



# A STUDY ON VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT LAC HONG UNIVERSITY

## NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC TỪ VỰNG CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI ĐẠI HỌC LẠC HỒNG

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**ABSTRACT.** To enrich their vocabulary, learners needed specific strategies to expand their vocabulary and avoid obstacles due to lack of vocabulary. Meanwhile, when teaching freshmen at Lac Hong University, the author realized that many students still had difficulty learning vocabulary because of not knowing how to learn it effectively. Therefore, the author conducted this research to find out the strengths and weaknesses in the vocabulary learning strategies of the research subjects. Then, the author gives suggestions to overcome the difficulties in learning vocabulary. By the methods of document analysis, questionnaire, interview, and data analysis, the author conducted this research. The results show that there are a variety of strategies used by the students to learn vocabulary, the strategies that are most often used by students as well as those that are not used to their full potential. As a result, not only learners but also teachers can adjust their learning strategies or teaching practice to help students make greater progress in learning vocabulary.

**KEYWORDS.** *english majors, vocabulary, strategies, first year students*

**TÓM TẮT.** Để làm phong phú vốn từ vựng, người học cần có các chiến lược cụ thể để mở rộng vốn từ vựng và tránh những trở ngại do thiếu từ vựng. Trong quá trình dạy sinh viên chuyên Anh năm nhất tại trường Đại học Lạc Hồng, tác giả nhận ra rằng nhiều sinh viên vẫn gặp khó khăn trong việc học từ vựng vì không biết cách học hiệu quả. Do đó, tác giả đã thực hiện nghiên cứu này để tìm ra điểm mạnh và điểm yếu trong chiến lược học từ vựng của các đối tượng nghiên cứu. Sau đó, tác giả đưa ra gợi ý nhằm giúp sinh viên vượt qua những khó khăn trong việc học từ vựng. Bằng các phương pháp phân tích tài liệu, bảng câu hỏi, phỏng vấn, và phân tích dữ liệu, tác giả đã thực hiện nghiên cứu này. Kết quả cho thấy, có rất nhiều chiến lược được sử dụng bởi các sinh viên trong việc học từ vựng, các chiến lược thường được hay được sử dụng nhất bởi các sinh viên cũng như những chiến lược chưa được sử dụng hết tiềm năng của chúng. Do đó, không chỉ người học mà cả giáo viên cũng có thể điều chỉnh chiến lược học tập hoặc thực hành giảng dạy để giúp người học tiến bộ hơn trong việc học từ vựng.

**TỪ KHÓA.** *sinh viên năm nhất, chuyên Anh, học từ vựng, chiến lược*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English plays an important role in students' study and future career because it has been an international language and is used as the most popular foreign language in all industries in Viet Nam. English are becoming more and more important and included in every school curriculum as a compulsory subject. It can be said that if we consider learning English as a building a house, then learning vocabulary is the foundation of that house. There are many ways to learn vocabulary, but to have a strategy to enrich the vocabulary effectively is not easy, and in fact, a lot of students find difficult to tackle with learning vocabulary.

For the above reason, the author carried out a study on vocabulary methods of first-year students majoring in English Language at Lac Hong University to find out their main methods of vocabulary learning. Therefore, the author can discover the problems the students are facing and suggest new learning methods to strengthen and improve their vocabulary effectively.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scott Thornbury (2002:13) emphasized that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". David Wilkin (2007:76) further asserts that if you spend most of your time learning

grammar, your English will not improve much. You will see significant progress if you learn many words and phrases. You can say very little with grammar but you can say a lot of things with vocabulary.

In another study by Schmitt (1997), he made his own proposal for classifying lexical learning methods. He distinguished the methods that learners used to approach the meaning of the word on the first contact with it and the methods that learners used to reinforce the meaning of the word in subsequent contacts. This classification is partly based on the Oxford classification system (1990), which consists of four strategy groups: Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive. Social Strategies (SOC) use interaction with other people to improve language learning. Approaches which relate new material to existing knowledge fall into the Memory Strategies (MEM) category. Cognitive Strategies (COG) exhibit the common function of "manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (Oxford, 1990:43). Finally, metacognitive Strategies (MET) involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating

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the best ways to study. In particular, the strategies for working out the meaning and memorizing the word are as follows.

**Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning** include (DET) Analyze part of speech, DET Analyze affixes and roots, DET Check for L1 cognate, DET Analyze any available pictures or gestures, DET Guess from textual context, DET Bilingual dictionary, DET Monolingual dictionary, DET Word lists, DET Flash cards, SOC Ask teacher for an L1 translation, SOC Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word, SOC Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word, SOC Ask classmates for meaning, SOC Discover new meaning through group work activity

**Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered** consist of SOC Study and practice meaning in a group, SOC Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy, SOC Interact with native-speakers, MEM Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning, MEM Image word's meaning, MEM Connect word to a personal experience, MEM Associate the word with its coordinates, MEM Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms, MEM Use Semantic maps, MEM Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives, MEM Peg Method, MEM Loci Method, MEM Group words together to study them, MEM Group words together spatially on a page, MEM Use new word in sentences, MEM Group words together within a storyline, MEM Study the spelling of a word, MEM Study the sound of a word, MEM Say new word aloud when studying, MEM Image word form, MEM Underline initial letter of the word, MEM Configuration, MEM Use Keyword Method, MEM Affixes and Roots (remembering), MEM Part of Speech (remembering), MEM Paraphrase the words meaning, MEM Use cognates in study, MEM Learn the words of an idiom together, MEM Use Physical action when learning a word, MEM Use semantic feature grids, COG Verbal repetition, COG Written Repetition, COG Word Lists, COG Flash Cards, COG Take notes in class, COG Use the vocabulary section in your textbook, COG Listen to tape of word lists, COG Put English labels on physical objects, COG Keep a vocabulary notebook, MET Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscasts, etc.), MET Testing oneself with word tests, MET Use spaced word practice, MET Skip or pass new word, MET Continue to study word over time.

**Research question:**

1. What is the role of vocabulary in learning English?
2. Which vocabulary learning methods are used by first-year English-majored students at Lac Hong University?
3. How can they learn vocabulary effectively?

**3. RESEARCH METHODS**

**3.1. Participants**

The study was conducted on all 134 students of the English language majors who were first-year students of four classes at Lac Hong University. Because the study focused on small number of first-year English majors, 100% of them participated in the processes of this research including doing the survey and being interviewed to ensure

the reliability and accuracy of the results. At the time of study, the students were in the second semester of the school year and were at different levels of English. All of them had learned English for nearly ten years before they joined the study.

**3.2. Instruments**

First, document analysis method was used to study related documents to have a scientific theoretical basis for the analysis of the topic. The most comprehensive list of vocabulary learning strategies was chosen to serve as the questionnaire for the survey. Second, using the method of survey, the author handed out survey questionnaires to all first-year students in the English Language Department, Lac Hong University. The questionnaire included 22 questions divided into two parts. The first part with only one question aimed to find out the viewpoint of the participants regarding the importance of vocabulary. The second part consisted of 21 questions focusing on discovering the frequency of each strategy used by the participants. Third, the interview method was employed to find out whether there were any other strategies used by the participants which were not mentioned in the questionnaire and the reasons why they preferred those strategies (one question). Finally, the author used the methods of data analysis to work on the data obtained on the questionnaire and the interview to lead to the most accurate findings for this research.

**4. FINDINGS**

**4.1. The role of vocabulary in learning English**

**Table 1.** *Assessing the role of vocabulary in learning English*

How important (I)	Very I.	I.	Moderately I.	Not I.
The role of vocabulary (Percentage of participants)	91%	9%	0%	0%

**4.2. Strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning**

**Table 2.** *The frequency of using strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning*

Questions	Frequency of Use			
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
2.1. Analyze part of speech	19.4%	50.7%	25.4%	4.5%
2.2. Analyze roots	14.9%	41.8%	38.8%	4.5%
2.3. Analyze affixes	9%	44.8%	31.3%	14.9%
2.4. Guess from textual context	41.8%	32.8%	20.9%	4.5%
2.5. Use a dictionary	74.6%	13.4%	9%	3%
2.6. Use word lists	9%	34.3%	29.8%	26.9%
2.7. Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms	7.5%	28.3%	41.8%	22.4%
2.8. Part of Speech (remembering)	13.4%	31.3%	40.3%	14.9%
2.9. Flash cards	3%	19.4%	28.4%	49.2%

