Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Thai Grade 9 EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Lexical knowledge is a foundation of language learning and communication. To be a successful language learner, one should have a large vocabulary repertoire; one way to acquire it is through incidental reading. What is also considered salient during the reading process is the employment of appropriate strategies to tackle unknown vocabulary. However, a few research has been carried out on vocabulary learning strategies in an incidental vocabulary acquisition. This paper, therefore, aims to explore and identify the most frequently used strategies employed by successful students and how they achieved their lexical knowledge. Ten word-frequency controlled reading texts were given to thirty grade 9 EFL students to acquire thirty target words incidentally. Pre- and post-word translation tests taken by the students were analyzed in order to select top ten students who received the highest scores to participate in an in-depth oral interview. The students were interviewed individually about the most frequently used strategies to determine the meanings of the thirty target words. Data interpreted from the oral interviews indicated that the two most popular strategies adopted by the highest achievers were guessing word meaning from context and asking for L1 translation from their peers at 60% and 30% respectively. The reason for the adoption of the two strategies was that they were considered concrete and feasible strategies to apply during the reading comprehension process. In contrast, other vocabulary strategies including learning words from TV programs and product labels were employed the least frequently, at only 10%.

Key words: incidental vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary learning strategy, high vocabulary achiever, word-frequency controlled reading, word translation test
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Inadequate vocabulary knowledge remains a vital problem for most Thai EFL students. One reason might be the inadequacy of English language exposure. Numerous explicit techniques of vocabulary teaching have been employed to solve this problem, such as using the vocabulary card-card-box technique (Tassana-ngam, 1994), learning from a single meaning of target words, and deriving words meanings from context (Wimolkasem, 1992). In spite of its proven effectiveness, direct vocabulary instruction appears to be inadequate to equip learners in ESL/EFL classrooms with an adequate amount of demanded by most English textbooks used at most EFL secondary high schools (Nation & Waring, 1997; Waring, 2000). Given this concern, achieving a large vocabulary of L2 lexicon is likely to be mediated by the learner’s L2 literacy, i.e. by the exposure to the L2 vocabulary during the reading process. It is also desirable that vocabulary acquisition instruction should expose learners to every new item comprehensively, thereby embedding it deeply and solidly into their mental lexicon. Personalized vocabulary acquisition using authentic texts is therefore one of the most beneficial activities.

Research on ESL/ EFL reading has found that when learners engage in adequate and purposively prepared reading activities, they are incidentally able to develop their lexical repertoire (Waring & Takaki, 2003). In the reading process, beginning readers may encounter a number of unfamiliar words. Basically, as the learners process a text for a primary function of comprehending it, their vocabulary knowledge is usually enhanced such as their pronunciations, their spellings, and their derivations (Nation, 1990; Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). With a view to comprehending the texts, learners need to apply lexical processing strategies when exposed to unfamiliar words (Ahmed 1989; Fraser, 1999). A major outcome of the research into the strategies used by successful language learners was the conclusion that learners should be taught not only the language but also the learning strategies themselves (Ahmed, 1989; Nassaji, 2003).

Vocabulary learning strategies in incidental vocabulary learning are rarely examined. Therefore, the strategies employed by high achievers need to be examined along with the question of how success in achieving lexical gains interacts with, and is mediated by contextual support in texts. The strategies which learners decide to use should be determined by their analysis of the task at hand, their own learning characteristics, and the learning context. Hence, the current study attempted to explore vocabulary learning strategies which the high achievers adopted while acquiring thirty target words in the hope that the findings would provide some important implications to EFL pedagogy in Thailand. The research
question guided in this paper is “What strategies will the vocabulary high achievers use to
determine the target word definitions and achieve word comprehension?”

OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to examine the vocabulary learning strategies the top ten
successful students employed in order to determine the target word definitions as a result of
attending to word-frequency controlled reading materials.

TECHNICAL TERMS

(1) Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition is implicit vocabulary learning in which
learners are engaged in activities which focus on understanding a text rather than on
vocabulary alone.

(2) Word Frequency Controlled Reading refers to the ten reading texts containing
the thirty target words as well as the accompanying exercises. The thirty target words
were included in each piece of reading materials.

(3) Word Translation Test refers to the L2 to L1 meaning translation pre- and post-
tests.

