

**The Saigon International
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GRADUATION THESIS

Major

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Title

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO
VOCABULARY LEARNING
STRATEGIES USED BY FIRST-
YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR
STUDENTS AT THE SAIGON
INTERNATIONAL
UNIVERSITY (SIU)**

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In recent years, there has been growing interest in exploring vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) among non-English major students. Several studies have investigated VLS usage, preferences, and effectiveness in different contexts and proficiency levels. Specifically, mastery of English vocabulary stands as a crucial element for successful communication (Brown, 2023). The focus of educational research has thus gradually shifted towards Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) and their influence on students' vocabulary acquisition process.

A study conducted by Nguyen and Tran (2022) investigated the impact of metacognitive strategies on vocabulary acquisition among non-English major students at a Vietnamese university. Different aspects of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) have been explored in research concerning non-English major students across diverse contexts. Their findings revealed a significant improvement in students' vocabulary knowledge when explicit VLS instructions were employed. Conversely, Le and Pham (2021) investigated the use and preference of cognitive strategies among the same demographic. They found that while these strategies were less frequently used compared to memory strategies, they were highly effective when used correctly.

Despite the growing body of research on VLS, there is limited research on the VLS preferences of non-English major students in Vietnam. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the VLS employed by second-year non-English major students at Sai Gon International University (SIU) and examine the correlation between these strategies

and students' proficiency levels. The findings can provide valuable insights into VLS usage in the Vietnamese EFL context and inform teaching practices to enhance vocabulary acquisition among non-English major students.

Rationale of Study

The investigation of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) is essential in second language acquisition, as it can contribute to effective and efficient vocabulary acquisition. Understanding VLS preferences can provide valuable insights into how learners approach vocabulary learning and inform teaching practices to enhance vocabulary acquisition among non-English major students. This study focuses on first-year non-English major students at Sai Gon International University (SIU) in Vietnam, a context where VLS usage has not been extensively explored. Investigating the VLS employed by these learners can help educators develop targeted teaching approaches and design suitable learning materials to promote efficient vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, exploring the relationship between VLS and students' proficiency levels can shed light on the effectiveness of different strategies based on learners' levels. This knowledge can empower learners to be conscious of their VLS preferences and select more effective strategies to enhance their vocabulary learning process. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the VLS preferences of first-year non-English major students at SIU and examine the correlation between these strategies and students' proficiency levels. The findings will advance our understanding the role of VLS in vocabulary learning and inform teaching practices in the Vietnamese EFL context, ultimately benefiting both educators and learners.

Research objectives

The objective of this research is to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies employed by first-year, non-English major students at Sai Gon International University (SIU), with a particular focus on understanding how individual differences among learners influence the choice and efficacy of these strategies. As language learning is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by a myriad of factors (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007), this research aims to shed light on two particularly influential elements: vocabulary learning strategies and learner individual differences.

Vocabulary learning strategies are cognitive, metacognitive, or socio-affective procedures employed by language learners to discover, create, store, recall, and use vocabulary (Schmitt, 1997; Cohen & Macaro, 2007). They can range from traditional strategies, like rote memorization and the use of bilingual dictionaries, to more contemporary ones facilitated by digital tools, such as language learning apps and online language communities (Tseng et al., 2020). Understanding the strategic behavior of students and how they negotiate vocabulary learning tasks can provide useful insights to educators for tailoring teaching methods that suit their students' learning styles and enhance vocabulary acquisition.

Individual differences among learners, such as their cognitive and affective factors, can significantly influence their learning experiences and outcomes (Dörnyei, 2005). Cognitive factors include intelligence, language aptitude, and memory, while affective factors entail motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence. Besides, personality traits, like extroversion and introversion, have also been found to impact the choice of vocabulary learning strategies (Nakata, 2011). By gaining a deeper understanding of these learner individual differences, educators can devise more personalized,

inclusive, and effective teaching approaches that respect and leverage the unique attributes of each student.

