

# STUDENTS' STRATEGIES IN LEARNING ENGLISH SPECIALIZED VOCABULARY

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**Abstract:** The present study aimed at investigating the learning strategies used by students in learning English specialized vocabulary. The participants were 100 students studying English for economics. Data was collected by means of questionnaire, interview and diary. The findings reveal that for the category of discovery strategy, a majority of students reported that they asked classmates for meanings of new words and used English-Vietnamese dictionaries. For cognitive strategy, to remember words, most students said that they studied spelling of words, synonyms and antonyms. They also took notes of specialized vocabulary in class. Besides, a large proportion of them relied on the mass media to learn new specialized words. Based on the research findings, recommendations were put forwards for teachers and students in teaching and learning English specialized vocabulary.

**Key words:** specialized vocabulary, learning strategies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a significant component of learning and teaching English in general and of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in particular. Harding [8] explained that vocabulary is crucial in ESP because students will meet many technical or specialized words which are used to explain materials in their area of specialization. Specialized words are often used by particular groups of people. They include technical and semi-technical terms. For example, in the field of economics, some examples of specialized words are *consultant, crisis, innovation, promotion, supervise, subordinates*, etc.

Undoubtedly, vocabulary learning strategies can help language learners acquire new English words and increase their vocabulary knowledge. However, ESP programs usually do not provide special classes teaching specialized vocabulary. In the context of research site, English is taught as a compulsory subject for non English major students who have to learn one semester of ESP. *English for Business Studies* by Ian Mackenzie [10] – 3<sup>rd</sup> edition was chosen as the main material ESP course for students of majoring in economics at the research site. The textbook contains a great deal of specialized vocabulary. Some topics in the book include: *Management, Work and Motivation, Managing across Cultures, Recruitment, Logistics, Advertising, Banking...*

Learning English specialized vocabulary is a challenge for students. This study thus was set out to investigate their strategies in learning specialized words. It seeks to answer the question: What strategies do students use in learning English specialized vocabulary?

## 2. GENERAL VOCABULARY AND SPECIALIZED VOCABULARY

### 2.1. General vocabulary

According to Tara & Melissa [13], general vocabulary is best thought of as the set of words useful to everyone who speaks a given language. This might include words about food, weather, and colors. West [17] called them high frequency words (2,000 words of English), or a general service vocabulary because they were of use (or service) in any aspects of a language. This vocabulary typically covers around 80% of the running words of academic texts and newspapers, and around 90% of conversations and novels.

### 2.2. Specialized vocabulary

As mentioned earlier, specialized vocabulary includes two types of vocabulary: technical and semi-technical. Semi-technical words are used in general language but have a higher frequency of occurrence in specific and technical description and discussion. Some examples are *technique, software, account, bank, etc.* According to Coxhead [4], semi-technical words cover on average 8,5% of academic text, 4% of newspapers and less than 2% of the running words of novels. In comparison, technical vocabulary has specialized and restricted meanings in certain disciplines and which may vary in meaning across disciplines. Nation [11] claimed that “technical vocabulary” is a type of specialized vocabulary and its occurrence is affected by factors that influence the use of all vocabulary and covered about 5% of the running words in specialized texts. Acquiring specialized vocabulary in the economic branch such as *treasurer, turnover, inflation, surplus, interest, revenue...* is crucial to learners to attain academic literacy and to become part of their chosen academic discourse communities.

It is necessary that language teachers who teach ESP courses should be familiar with the core vocabulary of the field of study and design curricula that integrate both content area and English language. In recent years, numerous studies have focused on and contributed to the knowledge of specialized vocabulary (e.g. Chung & Nation, [3]; Fraser, [6]; Kaewphanngam, 2002). These studies have helped to define exactly what determines whether a word is specialized and how much specialized vocabulary is found in textbooks.

