

## *Enhancing Vocabulary Learning through Pictures by E-mails*

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on the study of students' vocabulary learning through pictures by e-mails and their attitudes towards their learning. Seventy- two fourth year students of English for International Communication major studied in a five week vocabulary learning enhancement activity. Each student had two jobs to do in the process of learning vocabulary. One, the student independently accessed their e-mails to send a picture to the same classmate each week for 5 weeks, check the words in their own pictures sent back by his or her classmate. Two, the student himself or herself had to find words sent by his or her classmate' pictures every week for 5 weeks and write back to him or her for checking via e-mail. The students answered the questionnaire on vocabulary they learned and their attitudes towards learning vocabulary through pictures by e-mails in the sixth week. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected by means of the questionnaires. Descriptive results were analysed for percentages, frequency, and mean. Findings were: more than 85% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the pictures were interesting and they learned the meanings of new words. The words as nouns were mostly chosen in describing the pictures while adverbs were rarely used. 65.28% of the students agreed that E-mail was a suitable tool for learning vocabulary. The benefits they got were learning new words in both their parts of speech and meanings. The problems they faced were they thought there were not enough words to get from the pictures.

Keywords: Enhance, E-mail, Picture, Vocabulary

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## **Introduction**

According to the researcher's experience, when teaching Advanced Reading to fourth year students of the English for International Communication program, vocabulary is the first step in foreign language learning. The difficulty of teaching this subject is that students find themselves not knowing many words in the texts even some words are common words. That is the reason why they do not understand what sentences of text are about. It is because they do not know the meaning of most words in a sentence or a text. Although the teacher allows students to use a dictionary when they study, students forget the meaning easily. They learn vocabulary through pictures by themselves outside class by using e-mail as a tool to send pictures among themselves. The students need to be inspired to learn vocabulary from pictures. As the old saying goes, A picture is worth a thousand words. The researcher thought that using this kind of method would enhance students' learning vocabulary by themselves through pictures by e-mail. Pictures could be a suitable alternative to improve students' vocabulary achievement. Pictures can be used as a media to transfer an image of the real thing. As we know, that teaching through pictures is both effective and practical. Besides, technology is very useful for students to learn vocabulary. Therefore e-mail was chosen to be a tool for the students to learn vocabulary.

Thailand is currently a member of the ASEAN Community and with the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015 it will inevitably affect Thailand in every aspect. To ensure that Thailand is prepared to be an active and contributing participant of ASEAN, the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) launched the Higher Education Strategies for the ASEAN Community in 2015. The goal of the strategies is for Thai graduates to be equipped with professional skills, communication skills, and inter-cultural skills that meet international standards. One aspect of the strategy is the reform of language education in English and other languages used in ASEAN.

Currently Thailand already as a member of the Asian Community in 2015, English becomes a much more important tool for communication among people of the 10 countries in South East Asia than before. At the tertiary level, English is a required subject for all majors. However, in some universities such as Rajamanagala University of Technology Srivijaya, Songkhla, Thailand, they still need English, especially vocabulary which students lack. This results in a lack of English ability to communicate with foreigners in the Asian community. It is therefore a challenge for teachers of courses such as Advanced Reading to improve students' vocabulary for them to apply in the 4 skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

## **Purpose of the Study**

1. To investigate whether pictures by e-mail can improve students' vocabulary learning.
2. To find out what attitudes the students have towards learning vocabulary through pictures by e-mail.

## **Context of the Study**

The participants consisted of 72 fourth year students majoring in English for International Communication who studied the Advanced Reading course with the researcher in the first semester of the academic year 2014 at Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya, Songkhla. Participants were instructed to access their e-mail

to send pictures to classmates, check words in their own pictures sent by classmates and find words in friends' pictures and write back to them by e-mail.

## **Reviewed Literature**

### **Vocabulary and Picture**

Vocabulary is generally the total number of words that exist in a particular language. Moreover specially, it functions as the foundation stone without which any language is impossible to exist in this world. Vocabulary is acquired incidentally through indirect exposure to word and intentionally through explicit instruction in specific word-learning strategies. (Linda Diamond and Linda Gutlohn 2006). Learning a Foreign language, especially English as a language of international communication throughout the world.

