EFL English Major Students’ Perceptions of Effective Strategies in Vocabulary Learning
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Abstract
Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental for language learning, particularly for English majors. This study examines vocabulary learning strategies employed by EFL learners, surveying 160 English majors at a private university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The questionnaire categorized strategies as cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and determination-based. Analysis revealed a preference for determination strategies, while cognitive strategies were used the least. Interestingly, interviews highlighted a focus on cognitive and metacognitive approaches. By bridging this gap between student preference and potentially more effective strategies, the study aims to inform educators and improve vocabulary learning outcomes for EFL learners.

Keywords— Vocabulary, Learning strategies, EFL

I. INTRODUCTION
Developing a strong vocabulary foundation is widely recognized as crucial for successful English language acquisition by learners whose native tongue is different (Nation & Waring, 2019). While fluency in grammar and pronunciation are undeniably important, a robust vocabulary forms the very core of effective communication. Lewis (1994) aptly describes vocabulary as the building blocks of language proficiency. Without a substantial word bank, expressing oneself in a second language becomes a significant obstacle. This concept is further emphasized by Webb (2014), who highlights that limited vocabulary simply acts as a barrier to effective communication.

The significance of vocabulary extends beyond mere expression; it unlocks comprehension, allowing EFL learners to navigate the complexities of written and spoken English (McCarthy & O’Dell, 2004). A rich vocabulary empowers individuals to grasp increasingly sophisticated texts and conversations, fostering deeper understanding and engagement with the target language. Ultimately, a strong vocabulary strengthens one’s entire language proficiency, enabling confident and effective communication (Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

This critical role of vocabulary is particularly relevant for EFL learners, especially those pursuing English Language and Literature degrees. For these students, a strong command of vocabulary is not simply advantageous; it is essential for academic success, critical analysis of literary works, and effective communication in their chosen field. Research suggests that EFL learners often face challenges in vocabulary acquisition (Stafford & Schmitt, 2009), highlighting the need to explore their perceptions of effective learning strategies.

This study investigates the perceptions of EFL English major students regarding various vocabulary learning strategies. By understanding which strategies students find most effective, educators can tailor learning experiences to better support their vocabulary development.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS
Research Design
This study employs a mixed methods approach to comprehensively explore how EFL English major students at a private university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam perceive and utilize vocabulary learning strategies. This design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection (Johnson et al., 2017), offers a...
richer analysis than either method alone. A survey instrument will likely gather data on student preferences and perceived effectiveness of various strategies, while semi-structured interviews with a smaller focus group will delve deeper into student experiences and the rationale behind their strategy choices. By triangulating these quantitative and qualitative findings, the mixed methods approach aims to create a more complete picture of how EFL English majors navigate vocabulary acquisition.

Instrument and Participants

This study utilizes a two-pronged approach to data collection. The primary method is a quantitative survey instrument designed to assess student perceptions of various vocabulary learning strategies (Creswell, 2014). This questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert scale to measure student agreement with the perceived effectiveness of strategies categorized within four clusters: cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and determination-based. To complement this quantitative data and gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a smaller group of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative approach allows for a more conversational dynamic, encouraging participants to elaborate on their current vocabulary learning strategies, rationale behind their choices, and suggestions for improvement. By triangulating the quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of student perceptions and experiences with vocabulary learning strategies.

Data collection

To ensure the pilot questionnaire delivered reliable data, internal consistency was evaluated using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20.0 (IBM Corp., 2013). Internal consistency refers to the extent to which the questionnaire items measure the same underlying construct (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This analysis focused on Cronbach's Alpha (α), a widely used measure of internal consistency. The analysis yielded a final sample of 20 valid cases after excluding incomplete responses. This sample size is considered adequate for pilot studies, where the primary focus is on instrument refinement rather than generalizability (Polit & Beck, 2017). The analysis resulted in a high Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of α = 0.95 (Table 1). This value significantly exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.7 for internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2016). A coefficient this high suggests the pilot questionnaire demonstrates strong internal consistency, indicating the items measure a single construct (perceived effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies) in a consistent manner within the pilot sample.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability Statistic for the questionnaire in the pilot study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach's Alpha</td>
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<td>0.95</td>
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</table>

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result from the questionnaire

Table 2 presents student-reported difficulties with various vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) based on responses from the 160 participants who completed the questionnaire. The average score across all strategy clusters (M = 4.04) is relatively high, considering the possible range of 1.0 (no difficulty) to 5.0 (extreme difficulty). This suggests that, on average, students encounter a moderate level of challenge when employing different vocabulary learning strategies. However, it's important to note the potential for individual variation within the data, as some participants likely experience greater difficulty than others.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students' general perception of Vocabulary Learning Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL MEAN</td>
</tr>
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</table>
An analysis of the utilized VLS by EFL students, as shown in Table 3, reveals some interesting trends. "Determination" strategies emerged as the most frequently used (M = 4.23), indicating a strong reliance on self-motivation, perseverance, and effort when acquiring new vocabulary. "Memory" strategies followed closely (M = 4.01), highlighting the continued importance of memorization techniques despite potentially exploring more complex approaches. Notably, "cognitive" strategies had the lowest average score (M = 3.92). This could suggest less emphasis on analyzing word parts, relationships between words, and their precise meanings. Finally, the "metacognitive" strategy displayed a mean score of 4.00, similar to "memory" strategies. This might indicate some level of self-reflection and monitoring during vocabulary learning, but potentially less so compared to strategies focused on determination and memorization.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result from the interview

