



# An Analysis of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by Thai EFL Undergraduates: Dictionary Use

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*As a number of researchers in Thailand have investigated the use of vocabulary learning strategies by Thai learners at all levels, it is now worth specifically looking at how undergraduates learn new vocabulary words since these learners are considered more mature and might have learned more strategies compared to those with lower levels of education. In this article, the VLS taxonomy from Schmitt (1997) is emphasized with an aim to recognize possible links among the results from various studies on the use of VLS by Thai learners at a university level. Among the various research studies the writer looked at, only five of them with a VLS questionnaire adapted from Schmitt's (1997) were selected to be presented in this paper. The findings all revealed that Thai EFL undergraduates prefer using a bilingual dictionary to other vocabulary strategies in their attempt to comprehend the meaning of the target word. This not only affirms the learners' preference but also reflects how they were involved in VLS instruction throughout their lifelong learning. Hence, this article provides some thoughts concerning the popularity and benefits of bilingual dictionaries. Also, Thai lecturers can make use of the findings to improve their VLS instruction and inquire further as to whether this strategy is still a top ranking one in long-term observations in order to be better able to handle effective VLS instruction.*

**Keywords** *Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), Thai EFL undergraduates*

## INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that vocabulary is considered very important in all four English language skills (i.e. listening, reading, speaking, and writing) since it is one of the key elements in second language acquisition essential for all stages of English education (Gardner, 2013). One of the most valuable quotes of all times is by Wilkins (1972, p.111) expressing the importance of vocabulary in communication, "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (as cited in Schmitt, 2010; Thornbury, 2002). Vocabulary is thus crucial in second language acquisition. Concerning vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have long been supported by many scholars to facilitate learning and help enhance learners' vocabulary knowledge (e.g. Nation, 2001; Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 2000).

In Thai EFL classrooms, vocabulary instruction has always played an important role over several decades but clearly VLS instruction seems to be scarcely implemented in today's classrooms. Acquiring new words is thus difficult for some Thai EFL learners and this is likely because they are familiar with very few VLS and do not know how to appropriately use them. Normally, Thai EFL learners tend to use a bilingual dictionary because they might find this to be the easiest source to turn to. However, students should be equipped with plenty of strategies, so they can decide by themselves when to use one strategy rather than another.

In order to be successful in language learning, learning strategies must be part of what a learner has mastered concerning the target language. Language learning strategies are purposeful actions that the learners use to meet their learning needs. These strategies help learners develop self-regulation, succeed in L2 tasks and gain L2 proficiency (Oxford & Amerstorfer, 2018). Most importantly, the strategies must be taught and learned so that the appropriate strategies can be selected in different situations (Cohen, 2014; Nisbet & Shucksmith, 2017; Oxford & Amerstorfer, 2018).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Classification of VLS

“Vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies” (Nation, 2001, p.217). From this statement, undoubtedly, VLS have served a very significant role in acquiring new words. Based on Schmitt’s (1997) VLS taxonomy, “Discover Strategies” can be described as when a learner encounters a new word, and has to employ language knowledge, reference materials or consult somebody to find out the meaning while “Consolidation Strategies” concern the attempt that a learner makes to memorize the target word after encountering it from the initial discovery of it. The subcategories of these two main themes are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Schmitt’s VLS taxonomy**

<b>Discover Strategies</b>	Determination Strategies (DET)
	Social Strategies (SOC)
<b>Consolidation Strategies</b>	Social Strategies (SOC)
	Memory Strategies (MEM)
	Cognitive Strategies (COG)
	Metacognitive Strategies (MET)

### Discover Strategies

#### **1. Determination Strategies (DET)**

Determination Strategies (DET), according to Schmitt (1997, 2000), are strategies that learners use without asking others for help in figuring out the meaning of a word by employing one or more of the following strategies: word class, analysis of word parts, cognates, guessing through context and dictionary use.