In addition, the research will tap into recent studies and sources from 2012 to present to stay current with the ongoing shifts in the field. By including these recent studies, the research aims to make a valuable contribution to the current discussions surrounding vocabulary learning strategies and the diverse characteristics of learners.

Ultimately, the findings from this research aim to address a lack of knowledge in the existing literature on vocabulary learning strategies among non-English major students, particularly in the Vietnamese context. It is expected that this research will help educators, curriculum designers, and language learners themselves by providing new insights and practical recommendations for enhancing vocabulary learning in university settings.

Research Question

1. What are the most preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) among first-year non-English major students at Saigon International University (SIU)?

Significance of the Study

The study of vocabulary learning strategies used by second-year non-English majors at Saigon International University (SIU) is important for several reasons.

Firstly, this study is significant because it addresses a gap in current research. While there are many studies on how to learn vocabulary in a second language, most of these studies focus on students who are majoring in English. However, students who are studying in fields other than English also need to learn English vocabulary, often with different requirements and challenges. Our study will provide new insights

into how these non-English majors learn vocabulary, which will be valuable to researchers in this field.

Secondly, this research is important for teachers and educators. By understanding how non-English majors learn vocabulary, teachers can better support these students in their learning. They can use the findings from our study to develop teaching methods and materials that align with the learning strategies of their students, making vocabulary learning more effective and engaging.

Thirdly, the findings of our study can be used to develop resources and services that help students learn vocabulary independently. For instance, if we find that students often use memory strategies to learn vocabulary, we can develop digital flashcards or other tools that support these strategies.

Lastly, this study is significant for the students themselves. By understanding which strategies are most effective for vocabulary learning, students can be more strategic and proactive in their own learning. They can try out different strategies, keep track of their progress, and ultimately improve their English vocabulary skills.

In conclusion, this study will contribute valuable knowledge to the field of second language learning, and directly benefit teachers, educators, and students at SIU.

Scope of the Study:

The scope of this study covers an exploration of the vocabulary learning strategies used by first-year non-English major students at Saigon International University (SIU). Participants consisted of 55 university students from various disciplines such as Business Administration, Logistics, Marketing, Psychology, Hospitality, and Computer Science. The age range of the participants was

approximately 19-20 years old, although there was some slight variation due to some students retaking courses or taking an extra year of study.

This study was limited to students who demonstrated a certain level of English proficiency. Proficiency was established in two ways: either the students submitted an IELTS certificate with a minimum score of 6.5, or they successfully completed a mock TOEIC test that assessed all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The results of the proficiency test were used to divide the students into classes ranging from A to N.

Despite the diverse academic disciplines represented in the sample, the common thread between all participants was the requisite level of English proficiency. This allowed the study to focus specifically on vocabulary learning strategies, as opposed to grappling with broader language comprehension issues. Nevertheless, the diverse backgrounds of the participants provided a rich backdrop for analyzing how vocabulary learning strategies may vary between different academic disciplines.

This study aimed to add to the body of knowledge on vocabulary learning strategies, particularly within a Vietnamese higher education context. The results could inform pedagogical practices and curriculum development in universities with diverse student populations. However, it should be noted that the findings may not be generalizable to all non-English major university students in Vietnam or elsewhere, given the specific student demographic and English proficiency requirements in this study.

The Organization of the Study

This research is organized into six comprehensive chapters, each serving a distinct role in the overall study:

Chapter 1: Introduction: This opening chapter provides an overview of the research, including the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose and significance of the study, research objectives, and research questions. It offers an insight into what the study is about and its relevance in the field of English language learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: This chapter presents a critical review of the relevant literature on vocabulary learning strategies and learner individual differences. It summarizes the main findings from previous research, establishes the theoretical framework for the study, and identifies gaps in the existing literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology: In this chapter, the research methods used in the study are thoroughly discussed. It covers the research design, participants, data collection tools, procedures for data collection, and methods of data analysis.