(4) High Vocabulary Achiever refers to top ten students who gain the highest scores
both in pre- and post-tests.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

To explore the high achievers’ vocabulary learning strategies, this study adopted
Ahmed’s taxonomy (1989) of vocabulary learning strategies which seems to be the most
extensive, and has the advantage of being organized around an established scheme of
language learning strategies. Ahmed postulated five major categories of vocabulary learning
strategies. Macro strategies are broad general approaches to vocabulary learning. Examples
of macro strategies are the use of information sources, dictionary use, memorization, practice,
and other strategies used. Each macro strategy subsumes several micro strategies concerned
with specific learner behaviors that develop out of macro strategies. The five major types of
vocabulary learning strategies are shown in Table 1.
Table 1: The Five Major Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies
(Ahmed, 1989: 10-11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro Strategies</th>
<th>Micro Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information Sources</td>
<td>- asking peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- guessing words from context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- asking teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- asking for L1 translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dictionary Use</td>
<td>- using monolingual dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- using bilingual dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- looking up word meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Memorization</td>
<td>- searching for example use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- writing and repeating new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learned words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- using L2 synonyms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Practice</td>
<td>- using L1 equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- using new words in real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- asking others to verify Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Note-Taking</td>
<td>- organizing words by meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- using L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- using word derivations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

Prior to data collection, thirty grade 9 students studying in a secondary school in Southern Thailand were exposed to ten word-frequency controlled reading. Word translation tests were administered to the students before and after the reading treatment to assess incidental word gains from the reading of the thirty target words by measuring the students’ ability to produce English-to-Thai word translation. Data obtained from the pre-and the post-tests were quantitatively analyzed to discover only ten most successful students: their scores ranged from 80%-93.3%, their scores on the pre-test were 4.34% and their mean scores on the post-test were 85.6%.

Materials

Prior to material design, the researcher and the two teachers worked on 3 sets of word lists: the Headwords of the Academic Word List, the 1st 2000 Words of English, and the Second 1000 Words of the General Service List (Nation, 2002) in order to identify unknown words. These three sets of word lists were considered as the most common English vocabulary used in real life exposure as well as academic areas for EFL learners (Nation &
Waring, 1997). The list of 60 words included sixteen verbs, eleven adjectives, eleven adverbs, eleven nouns, and eleven prepositions. The vocabulary checklist was administered one month before designing reading materials. To ensure that the target words were unknown to the subjects, the subjects then were required to identify all of their possible unknown words. The top thirty least unknown words to them were selected as the appropriate target words for the study. This final set of the 30 target words consisted of sixteen verbs, eight adjectives, four adverbs, one noun and one preposition.

Reading Materials

The ten reading materials were selected and adapted from three books: 1) an unpublished English course book of Thidanukhro School 2005, 2) Adventures in Reading & Writing 3 (Billings et al.,2002), and 3) Inside Out for Pre-Intermediate (Kay et al.,2002). The researcher and the two instructors chose these reading texts on the basis of topic, difficulty, and length, in order to suit the learners’ level. All ten texts (approximately 500 words each) were slightly rewritten in order to contain the target words but the topics were not altered so in this way the reading materials were called “word-frequency controlled reading”. In addition, comprehension exercises, including short answer, multiple choices, true/false, and text summary were created for each reading text.

Pre- and Post-Tests

An assessment of lexical gains for this experiment was word translation tests (L2 to L1) used as pre- and post-tests. The tests were designed to assess incidental word gains from having encountered the thirty target words in the readings by measuring the students’ ability to produce English-to-Thai word translations. On the post-test, all thirty items were rearranged into reverse order in order to avoid the test recognition effect.

Oral Interview

An oral interview was conducted to obtain in-depth information on how the top ten highest achievers acquired the target words. The interview questions aimed at probing their individual strategies and finding out if there were any factors influencing their incidental word learning. There were two questions guided in the interview session e.g. “(1) What did you do when you encountered unfamiliar words while reading?” and “(2) Apart from reading the texts, how did you know the meaning of these target words?”
During the interview session, the list of thirty target words was presented to each interviewee. The interviewees were then asked to explain what strategies they frequently employed during the reading process in order to unlock the target words’ meanings and to comprehend them. The interviews were conducted in the subject L1 (Thai) to avoid misunderstanding of any directions and the interview form was also prepared in Thai to assist the researcher in eliciting more detailed responses from the interviewees. The interview sessions occupied approximately 20 minutes per one interviewee.

