

A Survey Study on English Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Non-English Major Students at University of Transport and Communication Ho Chi Minh City Campus

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Abstract: The research was conducted based on theoretical frameworks, previous research findings, and the English learning situation of non-English major students at University of Transport and Communication Ho Chi Minh City Campus (UTC HCMC). This study is a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Survey results from over 400 non-majored students at UTC HCM campus from February to May of the year 2023 showed that they are aware of the importance of English communication skills in general and English vocabulary in particular. However, their actual learning practices do not fully reflect this awareness. Furthermore, the experimental study results demonstrated the effectiveness of two proposed methods: (1) vocabulary flashcards and (2) repeated writing of words, both of which are proven to be effective and widely applicable for learners at UTC HCMC.

Keywords: Solutions, English Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Non-Majored Students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Learning and improving proficiency in foreign languages, especially English, are essential for students because this subject is integrated into all academic programs and is a requirement for students at colleges and universities. TOEIC is implemented at UTC HCMC, and students must study and pass all necessary TOEIC English modules for their level of study, or they must provide an equivalent English proficiency certificate to meet the English proficiency standards.

In reality, during the recent TOEIC placement tests for students of the 2008 and 2009 cohorts at the university, a significant number of students scored low and required remedial English language study: approximately 2000 students based on actual attending classes), despite the majority of students having completed a 7-year English program in secondary education.

Furthermore, through preliminary analysis of some student responses to reading comprehension and listening questions, we observed that many incorrect answers often fell within vocabulary-related questions. However, to date, there has been no official survey data on the specific situation of vocabulary learning and English language learning in general among students at UTC HCMC.

On the other hand, over the past 50 years, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has seen numerous studies revolving around the issue of vocabulary learning among students globally. Most research has been conducted in specific areas: Vocabulary learning methods based on situational/contextual learning, and vocabulary learning methods not based on situational/contextual learning. There exist contrasting viewpoints among language experts regarding these two vocabulary learning methods. There is compelling evidence demonstrating that

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vocabulary learning based on context (from authentic materials) is more effective than learning from pre-listed vocabulary word lists.

Oxford and Scarcella (1994) found in their research that vocabulary learning not based on context may help students memorize vocabulary for exams and tests, but students tend to forget those words quickly after the exams or tests. Additionally, McCarthy (1990) stated that if students learn vocabulary through meaningful situations with clear content, they are more likely to remember and internalize the vocabulary for a longer period.

Recently, researchers have endeavored to investigate which vocabulary learning methods not based on context are most commonly used, and they have discovered that mechanical methods are utilized more by students compared to more complex methods. Cohen and Aphex (1981) observed that students attempt to memorize unknown vocabulary words through rote memorization.

Furthermore, O'Mally *et al.*, (1985) also found that the repetition method is the most frequently used by students in the vocabulary learning process. Through studies, these aforementioned vocabulary learning methods have been deemed disappointing by researchers and ineffective for students. Ellis (1995) additionally supplements that the Depth of Processing Hypothesis, when applied to vocabulary learning, suggests that shallow processing only leads students to engage in oral rehearsal without aiding in long-term memory retention. Conversely, deep processing methods enable students to approach vocabulary from both form and semantic aspects, resulting in enhanced memorization and application abilities.

In a study involving over 300 Sudanese students learning English, Ahmed (1989) found that proficient students not only utilized a greater variety of vocabulary learning methods but also employed a more diverse range of genres compared to weaker students.

Sannoui's research (1992, 1995) identified two different approaches to foreign language vocabulary learning. Firstly, students who structured their vocabulary learning process independently engaged in learning and practicing the vocabulary they needed. On the other hand, students who did not structure their vocabulary learning process struggled to do so independently. The research results indicated that at all levels of study, students who structured their learning process were more successful than those who did not or could not structure their learning process

Sahandri and colleagues (2009) classified students' vocabulary learning strategies into five main categories based on their frequency of use: determination, memorization, metacognition, cognition, and social.

