

ACADEMIC ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES: REFLECTIONS BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: The present study was set out to investigate EFL university students' reflections on the strategies for learning academic English words. Fifty-five students' vocabulary learning journals were collected for data analysis. Each student filled a journal entry every day in a period of six days. Data from 330 entries revealed that the sources where students encountered academic words included university lectures, course materials and reference materials. Besides, the journal entries indicated the strategies students used to understand the meanings of the academic words. All the students claimed to look up dictionaries to know the meanings of words. A majority of them used the lexical familiarization strategy to guess the meanings of words from context and social strategy by asking other classmates/friends for the meanings of the academic words. The students also reported the employment of cognitive strategy with both written and verbal repetition to remember vocabulary.

Key words: Academic English vocabulary, learning journal, strategy

1. Introduction

Academic words are defined as “lexical items [that] occur frequently and uniformly across a wide range of academic material” (Coxhead, 2000, p. 218). Academic vocabulary is considered to comprise some 8%-10% of running words in academic texts (Nation, 2001) and accounts for a relatively high proportion of running words in all academic texts (Yang, 2014). An academic word includes a stem plus “all inflections and the most frequent, productive, and regular prefixes and suffixes” (Coxhead, 2000, p. 218). For example, the *create* family consists of other words that include the inflected forms *creates* and *created* and the derivatives *creative* and *creation*. Clearly, it is essential for students at university who have to read a lot of academic texts to know academic vocabulary. Besides, a good knowledge of academic words is likely to assist learners in succeeding in their studies as well as future careers.

2. Academic vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies in general have been investigated by quite a number of authors. It can be said that the taxonomies compiled by Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2000) seem to be rather comprehensive. Nation (2001) focused on the separate aspects of vocabulary knowledge (what is involved in knowing a word) from sources of vocabulary knowledge, and learning process. The taxonomy by Nation (2001) describes the three major issues in learning academic words including planning, finding information, and establishing knowledge. When planning, learning look for words to learn and decide how to learn them. When finding information about the words chosen to learn, learners examine the words by analyzing the words, using context, consulting a reference source in the first language and the

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second language. When establishing knowledge of words, learners find ways to retrieve and generate meanings of words.

Schmitt (2000) however divided vocabulary learning process into such categories as determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. With the determination strategy, learners discover a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise" (Schmitt, 1997, p. 205). Social strategy refers to the process of interactions that learners act out with others in discovering a word. As for memory strategy, learners try to remember words and consolidate them for later use. For cognitive strategy, learners link new information with existing knowledge, as well as to analyze and classify it. In this way, learners focus more on repetition and using mechanical means to study vocabulary. Some examples are written and verbal repetition word lists and flash cards, and study aids such as notes and labels. Lastly, metacognitive strategy involves a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, mentoring, or evaluating the best ways to study. Learners should make use of books, magazines, newspapers, and movies in English as well as interact with native speakers to increase language input.

Besides the strategies for learning vocabulary in general as reviewed above, it is necessary to discuss the strategies proposed by Bramki and Williams (1984) and Williams (1980), which are more specific to academic vocabulary learning. These strategies include inferring from context, unchaining nominal compounds, searching for synonyms, word analysis, and recognizing lexical familiarization devices. More specifically, Williams (1980) pointed out lexical familiarization involves several strategies for working out the meaning of some unfamiliar words occurring in scientific texts. Williams (1980, p. 314) described lexical familiarization as, "the author's intention to familiarize the newly-introduced lexical items to the target reader, by verbal, illustrative or numerical devices, or any combination of these means". In other words, lexical familiarization is defined as a contextual aid, intentionally provided by the author for a specific reader (Bramki & Williams, 1984). According to Bramki and Williams (1984), lexical familiarization is a sub-set category of guessing from context and it is a vocabulary recognition strategy.