Procedures

Data Collection

The experiment was carried out with one class of grade 9 students at a high school in southern Thailand during five-week instruction. During the experiment, the students received a total of ten periods (50 minutes for each) of EFL reading course. The reading treatment was conducted by the researcher in an actual extensive English reading course. The experiment involved having the subjects read ten texts-- two per week as well as do the reading exercises. The course focused on reading comprehension. No specific vocabulary instruction was conducted. The overall data collection procedure consisted of the following 4 phases: (1) administration of the pre-test, (2) provision of reading treatment, (3) administration of the post-test, and (4) conducting an oral interview.

Data Analysis

The data on the pre- and post-tests were collected, tallied and analyzed with the SPSS/PC program. Percentages and mean scores on the pre- and post-tests were calculated to identify the gains from the ten word-frequency controlled reading. A paired sample t-test was utilized to determine significant differences between the mean scores on the pre- and post-tests. The data obtained from the oral interview were analyzed by categorizing and further quantified using frequencies and percentages. The data obtained from the interview session were combined and quantified to calculate the mean values of the most frequent strategies the top ten highest achievers used. In order to determine which strategies the top ten highest achievers used in incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading, the mean values were used to determine the most frequently used type of vocabulary learning strategy employed overall by the subjects, as well as their frequency.
## FINDINGS

Table 3: Summary of Four Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies, from Data Obtained from the Oral Interview Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Vocabulary Learning Strategies</th>
<th>No. of Target Words</th>
<th>No. of Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Information Sources</td>
<td>1.1 guessing from context</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 asking for L1 translation from peers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 asking for L1 translation from tutors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4 asking for L1 translation from siblings</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 asking for L1 translation from teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.6 asking for L1 translation from parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>7.48</td>
<td>2.5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Dictionary Use</td>
<td>2.1 using bilingual dictionary (Eng-Th)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 using monolingual dictionary (Eng-Eng)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>2.5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Memorization and Practice</td>
<td>3.1 searching for example use</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 writing and repeating new learned words</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.3 learning from familiar roots/stems</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.4 learning from synonym/antonym</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.5 analyzing the word by its suffix</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.6 determining type of word</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.5 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Other Strategies</td>
<td>4.1 encountering while taking other tests</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 encountering while learning other subjects</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 encountering on TV</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4 learning from a product label</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.25 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.50</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.93 (19.3%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results from the responses in the oral interview are presented in Table 3. It can be seen that overall, each vocabulary strategies in the list was employed for almost eight out of 30 target words (mean = 7.5) by the top ten highest achievers. Each category of vocabulary learning strategies was employed by one to two high achievers on average (mean = 1.93). The most frequently employed strategies were consulting information sources and dictionary use, both at 25% especially the sub-strategies of guessing from context, which was the most frequently used at 60%, asking peers for L1 translation, and using a bilingual dictionary at 30%. The least employed strategy was in the “other” category, at 12.5%. Sub-strategies in this category included encountering the word on TV, learning it from a product label, and encountering it while learning other subjects, all at 10%, and encountering the word while taking other tests, at 20%. Meanwhile, the memorization and practice category was only a moderately-used strategy by the successful students, at 15%. This included searching for
examples of use, writing and repeating new learned words, and learning from familiar roots/stems, at 20%.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study were consistent with previous research with respect to the types of the vocabulary learning strategies employed by the top ten vocabulary achievers: contextual clues, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, using relevant background knowledge, and asking others to verify word meanings (Ahmed, 1989; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Fraser, 1999; Nassaji, 2003).

Information Sources

With regard to guessing from context, it made up a significant part of the students’ strategy use in dealing with unknown words. The students agreed that using contextual cues was a useful strategy to obtain the meaning of unfamiliar words. Sixty percent of the ten most successful students indicated that they had acquired the target words by guessing from context. Six out of ten used context cues most of the time when unfamiliar words impeded their attempts at comprehending a text. Students A, B, and C tended to make intelligent guesses about a word’s meaning before using any other strategies. Student B found nine unfamiliar words within two passages, and she always tried to infer their meanings from the context. She re-read the surrounding sentences for a particular word she did not know the meaning of, in order to pick up clues that might be helpful in figuring out the meaning of that word. The use of dictionary look-up behavior and translation, as well as strategies concerned with anticipating content, guessing word meanings from contextual clues, integrating information, using relevant background knowledge, and understanding overall reading content are all involved when a reader tries to make sense of a text (Ahmed 1989; Fraser, 1999). If word meanings are not readily identifiable in a text, these strategies are what will allow a reader to infer or search for their meanings (Rott, 2007). The students also reported that they did not attempt to use contextual clues if they lacked basic knowledge about the surrounded context. According to the interview, the participants pointed out that:

Student A

“I tried to guess certain target words’ meanings in sentences in which the words were surrounded by familiar vocabulary and context.”
Student B
“I usually figured out the target words’ meanings in order to understand what the sentence was about in general.”

