ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAM STUDENTS OF COKROAMINOTO PALOPO UNIVERSITY

RUSDIANA JUNAID
rosejunaid246@yahoo.com.au

Abstract
Vocabulary as one element of a language is very important to be mastered by language learners. The underlying assumption is that vocabulary is the muscles of a language. Thus, language learners should build up their vocabulary repertoire by employing various strategies. It has been revealed through research that learning strategies play a significant role in improving language-learning achievement. This means that language learners can develop their language skills, to include their vocabulary repertoire by applying a suitable strategy to achieve their learning purpose. In other words, learning achievement can be maximized by selecting and employing appropriate learning strategies. Although language learning strategies have been researched and widely discussed by a number of researchers, there is little research about learning strategies related to vocabulary. This research is a qualitative study which aims at identifying the category of English vocabulary learning strategies employed by English Education Study Program students. Data are provided by 80 of the sixth semester students as respondents who were taken randomly by answering a single open question, “What strategies do they employ to improve their vocabulary repertoire?” The findings shows that the majority of English Education Study Program students employed memory strategies, followed by cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies respectively.

Key words: English vocabulary, learning strategies, English Education Study Program students.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that language learners who have a good command of vocabulary will speak more fluently, will write better, will listen easier, and will read and understand faster than those who lack of vocabulary. They will be easier to understand the content of a reading passage when they are reading and what other people are saying when they are talking. Therefore, when learning a language, to include English, the importance of mastering its vocabulary is
unquestionably. In other words, mastering vocabulary is very important for learners who learn English as a foreign language since this can support them in speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

The statements above are in accordance with Wilkins’ statement more than 40 years ago that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing at all can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972). Echoing Wilkins’ statement, (Harmer, 1994) states that “If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh”. These two statements imply that mastering vocabulary for language learners is definitely an essential endeavor. Otherwise, they might not be able to participate in the communication if they do not know the meaning of the key lexical items addressed to them.

The above viewpoints are supported by (Krashen, 1998) who proposes that “vocabulary is basic to communication. If acquirers do not recognize the meanings of the key words used by those who address them, they will be unable to participate in the conversation and if they wish to express some ideas or ask for information, they must be able to produce lexical items to convey their meaning.” It means that words are the basic unit of a language form without which one cannot communicate effectively or express his/her ideas successfully.

It is presumed that to master English vocabulary, English language learners attempt to make use of various strategies in their vocabulary learning activities. Good strategy users always adapt their learning strategies to fit the vocabulary task they are given, and the result is that the task is always accomplished successfully.

In fact, language learning strategy has been a substantial area of educational research since the mid-1970s. Some researchers attempted to identify and classify characteristics of successful language learners in order to discover what strategies they use, and how they deal with the new language they are learning (Rubin, 1975); (Takeuchi, 2003). The findings were expected to be helpful for less successful language learners to enhance their learning achievement.
Based on those previous applied research, it has been revealed that language learning strategies play a significant role in improving language learning achievement (Rubin, 1975 and O’Malley, J.M. & Chamot, 1990). This means that language learners can develop their language skills by applying a suitable strategy at a suitable moment and in an appropriate way. In other words, being able to select and employ appropriate learning strategies enables language learners to achieve optimal learning and of course, this is also applicable in learning English vocabulary.

According to Oxford (1990) language learning strategies are “especially important because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence.” In addition, Chamot, Barnhart, El-Dinary and Robbins (1999) note the importance of teaching learning strategies as a means of “fostering learner autonomy.”

As Anderson (2005) suggests the purpose of strategy use is to “improve performance in the learning and use of one’s second language.” This implies that employing appropriate language learning strategies can lead language learners to learn a language more efficiently and effectively, and to become proficient and competent users of the language they are studying. Therefore, language learning strategies are worthwhile to investigate.

The present study is expected to add to the current corpus of research on language learning strategies, particularly in building up English learners’ vocabulary repertoire. Its specific focus is to identify and classify different English vocabulary learning strategies employed by students of English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of Cokroaminoto Palopo University.

English Education Study Program is one of the study programs under the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at the University of Cokroaminoto Palopo whose graduates are prospective English language teachers. This study program has become one of the most popular study programs at the university since it was officially operated in 2000. Every year the number of students enrolled shows a significant increase. Now (in 2013), the total number of English
Education Study Program students is 1.336. This big number, as it can be envisaged, provides a huge number of learning strategies given that every student is unique and has his/her own learning strategies which is valuable to identify. Of the total number 1.336 of the English Education Study Program students, there are 375 students who are at the sixth semester and this became the population of the present study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study employed a qualitative research design. It allowed the respondents to talk openly about their English vocabulary learning strategies. Research data were collected from 80 respondents. Data analysis consisted of sentence identification. It is “interpretive” (Creswell, 2002) as the researcher made a personal assessment and a description that sought to fit the learning strategy categories the respondents employed. More specifically it generated a general explanation about specific efforts, actions or techniques the respondents employed to build up their English vocabulary repertoire.

Methods:

Respondents

Data of the present study were provided by 80 respondents selected from 375 sixth semester students of English Education Study Program. The respondents were the representative of the total population who were categorized homogenous in terms of their level of English proficiency.

