

A Survey of Vocabulary Learning Strategies of English for Business Communications (EBC) Students at NUIC

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Abstract

This study investigated the receptive vocabulary size levels and the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) of ninety-three Bachelor of Arts in English for Business Communications students of Naresuan University International College (NUIC), Thailand. This identified the most and the least frequently used VLS of the participants and the differences of the VLS used by participants with high receptive vocabulary size as compared to participants with low receptive vocabulary size. However, there was nobody who had a high receptive vocabulary size, so the participants with medium and with low receptive vocabulary sizes were compared. All participants completed Nation's vocabulary level test from 1st 1000 to 10th 1000, and the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire. The methodology used in this study was the mixed method, and the T-test was the main statistical treatment test used in analyzing the collected data using the 0.01 level of significance. The results of this study showed that the most frequently used VLS were the dictionary strategy, the autonomy strategy, and the guessing strategy and the least frequently used VLS were the selective attention strategy, the memory strategy, and the note-taking strategy. All in all, though there were slight differences in the VLS used by the compared groups, but based on the statistical treatment of the data, there were no significant differences in the vocabulary learning strategies used by the medium-level group and the low-level group.

Keywords: nuic, vocabulary, vocabulary learning strategies, language acquisition, receptive vocabulary size

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1. Introduction

Teaching Critical Reading becomes a very challenging task if most of your students don't have the desire to read. Based on my observation, there are two types of readers in my class. If they were not reluctant, then, they were struggling readers. To illuminate on this, Sarawit (2009, p.1) defined reluctant readers as "learners who only read when necessary even though they find reading in English enjoyable and useful while struggling readers read when necessary but they have a very low comprehension of the coverage text that they read." Although the difficulty of understanding the vocabulary used was the usual problem that they encounter, but being college students and foreign language learners I am expecting them to be responsible for their own learning and find their ways of understanding the vocabulary used so they can fully understand what they are reading.

In addition, Krashen (1989, p.440) added that "foreign language learners realize that knowing new words are necessary for mastering a target language. However, in contrast to the foregoing, most of EBC students said that since there were a lot of words that they need to understand, they end up losing their interest to read. In this vein, it can be said that finding difficulty in the vocabulary used is the common problem among foreign language learners as Michael McCarthy mentioned in an interview for Cambridge Connection in 2001 as cited by Fan (2003, p.222) that "vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and vocabulary is the biggest problem for most learners." Relatively, Asgari & Mustapha (2013) and Amirian & Heshmatifar (2013) supported McCarthy's claim.

Additionally, Seddigh (2012) cited Benson's (2001) study that a way of helping learners in taking charge of their own learning is to consider the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) since it has become a vital part in language acquisition. Following Benson's line of thought, this study explored and investigated the receptive vocabulary size; the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies of all English for Business Communications (EBC) students of Naresuan University International College (NUIC). Additionally, this study also analyzed the differences of VLS used by participants with medium and with low receptive vocabulary size.

2. Review of Literature

Being familiar with a lot of words in English is essential in English reading and comprehension. That is to say, the more words a student knows, the better for that student to understand a text. Such was corroborated by Anderson & Freebody (1981), Singer (1965), and Davis (1944) by saying that the vocabulary size of a learner is a strong predictor of reading comprehension. This was attested by Baumann et al (2003), RAND Reading Study Group (2002), and National Reading Panel (2000) claiming that there is a strong, positive, and reciprocal relationship between word knowledge and reading comprehension. Additionally, the studies made by Beglar & Hunt (1999); Laufer (1998); Laufer & Nation (1995); Astika (1993); Laufer (1992); Hirsh & Nation (1992) showed that the size of students' vocabulary correlate closely with reading comprehension. Though, Pearson et al. (2007) point out that word knowledge and reading comprehension are complex and cannot easily be described as one causing the other because teaching words which are unfamiliar before reading the text does not guarantee comprehension. This was supported by Johnson & Johnson

(2012) suggesting that to know a target word, learners need to see the target word in different contexts and learn how its meaning relates to the words around it in order to learn it thoroughly. So, Texas Reading Initiative (2000) concludes that students who simply memorize word meanings frequently have trouble applying the information in definitions and often make mistakes about the meanings.