Student C
“At the beginning, I tried to figure out the context of a particular word. Then I guessed its meaning to obtain the exact meaning.”

Likewise, Students D and E made good use of context, but they also employed many other vocabulary strategies. Students D and E reported that using monolingual dictionary provided them the ease of comprehending the target words when the surrounding context was not make any sense to them. This was in contrast to Student F, who consistently employed the strategy of using context clues every time an unfamiliar word obstructed her understanding. It was especially apparent in one of participants, as she mentioned:

Student F
“I always guessed the meanings of unknown words from contextual clues in a text by considering the general idea of each sentence. I would gradually come to know their meanings after encountering them a few times (at least three times).”

Furthermore, three participants (30%) relied on the strategy of asking for L1 translation from their peers about some of the unfamiliar words they read in the passages. Student B, H and J always liked to ask their classmates for the meaning of the words so that they could exchange information, and learn from each other. One of them reported that:

Student H
“When reading, I usually asked my classmates for the meanings of unknown words. We can learn from each other. I would always teach my classmates the word if they don’t understand. If this did not work out, I would look up their meanings in a dictionary”.

Student G and C shared their experience of asking her English tutors as a source of help for the meaning of new vocabulary: “I always ask my English tutor for better explanation if I don’t understand the word” (Student G).

Student I and F also mentioned that they learned new words by discussing with and learning from his siblings who were smarter than her. “I learned a lot of vocabulary from my
sisters and brothers. Some of my siblings were very smart and they taught me how to use and say the word clearly” (Student F).

Dictionary Use

Dictionaries are considered helpful for EFL learners but they are difficult to use properly. The skills needed to use a dictionary well will depend on learners’ purpose (Ahmed 1989). It is important to remember, though, that using dictionary might be not efficient for knowing the exact context in which the word is being used, so the learners would have to know the knowledge of the language as well (Nassaji, 2003). For example, they need to use their knowledge of the language to get information about the grammar of the word they want look up and they need to check the meaning given by the dictionary to see if it fits in the context. As pointed out by Hulstijn (2003), a reader must be familiar with 98% of the words in a passage in order to successfully guess unfamiliar word meanings from context. This conclusion was also confirmed in the interviews. One student from the group remarked, Student B

“When I started the first reading, I encountered too many unknown words in one paragraph; I was discouraged and gave up guessing their meanings from their context. I decided to look up their meanings in a dictionary instead”.

Dictionary use was also very popular with the successful EFL readers for their comprehension and vocabulary learning. The participants sometimes consulted dictionaries only when the unfamiliar words appeared repeatedly or when the new words were crucial to their understanding of the passages. Dictionaries were used to aid comprehension. More extended dictionary usage strategies involve not only the meanings of new words, but also set phrases, word usage, and other pertinent information about the words for EFL readers (Ahmed, 1989; Nassaji, 2003).

Using a bilingual dictionary is more convenient for the participants than a monolingual one because it is easier to learn the meaning of English words by finding the equivalent translation in their native language. They mentioned that they did not need to translate the meanings from English to Thai if they looked it up in a bilingual dictionary. This reflected the way they comprehended English texts: they translated the printed words in English into their native language (Fraser, 1999; Nassaji, 2003). This was especially apparent in one of the participants, Student I. She interpreted the texts in chunks of ideas, usually a
phrase or a sentence. Immediately after reading each chunk, she translated it into her mother tongue by looking up from a bilingual dictionary. As she indicated:

Student I

“I usually checked the meanings of unknown words in a bilingual dictionary again after reading. I consider this strategy the best for me to understand the words.”

