

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This final chapter of the thesis provides a brief review of the results of the current quantitative and qualitative study on the perceptions and uses of upper secondary school Thai EFL students towards English vocabulary language learning strategies, based on Chapter Four. It then presents a thematic discussion of the major findings, provides implications for theory and pedagogical practice, and makes recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with a conclusion to the whole study.

5.1 Summary of the Major Findings

The purpose of this study was carried out to investigate the students' perceptions and their actual use of strategies. As different learning tasks require different strategies, it is worthwhile looking at how learners learn vocabulary and the strategies they use to discover and retain word meaning. The instruments consisted of number of selected sample included 200 grade 12 students, derived through purposive random sampling. The instruments consisted of vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire, think-aloud protocols, and semi-structured interviews. Collected data were analyzed using both quantitative data from the questionnaire, and qualitative data from the think-aloud vocabulary tasks and the semi-structured interviews.

The following major findings were summarized drawing from the data analysis and interpretation of the data.

5.1.1 Guessing followed by the use of the dictionary was the most commonly used discovery strategies for both the grade 12 students and the high achievers. Besides contextual guessing (90%), the results of the questionnaire indicated that the high proficient students used other inferencing strategies to discover word meanings such as look for clues in the word itself (75%). For the rest of the grade 12 students, they tended to use social strategies to infer word meanings. Almost eighty percent of the grade 12 students reported that they asked their classmates or peers for the meaning.

5.1.2 To consolidate a word in memory, the grade 12 students and the high proficient students favored strategies focusing on the spoken and written form of the word. They usually studied the spelling of the target word and divided the target word into syllables. Studying spoken and written form of the word, according to the high achievers, could help them to enhance retention and facilitate communication in daily lives. They also believed that knowing the meaning, spelling and pronunciation meant that they have learnt the word. Finally, it is worth noting that the high proficient students used grouping strategy most often to consolidate new words.

5.1.3 In general, the grade 12 students believed that asking the teacher(s) for meaning was the most useful discovery strategy; whereas, the high proficient students believed that using a monolingual dictionary was the most useful strategy to discover a new word meaning. At the top of the list, the high proficient students indicated that asking the teacher(s) for meaning and learning words from word lists or glossary were effective ways to learn a new word.

5.1.4 To enhance retention of a newly learnt word, all students unanimously agreed that keeping a vocabulary notebook was the most useful consolidation

strategy. Besides, the high proficient students also thought that studying the words over time helped them to keep track of their learning and remember the word.

5.1.5 In comparison with the use of strategies, it is found that there is no significant difference between the grade 12 students and the high achievers. At the first encounter of a new word, guessing followed by the use of dictionary was used commonly by both groups of students. Besides, both group of students favored strategies focusing on word form. The only difference seems to be the high proficient students would use more grouping strategy to consolidate new words.

Below are the discussions of the following aspects based on the findings: students' use of vocabulary learning strategies, students' perceptions of the usefulness of the strategies, think-aloud protocols by the high achievers, and high achievers' opinions about vocabulary learning, respectively.

5.2 Students' Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The results of this study found that guessing followed by the use of the dictionary was the most commonly used discovery strategies for both the grade 12 students and the high achievers. Besides contextual guessing (90%), the results of the questionnaire indicated that the high proficient students used other inferencing strategies to discover word meanings such as look for clues in the word itself (75%). For the rest of the grade 12 students, they tended to use social strategies to infer word meanings. Almost eighty per cent of the grade 12 students reported that they asked their classmates or peers for the meaning. The reasons why these learners tended to rely on contextual strategies for learning the tasks in English might be related to the context and the task types of their study. The learners in this study were learning