Since knowing a word doesn't just rely on memorization alone, we can say that knowing a word only means that knowing the full understanding of it is indeed very essential. This holds true for Read (2000) claiming that vocabulary knowledge includes several aspects like the breadth of the word knowledge and the depth of the word knowledge. To shed light on the two aspects of vocabulary knowledge, Shen et al (2008) explained that breadth of the word knowledge in the second language learning is based on the learner's knowledge about the a specific word while depth of the word knowledge isn't just about knowing the meaning of that specific word but also knowing a great deal about its components like pronunciation, spelling, meaning, register, grammatical features, derivations, register, and appropriateness. As regards to vocabulary knowledge, it can be noted that it plays a very important role because vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are highly, and positively, correlated as shown in the various research papers that were reviewed in this study.

Furthermore, collecting and knowing the receptive vocabulary size of the participants in this study was very essential. Hence, in order to get the participants receptive vocabulary size, a vocabulary size test was administered to establish their receptive vocabulary sizes, and right after that, the study's questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies was distributed.

It is interesting to note that the vocabulary size test was created and developed by Paul Nation to provide a reliable, accurate, and comprehensive measure of a learner's vocabulary size from the 1st 1000 to the 14th 1000 word families of English. In this study, only the 1st 1000 to 10th 1000 were administered for 30 minutes. This was so because Nation (2012) clearly stated that VST is a measure of knowledge not fluency, and the test typically takes 40 minutes to sit for 140 item and around 30 minutes to complete the 100 item test. Hence, to get the 100 items, the 1st to 10th 1000 were given to categorize the participants with high, medium, and low receptive vocabulary size in English.

Another thing was that Elgort (2011) suggested that the bilingual version of the vocabulary size test could increase to around 10 percent higher on scores as compared to the monolingual version. In the same token, Karami (2012) supported Elgort's claim by stating that the bilingual version of the vocabulary size test avoids complexities because the items in it provide simple word equivalent in their first language, and of course, due to the fact that participants are highly proficient in their first language. Even though Nation didn't include Thai version of the vocabulary size test, the VST that would be administered in this study was translated into Thai.

Normally, a learner who can perform certain tasks like reading a novel, academic texts, newspapers, watching movies, and listening to friendly conversations in a foreign language needs a receptive vocabulary of 8,000 to 9,000 word families (Nation, 2006). Relatively, Laufer (2013) said that the converging results of the studies on reading comprehension suggest that there are two thresholds for

comprehending authentic written texts. The most favorable however, is the knowledge of 8000 word families yielding the coverage of 98% (including proper nouns) and a minimal one, which is having around 5000 word families yielding the coverage of 95% (including proper nouns).

In other words, those who would fall into the high group would mean that they got a receptive vocabulary size ranging from 8000 to 10000. Those who would fall into the medium group got a receptive vocabulary size of 5000-7900, and lastly, the low group would range from 0-4900.

Though the vocabulary size test is a measure of participants' receptive vocabulary size, it is interesting to note that the scores of the participants provide a little indication of how well those words could be used in speaking and writing (Nation & Berglar, 2007). In addition to, Klare (1974) pointed out that the participants' scores are only and rough indication of how well they can read.

As regards to vocabulary learning strategies, Bernardo & Gonzales (2008) defined it the strategy that a learner employs to reach a certain goal or task. Kafipour (2011) also added that it is any technique or tool that is used to learn vocabulary quickly, easily, and independently.

In that note, the vocabulary learning strategies classification system that was used in this study was adapted from the categorization employed by Seddigh & Shokrpur (2012) which was also adapted from the study conducted by Jones (2006). As for classification system used in this study, they were classified into eight categories. Those classifications were as follows: the dictionary strategy, the guessing strategy, the study preferences strategy, the memory strategy, the autonomy strategy, the note-taking strategy, the selective attention strategy, and the social strategy.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were all English for Business Communications (EBC) students of Naresuan University International College. A total of 93 students participated in this study.

