

*Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by High Vocabulary Knowledge Students  
Studying in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year English for International Communication Students*

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by high vocabulary knowledge students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya, Songkhla. The subjects of this research were 72 third-year students studying in English for International Communication Program in the academic year 2013. The subjects were then divided into two groups; the students with high and low vocabulary knowledge groups based on their vocabulary size scores and were asked to rate the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire. The findings revealed that the students with high vocabulary knowledge used vocabulary learning strategies at the moderate level. The strategies that were rated at the highest level were using English-Thai dictionary, using English media, taking notes of the newly-learned words in class, learning the words by translating the word meaning, and asking classmates for meaning.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies; vocabulary size; strategy

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## **Introduction**

English plays a vital role in economic progress, modern technology, internationalization (Spolsky, 1998), as well as the Internet and the World Wide Web (Pakir, 2000). Lexical knowledge is also considered an important part of the foundation of learning English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Mastering a new word involves such common abilities as form recognition (pronunciation, spelling, derivations) and knowing its dictionary meaning. Knowledge of its specific grammatical properties, as well as the ability to use the word appropriately in certain context and function (frequency and appropriateness), are all part of the mastery process (Nation, 1990; Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). McCarthy (2001, cited in Fan, 2003) explained that vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and vocabulary is the biggest problem for most learners.

Vocabulary teaching in many classrooms is largely incidental and used as a support for reading comprehension (Catalan, 2003; Fan, 2003). This means that when a particular word or phrase appears difficult to the students, they are told the definitions. Occasionally, this may be supplemented with the collocations of the target words or information about how the words are used, e.g., whether they are used to express negative emotions or whether the word is used in formal situations. More often, however, finding out about new vocabulary items is left to the discretion of the students, and they are encouraged to turn to dictionaries to look up meanings of words.

Regarding English language learning at Rajamagala University of Technology Srivijaya, students did not perform well in most of the English language courses. Academic results of the two fundamental English courses (English I and English II) which are compulsory for RMUTSV students across different disciplines showed that 20%, 40%, and 5% of the students gained grades C, D, and F respectively. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the problems to those RMUTSV students' English language proficiency and also hinders the students' learning in other elective English courses. Learning to learn or strategies to learn new vocabulary and store them in the learners' repertoire of knowledge have been widely accepted among English language professional researchers (Brown, 1987).

Teacher should be aware of their students' learning strategies. Laufer (1998) pointed out that investigating students' vocabulary size can be of substantial value to language research and pedagogy. It provides the realistic situation for lexical syllabus and indicates what would constitute optimal syllabuses which will, in turn, guide material design, testing, teaching and learning. The present study, therefore, intends to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies in a group of students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya.

## **Methodology**

The subjects of this study consisted of 72 students majoring in English for International Communication from the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya (RMUTSV), Songkhla Campus. These subjects were purposively sampled since they had the same experience in learning the two

compulsory English courses. Moreover, it is believed that language students would have more exposure to language learning strategies.

The subjects took the vocabulary level test and they were divided into two groups: the students with high and the students with low vocabulary knowledge. The purposes of dividing the subjects into two groups (36 high and 36 low vocabulary knowledge groups using 27% technique) were to investigate to which extent each group used vocabulary learning strategies, to determine the vocabulary learning strategy used by high knowledge students in terms of the frequency of vocabulary learning strategies they used.

## Result and analysis

The first research question was to find out the five main categories of vocabulary learning strategies: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies used by the third year students. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were employed. The results of vocabulary learning strategies were presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Frequencies of use of all vocabulary learning strategies

Strategies	N	Min	Max	$\bar{X}$	SD
DET	72	1.22	5.00	3.36	0.68
SOC	72	0.85	4.72	2.60	0.75
MEM	72	0.84	4.84	3.21	0.72
COG	72	0.82	4.84	3.19	0.80
MET	72	0.74	5.00	2.98	0.76
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>1.22</b>	<b>3.95</b>	<b>3.02</b>	<b>0.75</b>

As table 1 exhibits, the third year students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts used vocabulary learning strategies at the moderate level ( $\bar{X}=3.02$ ). By categories, it was found that the determination strategies (DET) were most frequently used ( $\bar{X}=3.36$ ) followed by memory strategies (MEM) ( $\bar{X}=3.21$ ), and cognitive strategies (COG) ( $\bar{X}=3.19$ ). For metacognitive strategies (MET) were moderately used ( $\bar{X}=2.98$ ). In this study, it is found that the third year students used social strategies ( $\bar{X}=2.60$ ) less than other vocabulary learning strategies.