Although studies in the field of vocabulary learning are diverse and have yielded practical findings that are highly beneficial for further research in various domains, most of the aforementioned studies only scratch the surface, focusing on surveying and assessing students' vocabulary and general English proficiency. There is still a lack of in-depth understanding and evaluation of students' vocabulary learning methods to determine their effectiveness. Furthermore, there is a dearth of experimental studies designed based on survey results investigating the process and nature of students' vocabulary learning

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As university students from the different courses, participants belonged to various majors, encompassing both social sciences and engineering disciplines. The research subjects included 400 randomly selected students who were surveyed during their enrollment in English Level A2. This implies that all students were enrolled in the same English program, and this course had a uniform nature across all participating groups; it was a requirement for graduation evaluation. Therefore, students may have had relatively equal perceptions of the importance of this course. However, the motivation to learn cannot be expected to be uniform because students were taught by different teachers who provided direct guidance during the learning process. Depending on the specific requirements and teaching methods of each teacher, the motivation to learn among students in different classes could vary significantly. This factor could also be considered as having a certain influence on the survey responses.

Based on the research questions and the theoretical foundation of vocabulary learning in general and English vocabulary learning in particular, as well as the results of other studies in the same research field, the questionnaire consists of 15 closed-ended and semi-open-ended questions. These questions revolve around three main issues: students' assessment of the importance of vocabulary in using and learning English, the current situation of English vocabulary learning among students, and the nature of vocabulary learning as well as the methods students are using.

When participating in the vocabulary learning experiment, students were provided with a TOEIC vocabulary list covering common topics in business communication. This vocabulary list was

constructed based on words aimed at standardizing both the quantity and content of vocabulary that students would need to learn and be evaluated on. The vocabulary list may include words that students already know as well as words that they are unfamiliar with. However, the majority of these vocabulary words are new to the students. The vocabulary test was primarily designed to utilize the vocabulary provided in the vocabulary list for students.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The results of the Survey

The survey results indicate that the vast majority of students had studied English for 6 years or more during their secondary education (equivalent to 7 years of English education), with a rate of 95.7% out of the total of 370 students who answered this question (in the total of 400 students answered). This confirms that students' English learning duration before entering university is

relatively long, providing them with sufficient time to acquire basic and even intermediate to advanced English proficiency. However, surprisingly, 89.5% of these students reported that they did not feel capable of using English effectively.

In terms of the importance of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in using English effectively, the majority of students participating in the survey believe that speaking and listening skills are more important than other skills. Out of 370 responses to this question, 297 (75.4%) considered speaking skills to be important, and 57.6% rated listening skills as equally important. However, most respondents rated the roles of the other two skills, reading comprehension (29.7%) and writing (39.5%), as relatively low. Along with the high evaluation of the importance of listening and speaking skills, the vast majority of students (92.4%) also acknowledged that vocabulary plays a crucial role in effective English communication.