3.2 Instrument

Three instruments were used in this study. First was the VST developed by Paul Nation; second was the VLS questionnaire employed by Seddigh & Shokrpur (2012) which was also adapted other studies conducted by Jones (2006), Fan (2003), Nation (2001), Schmitt (2000), Gu & Johnson (1996), O'Malley & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990); and third was interview.

Regarding VST, the synonym choices were translated in Thai to get at least 10% higher on scores. It is interesting to note that Nation's VST covers 14th 1000 word families with a total of 140 items. However, this study only gave the 1st 1000 to 10th 1000.

As for VLS questionnaire, it had 41 items and each item had to be answered based on five-point Likert scale. Additionally, each item asked was related to students' approach to vocabulary learning and development

The interview was also conducted to all participants to enable to support and better interpret the results of the gathered data.

Statistical treatments were applied using SPSS in finding the Mean, the standard deviation, and the T-test using the 0.01 level of significance.

3.3 Procedure

Following Nation's standard operating procedure, the VST was administered for 30 minutes and another 30 for answering VLS. After the VST and VLS were gathered, checked, counted, tabulated and computed, the participants were scheduled for an interview to get some feedback on the different items presented in the questionnaire.

4. Results

4.1 Receptive vocabulary size distribution of the participants

Level Group	Frequency
High	0
Medium	49
Low	44
Total	93

As what can be shown in the table, there was no participant who belonged to the high group. On the other hand, there were 49 participants in the medium group, and 44 participants in the low group. Since there was nobody in the high receptive vocabulary size group, so the participants with the medium receptive vocabulary size and the low receptive vocabulary size were compared instead.

4.2 The most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies of the participants

Overall Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by All Participants

Strategy	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Dictionary	89	2.86	4.57	3.7705	.40096
Autonomy	93	1.00	5.00	3.7097	.71598
Guessing	93	2.00	5.00	3.6022	.79591
Social	93	1.33	5.00	3.5914	.70046
Study Preferences	93	1.00	4.67	3.5197	.59682
Note-taking	92	1.50	4.67	3.4384	.61261
Memory	91	2.31	4.69	3.4100	.46636
Selective attention	93	2.00	5.00	3.1398	.64703
Total	86	2.32	4.28	3.5182	.36678

Based on the computed descriptive statistics of the vocabulary learning strategies of all the participants as shown in the table, the dictionary strategy leads among all of the

strategies with an overall mean of 3.7705 (SD = .40096). It is followed by the autonomy strategy with an overall mean of 3.7097 (SD = .71598). In addition, the guessing strategy ranked third with an overall mean of 3.6022 (.79591). The social strategy took the fourth place in the vocabulary learning strategies used by the English for Business Communications students of NUIC with an overall mean of 3.5914 (SD = .70046). The fifth strategy that, is being practiced by the participants, is no other than the study preferences strategy with an overall mean of 3.5197 (SD = .59682). Furthermore, the note-taking strategy got an overall mean of 3.4384 (SD = .61261) and the memory strategy had a mean of 3.4100 (SD = .46636). Hence, of all the vocabulary learning strategies, the least used strategy, that is practiced by all participants, is no other than the selective attention strategy which received an overall mean of 3.1398 (SD = .64703).

The overall mean of all the strategies is 3.5182 with a standard deviation of .36678. Hence, the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy is the dictionary strategy, and the least used is the selective attention strategy.