English in the rural context in the Northeastern part of Thailand where contact with the English language is limited. Thus, it is not easy for the learners to practice using the materials they have learned in the classroom in other daily communicative situations, and as a result they might end up studying only what they are able to do by themselves and become solitary, such as memorizing through repetition and practicing course materials. In addition, the learners in this study were from a secondary school level. Thus, because the learners in the present study were not advanced learners, the tasks they focused on in their study might be dependent on the course materials and quizzes, because the beginning learners' tasks are cognitively often more challenging due to needing to build new concepts and memorize a lot of words rather than just comparing and matching prior language knowledge. This finding coincided with the students' learning behavior of using the writing repetition strategy for memorizing Chinese characters. Rao's (2006) research in Chinese students' use of language learning strategies also had a similar discovery. Sixty-three percent of these students tried to write a word repeatedly to remember it. Rao pointed out that in acquiring the thousands of characters in common usage; one must keep practicing them until they are kept in mind. Some researchers (Pressley, Leven & Delaney. 1982; Dansereau. 1988; Ebbinghaus. 1993) concluded that the use of learning strategies is perhaps the product of one's cognitive style which is "concerned with working on new words in order to understand, categorize, and store them in the mental lexicon" (Hedge. 2000: 117). Decarrico (2001) indicated that cultural institutions, such as schools, classrooms, etc., have significant roles to play in an individual's cognitive growth and development. Hence, the use of learning strategies might be influenced by these learning milieus.

As a result they might have mainly used contextual strategies such as practicing by repetition and completing the required class exercises. In fact, Chamot and Kupper's study (1989) found that beginning learners relied mostly on cognitive strategies, such as repetition and translation when compared with intermediate and advanced learners. Also, research on strategy use among different levels of learners has suggested that advanced learners use a greater number of strategies more often than beginning learners (Carroll. 1981; Bialystok. 1983; O'Malley & Chamot. 1990; Oxford. 1990; Catalán & María. 2003).

Therefore, the classroom setting and the teacher-assigned tasks strongly impacted how learners chose to use strategies for learning Japanese, which indicate contextual factors in classroom-restricted learning (Nyikos & Fan. 2007). According to the psycholinguistic perspectives, Ellis (1985: 103) suggested that the tasks "have a significant impact on the way learners process language in performance, and therefore, potentially, on how they acquire an L2". Also, Wenden and Rubin (1987) insisted that tasks lead to learning opportunities. Therefore, teachers may need to pay special attention to establish tasks and to consider how the tasks help learners to gain communicative ability beyond memorization and studying the tasks and materials for tests, although I believe that tests and quizzes (i.e., vocabulary quizzes) were still necessary, especially for the beginning level learners in order to gain the basic skills of the language.

To consolidate a word in memory, the grade 12 students and the high proficient students favored strategies focusing on the spoken and written form of the word. They usually studied the spelling of the target word and divided the target word into syllables. Studying spoken and written form of the word, according to the

high achievers, could help them to enhance retention and facilitate communication in daily lives. They also believed that knowing the meaning, spelling and pronunciation meant that they have learnt the word. Finally, it is worth noting that the high proficient students used grouping strategy most often to consolidate new words. A possible explanation could be that the high proficient students always monitored their learning by combining these wide ranges of strategies and using these multi-layered strategies. Also, they tended to be active strategy users in producing the language and sentences, and this strategy allowed them to make the words and grammar their own as they moved from explicit, effortful learning to more acquired, automatic learning that is strategic because it is focused, applicable to the task and therefore effective, and personally meaningful so they have strategic and personal control over the task. Huckin and Coady (1999) found learning in context slightly more advantageous, but not enough to be considered as different achievements. Much of the research conducted in vocabulary instruction has failed to demonstrate any clear advantage of learning in contextualizing conditions (Nation, 1982). For instance, Coady (1993) concluded after exploring the basic argument for a mixed approach to vocabulary acquisition in ESL that the basic or core vocabulary should be taught, but the less frequent vocabulary would be learned better via context. However, even in that case, some techniques played an important role to learning effectively. Hulstijn, Hollander, and Greidanus (1996) concluded that a mixture of approaches should be adopted since there are advantages and disadvantages between context-based inferential strategies and some other explicit vocabulary learning approaches such as key-word techniques, or translation in pairs, or using a monolingual or bilingual dictionary. In other words, the result of the current study is parallel with previous research mentioned above.

Furthermore, the high proficient students tended to practice the materials multiple times, as Paribakht and Wesche (1999) suggested in his study on the effects of task repetition. According to Cobb and Horst (2001) and Gaudio (2003), individual interest is the degree to which the learner is interested in certain topics, subject areas, or activities. It is also defined as an individual's long-term orientation toward a type of subject, activity, or an area of knowledge (Fraser, 1999). Since interest is a key part of motivation for learning, it is important to note that numerous studies reveal a significant relationship between motivation and language learning strategy use (Oxford, 1996a, 1996b).

