Vocabulary Learning Activities Employed by Chinese English-Major Undergraduates and Their Reflections on the Activities

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Abstract— Chinese English-major undergraduates face a demanding task regarding English vocabulary learning. Previous studies have focused on vocabulary learning strategies. Few studies have examined what learners actually do to tackle vocabulary learning tasks. The current study adopted qualitative research methods. Findings are reported in the following aspects: 1) what vocabulary learning activities do Chinese English-major undergraduates employ regarding English vocabulary learning tasks? 2) What measurements do they use to evaluate their learning results? And 3) what difficulties do these learners encounter?

Keywords: vocabulary learning activities, vocabulary learning difficulties, measurement

I. INTRODUCTION

In China, English is a compulsory course for secondary and tertiary institutions. Chinese university students need to take national English proficiency test in which vocabulary is an important element. Undergraduates majoring in English need to achieve a higher vocabulary level as required by national English proficiency test for English majors. This makes vocabulary learning an even more challenging task for Chinese English-major undergraduates.

This study examined what Chinese English-major undergraduates actually do regarding vocabulary learning tasks. Qualitative research method was adopted for this study. Students were firstly surveyed about what activities they do in their spare time to learn English vocabulary. The summary of the survey (the list of activities) was then provided to the students together with a vocabulary learning report for them to complete within a two-week schedule. The report aimed to collect information about what activities they would choose, in what way they plan the activities, measurements they use to evaluate their learning results, and difficulties they encounter during the learning process.

II. BACKGROUND

In China, English is a compulsory course at tertiary institutions. English-major undergraduates are required to take national English proficiency test (Tests for English Majors, TEM). English major undergraduates are required to meet the standard vocabulary level: TEM- Level 4 requires a vocabulary level of 8,000; TEM- Level 8 requires a vocabulary level of 13,000 (College English Test; Test for English Majors-4). In TEM, there is a section on grammar and vocabulary which includes multiple choice questions on English grammar and vocabulary. For example, in TEM-4 (2008):

Tim has failed three courses this semester, so he will have to _____ them next semester.

A.remake B. repeat C. reapply D. revise

Regarding such a demanding task of vocabulary learning for Chinese English-major undergraduates, research investigating how Chinese English-major undergraduates tackle this task is limited. Most research has examined this issue from perspectives like the acquisition of word knowledge (e.g., Tan, 2006; Jiang, 2007), incidental vocabulary learning (e.g., Wu, 2009), and vocabulary learning strategies (e.g., Yang, 2009; Yu, 2009; Hou, 2011).

This study raises questions about what types of activities Chinese English-major undergraduates use regarding vocabulary learning tasks. Many studies rested on the similar quests investigated to what extent vocabulary learning would benefit from the employment of certain vocabulary learning strategies. Liu (2001) examined the relation between English vocabulary learning strategies and overall English ability development. Hong and Ran (2003) proposed chunking memory strategy and its teaching implications regarding English vocabulary learning.

This study considered surveying students with a strategy inventory, e.g., the framework developed by Oxford (1990). Using a strategy inventory offers convenience for classifying strategies and analyzing data. However, using the strategy inventory may prevent researchers from getting the first-hand information about what activities language learners actually use when they try to cope with vocabulary learning tasks. In most cases, language learners tend to employ certain activities that have been shaped through years of learning.

Therefore, this study did not use the strategy inventory. Instead, a survey and a vocabulary learning report were used to collect information about what activities Chinese English-major undergraduates do regarding vocabulary learning tasks. This study has two phases. The first phase surveyed students about vocabulary learning activities they employ. The second phase provided students with the result of the first phase (activity summary) and a vocabulary learning report. The vocabulary learning report asked students to select activities from the activity summary list and use these activities for vocabulary learning tasks. Students were asked to keep a record of their vocabulary learning experience for a two-week schedule and note down their own comments on their study experience.

III. PHASE 1

The purpose of phase 1 was to survey what types of activities that Chinese English-major undergraduates employ when they face English vocabulary learning tasks. The following research question was addressed:

RQ1: What activities do Chinese English-major undergraduates employ regarding vocabulary learning tasks?