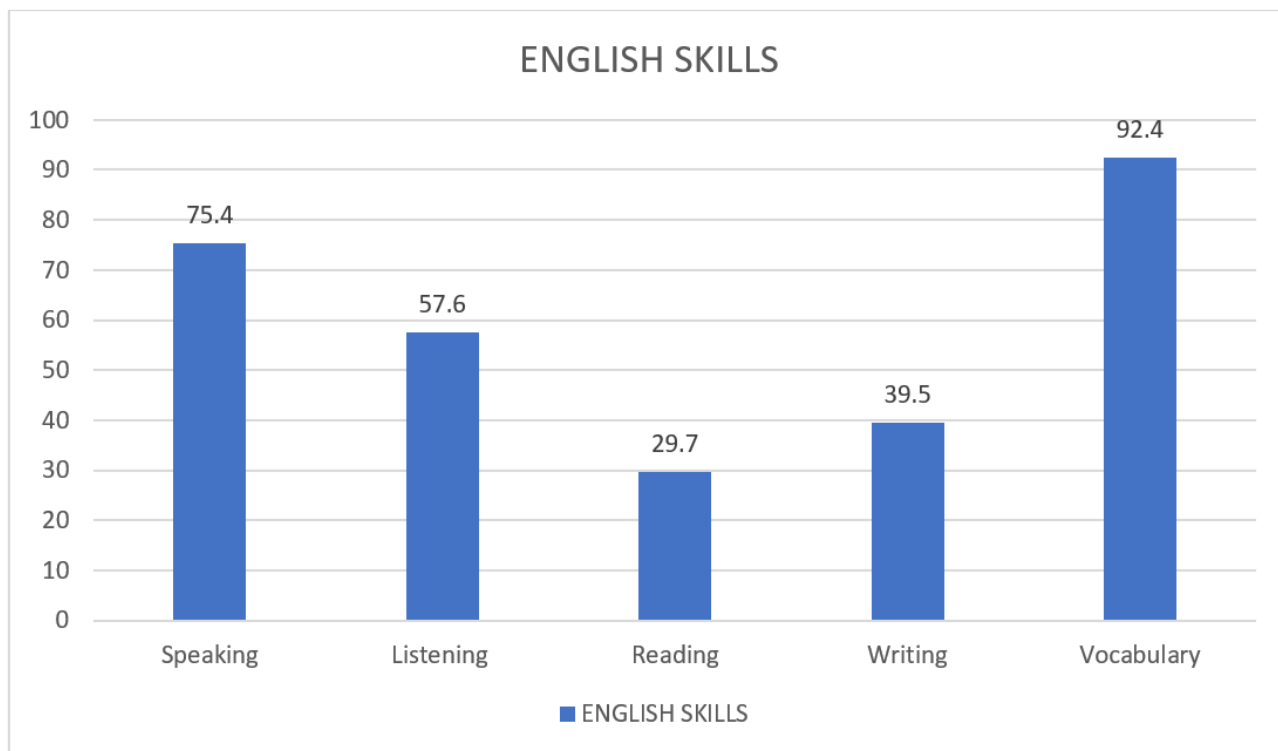


Chart 1: The importance of English skills

The information regarding the time spent on self-studying English and the time spent on self-studying vocabulary per day by students surveyed is

illustrated in Chart 2, which illustrates the second research question as follows:

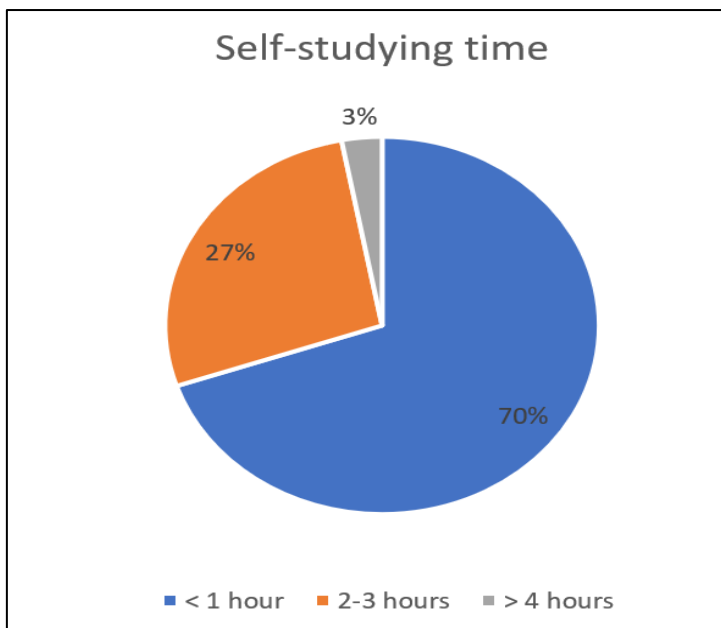


Chart 2: Self-studying time of students

Survey data shows that out of a total of 370 responses to the question (33 responses did not answer this question), a considerable proportion of students spend less than one hour per day studying English (69.8%), followed by those who study for 2-3 hours per day (27.2%). The number of students spending more than 4 hours studying English is very rare, accounting for only 3.0%.

From the statistical results of the survey, it can be seen that approximately 82% of the surveyed students spend less than 30 minutes per day studying vocabulary. In particular, some students never study

vocabulary (4 students added this information to their survey responses when this option was not provided in the survey), or study only occasionally, or study only when necessary or when they have free time. For the remaining percentage (18%), vocabulary learning is prioritized, meaning that these students dedicate relatively more time to studying vocabulary (from 45 minutes and above). Some students even spend 60 minutes (10 students) to 90 minutes (2 students) studying vocabulary. With such allocated time for vocabulary learning, there may be certain influences on the number of words students learn in a day.

