

# A Study of English Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Ethnic Minority Students in Leshan Normal University, Sichuan, China

Li Zou

School of Foreign Language, Leshan Normal University, China

Ye Zhou

School of Foreign Language, Leshan Normal University, China

**Abstract**—This paper probes into the English vocabulary learning strategies adopted by ethnic minority students in Leshan Normal University. In a study carried out in Leshan Normal University, altogether 250 non-English majors from different departments are chosen at random as research subjects, of whom 125 are Han students and the rest are ethnic minority students. Based on the data analysis, the study finds out: firstly, all students in the study share in common that English vocabulary should be acquired in context and by practice instead of being acquired simply by rote; secondly, the ethnic minority students adopt nearly all the vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than the Han students; and finally, the Han students and the ethnic minority students differ mainly in the following vocabulary learning strategies: guessing strategy, mother tongue dependence strategy, selective attention strategy, visual repetition strategy, association strategy and dictionary strategy. By this study, the paper tends to help ethnic minority students to take advantages of diverse vocabulary learning strategies in their English study and further to put forward some implications for EFL teachers in Leshan Normal University.

**Index Terms**—English vocabulary acquisition, English vocabulary learning strategies, ethnic minority students

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the enrollment expansion of colleges and universities, there are an increasing number of ethnic minority students in Leshan Normal University. Han nationality college students differ greatly in English vocabulary learning, let alone students from different ethnic groups. The ethnic minority college students have their own culture and mother tongue, speaking Chinese as their second language and English as the third one. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study how they study English. Based on a study carried out in the university comparing the Han students and the ethnic minority students in terms of English vocabulary learning, the paper is supposed to help ethnic minority college students to make the best use of English vocabulary learning strategies and further put forward some advice to EFL teachers in Leshan Normal University.

## II. PREVIOUS STUDIES OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

As a matter of fact, English vocabulary learning strategies play a vital role in strengthening English-learners' learning ability. Foreign researchers did abundant studies on vocabulary learning strategies. Hatch and Brown (1995) identified five steps in vocabulary learning: source, a clear image, learning, a strong memory and using. Luppescu and Day (1993) found out that students who often use dictionaries in their vocabulary study did a better job on vocabulary tests than those who do not use dictionaries. Lawson and Hogben (1996) studied college students in Australia studying Italian vocabulary, finding out how they study the meaning of new Italian words, that they often repeat the new words' spellings and meanings and that only a few students use context to guess the possible meanings of the new words. Kafipour and Naveh (2011) studied the effect of vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension, finding out that certain strategies make a difference in reading comprehension. Nosidlak (2013) pointed out that the vocabulary learning strategies adopted by eminent English-learners and further probed into the relation between language competence and certain vocabulary strategies. By using the best vocabulary learning strategies, students who are poor in vocabulary may save time and effort in their English study.

In China, Gu and Johnson (1996) studied the English vocabulary learning strategies adopted by Chinese university students and further probed into the relation between strategies and performances, finding out that two meta-cognitive strategies (selective attention and self-initiation) help the students most in vocabulary learning while strategies like visual repetition of new vocabulary hinder the students' vocabulary study. Fan (2003) did a survey, finding out that the vocabulary learning strategies of excellent vocabulary learners should be introduced to poor learners and that all students are supposed to be encouraged to develop their own efficient vocabulary learning strategies. Ding (2006) made a comparison between good learners and poor ones in terms of vocabulary learning, pointing out that correct use of

strategies matters most while frequent use of strategies does not. Wu (2011) presented a detailed observation of vocabulary learning strategies adopted by non-English majors in colleges and found out the reason why poor learners fail to use vocabulary learning strategies effectively and efficiently, advocating that English learners need more knowledge of appropriate vocabulary learning strategies under specific guidance.

### III. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research began from September 2016 to February 2017, which consisted of the following 4 stages: first, designing questionnaire and selecting subjects; secondly, handing out questionnaires and recollecting the data; thirdly, analyzing the data by SPSS 13.0 and verifying the results by interviews; and finally, writing the paper.

#### Research Subjects

In the research, 250 second-year non-English majors were chosen at random as the research subjects, among whom 125 students were Han students and the rest were ethnic minority students (including 70 Yi students, 30 Tibetan students, 10 Mongolia students and 15 Hui students). The subjects were from different departments including Computer Department, Accounting Department, PE Department, Political Science and Law Department, etc.

#### Research Questions

The research questions about the English vocabulary learning strategies adopted by the ethnic minority students in Leshan Normal University are listed as follows:

1. What are the current vocabulary levels of Han students and ethnic minority students respectively?
2. What are the most difficult problems in English vocabulary study, in Han students' eyes and in ethnic minority students' eyes respectively?
3. What vocabulary learning strategies are used by Han students and ethnic minority students respectively?
4. What are the commonly-used strategies of Han students and ethnic minority students respectively?
5. What are the similarities and differences in strategy use between Han students and ethnic minority students?

#### Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire on English vocabulary learning strategies includes four parts. Part one is about the subjects' background information such as name, age, gender, ethnic identity, major and CET scores, etc. Part two is about their major problems about learning English vocabulary. Part three is about their preferences and beliefs to English vocabulary learning, specifically, by rote, by context or by practice? And finally, part four consists of questions and statements about different vocabulary learning strategies such as guessing strategy, mother tongue dependence strategy, selective attention strategy, visual repetition strategy, association strategy and dictionary strategy.

#### Procedures

Firstly, the author gave 50 students questionnaires as a pretest to find the possible problems which may appear in the research. And then the main study was carried out in which the questionnaires were distributed to all 250 subjects during their English class with the help of their English teachers. Before finishing the questionnaires, all the subjects were informed by the English teachers that they are supposed to finish the questionnaires honestly, conscientiously, independently and anonymously within 20 minutes.

#### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The author recollected the questionnaires from the English teachers and then inputted the data into computers for further study and analysis. Actually, 244 valid questionnaires were recollecting, and the other six were excluded in that four subjects didn't finish all the questions and two participants did more choices than needed. Therefore, the 244 questionnaires were available for further analysis and research. By using the SPSS 13.0, the author analyzed the valid data. Further, in the process of analysis the author discontinuously implemented short interviews with 50 subjects who did the questionnaires aiming to understand the results better and to verify the validity of the results as well as to find more problems in the students' vocabulary study.

### IV. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

In the research, after a comparative study of English vocabulary learning strategies between Han students and ethnic minority students in Leshan Normal University by means of questionnaires, data analysis as well as interviews, the author concluded the following findings:

1. It is clear that all students in the study, Han students or ethnic minority students, share in common that English vocabulary should be acquired in context and by practice instead of being acquired simply by rote.
2. It is found that the ethnic minority students adopt nearly all the vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than the Han students.
3. It is found that Han students tend to use guessing strategy in English vocabulary study more often than their ethnic minority counterparts.
4. It is found that ethnic minority students tend to use more mother tongue dependence strategies in English vocabulary study than Chinese dependence strategies which Han students often adopt.
5. It is found that ethnic minority students tend to use selective attention strategy more frequently than Han students in English vocabulary study.

6. It is found that ethnic minority students tend to use visual repetition strategy more often than Han students in English vocabulary study.

7. It is found that ethnic minority students tend to use sound association strategy more frequently than Han students who often use meaning association strategy in English vocabulary study.

8. It is found that ethnic minority students tend to use the dictionary for content understanding more frequently than Han students in English vocabulary study.

## V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The above-mentioned questionnaires and interviews have also revealed some problems in English vocabulary learning of the students in Leshan Normal University. Both Han students and ethnic minority students have their strong points and weak points in vocabulary study respectively. In order to improve the students' English vocabulary learning and the EFL teachers' teaching, the paper puts forward some advice as follows.

1. Most the students want to master English vocabulary, but they do not study hard. The students, Han students or ethnic minority students, need to make a detailed plan for their vocabulary accumulation under the correct guidance of the EFL teachers. Also, the interview shows that most of the students pronounce English vocabulary in a wrong way and they complain that they do not have any partners to rectify their mistakes in the pronunciation of the vocabulary. Thus, in this case they need a cooperation in that the teachers can not help them anytime and anywhere. They can make joint efforts, share vocabulary learning strategies and communicate common problems with each other so as to make progress together. What's more, the students need to be aware that the plan is on a long term basis and they have a long way to go in English vocabulary study.

2. Obviously, English vocabulary learning strategies are of substantial significance in the students' English vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, the EFL teachers need share different vocabulary learning strategies to help the ethnic minority students to study vocabulary effectively. Further, the findings in the above-mentioned study show clearly that there are big differences in English vocabulary learning strategies between Han students and ethnic minority students. Thus, in English classes, EFL teachers should concentrate more on the factors that influence ethnic minority students' English vocabulary learning strategies, such as educational background, cultural background, different mother tongue, motivation, etc. The teachers should also realize that ethnic minority students might have a weaker basis in English compared with Han students so that they need more patience in teaching ethnic minority students.