A. Data collection

The data collection was conducted in an online course for English major undergraduates in a Chinese university. In order to collect as much information as possible, an open question "What do you usually do regarding English vocabulary learning?" was posted in the online discussion board. Students enrolled in the online course were third-year English majors. They were encouraged to participate in the discussion and post their responses online. The discussion was open for two weeks for students to post their responses. The participation in the discussion was voluntary, but students were highly encouraged to participate in the discussion because this would assist the understanding about their own learning. The objectives of the discussion were posted in the introduction to the topic. Questions about the survey were welcome and answered.

B. Results

Altogether 43 students responded to the question. Some students mentioned several activities they have used. The following are examples of the responses:

E.g.1: "*When I remember a word, I'd like to remember the pronunciation of the word. Then, according to the pronunciation, I can spell it. Finally, every day I will review the words that I have learned before*".

E.g.2: "*I have several methods of memorizing words. First, I would always learn the pronunciations of words ---I think the pronunciation is of great importance in the process of learning a word. Second, I would try to associate new words with old ones which are helpful to memorize new words. Third, put new words in contexts and this will help us to grasp the meanings and their usage*".

E.g. 3: "*Firstly, I will read the word. Then I will connect English meaning with Chinese meaning. Finally, I will spell or write down the words. Sometimes, I will identify suffixes or prefixes.*"

E.g. 4: "*I remember word[s] by using them, mostly in sentences.*"

E.g. 5: "*Usually, I have three ways: 1) remember words according to its pronunciation. 2) Classifying the words, such as synonym and antonym. 3) I write a word again and again.*"

The students' responses were summarized by indexing the activities they mentioned. The summary is listed below in Table 1. The numbers of each activity mentioned by students were counted. Figure 1 indicates the activities with the numbers of being mentioned by the students.

Table 1: SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO RQ1

| |
|---|
| Classify words into categories |
| Use dictionaries |
| Watch English movies/dramas |
| Review the words |
| Identify suffixes or prefixes |
| Write words down |
| Translate English words into Chinese |
| Associate words in the word families/other learned words/objects |
| Flash cards |
| English songs |
| Use the words to make a phrase or a sentence or in the writing assignment |
| Reading words out |
| Read the text with the target words |
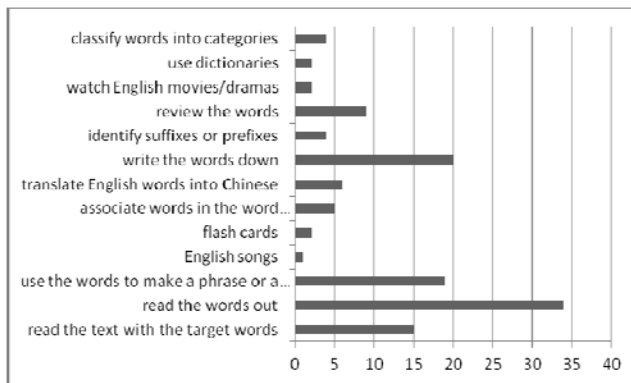
Figure 1: Numbers of activities mentioned in the survey

Figure 1 indicates that most students employ the activity of "reading the words out". The activities of "writing words down" and "using the words to make a phrase or a sentence" rank the second highest among the activities. Classifying words into categories, using dictionaries, watching English movies/dramas, or flash cards are not used very often by students. Only 1 student mentioned of using English songs to learn English words.

By talking to some participants afterwards, it was found out that they think reading the words out helps them to remember the sound of the word and benefits them in vocabulary tests in some courses. Also, they employ output tasks (i.e., using the words to make a phrase or a sentence) to enhance the learning result. They didn't provide much information about the activity of writing the words down, which many of them mentioned in their responses. Phase 2 collected more information about how students arrange activities and how they evaluate the learning result.

IV. PHASE 2

Based on what was found out in Phase 1, Phase 2 addressed the following questions:

RQ2: Will students employ more than one activity regarding vocabulary learning task? If yes, what are the activities they employ? And how do they plan/organize activities?

RQ3: What measurements do students use to evaluate their learning results?

RQ4: Have students experienced any difficulties during this vocabulary learning task? What difficulties have they experienced?