## 3. VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Vocabulary learning strategies are more than comprehending new vocabulary. According to Asgari and Mustapha [1], vocabulary learning strategies are stages taken by the learners in learning new words. It means that when the students find new English words in their learning process, they need to take an action in order to understand words so that they can understand the materials they learn. Taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies by Nation [11] and Schmitt [12] have been adopted in various studies. For its relevance and distinct classification of the strategies, the taxonomy by Schmitt [12] with two groups of strategies, namely, discovery strategies and consolidation strategies was employed in the current study. Discovery strategies help learners to discover learning of words and consolidation strategies assist learners

to consolidate a word once it has been encountered. The two groups are divided into sub-categories including social, memory, and metacognitive strategies. Social strategies involve interaction with others in learning new words by asking the teacher or classmates. Social strategies do not only work in discovering new vocabulary but can also be used to remember the words known by the students, for example, studying meaning with friends or practicing to use the words with native speakers. Memory strategies are also commonly known as "mnemonics strategies". The strategies are used to recall vocabulary which is already known. In these strategies, learners will relate their previously learned knowledge with the target words by grouping the words according to its form or topic, forming imaginary, using physical action, connecting new words to past experience, studying the spelling of the words and speaking out loud the words while studying them. Cognitive strategies emphasize more on the mechanical means to comprehend known words. Thus, cognitive strategies engage repetition and tools to learn vocabulary verbally and in writing, for example, making word lists, and labeling English words on physical objects. Metacognitive strategies help learners consciously decide the best way to plan, monitor, and evaluate the strategies to study the words. The learners using metacognitive strategies will decide which words they will focus upon and learn more deeply. The learners also try to check their understanding by doing word tests. The examples of metacognitive strategies are using English-language media skipping or passing new words, continuing to study the words all over the time, and testing oneself by using word tests or games.

### **Strategies for learning specialized vocabulary**

Beside the strategies mentioned in the previous section, more specifically, Schmitt's taxonomy, which addresses all kinds of vocabulary, ESP students needed more specific strategies to learn specialized words. For example, Bramki and Williams [2] and Williams (1980) suggest some strategies that are appropriate to the field of ESP. These strategies include inferring from context, unchaining nominal compounds, searching for synonyms, word analysis, and recognizing lexical familiarization devices. Lexical familiarization is considered to be the parent strategy of vocabulary recognition and it forms the mainstay of vocabulary tactics, involving several strategies for working out the meaning of some unfamiliar words occurring in scientific texts. It is defined as a contextual aid, intentionally provided by the author for a specific reader (Bramki and Williams, [2]). It includes exemplification, explanation, stipulation, definition, and illustration. It is always adjacent with newly introduced words which are always written in different typefaces, such as italicization, bold form, underlining, or any other typographic device. Students should recognize the languages or instances associated with the lexical familiarization so that they can interpret the meaning of some difficult words. Chung and Nation [3] indicated that for technical words, learners can adopt the strategies of recognizing, interpreting definitions, relating senses to a core meaning, and learning word parts in learning technical words.

#### 4. RELATED PREVIOUS STUDIES

Some studies related to vocabulary learning strategies in the ESP context have been conducted. Lessard [9] explored what kinds of vocabulary learning strategies were used by native and non-native English students of Christian Graduate School of Theology in Canada. To gain the results of the study, a test of theological language was done before a questionnaire and interview were conducted. The result of the study shows that the participants used the vocabulary learning strategies such as consulting to dictionary and glossary, practicing new words in paper, taking written notes in class, writing word lists, listing words in computer files, making index and flashcards, listening to recordings or teachers, repeating the words orally and written, quizzing, and asking the new words to others.

The study by Akbari and Tahririan (2009) identified the vocabulary learning strategies used by the students in learning specialized and non-specialized vocabulary. This study involved 137 participants from paramedical undergraduates of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences in Iran. Observation, interviews and questionnaires were used as the instruments for collecting the data. This qualitative study found that the participants mostly used consolidating, dictionaries and repeating the words orally and written.