4.3 Strategies which are frequently used by participants with medium and with low receptive vocabulary size

Overall Vocabulary Learning Strategies used by Medium-Level Group

Strategy	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Autonomy	44	1.00	5.00	3.8682	.71391
Dictionary	43	3.00	4.57	3.8007	.42302
Guessing	44	2.00	5.00	3.6818	.77077
Social	44	1.33	5.00	3.5379	.75471
Note-taking	44	2.00	4.67	3.4621	.58277
Study Preferences	44	1.00	4.67	3.4470	.68932
Memory	42	2.54	4.69	3.4341	.48437
Selective Attention	44	2.00	5.00	3.1818	.64079
Total	41	2.32	4.28	3.5460	.37249

As shown, the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy among the medium group is 'Autonomy' (M = 3.8682; SD = .71391), the least frequently used is 'Selective attention' (M = 3.1818; DS =.64079).

Overall Vocabulary Learning Strategies used by Low-Level Group

Strategy	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Dictionary	46	2.86	4.43	3.7422	.38169
Social	49	2.33	5.00	3.6395	.65205
Study Preferences	49	2.33	4.67	3.5850	.49782
Autonomy	49	2.00	5.00	3.5673	.69444
Guessing	49	2.00	5.00	3.5306	.81910
Note-taking	48	1.50	4.33	3.4167	.64412
Memory	49	2.31	4.31	3.3893	.45438
Selective Attention	49	2.00	4.33	3.1020	.65689
Total	45	2.63	4.28	3.4928	.36382

The strategy used most by the students in the low-level of the vocabulary levels test was 'Dictionary' (M= 3.7422; SD= .38169) with the least used strategy being 'Selective attention' (M= 3.1020; SD= .65689).

All in all, the vocabulary learning strategies used by medium level receptive vocabulary size and low level receptive vocabulary size showed no significant differences.

5. Discussion/Conclusion

Research question one was about the receptive vocabulary size of the participants in this study. Though forty-nine participants were in a medium receptive vocabulary size category, and forty-four participants were in a low receptive vocabulary size category. However, nobody among the participants in this study had a high receptive vocabulary size. The first possible explanation for not getting participants with high receptive vocabulary size is due to the study's limited population. The second is maybe due to the time that they spent on each item trying to figure out the meaning of the given vocabulary word. The third is that they are not independent learners yet.

Research question two was about the most and the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies of the participants as well as the differences between the high receptive vocabulary size group and the low receptive vocabulary size group.

The most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies of the participants were the dictionary strategy, the autonomy strategy, and the guessing strategy.

The dictionary strategy is the most frequently sought vocabulary learning strategy of the participants. One possible explanation on this is that it is a very common practice among second language learners to look for the meanings of the unfamiliar vocabulary words in the dictionary. In addition, getting hold of a dictionary nowadays is so convenient because one doesn't need to get hold of a "real" dictionary since there are handy electronic dictionaries and the popularity of different types of dictionary applications to choose from in the apps store that can easily be downloaded for free. However, based on the statistical results of this study, most of them only looked at the definition of the vocabulary word in their native language and care less on its definition in English. This type of practice corroborated the findings of Asgari (2011) that the learners with high receptive vocabulary size moved on from using bilingual dictionaries to monolingual ones. Furthermore, though EBC students of NUIC made use of the dictionary strategy, however, they only use it if they were interested in the vocabulary word. In other words, if they don't think the word is important, they won't look at the meaning of it. That's why their word knowledge about a specific word is very limited because they often neglect to study the lexical category of the new found words that they encountered in the course of their study.

The second most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy of the participants is the autonomy strategy. The autonomy strategy has something to do with finding time to know the meaning/s of word/s that a learner doesn't understand when he/she encountered unfamiliar words during the course of reading, listening to music, or watching English movies. In this study, the common practice of most participants due

to its easy accessibility were listening to English music and watching movies in English outside of class time. Though it is undeniable that that listening music and watching movies in English help boost the students' ability to develop their English abilities if and only if they are really honing their English abilities through the use of media. However, based on my interview with the participants, I asked them if they really understand the words of the music that they listened to, but most of them didn't understand almost everything in the song. They just like to listen to the song due to its popularity and of course, they like the rhythm of it.

