

Selecting Vocabulary: Factors Influencing Word Choice by Thai High-School EFL Students in Reading Comprehension

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 31 May 2025 Last revised: 12 Dec 2025 Accepted: 28 Apr 2026 Available online: 30 Apr 2026	<i>This study explores the factors influencing Thai high-school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) when selecting words to learn while reading an English passage. The goal was to understand students' word choices and which vocabulary they focus on in order to help improve their vocabulary and reading skills. Thirty Thai high school students from English-Math, English-French, and English-Chinese programs participated. They chose an English passage from National Geographic Kids or TIME for Kids, read it, and selected at least five unfamiliar words or phrases, explaining their choices. The words were analyzed using the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online, focusing on word class, academic status, and frequency. The findings showed that students frequently selected content words (such as nouns and verbs) over function words, often influenced by personal interests, e.g., music and movies, and social media relevance. Additionally, students used online dictionaries to explore meanings, enhancing their focus on specific unfamiliar words. The study suggests that Thai high school EFL students prioritize content words that aid comprehension, often overlooking grammatical elements. Teachers can use authentic materials reflecting students' interests and backgrounds to engage them. The research highlights the need to develop students' ability to choose their own vocabulary.</i>
Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Word selection Vocabulary preferences Thai high school students Personalized learning Reading comprehension	

INTRODUCTION

The English language is crucial in education worldwide, including in Thailand. English is mandatory for all students, from kindergarten to university. Despite this, many students struggle to communicate effectively in English due to limited vocabulary. Research suggests that vocabulary knowledge is vital for language learning, impacting listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Rezvan et al., 2021). Students with a broader vocabulary communicate more skillfully, while inadequate vocabulary can severely impede mastering English (Alqahtani, 2015). Therefore, enhancing vocabulary learning in Thai schools is essential in order to improve students' English proficiency.

Teaching vocabulary is crucial because it helps EFL learners understand and express themselves (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Vocabulary knowledge is critical to students' academic progress. As an English teacher, the researcher faces students' inability to express themselves in written and spoken English. Students often struggle to remember words. According to Jahan and Jahan (2011), students who lack vocabulary knowledge may struggle to comprehend and produce other skills in the target language.

Vocabulary acquisition is essential for language learning and proficiency, as emphasized by Nation (2001). Understanding and effectively expressing ideas depend on the breadth and depth of one's vocabulary. However, a significant barrier to vocabulary acquisition is the lack of vocabulary itself. Some students struggle to recognize different parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. This deficiency can persist throughout their academic journey, leading to frustration and setbacks (Khany & Khosravian, 2014). Given the critical role of vocabulary in communication, exploring how students select and prioritize words for learning is key to supporting their language development.

This study uniquely examines word selection strategies utilized by Thai high-school EFL students, an area that has received limited attention in the existing literature. By focusing on word choices made during reading, the research aims to provide insights into the cognitive and situational factors influencing vocabulary acquisition. Understanding these factors can help teachers tailor instruction to better meet students' needs.

Insufficient vocabulary knowledge can profoundly impact individuals' ability to acquire new words and use effective vocabulary learning strategies. Limited vocabulary makes it challenging to understand the meaning and usage of unfamiliar words. This limitation can hinder comprehension of written and spoken texts and the ability to express oneself clearly. Additionally, inadequate vocabulary skills can hamper academic performance across subjects requiring a strong command of language. Poor performance on exams can result in lower scores, and many students dislike heavy reading assignments due to uninteresting content.

Vocabulary acquisition can be achieved through both intensive and extensive reading (Nation & Waring, 2020; Fu, 2021). Intensive reading offers a focused exploration of vocabulary in specific texts, while extensive reading provides exposure to a broad range of vocabulary in diverse contexts. Combining these approaches effectively develops a rich and versatile vocabulary, benefiting learners' language proficiency and communication skills. Engaging students in effective vocabulary learning may require dialogic learning using real-world contexts (Dufva, 2013). Students can quickly acquire language about their interests and discuss their contexts, cultures, and lives in English better than discussing random texts. Self-awareness of dialogic learning as a tool is beneficial (Wang & Simpson, 2020). Teachers should develop dialogue tasks for effective language learning, including online dialogue systems (Li et al., 2020).

While students' vocabulary growth often benefits from teacher-led instruction, learner autonomy plays a critical role in fostering deeper engagement with vocabulary. This article focuses on word selection, a key aspect of autonomous learning, where readers actively decide which words to focus on, skip, or skim over. These choices involve allocating attention and cognitive resources effectively, allowing students to personalize their vocabulary learning experience.