Vocabulary is one important part in learning a language, because without vocabulary it is difficult to communicate with each other. Harmer (1993:153) says that if language structure makes up the skeleton of language, it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh. Based on the expert statements above, it can be inferred that vocabulary is a very essential part in learning languages. By knowing vocabulary people understand other and it makes expressing an idea easy. Visual aids are usually used to help teachers to deal with a task on actuating the teaching materials. The aids which are used must suit the aim and the setting of the teaching learning process. Stevick (1957:74) defines that visual aids are anything visible which helps students learn a language more quickly and more accurately. Thornsbury (2004) advises to visualize a picture for a new word or to link an abstract word with some mental image Images drawn by students themselves have the best outcomes. Besides, imaging, there are other mnemonics, such as making clues from associations with similarly sounding words and its meaning in the mother tongue. Thornsbury (2004) also claims that students' own images have the best influence on remembering .

A picture is a kind of visual aid that can help students in acquiring vocabulary. There are some advantages and disadvantages of using pictures in teaching English. Hill (1990: 1) listed several advantages of pictures, such as availability (one can get them in any magazines, on the Internet etc). A picture can be used for an individual student or a group. Pictures meet with a wide range of use not only in acquiring vocabulary, but also in many other aspects of foreign language teaching. Wright(1990: 4-6) demonstrated the fact where he used one complied picture and illustrated the possibility of the use of five very different language areas. He showed employing pictures in teaching structure, vocabulary, functions, situations and all four skills. And some of the disadvantages are: It is difficult to look for a specific picture which is suitable for the students' level, curriculum, needs or socialization. However, "pictures have their limitations too". (McCarthy 1992: 115) For example in teaching vocabulary, pictures are not suitable or sufficient for demonstrating the meaning all words (McCarthy 1992: 115; Thornbury 2004: 81). It is hard to illustrate the meaning of some words, especially the abstract ones such as 'opinion' or 'impact'. Therefore, not all vocabularies can be taught by picture, especially those concerning abstract concepts.

A review of the very large body of research related to the teaching and learning of vocabulary indicates that there are very strong reasons for implementing a systematic and principled approach to the teaching and subsequent learning of vocabulary as a

cornerstone for developing comprehension. Several researchers and vocabulary experts agree, vocabulary learning is really a special case of reading comprehension (Blachowicz and Ogle, 2001; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Nagy and Anderson, 1984; McKeown, et al., 1983).

In addition, by implementing a systematic and principled approach to teaching and learning vocabulary, learners see vocabulary as a very important element in language learning and reading (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002; Bormuth, 1966; Davis, 1944, 1968). Receptive knowledge of words requires that the learner recognize a word and recall its meaning when it is met. Instructional techniques that help students become familiar with a large number of words are the best facilitators for this level of vocabulary learning and, because of this facilitation, can eventually lead to greater student reading comprehension (Beck, et al., 1987; Anderson and Freebody, 1981; Anderson and Kulhavy, 1972).

### **E-mail**

Electronic mail, most commonly referred to as email or e-mail since ca. 1993, is a method of exchanging digital messages from an author to one or more recipients. Modern e-mail operates across the Internet or other computer networks. Some early email systems required that the author and the recipient both be online at the same time, in common with instant messaging. Today's email systems are based on a store-and-forward model. E-mail servers accept, forward, deliver, and store messages. Neither the users nor their computers are required to be online simultaneously; they need connect only briefly, typically to a mail server, for as long as it takes to send or receive messages. Historically, the term *electronic mail* was used generically for any electronic document transmission. For example, several writers in the early 1970s used the term to describe fax document transmission. As a result, it is difficult to find the first citation for the use of the term with the more specific meaning it has today.

### **Dictionary Use**

Reference materials, primarily a dictionary, can be used in a receptive or a productive skill in language learning. However, since having insufficient time to consult a dictionary during the process of speaking and listening, more look-up work happens during reading and writing. A common situation is that, for example, when a learner meets an unknown word in the text and fails to infer the meaning through context, they might be advised to consult a dictionary. Looking up a word in a dictionary is “far from performing a purely mechanical operation” (Scholfield 1982, p.185); instead, a proficient dictionary user “is often required to formulate and pursue several hypotheses and make use of prior knowledge of various sorts, especially information derived from context” (Scholfield 1982, p.185). Except for locating the unknown word in the alphabetic list, which seems to be the skill most dealt with in respect of training dictionary use, other important facets involving effective dictionary use receive little attention (Scholfield 1982). Since many lexical items in a language have more than one meaning, learners should be instructed how to reduce multiple options by elimination. Scanning all of the definitions in the entry before deciding which is the one that fits is a good idea proposed by Underhill (1980). After choosing a seemingly reasonable sense from the definitions in the entry, a user then needs to “understand the definition and integrate it into the context where the unknown was met” (Scholfield 1982, p.190).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Subjects**

The population comprised of 72 fourth year students majoring in English for International Communication who studied the Advanced Reading course.