#### 4.3. Social strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning

**Table 3.** The frequency of using social strategies

Questions	The Frequency of Use			
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
2.10. Ask teacher directly	31.3%	23.9%	37.3%	7.5%
2.11. Ask classmates for meaning	43.3%	44.8%	10.4%	1.5%
2.12. Interact with native speakers	6%	12%	12%	70%

#### 4.4. Strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered

**Table 4.** The frequency of using strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered

Questions	The Frequency of Use			
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
2.13. Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning	31.3%	23.9%	37.3%	7.5%
2.14. Associate the word with its coordinates	13.4%	38.8%	37.3%	10.4%
2.15. Group words together to study them	10.4%	43.3%	35.8%	10.4%

#### 4.5. The cognitive strategies

**Table 5.** The frequency of using the cognitive methods

Questions	The Frequency of Use			
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
2.16. Say new words aloud when studying	47.8%	41.8%	9%	1.5%
2.17. Read new words silently to remember	34.3%	49.3%	11.9%	4.5%
2.18. Written Repetition	26.9%	43.3%	26.9%	3%
2.19. Use the vocabulary section in your textbook	20.9%	44.8%	31.3%	3%
2.20. Listen to CDs of word lists	16.4%	31.3%	37.3%	14.9%
2.21. Keep a vocabulary notebook	25.4%	34.3%	29.9%	10.4%

#### 4.6. Other strategies

Because these are open-ended questions, students' opinions were diverse. Most of the students studied vocabulary with the above ways, but 10% - 20% offered

some other interesting ways to learn which are summarized as follows:

Based on the survey results of the question 2.23, using recreational means in English was very popular, used regularly and commonly by students. There are many means of entertainment such as books, newspapers, and movies. Learners can use those media to serve their learning needs such as practicing reading comprehension skills and writing skills through reading newspapers, stories, magazines, books, and literary works in English. Also, they practiced listening, speaking and pronunciation skills by listening to English music and learning to sing along with those songs or watching foreign movies with English subtitles. Besides, they can listen and watch English news on radio and on TV. In order to promote the effectiveness of English forms of entertainment, learners combined word guessing and dictionary lookup.

Only 3% of the students regularly learned vocabulary by reading bilingual stories. First, they read the English part, try to understand the plot, then read it again in Vietnamese to check the information they have read. Learners found this method effective because when they did not know the meaning of a word, they could immediately find the meaning in Vietnamese. Moreover, in a story, there are words that are repeated many times; thus, they can reinforce the meaning of the word just discovered to remember the word longer.

Other ways of learning that some of the participants mentioned were to organize group-study sessions and take extra-curricular sessions, and English competitions were also a good way for learners to exchange, improve their knowledge. Through these activities they could enrich their vocabulary.

A clever way employed by the participants was to call the English names of surrounding objects or the names of products advertised on TV. This strategy of learning helped them to remember new words for a long time because learners came into contact with those items on a regular basis.

## 5. DISCUSSION

According to Table 1, most of the students recognized the importance that vocabulary should have in language learning. Most of the students (91%) rated vocabulary as very important in the process of learning English, 9% said it was important to learn vocabulary, 0% thought that role of vocabulary was slightly important, and 0% thought vocabulary was not important. They do realize that without a certain bank of vocabulary, they cannot perform all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing effectively as well as understanding the language theory subjects.

Student's proper awareness of the role of vocabulary is a favorable factor for both teachers and learners. Clearly, when students are aware of the role of vocabulary learning, they will find interest to learn new words. Thanks to that interest, the quality and effectiveness of learning are also higher. However, there are thousands of words they must remember so students have to choose the method of learning vocabulary that best suits their level and style.

For students majoring in English, the learning strategy of guessing meaning according to its context is very good for reading skills. Contextual analysis helps readers focus on the reading while helping them guess the meaning of words quickly and accurately. That's why, in Table 2, 41.8% of students always learned vocabulary this way, 32.8% frequently used this technique, 20.9% sometimes used it, and 4.5% rarely did.