Through these strategic approaches, the high proficient students seemed to study the tasks until they were able to produce and use them, and did not terminate at the stage of recognition or word-level production. This form of over learning seemed to ensure that the high level of certitude that they appear to need going into the classroom was achieved. As a result, the use of these strategies by the high proficient students was systematic and did not change over the one and a half month period under examination. Therefore, these findings may suggest that the high proficient students tended to know how and how much they have to study the tasks in order to attain high achievement on the target materials and tasks.

5.3 Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of the Strategies

In the current study's findings from the think-aloud task and the interview taken together, prior English learning appeared to be associated with students' strategy use for learning English. The reason for this might be explainable by the fact that the students in this study had the restricted range of English proficiency and the

restricted range of strategy use scores. It seems that prior English learning is related to high frequency of strategy use and high English proficiency and achievement (Chow, 1997; Lin, 2002; Chen, 2003). This finding is consistent with the previous study conducted with Taiwanese college students. Similar to this study, in Chou's study (2002), the participants were at the lower end of high range and showed stronger extrinsic motivation than intrinsic motivation. The mean of extrinsic motivation was significantly greater than that of intrinsic motivation in both studies. Also, participants' effort to learning and desire to use English was relatively low compared to two other types of motivation in both studies.

In general, the grade 12 students believed that asking the teacher(s) for meaning was the most useful discovery strategy; whereas, the high proficient students believed that using a monolingual dictionary was the most useful strategy to discover a new word meaning. At the top of the list, the high proficient students indicated that asking the teacher(s) for meaning and learning words from word lists or glossary were effective ways to learn a new word. These results may be because the high proficient students tended to have already developed and be aware of English learning strategies which were appropriate for certain tasks. The findings of the present study are consistent with those of previous studies (Kroll & Curley, 1988; Sautermeister, 1989; Fraser, 1999). Fraser's study (1999) showed that consulting a dictionary to confirm inference is a valuable strategy for lexical acquisition. Kroll and Curley (1988) stated that vocabulary learning in the beginning stage uses translation exclusively compared to vocabulary learning at the advanced levels. Indeed, in Sautermeister's (1989) study, he reported that vocabulary learning behavior among English learners at colleges. English language learners were not satisfied until they had found a first language

equivalent to assist their learning. In fact, in their interviews, half of the high proficient students reported that the things they noted in their answers to the questions in this study were effective in learning English, which might indicate their self-efficacy (Bandura. 2001). It is reasonable to believe that students' self-rating is in a way a manifestation of their self-efficacy. Research has also provided evidence in how self-efficacy is related to more positive learning results. These findings concurred with the study of Oxford (1996a), which have found that self-efficacy is raised when students receive language learning strategy instruction. Thus, the high proficient students tended to have evaluated their previous English learning strategies, and have developed systematic and sustained approaches to their own strategy use which were appropriate for each task. These findings support a number of previous studies demonstrating the degree of expressed motivation to learn the language had the significant main effect on strategy choice (Oxford & Nyikos. 1989; Oxford & Ehrman. 1995; Oxford et. al. 1993; Wharton. 2000; Chou. 2002). For instance, Oxford and Ehrman's (1995) study of language learning strategy use among adult language learners reported that the strong relationship between learning strategy use on the one hand and motivation on the other hand.

In comparison with the use of strategies, it is found that there is no significant difference between the grade 12 students and the high achievers. At the first encounter of a new word, guessing followed by the use of dictionary was used commonly by both groups of students. Besides, both group of students favored strategies focusing on word form. The only difference seems to be the high proficient students would use more grouping strategy to consolidate new words. This can be described that there was a relationship between the frequency of strategies students

applied on the vocabulary task and both self-rated English proficiency and prior English learning.

Green and Oxford (1995) reported that no significant difference was found between the high and the mid groups. These findings suggest that “in research of this kind, the strength of the findings obtained can depend to a significant extent on the range of ability levels in the study” (Green & Oxford, 1995: 286). More precise relationships between strategy use and proficiency could be determined if researchers work with a variety of groups that show a broader range of proficiency outcomes.