To facilitate effective vocabulary learning strategies, the researchers allowed participants to choose a text of personal interest and select and analyze vocabulary when reading an English passage. This approach highlights the importance of personal relevance in vocabulary acquisition, recognizing that students engage more deeply with words tied to their individual interests and experiences. The study aimed to reveal the types of words—including parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), word frequency (high, medium, and low), and contextual relevance (domains like social media, education, or real-world experiences)—that students choose to learn when independently reading an English passage. This is because it is hoped that teachers will be able to teach vocabulary and reading more successfully if they better understand their students' word choices. The findings may have pedagogical implications for future language teachers who want to teach vocabulary and reading. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to analyze the students' selection of words to analyze when independently reading an English passage.

Research Question: What types of words do students choose to take an interest in or study further when directed to read an English passage independently, and why?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role in second language learning, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This literature review explores factors influencing word selection during extensive reading among students learning English as a foreign language.

Importance of vocabulary acquisition and word selection

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental component of language learning, crucial for developing proficiency across all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Extensive research indicates a strong correlation between vocabulary size and overall language competence, as it enhances learners' ability to comprehend texts, articulate ideas, and engage in fluent communication (Nation, 2001; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014). For instance, Laufer and Nation (1999) demonstrated that learners with broader vocabularies can process written and spoken language more efficiently, leading to improved comprehension and expression.

Vocabulary knowledge is particularly important in reading comprehension, where learners must navigate unfamiliar terms to grasp meaning (Hu & Nation, 2000). A robust vocabulary provides the lexical tools necessary for understanding complex texts, enabling learners to decode unfamiliar words using contextual clues. Moreover, in oral communication, a diverse vocabulary helps learners select precise words for different contexts and engage in meaningful interactions (Schmitt, 2010). This highlights the need for effective word selection strategies to support language acquisition.

Word frequency also plays a critical role in vocabulary acquisition. According to Nation (2006), prioritizing high-frequency words is essential, as they form the core vocabulary needed for basic communication. Dang (2020) underscores that high-frequency words are foundational

not only for spoken English but also for academic success, as they ensure learners can navigate common lexical challenges in both formal and informal contexts. However, Barcroft (2015) emphasizes that exposing learners to words slightly beyond their proficiency level fosters vocabulary growth, suggesting that a balance between high-frequency and more challenging words is crucial.

Vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading

Extensive reading is widely recognized as an effective strategy for vocabulary acquisition. Research shows that exposing learners to diverse texts enhances their lexical knowledge by providing repeated encounters with words in various contexts (Nation & Waring, 1997; Sevy-Biloon, 2022). Through extensive reading, learners not only expand their receptive vocabulary but also develop the ability to use words accurately in production.

Several studies underscore the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary growth. Anh (2021) demonstrated that non-major university students in Vietnam significantly improved their reading comprehension and vocabulary through structured extensive reading programs. Similarly, Subramaniam and Zainal (2018) found that incorporating graded readers helped students acquire new vocabulary more effectively.

Extensive reading also fosters positive attitudes toward learning. Thanh and Viên (2021) highlighted that integrating skimming and scanning strategies into reading lessons improved students' reading performance and their perception of reading as an enjoyable activity. Krampah's (2022) study further supported this, recommending that extensive reading be a mandatory part of high-school curricula to enhance overall English competence.

Exploration of word selection strategies

Word selection strategies are pivotal in helping learners acquire and retain new vocabulary. Several approaches have been proposed, ranging from frequency-based strategies, which emphasize learning high-frequency words (Nation, 2006), to context-based strategies that focus on understanding word meaning through contextual usage (Schmitt, 2010). These strategies help learners prioritize which words to focus on, improving their efficiency in vocabulary acquisition.

Personal relevance also plays a significant role in word selection. According to Paribakht and Wesche (1993), learners are more likely to retain words that align with their interests or immediate needs. For example, selecting vocabulary related to hobbies or daily experiences enhances motivation and engagement, leading to better retention. This aligns with recent findings emphasizing the importance of personalized learning in vocabulary acquisition.

Fu (2021) found that Chinese EFL learners often prefer strategies that reflect their autonomy in vocabulary learning, focusing on words they find personally meaningful. This resonates with the current study's emphasis on independent word selection driven by students' interests and experiences.

In addition, Schmitt (1997) categorized vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) into discovery strategies, such as using dictionaries, and consolidation strategies, including repetition and association. The effectiveness of these strategies varies across learners, depending in part on cultural and educational contexts (Schmitt, 2000). For Thai EFL students, leveraging a combination of these strategies could significantly enhance their vocabulary acquisition process.

Word frequency and importance: Implications for word selection

Word frequency is a crucial determinant in vocabulary acquisition. High-frequency words are encountered regularly in both spoken and written communication, forming the foundation of language proficiency (Nation & Waring, 1997). Learners benefit significantly from prioritizing these words, as they provide the linguistic building blocks necessary for effective comprehension and communication. For instance, focusing on high-frequency vocabulary enables learners to cover a broad range of everyday language needs quickly.