Chapter 4: Results: This chapter presents the results of the study in a clear and concise manner, including descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and responses from participants. The results are presented as they relate to the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion: The fifth chapter interprets the results in light of the research questions, comparing them with the findings from the literature review. The implications of these results for English language learning and teaching are also discussed.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: The final chapter concludes the study, summarizing the main findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

This chapter also reflects on the research process as a whole and how it contributes to the field of English language learning.

This structure ensures a logical progression from defining the research problem to presenting and interpreting the findings, ultimately providing a significant contribution to our understanding of vocabulary learning strategies among first-year non-English major students at Sai Gon International University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary

Definition of vocabulary

Vocabulary is a critical aspect of language learning and communication, encompassing far more than just a list of words. It is an intricate system of knowing

words, their meanings, forms, pronunciations, syntactic roles, and the ways they combine and interact in a particular language. In this brief discourse, we will delve into various contemporary definitions and aspects of vocabulary from different scholarly perspectives, bringing forward the richness and complexity of this fundamental language component.

According to Nation (2013), vocabulary is multifaceted and consists of form, meaning, and use. The 'form' involves understanding how words are pronounced and spelled, 'meaning' involves understanding the various connotations of a word, and 'use' involves knowing in which context to use which word. This definition is comprehensive, reflecting how vocabulary is much more than rote memorization of words.

Expanding on this definition, Schmitt (2014) illustrates vocabulary knowledge as an iceberg, where one's recognition of a word merely scratches the surface, while deep knowledge, including aspects of form, meaning, use, word parts, collocations, and connotations, lies beneath. This metaphor emphasizes the depth and complexity involved in truly understanding vocabulary.

Meanwhile, Zimmerman (2014) introduces the notion of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Receptive vocabulary refers to words that learners understand when they hear or see them, but may not use in their speech or writing. Productive vocabulary, on the other hand, refers to words that learners understand and use. This perspective of vocabulary delineates the active and passive aspects of word knowledge.

Webb and Nation (2017) additionally stress the importance of size, depth, and fluency of vocabulary knowledge. 'Size' refers to the quantity of words a person knows, 'depth' concerns how well they know each word, and 'fluency' concerns how quickly and confidently they can use these words. The authors argue that a balanced development of all these aspects is essential for overall language proficiency.

Adding to this, Thornbury (2017) introduces the notion of lexical phrases or chunks, which are combinations of multiple words such as idioms, collocations, and fixed expressions that operate as cohesive units conveying specific meanings. He argues that vocabulary knowledge also includes the understanding of these common word combinations, challenging the traditional view that vocabulary simply consists of individual words.

In 2021, Hiebert and Kamil took vocabulary understanding a step further, linking it to the concept of word consciousness, which refers to an individual's awareness and fascination with words and their meanings. They argued that cultivating this consciousness can improve vocabulary knowledge and enhance language and reading skills.

In conclusion, vocabulary knowledge is a complex, multifaceted construct. It's not just about knowing individual words, but understanding their form, meaning, and use, recognizing them in receptive and productive capacities, developing size, depth, and fluency, being aware of lexical phrases, and cultivating word consciousness. As language learning continues to evolve, these comprehensive perspectives on vocabulary provide valuable insights for both learners and educators.

The importance of vocabulary in English learning.

The importance of vocabulary in English language learning cannot be overstated. As outlined by Schmitt (2010), vocabulary is not only a critical component of language proficiency, but it is also central to communicative competence. Language learners cannot understand, convey, or express their thoughts effectively without a sufficient vocabulary base. Essentially, vocabulary is the cornerstone of language comprehension and use, making it a vital element in second language acquisition (SLA).

Additionally, Nation (2013) posits that vocabulary is integral to all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In listening and reading, it is the key to decoding meaning, while in speaking and writing, vocabulary is critical for the encoding process. Without an adequate vocabulary, learners may find it difficult to comprehend spoken and written language and may also struggle to express their thoughts and ideas effectively.

