

Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Thai Primary School Students

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Abstract

The study surveyed vocabulary learning strategies of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's (BMA) primary school students and their problems in vocabulary learning. A questionnaire was distributed to 50 Pratom 6 students (aged 11-12) and 10 of them were further selected for a follow-up semi-structured interview. The findings indicated that most students realized the importance of vocabulary learning and they had encountered new words from various sources. However, they did not devote enough time to vocabulary learning and this strongly affected their lexical development. Moreover, many of them relied heavily on rote learning rather than other strategies. Their vocabulary learning problems were also related to their negative attitudes and poor English background as well as lack of support from their teachers, parents and peers. Therefore, teachers and parents need to work cooperatively to support their learning and to deal with negative attitudes. Also, students should be trained with a variety of effective vocabulary learning strategies in order to maximize their potential for language learning.

Background and introduction

'The younger the better' is one influential belief in learning a second or a foreign language. It is argued that younger learners are better at second language acquisition than older learners (Krashen, 1987). English, with its crucial status as the global language and a major foreign language in Thailand, is thus taught at many Thai schools beginning at the lower primary levels.

Like other schools, Wattampirataram School, one of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's (BMA) primary schools, realizes the importance of English and makes it compulsory for Pratom 1-6 students (i.e. primary school students aged 5-12). Students at each level study English for at least one course per term. The school also reinforces the importance of English by supporting many extracurricular English activities, such as English Camp and English Words of the Day. It also provides supporting resources, such as setting up an English Self Access Centre, an English Sound Lab, and hiring English native speakers to teach there.

In this school, students normally study English in classes of 35-40 students. The teachers use a course book provided by the Ministry of Education. They encourage students to learn English both inside and outside class. The teaching emphasizes all language skills as well as grammar and vocabulary. As stated in the Basic Education Curriculum (2001 / B.E. 2544), at the level of Pratom 6, students will have had to have studied English for six years and should possess the last level of vocabulary size, between 1,050 and 1,200 words.

From the researchers' experience, however, most Pratom 6 students at this school usually acquire fewer words than the standard number required by the curriculum. Many English teachers at the school also complained that students often forget the words that they had learned easily. Some teachers blamed the teaching techniques as not good enough to enable students to retain vocabulary; others thought that the problems may be rooted in the students' poor background and low motivation to learn English since a BMA school is meant to serve a local community. Most of the students attending the schools come from low-income families and the parents cannot afford to send them to other, more prestigious schools. Many students have no real interest in learning especially English. Some teachers questioned vocabulary learning strategies, suspecting ineffective use or even lack of strategy knowledge as they had introduced many words in class but the students could not remember these words and some students said that they did not know how to remember them well. To address these problems, this study aims to investigate vocabulary learning strategies used by Pratom 6 students and problems that they have in learning vocabulary. It is expected that the investigation will cast light on the problems and provide insights into effective vocabulary teaching for young learners.

Importance of vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a significant role in second or foreign language learning. It seems to be a pre-requisite for communication and is required for both receptive and productive skills. For receptive skills, meanings which are focuses of communication are carried through vocabulary inputs via listing and reading. Learners, therefore, need an adequate number of words to comprehend the input. If learners have limited vocabulary, they probably would have limited comprehension. Nation (2001) suggested that, in order to gain reasonable comprehension of a text and to be able to guess meanings of unknown words from context, learners need to know at least 95% of the running words in the input.

The same is for productive skills, learners use words to convey meanings. Vocabulary is used productively when learners want to express their meaning through speaking and writing; so, if they do not have enough vocabulary, they may fail to convey their messages. Wilkins (1972: 111) emphasizes the importance of vocabulary, stating that "*Without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed*".

Process of learning new vocabulary

In order to learn new words and retain them in memory, Nation (2001) proposes that learners have to go through three important processes: noticing, retrieval and creative or generative use.