After investigating, the author found that students enjoyed using dictionaries while learning English and this was also the most frequently used strategy in vocabulary learning with 74.6% always using, 13.4% often, 9% sometimes, and only 3% rarely. Most students thought that when they didn't know the meaning of a word, looking it up a dictionary was the best and most useful way. However, any problem has two sides and using too many dictionaries can reduce the ability of students to guess the meaning and affect the effectiveness of reading process. Therefore, learners need to know how to use dictionaries appropriately and correctly.

Learning words through analyzing roots is to rely on existing roots to make speculations about the meaning of a word. These roots are usually from Latin and Greek, and they have certain meanings. With some knowledge of roots, learners can guess the meaning of the word. However, this learning method requires learners to spend time to learn those roots. Therefore, only 14.9% always used, 41.8% often used, 38.8% sometimes used, and 4.5% rarely used this strategy.

Notably, students often guessed meaning based on the part of speech (19.4% always used, 50.7% frequently used, 25.4% sometimes used, and 4.5% rarely used). This proves that memorizing word forms of is not too difficult for learners. Learners can easily identify a word of any type through the grammatical structure of the sentence or some specific forms and variations of words. This way of learning is quite common and can be applied to many words including difficult words.

Using flash cards was the strategy with the least usage with 3% always using, 19.4% frequently used, 28.4% sometimes used and up to 49.2% rarely used.

Making a word list is used quite a lot by students in their vocabulary learning process. Different types of word lists have different levels of use and effectiveness. The survey results show that 9% always, 34.3% often, 29.8% sometimes and 26.9% rarely grouped words together to study them. Learners can design their own word lists to create interest in vocabulary learning. This method of learning is relatively good so students can use some more forms of tree or bubble diagrams to make the list more vivid, creating excitement when learning words. In addition, while only 7.5% always, 28.3% usually, 41.8% sometimes, 22.4% rarely connect words to its synonyms and antonyms. Learning words through this way is a very effective way to enrich their word banks, so learners should apply it more in their vocabulary learning process. Besides, by learning through a list of words by parts of speech, learners can know the forms of a word so that they can form signs to identify them when they see other words with the same prefixes and suffixes. Due to that, up to 13.4% always, 31.3% often, 40.3% sometimes, and 14.9% rarely used this strategy to memorize new words.

Generally speaking, through table 2 which reflects a variety of strategies that the participants used to find out the meaning of new words, we can draw the conclusion that the students knew how to take advantage of good strategies to discover the meaning of new words including some more demanding techniques like guessing meaning from context or analyzing roots and affixes. In contrast, the least popular choice by the participants were to use word lists and flashcards; in fact, not every coursebook or learning material has word lists or flashcard accompanied. Therefore, it is reasonable that they did not make use of these two means of discovering word meaning.

Observing Table 3, the author found that asking friends was the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategy in the above strategy group (43.3% always, 44.8% often, 10.4% normal and only 1.5% rarely use). During each lesson teachers often provide them with interactive activities. Therefore, students can freely exchange information and ask questions. Moreover, with the objects of the same age, the exchange of information will take place more smoothly and comfortably.

Used by 31.3% as always, 23.9% as usually, 37.3% as sometimes and 7.5% as rarely, the method of asking teachers directly about the meaning of words was also preferred by the students. It had the support from many students and was said to be an effective way to learn because teachers are always available in the class to provide them with reliable information and ready to answer any questions they may have. However, relying too much on teachers may lead to passive learning habits.

If the students have the opportunity to communicate with native English speakers on a regular basis, their speaking competence and vocabulary will be greatly improved. For the participants, the opportunities to interact with foreigners are plentiful because they learn with foreign teachers every week. However, they are afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at by others or not confident enough, so learning vocabulary in this way is uncommon (6% always, 12% frequently, 12% sometimes, and up to 70% rarely used).

In short, Table 3 showed that the participants preferred asking their Vietnamese teachers or their classmates to native speakers for meaning of new words. Regrettably, although there are two native teachers in the faculty and they are in charge of two subjects in each semester, the students, due to their shyness, did not take advantage of this favorable condition. Form teachers as well as native teachers should encourage the students to interact more with native speakers to be more effective in learning new vocabulary in particular and to improve their communication skill in general.

