Vocabulary learning strategies among Malaysian TEVT students in German-Malaysian Institute (GMI)

Adibah Halilah binti A. Mutalib*, Rashidah binti Abdul Kadir, Rashidah binti Robani, Faizah A Majid

German-Malaysian Institute, Kajang, Malaysia
Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Abstract

In an effort to look into the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) of Malaysian TEVT L2 learners, a mixed-mode research was conducted among 31 German-Malaysian Institute (GMI) students. Data was collected via questionnaires which were then followed by a semi-structured interview. The results of the study revealed that although students saw the importance of vocabulary learning, a majority relied on discovery strategies such as referring to dictionaries, guessing words, asking friends and teachers. Very few students were familiar with more concrete cognitive strategies which would lend more success in vocabulary learning. As a result, it is hoped that the study will induce compatibility between learning of vocabulary among students and the approach used by instructors in TEVT institutes; which would enhance the effectiveness of English Language learning.

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Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS); TEVT; Engineering; English language learning

1. Introduction

The power of words was best said by Confucius, when he stated, “Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know more”. The resonance of such wisdom relates well to the importance of vocabulary learning among students in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TEVT) institutes such as German-Malaysian Institute (GMI) whereas stronghold in vocabulary is the key to boosting their language capabilities. Perhaps as teachers, the greatest gift one can award a student is an extensive list of words that will be used in his/her academic

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +603-8921 9341; fax:+603-89219001
E-mail address: adibah_halilah@gmi.edu.my
and professional development. However, the question is how does one acquire a good grasp of vocabulary? What are the strategies that a student can emulate in order to produce maximum output of words? Hence, popularly associated with learning strategies; vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) may prove to be the key to successful language acquisition. Due to its never-ending process which more often than not poses overwhelming difficulties to the language learner; this paper shall explore the current trends of vocabulary learning strategies among GMi students.

The English language has thus been chosen as the medium of instruction at GMI as it holds the prestige of being the language of choice in the world of business, trade and the sciences (Johnson, 2009). Although students meet the minimum entry requirement of a pass at the Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM) level, many students grapple with the basic English skills; namely in writing and speaking, with English proficiency levels ranging from low to intermediate. Teachers have also noted that a majority of students have vocabulary sizes falling below average which often lend to difficulties in expressing their ideas and overall poor academic learning (Adam, 2013). Nonetheless, vocabulary learning is an area that is frequently neglected, both in and outside the classroom and more so in higher education in Malaysia (Asgari & Ghazali, June 2011).

In order to fulfill the purpose of the research three underlying questions shall guide the present study which are:

- What are the students’ views and background on vocabulary learning?
- What strategies are most and least commonly employed by students in learning vocabulary?
- Are there any problems faced by students when learning vocabulary?

For this study the definition of VLS that shall be applied here can be categorized according to (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997) which are broken into two areas:

- Discovery Strategies, which are techniques applied when encountering new words.
- Consolidation Strategies, which include methods in ascribing words to memory, once the words are learnt.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Importance of Vocabulary

It is without a doubt that vocabulary is the key to all the language skills; speaking, reading, writing and listening. A person with a limited vocabulary will never be able to speak, write, read or understand a language effectively. In second or foreign language learning in particular, vocabulary plays a significant role serving to become the prerequisite for communication; for both receptive and productive skills.

A receptive skill means a form of communication which focuses on vocabulary inputs via listing and reading. In other words, learners need to have an adequate vocabulary to comprehend the input. (Fijin, 2009) mentioned in order to gain reasonable comprehension of a text and to be able to guess the meaning of unknown words from a context, learners need to know at least 95% of the running words in the input (as suggested by Nation I. S., 2001). Thus, vocabulary learners who possess limited vocabulary would also yield a limited comprehension of the text.

On the other hand, a productive skill is when learners use words to convey meaning. As cited by (Mart, 2012) referring to what Wilkins (1972) emphasized, "without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed". This means that vocabulary is used productively through speaking and writing which in turn can be effective if learners have enough vocabulary.
2.2. The process of learning new vocabulary

(A. Muensorn & S. Tepsuriwong, 2009) stated the three stages proposed by (Nation, 2001) which may contribute to a learner's learning of a vocabulary item namely noticing, retrieval and creative or generative use. The first stage involves identifying and giving attention to the words as an item to be learned. (Laufer, 1997) believes that this is an important stage as it affects the extent to which the word is picked up and learned. Thus the more words involved in learning, the deeper the level of processing and memorizing will take place.