Instrument

In the present study, an open-ended question was used as the principal means of gathering relevant research data. This type of question permits the researcher to identify any answers the respondents provided. The question posed was related to the respondents’ English vocabulary learning strategy they employed as an attempt to improve their English vocabulary. The question was open-ended, as it was intended to avoid yes/no answers so that the participants, as Creswell (2005) suggests, could “best voice their experiences unconstrained” by any perspectives of the researcher. In other words, the participants were allowed
to “create the options for responding” and to “describe personal information” so that rich, descriptive and authentic data could be gathered (Creswell, 2005)

Data Analysis

The data obtained were analysed inductively. The analysis started from listing all answers of the respondents to coding the key words and categorizing them into the appropriate learning strategies category. In other words, the analysis was based on the application of “codification” and “classification” techniques (Bouma, 2001). These techniques, as (Bouma, 2001) suggests, are one major way of dealing with qualitative data collection. The classification was based on Oxford’s strategy classification system.

DISCUSSION

After listing all the responses of the 80 respondents to the open-ended question posed, it is identified that there are 18 vocabulary learning activities that the English Education Study Program students do as their attempt to build up their vocabulary repertoire. They are: memorizing vocabulary, translating words or sentences, reading English books or magazines, listening to music (English songs), practicing conversation in English, watching western films, writing new vocabulary they come across, playing games on the computer (using English), attaching words on the wall, choosing English application on their mobile, practicing writing sentences using new vocabulary or placing new words into context, asking high achievers’ friends, finding new words on the internet, sending SMS in English, studying with friends, listening to other people’s conversation in English, rehearsing new words, and labeling objects around them.

After coding and categorizing those activities based on Oxford’s taxonomy, they fall into two groups, namely direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies include memory strategies (e.g. creating mental linkages, reviewing well, and applying images and sounds) and cognitive strategies (e.g. practicing, receiving and sending messages, creating structure for input and output, and analyzing and reasoning). Indirect strategies consist of metacognitive strategies (e.g. arranging and planning), affective strategies (e.g. lowering anxiety
and taking emotional temperature), and social strategies (e.g. asking questions and cooperating with others).

One memory strategy, as one of the sub categories of direct strategy that the students employ to improve their vocabulary is creating mental linkage, for example, placing new words into a context. Another memory strategy that the students use in developing their vocabulary is applying images and sounds, for instance, representing sounds in memory by watching western film and using imagery by attaching the words on the wall. Yet other memory strategies that the students use are reviewing well, e.g.: rehearsing new words they come across, and employing action, e.g. using mechanical techniques such as finding new words on the internet. Total occurrence of different activities which are categorized into memory strategy employed by the sixth semester students of English Education Study Program in this study is sixty four. This is the most frequently strategy used by the respondents.

Cognitive strategy is another direct strategy that the students employ in improving their English vocabulary. This strategy as explained before is subdivided into four categories: practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output. Examples of activities that can be categorized into practicing are practicing naturally in terms of using English in conversation, doing a lot of reading, and writing new vocabulary. Another activity that the students do to increase their vocabulary is sending SMS in English. In Oxford’s classification system, this activity belongs to cognitive strategy. In analyzing and reasoning strategy, another sub category of cognitive strategy, students do such things as translating words or sentences. In the present study, none of the 80 respondents employ compensation strategy to improve their vocabulary. This is perhaps due to the limited number of questions posed to the respondents and also the nature of the language element being research. For cognitive strategies, there are forty three different activities that respondents of the present study do as manifestation of this category.

For the indirect strategies, all its three sub categories – metacognitive, affective, and social strategies – are used by the respondents. When they employ
metacognitive strategy, the respondents do such things as playing games on the computer using English and choosing English language for menu application on mobile as their attempt for seeking practice opportunity. In this case, they arrange and plan their learning. Metacognitive strategies are exemplified by five different activities that the respondents do as their effort to build up the English vocabulary repertoire.

For the affective strategy such as lowering anxiety, the some students did mention a preference for listening to music (especially English songs), which is a well-known strategy for improving memory. The third category of indirect strategies is social strategies. In employing this strategy, the respondents are asking questions and cooperating with others, for instance they ask high achievers’ students, studying with friends, and listening to other people’s conversation in English.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The findings of the present study reveal that the most frequently strategy employed by the sixth semester students of English Education Study Program of Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of Cokroaminoto Palopo University in building up their vocabulary command is memory strategies, followed by cognitive and metacognitive strategies respectively.

The other three categories – social, affective and compensation (listed in rank of most frequently used) – were also employed. The finding that a cognitive strategy was the most frequently used confirms the evidence of Lengkanawati’s (2004) study, namely that a cognitive strategy was the most preferred strategy by IFL learners in Australia. However, metacognitive and memory strategies, which were not found to be favored by IFL learners in the Lengkanawati’s study, appeared to be moderately used by IFL learners in this study.

For language teachers, IFL and EFL teachers, the study clearly indicates a need to be familiar with the preferred learning strategies of their students. In particular, the students’ use of cognitive and memory strategies can be encouraged and applied in lesson planning to facilitate the learning process. In other words,
language teachers can effectively “attune instruction to the specific needs of the students” based on the students’ learning strategy preferences (Oxford, 2011).

The present pilot study could indeed be used as a catalyst to pursue future research into English learning strategies in a larger scale in terms of different nationality groups and number of participants. In addition, various other instruments such as classroom observation or naturalistic observation to collect data would be useful to utilize as these perhaps could generate different results.

Although there are many factors that make students successful or unsuccessful in language learning, using or not using appropriate vocabulary learning strategies might be one among them.
REFERENCES