At the initial stage, the word has to be noticed. This noticing stage involves seeing and paying attention to the word as an item to be learned. It is an important stage as it affects the extent to which the word is picked up and learned (Laufer, 1997). If words are noticed and processed as learned words, they become part of the learner's lexical knowledge. The more the learner is involved in learning, the deeper the level of processing and the better they can memorize and retain the words since such active involvement as deeper analysis requires high levels of cognitive effort, which leads to a more persistent memory trace (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Noticing may be affected by several factors: how outstanding

the word is in the context, frequency of the occurrence of the word and learners' awareness about the importance of the word (Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

Retrieval is the stage where learners recall the learned words from their memory. Only the words learnt would be retrieved. When learners encounter the word in a different context, they can recall or recognize it as a previously learned word. In this retrieval stage, learners may recognize the forms, meanings, and uses of the words in new contexts.

Creative or generative use seems to be the aim of vocabulary learning. It is the stage where learners have enough vocabulary that they can use for communication as the words learned become active vocabulary or words that they can use effectively and productively in different contexts. To be able to use vocabulary effectively, learners have to know enough about the words. Knowing vocabulary means knowing its meanings, forms and uses. Learners need to know all these aspects of words and need to practice using them actively to enhance both retrieval and creative use. In order to do so, effective vocabulary learning strategies are required to guide learners to process their learning and expand their lexical knowledge.

Vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies constitute knowledge about what learners do to find out the meaning of new words, retain them in long-term memory, recall them when needed in comprehension, and use them in language production (Ruutemets, 2005). Based on this definition vocabulary learning strategies can be used in all the three phases of vocabulary learning process outlined in the previous section. To help learners reach the last stage of generative use, they have to be encouraged to apply two main groups of vocabulary learning strategies: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies.

Discovery strategies are strategies used for gaining initial information about a new word (Schmitt, 2000). They include two main strategy groups: determination strategies and social strategies. Determination strategies are used for discovering new words' meaning by, for instance, guessing from context, using reference materials, analyzing parts of speech, affixes and roots. This group of strategies seems to be self-dependent strategies – learners work out the meaning of the new words by themselves, whereas social strategies are based on interaction with other people. Learners get the word meanings by asking from other people or interacting with others.

Consolidation strategies are used for reinforcing and remembering a word once it has been introduced (Schmitt, 2000). These include four main strategy groups: memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Memory strategies play crucial roles in helping learners remember the words. They are those that *'enable learners to store verbal material and then retrieve it when needed for communication'* (Oxford, 1990: 39). Memory strategies are also known as 'mnemonic' methods. They include memorization techniques such as grouping a word with its association, using key words, semantic mapping, and reviewing in a structured way. Cognitive strategies are similar to memory strategies; however, they are not focused so specifically on manipulative mental processing. These strategies are less obviously linked to mental operation. They operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that support learning (Oxford,

1990). They can be considered under three broad groups of processes: rehearsal, organization and elaboration. Examples of cognitive strategies are repetition and using mechanical means to study vocabulary, including the keeping of vocabulary notebooks. Metacognitive strategies are used by learners to control and evaluate their own learning. These strategies allow learners to control their own cognition to cooperate in the learning process by using functions such as planning, monitoring and evaluating. Learners can also consolidate the words learnt by studying and practicing in groups, with peers or a teacher, or interacting with native speakers. These social strategies enhance interaction, providing opportunities to use the words in a real communication.

These vocabulary learning strategies are important contributors in learning new words. They equip learners with effective tools to expand lexical knowledge learning new words, storing and turning them to active vocabulary that is ready to be used in communication.

Factors affecting vocabulary learning

Vocabulary learning is affected by many factors (Higa, 1965; Nation, 1990; Laufer, 1997). These factors can be broadly categorized into two groups: words and learners.