The second stage, retrieval is where learners recall the learned words from their memory. Nation (2001) indicates that most research found learning to be optimized when retrieval is spaced rather than massed. It can be said that this stage contains recalling knowledge in the same way it was originally stored. Learners may recognize the forms and meanings of the words they learned and uses of the words in new contexts.

Creative or generative stage is where learners have enough vocabulary in that they can use words for communication as the words learned become active and is used effectively and productively in different contexts. It can be either productive or receptive, and is believed to be an important contributing process in first and second language vocabulary learning (Nation, 2001, p.68). In order for it to be achieved, learners have to know enough about the words; meanings, forms and uses. These aspects are significant as learners need to practice using the vocabulary learned actively to enhance both retrieval and creative use.

2.3. Vocabulary learning strategies

(Eleni G., Stavros K., Athina G., 2009) stated that according to Ruutmets (2005) vocabulary learning strategies constitute knowledge about what learners do to find out the meaning of new words, retain them in long-term memory, recall them when needed in comprehension and use them in language production. The definition relates to the phases or processes above mentioned in which the last stage encourages learners to apply the strategies namely discovery and consolidation strategies.

Discovery strategies are used for gaining initial information about a new word (Schmitt N., 2000). The most common strategies in this area take the form of memorizing, repetition and note-taking. It is believed that the strategies seem to be self-independent; learners work out the meaning of the new words by themselves based on interaction with other people. The latter may also mean that learners get the word meaning by asking other people or through their interaction with others as well as through dictionaries.

Whilst, consolidation strategies is used to reinforce and remember a word once it has been introduced (Schmitt, 2000). These strategies include a more in-depth look at the meaning which employ tactics such as inferencing, imagery, active manipulation and key-word technique. It is also categorized into four main strategy groups; memory, cognitive, metacognitive and social. Memory strategy includes memorization techniques such as grouping a word with its association, using key words, semantic mapping and reviewing in a structured way. While cognitive strategies are repetition and using mechanical means to study vocabulary, for example keeping of vocabulary notebooks. Furthermore, metacognitive strategies are used by learners to control and evaluate their learning. Among the many activities that can be put applied by learners, such strategies may include planning, monitoring and evaluating. Learners as well can consolidate the word learnt by studying and practicing in groups, with peers or a method of teaching that require social strategies.

2.4. Factors affecting vocabulary learning

Vocabulary learning is affected by many factors which can be broadly categorized into two groups: words and learners. (Ellis, 2002) mentioned that high frequencies words are more easily recognized than words at low frequencies. This means that the more often the words are come upon; the higher the chance learners are able to
remember and learn it. Word learned is called input and its usage is the output. The process of input and output of words involves rote and meaningful learning in which learners are responsible for their own learning.

Furthermore, (Schmitt N., 2000) adds that, motivation, culture and proficiency are some of the contributors which may affect strategies used by learners. Based on studies which involve Malaysian students as seen in the study (Mokhtar A. A., Rawian, Yahaya, Abdulllah, & Mohamed, 2009), the strategies that are assumed by learners may depend on a few factors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Samples

Thirty-one students attending TEVT courses at GMI were the subjects of this study. They comprised of 5 females and 26 male students with proficiency level ranging from low to moderately high.

3.2. Instruments and procedures

Two instruments were used, a questionnaire (n=31) and a semi-structured interview (n=3), both of which were a replication of the survey used by Athorn Muensorn and Saowaluck Tepsuriwong on the same area. The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions (including 3 open-ended question) It can be noted here that each item was classified into 3 parts (Muensorn & Tepsuriwong, 2009) (Part A until Part C). The items used to test students background and views of vocabulary learning were labeled as Part A and corresponded to item 1 to 4 as well as item 23 to 26 on the questionnaires given. Items which were used to compute discovery strategies used by students were categorized as Part B, which ranged from item 5 to 9 whilst the remaining items were used to test the consolidation strategies used by students. These items were in form of a five-point Likert scale rating, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The questionnaire was done online via SOGOsurvey.com by 31 TEVT students in their second semester at the institutions.

Besides, three out of the thirty-one samples were randomly selected for follow-up semi structured interview as to obtain additional information and clarification of the questionnaire data.

