

An Experimental Study of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies Training for College Students

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Abstract: Vocabulary learning is the important and difficult field in English teaching. In recent years, the researches about VLS use and VLS training have been growing rapidly in China. However, the researches about the VLS training are still in the early stage. This thesis aims at finding the effective vocabulary learning strategies training method for college students by analyzing the changes in VLS use and vocabulary proficiency after the VLS training. This research provides a perspective on the vocabulary learning strategies training. The research findings suggest that more effective training methods for vocabulary learning strategies should be deeply studied; motivation and other factors related with vocabulary learning strategies should be studied together; more training time and more VLS training programs should be allotted, especially in the first-year college English classes.

1. Introduction

In the early 1970s, researchers became more interested in how students learn rather than how teachers teach. Joan Rubin is one of the most important and earliest researchers in this field. In her study, Rubin concluded that “the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser, has a strong drive to communicate, is often not inhibited, is prepared to attend to form, practices, monitors his own and the speech of others, and attends to meaning” [1].

The research of language learning strategies developed very quickly in 1980s. Politzer and McGroarty investigated English learners from different backgrounds and found that “cultural background has a great deal to do with the type of language learning behavior likely to be used by students” [2]. Based on cognitive learning theory, language learning strategies were firstly put into the frame of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by O’ Malley, Chamot, Manzanara, Kupper and Russo. They distinguished three major types of learning strategies as meta-cognitive, cognitive and social strategies [3].

The above researches pay more attention to theories rather than practices. Nunan claimed that language learning strategies training should be used in normal classes. After the training, students could choose the most effective language learning strategies and improve their language study [4].

In China, researches on vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) developed very quickly in 1990s. Gu and Johnson made a survey of 850 non-English major students at Beijing Normal University. The aim of this research was to “establish the vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese university learners of English and the relationship between their strategies and outcomes in learning English” [5]. Fan did a descriptive study of Hong Kong university students learning English vocabulary. Fan suggested that if teachers could first convince students of the usefulness of strategies, students might use vocabulary learning strategies more often [6].

After the year of 2005, more researchers in China began to study vocabulary learning strategy training about college students. Huang and Zhou did the VLS training and proposed the necessity of VLS training and suggested several important aspects for further training [7]. Another study on college English learning strategy training was carried by Li and Cao. They investigated college students’ VLS first, and then gave them VLS training. The training aims to improve students’ VLS awareness [8]. Li did an empirical study about vocabulary learning strategy training for elementary

English reading class. It is concluded that students in senior schools cannot use vocabulary learning strategies frequently and the VLS training do help students improve their vocabulary and reading abilities [9].

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

This research aims to find the VLS use patterns for college students and propose a VLS training model after college students' VLS use patterns are analyzed. This research pays more attention to the training effectiveness by analyzing the changes in VLS use patterns and vocabulary proficiency after the VLS training. Based on the above consideration, the following research questions are asked:

(1) Does the VLS training have any significant impact on the use of VLS for college students? If yes, in what aspects, and to what degrees?

(2) Does the VLS training improve college students' English vocabulary proficiency? If yes, in what aspects, and to what degrees?

2.2 The Participants

Participants are college students in Beijing City University. They are all freshmen. These students' ages range from 18 years old to 22 years old. Most of them have been learning English for 10 years. They are from two classes. Class A is the experiment group. Class B is the control group. The two classes were taught by the same English teacher and used the same English textbook. There are 49 students in the experiment group, who received the VLS training for one semester. There are 43 students in the control group, who did not receive the VLS training. The freshmen were chosen for the research because after the high school education, most of them were fed up with the numerous tests and exam-oriented learning atmosphere. Vocabulary learning is an important and difficult aspect for their English learning. They were eager and willing to follow the program and receive vocabulary learning strategies training.

2.3 Research Methods

This is an experimental research. Quasi-experimental design was used in sampling as selecting participants randomly is not so convenient. The researcher chose two similar classes and randomly assigned them as the experiment group and the control group. The detailed research methods of the experiment are followed. First of all, the vocabulary learning strategy training model is discussed, in which the crucial and important aspects are analyzed. Then the detailed research methods for the experiment group are listed.

2.3.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategy Training Method

Among those strategy training models, Cohen's Strategies-based Instruction (SBI) "is especially valuable because it can easily be adapted according to the needs of various groups of learners, the resources available to a particular institution, and the length of the strategy training, whether short- or long-term" [10]. There are seven steps in SBI model.

(1) Determining the learners' needs and the resources available for training.

(2) Selecting the strategies.

(3) Considering the benefits of integrated strategy training.

(4) Considering motivational issues.

(5) Preparing the materials and activities.

(6) Conducting explicit strategy training.

(7) Evaluating and revising the strategy training.