## A comparison of the use of vocabulary learning strategies between high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

To answer the research question asking if there are any significant differences between students with high and low vocabulary knowledge in the use of vocabulary learning strategies. The test scores of vocabulary level test of the students with high vocabulary knowledge were significantly higher than those of students with low vocabulary knowledge at the 0.01 level. An independent sample t-test was then carried out with each strategy as a dependent variable and high and low vocabulary

knowledge groups as independent variables to determine whether the use of a particular strategy was significantly different between the two groups. The results of these analyses were presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Vocabulary size scores of high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

Vocabulary size	No of item	High		Low		t	Sig
		$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
<b>Total scores</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>23.40</b>	<b>2.82</b>	<b>12.25</b>	<b>3.29</b>	<b>17.338</b>	<b>.000**</b>

\*\*Significant at the 0.01 level

**Table 3:** Five categories of vocabulary learning strategies used by the students with high and low vocabulary knowledge

Strategies	High		Low		t	Sig
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
<b>DET</b>	3.61	0.58	3.14	0.71	3.456	.001**
<b>SOC</b>	2.75	0.74	2.44	0.73	2.495	.014*
<b>MEM</b>	3.16	0.65	2.65	0.65	3.564	.001**
<b>COG</b>	3.44	0.75	2.92	0.75	3.342	.001**
<b>MET</b>	3.28	0.56	2.70	0.60	3.846	.000**

\* significant at 0.05 level

\*\* significant at 0.01 level

Table 3 displayed the mean of vocabulary learning strategies used by the students with high vocabulary knowledge and their low vocabulary knowledge counterparts. The results revealed that the students with high vocabulary knowledge reported using all five categories of strategies significantly higher than the students with low vocabulary size ( $p < .01$ ). When looking into each category of the vocabulary learning strategies used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge students, the determination strategies (DET) were used significantly more often by the high vocabulary knowledge group than did the low vocabulary size group (high group,  $\bar{X} = 3.61$ ; low group,  $\bar{X} = 3.14$ ;  $p < .01$ ), followed by cognitive strategies (COG) (high group,  $\bar{X} = 3.44$ ; low group  $\bar{X} = 2.92$ ;  $p < .01$ ), metacognitive strategies (high group,  $\bar{X} = 3.28$ ; low group,  $\bar{X} = 2.70$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and memory strategies (high group,  $\bar{X} = 3.16$ ; low group,  $\bar{X} = 2.65$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Social strategies were determined as the least used strategies by the two groups and were found at a significant of 0.05 difference in the frequency of use between the two groups (high group,  $\bar{X} = 2.75$ ; low group,  $\bar{X} = 2.44$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

#### **A comparison of determination strategies used by high and low vocabulary knowledge groups**

**Table 4:** A comparison of determination strategies used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

Determination strategies	High		Low		t	Sig
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
- Look up a word in English – Thai dictionary.	4.42	0.79	4.25	0.83	1.000	.320
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.61</b>	<b>0.56</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>3.457</b>	<b>.001**</b>

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

\* significant at  $p < .05$

As shown in Table 4, the high vocabulary knowledge group used the determination strategies frequently ( $\bar{X}=3.61$ ) while the low vocabulary knowledge group used these strategies moderately ( $\bar{X}=3.15$ ). It was noticeable that high and low vocabulary size students reported using the strategy of using English-Thai dictionary at the most frequently used level ( $\bar{X} = 4.42$ ,  $\bar{X} = 4.25$  respectively). For consideration of determination strategies in order to see whether there were any significant differences between high and low vocabulary knowledge groups in using vocabulary learning strategies, the independent sample t-test was applied. As revealed in Table 4, in general, high vocabulary knowledge group reported using determination strategies significantly more often than those in the low vocabulary knowledge group ( $p < .01$ ). Only the strategies of using English-Thai dictionary and using Thai-English dictionary were not statistically significant different in terms of the frequency of use.