4. Data analysis

Both data from the questionnaire and interviews were then grouped into themes of students’ background, the views on the importance of vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning opportunities, vocabulary learning strategies and problems related to vocabulary learning.

4.1. Results and discussion

This section begins with learners views and background of vocabulary learning followed by the strategies employed the students. The results of the questionnaire can be divided into three underlying themes which are; students’ views of vocabulary learning, students’ problems with learning vocabulary and students’ current strategies.

4.2. Learners’ views and background on vocabulary learning

To begin with, it can be seen that most students found vocabulary learning as significantly important and expressed their commitment to learning. With 61.3% considering vocabulary learning as ‘important’ or ‘very important’. Despite, agreeing to the significance of vocabulary learning, interestingly, students had not shown the dedication needed to its study; with only one student claiming to devote time to studying 10 to 15 words per week as seen in Table 1.
Furthermore, it can be seen in Table 2, that learners only spent a few days per week on vocabulary learning. 48.4% (n=15) only spent 1-2 days per week to study vocabulary, while a small minority 19.4% claim to devote 5 to 6 days in a week.

According to items 1, 2 and 3 students came across most words through their daily life, which includes media and social interaction. It was found that 93.6% said that they ‘sometimes’ to ‘always’ find news words in course books, while 96.8% found that they were frequently exposed to new words in the classroom itself which is quite similar to the amount of new words found in a students’ daily life which is approximately 96.8% ranging from ‘sometimes’ to ‘always’. When asked where specifically they met with new words, they quoted areas such as movies, music, internet, books and even in their coursework. In spite of the various opportunities to learn English vocabulary, it did not seem that learners paid attention to the learning of new words, this perhaps may be due to the limited occurrence of the words encountered (Ellis, 2002).

4.3. Learners’ vocabulary learning strategies

To interpret the findings of the questionnaire each question has been grouped as either Discovery or consolidation technique based on definitions provided by (Li & Zhang, 2011). Furthermore based on Schmitt’s taxonomy (2000) of VLS, it can be concluded that Discovery strategies refer to determination and social strategies while Consolidating strategies are social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies (ÇELIKa & TOPTAŞ, 2010)

- Discovery Strategies

Part B of the questionnaire was dedicated to the use of discovery strategies by learners. Responses for items corresponding to discovery strategies represents the use of ‘often’ and ‘always’ in percentage as well as their mean score see Table 3.

| Reports of using strategy 'often' or 'always' in % | Mean |
|--------------------------------------------------|------|
| Asking teacher                                   | 22.6%| 3.00 |
| Asking friends                                   | 45.2%| 3.26 |
| Using bilingual dictionary (English-Malay / Malay-English) | 41.9%| 3.29 |

| Table 1. Number of words learners reported learning per week | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Fewer than 5 words                                          | 17        | 54.8    |
| 5 – 10 word                                                 | 10        | 32.3    |
| 10- 15 words                                                | 1         | 3.2     |
| Others                                                      | 3         | 9.7     |

| Table 2. Time allocated to vocabulary learning in a week     | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Never                                                       | 2         | 6.5     |
| 1-2 days                                                    | 15        | 48.4    |
| 3-4 days                                                    | 7         | 22.6    |
| 5-6 days                                                    | 6         | 19.4    |
| Every day                                                   | 1         | 3.2     |
| Total                                                       | 31        | 100.0   |

| Table 3. Strategies frequently used by students for discovering new words | Reports of using strategy 'often' or 'always' in % | Mean |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------|
| Asking teacher                                                           | 22.6%                                            | 3.00 |
| Asking friends                                                           | 45.2%                                            | 3.26 |
| Using bilingual dictionary (English-Malay / Malay-English)               | 41.9%                                            | 3.29 |
Table 4. Consolidation techniques (memorising) among TEVT students

| Consolidation Strategies          | (%) Report of using strategies ‘often’ or ‘always’ | Mean |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------|
| a) Rote-learning or Memorising   |                                               |      |
| -writing words                    | 16.1                                          | 2.35 |
| -Use pictures or flashcards       | 12.9                                          | 2.35 |
| -Sticking words on a wall         | 6.46                                          | 1.90 |
| b) Higher than memorizing strategies |                                          |      |
| -Semantic mapping                | 9.7                                           | 2.39 |
| -Categorising words               | 6.5                                           | 2.00 |
| -Creating stories                 | 16.1                                          | 2.19 |
| -Make new sentences               | 9.7                                           | 2.22 |
| -Using antonyms                   | 9.7                                           | 2.24 |
| -Using synonyms                   | 12.9                                          | 2.58 |
| -Playing Vocabulary games         | 9.7                                           | 1.87 |

4.4. Students’ problems with learning strategies

From the research findings, it can be said that many students were unaware of strategies beyond discovery techniques. Students at GMI seem satisfied with finding meaning and using words in given context, yet were not interested in gaining deeper insight into the application of the word.