For my research, SBI model is adapted to conduct the long-term vocabulary learning strategy training. As a teacher, the role in the training is to assist students in becoming more effective learners. In my SBI classroom VLS training, the instructor will integrate vocabulary learning strategies into everyday teaching activities.

2.3.2 Strategies Training

For the detailed strategies in training, nine vocabulary learning strategies were chosen. There are two meta-cognitive strategies (planning and self-monitoring), five cognitive strategies (references, classification, contextualization, summarizing, and keywords), and two social/affective strategies (questioning/ clarifying and cooperation). The participants of the experiment group took part in the strategy training, while the participants of the control group still had the normal English classes. In this part, specific strategy trainings will be explained.

2.4 Research Procedures

In this section, first of all, pre-investigations are discussed. Secondly, the experimental process is briefly proposed. Thirdly, there is a detailed description of the classroom training procedure for VLS. Lastly, there shows an outline of the VLS training curriculum in this research.

2.4.1 Pre-Investigations

The first stage for the research is preparatory stage, which is about the pre-investigations. The aim of these pre-investigations is to assess the needs of the learners-- know learners' current level of proficiency and their experience with English learning strategy use. Investigation instruments include questionnaires, vocabulary levels test, and productive vocabulary levels test.

2.4.2 The Experimental Process

Based on the data analysis of pre-investigations, vocabulary learning strategies training was carried out in the experiment group. For the detailed strategies in training, I choose nine vocabulary learning strategies which college students lack: two meta-cognitive strategies (planning and self-monitoring), five cognitive strategies (references, classification, contextualization, summarizing, and keywords), and two social/affective strategies (questioning/ clarifying and cooperation).

The VLS training was integrated into the course content. For different language learning strategies, the training time will be a little different according to the difficulty. Time assignment is followed: two meta-cognitive strategies (week 3-week 4), five cognitive strategies (week 5-week 9), two social/affective strategies (week 10-week 11), and integrated strategies (week 12). After every strategy's training, there is a stage-test. In week 17, there was a long-term test. The forms of stage-tests and long-term tests will be the same with the tests before experiments. However, teachers gave instructions to students for the post-test. After the end of the experiment, quantitative data were collected and analyzed, which will be discussed in detail in the following parts.

2.5 Data-Collection Methods

Data-collection instruments in this research include two aspects: tests (vocabulary levels test and productive vocabulary levels test) and questionnaires.

There are two vocabulary tests for this experiment: the Vocabulary Levels Test and the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test. These two forms of tests are both designed by Nation. This research adopts the 2,000-word level VLT, and the 3,000-word level VLT. There are ten groups and thirty items in every test. The full mark of the tests is ninety points, and each item has three points. This research adopts the 2,000-word level PVL, and the 3,000-word level PVL. There are 18 items in every test. The full mark of the tests is ninety points, and each item has five points.

In this study, the main instrument is a written questionnaire to survey college students' strategies in vocabulary learning. The questionnaire is designed based on O' Malley and Chamot's framework of learning strategies and Nation's taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. The questionnaire is made up of two parts, instruction and twenty-four statements about the vocabulary learning strategies. The VLS questionnaires were administered to the participants before and after the experiment. Before the experiment, it is taken to investigate the VLS use patterns by college students and then the researcher can design the VLS training based on the results. After the

experiment, it is taken to prove how much improvement the participants in the experiment group get during the VLS training.

3. Data-Analysis and Conclusion

3.1 Data-Analysis Methods

From March 1 of 2021 to June 31 of 2021, this research program was conducted for one semester. In March of 2011, the VLS questionnaires, VLT, and PVLТ were administered to participants. After all the results were collected and analyzed, the VLS training curriculum was designed according to the needs and characteristics of learners. From March 07 of 2021 to May 26 of 2021, the experiment group received the VLS training while the control group did not get the training. After the VLS training ended, both groups answered the same VLS questionnaires and took the Vocabulary Levels Test and the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test.

There are two kinds of data collected: the data of the tests and the data of the questionnaires. The VLS questionnaires are based on the five-point Likert scale. The data of the tests were collected before and after the experiment. The data of the questionnaires were also collected before and after the experiment. After the data collection, all the data were entered into the computer. With the help of software SPSS, the data-analysis was obtained. By analyzing the data before and after experiments, the researcher got the different patterns of VLS and vocabulary level by college students. The independent samples t-test of the VLS use, VLT, and PVLТ before training were conducted to check if the VLS use and vocabulary level of the two groups were at the same level. The Independent samples t-test of the VLS use, VLT, and PVLТ after training were conducted to compare the difference between the two groups' VLS use frequency and vocabulary levels after experiment.

