

A Study of L2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies and L2 Reading Strategies of English Major Students in the Writing and Reading Courses

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Abstract

The purposes of the current study are to explore the vocabulary learning strategies and reading strategies among a group of EFL learners at Rangsit University and also to discuss the effect these strategies may have on learners' learning process. A sample of 240 respondents participated in the study. They were randomly selected by a purposive sampling technique. The data collection process was carried out using questionnaires adapted from Schmitt (1997) and Anderson (1999). The results revealed that there were distinctive strategy uses to vocabulary learning strategies (determination strategy: dictionary strategy) and reading strategies (cognitive strategy) among the learners. To conclude, the paper will discuss the implications of the findings and some pedagogical considerations for the teaching and learning of vocabulary and reading within an EFL context.

***Keywords:** vocabulary learning strategies, reading strategies, second language learning, undergraduate students*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, learning a language is important for everyone, and English is believed to be the most influential language in the world and the main language used for international communication. English is necessary in daily life because it is an important tool for communication, education, and the pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, English is widely used in movies, music, and books.

In Thailand, most Thai students have problems in learning English, especially the lack of vocabulary. In other words, they seem not to understand the meaning of vocabulary found in a number of academic textbooks. Sawangwaroros (1984) and Sukkrong (2010) stated one of the primary problems among Thai learners is a lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge, contributing to their difficulties in reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills.

Therefore, vocabulary learning is found to be essential for learners who need the basics of good vocabulary. When learners have enough vocabulary, it will be helpful for them to understand the meaning and read the text quickly. Nation (1993) also stated that vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in effective language use. If learners have inadequate vocabulary knowledge, it can be one of the factors, which leads to learners' unpleasant language performance (McCarthy, 1998; Fan, 2003).

With these benefits, vocabulary learning strategies can help learners guess words in the story and help them understand the content by listening, reading, and speaking more effectively. Cunningsworth (1995) also suggested that an effective way to improve learners' vocabulary knowledge is to develop their own vocabulary learning strategies.

There is a significant connection between effective vocabulary learning and reading skill. Johnson (1996) stated that successful vocabulary learners are likely to use vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than less successful ones. In addition to learning the same vocabulary, but with different meanings, it can make learners read the story thoroughly.

As a foreign language learner, to have a good reading skill is a fundamental and vital skill for learning English. Reading is regarded as a tool for learning and acquiring English as well as gathering information. In the present day, the fact that effective reading skills can allow you to comprehend and become engaged in the world around you cannot be easily denied.

However, Nongnat (2008) found that the reading ability of the Thai participants in his research study in the three areas of sentence structure, vocabulary, and reading comprehension was at a low level. Besides, some students, while learning a word, find it difficult to select the right word and when they want

to convey meaning, they may have difficulties in choosing the appropriate one. Because of this, reading strategies are believed to be a process which helps students find the topic and main idea to understand the whole story

As mentioned above, L2 vocabulary learning strategies and L2 reading strategies are essential for language learners. Therefore, this study aims to find out vocabulary learning strategies and reading strategies of undergraduate students. In addition, the results of the study provide the valuable information for anyone who is interested in studying or conducting the research.

2. Objectives

This study aims to investigate learners' L2 vocabulary learning strategies and L2 reading strategies. It also discusses the effect these strategies may have on learners' learning process.

3. Materials and methods

The participants in this study are 240 English major students in the writing and reading courses from Faculty of Liberal Arts at Rangsit University. This study applied purposive sampling; the main reason why these selected groups of students were asked to participate in the current study is because of their exposure to English and their level of English proficiency that is relatively satisfying.

- 30 students participating in ENG 231 (Writing I), out of which were 77% (n=23) were female and 23% (n=7) were male. The majority of the respondents (63%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 50% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 332 (Writing II), out of which were 77% (n=23) were female and 23% (n=7) were male. The majority of the respondents (87%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 57% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 333 (Academic writing), out of which were 63% (n=19) were female and 37% (n=11) were male. The majority of the respondents (57%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 57% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 372 (Business writing), out of which were 83% (n=25) were female and 17% (n=5) were male. The majority of the respondents (93%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 57% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 221 (Reading I), out of which were 50% (n=15) were female and 15% (n=5) were male. The majority of the respondents (40%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 50% of the respondents have been studying English for 5-10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 322 (Critical reading), out of which were 80% (n=24) were female and 20% (n=6) were male. The majority of the respondents (83%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 73% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 323 (Academic reading), out of which were 80% (n=24) were female and 20% (n=6) were male. The majority of the respondents (80%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 70% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

- 30 students participating in ENG 371 (Business reading), out of which were 77% (n=23) were female and 23% (n=7) were male. The majority of the respondents (60%) were 20-21 years old. Lastly, 87% of the respondents have been studying English for more than 10 years.

In this study, the questionnaire is used as the only step in data collection. The response rate is considered favourable (100% return rate).