According to Bramki and Williams (1984, p. 175), the strategy of lexical familiarization consists of exemplification, explanation, stipulation, definition, and illustration. Exemplification provides the readers with an instance of what the newly-introduced term refers to by giving examples. Next, explanation provides more words, a phrase, a sentence or several sentences which are equivalent or opposed in meaning to the newly-introduced term. Another technique is stipulation which defines the particular meaning of a given word only in a given situation and that it does not necessarily have the same meaning in other situations. Synonymy provides the reader with a more familiar lexical item which has almost the same meaning. The last strategy of lexicalization is illustration which is a non-verbal method because it familiarizes the reader through tables, pictures, charts, and diagrams. It is a combination of a text and visual aids to clarify concepts. In a word, lexical familiarization 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. As for Chung and Nation (2003), for academic

words, especially technical words, such strategies as recognizing, interpreting definitions, relating senses to a core meaning, and learning word parts can be employed.

3. Previous studies

Some studies related to academic vocabulary learning strategies have been conducted. Lessard-Clouston (2008), for example, explored what kinds of academic vocabulary learning strategies were used by native and non-native English students of Christian Graduate School of Theology in Canada. The findings pointed out that the participants used such 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, and making index and flash cards. They also listened to recordings or teachers, repeated the words orally and written, quizzing, and asked the new words to others. The author found that the participants used such vocabulary learning strategies as writing, using the lexical items, contextual associations to learn academic words (technical words in this study). Another finding of this study was that linguistic associations were present in the study but immediate or spaced repetition and imagery, were absent from the study results. Lessard-Clouston (2008) concluded that these learners need structured approaches in order to gain greater depth knowledge of the academic vocabulary in their field.

The study by Akbari and Tahririan (2009) identified the vocabulary learning strategies used by the students in learning specialized (academic words) and non-specialized vocabulary. It involved 137 participants from paramedical undergraduates of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences in Iran. Data collection tools included observation, interview and questionnaire. Similar to the findings of the study by Lessard-Clouston (2008), this study found that the participants mostly used consolidating, dictionaries and repeating the words orally and written in learning both academic and general words.

Nagy and Townsend (2012) pointed out that words are tools in the learning process. Strategies for learning academic vocabulary must use words as means for communicating and thinking about disciplinary contents. Therefore, learners must be provided with opportunities to use the instructed words for these purposes as they are learning them. Another study was carried out by Tran Huynh Thu Huong (2012) who examined the current situation of using strategies to broaden academic vocabulary and develop language skills of college students. The study found that the learners had a tendency in using less thinking strategies in learning academic vocabulary. Besides, they did not use the right strategies on the process of learning academic vocabulary.

Given the fact that academic vocabulary is important in academic settings for university students and that few studies have been carried out to investigate the strategies for learning academic words, the current study was set out to fill this gap. The aim of the current study was to investigate the strategies that EFL students used in learning academic English words through their reflections in learning journals.

4. Research methodology

The report of this study was part of a larger project in which both quantitative and qualitative research method were combined as they complemented each other to strengthen the robustness of studies (Creswell & Plano, 2011). Data collection tools included questionnaire, learning journal and interview. In the scope of this paper, only students' reflections in their learning journals were analyzed for the report.

According to Oxford and Crookall (1990) recording the words learned is necessary. When students write the journals for learning vocabulary, it is likely that they will remember the words longer. Besides, vocabulary learning journal can be used as a reference material inside and outside the class, which assists learners in retrieving words.

In this study, students were given a journal with a guideline for recording the academic words that they learned daily. The students were instructed to look at the academic word list given which was compiled by the author. The software Range was used to run a corpus analysis (Coxhead, 2000) of 702,828 running words from nine books on English language teaching provided in the course material list of different universities around the world. The corpus analysis resulted in a list of 665 academic words specific to English language teaching. The students were asked to look at the list and to identify the words that they had learned and were included in the list. More importantly, they had to write in the journal how they learned the words. The guiding questions asked them where they met the words and how they learned the words. In total, 55 learning journals were collected for data analysis. Each student filled the journals in seven days with an entry each day. In other words, 330 entries of journals were used for data analysis.