However, Cobb (2007) emphasizes that word frequency alone does not determine a word's importance. Some low-frequency words may carry specialized meanings or cultural significance, making them vital for understanding specific topics or engaging in specialized domains. Laufer and Nation (1999) argue that learners must strike a balance between acquiring high-frequency words for general proficiency and identifying key low-frequency terms relevant to their specific communication goals.

This balance is particularly important for EFL learners, as their exposure to English is often limited outside the classroom. For Thai EFL students, who may rely heavily on structured educational materials, understanding word frequency helps streamline their vocabulary learning process and optimize their cognitive resources.

Vocabulary acquisition through personalized learning

Personalized learning approaches are increasingly recognized as effective strategies for vocabulary acquisition. The key principle is that when learners engage with materials tailored to their interests, their intrinsic motivation to learn increases (Heilman et al., 2010). This intrinsic motivation, driven by personal relevance, enhances engagement, retention, and overall learning outcomes.

Technology can also play a role. Slavuj et al. (2017) highlight the role of technology in facilitating personalized learning. For example, machine learning algorithms can recommend reading passages based on learners' previous selections, ensuring that the content aligns with their interests and proficiency levels. Studies on personalized learning environments for language learners have shown promising results, particularly in improving vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension (Lee, 2022; Lee et al, 2022).

Supasiraprapa (2019) similarly underscores the importance of tailored learning environments, noting that contextual factors significantly influence learners' vocabulary depth. By aligning instructional materials with students' unique needs, educators can foster deeper engagement and more meaningful vocabulary learning.

In the context of Thai EFL learners, personalized learning could involve selecting reading materials that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds or personal hobbies. This approach not only fosters a deeper connection with the language but also equips learners with vocabulary relevant to their daily lives and aspirations.

Previous research on word selection in reading

Despite the extensive research on vocabulary acquisition, studies specifically examining word selection strategies remain limited, particularly with EFL learners. Rayner and Duffy (1986) explored how readers process high- and low-frequency words in sentences, finding that high-frequency words are accessed more quickly and accurately. This suggests that word frequency significantly influences reading efficiency and comprehension.

Cunningham and Stanovich (1991) emphasized the importance of exposing learners to a diverse range of vocabulary, including less frequent words, to broaden their lexical repertoire. Similarly, Desai et al., (2018) found that frequent exposure to high-frequency words enhances semantic processing, making these words more readily accessible during reading.

While these studies provide valuable insights, few have specifically addressed how EFL learners choose which words to focus on during reading. This gap is particularly relevant for Thai EFL students, whose word selection strategies may be influenced by unique cultural and educational contexts. By examining word selection behaviors, the current study aimed to fill this gap and offer practical recommendations for enhancing vocabulary acquisition in Thai high-school students.

METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to engage participants in reading, assess their language skills, respect their reading preferences, and enhance vocabulary acquisition in reading comprehension. Acquiring vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) is crucial for academic success and broader language proficiency. The approach involved directing participants to select words from a self-selected English passage. Analyzing the word selection process is vital as it contributes to a better understanding of VLSs and the study's success. Students' integration of online dictionaries allows them to choose words of personal interest and expand their comprehension by exploring word meanings and usage in real-time, fostering a more immersive reading experience.

Participants

The study was conducted with 30 secondary school students who were identified as having low English proficiency enrolled in Wat Intharam School in Bangkok, Thailand. Their English proficiency levels were determined based on their previous academic performance in English language subjects and on teacher evaluations. Participants were selected using convenience sampling due to the requirements of accessibility and availability. The researchers chose these students as the research cohort due to the convenient location and suitability. The participants

were all in the 12th grade, were aged 17–18 years, and demonstrated limited English proficiency. They were divided into three study programs: English-Math, English-French, and English-Chinese. The English-Math program was for students interested in STEM fields, while the English-French and English-Chinese programs were for students interested in the respective languages and cultures. Prior to data collection, students were briefed on the study's purpose and procedures, and those who wished to participate signed a consent form.

Table 1
Demographic profile of participants

	Categories	Participants	Percentage
Gender	Female	20	66.7%
	Male	10	33.3%
Program	English-Chinese	13	43.4%
	English-Math	11	36.6%
	English-French	6	20.0%
Total		30	100.0%

As shown in Table 1, the participants consisted of 66.7% females and 33.3% males, and their language preferences were split among three categories: English-Chinese (43.4%), English-Math (36.6%) and English-French (20.0%). All participants reported that Thai was their first language, with only a few reporting that they spoke other languages, such as Lao or Khmer as their first language. None of the participants in this study were native speakers of English, and all had limited exposure to English-speaking environments outside the classroom, which may have affected their ability to use English in real-world situations.

Overall, despite being enrolled in different programs, the participants shared a common goal of improving their English proficiency. Examining their demographic profile helps us understand their characteristics and how they might have influenced the study's results.