Frequency of word occurrence and saliency are important words' characteristics that designated whether the words would be noticed and chosen to be learnt. The words that occur at high frequencies are more easily recognized than words at low frequencies (Ellis, 2002). Therefore, the more often the learner encounters the words, the higher the chance that they will remember and learn the words. Moreover, if the words are perceived as 'salient', they will be easily noticed and picked up by learners. Skehan (1998: 48) says that "*the more a form stands out in the input stream, the more likely it will be noticed*". Word saliency can be promoted. For example, teachers may emphasize the words by writing them on the board, asking questions about the words to direct learners' attention, and using unusual tones of voice to make the words more obvious. However, neither frequency nor saliency can work in isolation; both need to be incorporated with other factors to explain how students learn vocabulary.

Learners seem to be the most influential factors in vocabulary learning. Learner factors include needs, motivation, attitudes, and learning styles and strategies used. Learners learn words more quickly if they have a need for them in some ways. They are likely to remember well vocabulary which is concerned with their needs and relevant to their use in the future as needs, interest, attitudes and motivation are closely related, and these positively contribute to learning. Styles and strategies used are also crucial learner factors that strongly affect success in vocabulary learning. Learners use their preferred strategies as tools to cope with words they have encountered. However, research suggested that some strategies are more effective than others. Therefore, if the learners' preferred strategies are effective strategies, their vocabulary learning is likely to be efficient. Nonetheless, other research does not support concepts of 'good' or 'poor' strategies. Rather they point out that more effective learners use greater variety of strategies and use them in ways that help them complete language tasks successfully, whereas less effective learners have fewer strategy types and frequently use strategies that are inappropriate to the task or that do not lead to successful task completion (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). However, though there is no consensus whether it is better to use more strategies or

which strategies are better, it is agreed that styles and strategies used vary from learner to learner and individual differences play an important role in any kind of learning.

Methodology

Subjects

Fifty Pratom 6 students at Watthampirataram School were the subjects of this study. They were randomly chosen from the three classes in the school.

Instruments and procedures

Two instruments were used, a questionnaire (N=50) and a semi-structured interview (N=10), both of which were in Thai in order to avoid misunderstanding due to language constraints. In the questionnaire (see Appendix 1), the subjects were asked about their background and attitudes towards vocabulary learning, opportunities for encountering new English words, strategies for obtaining and consolidating words' meanings, and problems related to vocabulary learning. They were in the form of a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The subjects were provided with lists of possible sources where they encountered new words and vocabulary strategies, and they were asked to select the point on the scale that fitted their vocabulary learning and strategy use. Open-ended questions were also provided to account for other sources or strategies not included in the list. To obtain additional information and clarification of the questionnaire data, ten of the fifty subjects were randomly selected for a follow-up semi-structured interview (see Appendix 2).

Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire and the interview were grouped into themes of students' background, their views on the importance of vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning opportunities, vocabulary learning strategies and problems related to vocabulary learning. The numbers of subjects supplied each answer discussed were counted into percentages and the total responses to the rating scale items were calculated for mean scores to see how often they used the strategies. The means are interpreted as follows: 4.21-5.00 = always, 3.41-4.20 = often, 2.61-3.40 = sometimes, 1.81-2.60 = hardly ever, and 1.00-1.80 = never.

Results and discussion

This section begins with presentation and discussion of the questionnaire findings on the subjects' views on vocabulary learning and their reports on use of vocabulary learning strategies. Then the interview data on the subjects' problems learning vocabulary are presented and discussed.

Subjects' views and backgrounds on vocabulary learning

The findings from part 4 of the questionnaire revealed that the subjects had different views on, and levels of commitment to, vocabulary learning. As shown in Table 1, most of the subjects (72%) regarded vocabulary learning as 'important' or 'very important'; only 4% did not think that it is important while some subjects (24%), however, could not decide how important vocabulary learning is to them.

Table 1: Subjects' views on importance of vocabulary

Levels of importance	Subjects (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Very important	17	34%
Important	19	38
Undecided	12	24
Less important	0	0
Not important	2	4

Noticeably, though most of the subjects realized the importance of vocabulary learning, they reported learning only a few words a week. Table 2 shows that most of them (70%) reported learning not more than 10 words while only 30% learn more than 10 words per week. This means that, in a twenty-week semester, they would learn only about 200 words and not be able to meet the requirement of the primary schools' curriculum, which stipulates that students at this level should know 1,050-1,200 words (Basic Education Curriculum, 2001 / B.E. 2544).