### A comparison of social strategies used by high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

**Table 5:** A comparison of social strategies used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

Social strategies	High		Low		t	Sig
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
- Ask classmates for meaning	3.60	0.98	3.83	0.90	-1.187	.238
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>0.74</b>	<b>2.45</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>2.499</b>	<b>.001**</b>

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

\* significant at  $p < .05$

As revealed in Table 5, the average mean scores of the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups differed in using each social strategy which indicated that the high vocabulary knowledge group used these strategies at a moderate level ( $\bar{X}=2.85$ ) while their low vocabulary knowledge counterparts reported using these strategies at the lower level ( $\bar{X}=2.45$ ). When looking by items, it was found that strategy of asking classmates for meaning ( $\bar{X}=3.60$ ,  $\bar{X}=3.83$ ) was frequently used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups. The results of independent t-test revealed a significant difference between the two groups on their frequency of social strategy use ( $p < .01$ ). There were three social strategies that both high and low vocabulary knowledge groups significantly differed in terms of frequency of use. These are asking the teacher to translate the meaning that they do not understand, asking the teacher for synonyms or similar meaning of words, and interacting with native speakers.

### A comparison of memory strategies used by high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

**Table 6:** A comparison of memory strategies used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

Memory strategies	High		Low		t	Sig
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
- Learn the word translating the words' Meaning	3.96	0.89	3.75	0.95	1.100	.274
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>2.66</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>3.565</b>	<b>.001**</b>

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

\* significant at  $p < .05$

As indicated in Table 6, the students with high and low vocabulary knowledge reported using memory strategies at a moderate level ( $\bar{X} = 3.15$ ,  $\bar{X} = 2.66$ ). As the reading frequency below showed, the strategy of learning the word by translating the words' meaning was frequently used by the students with high and low vocabulary knowledge groups ( $\bar{X} = 3.96$ ,  $\bar{X} = 3.75$ ). In order to test the significant differences between the students with high and low vocabulary size in using memory strategies, the mean score exposed to inferential statistic. In the independent sample t-test below, there were significant differences emerged among the two groups ( $p < .01$ ) in the following, the strategies of connecting the word to their experience, making a list of vocabulary arranged by topic or group for reviewing, associating the word with other words they have learned, reviewing the word they have learned by spelling it aloud, remembering the word from its strange form, pronunciation or difficult spelling, saying the word aloud when studying in order to easily remember, and learning the word of an idiom together. Noticeably, learning the word translating by the words' meaning was not statistically significant difference in the frequency of use in the two groups and this was the strategy students resorted to most often.

### A comparison of cognitive strategies used by high and low vocabulary size groups

**Table7:** A comparison of cognitive strategies used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

Cognitive strategies	High		Low		T	Sig
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
- Learn the word through verbal repetition	4.00	0.98	3.38	1.14	2.866	.005**
- Learn the word through written repetition	4.02	1.04	3.42	1.00	2.889	.005**
- Take notes the newly-learned words in class	4.06	0.83	3.67	1.11	1.966	.052
- Use the vocabulary section in your textbook	3.56	1.12	3.34	1.09	1.742	.085
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.47</b>	<b>0.76</b>	<b>2.94</b>	<b>0.77</b>	<b>3.352</b>	<b>.001**</b>

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

\* significant at  $p < .05$

As depicted in Table 7, the students with high vocabulary knowledge reported using cognitive strategies frequently ( $\bar{X} = 3.47$ ) while their low vocabulary knowledge counterparts performed these strategies at the moderate level ( $\bar{X} = 2.94$ ). When considering by items, it was observed that the strategies of taking notes of the newly-learned word in class, learning the word through written repetition, learning the word through verbal repetition, and using the vocabulary section in their textbook (high group  $\bar{X} = 4.06$ ,  $\bar{X} = 4.02$ ,  $\bar{X} = 4.00$ ,  $\bar{X} = 3.56$ : low group  $\bar{X} = 3.67$ ,  $\bar{X} = 3.42$ ,  $\bar{X} = 3.38$ ,  $\bar{X} = 3.34$  respectively) were frequently used by the students with high low vocabulary knowledge. Concerning the differences in using different types of cognitive strategies between the students with high and low vocabulary knowledge, it was found three strategies which the students with high vocabulary knowledge used significantly more often than the students with low vocabulary knowledge ( $p < .01$ ). These were the strategies of learning the word through verbal repetition, learning the word through written repetition, and keeping a word notebook wherever they go. Interestingly, it was found the strategies of taking notes the newly-learned words in class and using

the vocabulary section in their textbook were more often used by the two groups though significant differences were not found.