Schmitt's (2010) comprehensive model of vocabulary knowledge illustrates this point further. The model suggests that depth of vocabulary knowledge, which includes understanding various aspects of a word such as its meaning, form, and usage, significantly impacts a learner's ability to understand and produce language. This model presents vocabulary learning as a multi-dimensional process, emphasizing

that knowing a word is not simply about knowing its definition, but also understanding its connotations, collocations, and grammatical behavior.

Furthermore, Nation (2013) emphasizes the essential role of vocabulary size in determining a learner's overall language proficiency. He proposes that a larger vocabulary size facilitates greater understanding and production of language. Similarly, Milton (2009) and Laufer (2011) arrive at the same conclusion, establishing a correlation between language proficiency and the extent of an individual's vocabulary repertoire.

Comparing these two perspectives, it becomes clear that both depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge are critical for English language learning. While Schmitt (2010) underscores the importance of depth of vocabulary knowledge, highlighting the various dimensions of word knowledge, Nation (2013) accentuates the role of vocabulary size. Together, they paint a holistic picture of vocabulary learning, wherein both the quality (depth) and quantity (breadth) of vocabulary knowledge are crucial for achieving language proficiency.

In conclusion, vocabulary holds a paramount position in English language learning. It is not merely an aspect of language proficiency, but rather the backbone supporting all language skills and communicative abilities. Both the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge significantly impact a learner's overall language proficiency, and therefore, should be given due attention in language teaching and learning.

Factors affecting vocabulary acquisition

Vocabulary learning strategies.

Definition of VLS

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) are central to the acquisition of a second language. These strategies provide learners with methods to understand, and retain new words. As Schmitt (2010) describes, these techniques can be categorized into discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies assist learners in identifying the meaning of a new word, whereas consolidation strategies concentrate on embedding the newly acquired vocabulary into long-term memory.

Catalán (2013) presents a more elaborate categorization, dividing Vocabulary Learning Strategies into five groups: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Determination strategies involve learners figuring out the meaning of new words independently, while social strategies involve learning in collaboration with others. Memory strategies pertain to techniques employed for remembering new words, cognitive strategies focus on the analysis and comprehension of new words, and metacognitive strategies revolve around evaluating the learner's progress in vocabulary acquisition.

Nation (2013) offers a slightly different viewpoint. According to him, vocabulary learning strategies are categorized into four primary types: guessing, dictionary use, note-taking, and rehearsal. Guessing strategies involve learners attempting to derive meaning from the context, while dictionary use and note-taking involve more structured approaches to understand and remember new words.

Rehearsal strategies, similar to Catalán's memory strategies, involve repetition and review to commit words to long-term memory.

In comparing the three authors' classifications, there are evident overlaps. For instance, guessing strategies in Nation's taxonomy align with discovery strategies in Schmitt's and deterministic strategies in Catalán's classifications. Similarly, Catalán's memory strategies correspond to Nation's rehearsal strategies and a portion of Schmitt's consolidation strategies.

However, Catalán presents a more detailed categorization by adding social, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, emphasizing the importance of both interpersonal learning and self-reflection in the vocabulary learning process. This shows that while different scholars may present different terminologies or categories, the underlying essence of vocabulary learning strategies remains consistent.

Lastly, Guo (2017) provides another perspective by emphasizing the role of technology in vocabulary learning strategies. His classification divides strategies into digital and non-digital strategies, marking an evolution of the field in response to modern learning tools. This underscores the dynamic nature of VLS, which evolve with societal changes and advancements in learning technology.

In summary, Vocabulary Learning Strategies are varied and adaptive, depending on individual learning preferences, the sociocultural context, and available resources. Although these strategies are classified differently by various authors, they share the common goal of facilitating learners' understanding and retention of new words.

Schmitt's Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Schmitt's taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies is a widely used framework for understanding the different strategies that learners employ when acquiring vocabulary in a second language. The taxonomy was first proposed by Paul Nation and Batia Laufer in 1997 and was later expanded upon by Michael Schmitt in 2000. The taxonomy categorizes vocabulary learning strategies into five main categories: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies.