Most of them based their understanding of the song on its music video. With regard to watching movies in English, the movie, that they commonly watched, were subtitled in Thai because if it wasn't, they would not enjoy watching it because they would struggle with understanding. Though, the autonomy strategy highlighted the use of media in learning English, it is focused on reading books, newspapers, and magazines in English. However, on all of the 41 items asked for to participants, reading is the fifth least activity that they do. One possible explanation on this issue was explained by the study on students' attitudes towards reading conducted by Sarawit (2009). She explained the nature of being reluctant readers, that is, they read only when necessary even though they consider reading in English enjoyable and useful.

In connection with this, I can say that majority of the participants in this study were struggling readers. Though reading per se is one thing, however, reading comprehension is another thing. For me to be illuminated on this issue, I asked my participants what they usually do if they didn't understand what they had read. In such particular case, most of them just move on. That is to say that that they didn't try their best to understand it, instead, they just asked their teachers to explain the text to them in class. Often times, they didn't read because only few students in class practice reading outside of class time.

The third most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy of the participants was the guessing strategy. This strategy basically guesses the meanings of the words that they didn't understand before finding the meaning in the dictionary or asking someone else for the word's definition. One plausible explanation for this is that, it is easier to guess. Careless as it may seem but it gives learners the freedom to use their knowledge of linguistics, strategies, and the world. However, if all else failed, their best option was to ask someone who they think was familiar with the word, and of course, the dictionary would be consulted just in case that they didn't know who to ask.

All in all, the dictionary strategy, the autonomy strategy, and the guessing strategy were the most frequently used strategies by participants.

Regarding the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies used by participants, these were the selective attention strategy, the memory strategy, and the note-taking strategy.

The selective attention strategy dealt with being responsible for one's learning. Being this as the least frequently used meant that most participants in this study didn't find to allocate time on studying vocabulary. In addition, among the 41 items asked for to participants, finding time or schedule to study vocabulary was the last thing that they

would do. Based on the information I gathered from the interview conducted to participants, they only study when there would be an announced quiz, but on regular basis, they just recognize the vocabulary word that they had encountered while reading or heard in the lecture, but they didn't search for their definitions not unless they were required to look for their definitions and submit them afterwards. They only study the vocabulary words which were told to them to be included in the test so they can survive getting a passing grade.

Additionally, to most participants, thinking about their progress in vocabulary development wasn't an issue. It wasn't because they felt that their English skills were better than some people that they know. However, they were aware that their English competency was low that's why they planned to study abroad to study masters and at the same time, master the English language. If they have a chance, they would enroll for language training in private language entities because they believed that engaging in it would greatly help them learn the English language pronto.

The memory strategy was the second least frequently used vocabulary learning strategy of the participants. Based on the gathered data, it was evident that they were not interested in learning English vocabulary if they have to exert an extra effort memorizing vocabulary words. One possible explanation of this is that most of them didn't keep a record or jot down vocabulary words that they encountered from time to time that's the reason why they rarely review for new words. Since most of the times they didn't have something to review about, ergo, repeating the words for several times, knowing its homograph, homonyms and homophones, and creating mental pictures of new words were being practiced by a few. They also didn't pay much attention to the words' prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Since jotting down notes wasn't given much emphasis, they usually have the difficulty of classifying the words according to its lexical category as well as remembering the sentence where they saw the particular vocabulary word. In other words, I can say that the participants in this study were not motivated enough in learning English vocabulary. They may be interested in learning English; however, they might not have the will to work on that interest.

That's why their third least frequently used vocabulary learning strategy was the note-taking strategy. It is interesting to note that most participants didn't like writing vocabulary words that they think were common not unless such vocabulary word was of personal interest to them. Nowadays, less and less students are taking down notes due to the fact that taking photos of almost everything is as easy as 1-2-3 as long as they have tablets or smartphones. This observation was very prevalent among EBC students at NUIC. To clarify this issue, I asked them if they find time to review or take a look at the photos that they shot and majority of them said that they only looked at them when necessary. That means when there would be a coming quiz only. Basically, they didn't add any extra information on the notes that they shot. Since they just like to take photos of the lecture notes, it is plausible to say that it is also one of the reasons why jotting words or phrases from the dictionary or from different sources where they encountered the unfamiliar words seem too difficult to do.