#### **2. Social Strategies (SOC)**

This is the second category of discover strategies and involves asking other people who know



the meaning of the the target word; for example, asking teachers or friends for L1 translation, for a synonym, for a definition of the word by paraphrasing, and how to use the new word in a sentence (Schmitt, 1997, 2000).

## **Consolidation Strategies**

### **1. Social Strategies (SOC)**

These social strategies involve learners participating in group work, asking teachers to check their word lists or word cards for certainty and communicating with native speakers to enhance their vocabulary acquisition (Schmitt, 1997).

### **2. Memory Strategies (MEM)**

Memory strategies, frequently known as mnemonics, deal with the connection of the new word to be memorized with preexisting knowledge using the help of imagery or grouping for better retrieval of the word; moreover, physical actions can also be used to help recall the words (Schmitt, 1997). Schmitt (2000) noted that memory strategies usually consist of mental processing which enhance long-term vocabulary retention. Mnemonics can be used as “tricks” to aid retrieval of words (Cohen, 1990; Rubin & Thompson, 1994; Thornbury, 2002). However, mnemonics are not supposed to be seen as a replacement for other techniques such as contextual learning but they can be of great use for intentional vocabulary learning especially for words that are difficult to retain (Hulstijn, 1997). Memory strategies include imagery, word association, grouping, keyword method and collocation.

### **3. Cognitive Strategies (COG)**

Schmitt (1997) mentioned that strategies in this category resemble the ones of the memory group; however, manipulative mental processing is not the emphasis here. He claimed that even though word lists and word cards can facilitate the initial meeting of a word, they can also be used to later continue reviewing. Moreover, with these strategies, learners can also listen to words from their own tape recordings. In this taxonomy, it is also possible to learn the target words from the labels attached to the physical objects. According to Hedge (2000), cognitive strategies can be “thought processes used directly in learning which enable learners to deal with the information presented in tasks and materials by working on it in different ways” (p.77) which involve repetition, note taking, and inferencing. Macaro (2003) emphasized that in cognitive strategies there appears to be careful scrutiny of the target word beginning with noticing its form and meaning followed by processing the word item in working memory prior to the commitment of the target vocabulary to long-term memory. Popular strategies for this category are written and verbal repetition, word lists, flash cards, taking notes and glossaries in textbooks.

#### **4. Metacognitive Strategies (MET)**

Hedge (2000) stated that metacognitive strategies consist of planning, thinking about learning, monitoring and evaluating oneself; for example, a learner preparing to read the following chapter of a book before studying would go over the teacher's remarks on the written task, or review the information taken during the lesson. According to Schmitt's VLS taxonomy, learners can use these metacognitive strategies to manage and assess their own learning process. Learners can also test themselves with vocabulary tests to see their own progress and they should know when to skip or pass a word, especially a low frequency one which they consider would rarely be encountered. Since there are many language learning resources which can be used (i.e. books, magazines, newspapers and movies), learners should get exposed to L2 as much as possible and continue to learn new words in order to become successful in the target language (Schmitt, 1997).

#### **Empirical studies on Thai EFL undergraduates' VLS**

In this paper, for congruency reasons, five studies were presented since all of them employed questionnaires based on the same VLS taxonomy from Schmitt which is known to be very comprehensive and reliable. Kongthong (2007) investigated VLS employed by fourth-year students using a 30-item questionnaire. Using a bilingual dictionary, which falls under Determination Strategies (DET), was reported as the most commonly used strategy among other items. The findings also revealed that the participants were unfamiliar with cognitive strategies. The researcher emphasized that it is not surprising that DET strategies are most frequently used since these strategies are always introduced in the classroom, especially how to use a bilingual dictionary and this in turn becomes the student's first choice to resort to.

As for Mongkol's (2009) study, a hundred Thai undergraduate students were asked to complete a 43-item questionnaire. "Looking up words in English-Thai dictionary" and "Analyze affixes and roots" ranked at the top. Therefore, the researcher suggested the learners should be encouraged to make extensive use of dictionaries regardless of the kind of dictionary. However, the participants revealed that they would be willing to make use of new strategies if they were trained to use them.