From Table 4, we found that that grouping words together to study them was the strategy that students used quite a lot with always at 10.4%, usually at 43.3%, sometimes at 35.8%, and rarely at 10.4%. Currently, there are many books about thematic and functional vocabulary; learners can refer to them to learn vocabulary better.

Studding words with a pictorial representation of its meaning was a popular practice among students (31.3% always used, 23.9% frequently used, 37.3% sometimes used and 7.5% rarely used it). The purpose of using pictures is to make the vocabulary learning process not become boring.

Obviously, remembering the meaning of words through images is simpler than through definitions. However, not every word can be illustrated with images. With abstract words, learners need to apply a different way of learning.

According to the survey results, the number of students associating words with their coordinates was relatively high: 13.4% always, 38.8% often, 37.3% normal and 10.4% rarely. The word groups can be related to each other in terms of meaning, function, or part of speech. This is a logical and systematic way to learn vocabulary.

Survey results in Table 5 show that reading aloud several times to practice pronunciation was the most frequently used procedure among the group of cognitive strategies (47.8% always, 41.8% often, 9% sometimes, and only 1.5% rarely). Many students thought that this was a way to help them increase their vocabulary, improve their speaking skills and help them pronounce better. However, to apply this learning method, learners need to avoid rote learning, or trying to remember right away without long-term memory.

Reading silently to remember new words seems to help learners to inculcate words and memorize words longer because they only focus on memorizing words, not focusing on its pronunciation. To be successful, learners should dive into memorizing not only the meaning of the words but also other factors related to it. The number of students using this method was also quite high with 34.3% always, 49.3% frequently, 11.9% sometimes, and 4.5% rarely.

Written repetition to remember the spelling is a strategy that was used evenly with 26.9% of students always using it, 43.3% frequently using it, 26.9% sometimes using it, and 3% rarely using it. This way of learning does not only help learners to memorize words longer but also a way to check the accuracy of the learners' memorization process.

Observing Table 5, we find that the strategy of using word lists in textbooks were also frequently used by students (20.9% always used, 44.8% usually used, 31.3% sometimes used, 3% rarely used). Word lists in textbooks are useful because with word lists, learners can check information about the words as soon as they have difficulty with them.

Listening to CDs of word lists was the least frequently used techniques with 16.4% always used, 31.3% frequently used, 37.3% normal and 14.9% rarely use. In contrast, the survey shows that the number of students learning vocabulary by creating a new-word notebook was relatively high (25.4% always used, 34.3% usually used, 29.9% sometimes used, and 10.4 % rarely used). A vocabulary notebook, both easy to use and convenient, is an effective learning strategy that students should apply.

To sum up, through Table 5 related to ways to memorize new words, most of the students were in favor of saying new words aloud or silently, or writing the words repeatedly to memorize the words after discovering their meaning. However, they tended to use the strategies of keeping a vocabulary notebook less frequently. To make the vocabulary lists more organized, they should keep one notebook of new words so that they can easily learn them and review them later.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The strategies of vocabulary learning are especially important because vocabulary is an effective tool to help develop all four skills of learners. English majors in particular and vocabulary learners in general nowadays have many opportunities to test different vocabulary learning strategies. Each method has its own purpose and advantages. Choosing a method that is the most effective and suitable for each learner's ability and is an extremely necessary factor for English learners.

This research project is based on the previous study by Norbert Schmitt as a theoretical basis for the main content of our research on the vocabulary learning strategies of first year students majoring in English at Lac Hong University. The author hope this is not just a study but will introduce the most effective vocabulary learning strategies for English learners.

Through this study, the author would like to emphasize that a successful English learner is a skillful user of the learning strategies that suit his or her learning goals and style. The important thing is to take advantage of those strategies to make progress in learning vocabulary in particular and learning English in general.

However, in order for learners to choose the most effective learning strategies, one factor to consider is to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of each of the above vocabulary learning strategies. A certain strategy is effective for one person, but it's not sure to be suitable for others. Therefore, it is recommended that further research in this field focus on analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of each learning strategy so that students can decide on the most effective vocabulary learning strategies for themselves. In addition, in this topic, we only conduct research on the subjects of first-year English-majored students at Lac Hong University. The next research can be studied on other subjects such as junior or senior students, or non-English majors.

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