Twenty-five percent of the students reported that translation was very useful for vocabulary learning. They commented that dictionary use was the best way to quickly translate word meanings, as well as helping them to easily understand word definitions. Bilingual dictionary use was more frequent used by the interviewees (30%). However, the students admitted that monolingual dictionaries were also useful to them. Students A and J occasionally turned to a monolingual dictionary rather than a bilingual one. Interestingly, this observation could indicate that these three participants, unlike their peers who always preferred a bilingual dictionary as their primary strategy, actually processed the written input entirely in the target language (English). They did not see any need to translate the concepts they absorbed from the text; instead, they actually thought in English, and if they were significantly obstructed by lexical items, only then they did turn to a dictionary, but always a monolingual one.

Student A

“I chose a monolingual dictionary to look up the use of the word “consider” because I thought it provided more examples than the bilingual one.”

Of the ten participants, Student B, C and I combined the use of a bilingual dictionary with guessing from contextual clues to comprehend target words. Although a monolingual dictionary was available, they preferred the bilingual one. Student I, for example, almost always consulted a bilingual dictionary. She identified target words and other content words as unfamiliar, and frequently consulted the dictionary. For the words-- familiar, gather, however, and therefore- she used context clues, and for three others she combined the use of a dictionary and context clues or skipped the words altogether. Similarly, Student H encountered more than thirty unknown words in the two passages, and consulted a bilingual dictionary for twenty of the target words. For the rest, she combined the bilingual dictionary and a monolingual dictionary, or simply skipped them. Such a pattern of strategy use was very similar to the one employed by Student H, who found thirty words which she did not know the meanings of.
Two participants used a monolingual dictionary as their main vocabulary learning strategies. Of the thirty unfamiliar words they encountered, five words were dealt with by means of a monolingual dictionary. The participants also consulted a bilingual dictionary to look up the meanings of some other difficult words. Occasionally, when having difficulty in fitting one of the meanings into the context in the passage, one of the students turned to the bilingual dictionary, hoping that the translated meaning would be less problematic.

One of the students said, “When I wanted to find out the different shades of meaning and to understand which meaning was used in which context, I would choose a bilingual dictionary to find the appropriate usage of a word” (Student J). Student J also mainly depended on a monolingual dictionary for the same reason as Student A, i.e. she did not need to think about the same concept twice in her native language and the target language, respectively. In addition, she mentioned more comprehensive entries and a clearer definition as reasons why consulting a monolingual dictionary was her preferred vocabulary strategy.

Memorization and Practice

Twenty percent of the interviewees (Student E and G) reported that they kept personal vocabulary notes in which they wrote new words, their definitions, translations, and examples. Another 20% pointed out that they wrote down all new words they came across and tried to search for examples of their usage. In addition, while another 20% of the students (Student F and E) noticed word roots and stems, from which they felt that multiple meanings and multiple dimensions of meanings (referential, syntactic, pragmatic, and emotional) could be decoded. As student F pointed out:

Student F

“When I saw unknown words, I often looked at the familiar words and the context in general. If I still could not get the meaning, I sometimes looked at their roots. Then I tried to work out the meanings from these roots”.

Ten percent of the interviewees predicted the meaning of unfamiliar words when they were used with an example of a familiar word and the unknown words were paired with synonyms or other closely related words during reading. One student reported that she attempted to comprehend some words by first recognizing stems, to which affixes (prefixes or suffixes) had been added. Student C reported that:
Student D

“I sometimes referred to previous familiar meanings for particular words. I sometimes determined the words’ prefixes and suffixes to get their meanings. I think this way is easier than memorization alone.”

One student out of ten considered that thinking of a picture or imagining a look-alike word helped her to remember a word and its meaning. She could break the word down into a more familiar word. She could then associate the word “however,” for example, with introducing different idea. Moreover, she also analyzed texts by inferring the authors’ moods (ironic, funny, and serious), which helped her to obtain the meanings of unknown words. As she said:

Student D

“Many English words have similar meanings and pronunciations. Therefore, I listed some words which might be related to the unknown words. I also studied them, and their synonyms and antonyms.”

When the students tried to comprehend the words, 10% of them determined the words’ type by looking at their semantic functions in context. For instance, the words “achievement,” “spontaneous,” and “eventually” were guessed by the students as being noun, adjective, and adverb respectively, due to their usage in sentences. One of the participants reported that:

Student J

“At the beginning, I tried to determine the part of speech of an unknown word. Then I would try to guess its meaning. If I could not understand it, I would then look up its meaning in a bilingual dictionary.”