For vocabulary learning strategies, it was adapted from Schmitt's taxonomy on vocabulary learning strategies in 1997. For L2 vocabulary learning strategies, the questionnaire consisted of 25 statements, which are concerned with the strategies the students use when they learn English vocabulary.

For reading strategies, the questionnaire adapted from Anderson (1999) consisted of 11 statements; they are concerned with the strategies the participants use when they read English texts. Anderson (1999) states that the background knowledge each reader brings to the reading setting makes the orchestration of strategies such an individual process that he divided reading strategies into three different groups: cognitive reading strategies (thinking), metacognitive reading strategies (thinking about our thinking), and

compensating reading strategies. They were asked to choose from the 5-likert scales based on their own studying experience.

The data were analyzed by using the Microsoft Excel to calculate the percentages and frequency. The results were presented by using tables to describe the information.

4. Results

This section analyses the data collected according to the method applied in the present research: questionnaire. The questionnaire section analyses the data from the participants' responses.

4.1 Participants' Information

Table 1 Gender

Gender	Number of student	Percentage
Male	64	27%
Female	176	73%
Total	240	100%

According to Table 1, most respondents were female (73%) and the rest were male (27%).

Table 2 Age

Age	Number of student	Percentage
18-19 years old	18	8%
20-21 years old	165	68%
22-25 years old	54	22%
More than 25 years old	3	2%
Total	240	100%

As shown in Table 2, most respondents were students of 20-21 years old (68%) and 22-25 years old (22%) respectively, while the group of respondents with more than 25 years old was the smallest (2%).

Table 3 Experience in studying English

Experience	Number of student	Percentage
3-5 years	25	10%
5-10 years	60	25%
More than 10 years	155	65%
Total	240	100%

According to Table 3, it showed that most respondents have studied English for more than 10 years (65%) and 25% of respondents have studied English for 5-10 years old, while the group of respondents having studied English for 3-5 years was the smallest (10%).

4.2 Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)

The results from the L2 vocabulary learning strategies will be presented according to the actual number of responses as well as in percentage form. The total number of participants is 240. The percentage has sometimes been rounded-off for convenience.

Table 4 Results regarding vocabulary learning strategies

Statements	Always 5	Often 4	Sometimes 3	Rarely 2	Never 1
1. I use a bilingual dictionary to help me translate English words into Thai language.	40%	36%	20%	4%	0%
2. I use pictures illustrated in the textbook to find the word meanings.	12%	12%	28%	36%	12%
3. I learn the meaning of words by identifying its part of speech.	4%	20%	44%	20%	12%
4. I ask the teacher to translate the words into Thai.	12%	24%	32%	28%	4%
5. I ask the teacher to put an unknown word into a sentence to help me understand the word meaning.	4%	32%	20%	28%	16%
6. I ask my classmate for word meaning.	24%	48%	12%	16%	0%
7. I know some new words when working in group works.	12%	52%	32%	4%	0%
8. I practice English in group work activities about vocabulary.	4%	32%	40%	20%	4%
9. I ask native speakers for help about word meaning.	4%	34%	28%	36%	8%
10. I learn words about the culture of English speaking countries.	4%	20%	32%	24%	20%
11. I write a new word in a sentence so I can remember it.	0%	28%	40%	24%	4%
12. I study how to spell new words.	0%	36%	36%	24%	4%
13. I speak the new words out loud when studying.	8%	16%	32%	36%	8%
14. I use physical actions when learning words.	16%	24%	20%	20%	20%
15. I repeatedly practice new words.	8%	20%	48%	24%	0%
16. I write a new word on a flash card so I can remember it.	4%	20%	20%	24%	32%
17. I learn words by listening to vocabulary CDs.	0%	12%	16%	44%	28%
18. I record vocabulary from English soundtrack movies in my notebook.	0%	24%	12%	20%	44%
19. When I try to remember a word, I write or say it repeatedly.	12%	36%	36%	12%	4%
20. I make vocabulary cards and take them with me wherever I go.	4%	8%	8%	36%	44%

Statements	Always 5	Often 4	Sometimes 3	Rarely 2	Never 1
21. I review my own English vocabulary cards before the next lesson starts.	0%	12%	24%	36%	28%
22. I memorize new words from English magazines.	4%	16%	44%	24%	12%
23. I use on-line exercise to test my vocabulary knowledge.	4%	12%	32%	40%	12%
24. I listen to English songs and news.	24%	28%	32%	12%	4%
25. I am not worried about the difficult words found when reading or listening. I skip them.	12%	20%	44%	20%	4%

Table 4 shows the strategy, which is most frequently used by the majority of respondents, is the determination strategies for learning the new word's meaning. They always or often use a bilingual dictionary to help them translate English words into Thai language (more than 50%).

As can be seen from the Table 4, the determination strategies are used to determine meaning of new words when encountering them for the first time. Some examples of these strategies are that most respondents sometimes use pictures illustrated in the textbook to find the word meanings (53%) and sometimes learn the meaning of words by identifying its part of speech (46%).