3. Basically, EFL teachers are supposed to stimulate the students to use the most effective learning strategies on their own. Besides, EFL teachers should let students be aware that vocabulary study is a task not only in classroom but also in their spare time independently or by cooperation with classmates. After all, limited classroom study can not enable them to study all vocabulary. It is also true that students do need some spare time to reflect and review what they have learned in the class on their own and that they also need some occasions in which they can practice those vocabulary. Otherwise, there is a possibility that the students only study the vocabulary in class and the newly-learned vocabulary will be forgotten soon after the class is over.

4. In the English class, EFL teachers are supposed to set up a comfortable and positive atmosphere for both Han students and ethnic minority students to learn English vocabulary and introduce diverse approaches to learn English vocabulary, for instance, the EFL teachers may use TV programs or radio to let the students practice vocabulary they have learned through listening practice. By this way, the students can vividly have a closer understanding of those words and phrases in different contexts other than in textbooks, which can undoubtedly reinforce their memory of the vocabulary. The findings of the above-mentioned study show that ethnic minority students tend to use visual repetition strategy more often than Han students in English vocabulary study so that the teachers should do better in accordance with this.

5. Ellis (1994) held that language learners' motivation did have a positive effect on the quality of learning strategies they adopt. Therefore, the more motivated vocabulary learners tend to do a better job in the use of vocabulary learning strategies. It is true that the students, especially non-English major students, lack a clear goal of English study and confidence in English vocabulary. So, they need to be motivated by the EFL teachers who are supposed to arouse the students' interest in English study and to improve their confidence in English vocabulary. The findings in the above-mentioned questionnaires and interviews show that ethnic minority students are more motivated in English vocabulary study compared with their Han counterparts. What ethnic minority students need is a correct guidance of appropriate vocabulary learning strategies.

6. Prabhu (1987) firstly put forward the task-based language learning, which refers to students' studying second languages by accomplishing the various kinds of tasks in the process of language learning. And numerous researchers have proved that TBL is an efficient and effective in language education. The same is to English vocabulary teaching. Therefore, the EFL teachers can design different kinds of tasks to facilitate the students' vocabulary study. For example, the EFL teachers can require the students to do vocabulary presentation by turns in which every student is supposed to introduce a new word to the whole class with detailed explanations as well as usages. By this way, the students have to prepare a lot before presentation, which can help a lot in their vocabulary study in that they will try to find the best way to introduce the word to the whole class.

7. The findings in the above-mentioned study show clearly that both Han students and ethnic minority students hold a

negative view of learning English vocabulary by rote while being in favor of learning vocabulary through context. Therefore, the EFL teachers are supposed to introduce the skill of guessing the meaning of a certain word in a context. In addition, the more input, the more output. The EFL teachers should assign appropriate reading materials to the students to read regularly on their own in the spare time, after all, the textbooks are limited in content and quantity. For example, the original novel and newspapers as well as magazines are good choices, especially those to their like and interest, which can help a lot in their vocabulary study in that interest is the best teacher.

8. The EFL teachers are supposed to master different kinds of English vocabulary learning strategies before introducing them to the students. What's more, because of the differences between Han students and ethnic minority students in many ways, especially the big difference in English vocabulary learning strategies they use respectively, the EFL teachers should come up with different learning strategies that can suit different students best. On the other hand, the students need to try different strategies first before finding the best way because of individual differences. In the process of the trial, the EFL teachers can help the students to make records about their different progress out of different vocabulary learning strategies so as to find the best way.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, different English learners consciously or subconsciously adopt different vocabulary learning strategies in their study. What matters most is that English learners should try to find the vocabulary learning strategies that suit them best. Cohen (1990) stressed that there is no such thing as a single learning strategy that will be appropriate and effective for all the students or for all the tasks. Therefore, language learners should employ diverse strategies in different occasions in accordance with their different conditions and different needs in language learning. And for ethnic minority students who have their own educational background, cultural background and mother tongue, they need to know more about learning strategies and try more to find the best one. On one hand, in English teaching, the EFL teachers should employ different skills and design various tasks to teach vocabulary instead of directly asking the students to memorize the words and phrase by hard work. On the other hand, the students should realize that vocabulary acquisition is a long-term process that requires not only the appropriate way but also the time and the energy. Besides, vocabulary study calls for the cooperation not only among students to communicate and learn from each other but also the cooperation between the students and the teachers to make joint efforts so as to find the most efficient and effective way.

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**Li Zou** was born in Leshan City, Sichuan Province, China in 1979. He received his Master's Degree in Education Technology from Southwest University, China in 2008.

He is currently an associate professor in the School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Sichuan, China. His research interests include English teaching and American literature.

**Ye Zhou** was born in Leshan City, Sichuan Province, China in 1983. She received her Master's Degree in Comparative Literature and World Literature from Sichuan International Studies University, China in 2012.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University, Sichuan, China. Her research interests include English teaching and American literature.