3.2 Major Findings

4. The VLS Training Can Improve the VLS Use Frequency and Efficiency.

The independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the different VLS use patterns by the experiment group before and after training. There were statistical differences after the training for three categories (meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies). Among nine strategies, only one strategy (reference) did not show statistically difference after training (2-tailed sig.=0.186) and the other eight strategies all showed statistically significant differences (2-tailed sig.=0.000 in all cases). After the analysis above, it can be concluded that the VLS can improve the VLS use frequency and efficiency.

5. The VLS Training Can Improve students' Vocabulary Proficiency, Which Includes Two Sections: the Vocabulary Level and the Productive Vocabulary Level.

Before the training there was no statistical difference in the vocabulary level and the productive vocabulary level between the two groups. After the training, there was statistical difference between the two groups for the vocabulary level and the productive vocabulary level, which showed that the experiment group outperformed the control group for the two kinds of vocabulary level increase. It can be concluded that with the VLS training the experiment group's vocabulary level and productive vocabulary level increased much more than those of the control group. It also indicates that the VLS training is effective for the experiment group to improve their vocabulary level and productive vocabulary level.

6. For the VLS Use, College Students Can Use All the Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Their English Learning, But Only Some of the VLS Are Used in High Level.

Most of the use frequencies for the VLS are in the medium or low level. For the three categories, they are all in the middle level use, with an increase in this order: meta-cognitive strategies (M=2.9423), social/ affective strategies (M=2.9462), and cognitive strategies (M=3.0533). For the fifteen strategies, there are four strategies in the high-level use: selective-attention, repetition/mechanic memory, guessing, and self-stimulation strategies. Two of them are in the low-level use: planning and summarizing strategies. There are nine strategies in the middle use: self-monitoring, self-evaluation, references, classification, contextualization, translation, keywords, questioning/clarifying, cooperation strategies.

7. The VLS Training Model Adapted from Cohen's Sbi Proved to Be Effective.

There are many training models from different researchers for the strategy training. Cohen's Strategies-based Instruction is clear and easy to conduct. The VLS training model in this research is adapted from Cohen's SBI. The results of this research prove that the SBI model is effective not only in improving learners' vocabulary proficiency but also in increasing learners' VLS use frequencies.

8. Suggestions for Further Studies

After the whole training program ended, there was also an evaluation from teachers and students. Based on the above evaluations, there are four suggestions for the revision of the future VLS training program.

8.1 More Effective Training Methods for Vocabulary Learning Strategies Should Be Deeply Studied.

Training is important for students to know the vocabulary learning strategies and put them into real practice. Otherwise, these learning strategies cannot play positive roles in students' learning process. This research employed the SBI training model by Cohen. There are also other strategy training models proposed by many other researchers (Hosenfeld et al. [11]; Weinstein & Underwood [12]). If further researches can try other strategy training models and find the effective and suitable models for students of different levels, it will benefit the vocabulary teaching and improve students' interests in learning English vocabulary.

8.2 Motivation and Other Factors Related with Vocabulary Learning Strategies Should Be Studied Together.

Motivation is the key factor to arouse students' interests to learn vocabulary. For this VLS training, extra grades will be given to learners who have the willingness to try new strategies, which will also improve the effectiveness of the strategy training program. Above are the measures to improve learners' motivation in the training. Nevertheless, there is not the assessment and evaluation for the motivation measures, such as the special grading system, and free strategy choices. What's more, other related factors are not carefully studied, such as the learning styles of learners, their personality characteristics, and their expectations about the roles of the teachers and language learners. From the above discussion, it can be proposed that motivation and other factors related with vocabulary learning strategies should be studied together.

8.3 For English Teachers in College, We Should Pay More Attention to the Process of Language Learning Instead of Just Focusing on Those English Tests.

Language learning is a process and also an experience for students to build their confidence for learning abilities, and their happiness of enjoying learning English. However, there are many requirements for college students to pass different English tests, such as CET-4 and CET-6. As a result, the focus on these English tests has made students feel unhappy in learning English, especially in learning English vocabulary. For college English teachers, more attention should be paid to the process of language learning instead of just focusing on those English tests.

8.4 More Training Time and More VLS Training Programs Should Be Allotted, Especially in the First-Year College English Classes.

For Chinese college students, it is not easy to learn English well. Most of them pay lots of time and efforts in learning English vocabulary. Some of them have had sustained hard work, however, they cannot gain a good command of English. In the college English classes, there have been the vocabulary teaching and many vocabulary learning tasks. But students cannot enlarge their vocabulary with the in-class teaching and assignments. The vocabulary learning strategies can be employed to make the English learning easier and more effective. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that more training time and more VLS training programs should be allotted, especially in the first-year college English classes. The training programs will bring the learners more confidence and more independence in learning English vocabulary.

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