A. Data collection

A vocabulary learning report was used to collect information regarding research questions. The report consisted of three parts: 1) questions prior to the vocabulary learning task; 2) vocabulary task report; 3) summary questions to be answered after the vocabulary learning task (refer to Appendix).

The pre-task questions asked students to decide on activities that they would use and how and why they would choose certain activities and organize them in certain ways. Students were asked to decide two lists of words for them to work on for a two-week learning schedule. For each week, students were to work on one word list three times with the activities they decided to use.

The reason for asking students to decide the word lists by themselves was because the participants were from different classes. As third-year students, they worked on different courses. What's more, they might have engaged in different tasks, e.g., preparing for TEM 8 (Test for English Majors, Level 8), or preparing for IELTS if one plans to study aboard after graduation. They may not want to spend time on vocabulary tasks that do not suit their learning plan. Further, the purpose of this study is not to evaluate the effects of vocabulary learning activities; therefore, students were asked to decide word lists by themselves. Students were also asked to note down the difficulty/difficulties they experienced and any comments regarding the vocabulary learning activities. In the summary questions, students were to provide their feedback on this two-week vocabulary learning task.

This vocabulary learning report and the list of activities (Table 1) were distributed to those who participated in Phase 1. Students were encouraged to conduct this vocabulary task. Altogether 14 students returned the vocabulary learning report.

B. Resutls

The responses in the vocabulary learning report were analyzed and indexed. The activities students mentioned in their vocabulary learning report were summarized in Table 2. Each row indicates the response from a student.

Table 2 RESPONSES OF ACTIVITY/ACTIVITIES TO RQ2

1.	Write the words down
2.	Check the words with electronic dictionary.
	Spell and write the words on the flashcards.
	Use flashcards to remember words.
3.	Read the text with the target words./Read the words out aloud.
	Associate words in the word families
4.	Use the words to make a phrase or a sentence.
5.	Write down each word on a paper several times.
	Use the words to make a phrase or a sentence.
	Use the words in the writing tasks.
6.	Read the text with the target words.
	Use the words to make a phrase or a sentence.
	Review the words.
	Write the words down.
7.	Write the words down.
	Associate words in the word family.
8.	Read the words out.
	Translate the words into Chinese.
	Review the words.
9.	Write down the words until I have remembered them.
10.	Read the words out and remember the phonetic features.
	Review words.
11.	Flash cards.
	Review words.
12.	Read texts with the target words.
	Review the words.
13.	Use the words to make phrases or sentences.
	Review the words.
	Translate the words.
	Write the words down.
14.	Use the words to make a phrase or a sentence.
	Review the words.
	Write the words down.

Table 2 illustrates the activities and the sequence of activities employed by the students. Most of students chose to use "write the words down", "use the words to make a phrase or a sentence", and "review the words"; or a combination of these activities. To answer RQ2 *"Will students use more than one activity regarding vocabulary learning task? If yes, what are the most frequent activities they use? How do they plan/organize activities?"* most students used several activities. The combinations of activities feature individual learning habits. This can be seen from the information provided by the students to the question *"Why I want to use these activities?"*

> E.g. 6: *"This the way which I used to remember the words, so I choose this."*

> E.g. 7: *"I want to use these activities because it is very easy to use and it can make me read the words and also memorize the words faster. To use flash cards is a good way to take some notes by myself. To use the dictionary can help me to understand the meaning of the words. Speeling [Spelling] and writing it down and help me to practice during that time and have a deep experience on it."*

> E.g. 8: *"I used to doing that in this way."*

> E.g. 9: *"When I use repetition to learn words, I think it's very boring. Now I hate memorizing vocabulary. While I like to associate words in the word families, because I think I can understand the meaning of the original language by memorizing the new words. Sometimes, I often use the words to make a phrase of a sentence when I memorize a new word."*

These responses indicate that they considered a number of factors when they made the decision about what activities to use. They considered whether the activity was interesting, e.g., *"repetition is boring"*; and the outcome of activities, e.g., *"To use the dictionary can help me to understand the meaning of the words."* etc. However, when students moved on to provide information about how they evaluate their learning results. It seems that, though students might be aware of the "desired outcome" of activities (e.g., they had certain expectations of learning results when they employ certain learning activities.), they had limited knowledge about the measurements they used.