Determination Strategies (DET)

Determination strategies are those that help learners maintain their motivation and interest in vocabulary learning. These strategies include setting goals, making a commitment to learning, and developing positive attitudes towards the language and the learning process. Determination strategies are essential in vocabulary learning, as they help learners persist in the face of difficulties and setbacks.

Social Strategies (SOC)

Social strategies involve learners engaging with others to improve their vocabulary learning. These strategies may include asking for clarification, engaging in conversations, and seeking feedback from peers or teachers. Social strategies are particularly useful for learners who may not have many chances to utilize their English skills beyond the classroom setting.

Memory Strategies (MEM)

Memory strategies are those that help learners store and recall new vocabulary items. These strategies may include the use of repetition, visualization, or association. Memory strategies are critical in vocabulary learning by facilitating the transfer of new vocabulary items from short-term memory to long-term memory.

Cognitive Strategies (COG)

Cognitive strategies, as explained by Schmitt, which can be considered as memory strategies, involve more than just complex mental processes. These strategies encompass actions such as repetition and the utilization of mechanical methods for vocabulary study, which may involve maintaining vocabulary notebooks (p. 136).

Metacognitive Strategies (MET)

Metacognitive strategies are those that help learners monitor and regulate their own vocabulary learning. These strategies may include setting goals, planning and organizing vocabulary learning, and evaluating progress. Metacognitive strategies are particularly useful for learners who need to manage their own learning process and adapt their strategies as they progress.

While Schmitt's taxonomy has provided a useful framework for understanding Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), it has not been without criticism. For instance, Webb and Nation (2017) argue that the taxonomy is too broad and may lead to confusion as the categories are not mutually exclusive and there is significant overlap between them. They point out, for instance, that cognitive and metacognitive strategies both involve elements of planning, monitoring, and evaluating vocabulary learning. Furthermore, they suggest that determination

strategies could also be seen as a subset of metacognitive strategies, as both involve setting goals and managing the learning process. Another criticism comes from Gu (2003), who believes that Schmitt's taxonomy does not sufficiently take into account the role of context in vocabulary learning. Gu argues that learners' strategies can vary significantly depending on the learning context and the individual learner's personality, motivation, and language proficiency. Therefore, a taxonomy that doesn't take these factors into account may be too simplistic to accurately capture the complexity of vocabulary learning. Additionally, Zhang and Anual (2008) point out that while Schmitt's taxonomy classifies strategies into five categories, it does not provide a clear guide on how these strategies can be effectively implemented in different learning situations. They argue that it's not sufficient to simply categorize strategies, but it's also necessary to understand how these strategies can be applied in practice.

In summary, while Schmitt's taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies has been influential and widely used, there are concerns about its broad categorizations, lack of context considerations, and the practical application of the strategies it proposes.

Despite these criticisms, Schmitt's taxonomy remains a useful framework for understanding the different strategies that learners employ when acquiring vocabulary in a second language. By categorizing vocabulary learning strategies into distinct categories, the taxonomy serves as a beneficial starting point for both research and practical applications in vocabulary instruction. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that learners often utilize a combination of strategies from different categories and that the effectiveness of these strategies may depend on the learner's

individual needs and learning context. Memory strategies refer to the techniques and methods that individuals use to aid the retention and retrieval of information. These strategies play a crucial role in enhancing learning and academic performance. According to Dunlosky et al. (2013), using memory strategies can assist learners in encoding information with more efficiency, increasing retention over extended periods, and facilitating more efficient retrieval of the information when required.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Research site

This study is designed as a quantitative descriptive survey research. The main source of data is a self-administered questionnaire distributed to a targeted group of participants.

The population of this study consists of first-year non-English major students from Sai Gon International University (SIU). The sample size for the study is 55 students selected from English classes ranging from A to N. The rationale for choosing first-year students lies in the understanding that these students are at the beginning of their university journey, and their language learning strategies might still