In a nutshell, the selective attention strategy, the memory strategy, and the note-taking strategy were the least frequently used vocabulary learning strategies of the participants.

Research question three dealt with the differences between the vocabulary learning strategies used by participants with high receptive vocabulary size and low receptive vocabulary size. Since there was nobody in the high receptive vocabulary size group, so the participants with the medium receptive vocabulary size and the low receptive vocabulary size were compared instead.

Based on the gathered data, the medium receptive size group's frequently used vocabulary learning strategies were the autonomy strategy, the dictionary strategy, and then guessing strategy. However, for the low receptive size group, the frequently used vocabulary learning strategies were the dictionary strategy, the social strategy, and the study preference strategy.

It can be said that listening to music and watching movies in English with Thai subtitle were helpful in developing the medium group's vocabulary development because the autonomy strategy was their utmost frequently used vocabulary learning strategy. In relation to such, they used the aid of a dictionary to help them understand the words that they didn't know from the songs that they listened to or from the movies that they just watched. In addition, if they didn't look at the meanings or definitions of the words that they didn't understand, most probably than not, they would just guess the meaning of the vocabulary words.

On the other hand, for the low receptive size group, the dictionary strategy was the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy because using a dictionary was the easiest thing to do. After finding the definitions of the words that they didn't understand and still they could not comprehend their meanings, then, they would ask the help of their teachers or friends explaining to them the things that they didn't understand until they reached a level of comprehension, and thus, making the social strategy their second most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy. Once they reached a certain level of comprehension, they would make use of the study preference strategy by referring back to use of a dictionary that will aid them in further comprehension of the given text.

It can be noticed that the guessing strategy wasn't included in the most frequently used learning vocabulary strategies of the low receptive group. One possible explanation on this issue was due to their inability to guess because in guessing, they need to use their background knowledge and use linguistic clues like grammatical structures of a sentence to guess the meaning of a word (Ghazal, 2010).

Though the participants in with medium receptive size and with low receptive size differed on their most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies, it was found out that there was no significant relationship between the vocabulary learning strategies used by both groups. The possible explanations for this were the limited number of participants, getting nobody in the high receptive vocabulary size level, and the results of the means of the students' vocabulary learning strategy questionnaires were so close to each other.

6. Recommendations

6.1 For Student Language Development

1. To improve the vocabulary development and reading strategies of EBC students at NUIC, necessary training on reading and vocabulary learning strategies must be conducted every semester with ten students per group, three hours a week, for four semesters starting first year. This is so because the size of student's vocabulary correlates with reading comprehension. Training on reading and vocabulary strategies can be part of academic development and practice of selective attention strategy is also needed since this was the least frequently used strategy by the participants.

2. To practice note-taking and memory strategies, all teachers of EBC must convene and agreed to require all EBC students to jot down notes and prohibit them from simply taking photos of the PowerPoint slides. By doing this, their abilities to think and remember vocabulary words would be enhanced including their listening skills.

3. To develop EBC students' vocabulary development, it is also important for them to learn at least thirteen words in a day since it is recommended for a non-native speaker who is at tertiary level to at least learn 1000 words in a semester. Those thirteen words per day must come from different readings that they need to read or had read and a vocabulary test about the learned words must be administered every week. By doing this, their ability to communicate in English would be developed.

6.2 For Future Research

1. It is highly recommended for future researchers that would delve into the same field of study to get an in-depth analysis of the receptive vocabulary sizes of the participants by exploring and administering other related receptive vocabulary levels test aside from VST.

2. To lessen unscholarly guesses, it is also recommended to add the "I don't know" option in very question if using VST developed by Nation.

3. It is also hoped and recommended that a further research on vocabulary learning strategies still be explored to students of NUIC especially in the fields of Tourism, HRM, and International Business Management to students

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