Before analysis was carried out, the words noted down in the journals of students were checked whether they were present in the academic word list that was given to them. It was found that 100% of the words recorded were in the academic word list. Then all the journals were numbered from NK1 to NK55. Themes emerged from the journal entries were compiled and they mainly focused on two categories: Strategies to understand the meanings of the academic words and strategies to remember the words.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Sources for academic words

Analysis of students' journals shows that fifty-five students wrote in their journals that they met the academic words from reference books, articles, tests, materials for some courses. Below are some examples:

"I came across the words *equivalent*, *attribute*, and *hypothesis* when I was doing IELTS reading." (NK 34)

"I got to know the words *manipulate*, *reinforce*, *index*, and *precede* from a TOEIC book." (NK 44)

"I knew the words *beneficial*, *component*, and *complement* in the materials for the course 'functional grammar.'" (NK 51)

Forty seven students wrote that they came across a lot of academic vocabulary in the course materials for the English pedagogy major. Forty others recorded that they got to know the words via the mass media, such as Youtube, Facebook, TV programs, BBC channel, CNN, video clips on the Internet, news programs, websites, Tedtalk, etc.

Some examples are as follows:

“I learned the words *selection*, *random*, *implicit* and *respond* in the program Talk Vietnam VTV4.” (NK05)

“I’ve learned the words *briefly*, *process* when I watched the cooking video on Youtube.” (NK34)

“I watched Ted Talk and learned the words *facilitator* and *considerable*.” (NK15)

“I watched movies and learned the words *clarity*, *framework*, *justify* and *series*.” (NK 18)

“I have learned the words *reluctant*, *ranging*, *internal*, *grant* from some entertainment videos in English learning channels.” (NK 38)

“I’ve learned the words *hence*, *integrated*, *convince*, and *posed* from the news program.” (NK49)

Twenty-six students wrote that they learned academic words from the lectures. Below are some examples from their journal entries:

“I’ve learned the words *emerges*, *criteria*, *consensus*, and *constitute* from a lecture.” (NK 33)

“I’ve learned the words *emerge*, *crucial*, *fundamental*, *immigrant*, and *framework* from the class lectures.” (NK 30)

“I’ve learned the words *manipulate*, *correspond*, *denote*, and *consensus* from the lectures at university.” (NK 03)

Nine students said that they studied vocabulary from listening to the presentations given by other students in class.

“I’ve learned the words *intervene* and *item* from a classmate’s presentation.” (NK11)

“I’ve learned the words *definition*, *contribution*, *evaluating*, and *coherent* from the presentation of a group of students.” (NK 13)

“I got to know the words *availability*, *impact*, *category*, *contextual*, and *mental* from the lecture of my friends.” (NK 39)

5.2. Understanding the meanings of words

Data from the learning journals show that 55 students claimed to consult dictionaries to know the meanings of words. Besides, 42 of them said that they tried to guess the meanings of the words from context:

“I guessed the meanings of the words *acknowledge*, *revision* and *coherent* from the context and examples.” (NK 13)

“I based on contexts to guess the meanings of the words *dynamics*, *sequence* and *scheme*.” (NK 28)

“Based on the context, I was able to know the meanings of the *forthcoming*, and *contemporary*.” (NK 54)

In the journals, 24 students wrote that they asked other classmates/friends for the meanings of the academic words:

“In the lectures, there were the words such as *functional*, *hierarchy*, and *facilitator*. I asked my friends to know their meanings.” (NK 10)

“When I was reading, I came across the words *dimension* and *scheme*, I asked my friends for the meanings of these words.” (NK 16)

“I saw these words *crucial*, *proceed*, and *enormous* in a C1 practice test. I asked my friends to know the words.” (NK 32)