In Vietnam, the study by Tran Huynh Thu Huong [14] investigated the current situation of using strategies to broaden vocabulary and develop language skills of 100 ESP students at a college. The study found that the learners had a tendency in using less thinking strategies in learning specialized vocabulary, and they did not use the right strategies on the process of learning specialized vocabulary.

The literature indicates that minimal research has been carried out in the context of Vietnam to investigate the strategies of learning specialized vocabulary by ESP students. This research thus aims at exploring this issue.

#### 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study included 100 volunteer 2<sup>nd</sup> year students from an economic college in Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 and they have learnt English for from 5 to 13 years. As mentioned earlier, *English for Business Studies* was used as the course book in the program. Data collection tools included a questionnaire adopted from the taxonomy by Schmitt [12] focusing two main groups: discovery and consolidation strategies which are divided into subcategories of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Besides, the content of lexical familiarization devices suggested by Bramki and Williams [2] and Williams [15] were integrated into the taxonomy questionnaire. Twenty out of the 100 students were invited to keep specialized word learning diaries and 10 were interviewed. The diary with clear explanations and examples of how to write about the specialized words learning was given to students and collected after one week. The interviews elaborated on the strategies mentioned in the questionnaire. Each interview lasted about 10 minutes and

was conducted in Vietnamese. Where data were given in Vietnamese, they were translated into English by the researcher.

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire was given to the students and their responses related their strategies in learning specialized vocabulary are reported below.

### 6.1. Discovery Strategies

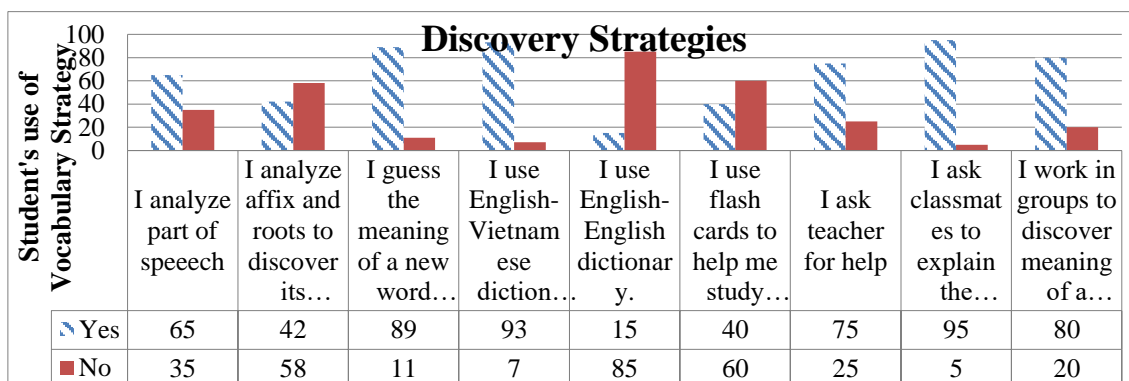


Chart 1. *Reported Use of Discovery Strategies*

As can be seen from the chart, asking classmates for the meanings of new words accounted for the highest percentage (95%), followed by looking up in an English-Vietnamese dictionary (93%), and the strategy of working in groups (80%). However, only 15% of the students stated to use English-English dictionaries. Falchikov [5] indicated that interaction with peers can result in an increase in knowledge and understanding of new words. This finding is also in agreement with the findings of Wu [16] which showed the common use of electronic dictionary strategy among Taiwanese students. In the interview, however, one student said, "The teachers could provide clear and correct definitions of new words and I rarely used dictionary". Data from learning diaries revealed that all of the students stated that they all used electronic bilingual dictionaries in their smart phones to look up the meanings of new words. One diarist shared, "I often search the meaning of words on Google, especially phrasal verbs such as: pay attention, have problem with, etc., or some phrases such as: full capacity, advertising budget, profit margins, and so on."