Table 2: Numbers of words subjects reported learning per week

Words per week	Subjects (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Fewer than 10 words	35	70
More than 10 words	15	30

In addition, the subjects spent only a few days a week on vocabulary learning. More than half of them (58%) spent only 1-2 days a week on vocabulary learning. Only some (30%) spent 3-4 days per week and 12% spent more than 5 days a week on vocabulary learning. It should, therefore, be pointed out that the subjects did not spend enough time on vocabulary learning as they studied only a few words in a few days. Their devotion to vocabulary learning is not enough and this might partly explain their insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Sanaoui, 1995).

Table 3: Time subjects reported spending on vocabulary learning per week

Days per week	Subjects (N=50)	Percentage (%)
1-2 days	29	58
3-4 days	15	30
5-6 days	2	4
Every day	4	8

However, in part 1 of the questionnaire, when the subjects were asked about opportunities for encountering new English words, they reported opportunities both inside and outside class. The subjects encountered new words from teachers, the course books, graded readers, and other 'daily life' situations, explaining that they meet new English words from television programmes, advertisements, magazines, etc. A few of

them (10%) also added a different source, such as dictionaries. In the interview, the subjects revealed that, in school, they usually read the school magazine, *Thammasamphan*; although it is in Thai, there are some English words in a dedicated English column.

These wide ranges of opportunities should have positively reinforced their vocabulary learning; however, based on the evidence from part 4 of the questionnaire (presented above), the subjects did not seem to learn these words. This might be because their frequency and saliency may not be enough for them to pay attention to and pick up for learning (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2002). The subjects may see new words from a TV program or a magazine every day, but they did not reinforce or review the words so they easily forget them.

Subjects' vocabulary learning strategies

The subjects' vocabulary learning strategies are classified into groups of discovery strategies and consolidation strategies.

Discovery strategies

Part 2 of the questionnaire asked the subjects about their use of discovery strategies to find the meanings of new words. Table 4 presents the strategies reported as used either 'often' or 'always'.

Table 4: Strategies reported frequently for discovering meanings of new words

Discovery strategies	Reports of using strategies 'often' or 'always' (%)	Mean
Using bilingual dictionary (English-Thai, Thai-English) (DET)	82	4.22
Asking teachers (SOC)	64	3.86
Using monolingual dictionary (English-English) (DET)	62	3.72
Asking friends (SOC)	60	3.68
Guessing meaning from context (DET)	52	3.52

Note: DET = Determination strategies; SOC = Social strategies (Schmitt, 2000)

In Part 2 of the questionnaire, the subjects were asked how often they used five discovery strategies listed based on a five-point rating scale (from 'never' to 'always'). As suggested by the mean scores, which ranged from 3.52-4.22, all of these strategies were reported as being utilized 'often' or 'always'. Using a bilingual dictionary seemed to be the most frequently used strategy (82%), a finding that is consistent with many studies, such as Ahmed's (1989) and Gu & Johnson's (1996). Though a bilingual dictionary seems to lead to problems of word-to-word translation and the use of a monolingual dictionary is usually suggested to promote better learning (Baxter, 1980; Nation 2001), for this level of learners, a bilingual dictionary could be a good start. They then could be trained to use a monolingual dictionary after gaining more confidence.

Guessing meaning from context was the least common determination strategy and it was reported by only half of the subjects (52%). In order to be able to use contextual clues effectively, a reader needs to know about 95% of the running words (Nation, 2001). This seemed to be the reason why the strategy was not common among the subjects who had limited lexical knowledge. Improving vocabulary knowledge and promoting this strategy, therefore, seem to be interrelated.