### **Instruments**

The research instruments were two parts of questionnaires:

Part 1: Students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary through pictures by e-mail.

Part 2: Students' perceptions of the usefulness learning vocabulary through pictures by e-mail in an Advanced Reading course.

### **Data Collection**

The first day of the Advanced Reading class, the teacher explained to 72 students what and how to do and learn vocabulary through pictures by e-mail.

The data collection process for this study included the procedures as follows.

### **Procedure**

- Find and send a picture to his or her friend by e-mail once a week for five weeks.
- Find new words which the students have not known before or are unfamiliar with from the picture sent by a friend.
- Write down at least 10 words per picture in the e-mail. So there are at least 50 words all together for 5 pictures. Then send it back to the picture owner.
- The picture owner studies and checks the words sent whether they are proper words according to the picture and their spellings.
- Learning vocabulary through pictures by email is a pair activity so they do the activities with the same person until they have finished the activity.
- The number of words that the teacher wanted her students to learn were at least 100 words: 50 words from their own findings and another 50 words from their paired classmates.
- The students completed and submitted the questionnaire to determine students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary through pictures by e-mail in the sixth week. The items used a 5 point Likert Scale format. All the items in the questionnaire given were explained and translated into Thai. The teacher collected the questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis**

Data of the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics where frequency counts were tabulated and converted to percentages and mean.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The recognition of the role of vocabulary in language learning has continued to grow in recent years. According to Neil Selwyn and Kate Robson (1998), most researchers and vocabulary experts believe that the best methodology employs both direct and indirect teaching and provides opportunities for both receptive and productive learning to occur.

**Table 1: Students' attitudes towards learning vocabulary through pictures by e- mail.**

	5 Strongly Agree %	4 Slightly Agree %	3 Neutral %	2 Slightly Disagree %	1 Strongly Disagree %	Total %(n=72)	Mean ( $\bar{X}$ )
1. The pictures are interesting.	31.94 (23)	55.56 (40)	12.50 (9)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	100 (72)	4.19
2. I can find words to suit the pictures.	19.44 (14)	45.83 (33)	33.33 (24)	0.00 (0)	1.39 (1)	100 (72)	3.82
3. Finding out new vocabulary through pictures are challenging.	19.44 (14)	45.83 (33)	31.94 (23)	1.39 (1)	1.39 (1)	100 (72)	3.79
4. E-mail is a suitable tool for exchanging pictures.	23.61 (17)	45.83 (33)	22.22 (16)	5.56 (4)	2.78 (2)	100 (72)	3.82
5. E-mail is a suitable tool for learning vocabulary with friends.	16.67 (12)	48.61 (35)	27.78 (20)	4.17 (3)	2.78 (2)	100 (72)	3.72
6. I learn the meanings of new words.	37.50 (27)	48.61 (35)	12.50 (9)	1.39 (1)	0.00 (0)	100 (72)	4.22
7. I learn how to spell and pronounce the words.	18.06 (13)	50.00 (36)	30.56 (22)	1.39 (1)	0.00 (0)	100 (72)	3.85

Vocabulary is the one important part in learning a language, because without vocabulary it is difficult to communicate with each other. Harmer (1993:153) says that if language structure makes up the skeleton of language, it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and flesh. Neil Selwyn and Kate Robson (1998) stated that using e-mail as a research tool potentially offers researchers many advantages such as easy access to world-wide samples, low administration costs (both financially and temporally) and its unobtrusiveness and 'friendliness' to respondents. 65.28% of the students agreed that e-mail was a suitable tool for learning vocabulary while only five or six participants disagreed that e-mail was a suitable tool for exchanging pictures and learning vocabulary with friends. However, e-mail's application as a research tool is constrained by its, as yet, limited and biased population of users in terms of age, income, gender and race (Neil Selwyn and Kate Robson,1998). E-mail might be no longer interesting as a tool for communication among students as before in 1993 and

there are other more popular tools such as Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006) Instagram (2010) or Line (2013). According to Sri Herawati, Ari Nurweni, Huzairin (2004), pictures could capture the students' interest and stimulates students' motivation and could be used for individuals or a group. More than 85% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the pictures were interesting and they learned the meanings of new words. Stevick (1957:74) defines that visual aids are anything visible which helps students to learn the language more quickly and more accurately.

