



Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies

**VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY ON
ENGINEERING UNDERGRADUATES OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
UNIVERSITIES**

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**Bachelor of Arts with Honours (Linguistics)
2017**

**VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY ON ENGINEERING
UNDERGRADUATES OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES**

by

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This final year project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours (Linguistics),
Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

2017

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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Final Year Project Report

Masters

PhD

DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, AP Dr Shanthi Nadarajan for sharing her invaluable knowledge in vocabulary learning strategies. Her continued advice, support and discussion helped me to complete my final year project successfully.

In addition, I would like to take this opportunity to express my special thanks to all my friends and family members who provide encouragement and valuable moral support to help me complete this study.

Lastly, I would also like to thank my evaluators for their comments and advices for this case study, as well as participants from private and public universities students who participated in the survey.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
L2	Second Language
NLPT	Nelson Language Proficiency Test
NLPTS	Nelson Language Proficiency Test Scores
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
VLS	Vocabulary Learning Strategies

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Case Study on Engineering Undergraduates of Public and Private Universities

Shereen Ong Lee Jing

The study aimed to compare the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by undergraduates engineering students from private and public universities. The objectives of the study are: 1) to examine the most frequently used VLS by students; 2) to compare the most frequently used VLS by male and female students; 3) to compare the differences in VLS used by students according to proficiency level. A total of 138 engineering students participated in the study. The two instruments used to collect data were Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (Version 300D) and Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire. The findings showed the most frequently used VLS was determination strategies whereas individual VLS were guessing the word's meaning from context, using Internet to search the word's meaning, remembering the word sounds and using English language media. For gender, memory and social strategies in the five categories of VLS were found to have significant difference. Intermediate students from public university also depicted significant difference in individual VLS use. For proficiency, there was no significant difference found in the use of determination, social and metacognitive strategies but there was significant difference shown in the use of memory and cognitive strategies. Significant differences were also identified in the use of seven similar individual VLS by students.

ABSTRAK

Strategi Pembelajaran Perbendaharaan Kata: Kajian Kes tentang Mahasiswa Kejuruteraan dari Universiti Awam dan Swasta

Shereen Ong Lee Jing

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk membandingkan strategi pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata (VLS) yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa kejuruteraan dari universiti awam dan swasta. Objektif kajian ini adalah: 1) untuk mengkaji VLS yang paling kerap digunakan oleh pelajar; 2) untuk membandingkan VLS yang paling kerap digunakan oleh pelajar lelaki dan pelajar perempuan; 3) untuk membandingkan perbezaan VLS yang digunakan oleh pelajar berdasarkan kemahiran bahasa. Seramai 138 mahasiswa kejuruteraan terlibat dalam kajian ini. Dua instrumen kajian telah digunakan untuk mengumpul data, antaranya ialah Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (Versi 300D) dan Soal Selidik Strategi Pembelajaran Perbendaharaan Kata oleh Schmitt (1997). Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan strategi yang paling kerap digunakan ialah strategi determinasi manakala VLS individu ialah meneka makna perkataan daripada konteks, menggunakan Internet untuk mencari makna perkataan, mengingatkan bunyi perkataan dan menggunakan media bahasa Inggeris. Bagi jantina, keputusan yang diperolehi menunjukkan strategi memori dan sosial dalam lima kategori VLS mempunyai perbezaan yang signifikan. Pelajar dari universiti awam yang kemahiran bahasanya sederhana juga menunjukkan perbezaan yang signifikan dalam penggunaan VLS individu. Bagi kemahiran bahasa, keputusan yang diperolehi tidak menggambarkan perbezaan yang signifikan dalam penggunaan strategi determinasi, sosial dan metakognitif. Namun, terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan digambarkan dalam penggunaan strategi memori dan kognitif. Perbezaan yang signifikan juga ditunjukkan dalam penggunaan tujuh VLS individu oleh pelajar.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This study concerns with the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) employed by engineering students from private and public universities in Malaysia. In this chapter, the background of study, problem statement, research objectives and questions, operational definition of terms, significance as well as scope of the study will be introduced.