Research instrument

Task record sheet

The researchers designed a task record sheet for the study. To ensure comprehension, it was translated into Thai to prevent misunderstandings by the Thai participants. Students had one week to complete their reading assignment after selecting a passage. They were asked to complete this assignment at their own pace and time. The students were required to submit two items: a passage with five-to-six underlined words and a task record form containing 1) the selected passage with five to six underlined words and, 2) a task record form containing: their reasons for selecting the passage, the meanings of the five words after lookup, and the type of dictionary or online tools used (if any).

The translation and clear task instructions ensured that participants fully understood what was expected of them, minimizing potential miscommunication.

Research procedure

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling and asked if they were interested in participating. Recruitment occurred during school hours with the cooperation of teachers, ensuring voluntary participation. Participants could select a reading passage from two reputable sources: National Geographic Kids (<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com>) (Peterson, 1992; Vrla et al., 2020) and TIME for Kids (<https://www.timeforkids.com/>) (Lay et al., 2019). These websites offer age-appropriate content, clear language, educational value, varied reading levels, and interactive activities, providing a supportive environment for English learners.

The passage length was set at one-to-two pages to ensure the task was manageable for participants and that the participants could maintain their focus while reading. This length struck a balance between exposing students to a sufficient amount of vocabulary and avoiding cognitive overload. Furthermore, it allowed for the identification of five-to-six unfamiliar words or phrases without overwhelming the participants, aligning with the study's objective of fostering independent vocabulary selection.

To ensure alignment with their proficiency levels, students were provided with a brief guideline on selecting passages suited to their English ability. For learning purposes, they were encouraged to choose texts which they could mostly understand but that included some unfamiliar words or phrases. The students read the passage during their leisure time, a requirement which was intended to reduce academic pressure and promote independent engagement. Participants underlined or highlighted five-to-six unfamiliar words or phrases of interest, with the aim of encouraging active reading and identifying specific linguistic elements needing further investigation. They were provided with a task record sheet to collect their responses and instructed to complete it within one week, submitting it via a secure online platform for efficient data collection.

Data analysis

After data collection, the researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the participants' selected vocabulary. The underlined words from each passage were extracted and systematically categorized based on three key dimensions:

1. Grammatical Category (Parts of Speech): Each word was classified as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, or other, e.g., prepositions, pronouns.
2. Word Frequency: Using the Longman Communication 9000 (LC9000) from the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (6th edition), each word was categorized as high, mid, or low frequency. This step highlighted whether students focused on common or less frequently encountered vocabulary in their reading selections.
3. Contextual Relevance: Words were also analyzed for their contextual significance—whether they appeared frequently in educational materials, social media, or everyday conversations.

The Longman Communication 9000 corpus (LC9000) was selected for its comprehensive and data-driven frequency lists, which provide a reliable measure of word usage in both spoken

and written English. Additionally, the Academic Word List (AWL), developed by Coxhead (2000), was used to identify words frequently encountered in academic texts. This combination of resources ensured a robust framework for analyzing the participants' vocabulary selections.

The AWL was chosen to explore the extent to which students engage with academic vocabulary, even in non-academic contexts, thereby gauging their readiness for advanced language use. High school students may encounter AWL terms in standardized tests, preparatory materials, and future academic pursuits, making this an important aspect of their vocabulary acquisition journey.

The rationale for the seven categories of reasons for selecting words was derived from both theoretical frameworks and the data collected from participants. The categories reflect a blend of intrinsic and situational factors, allowing a comprehensive analysis of students' vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). These categories were influenced by established studies on learner motivation and vocabulary acquisition, ensuring their alignment with relevant literature while capturing the unique contexts in which students learn.

Coding and categorization:

To obtain deeper insights into the motivation behind word selection, the researcher coded the students' reasons into seven distinct categories, which are summarized in Table 2. These categories helped identify whether the chosen words were driven by personal interests or situational factors:

Table 2
Seven criteria

Code	Meaning	Situational Interest/Personal Interest
1	Personal interest	Personal
2A	Unfamiliar word (meaning)	Situational
2B	Unfamiliar word (pronunciation)	Situational
3	Educational relevance	Personal
4	Word encountered every day	Personal
5	Social media relevance	Personal
6	Real-world experience	Personal

Each word was then assigned one or more of these codes based on the participant's explanation for its selection. This coding framework allowed for a nuanced understanding of the VLSs employed.

Quantitative analysis:

Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, were used to summarize the distribution of word categories. These statistics provided insights into patterns of word selection, highlighting the prevalence of high-frequency content words versus more specialized or context-driven vocabulary.

Integration with qualitative insights:

The analysis also integrated qualitative data from participants' task record sheets in order to contextualize their word choices. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study captured the multifaceted nature of vocabulary selection in autonomous learning.