Seventeen students wrote in their journal entries that they asked their lecturers for word meanings. For examples,

“I heard the words *hierarchy* and *facilitator* from a lecture, and I asked the lecturer for their meanings.” (NK 10)

“Course materials have the words *coherence*, *complementary* and *hence*, I asked my lecturers for their meanings” (NK 27)

“I asked the lecturer for these words meanings: *assessment*, *relevant* and *expose*”. (NK 23)

Four other students wrote that they tried to guess the meanings of the words they did not know by looking at the words nearby. For example, journal 44 wrote that:

“I saw the words *acquisition*, *concensus* and *intervene*, I read the nearby words to guess the meanings of the words that I did not know”. Similarly, journal 41 wrote, “When I was doing a test, I came across the words *hypothesis* and *alters*, I read the nearby words to guess the meanings.”

Four other students wrote that they guessed the meanings of words via images and pictures:

“From the pictures, I could understand the words *mediate*, and *output*” (NK 01). “I watched some video clips, looked at the pictures and I understood the meanings of the words *cooperation*, and *evidence*.” (NK 09)

There were two students who claimed to use analyzing strategies to know word meanings. A student wrote, “I tried to analyse the components ‘alter’ and ‘native’ of the word *alternative* and its affix ‘ly’ to understand the meaning of this adverb” (NK 07). In journal 53, a student wrote, “When I was reading a book, I met the words *complementary* and *inevitable*, I tried to analyse the components of the words. For example, the prefix ‘in’ means ‘no’ as in ‘inexpensive.’”

Another student (NK 45) wrote that she used some vocabulary learning applications to learn word meanings. Journal 34 recorded that readings usually have some footnotes to explain new words, which helped me to know the meanings of the words *assess*, *flexible* and *derive*.”

5.3. Strategies to remember academic vocabulary meanings

Thirty-eight students wrote that when they met academic words, they would write into vocabulary notebooks or new words books or write them on paper to review and to remember them. For examples,

“I knew the words *cite*, *compile*, *implementation*, and *hierarchy* from the lectures given by the teachers. I wrote the words on paper and review them often to remember how to pronounce the words and remember their meanings.” (NK 07)

“I came across the words *interpret*, *comprises* and *criterion* from group discussions, I wrote them in vocabulary notebook to remember them.” (NK 33)

“I knew the words *integrated*, *posed*, *controversial* and *hence* when I read reference books and I wrote them in a notebook to review them every day.” (NK 47)

There were 27 students who wrote words a lot of times on paper to remember them.

“I met these words *accessible*, *evaluation*, *irrelevant* from the lectures of teachers and I wrote these words a lot of times to remember them.” (NK 19)

“I learned the words *draft*, *flexible* and *granted* from reference materials. I read them out loud and wrote the words many times to remember them.” (NK 26)

“When I met these words *hypothesis*, *forthcoming*, *explicitly* in class readings, I wrote them a lot of times to learn by heart.” (NK 46)

Seven students claimed that they used vocabulary learning applications to remember the words. For example, journal 16 stated, “I stored the words *retention*, *compensate*, *granted* and *perceived* in a vocabulary learning application to remember them.” Similarly, journal 08 wrote, “I used a software to learn vocabulary and keep the words such as *discrimination*, *immigrant* and *proceeding*”.