The findings to RQ3 *"What measurements do students use to evaluate their learning results?"* has been summarized in Table 3. Each role indicates the response from a student.

Table 3: MEASUREMENTS FOR EVALUATION TO RQ 3

1.	Listening to tapes.
2.	Vocabulary website.
3.	Check if I can tell the Chinese meaning of the words. Make a sentence with the words.
4.	Review spelling. Read the sentence/phrases I made.
5.	Read the words out and recall the pronunciation and Chinese meaning.
6.	Dictation. Write the words down and recall Chinese meaning. Write down the phrases.
7.	Dictation. Check Chinese meaning of the words.
8.	Write down English words and recall Chinese meaning. Write down Chinese meaning and recall English words.
9.	Write down Chinese meaning and recall English words. Write down English words and recall Chinese meaning.
10.	Read Chinese meaning and recall English words.
11.	Do vocabulary tasks.
12.	Put the words in random order and recall Chinese meaning.
13.	Write the Chinese meaning of words on one side of the paper and write the English words on the other side.
14.	Dictation.

Table 3 summarized the measurements students used to evaluate their vocabulary learning result. It can be seen that most students tend to rely heavily on Chinese meaning to check their knowledge of English words. As it indicates in Table 3, 9 students out of 14 mentioned that they consider recalling Chinese meaning as a measurement. Other measurements mentioned are dictation, listening to audio materials, or use online vocabulary test.

The information for RQ 4 "*Have students experienced some difficulties during this vocabulary learning task? What are the difficulties have they experienced?*" was collected by asking students to answer the summary question, such as, "Are you satisfied with the activities you chose? Why?"

The difficulties reported by the students are summarized in the following Table 4:

Table 4: DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED IN THE LEARNING PROCESS TO RQ4

1.	"*Easy to remember at the beginning. Easy to forget later. The effect was temporary.*"
2.	"*Not sure where to read the words out aloud.*" "*The problem is I still cannot focus on learning word for a long time. It takes me several hours and I just remember about twenty words.*"
3.	"*The activity isn't as good as it was in the first time. Getting frustrated because I can't well master the knowledge of certain words.*"
4.	"*I forgot most of them. Feeling bored.*" "*I am not satisfied with my learning result. I can't keep on learning for a long time. Many words are not used in my writing.*"
5.	"*I have a problem in my learning. I am lacking of words in writing. Thought I know the words and I did remember a lot words in daily life, but when comes to use it, I often forget them and use the words I know very well.*"
6.	"*I can write it down easily according to the pronunciation; but it is still difficult to remember all the Chinese meaning if it has several different meanings.*"
7.	"*In the short run, I am definitely satisfied with my learning result because I can remember the words in the short time. However, in the long run, I can forget the Chinese meanings easily, so I am not satisfied with my learning result.*"
8.	"*I find that my way of learning words have a disadvantage- it can't help me remember the words' pronunciations.*"
9.	"*I have use [used] these methods for 7 years. But I find I can hardly memorize the words just write them down many times.*"

Table 4 indicates that students were concerned about different issues. Some of them lacked of motivation, e.g. "*Feeling bored.*" Some students were more concerned about

learning results, e.g. "*The effect was temporary*." Some responses revealed that students, after doing this vocabulary learning task, became more aware of their own learning problems, e.g. "*I have a problem in my learning. I am lacking of words in writing*."

To sum up, the activity of "reading words out aloud" was reported to be used most frequently in Phase 1. In Phase 2, it was found out that the activities like "review words" and "use the words to make phrase or a sentence" were used most often. Difficulties students experienced were more related to individual learning situation.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings from the survey and vocabulary learning task revealed several interesting issues concerning vocabulary learning activities employed by Chinese English-major undergraduates.

Firstly, it seems that students were more concerned about learning results and their plan of activities was influenced by the measurements they chose to evaluate their learning results. In Phase 1, when asked what types of activities they would use regarding English vocabulary learning tasks, most students responded that they would employ the activity of "reading the words out". However, when asked to plan the activities and work on the word list in Phase 2, most students used the activity of "using words to make a phrase or a sentence". Only 3 students mentioned that they used the activity of "reading the words out". This discrepancy shows that students may have valued the sound features when they think of the learning of English vocabulary words as some of them mentioned "reading the words out" can help them learn the sound patterns of words. However, when students were to plan the activities for the learning in Phase 2, they were more concerned about the learning results, i.e., how they would evaluate their learning results. In Phase 2, most students reported that they used "translation" as the measurement. This might explain why most students chose the activities that focus on the meaning of the words, e.g., "use the word to make a phrase or a sentence."