RESULTS

Table 3
Passage source and online tools employed by participants for reading the English passage

Program	English-Math	English-French	English-Chinese	Total	Percentage
Passage Source					
National Geographic Kids (kids.nationalgeographic.com)	8	6	12	26	86.70%
TIME for Kids (www.timeforkids.com)	3	0	1	4	13.30%
Online Tool					
Longdo Dictionary	2	1	2	5	16.70%
Google Translate	9	5	11	25	83.30%

According to the data in Table 3, the National Geographic Kids (NGK) website was more popular among the 30 participants, with 86.7% using it. This website attracted significant attention from participants with English-Chinese, English-Math, and English-French backgrounds, with 12, 8, and 6 users, respectively. In contrast, the TIME for Kids (TFK) website was used by only 13.3% (four students), with three users from the English-Math group and one user from the English-Chinese group.

The division of participants into English-Math, English-French, and English-Chinese groups was based on their enrollment in distinct academic programs, which emphasized different areas of study and potentially influenced their vocabulary exposure and selection. This grouping allowed us to examine whether the students' academic focus affected their reading preferences and word selection strategies.

Each passage was selected individually, reflecting the students' diverse interests. No student chose the same topic, highlighting their unique preferences. For instance, Participant 7 chose "Women's History Month," Participant 12 selected "Chameleons," and Participant 30 picked "Tiger." This variety in choices indicates that students were free to select topics that resonated with their interests. A significant trend observed among the topics chosen is a strong interest in wildlife and nature. Many students selected topics related to animals and their habitats. For example, some students chose topics like "Megalodon," "Bald Eagles," and "Velociraptor," indicating a fascination with both current and prehistoric wildlife. This trend was consistent across all language groups, suggesting a shared interest in wildlife and conservation among the participants.

Regarding the online tools, Google Translate was the most used, with 83.3% (25 students) utilizing it. This tool was popular with all three groups: nine students in the English-Math group, five in the English-French group, and eleven in the English-Chinese group. Longdo Dictionary was used by 16.7% (five students), particularly by the English-Math (two users) and English-Chinese (two users) participants, with one user from the English-French group. This suggests that Google Translate is becoming an essential tool for Thai EFL learners, offering convenience and ease of use.

Table 4
Participant word selection while reading an English passage

Program	English-Math	English-French	English-Chinese	Total
Participants	11	6	13	30
Look ups	58	30	78	166
Average look ups	5.27	5.00	6.00	5.53

As shown in Table 4, the participants were asked to select words they were unfamiliar with and were interested in, including those they wished to further investigate, from a reading passage. The results indicate that the English-Math group selected 58 words, the English-French group selected 30 words, and the English-Chinese group selected 78 words. This resulted in a total of 166 word lookups across all three groups.

The average number of words selected per participant was 5.53 words across all groups, with subgroup averages of 5.27 for the English-Math group, 5.00 for the English-French group, and 6.00 for the English-Chinese group. These findings demonstrate that, while the total number of words varied among the groups, participants consistently identified approximately five to six words per passage on average, aligning with the study's expectations.

Table 5
Reason for selecting words

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Personal interest (e.g., from music, movie, sport or game)	60	36.1%
Unfamiliar word (meaning)	49	29.5%
Educational relevance	21	12.7%
Word in everyday usage	14	8.4%
Social media relevance	10	6.0%
Social media relevance	7	4.3%
Unfamiliar word (pronunciation)	5	3.0%
Total	166	100.0%

As seen in Table 5, participants explained why they chose specific words, which were categorized into seven distinct groups. The researcher collected and analyzed 166 responses, consolidating these reasons into broad categories based on shared personal and situational interests, rather than dividing the data into academic groups as in previous tables.

The first reason, personal interest, was selected by 36.1% of participants. This category includes words related to hobbies or entertainment, such as music, movies, sports, or games. For example, Participant 19 chose “predator” because he had seen it in a movie, while Participant 27 chose “armored” from a first-person shooter game. Participant 28 selected “frozen” because she liked the movie and the character Elsa.

The second reason, unfamiliar words (meaning) (situational interest), was chosen by 29.5% of participants as their primary obstacle to reading comprehension. This included unknown words that participants did not know or had not encountered before. For instance, Participant 1 identified “deputy” as an unknown word because he had never seen it before. Similarly, Participant 18 selected “leftovers” because she was unfamiliar with it and with its meaning.

The third reason, educational relevance (personal interest), chosen by 12.7% of participants, was related to the classroom. This included words encountered in classes or textbooks. For example, Participant 13 selected “odors” because she remembered it from class and wanted to know if its meaning was different from “smell,” while Participant 25 chose “anything” because she had seen it in a textbook and handouts.

The fourth reason, words in everyday usage (personal interest), chosen by 8.4% of participants, included words frequently used or seen in daily life. For instance, Participant 6 selected “fierce” because it is commonly used in Thai mixed with English, and she wanted to understand it better. Participant 23 chose “sunset” because she frequently encountered it.