5.4 Think-aloud Protocols by the High Proficient Students

The results of this study indicated that, the high proficient students were invited to participate in the think-aloud tasks to demonstrate how they made use of the strategies to discover meanings of ten target words, the most used strategy is guessing or lexical inferencing and the second commonly used strategy is monolingual dictionary by the high proficient students in the tasks. Some think-aloud protocol data is used for illustration. It can be inferred that good learners used more vocabulary learning strategies and they consistently adopt types of strategies based either on their beliefs about vocabulary and vocabulary learning or on other pre-existing cognitive or social factors. This finding fully supports the convictions by Sanaoui (1995), which claims that although each strategy contributes to success or failure, consistent employment of certain types of strategies forms an approach to vocabulary learning that may considerably influence the outcomes of L2 learning. Therefore, how different learners combine different strategies and how this affects their learning

outcomes warrant studying as much as, perhaps more than, the effects of individual strategies.

As stated earlier, the think-aloud introspection indicates the high proficient students favored the guessing strategy when they encountered new words in the tasks. Clark and Nation (1980) pointed out that studying the context in which a word occurred provides important linguistic and contextual clues for making inferences. These clues include sentence-level grammar and the surrounding text, which provide a knowledge base for inferencing.

5.5 High Achievers' Opinions about Vocabulary Learning

To enhance retention of a newly learnt word, all students unanimously agreed that keeping a vocabulary notebook was the most useful consolidation strategy. Besides, the high proficient students also thought that studying the words over time helped them to keep track of their learning and remember the word. The explanation for this may lie in two areas. First, students justify the importance of vocabulary learning may be that words are the building blocks to communication that is why vocabulary learning and teaching are important to second language acquisition. Second, the students seem to agree that vocabulary learning played an important role in learning English. The findings in this study support the viewpoint of Hill (2005: 1) which explains that one of the most difficult challenges for language learners is to learn the meanings and use of the words they need to master if they are to be able to understand and communicate in a second or foreign language.

Relatively, most linguists agree that a word is a complex entity made up of a set of properties and features. Chomsky (1957), for example, viewed lexis as a set of

dictionary entries and the lexis contains syntactic, phonological and semantic information. To Nation (2001), words are not isolated units of language, but fit into many interlocking systems and levels. Because of this, there are many things to know about any particular word and there are many degrees of knowing. At the most general level, knowing a word involves form, meaning and use and there is receptive and productive distinction for each aspect. The validity of the receptive/productive distinction as a way of distinguishing types of knowledge in most cases depends on its resemblance to the distinction between the 'receptive' skills of listening and reading and the 'productive' skills of speaking and writing (Palmer, 1921: 118, cited in Nation, 2001).

5.6 Pedagogical Implications

The first pedagogical implication is that more vocabulary learning strategies should be introduced to learners and strategy training is essential for learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) stressed that the strategic behavior might be affected by student characteristics such as motivation, aptitude, age, sex, prior education, as well as the cultural background and learning style. It may be complexes of them (i.e. behaviors) rather than specific ones which characterize different kinds of learners is worthy of further research. Therefore, it is worthwhile for both teachers and learners to spend time working on strategies. It may be beneficial for learners to choose their own learning strategies according to their characteristics such as proficiency and learning style.

Another pedagogical implication of this study is that learners and teachers should be mindful of the quality (or depth) of the vocabulary students learn in order to

achieve basic success in EFL learning. Nation (2001: 6) warned that when we plan the vocabulary goals of a long-term course of study, we can look at three kinds of information to help decide how much vocabulary needs to be learned: the number of words in the language, the number of words known by native speakers and the number of words needed to use the language. Therefore, the underlying principle of vocabulary teaching should have a major influence on content and sequencing of the curriculum. Teachers and learners should reach a general consensus on the learning goal when designing the course or curriculum.

The results of the study shed light on the role of learners and learner responsibility. Recent research has demonstrated that learner initiative and independence are crucial factors to attain higher levels of achievement (Gu, 1997; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999). In other words, the more learners are aware of how learning is best carried out, the better learning is likely to be. For example, learners should know what vocabulary to learn, learners should continue to increase their vocabulary size and enrich the words they already know. As a result, no matter what the teacher does or what the course book presents, ultimately it is the learner who does the learning. With this in mind, teachers should deal with vocabulary in systematic and principled ways to make sure that the learners get the most benefit from the time spent and provide a rich environment for them to learn vocabulary in and outside class time.