### 6.2. Social Strategy in Consolidating Vocabulary

The following chart presents the responses given by 100 students in the questionnaire.

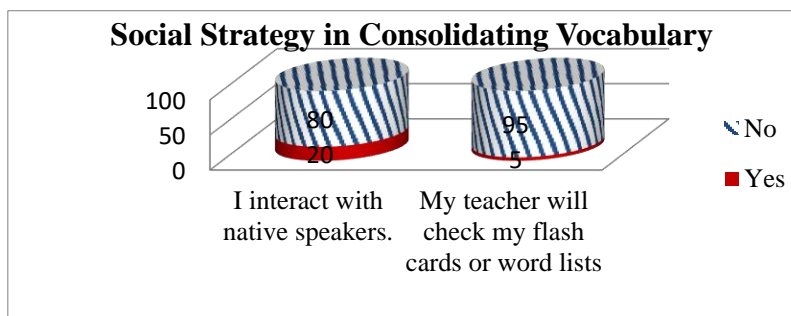


Chart 2. Reported use of social strategy

The result showed that only 20% of the participants chose the item "interacting with native speakers to consolidate meanings". The absence of native English speakers at the research site could be the reason why this strategy was less chosen by the students. The item "teachers check flash cards or word lists" made up only 5%. One interviewee shared, "Teachers have no time to prepare the flash cards and teachers spend no time on checking them. A forty-five minute period is spent for explaining the new lesson".

### 6.3. Memory Strategy

Students' responses to the use of memory strategy is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Students' Reported Use of Memory Strategy

<i>Memory Strategy</i>	<i>%</i>
I study the spelling of a word.	90
I group words to their synonyms and antonyms.	77
I study words with a pictorial representation of its meaning.	74
I underline initial letter of the word when I study.	71
I pronounce the new word aloud when I study.	10
I image the word form when I study.	6
I use key word method when I study new words.	4
I learn the words with an idiom together.	0
I use physical action when learning to remember new words.	0

The table above shows that word spelling was paid attention to by nearly 90% of the students. The strategies of grouping words into their synonyms and antonyms, studying words with a pictorial representation of its meaning, and underlining initial letters of the words accounted for substantial percentages: 77%, 74% and 71% respectively. This finding again confirms the finding of Khasawneh's [7] study on synonyms or antonyms found in science and technology field learned by students. In the interview, one student said, "Underlining words helps me remember the words easily. As the words are important so they can be repeated again and again." Another student stated, "Underlining words helps us learn them at home". To retain words, a student wrote in his diary, "Learning new specialized words in a meaningful context is an effective way to remember the word".

### 6.4. Cognitive Strategy

Data from the questionnaire regarding cognitive strategy is presented in the following chart.

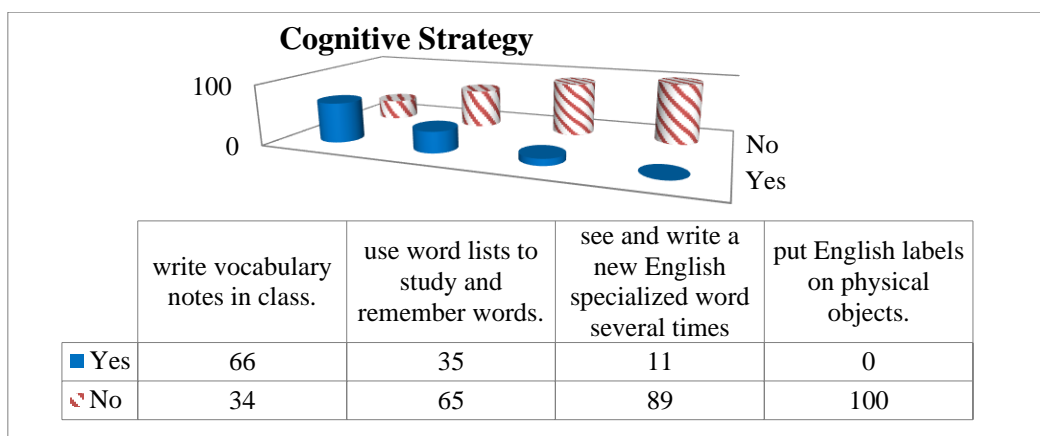


Chart 3. *Students' Reported Use of Cognitive Strategy*

Chart 3 shows that the highest percentage the participants responded that they took vocabulary notes in class (66%) followed by the strategy of using word lists (35%) and writing new English specialized words (11%).