Based on the interview, it can be assumed that all three subjects did not dedicate a large portion of their time to Vocabulary learning since they only claim to learn less than 3 words per week. This can be further supported with the data from the questionnaire which states that 54% learn fewer than 5 words in a week. As mentioned by (Asgari & Ghazali, 2011), a lack of learning time can lead to poor mastery of the language. Some reported that they did not know of the best way to memorise or learn English vocabulary, while others complained that they had poor memory techniques. Although 76% claimed that they did refer to dictionaries (especially bilingual dictionaries), the extent to which dictionaries were used were merely superficial and to search for meaning only. Among the consolidation techniques that were boasted by the students were, jotting down new words in books, laptops and sticky notes whilst practicing their usage on friends, text messaging and even creating their own song lyrics. Although these were the assertions made by the participants, the statistical evidence showed the likelihood of this to occur often was very rare or next to never.
5. Implications and Conclusion

The study is based on the feedback of 31 students from one institute thus the generalizability of this research to a student population is questionable. Nonetheless the findings still provide insight into VLS among teaching and learning institutes of a similar nature. The implications of this is that EFL/ESL teachers will need to play a more active role in bridging the gap between what students knows and what the students should know (Ghazal), and making them more independent in their learning.

Also many students attributed their poor VLS due to lack of time. They complained that there was insufficient time to focus on language learning and the only time allocated for vocabulary is during leisure time and when they read novels or play games. As stated by (Lightbown & Spada, 1989), lack of time is a concerned factor in language learning, which can further discourage students in investing in vocabulary learning.

One or two students even declared that their problems with vocabulary learning lies in the problems they had committing words to memory, due to poor memory retention skills. This is believed that the techniques they used relied on a lot of rote-learning and memorization. As seen in the study, few students used strategies beyond note-taking and repetition techniques, and incidentally were ineffective as they did not engage in cognitive thought processes.

Another prevailing issue was the motivation and support from teachers. Two subjects explained that most efforts made in vocabulary learning were reinforced in the home and among friends. Those who felt inferior to learning vocabulary felt that teachers in the past had scolded or scoffed at their efforts in vocabulary learning. One student even stated that his teacher was very strict and in the past asked them to redo and memorise vocabulary exercises. He described these sessions as ‘torturous’.

Also based on the findings of the study, it can be seen that a majority of student exhibit a lack of strategies all together and thus were not successful in acquiring better hold of the English language. Among the most popular strategy utilised are discovery techniques, which included heavy reliance on dictionaries, guessing and asking teachers and friends. The % Mean of such Discovery strategies was found to be 42.6%. The lowest or least used strategy were the consolidation strategies, which students seemed less familiar with. Among these strategies were cognitive, metacognitive strategies such as creating new sentences, using semantic mapping, playing vocabulary games and etc.

Students’ attitude is one of the main causes of the problem in learning vocabulary. When asked why they had not reverted to dictionaries or other means of finding definitions of words, two respondents replied that they were ‘too lazy’ and checking for words was deemed as time-consuming. Among the 3 students interviewed, 2 said that they learned less than 3 words per week. As mentioned by (Asgari & Ghazali, 2011), a lack of learning time can lead to poor mastery of the language.

Furthermore, with better understanding of VLS, a suitable strategy could be implemented at GMI to ensure compatibility between students learning and instructors teaching approach. Such method would encourage a more sensible way for students to learn English effectively as suggested by (ÇELİK & TOPTAŞ, 2010). It can also help students develop strategies and ways of becoming more motivated and independent learners Teachers should teach the effective, efficient, realistic use of dictionaries, thesauruses, and other reference works. Teachers should also create a keen awareness of and a deep interest in language and words. Be creative and design exciting activities that can attract the students to learn. Provide effective learning tools so that they could make the most out of their opportunities for language learning.
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