The conception of vocabulary as a dynamic complex of knowledge plus skill is especially important in the understanding of vocabulary learning strategies. If the task of vocabulary learning is multifaceted, different dimensions of the lexicon would

demand different learning strategies, and strategies suitable for one dimension might not be suitable for another dimension.

5.7 Suggestions for Further Studies

In considering this study, a variety of additional unanswered questions arose that could be the impetus for further investigations. The findings in this study support other researches in the field, but also contradict some findings. The following are some suggested research ideas the researcher feels would be of value.

5.7.1 The current research investigated the most-used vocabulary learning strategies by the intermediate L2 learners and their perceptions of the usefulness of the strategies. More importantly, the study enabled the researcher to closely examine the use and perception of strategies by the high achievers. With a view to investigating whether language proficiency is one of the crucial factors to vocabulary learning, it would be interesting if more research is carried out among the high proficient students in other Thai secondary schools.

5.7.2 In addition, vocabulary learning strategy research should also take cultural factors and pragmatic constraints into account and, rather than finding universal “good” strategies, aim to discover vocabulary strategies that suit different groups of learners with different backgrounds and ability. Methodologically, longitudinal designs are especially needed if vocabulary development as opposed to word list retention is of interest.

5.7.3 Furthermore, vocabulary researchers need a change of mentality, in that learners, especially experienced and successful ones, are capable of managing their own learning and choosing their own strategies. They should not be only on the

receiving end. In other words, we need systematic studies of the natural processes of vocabulary learning in authentic foreign language learning situations with the aim of identifying the whole range of vocabulary learning strategies, finding out what works and what does not work, and what distinguishes the successful from the unsuccessful learners. Obviously, there is still much to learn and explore in the field of vocabulary acquisition. It is important for the language learners and teachers to work collaboratively towards the same learning goal.

Finally, the researcher wants to make an appeal that it is important to continue conducting research on vocabulary learning strategies. It will certainly lead to better understanding of the complex processes of vocabulary learning and contribute to foreign language learning and teaching.

5.8 Concluding Remarks

Based on the findings from the present study, the researcher draws the following conclusions which are outlined in four points:

5.8.1 Vocabulary should not be left to the learners alone.

5.8.2 Learners should be well informed about vocabulary learning strategies and develop a strategy inventory through strategy training.

5.8.3 Language instructors should be well informed about vocabulary learning strategies as well.

5.8.4 The language textbook should play an active role in strategy training.

Most importantly, as Schmitt (1997)'s suggestion, the good learners use a variety of strategies and take the initiative to manage their vocabulary learning. In the present study, it is found that the high proficient students were aware of the

importance of vocabulary learning and they favored contextual guessing and strategies focusing on word form. Based on observation, however, it is surprising that the high proficient students in this study did not demonstrate all the good learner's characteristics described by Schmitt (1997). First, they tended to place heavy reliance on contextual guessing and dictionary strategies to discover word meaning instead of using a wide range of strategies when they encountered new words. In addition, the students focused mainly on the memorization of spoken form to consolidate new word meaning. Given the students processed vocabulary mainly at sensory level where committing the form to memory was the focus, it is difficult for them to recall the learned vocabulary that was neither deeply processed nor linked with their existing knowledge. Finally, although most of the high proficient students agreed that vocabulary was very important in learning English, they rarely planned their vocabulary learning and spent very little time on it. As a result, there were insufficient use and practice of the newly learned vocabulary and thus the vocabulary items were easily forgotten. The findings allowed the researcher to understand how the students in Thai teaching context, in particular, the high proficient students learnt vocabulary in English and helped the researcher to get more insights to her teaching. It is hoped that researchers will continue to explore the numerous factors that contribute to the success of Thai EFL learners.

Certainly, it is also crucial to bear in mind that teaching strategies to learners does not guarantee that they will definitely use the strategies in their learning processes afterwards. However, in the researcher's opinion, this does not decrease the importance of ensuring that learners are well informed about the various options they

have and that learners should develop an inventory of strategies to facilitate vocabulary and language learning.

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