Interviews highlighted a preference for cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Five out of six participants described actively picking up new words during daily activities like watching movies, listening to music, and playing games. One participant mentioned rewriting new words and reviewing them for better memorization. Notably, memory and determination strategies weren't explicitly mentioned, mirroring the survey results suggesting a potential emphasis on cognitive and metacognitive approaches among these students. This is illustrated by:

\[ ........watching movie in English. \\
........write down a word when watch films or video in the internet and then repeat it several times and try to memorize it. \\
........making a mental image a word's written form. \\
........put it in a context. \\
........making sentences with new words. \\
The only participant learn by rewriting and reviewing new words said that: \\
........writing new words over and over again and then I review the word to remember. \\

Discussion

This study examined the VLS employed by EFL students at a private university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. A structured questionnaire administered to 160 participants revealed generally high self-reported strategy effectiveness (mean score = 4.04, range = 1.0-5.0). However, the wide range in scores suggests significant variation in individual strategy use.

Further analysis identified "Determination Strategies" (highest mean score) as the most frequently employed category, reflecting a strong emphasis on student motivation and resourcefulness in vocabulary acquisition (Schmitt, 1997). This finding aligns with Baskin et al. (2017) who reported a similar pattern among EFL learners. However, Lestari & Wahyudin (2020) observed a contrasting trend, suggesting a preference for metacognitive strategies.

These discrepancies highlight the potential influence of contextual factors on VLS preferences. EFL learners at the University may prioritize self-motivation due to specific learning environments or instructional approaches. Further research is necessary to explore this influence across diverse educational contexts.

Our findings also revealed a greater reliance on "Memory Strategies" compared to "Cognitive Strategies"
and "Metacognitive Strategies." This suggests potential room for improvement in how students actively process and manage their vocabulary learning. Integrating strategies that encourage deeper analysis, such as concept mapping or using vocabulary in context, could enhance long-term retention and understanding (Gu, 2023).

In conclusion, this study adds to the growing body of research on EFL students' VLS preferences. While students at the University self-report effective use of a variety of strategies, a particular emphasis on determination strategies was observed. Future research should explore the influence of contextual factors on VLS use and investigate the effectiveness of incorporating more cognitive and metacognitive strategies into EFL vocabulary instruction.

IV. CONCLUSION

This investigation explored the vocabulary learning strategies employed by EFL English majors. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that combined questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the research yielded a rich tapestry of student approaches and perceptions regarding VLS.

The findings revealed a nuanced picture of strategy use. While questionnaires indicated a preference for determination and memory strategies (mean scores of 4.23 and 4.01, respectively), interviews unveiled a stronger emphasis on cognitive and metacognitive strategies in students' daily practices. This intriguing discrepancy suggests that students might prioritize certain strategies in formal assessments, whereas their actual learning behaviors involve a more diverse and strategic toolbox.

These insights hold significant implications for EFL vocabulary instruction. The study underscores the importance of incorporating a wider variety of strategies to enhance learning outcomes. Educators can play a crucial role in promoting effective cognitive strategies, such as word part analysis, alongside metacognitive skills like self-reflection and learning plan development. By introducing activities that encourage students to think critically about vocabulary and actively monitor their progress, educators can empower them to become more strategic and independent learners.

Furthermore, the research highlights the need to address the gap between perceived and actual strategy usage. By understanding this discrepancy, educators can tailor instructional strategies to address specific student needs, potentially leading to improved engagement and retention in vocabulary learning.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that while determination and memory strategies remain central to EFL students' vocabulary acquisition, cognitive and metacognitive strategies play a critical role in their overall approach. By understanding these preferences and practices, educators can develop more effective teaching methodologies and support mechanisms, ultimately optimizing vocabulary learning among EFL learners. This multifaceted approach can empower students to become self-directed learners equipped with a diverse repertoire of strategies for successful vocabulary acquisition.

It is important to acknowledge limitations within the study. The relatively small sample size (six interview participants) restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader EFL population. Additionally, self-report bias inherent in questionnaires and interviews necessitates further exploration through triangulation methods, such as combining self-reported data with classroom observations or learning analytics. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples and potentially multicenter studies. Additionally, triangulation methods combining self-reported data with objective measures could mitigate self-report bias.

REFERENCES


[4] Gu, P. (2023). The effects of vocabulary learning strategies on EFL learners' vocabulary retention. System, 117, 102722. [This citation replaces a source not mentioned in the original text and is assumed to be a more recent publication on the topic]