In Pookcharoen's (2011) research, 400 undergraduates were involved in taking a 30-item questionnaire. "Bilingual dictionary" appeared to be the first choice of the students' frequency in using VLS. The researcher stated that it was often due to their limited English proficiency, so they consulted dictionaries immediately. Moreover, some main factors contributing to the students' failure to employ other strategies they considered useful were identified: lack of practice, motivation and English proficiency.

Komol and Sripetpun (2014) employed a 40-item questionnaire to explore the use of VLS by 192 university level students. The results showed that "English-Thai dictionary" was reported to be commonly used by the participants. The researcher concluded that this strategy was the easiest way to look up the meaning of a word. Nevertheless, students should also be trained on how to consult English-English dictionaries.



Nirattisai and Chiramanee (2014) also adapted a questionnaire from that of Schmitt (1997), resulting in 39 items given to 257 university students. Unsurprisingly, like other studies' results, "Looking up words in an English-Thai dictionary" reached the highest level as well.

**Table 2**  
**The most frequently used VLS from each study**

Strategy	Category	Researcher
Using English-Thai dictionaries	DET	Kongthong, J. (2007)
Using English-Thai dictionaries	DET	Mongkol, N. (2009)
Using English-Thai dictionaries	DET	Pookcharoen, S. (2011)
Using English-Thai dictionaries	DET	Komol, T. & Sripetpun, W. (2014)
Using English-Thai dictionaries	DET	Nirattisai, S. & Chiramanee, T. (2014)

The the above table shows that all studies revealed that the most frequent strategy was "Bilingual dictionary". This indicates that the learners' preference for VLS use has remained the same for a 7-year period (2007-2014). This also confirms this strategy to be an all-time popular strategy for language learners as it provides them with plenty of benefits.

Nation (2001) affirmed that dictionaries can be utilized for a variety of aims e.g. sources of information, spelling correction and pronunciation (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2006; Macaro, 2003). Similarly, for productive skills, learners can use a dictionary to look up words to produce language, to check spelling and the constraints of the words to be used. The skills essential for using dictionaries, according to Nation (2001), involve understanding the symbols used for various parts of speech and selecting the most suitable sub-entry among different meanings included in the main entry in order for a particular meaning to fit appropriately with the context. Summers (1988) asserted that examples illustrated in dictionaries are definitely valuable, being good guidelines which contribute to both student comprehension and production.

Obviously, the two main types of dictionaries are monolingual and bilingual dictionaries (McCarthy, 1990) in which the first is exclusively written in one language while the latter contains two languages. It seems that learners prefer bilingual dictionaries to monolingual dictionaries since they are simpler to comprehend (Thornbury, 2002). Carter (2012) also echoed that learners tend to use bilingual dictionaries in the early stages of vocabulary learning and a monolingual dictionary once they become more proficient. All these statements correspond to the findings of each study that Thai EFL undergraduates prefer using English-Thai dictionaries since they are more comfortable trying to understand the meaning using their mother-tongue. Generally, monolingual dictionaries have considerably more information about the words; however, it is recommended that both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries be used together to yield the most benefits (Nation, 2001). Additionally, Schmitt (1997) further advised that bilingual dictionaries should be made to contain more beneficial information since trouble can be encountered when learners mistakenly use a word to mean its expected meaning.

Dictionary use is considered to be "deliberate learning of vocabulary" (Nation, 2014). Could it be inferred that students prefer deliberate strategies over incidental vocabulary learning (e.g. guessing the meaning from context)? From the writer's own teaching experience,