The subjects also commonly used social strategies in discovering word meanings. These strategies involved students communicating with other people. However, students should be well trained also to check the information obtained and to reflect on when they should ask. These strategies should be used with caution. There should be a balance between depending on others and aspiring towards being autonomous.

Consolidation strategies

In Part 3 of the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to rate how often they used twelve consolidating strategies for vocabulary learning. To facilitate discussion, these strategies were then categorized into two main groups: strategies related to reciting and rote-learning and those requiring deeper levels of cognitive processing. The mean scores reported in Table 5 represent the averages of the mean scores of strategies in each group.

Table 5: Strategies reported for consolidating vocabulary learning

Consolidation strategies	Reports of using strategies 'often' or 'always' (%)	Mean
Strategies related to reciting and rote-learning: - Writing words in a notebook for remembering - Repeating the words and their meanings - Sticking words on a wall for remembering	72	3.74
Strategies requiring deeper levels of cognitive processing: - Using semantic mapping - Categorizing words - Making sentences from words - Creating stories from words - Using pictures or flash cards - Relating words with similar sounds - Using synonyms - Using antonyms - Playing vocabulary games	30	3.21

All of the strategies mentioned in Table 5 were used by the subjects to review and recite the words they encountered. It seemed that the subjects used many memory strategies in consolidating their vocabulary learning. However, most of them (72%) relied on strategies that involve reciting (e.g. putting words in a notebook, repeating words until they remembered, seeing the words again and again by sticking them nearby). They

frequently used these strategies as evidenced by the mean score of 3.74; however, these strategies do not seem to be very effective (Chamot, 2005).

Only some subjects (30%) used higher level cognitive strategies or strategies that required deeper levels of cognitive processes, such as, grouping strategies, semantic mapping or forming sentences from words (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Moreover, the reported frequency of these strategies were not high, as suggested by the mean score of 3.21; these strategies were just 'sometimes' used. The use of less effective strategies might be part of the causes of the subjects' vocabulary problems.

Subjects' problems learning vocabulary

Moving to the interview data, these revealed that the subjects' major problem seemed to be not enough devotion. This part of the findings reinforced the data from the questionnaire which indicted that they learnt only a few words per week and spent only a few days on vocabulary learning. Insufficient learning time is often a major factor that deters mastery of language (Lightbown & Spada, 1989). The same to vocabulary learning, learners need to devote sufficient time to learning and be actively involved in the learning process. Most of the interviewed subjects (6 out of 10) rarely practiced or recited words outside class. They explained that they did not have time to do so because of homework from other courses and some family errands. This pointed towards inefficient time management. Students should be taught how to manage time efficiently and how to prioritize their work since they were young as time management and self-disciplines are important learning skills.

The subjects also mentioned problems about their memory. Three of them complained that they often forgot the words even though they had just learned them the day before. Another two subjects stressed that they did not have good techniques for vocabulary learning so they easily forgot the words. The researchers thought that this issue might be related to strategies that they used. After checking with them, it appeared that the main strategies used were reciting or repeating the words, which, incidentally, reflects the questionnaire data (reported above). As discussed earlier, these strategies were not quite effective as they did not require higher levels of cognitive processes (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). If the learners employ more effective vocabulary learning strategies, they should be able to remember the words better and make the words become their active vocabulary.

Two subjects blamed their poor background and level of English. They said that they were not good at English and this demotivated them. Two subjects thought that English was very difficult so they did not like English. They could not read many words so they did not bother paying attention to leaning them. Students' attitudes towards the language and language learning are one influential factor that strongly affects the results of their learning (Nation, 2001). If they are discouraged and feel that they could not learn well, they can never learn well.