In general, the findings of this study show that the students reported a wide range of academic words from different sources including university lectures, course materials and reference materials. As for strategies used to understand the meanings of words and how to remember them, it could be said that the students in the current studies made use of the strategies proposed by Schmitt (2000). They employed the determination strategy because they tried to discover a new word’s meaning without recourse to another person’s expertise. Whether looking up in dictionaries or guessing from context, the students in the current study demonstrated their efforts in trying to understand the meanings of the academic words. Besides, the students also interacted with other students to figure out the meanings of the academic words that they did not know. To remember the words, they wrote the words a lot of time. Even though the strategies seem to be habitual, they reflected truly what Schmitt (2000) has proposed. The finding of this study is also quite similar to those of the studies by Lessard-Clouston (2008), Akbari and Tahririan (2009). These studies found that the participants mostly used consolidating, dictionaries and repeating the words in learning and remembering academic words. As most students reflected that they tried to guess meanings from context when encountering new words, it can be said the finding of this study reiterates with the strategies found by Bramki and Williams (1984) and Williams (1980) which was inferring from context. The students in this study also made use of lexical familiarization or contextual aids, intentionally provided by the author to understand meanings of words (Bramki & Williams, 1984). Besides, they reported to employ the cognitive strategy with more written than verbal repetition to remember words (Schmitt, 2000).

The findings of the current study also reveal that the students in this study only reflected to use the strategy of finding information in learning vocabulary as Nation (2001) pointed out. They referred to contexts and using reference materials, mainly dictionaries, to find the meanings of the words that they did not know the meanings. However, planning and establishing knowledge strategies were now reported in the students' journals.

6. Conclusion and implications

The present study was set out to investigate EFL university students' reflections on the strategies for learning academic English words. Data were collected from fifty-five students' vocabulary learning journals. It was found that looking up dictionaries to know the meanings of words was used by all the students. They also made use of lexical familiarization or contextual aid to figure out the meanings of academic words. Social strategy and memory strategy were claimed to be used by the students in this study. They tended to ask friends or classmates for meanings of words and writing the words a lot of time to remember them.

From the findings, several implications for learning academic words can be drawn. First, even though students have employed the strategies reviewed in the literature of this study, they may not be aware of how these strategies should be used effectively. It is therefore necessary to teach students these strategies. Second, when students have understood the strategies, they should keep practicing them in daily study to enhance the effectiveness of learning academic words. Teachers should also know and learn how to integrate academic vocabulary learning strategies into classroom activities. In this way, they can help students develop and use the strategies effectively.

Even though the findings from this study cannot be generalized, the application of the strategies for learning academic words in this study can be made use of at an individual level. However, learners should know their preferences in using which strategies to study more effectively. Further studies should focus on the effectiveness of the vocabulary learning strategies for academic words to provide more insight into the topic. Besides, it is worth investigating whether students are able to use the academic words that they claim they have learned later in different settings and for different purposes.

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CHIẾN LƯỢC HỌC TỪ VỰNG TIẾNG ANH HỌC THUẬT: CHIÊM NGHIỆM CỦA SINH VIÊN ĐẠI HỌC

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu chiến lược học từ vựng tiếng Anh học thuật của sinh viên đại học học tiếng Anh như là một ngoại ngữ. Năm mươi lăm nhật ký học tập đã được thu thập làm cứ liệu. Mỗi sinh viên tham gia vào nghiên cứu ghi nhật ký học tập từng ngày trong sáu ngày. Phân tích 330 lần ghi nhật ký học tập của sinh viên cho thấy sinh viên đã gặp từ vựng tiếng Anh học thuật chủ yếu từ các bài giảng ở đại học, tài liệu khoá học và tài liệu tham khảo. Ngoài ra, các nhật ký học tập cũng ghi lại các chiến lược mà sinh viên dùng để hiểu nghĩa của từ. Tất cả các sinh viên cho rằng họ tra từ điển để học nghĩa của từ. Phần lớn các em sử dụng chiến lược làm quen với từ để đoán nghĩa của từ từ bối cảnh và chiến lược xã hội bằng cách hỏi bạn cùng lớp về nghĩa của từ tiếng Anh học thuật. Các sinh viên cũng ghi lại việc sử dụng chiến lược nhận thức bằng cách lặp lại từ vựng theo hình thức viết và nói để nhớ từ.

Từ khoá: Từ vựng tiếng Anh học thuật, chiến lược, nhật ký học tập