**Table 2: Number of new words learned by the students.**

No. new words	10	10	11	11	12	12	13	13	14	14	15	17
No. students	8	1	5	5	43	1	2	1	3	1	1	1

**Table 3: Kinds of pictures chosen by the students.**

	people	places	things	others	total
No. Pictures	110	175	51	24	360

**Table 4: Kinds of parts of speech of words written by the students.**

Parts of Speech	Noun	Adjective	Verb	Adverb	Others	total
No. words	2,855	421	303	23	4	3,606

**Table 5: Tools used by the students to find new words and their meanings**

Sources	Dictionary	Online Dictionary	Both Dictionary and Online Dictionary
No. students	4 (5.6%)	50 (69.44%)	18 (25.00%)

It was found that pictures of places were chosen mostly at 175 pictures, pictures of people were the second most popular among the students at 110 pictures while things were less interesting. As the saying goes, a picture paints a thousand words and pictures are a great way of improving English and pictures can be used to learn vocabulary. Surprisingly, 53 students or 73.61% of the students learned willingly more than 120 new words. Actually the number of words targeted by the teacher were 100 words. More than half of the students (43 out of 72 students) knew 120 words. Only 8 students studied 100 assigned words. Receptive knowledge of words requires that the learner recognize a word and recall its meaning when it is met. Instructional techniques that help students become familiar with a large number of words are the best facilitators for this level of vocabulary learning and, because of this facilitation, can eventually lead to greater student reading comprehension (Beck, et al., 1987; Anderson and Freebody, 1981; Anderson and Kulhavy, 1972). The researcher feels that this instruction technique could lead students to achieve reading

comprehension at a somewhat level and help them not to struggle when reading or spend too much time in finding words in the dictionary, which sometimes leads them to give up reading. Unexpectedly, 421 words were adjectives while 2,855 words were nouns in describing pictures.

All in all 97.22% accepted that they learned new words. A half of the students could not find new words for pictures in a dictionary, this problem was that there were not enough words to get from the pictures. It is difficult to look for a specific picture which is suitable for the students' level, curriculum, needs or socialization, Not all vocabulary can be taught by pictures, especially those concerning abstract concepts (Sri Herawati, Ari Nurweni, Huzairin, 2004).

In order to find suitable words from the pictures, the participants used both online and book dictionaries because dictionaries are reference materials, primarily a dictionary which can be used in a receptive or a productive skill in language learning (Schofield, P., 1982, pp. 185-194). Therefore, 69.44% used an online dictionary to find new words, 25% used both a dictionary and an online dictionary and 5.6% looked up the words in the dictionary.

### **Conclusion**

The researcher used e-mail as a tool for the fourth year students who studied an Advanced Reading course to learn vocabulary through pictures in order that they could surpass their lack of common vocabulary. It was found that more than 85% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the pictures were interesting and they learned the meanings of new words. Only five or six participants disagreed that e-mail was a suitable tool for exchanging pictures and learning vocabulary with friends. Overall, more than 65% of the students agreed that they had a good attitude towards learning vocabulary through pictures by e-mail. Moreover, it was also found that 73.61% of the students learned new words of 120 words up more than the teacher assigned them to learn. Only 8 students studied 100 words assigned. The pictures of places were the most popular pictures among themselves while things were the least interesting. The students chose nouns mostly to describe the pictures while adverbs were rarely used. They preferred to look up words online rather than in a dictionary. Besides, 93.06% of the students searched for pictures from the Internet only. No one was interested to choose pictures from books and magazines. The benefits they got were learning new words in both their parts of speech and meanings. The problems they faced were they thought there were not enough words to get from the pictures. A few students found some new words were too difficult to remember and did not like the pictures sent from their paired classmates.

### **Suggestion**

The researcher thought that pictures would be interesting for students to learn new words but some pictures selected by students did not contain enough words to learn. Therefore, the teacher should check all the students' pictures before allowing them to do the activities.

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