Secondly, it seems that students may not be aware of the objectives/functions of the activities and measurements they employed in the vocabulary learning task. One student reported that she employed the activity of "writing the words down" to learn the words and used "listening to the tape" as the measurement. The activity of "writing words down" emphasizes the spelling/orthographic feature of the words. Only if the student attends to the sound features purposefully

during the process of writing the words down, the sound features would be easily neglected in this activity. The measurement this student chose, "listening to the tape of the words", focuses on the sound feature of the words, which does not echo the targets of the learning activities (focusing on the orthographic features of the words). Therefore, due to the lack of knowledge on the types of activities and measurement they employed, students may not receive the desired learning results, and in turn, they may feel more depressed and anxious about vocabulary learning.

What's more, the results from Phase 2 revealed that most students employed the activity of "writing the words down" to learn English words, and they reckoned that choosing this activity was because that "they are used to it". This might contribute to the phenomenon that some students felt they were not well-motivated because they "have used this activity for years."

Finally, it was found out that after doing this vocabulary learning task, students became to know better about their own learning habits. In Phase 2, students commented in summary questions that:

E.g. 10: "*After this task, I think I should read text aloud first, and then try to understand the texts' and words' meaning*."

E.g. 11: "*Getting better in the second week. When I review the words, I can immediately speak out the phrases/sentences I made*."

E.g. 12: "*I made a list of all the words I learned [in] the two weeks. I found that learning words were not as hard as I thought before*."

These comments show that some students recognized that the learning result was getting better in the second week. This information is important because it shows that students, through this two-week vocabulary task, they understood better about the learning process and his/her own learning problems (e.g., probably he/she gives up too easily).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study surveyed Chinese English-major undergraduates about what types of activities they employ regarding English vocabulary learning task. A vocabulary learning task was conducted to find out how students plan the vocabulary activities, how they evaluate their learning results etc. The findings showed a discrepancy in terms of the activities reported in the survey and the vocabulary learning report. It

was found out that students were concerned about the learning results; therefore, their plan for vocabulary tasks was influenced by the measurements they chose to evaluate their learning results. What's more, this study revealed that students lacked of the knowledge of types of activities and measurements they employed for vocabulary learning tasks. Due to this lack of knowledge, students may not receive the desired learning result. To tackle this problem, introductory courses on learning style/strategies might help.

The number of participants in this study is small (48 participants in the survey and 14 participants in the vocabulary learning task). More studies are needed to verify the learning activities employed by Chinese English-major undergraduates to understand better about how these learners tackle English vocabulary learning tasks.

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APPENDIX

This vocaublary learning report requires you to work on it for two weeks. You will need to decide two English word lists to work on for each week. Please read the following instructions before you start this report.

1. Identify a word list for each week (you can decide how many words you want to work on for each week).

2. Select one or more activities from Vocabulary learning activity summary. Be aware that you need to repeat the activities you choose three times a week.

3. If you decide to use several activities, please write down the sequence of the activities you are going to use.

4. You need to answer the questions on the next page first, and then use the report as a record during your study in the following two weeks.

5. After you finish this two-week vocabulary learning task, answer the summary questions on the last page.

Questions before you start the study report:

1. The activity/activities I choose to use:

2. Why I want to use these activities?

3. The sequence of the activities (if you choose more than one activity):

4. The words I will work on:

5. How will I evaluate my learning result?

Use this table as the record of your learning:

Date	Words	Activities	My comments

Summary questions (answer these questions after you complete this two-week vocabulary learning task):

1. Are you satisfied with the activities you chose? Why?

2. Are you satisfied with the sequence you planed for the activities? Why?

3. If you are not satisfied with certain activities, what do you think are the causes of your dissatisfaction?

4. Have you tried to learn English words in this way before?

5. Are you satisfied with your learning result? Why?

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