Other Strategies

Another way of learning the target words was from having encountered them while taking other tests. Twenty percent of the students (Student H and I) had noticed the words “complex,” “however,” “establish,” and “indicate” on their National Test (NT). One student concluded that the words she encountered on the NT test might be important for her to pass her school’s tests, so she noted them down to study later on. As she indicated:
Student H

“When I encountered the word “process” during the reading treatment, I realized that I had seen it on the NT test. Thus, I thought I could understand what the word means because I have noted the word down in my vocabulary notebook.”

Student I

“I had encountered the two target words in some tests and exercises before attending the reading treatment and I found that they were difficult to remember, so I recorded them in my notebook to find out their meaning.”

Interestingly, one of the top ten highest achievers indicated that they encountered the words “concentrate” and “process” while studying in a science class. They gradually learned these words from their science teacher, so this previous exposure helped them comprehend the words better when they saw them in the reading. The two participants reported that:

Student J

“When I encountered the words “process” and “concentrate” during the reading treatment, I suddenly realized that I had encountered them before in a science class in which I have paid good attention to these words. Therefore, I thought I could guess their meanings from the texts.”

As useful aids to learning English, one student noted that TV programs, product labels, and other course books helped him learn new words incidentally. One of the ten students pointed out that she had heard the words “complex” and “reveal” from cosmetics’ advertisements on TV. Incidentally, she determined the word meanings from pictures and their descriptions on TV.

Student E

“I myself like watching cable TV; this helped me learn the word, “complex” and “reveal,” from an advertisement about women’s skincare products.”

Furthermore, one participant (10%) saw on a product label (for ice cubes), the word “unique,” so this helped her figure out its meaning. Two respondents reported that:
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results concerning the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies employed by successful students, four essential issues were revealed. First, the overall vocabulary learning strategies the top ten highest vocabulary achievers used most frequently suggested that they considered comprehension of the target words in the reading texts important to processing the texts. This finding has some implications for enhancing vocabulary learning strategies at the secondary educational level in Thailand. First, it is essential that vocabulary learning strategies be inserted into the syllabi of reading courses in secondary schools. This has also been recommended in many anecdotal and personal reports from the reviewed literature mentioned in the initial part of this paper. Currently, as students barely know how to cope with unfamiliar words, they definitely require some instruction on this. Explicit instruction of vocabulary learning strategies may be expected to assist them in gaining higher levels of proficiency in reading. Second, it might be misleading to consider all learners alike and to assume that all of them can use the same vocabulary learning strategies with an equal degree of effectiveness. One particular vocabulary learning strategies may work best for a certain learner, but another learner might achieve the same level of success in obtaining meaning by means of a completely different strategy. It is therefore suggested that learners be encouraged to practice different types of vocabulary strategies to find out which are the most suitable for them.

Guessing from context is probably one of the most useful skills ESL/EFL learners can acquire and apply, both inside and outside the classroom. In order to improve and develop this skill, vocabulary guessing tasks should be integrated as often as possible into reading activities. This, however, can be more effective after a global or gist understanding of a text has been established.

From the data obtained from the oral interview sessions, it was found that among the four vocabulary learning strategies (information sources, dictionary use, memorization and practice, and others), the use of information sources was the most popular among the top ten most successful students, being employed at a rate of 25% by the top ten achievers. The subjects under investigation were well aware of the importance of incidental vocabulary acquisition and the associated vocabulary learning strategies. These positive feelings towards
incidental vocabulary learning are helpful for learners’ vocabulary development. Teachers should be encouraged to help students to expand their conscious involvement in the learning process. Teachers should be sure to choose teaching materials, teaching methods, and techniques that match learners’ interests, as well as promoting their learning strategies. Therefore, incidental vocabulary learning can be a great supplement to intentional learning. Learners should be aware that opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning can occur in places other than in textbooks.

In addition, teachers should focus on helping learners to develop vocabulary learning strategies to better comprehend and learn vocabulary incidentally, and the final goal of these vocabulary learning strategies should be to help the learners continue to learn new words and increase their vocabulary size. However, the information on vocabulary learning strategies which the subjects employed was obtained purely from oral interviews. Other data collection methods such as questionnaires and observation and other groups of learners e.g. low proficiency as well as from high vocabulary achievers under a certain type of vocabulary treatment should be included in further investigations to determine if the results are the same.

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