She said that she found it very interesting to see the colorful cards everywhere in the house every day and she could remember the words easily. Another student shared that he often learnt new words by putting them in a map of words of the same topic and found that the association could help him remember the words easily and for a long time. He also said that he often brought a dictionary in his bag so he could check any words at

any time and thought it is also a good way to discover more new words. No student mentioned e-dictionary because as far as concerned, no one in the classroom used it.

Question 5: In your opinion, what are the roles of the teacher in helping you remember and use vocabulary effectively? Who plays the decisive role in learning vocabulary, the teacher or the learner? Why?

All of the students when asked this question indicated that the teacher plays the role of a guide or a facilitator in helping students remember and use vocabulary effectively. She just introduced some strategies for the students to get familiar with, but it's the students who test and decide which strategy is appropriate with their level and interest, and which is more efficient for them. Therefore, students play the decisive role in learning vocabulary.

Question 6: In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the innovation in teaching and learning your teacher has applied into your classroom?

To talk about the strengths, all the students interviewed mentioned their interest in the innovation in the classroom. They said that they felt relaxed and more motivated to come to class. Moreover, they could learn more new words of daily life which don't appear in the textbook. The innovation has made their class more interesting and more active because it was not only learning all the things in the textbook which is boring but also helped them explore many kinds of new words. They also said that they could remember the words more easily thank to presenting them in front of their peers or their impression of the presenters when they were audience. They also committed that though they are still using a notebook of translation, they also found it a new way to remember the words freely, not just writing the words for many times. Some indicated that they could also make friends with more students in the class when they worked together in groups. They also showed that presenting new words has made them more comfortable and more confident to be in front of crowds. They could learn how to use English to describe and explain the words; thus, they could learn how to communicate and negotiate the meanings with the peer audience.

In the area of weaknesses, all the students interviewed talked about the time consumption of the presentations. Some of them mentioned their lack of time to communicate and practice the new words in class. One of the students said that there were too few tests to check their knowledge. She suggested having a vocabulary test every week.

6. Discussion

The innovation has made some difference for the students in the class. The positive change in the final test compared with the mid-term test shows that students have had certain improvement in their learning as in the chart below
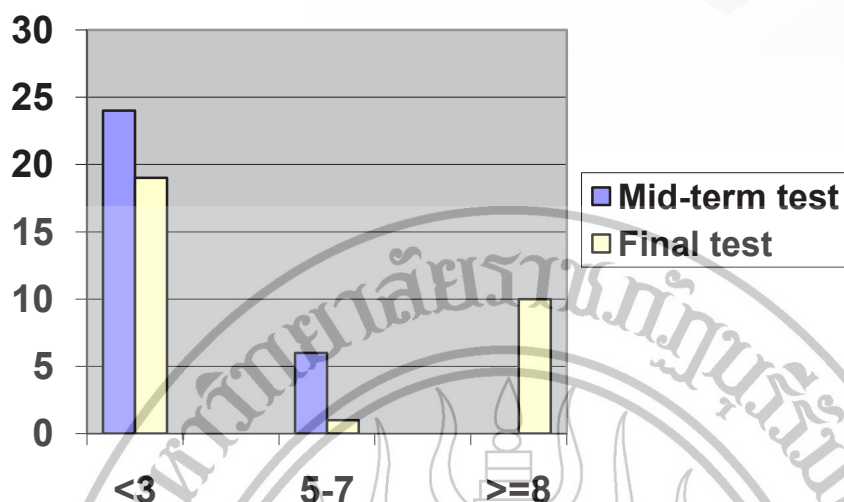
From the interview, the answers show that the students are still influenced by the traditional way of learning when most of them still like using a vocabulary notebook with translation. Looking back to the strategies pointed out by Schmitt (1997), it has been found out that most of the students have employed determination strategies, social strategies and cognitive strategies. Moreover, their learning seems not very active. Most of them only look at the new words before going to class, or forget to review them, or just review them before the test. They don't think about the strategy "the fewer the better" in learning vocabulary. It means they should learn few words but continuously day by day because this way will help them enlarge their vocabulary quickly and firmly. Perhaps that's the culture of Vietnamese students, who are always in the race before the exams.

7. Conclusion
7.1. Strengths

The innovation was successful because, firstly, it has raised the interest of students in learning vocabulary in the classroom with their friends in general and individually in particular. The results of all the observation, the tests, and interviews have showed the improvement both in their feeling of learning and in their learning outcomes. Secondly, the innovation has also increased the self-direction in learning of the students as they can "learn by doing". It offered learners an opportunity to develop individually chosen new words, prioritized the importance of different words and focused on those the learners really want to know. It also offered students a freer way of learning and using vocabulary beyond the traditional way of only translation which causes less motivation. Thirdly, the way of presenting vocabulary in front of the class helped students be familiar and more confident standing in front of crowds, which helps them much in presentation skills. Fourthly, it created some refreshment in the learning environment inside the classroom. The students had never experienced such activity before, so they feel motivated and interested to join in the innovation. Finally, it also

helped the teacher herself overcome the boredom of teaching for a long time with the same kind of material. The innovation has actually brought a flow of fresh air to the whole class.

7.2. Weaknesses and limitations

When the research was implemented in a foreign language class, there were some limitations that need to be considered. First of all, the learning material was so boring and the topics from the text book were not familiar with the students, (the book is about business, it's a kind of monolingual textbook that is difficult for the students of pre-intermediate level). Meanwhile, the students wanted to learn more about English of daily life, of some other things that are familiar with them. Therefore, the new vocabularies the students chose didn't match the topics in the book and they couldn't make much use of them. Second, there were some holidays in the middle of this course such as Vietnamese Teachers' Day, Christmas Day and New Year day, which interrupted our plan and the presentations of the students throughout the course. Hence, there was no continuity of the students' demonstration and the teacher's observation. The third problem is that the topics for demonstration were not limited, so there were some unexciting demonstrations due to unwisely-chosen vocabularies, which made the students bored and felt less interested in the demonstrations. Thus, they were really excited about the plan at the beginning of the course but later some of them lost their interest in their friends' performances. One more problem that made the innovation difficult to be successful was that the time of the innovation was also the time of examinations at almost schools and universities, so the students couldn't spend a lot of time studying what they learnt from the class at the foreign language centre. That was the reason why the test results were not as good as expectation. Finally, the innovation has created a chance for students to be in front of the class and present their favorite words, but their chance to use the words in the learning environment has still been restricted due to the limitation of time and the compulsory tasks that need to be completed in the textbook as assigned.

8. Conclusion

The students showed more interested in the course, compared to the previous course with the same teacher and learners. They expected to have more chance to be exposed to some other innovation in learning in the class. They had more motivation to come to the class and enjoy their learning with their peers.

9. Recommendations

The research hasn't indicated the competition between groups of different learning strategies. It would have been much better if the effectiveness of different strategies among groups had been considered so that the findings could be seen more clearly.

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