Lack of parental and moral support also seemed to be a problem. Two subjects explained that their parents did not know English so, when they had problems, they could not ask their parents for help. They then did not and could not review words at home. Two mentioned that they felt inferior in an English class. They did not like to be laughed at by

friends. Another subject seemed to be discouraged by a teacher after hearing him say “Even I myself don’t know English”.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that vocabulary learning is influenced by many interrelated factors, including students’ attitudes, devotion and vocabulary learning strategies. In fact, most of the subjects recognized the importance of vocabulary; however, they did not devote enough time to vocabulary learning and this may have strongly affected their lexical development. They encountered new words both from resources both in and beyond class but did not pick up the words for further consolidation. Moreover, relying more on rote-learning rather than utilizing strategies that require deeper processing, such as using word associations, seemed to fail to optimize the situation. Many of them forgot the words easily afterward. In addition, some of the subjects had negative attitudes towards English and their own learning, thinking that English was too difficult for them and they were in a hopeless situation. Learners with poor English background and negative attitudes need a lot of support from teachers, parents and their peers.

These factors helped explain causes of the subjects’ insufficient vocabulary knowledge. This problem needs to be dealt with carefully and immediately as they are at the age when they can best learn English. An English class can be a good starting point to solve the problem. Positive attitudes and effective vocabulary learning strategies should be introduced and reinforced to equip learners with effective learning tools so that they could make the most out of their opportunities for language learning.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed in order to investigate Pratom 6 students' vocabulary learning strategies. It includes 4 parts. Your answers will not affect your grade for English course. Please feel free to give frankly opinion.

Directions: Please put \surd in the column that fits your choice.

When learning vocabulary, I do this

5 = always 4 = often 3 = sometimes 2 = hardly ever 1 = never

Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Your Opinion				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never
Part 1. Sources that students encounter new words					
1. Course books					
2. Teacher taught in class					
3. Graded readers					
4. Daily life (e.g. newspaper, TV, billboards)					
5. Others (Please specify).....					
Part 2. Strategies students use for finding out the meaning of new words					
1. Ask teachers					
2. Ask friends					
3. Use a bilingual dictionary (English-Thai, Thai-English)					
4. Use a monolingual dictionary (English-English)					
5. Guess meanings from contexts					
6. Others (Please specify).....					
Part 3. Strategies use to review and recite words encountered					
1. Write words in a notebook for remembering					
2. Write words on paper and stick them up where they can be easily seen (e.g. on the wall, mirrors, beds, doors)					
3. Make sentences from words					
4. Use pictures or flash cards for remembering techniques					
5. Categorize or group words into themes					
6. Play vocabulary games (e.g. crosswords, word puzzles)					
7. Recite words with Thai translation					
8. Relate words with the same or similar sounds (e.g. use rhyme)					
9. Use synonyms (e.g. learn-study, home- house)					
10. Use antonyms (e.g. good-bad)					
11. Create stories from words					
12. Use semantic mapping					
13. Others (Please specify).....					

Part 4. Others

1. Beside the strategies mentioned, do you have any other vocabulary strategies?

Yes (Please specify).....

No

2. How often do you learn vocabulary by yourself?

1-2 days/week 3-4 days/week

5-6 days/week every day

3. How often do you learn vocabulary by yourself?

fewer than 5 words 5-10 words 10-15 days/week

more than 15 words (please specify)..... Words

4. In your opinion, how important is vocabulary learning?

(Put a \surd the column that fits your opinions)

1 (Not important)	2 (Less important)	3 (Undecided)	4 (Important)	5 (Very important)

5. Please give information on your vocabulary learning problems or any comments.

.....

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions

1. What do you think about your levels of English and your vocabulary learning? How well is your learning / vocabulary learning?
2. Do you have time / opportunities to learn vocabulary outside class? Where? When?
3. How much time do you spend on vocabulary learning? How many words do you learn per week? Is this enough? Why / Why not?
4. How do you learn vocabulary? Do you have any special techniques in learning vocabulary? Please give some examples what you have done and or some words that you used the techniques with.
5. Do you think your techniques are effective? Why? Why not?
6. Do you have any problems in learning vocabulary? What are they? How did you try to solve the problems? Did your techniques work?
7. What factors influence your vocabulary learning the most?
 - Do your teacher and his / her teaching techniques influence you?
 - Do your parents influence you?

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