### **A comparison of metacognitive strategies used by high and low vocabulary knowledge groups**

**Table 8:** A comparison of metacognitive strategies used by the high and low vocabulary knowledge groups

Metacognitive strategies	High		Low		t	Sig
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
- Use English media (song, movie, newspaper leaflets, the Internet, magazine, etc	<b>4.02</b>	1.00	<b>3.75</b>	1.10	1.262	.210
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.28</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>2.72</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>3.853</b>	<b>.000**</b>

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

\* significant at  $p < .05$

As Table 8 revealed, students with high and low vocabulary knowledge reported using metacognitive strategies at a moderate level ( $\bar{X}=3.28$ ,  $\bar{X}=2.72$  respectively). The frequently used strategies of these two groups was the strategy of using English media ( $\bar{X}=4.02$ ,  $\bar{X}=3.75$ ). In order to find the significant differences in terms of frequency of use between both high and low vocabulary knowledge students, five cognitive strategies were found to significantly differ at the 0.05 level: testing themselves with their word tests, translating the meaning of word from English into Thai, continuing to study the words over time, practicing by doing vocabulary exercises, and trying to speak or describe things in English.

### **Conclusion**

The results indicated that the strategies used by high vocabulary knowledge students were using English-Thai dictionary ( $\bar{X}=4.42$ ) under determination strategies was most frequently employed by all subjects. This finding was in line with that of Schmitt (2000) and Sanaoui (1995), who claim that dictionary use plays an important role in EFL learning. The next frequently used strategies were using English media (songs, movies, newspapers, leaflets, internet, magazines, etc.) ( $\bar{X}=4.02$ ) in the metacognitive strategies, taking notes of the newly-learned words in class ( $\bar{X}=4.06$ ) under the cognitive strategies, learning the words by translating the word's meaning ( $\bar{X}=3.96$ ) belonging to the memory strategies, and lastly asking classmates for meaning ( $\bar{X}=3.60$ ) under the social strategies. These findings were similar to the findings of Stern (1992), Ellis (1997).

The results of this study were consistent with the previous studies in terms of types and frequency of vocabulary learning strategies employed by university students. The strategies used by the students were similar to those research studies of Schmitt, (1997), Oxford, (1990), Gu and Johnson, (1996).

The implication derived from the results of this study is that training the students for vocabulary learning strategies should be regarded as a needed aspect of lexical learning and it deserves more consideration. Understanding the students' natural learning patterns contributes to a better understanding of how they can learn the words of the target language, particularly English. From this study, it is hoped that

university teachers will better understand the vocabulary learning trends of students so that they can train and lead students more effectively to greater achievement in learning vocabulary.

Certainly, the findings offer great benefits to English language teachers and students. As the results showed that the strategies of using English-Thai dictionary, asking classmates for word meaning, learning the words by translating the words' meaning, taking notes of the newly-learned words in class, and using English media were found to be the most frequently used strategies among the students with high and low vocabulary size. Therefore, the students should be encouraged to make extensive use of those strategies. The teachers can design tasks for the students in order to improve their skills in using those most frequently used strategies.

Another implication is that the teachers should try to make the learners aware of the strategies that were found to significantly correlate to their vocabulary size. These were the strategies of analyzing parts of speech, analyzing affixes and roots to guess the meaning of words, using English-English dictionary, using Thai-English dictionary, listing vocabulary and reviewing it, asking the teacher for synonyms or similar meanings of the new word, asking the teacher to make a sentence by using the new words, asking the teacher to check their word lists for accuracy, interacting with native speakers, connecting the word to learners' experience, learning the word through verbal repetition, learning the word through writing repetition, taking notes of the newly-learned words in class, testing themselves with word tests, continuing to study the word over time, using English media, and trying to speak or describe things in English. The teacher should teach the students how to use these strategies whenever necessary and try to include these strategies in class activities and assignments, etc, in order to encourage the learners to internalize these strategies. Oxford (2001) states that making the students aware of the strategies they use in learning are one of the best ways to enhance their learning. When students are aware of the strategies which help them to learn better, they are motivated to use them more frequently in their learning.

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