### 6.5. Metacognitive Strategy

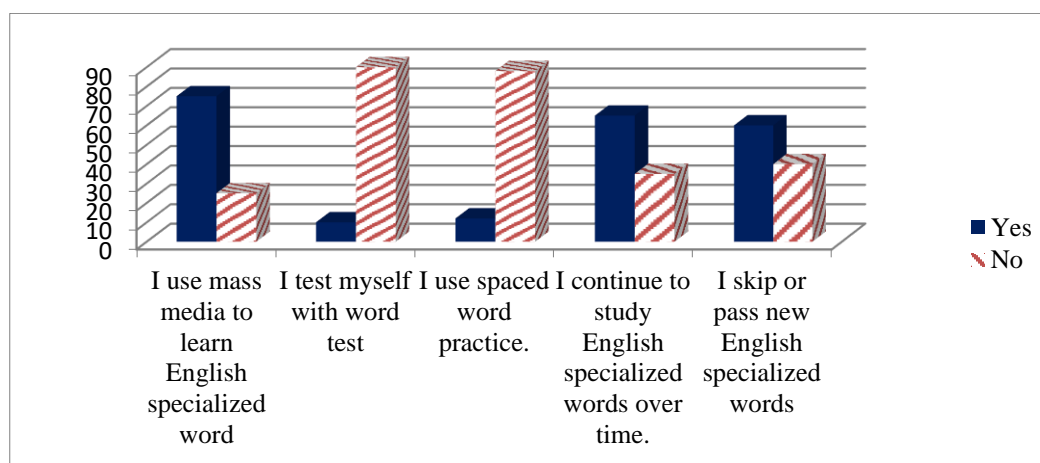


Chart 4. *Students' Reported Use of Metacognitive Strategy*

As can be seen from the chart, more than 60% of the respondents chose the strategy of using the mass media to learn English specialized words. They also reported to continue to study English specialized words over time (60%). A high proportion of the students said that they did not test themselves with word tests or do word practice. The same result was shown in the research by Khasawneh [7] in vocabulary for science and technology which reveals that students continued to study words overtime. The

finding regarding the use of word tests was mentioned by one diarist, "I often passed or skipped the new words tests ". In the interview, one student further explained, "I just do what the teacher asks to do at home only, I rarely test myself with word tests".

## 7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was set out to find out what strategies students used in learning specialized words. Data from questionnaire revealed that for the category of discovery strategy, a majority of students reported to ask classmates for meanings of new words and use English-Vietnamese dictionaries. For cognitive strategy, to remember words, most students said that they studied spellings of words, synonyms and antonyms. They also took notes of vocabulary in class. A large proportion of them relied on the mass media to learn new specialized words. Data from the interview and diary further explained why students used these strategies.

Based on the findings, it can be suggested that students utilize all facilities, media, and sources around them such as textbooks, the Internet, teachers and classmates to support their learning of English specialized words. They also need to make good use of a dictionary to be able to continue learning outside the classroom (Gairns and Redman, 1986). Teachers should suggest the students use the strategies presented in this study. Moreover, teachers can direct students to be independent learners by introducing and teaching them learning strategies in learning specialized words.

The current study did not observe the actual process of using the strategies of learning English specialized words. Therefore, further study can investigate this issue and focus on the effectiveness of the vocabulary learning strategies reported in this study.

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