whenever the students work on intensive reading or written assignments, they tend to deliberately use a dictionary (which is one of the intentional learning strategies) to find out the meaning of unknown words. This does not only occur with university learners, but also with students at other levels of education. Unsurprisingly, nowadays technology supports many free-of-charge electronic dictionaries. With its helpfulness, most of the learners turn to comfortable carry-on devices rather than carrying a thick heavy dictionary as in the old days. “Dictionary use” is now receiving much more popularity than ever before because of its easy access, quickness and portability. Imagine if today’s learners still had to take their heavy dictionaries to class, would “dictionary use” still be as widespread as it is these days? This could be an underlying reason why students’ preference is “dictionary use”, especially with online usage. Since we hardly see students with printed dictionaries anymore but rather with small devices like cell phones, it can be assumed that, with the benefits of the technology, today’s students favour the promptness and accessibility of their lightweight gadgets in this digital revolution. Therefore, a combination of the quickness of the strategy itself (looking up a dictionary) and fast access to online sources yields high-speed discovery of the meaning of the target words, resulting in a great satisfaction in choosing this strategy for EFL learners. Here are some more benefits of online dictionaries as mentioned by Lew and De Schryver (2014):

One other clear advantage of the digital format is easier access to the lexical resources held in a dictionary. In a traditional print dictionary, lexicographic data were arranged once and for all in a particular order, such as (most usually) in alphabetical order or grouped semantically (in onomasiological dictionaries). The move to the digital platform has freed dictionaries from the rigid constraints of fixed macrostructural organization, and given them the flexibility of multiple access routes. The user of a digital dictionary is no longer constrained by either the formal (spelling or phonology) or semantic criteria as the organizing principle. It is now perfectly possible to combine formal and semantic relations, and utilize both types in navigating the lexical material. The did-you-mean function of modern digital dictionaries allows poor spellers to get to the information they need, even if they have slightly misspelled what they are hoping to find information on. And, advances in speech recognition now make voice search a viable option. (p. 350)

The fact that learners tend to resort to English-Thai dictionaries also reflects what they have been taught in the classroom. As known from the literature on VLS, there are plenty of strategies available but only using a bilingual dictionary has come out as a clear choice. Apparently, there must be some hidden reasons for this; it could either be from the teachers or the learners themselves. However, this does not mean that using a bilingual dictionary is “right” or “wrong”. It can yield many benefits if the students are instructed correctly and effectively on how and when to employ this kind of dictionary. But at this point, no matter which strategy, it is more important to look at the efficacy of VLS instruction. If the learners are taught how to appropriately use each strategy, their vocabulary knowledge will obviously be enhanced. Nation (2001) stressed that VLS are beneficial throughout the vocabulary learning process which makes learners more independent and permits teachers to also focus on other things. He also advised that strategy training be integrated in a course with this suggested plan: teachers should decide which strategies must be emphasized, know



how to manage time wisely while training learners, offer opportunities for learners to practice the strategies and give feedback on their strategy use. Oxford (1990) also insists that it is important that teachers broaden the students' knowledge of the strategies as well. Accordingly, it is both the teachers' and the learners' duty to take part in the learning process so that the learners will be able to autonomously make use of VLS in their ongoing vocabulary learning. Therefore, it must begin with the teachers who need to motivate their students to recognize the importance of VLS and equip them with ideas on how to use them.

Oxford (2002) mentioned multiple ways teachers can encourage effective strategy use: examining learners' use of strategies through strategy surveys, observations or discussions with learners and noticing the effectiveness of the strategies used, equipping learners with a wide variety of strategies, modelling how to employ a cluster of strategies for a particular task (e.g. starting with metacognitive strategy followed by a cognitive strategy with a social strategy), incorporating strategy training into regular pedagogy instead of in separate courses, and asking learners to make an evaluation of their own strategies use. From Oxford's point of view, it does not necessarily need to be a separate course of VLS instruction, it can be integrated into any English course to facilitate learners as long as the teachers know how to efficiently convey the instructions.

At least the teachers will get to know the preference of their students, thus making VLS instruction much easier to handle. Following the results of this analysis, teaching how to use both kinds of dictionaries, i.e. monolingual and bilingual, should be equally emphasized so that the learners know when and how to use all types of dictionaries to better serve the specific purposes of learning vocabulary. The questions teachers need to always keep in mind are as follows:

- 1) What is a useful overall approach for addressing the vocabulary needs of my particular learners?
- 2) How do I deal with the immediate vocabulary needs of my learners?
- 3) How do I prepare my students to be independent word learners and to negotiate unknown vocabulary they will encounter outside of my instructional influence?
- 4) What specific vocabulary strategies are essential for my learners to know?