The fifth reason, social media relevance (personal interest), selected by 6.0% of participants, was associated with social media. This category included keywords linked to experiences with social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter. For instance, Participant 8 chose “donate” because he came across it on YouTube, and Participant 11 selected “sponsor” because she saw it on Facebook.

The sixth reason, real-world experiences (personal interest), selected by 4.2% of participants, was related to experiences outside the classroom. For example, Participant 8 selected “fortunate” because he had seen it several times in New Year and birthday cards. Participant 16 chose “whistle” because she saw it at a concert. This suggests that real-world events and media sources shape an individual’s vocabulary.

Finally, for unfamiliar words (pronunciation) (situational interest), only 3.0% selected words because they did not know how to pronounce them. For instance, Participant 23 selected “gazelle.”

Table 6
Analysis of word selection by part of speech, frequency, and academic relevance

Classified by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online	Part of speech of frequency (words) as appear in the text		N.	V.	Adj.	Adv.	Pron.	Prep.	Total	
			98	20	36	8	1	3	166	
	Average		59.0	12.0	21.7	4.8	0.6	1.8	100	Average
	Core vocabulary of frequency (words)	High-frequency	27	6	8	6	1	3	51	30.7%
		Medium-frequency	16	8	8	3	0	0	35	21.1%
		Low-frequency	15	2	6	0	0	0	23	13.9%
		Unidentified	41	5	10	1	0	0	57	34.3%
	Total		99	21	32	10	1	3	166	
	Top written words of frequency (words)	Top 1000 written words	9	2	4	4	1	3	23	13.9%
		Top 2000 written words	10	6	3	1	0	0	20	12.0%
		Top 3000 written words	10	3	3	0	0	0	16	9.6%
		Unidentified	72	9	24	2	0	0	107	64.5%
	Total		101	20	34	7	1	3	166	
	Academic word list	Academic word	5	3	3	1	0	0	12	7.2%
		Unidentified	94	17	33	7	1	2	154	92.8%

In response to the research question, Table 6 presents the analysis of 166 selected words, categorized into core vocabulary, top written words, and the Academic Word List. These groups were classified using the LDOCE Online. Before analyzing the words, they were first categorized by part of speech. The results show that out of the 166 selections, 59% are nouns, 12% are verbs, 21.7% are adjectives, 4.8% are adverbs, and 1.8 and 0.6% are prepositions and pronouns. This reveals that nouns are the most commonly used type of word among the selected words, with more than half falling into this category. Verbs are the second most common, comprising just over one-fifth of the words analyzed. Adjectives and adverbs make up smaller proportions of the selected words, while pronouns and prepositions were rarely selected.

Core vocabulary

The initial stage of the analysis involves categorizing the chosen words into high-frequency, medium-frequency, low-frequency, and unidentified words. The researcher used the LDOCE Online as the reference source. The core vocabulary was classified to understand the words' usage and significance in English. High-frequency words are commonly used in everyday conversation and written communication, crucial for basic language skills. Examples include "community," "common," and "variety," chosen by Participants 10, 11, and 24. The study revealed that 30.7% of the core vocabulary consists of high-frequency words.

Medium-frequency words are less commonly used than high-frequency words but still play a significant role in communication. These words may include technical or specialized vocabulary relevant to a particular field, such as "agriculture" and "researchers," associated

with Participants 22 and 24. The study found that 21.1% of the core vocabulary consists of medium-frequency words.

Low-frequency words are used infrequently in everyday language. These may include archaic terms or specialized vocabulary used in specific domains. For example, Participants 5 and 13 selected “extinction” and “ambush,” respectively. The study revealed that 13.9% of the core vocabulary consists of low-frequency words.

Unidentified words refer to those that could not be categorized within the LDOCE Online’s available frequency bands. The study revealed that 34.3% of the core vocabulary consists of such words, including “crustacean” and “triceratops,” selected by Participants 16 and 20. These unidentified words often represent specialized or technical vocabulary encountered in specific topics, such as wildlife or scientific contexts. While LDOCE Online provides a comprehensive framework for categorizing general English vocabulary, its coverage of niche or highly specialized terms may be limited. Future studies could consider using additional reference sources to reduce this category and achieve more detailed classifications.

Top written words

The study also analyzed the most frequently written words in English and classified them into different groups based on the LDOCE Online. The top 1,000 written words were identified as the core vocabulary of English and are essential for basic writing. Examples include “ability” and “success,” chosen by Participants 7 and 21. This group accounted for 13.9% of all words.

The top 2,000 written words are also essential for basic writing and made up 12% of all written words. Examples include “protect” and “temperature,” chosen by Participants 5 and 28. The top 3,000 written words refer to commonly used words in written language essential for effective communication. These words accounted for 9.6% of all words. For example, Participants 8 and 13 selected “charity” and “detect.”