1.1 Background of the Study

Second language learners are often faced with the need to master vocabulary as it is one of the important elements required for successful communication. Without vocabulary, one could have difficulty in understanding the meaning of the message that is being conveyed in a communication. McCarthy (1992) has claimed that “without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way” (p. 50). Besides, vocabulary can influence one’s reading, listening, speaking and writing skills as vocabulary is part of the aspects that build up existing language skills.

Vocabulary knowledge is essential for the development of good language skills. Language learners need adequate vocabulary knowledge to communicate in a target language successfully. According to Rupley, Logan and Nichols (1999, cited by Davoudi & Chavosh, 2016), vocabulary knowledge involves “all the words we must know to access our background knowledge, express our ideas and beliefs, communicate successfully, and learn new notions” (p. 69). Nation (2001) stated that vocabulary knowledge and language use are complementary to each other, whereby the knowledge of vocabulary allows the use of

language and the language use results in the improvement of vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge not only involves the knowledge of word meanings, it includes the ability to use the words effectively in a suitable context as well as in a natural situation. It also has been identified as an indispensable element and crucial factor for language proficiency (Stæhr, 2008).

Insufficient vocabulary knowledge can cause learners to face hardship in learning a language (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011) as it hinders the learners to communicate efficiently in the target language. Besides, some learners claim that they have limited vocabulary forcing them to use coping strategies such as gestures or sounds to make meaning (Boonkongsan & Intaraprasert, 2014). Sometimes, this situation can result in miscommunication as the conveyed messages are not the same as the original version.

Vocabulary learning has been considered as the major challenge encountered by language learners when learning the language (Ghazal, 2010). To solve this problem and to assist learners in learning and acquiring vocabulary as well as to increase the vocabulary size which refers to the total amount of words an individual knows, several research studies (Stoffer, 1995; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Kudo, 1990; Nation, 2001) have been carried out on the acquisition of vocabulary as well as the strategies used by learners in vocabulary learning. The studies have found that learning strategies is a useful tool to assist learners in language learning. In fact, Oxford (1990) has described learning strategies as the “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). She believed the route of learning will be better and faster if the learners learn to use the strategies. When it comes to VLS, Nation (2001) claimed “vocabulary learning strategies are a part of language learning strategies which in turn are a part of general learning strategies” (p. 217). The VLS

defined by Catalan (2003) was the “knowledge about the mechanisms (processes and strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students (a) to find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode” (p. 56).

Learners will encounter various kind of vocabulary when they are learning a language. In the midst of learning, they will utilize learning strategies to assist them in learning as well as memorizing the vocabulary items. Besides, different learners have their own ways and preferences of learning vocabulary. They are said to employ different types of VLS in various situations because of the contextual factors. The factors that can affect VLS are gender, proficiency level, motivation, belief, attitude and so on. VLS will also be different depending on the learners’ aim whether they want to know the language which is listening or reading or to produce the language that is speaking or writing.