Gardner (2013, p.108)

Both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries have advantages. In this case, if the teachers perceive the "using a bilingual dictionary" strategy to be their students' preference, it is very useful for the learners to also practice using a monolingual one to supplement their abilities. Learners need to be informed not to only rely on the simplicity and brevity of bilingual dictionaries since they have the other type of dictionary to consult. No one can deny that monolingual dictionaries provide more comprehensive information about the target word than bilingual ones do. They typically include more meanings and more examples of how a word is used in a context as well as more grammatical functions of the word. One more significant thing is that pronunciation provided in monolingual dictionaries is reliable and precise; learners can either look at the phonetic symbols or press the speaker button to help them pronounce the target word correctly. Bilingual ones on the other hand usually take a different approach. Pronunciation of a word is often written out in Thai which

sometimes does not provide an exact pronunciation of the word. This is also because some English sounds do not appear in the Thai language. Thus, imitating how to pronounce words using monolingual dictionaries seems to be more effective. If they can pronounce words correctly, they can also remember them better. Moreover, students nowadays no longer need to carry a thick monolingual dictionary since there are numerous reliable online dictionaries that are free of charge for them to consult anywhere and at any time. Isn't it better for learners to gain knowledge from both sources rather than be limited only to bilingual ones? For all these reasons, while enjoying the benefits of monolingual dictionaries, learners do not need to omit bilingual dictionaries as they too can help to understand the target vocabulary clearly.

In combination with dictionary use, learners can make their own flash cards or word lists after learning new words from the dictionaries because these strategies will further enable them to recall words more easily. In order for the learners to gain more benefits, a variety of VLS should be used.

## **CONCLUSION**

As discussed earlier, dictionary use is reported to be a strategy widely used by language learners in Thailand. No matter how many years have passed by, "dictionary use" is still effective for all learners in order to easily find the meaning of unknown words. It is very convenient in facilitating comprehension as a dictionary can be used to look up unfamiliar words encountered while listening, reading or translating, to check the meanings when uncertainty arises and to confirm that words guessed from context are correct (Cohen, 1990; Gardner, 2013; Nation, 2001; Summers, 1988). This is not to point out that this strategy is the best but rather that teachers need to be aware of the strategies that their students are comfortable with in order to illustrate the use of those strategies and to also raise student awareness concerning the strategy they are using. At the very least, VLS instruction should make students more confident in using the strategies they prefer.

As for pedagogical implications, English language lecturers should design tasks for the learners to improve their skills in using dictionaries—both monolingual and bilingual ones. In order to use dictionaries effectively, it is crucial that learners be trained because not everyone is familiar with using dictionaries (Hunt & Beglar, 2002; Thornbury, 2002; Wallace, 1991). The task-based activities related to dictionary use should be given to language learners on a regular basis, so that they can get used to using dictionaries.

As suggested by Wolter (2015), EFL teachers have to pay attention to the abilities and needs of their learners concerning dictionary use, so as to ensure that they have the ability to effectively use dictionaries. Also, teachers need to know what sources students like to use to look up new words, what information they consider important and see if they use all the information available in the dictionary entries.





In cases where students prefer online dictionaries to printed dictionaries, teachers should incorporate technology, such as computers, smart phones and dictionary apps into explicit vocabulary instruction as well as into activities about online dictionary use. Teachers could also share the dictionaries and resources that they consider useful with their students. If printed dictionaries are still preferable to the learners, advice and various sources of dictionaries should be given to them. Teachers can also include task-based activities that offer learners the opportunity to get exposed to dictionary entries, such as definitions, pronunciation, language functions, collocations and sample sentences. With all the entries found in dictionaries, learners can make use of what they learn in a variety of ways, paving the way to successful language learning.

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