Words that could not be classified into the top 3,000, top 2,000, or top 1,000 written words were grouped as unidentified words. This group accounted for 64.5% of all words and consisted of less commonly used words or technical terms specific to certain fields, such as wildlife. For example, Participants 12 and 27 selected “omnivores” and “reptiles.”

Academic word list

The last phase of analysis focused on the Academic Word List (AWL), which was classified into different groups based on the LDOCE Online. The AWL, developed by Coxhead (2000), consists of words commonly used in academic texts. It is based on a corpus of academic texts from various disciplines and helps students understand and use language they are likely to encounter in their academic studies.

Although the participants in this study are high school students, the inclusion of the AWL serves a dual purpose: it provides insight into their exposure to academic vocabulary and their potential readiness for higher education or standardized tests. Words from the AWL are

not necessarily technical but are frequently used across different academic subjects, making them relevant for students aspiring to continue their education. For example, Participant 1 selected the word “equipment,” while Participant 17 chose “approaches.” The research findings indicate that only 7.2% of the words analyzed are part of the AWL.

Key findings from the study

The study revealed that Google Translate, a widely used translation tool, was the most popular online resource among all language groups, with 83.3% of participants using it. Google Translate provides instant translations of words, phrases, and full texts, offering definitions, synonyms, and contextual examples in multiple languages. It also includes voice input and pronunciation features, making it highly versatile and user-friendly. In contrast, the Longdo Dictionary, a Thai-English dictionary, was used by only 16.7% of participants. While the Longdo Dictionary also offers convenient access to definitions, pronunciation guides, and sentence examples, it primarily caters to Thai users and lacks the broader multilingual functionality and real-time translation capabilities of Google Translate. These differences may explain why Google Translate was favored, as its broader feature set aligns more closely with the immediate needs of EFL learners.

The setting encouraged personal interest through student selection of texts from two websites, creating a quasi-teacher influenced model for personal interest. The study identified seven categories of word choices: personal interest, social media relevance, unfamiliar word (meaning), unfamiliar word (pronunciation), word in everyday usage, educational relevance, and real-world experience.

In five categories, namely personal interest, social media relevance, educational relevance, words in everyday usage, and real-world experience, students were not just selecting vocabulary due to teacher instruction but due to existing personal interest. This underscores the finding that vocabulary acquisition is influenced by student interaction with sources like personal interests, social media, educational settings, and real-life experiences.

Participants with lower English proficiency tend to prefer common words over complex ones. The study emphasizes the importance of mastering basic, high-frequency words as a foundational step in language development. However, when encouraged to take a personal interest, students also took an active interest in more complex vocabulary. While mastering complex vocabulary is important, especially at higher grades, this should come after building a foundation of common words. Educators should prioritize teaching high-frequency words to enhance language acquisition. The study also recognizes the significance of medium-frequency words in specialized fields, underscoring the importance of analyzing language use in different academic disciplines.

In summary, the study highlights the complexity of personal interest-driven word selection and VLSs in language development and the pivotal role of vocabulary acquisition in effective language learning. Understanding the various factors influencing student-driven interest in vocabulary can aid educators and learners in crafting and employing better VLSs.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings provide significant insights into the vocabulary selection processes of Thai high-school EFL learners. Participants demonstrated a clear preference for the National Geographic Kids (NGK) website, with 86.7% of users accessing content from this platform. NGK's appeal likely stems from its engaging, age-appropriate materials, which align well with students' interests and reading levels. Topics related to nature and wildlife, such as "megalodon" and "bald eagles," were particularly popular across all groups, reflecting a shared interest in environmental themes.

In contrast, the TIME for Kids (TFK) website, though offering a broader range of topics, was less favored. This divergence suggests that content relevance and presentation style play a critical role in students' engagement with reading materials. However, as this preference does not directly address the study's research questions, its extensive discussion has been condensed to maintain focus on the primary objectives.

The use of online tools also emerged as a key finding. Google Translate was the dominant tool, used by 83.3% of participants, primarily for its accessibility and convenience. Its capacity for instant translations likely explains its popularity among learners with limited proficiency. However, Longdo Dictionary, preferred by 16.7% of participants, still holds value for more detailed or specialized tasks. The findings of this study align with Fu (2021), who highlighted the significant role of online tools in supporting vocabulary learning strategies among Chinese EFL university students. These tools help learners independently explore unfamiliar words, contributing to their overall vocabulary development. While this study did not explore the full breadth of reasons behind tool preferences, its findings suggest that online tools play a crucial role in facilitating independent vocabulary acquisition. Future research incorporating interviews or surveys could provide richer insights into these preferences.

The study's findings imply that students completing the task mechanically by reading a text, selecting an unfamiliar word, and then looking it up are mainly using determination strategies. In contrast, students who locate a word with previous contextual relevance and then look it up may be processing the word both cognitively and metacognitively. This combination of Schmitt's (1997) VLSs—determination, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies—is viewed as most fruitful for vocabulary acquisition (Wright & Cervetti, 2016). The only major group of strategies missing is social strategies, e.g., students dialoguing their word selections with peers (Dufva, 2013).