Many second language researchers (Brown & Payne, 1994; Stoffer, 1995; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997, Kudo, 1999; Nation, 2001; Fan, 2003; Jones, 2006) who have worked on VLS have demonstrated different classifications for VLS. In this research, Schmitt’s (1997) inventory will be used to identify the VLS employed by engineering students from private and public universities. The rationale for choosing the classification is because it is widely used among researchers as well as it has high reliability and validity. Rabadi (2016) had stated that “Schmitt’s taxonomy (1997) is a comprehensive inventory of vocabulary learning strategies” (p. 48). Apart from that, Schmitt (1997) has classified the VLS into five categories which are the determination strategies, social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies as well as metacognitive strategies. This classification is used as it can identify the types of preferred strategies by engineering students.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Vocabulary has not received much attention in the university curriculum of Asian countries. In Asian countries, the development of four language skills is more emphasized than improving learners' vocabulary learning (Fan, 2003). Although many studies on VLS have been performed in various countries in Asia, little studies have been done in Malaysian context. The studies conducted in Malaysia were done by Asgari and Mustapha (2011), Noor and Amir (2012) as well as Safian, Malakar, Kalajahi (2014). They identified the VLS employed by Malaysian students in one institution. However, till to date, there has been no study carried out to compare the VLS used by private and public universities students. Besides, most of the studies (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011; Khatib, Hassanadeh & Rezaei, 2011; Barekat & Karami, 2012; Zokaee et al., 2012; Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Jafari & Kafipour, 2013; Behbahani, 2016) focused on the VLS used by ESL and EFL learners and fewer studies (Tahriri & Fallah, 2013; Cai, 2014) emphasized on the use of VLS by engineering students in vocabulary learning. Thus, more studies need to be carried out on engineering students or other science-based courses in order to highlight the importance of English in Science and Technology. In order to fill in the research gap, this study aims to compare the VLS used by engineering students from two different institutions which are private and public universities in Sarawak.

1.3 Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to compare the VLS used by undergraduate engineering students from private and public universities. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the most frequently used VLS by engineering students from private and public universities.
2. To compare the most frequently used VLS by male and female engineering students from private and public universities.
3. To compare the differences in VLS used by private and public universities engineering students according to proficiency level.

1.4 Research Questions

This study focuses on answering the following questions:

- i. What are the most frequently used VLS by engineering students?
- ii. Is there a difference between the most frequently used VLS by male and female engineering students?
- iii. What are the differences in terms of VLS use according to proficiency level?

1.5 Operational Definition of Terms

The following are the definition of terms employed in this study.

1.5.1 Vocabulary

According to Richards et al. (1992), vocabulary is “a set of lexemes which includes single words, compound words and idioms” (p. 400). Vocabulary also refers to the collection

of words that an individual or a group of people need to understand and apply frequently in their daily life (Ansarin, Zohrabi, & Zeynali, 2012).

1.5.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Intaraprasert (2004) has defined VLS as “any set of techniques or learning behaviours, which language learners report using in order to discover the meaning of a new word, to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words, and to expand their knowledge of vocabulary” (p. 9).

1.5.3 Discovery Strategies

Discovery strategies are employed when a person wants to identify the meanings of unfamiliar words. This strategy has been classified by Schmitt (1997) into two groups which are determination and social strategies.

1.5.4 Consolidation Strategies

Consolidation strategies are known as strategies used to remember the words once a person has overcome it. Schmitt (1997) has categorized this strategy into four groups which are social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

1.5.5 Determination Strategies

Determination strategies are strategies which help learners to identify the definition of new words without assistance from others. This strategy is usually employed by the individual.

1.5.6 Social Strategies

Social strategies involve the interaction between learners and other people such as friends as well as teachers. The learners look for the answers by asking someone who knows the meaning of words.

1.5.7 Memory Strategies

Memory strategies involve mental processing where learners learn the new words by connecting it to their existing or background knowledge.

1.5.8 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies involve mental processing of words. According to Oxford (1990), it is the “manipulation or transformation of the target language by learners” (p. 43). It can assist a person in achieving certain goals such as comprehending text.

1.5.9 Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies are “a conscious overview of the learning process and making decision about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best way to study” (Oxford, 1990, p. 205).

1.5.10 Gender

The gender in this study is denoted by the physical identity of male and female.

1.5.11 Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is defined as the capability of the learners to communicate in the target language.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study can shed some lights to several people such as language teachers or educators, Ministry of Education, students as well as researchers who intend to conduct studies on vocabulary acquisition.

First, this study will provide an insight for language teachers or educators as the information on VLS employed by engineering students can be used as reference for all language teachers or educators to design more appropriate materials and activities to help students use vocabulary learning strategies. Besides, it can guide language teachers and educators to implement new approaches in their teaching so that the students can learn to apply appropriate vocabulary with ease.