Nevertheless, ranked the lowest percentage in frequency of strategy use, cognitive strategies include repetition and the use of mechanical methods in immediate tasks to acquire and retain the information. Some examples of these strategies are most respondents never make vocabulary cards (44%), rarely learn words by listening to vocabulary CDs (30%) and never record vocabulary from English soundtrack movies (44%).

4.3 Reading strategies

The results from the L2 reading strategies will be presented according to the actual number of responses as well as in percentage form. The total number of participants is 240. The data have sometimes been rounded-off for convenience.

Table 5 Results regarding reading strategies

Statements	Always 5	Often 4	Sometimes 3	Rarely 2	Never 1
1. Identifying the main idea to help you comprehend the entire reading.	40%	36%	20%	4%	0%
2. Guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases to let you comprehend the statements.	12%	12%	28%	36%	12%
3. Breaking down larger phrases into smaller parts to help you understand difficult passages.	4%	20%	44%	20%	12%
4. Writing a short summary of what you read to help you understand the relationships between words and ideas.	4%	12%	32%	40%	12%
5. Making lists of relevant vocabulary to prepare for new reading.	4%	28%	20%	28%	20%
6. Working with classmates to help you develop your reading skill.	40%	36%	20%	4%	0%

Statements	Always 5	Often 4	Sometimes 3	Rarely 2	Never 1
7. Taking opportunities to practice what you already know to keep your progress steady	40%	36%	20%	4%	0%
8. Taking notes to help you recall important details.	4%	20%	44%	20%	12%
9. Trying to remember what you understand from a reading to help you develop better comprehension skills.	40%	36%	20%	4%	0%
10. Picturing scenes in your mind to help you remember and understand your reading.	4%	32%	20%	28%	16%
11. Classifying words into meaningful groups to help you remember them more clearly.	4%	12%	20%	28%	36%

Cognitive reading strategies

According to Table 5, the results show that more than 50% of the respondents most frequently identify the main idea to help them comprehend the entire reading” while the least used strategy is “Writing a short summary of what you read to help you understand the relationships between words and ideas” (more than 50%).

Metacognitive reading strategies

In Table 5, the results reveal that respondents most frequently take opportunities to practice what they already know to keep their progress steady. The percentage is more than 50%. Meanwhile, the least used strategy is “Making lists of relevant vocabulary to prepare for new reading” is more than 40%.

Compensating reading strategies

As in Table 5, the results show that respondents most frequently try to remember what they understand from a reading to help them develop better comprehension skills (76%) whereas the least used strategy is “Classifying words into meaningful groups to help you remember them more clearly” (64%).

5. Discussion

5.1 Vocabulary learning strategies

The current study revealed that the most used vocabulary learning strategy is dictionary strategies. This was consistent with Schmitt (1997) that the use of a bilingual dictionary, one of the elements of the determination strategies, was employed by mostly junior high school, high school and university students.

This is also in accordance with the results of the study conducted by Seddigh and Shokrpur (2012) among medical students at Shiraz University. Besides, Ahmad (1989) believed that dictionary strategies were most used by successful students. This result can also suggest that the participants of the study have already advanced in their learning that they have shifted from using bilingual dictionaries to the use of monolingual ones.

5.2 Reading strategies

Based on the aspect regarding the reading strategies, cognitive reading strategies were most frequently used by the participants. The findings of this study are inconsistent with Panicha (2010) who researched the English reading strategies used by the fourth-year resident physicians and sixth-year medical students at Siriraj hospital. It revealed that students used metacognitive strategies more than cognitive strategies and compensating strategies. They often write vocabulary in notebooks to prepare new reading. Additionally, the use of metacognitive strategies was effective in solving their reading problems.

Furthermore, metacognitive reading strategies were found to be the lowest used strategies, and the findings were not consistent with Phakiti (2003) who investigated the relationship between the test takers’ use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in EFL reading test performance. The finding showed that the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies increased the students’ reading test performance.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigates learners' L2 vocabulary learning strategies and L2 reading strategies. It also discusses the effect these strategies may have on learners' learning process. As a consequence, when teaching vocabulary, teachers can teach students these strategies explicitly and guide them to use these strategies in their learning process based on their English abilities.

Moreover, when teaching reading, Oyetunji (2013) believes "ESL teachers in primary and secondary schools as well as colleges need to integrate explicit strategy training into the regular reading instruction procedures. For instance, teachers can embrace a teaching method that involves a comprehension task and strategy application and assessment, with emphasis on strategy assessment. This pedagogy might help in increasing students' strategy use and ultimately facilitate their competence in using strategies in various situations and may increase their self-confidence, motivation and self-efficacy."

This study, however, has some limitations due to a small sample size. Further study should be conducted in different universities which offer similar programs.

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8. References

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