The findings emphasize the importance of focusing on high-frequency words as a foundation for language proficiency. Participants primarily selected words from the top 1,000 written words, reflecting the necessity of building a basic vocabulary. This aligns with Dang (2020), who emphasized the critical role of high-frequency vocabulary in academic spoken English, which enables learners to manage basic communication tasks effectively. Medium-frequency words, often more specialized, were also selected, supporting their importance for learners aiming to expand their vocabulary in academic contexts (Masrai, 2019).

The study identified seven categories of word selection reasons: personal interest, social media, unfamiliar words (meaning and pronunciation), everyday encounters, classroom encounters, and real-world experiences. This diversity underscores the multifaceted nature of vocabulary acquisition, as learners draw from a variety of intrinsic and situational contexts. Personal interest emerged as a predominant factor, reaffirming the role of intrinsic motivation in language learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Similarly, Supasiraprapa (2019) found that EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition is strongly influenced by their learning environment, which includes their personal and academic interests. By understanding the seven categories, educators can better design vocabulary instruction tailored to learners' unique needs and experiences.

Finally, the study highlights the potential of extensive reading in vocabulary instruction. Encouraging students to explore diverse texts guided by their personal interests can promote both vocabulary growth and deeper engagement with language. Future research should investigate the interplay between personal interest, reading strategies, and technology use to refine teaching practices further.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the significance of focusing on high-frequency vocabulary as a foundational element in English language learning for Thai high-school EFL students. Given the participants' lower proficiency levels, their emphasis on high-frequency words highlights the need for explicit instruction in these areas. This finding aligns with Dang (2020), who argued that prioritizing high-frequency words helps learners build essential language skills, thereby supporting comprehension and communication. This finding also aligns with Nguyen and Nation (2011), who stress that the mastery of core vocabulary facilitates the development of complex language skills.

Additionally, the findings reveal that students' word choices were often influenced by personal interest, with selections linked to hobbies, entertainment, or daily life experiences. Supasiraprapa (2019) similarly highlights the importance of tailoring vocabulary instruction to learners' personal contexts to improve vocabulary depth. The finding therefore supports the role of personalized learning in enhancing engagement and motivation. Authentic materials, such as news articles, films, and novels tailored to students' interests, can help educators foster intrinsic motivation and deeper vocabulary retention.

The study also demonstrates the value of extensive reading in vocabulary acquisition. Independent reading activities, supported by online resources like Google Translate and the Longdo Dictionary, contribute significantly to vocabulary growth. This aligns with Fu (2021), who emphasizes the role of digital tools in enabling learners to independently explore and acquire new vocabulary in context.

In the present study, while both tools proved effective, participants favored Google Translate for its accessibility and ease of use. Future studies could explore a broader range of tools, including traditional methods such as paper dictionaries, to comprehensively understand their relative impact on vocabulary acquisition.

Limitations and future directions

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling and a small sample size ($n = 30$) limits the generalizability of the findings. While the findings provide valuable insights specific to Thai high-school EFL learners, a larger, more diverse population would allow for broader applicability and stronger conclusions. Future research should involve larger, more diverse populations to enhance representativeness.

Second, while the study focused on participants' word selection processes, it did not delve deeply into contextual factors, such as text difficulty or prior knowledge, which may have influenced their choices. Including these variables in future studies could provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between text characteristics and vocabulary selection behaviors.

Additionally, the study relied solely on reading summaries and task record sheets, limiting its scope. Without interviews or additional qualitative data, the exact reasons behind participants' tool and website preferences remain unclear. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into learners' decision-making processes. For instance, conducting semi-structured interviews or focus groups could help capture participants' perspectives on tool usability and reading preferences more comprehensively.

Further investigation is also needed into the role of motivation in extensive reading. Specifically, future studies could examine how factors such as personal interest, perceived usefulness, and enjoyment influence word selection and reading engagement. These motivational dimensions, as highlighted in the current study, play an important role in shaping autonomous learning behaviors. Similarly, the integration of technology in language learning beyond online dictionaries warrants further exploration. Exploring how learners interact with vocabulary apps, online corpora, or other digital tools could reveal additional strategies for enhancing lexical acquisition. Understanding learners' attitudes toward various tools and their effectiveness could yield actionable insights for educators.

Final thoughts

This study contributes to the growing body of research on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) by examining the interplay between personal interest, extensive reading, and technology use. By emphasizing high-frequency vocabulary and personalized learning, educators can create engaging and effective language environments. Empowering students to take ownership of their learning through autonomy and interest-driven activities fosters both vocabulary growth and lifelong language proficiency.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) (Approval No. KMUTT-IRB-COE-2024-030). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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