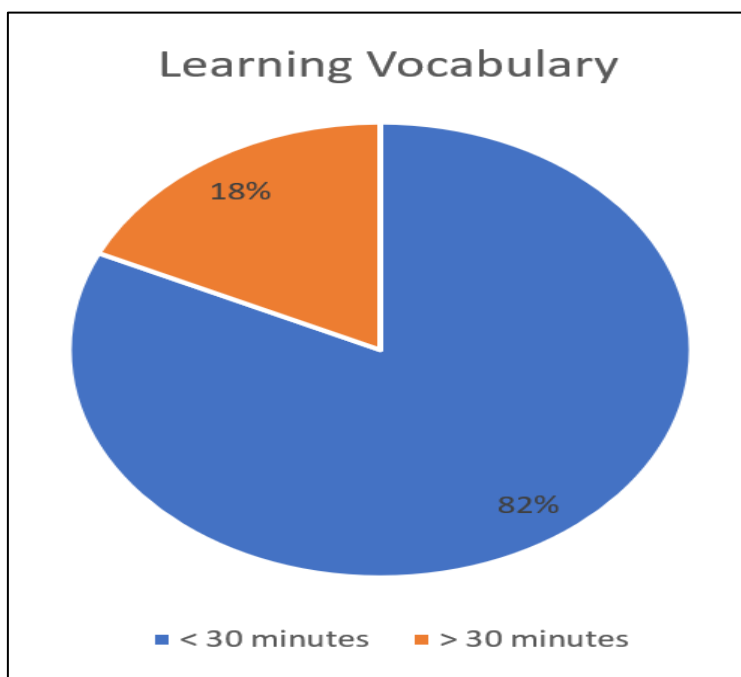


Chart 3: Time for Learning Vocabulary

We presented common vocabulary learning methods and asked students to choose the most suitable option for themselves; they could choose multiple options for this question. The options provided were (a) repeating aloud until the learner can remember the word; (b) writing repeatedly until the word can be remembered; (c) writing the Vietnamese meaning of the word as in an English-Vietnamese dictionary; (d) and trying to explain the meaning of the new word with their existing vocabulary. Out of a total of 370 survey responses, a remarkable 78.1% of students used the method of repeating aloud, while other methods were relatively less utilized (around or below 20%). Interestingly, the last vocabulary learning method (Explaining the meaning of new words using existing vocabulary) was not used by students.

Furthermore, we also asked students about the use of flashcards as an effective vocabulary learning tool. The results showed that out of a total of 361 respondents to this question, only 93 students (25.8%) used flashcards for vocabulary learning, while the remaining 74.2% did not use flashcards and instead utilized other methods as mentioned above.

For coping strategies with new words while reading, a large proportion of surveyed students chose to either look up the word in a dictionary or guess the meaning of the new word rather than skipping it and continuing to read or stopping reading altogether. Specifically, 55.7% of respondents (359 students) opted to use a dictionary, and 32.9% chose to guess the meaning of the word. Meanwhile, those who chose to skip the word and continue reading or stop reading altogether accounted for 10.0% and 1.4% respectively.

4. DISCUSSION

According to the aggregated survey results in Chart 1, the majority of students have varying levels of awareness regarding the importance of language skills in English communication. While most students consider speaking and listening to be the two most important skills among the four main language skills in English, this indicates that communication for students involves both being able to listen and understand others and speak to be understood by others. However, communication through language is conducted through various channels, not just limited to listening and speaking.

The importance of vocabulary in using English for communication cannot be overstated. Learning a foreign language, including learning English specifically, is a process of skill development that requires long-term practice. To become proficient in speaking, students must practice speaking at all times and in all places, and similarly,

they must do the same for the other three language skills: listening, reading, and writing. However, students will encounter many difficulties in honing these skills if they lack the necessary vocabulary. Without vocabulary, students cannot express their ideas when speaking and writing, nor can they understand what is being said or written when practicing listening and reading.

About the time for self-study, students invest in learning foreign languages, but the amount of time invested is relatively modest; they may have to allocate time to other subjects. The research results reveal a paradox between students' awareness and actions. In the first research question, the majority of students recognize the importance of language skills, especially vocabulary, in learning and using English. However, they invest little time and effort in learning English in general and vocabulary in particular. The infrequent vocabulary learning may explain why their test scores are not high. This aligns with previous research findings on the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, which are positively correlated. This result somewhat affirms students' English proficiency through TOEIC test scores.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The survey results indicate that students are fully aware of the importance of English in general and English vocabulary in particular. However, there is a significant contradiction between students' thoughts and actions, which can reasonably explain their TOEIC test scores. If the role of vocabulary in English communication needs to be reconsidered, then vocabulary is a fundamental element that students need to equip themselves with. If students want to communicate well or use English effectively, they need to increase their practice.

Furthermore, the two vocabulary learning methods were designed based on information collected from students and theories of vocabulary methods outlined in previous studies in the same field. The experimental vocabulary learning methods have been proven to be effective, although not significantly superior to the methods students are currently using. However, these two methods are considered feasible and can be widely applied among non-English major students.

The two vocabulary learning methods mentioned above (1) learning through flashcards and (2) learning through repeated writing have been proven to be effective. These two vocabulary learning methods should be widely applicable to non-English major students, especially those preparing for exams like TOEIC, as well as students learning English.

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