Second, the Ministry of Education will benefit from this study as it involves two institutions which happen to be the private and public universities in a single state. They would be able to compare and contrast the use of VLS by private as well as public universities engineering undergraduates. Through this study, they can suggest for improvements toward the curriculum and syllabus.

Third, this study will benefit the students as well. Students with low proficiency in English can know the strategies used by the advanced students and improve their ways of learning vocabulary. Furthermore, secondary students who want to pursue their studies in engineering programme can obtain some information from this study by adopting strategies according to the type of university.

Apart from that, this finding can provide opportunities and serve as a foundation to researchers who want to further their studies in this area. They can utilize this finding as their reference to identify the strategies employed by other universities' engineering students.

Therefore, this study provides different significances to teachers, educators, Ministry of Education, students as well as researchers. It can be used as a stepping stone in understanding strategy based knowledge and actual use of strategies among engineering undergraduates.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The present study includes both private and public universities. The former is Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) whereas the latter is Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus. The participants of this study are engineering undergraduates from the two universities. They were required to take the Nelson English Language Proficiency Test as entry test prior to being categorized into advanced, intermediate and elementary group. The questionnaire is also distributed to the engineering students in order to obtain the VLS employed by them.

1.8 Chapter Review

This chapter has discussed the background of the study, problem statement, the research questions and objectives, the operational definition of terms, the significance as well as scope of the study. Therefore, this chapter provides the brief explanation on what the researcher is intended to do in this study. The next chapter will discuss the literature and research findings related to this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the information about the concept used in the study as well as the findings from previous studies. This chapter is made up of six parts which include the definition and classification of VLS, frequency use of VLS, the effect of gender and language proficiency toward the VLS use as well as the summary of the chapter.

2.1 Introduction

Vocabulary has been identified as one of the important elements required for language learning. Without vocabulary, communication will be interrupted as people have difficulties in understanding the message as well as the thoughts or ideas cannot be delivered effectively. According to Rubin and Thompson (1994), “one cannot speak, understand, read, or write the foreign language without knowing a lot of words (p. 79). Therefore, vocabulary is indicated as the building blocks for the development of language skills.

Richards et al. (1992) has defined vocabulary as “a set of lexemes which includes single words, compound words and idioms” (p. 400). Nandy (1994) stated that the vocabulary of a person is determined based on the individual’s understanding of the words used in one’s daily communication. Besides, Nation (2001) has said the vocabulary knowledge is formed from various aspects of word or vocabulary and it is related to the item and system features of vocabulary. He explained item knowledge as the ability to “recognize the word items” whereas system knowledge as the capability “to understand the various features of the word items” (p. 23). Therefore, some learners may have insufficient vocabulary knowledge as they

might have problems in recognizing and understanding the vocabulary they have encountered. Apart from that, the learners who have insufficient vocabulary knowledge find it is hard to express their thoughts accurately in the target language and they can only use simple words, gestures, mere sounds or other non-verbal actions to convey the messages to other person. This situation can cause miscommunication to occur easily as the messages delivered by the speakers or writers are not the same as that perceived by the listeners or readers. Thus, having sufficient vocabulary knowledge is crucial as it can help learners to communicate successfully and efficiently.

However, Ghazal (2010) has stated vocabulary learning is a problem faced by language learners when learning a language. This is because vocabulary learning is a continual process where learners acquire the new vocabulary items based on their meaningful and understandable language contexts (Harmon, Wood, & Kiser, 2009). Besides, human tend to forget the new words easily if they do not use it regularly. Therefore, Nation (1990) has suggested that the learners need to put in more efforts when they are learning new or unfamiliar words. They are also required to search for appropriate and effective ways of learning, acquiring, comprehending, retaining, recalling, using and expanding their vocabularies. Apart from that, they need to know the meaning of the word before applying it in their communication.

As learning a language is not easy, many researchers have conducted studies to identify suitable ways to help students learn languages. They found learning strategies to be a tool that can help learners in language learning. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), learning strategies were "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). Besides, Oxford (1990) has defined learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster,