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The Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies by Good and Poor Language Learners

A case study of Chinese non-English major sophmores

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Aim	2
1.2 Material and Method	2
1.2.1 Participants	2
1.2.2 Questionnaire.....	3
1.2.3 Procedure and data analysis	4
2. Theoretical Background	4
2.1 The Importance of Vocabulary in Language Learning	4
2.1.1 Vocabulary is of critical importance to language learners.....	5
2.1.2 Vocabulary learning strategies is one crucial factor affecting the success of vocabulary acquisition	5
2.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies	6
2.2.1 Dictionary use	7
2.2.2 Guessing	9
2.2.3 Perception.....	10
2.2.4 Encoding.....	11
2.2.5 Activation	12
2.2.6 Management	12
2.2.7 Sources	13
2.3 Previous Studies	14
2.3.1 Vocabulary is of critical importance to language learners.....	14
2.3.2 Vocabulary learning strategies is one crucial factor affecting the success of vocabulary acquisition	15
3. Analysis and Discussion	17
3.1 Frequency of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	17
3.1.1 Results of the current study	17
3.1.2 Comparison of the general information between the current study and previous studies	24
3.2 The difference between good and poor learners	27
3.2.1 Results of the current study	27
3.2.2 Similarities between the current study and previous studies.....	32
4. Conclusion and Implication	33
References	35
Appendices	

Abstract

The use of vocabulary learning strategies is one crucial factor that affects the success of foreign vocabulary acquisition. This case study investigated a group of Chinese sophmores' employment of learning strategies in their learning process in order to identify the most frequently used strategies and the least frequently used strategies, and compared good language learners with poor learners. A 26-item five-scale point questionnaire was employed for data collection. Through careful calculation and detailed discussion, it was found that both good and poor language learners used many effective strategies for vocabulary learning. This group of students were found that they tended to carry a pocket dictionary to look up new words while they were least likely to look up new words in an English-English dictionary. Good language learner were found to employ learning strategies more frequently than poor leaners in 21 strategies, which revealed that vocabulary learning strategies were positively related to learning outcomes.

Key Words: vocabulary learning strategies, frequency, good and poor

1. Introduction

Words are the basic units of language use. Ample evidence suggests that the vocabulary size of a learner is highly predictive of his entire language ability (Gu 1994). One cannot communicate successfully without a sufficient vocabulary. Limited vocabulary is a great obstacle that stops students from learning a foreign language (Zhihong, 2000, cited by Subekti & Lawson, 2007:485). According to Zimmerman (cited by Subekti & Lawson, 2007:485), vocabulary is crucial to language and of great importance to language learners. Gupta and MacWhinney (1997, cited by Subekti & Lawson, 2007:485) also argue that learning unknown words is one of the most important processes in human development.

The use of vocabulary learning strategies is one crucial factor that affects the success of foreign vocabulary acquisition. Nation (2003: 159) advises the teacher to spend time on strategies that the learners can use to deal with words rather than spending time on individual words if he or she wants to help learners cope with vocabulary, which is also the starting point of this case study. Schmitt (1997) studies a representative sample of 600 Japanese students to find answers to which strategies the students use and which they consider helpful even if they do not use them. Using a bilingual dictionary strategy is found to be the first both in the category of the strategies exploited most frequently and that of the most helpful strategies. In addition, five other strategies, namely written repetition, verbal repetition, speaking a new word aloud, studying a word's spelling and taking notes in class, are among the most often used and most helpful strategies. Research is badly needed on the strategies and processes of vocabulary development that very possibly make the good learners good and the poor learners poor.

Many researchers tend to make lists of strategies and other features presumed to be essential for all "good L2 learners". Robin (1975) suggests seven strategies adopted by "good L2 learners", and Stern (1975) discusses the strategies of good language learning and names ten features that mark the good language learner, which will be discussed in detail in later chapters. However, Oxford has a different opinion (1992:126). She claims that many of the poor L2 learners are indeed aware of the strategies they use, can clearly describe them, and employ just as many

strategies as good L2 learners. However, poor learners apply these strategies in a random, even desperate manner, without careful organization and without assigning specific strategies to specific tasks.

The author is motivated by these opinions to investigate if there is any difference between good and poor Chinese college students' vocabulary acquisition strategies.

1.1 Aim

This case study looks into the scores a group of students received in their College English Test 4, organized by the Chinese Ministry of Education, and the strategies they adopted for building up their English vocabulary. The author aims to; 1) discover whether there are differences in the different vocabulary acquisition strategies used by good and poor language learners; 2) identify the types of strategies used by them, and to assess how frequently these strategies are used.

1.2 Material and Method

This part introduces the basic information about the participants, who give their responses honestly of their own will, the questionnaire, which is used for data collection, the procedure of data analysis, which includes the questionnaire's handing-out and statistical analysis.

1.2.1 Participants

This study bases its sample on a group of sophomore English majors drawn from a total population of 120 students in a class at a university in China. By the time the study took place these learners had all had at least 8 years' experience of learning English as a course in their primary and secondary schools around China, plus one and a half years of English learning experience at a university. They all took the College English Test-4, which is a nationwide and standardized test taken each year by all sophomore non-English majors in China, in December 2010, and got their scores in March 2011. The full score of the test is usually 710. The students

are all cognitively developed and mature enough to be aware of, and self-examine their own learning process and strategies according to their age.

In order to provide a basis for comparison, the chosen participants were divided into three groups according to their performance in CET-4. The high group is a collection of students whose CET-4 score is above 550, the middle group is students who got a score between 550 and 450, and the low group is students with a score lower than 450. Only the high group representing good, effective, successful language learners and the low group standing for poor, ineffective, underachieving language learners are adopted in the analysis, to make the result clearer and more convincing. Twelve students in total, six picked randomly from the high group and six from the low group, form the subjects of this case study. The distribution of male and female is the same with 3 boys and 3 girls in each group to minimize the possible influence of gender differences.

1.2.1 Questionnaire

Observational methods are often difficult to employ because many learning strategies are internal and invisible to observers. Much learning-strategy research depends on learners' willingness and ability to describe their internal behaviors, both cognitive and affective (emotional) (Brown, 1989; Harlow, 1988, cited by Oxford 1992:125). According to Schmitt, N. & Schmitt, D. (1993:27), if learners are to have the best awareness of their own strengths, weaknesses, and personal preference in individual and cultural learning style, they should have some voice in how their learning is achieved. The questionnaire method is the most reliable method in that its data are given by the learners themselves. That is why the questionnaire method was employed in this case study.

The questionnaire used for data collection in this study is adapted from Ming Wei (2007). It contains 26 items about students' approaches to vocabulary learning, which were divided into seven categories: dictionary use, guessing, perception, encoding, activation, management and learning sources. The author revised Ming Wei's eight-part questionnaire into seven parts. This was done because the rehearsal section in her questionnaire which was attached to her article, was supposed to have two items. It only provided one item. Since item 11 was missing in her questionnaire, the rehearsal section was deleted in the current study.

1.2.3 Procedure and data analysis

The assistant of this study, who is also a teacher in a Chinese university, took the questionnaire to a regular class and asked the respondents to rate each strategy statement in the questionnaire. They responded on a 5-point interval Likert scale, ranging from never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always, in terms of their frequency of use. They were also required to give their opinions as honestly as possible. The whole procedure took 15 minutes of class time.

The data were collected immediately after class and sent back to the author soon by email. Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Data analysis procedures for this study included 1) calculating descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviation for the whole sample, to identify the most and least frequently used strategies, and 2) running an independent t-test to see if there is any difference between the high group's and low group's employment of each strategy.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical background of this study is divided into three sections. In the first section, the importance of vocabulary in language learning is given as the basis of the following sections and the starting point of this investigation. Then various vocabulary acquisition strategies are discussed in detail. In the last section, some previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies, and the difference between good and poor language learners are introduced.

2.1 The Importance of Vocabulary in Language Learning

Vocabulary is viewed as one of the central aspects of second language learning, which is important to language learners (Ming Wei, 2007). While in the process of vocabulary learning, the employment of vocabulary learning strategies can facilitate vocabulary learning (Schmitt, 2000). Therefore it becomes important to investigate useful learning strategies and introduce them to the learners.

2.1.1 Vocabulary is of critical importance to language learners

The importance of vocabulary knowledge is well summed up by McCarthy (2001: 2),

Vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and vocabulary is the biggest problem for most learners. So I've always been interested in ways of helping learners in building up a big vocabulary as fast and as efficiently as possible (cited by Fan, 2003:222).

Vocabulary is put in the central place in many linguistic theories. Lewis believes lexis to be the core of language (1993: 89). According to Gass and Selinker (2008), the lexicon is more important than any other component, and that it may be the most important language component for learners.

Knowing a word is complex in that it involves not only the ability to recognize its form, or memorizing its definition provided in the dictionary, it also includes knowledge of using it correctly and appropriately in communication and writing (Nation, 1990).

Learning a word in China is even more complex in that the learners “frequently encounter unknown words in text materials and need to learn and retain the meaning of some of these words for later use” (Lawson & Hogben, 1996: 272), which is quite different from native speakers’ language learning environment. Ming Wei observes that Chinese college learners become increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of their vocabulary learning as they are aware of English’s importance to their academic and career advancement. However, as observed by Kelly (1990, cited by Ming Wei, 2007:97), vocabulary ignorance is still the largest obstacle to foreign language learning at the intermediate and advanced level.

2.1.2 Vocabulary learning strategies as one crucial factor affecting the success of vocabulary acquisition

Oxford (1990:1) defines learning strategies as steps taken by students to enhance their own learning and their significance lies in that they are tools for active, self-directed involvement. He

also believes that appropriate language learning strategies to result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence.

The important benefit gained from all learning strategies, including strategies for vocabulary learning, is the fact that they enable learners to take more control of their own learning so that learners can take more responsibility for their studies (Nation 2001: 222).

By acquiring various vocabulary learning strategies, students can decide how they would like to deal with new words. According to Schmitt, many learners do use strategies for learning vocabulary, especially when compared to language tasks that integrate several linguistic skills, like oral presentation that involves composing the speech content, producing comprehensible pronunciation, fielding questions, and so on (2000:132).

Allen believes (1983: 82) teachers in advanced classes have two major aims. One is to prepare students for the kind of English used by and for native speakers. The other special aim is to help students become independent, responsible for their own learning. Advanced students have to count on their own efforts and habits of study for their further study. As the material which is read becomes increasingly difficult, there are many more new words to be explained. The teacher can not, and should not, help students learn all of them. Allen even lists the unfortunate results of spending too much time on explaining vocabulary at class,

When the teacher spends an entire class period explaining vocabulary, there are three unfortunate results: 1) the students remain too dependent on the teacher; 2) opportunities for learning to use a dictionary are lost; and 3) no class time is left for the communicative use of the language. (Allen 1983: 82)

As no one wants this kind of result happen, the effectiveness and use of vocabulary learning strategies becomes one crucial factor affecting the success of foreign vocabulary acquisition, especially for learners at advanced levels.

2.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Oxford (1992: 124) defines language learning strategies as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques, which can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language language learners employ to develop their L2 skills. These strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement which is a necessity for developing communicative ability (Oxford, 1992:124).

Another general definition of vocabulary learning strategies is given by Cameron (2001: 92), who states that vocabulary learning strategies are “actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary”.

Brown and Payne (1994, cited by Hatch & Brown, 1995:373) identifies five steps involved in vocabulary learning:

- 1) having sources for encountering new words, 2) getting a clear image, either visual or auditory or both, of the forms of the new words, 3) learning the meaning of the words, 4) making a strong memory connection between the forms and the meanings of the words, and 5) using the words.

Consequently, all strategies for learning L2 vocabulary are, to a certain degree, related to these five steps (Fan, 2003: 223).

Rather than being used individually, multiple vocabulary learning strategies are often used concurrently; it implies that active management of strategy use is significant. The general organization of the strategies discussed in the subsections below is based on Ming Wei (2007), i.e. the names of the broad categories of the strategies are derived from her classification. This classification is not perfect, and Fan (2003: 223) believes no classification is perfect, and any individual strategy may fall into one category or another. For example, it is difficult to define note-taking as a management strategy or a source category.

2.2.1 Dictionary Use

Dictionary strategies are commonly used among learners in order to determine the meaning of unknown words. When learners come across a new word that they can not infer from context,

they can either ignore it, or consult a dictionary. Instructors following traditional grammar-translation methods have encouraged the extensive use of dictionaries. According to Nation (2001: 263), using a dictionary is related to the intentional method of vocabulary learning as opposed to guessing, which is generally associated with incidental learning of vocabulary.

Many studies have shown that using dictionaries could improve reading comprehension and could lead to lexical development. In Summers's (1988) three studies, English learners using a dictionary receive a higher score on both postreading comprehension and vocabulary tests. In another study involving 112 learners of Spanish, learners who have access to a dictionary score much higher on postreading comprehension and vocabulary tests. The difference in the comprehension scores of more proficient learners is not obvious. Similarly, Gu and Johnson (1996) find that Chinese students are very positive about dictionary use. They report using a variety of "look-up" strategies, which positively correlated with vocabulary outcomes.

The findings of the studies on vocabulary learning strategies in general have proved the popularity of dictionary strategies, especially the use of bilingual dictionaries. Luppescu and Day (1993: 271) find that the use of a dictionary largely improves students' performance on the vocabulary test. The result leads them to encourage the use of a bilingual dictionary, which may help students' learning.

What kind of dictionary is the best for a learner, monolingual, bilingual or semibilingual, has been debated for a long time. Both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries have their shortcomings. Monolingual dictionaries are not perfect in that users might be in trouble with looking up the right word and with understanding the definitions although they can provide the users with much more information (Thompson 1987). Bilingual dictionaries' drawbacks lie in that they lack the information on how words are used and they encourage the use of translation which is harmful for the learners in a long-term perspective (Nation 2001). That is why Bejoint and Moulin (1987) suggest using bilingual dictionaries for quick reference and employing monolingual dictionaries if a learner wants a more detailed overview of the word's system.

Employing modern technologies, such as pocket dictionary (including electronic dictionary) and online dictionaries may improve the efficiency of dictionary use. Referring to a new word through a pocket dictionary takes much less time and is easier to operate. According to another study (Koyama & Takeuchi, 2004), users of electronic dictionaries look up more words in less time than users of printed dictionaries.

2.2.2 Guessing

Whereas using dictionary strategies is an intentional way of learning new words, inferencing or guessing strategies are closely related to the incidental learning of vocabulary. Inferencing is generally understood as using available information to guess the meaning of unknown words. It allows students to use all possible clues to guess meaning, to understand the overall meaning, and to find ways to get the message across.

Gu and Johnson (1996: 650) distinguish between two types of guessing among cognitive strategies: guessing by using background knowledge or wider context, and guessing by using linguistic clues or immediate context.

Unlike instructors following traditional grammar-translation methods, current communicative practices in the field focus on strategic reading and guessing the meaning of unknown words from context (Knight, 1994). Schmitt (1997: 208-209) believes students can guess the meanings of words by analyzing the new word's part of speech or its root and affix, by thinking of a mother tongue cognate, and by guessing a new word's meaning from context.

Nation also believes that once learners know about two or three thousand words, they can use the reading skills they have developed to infer the meanings of unknown words that they come across. Once learners know 80 percent of the new words, then they can eventually get the main idea of the passage,

In theory, at least, if one learner can find enough clues in a passage to guess 80 percent of the previously unknown words, then every learner can achieve a similar score with training. (2003: 160)

For a successful guessing of words students should have three kinds of knowledge: linguistic, world, and strategic knowledge (Nagy 1997: 76). As for linguistic knowledge, the higher the language level of students, the more effectively they are able to guess unknown words (Schmitt, 1997: 209). A large vocabulary size is the prerequisite for successful guessing (Nation, 2001: 233). World knowledge is a kind of prior knowledge of the topic or the situation in general. Nagy (1997: 79) finds it much harder to learn a word about a new concept than to learn a new word for a known phenomenon. The final type of knowledge, strategic knowledge, has been defined by Nagy (1997: 65) as “involving conscious control over cognitive resources”. This definition implies that students may become better guessers if they are taught how to guess.

Nation even gives some specific pragmatic advices on promoting the success of guessing, like practicing various steps needed in the strategy, namely part of speech, immediate context, wider context, word parts, separately before combining them into a strategy (2003:164).

2.2.3 Perceptions

The strategies in this category involve deciding on where to focus attention, how to focus the attention, and how often to give attention to the item. More specifically, the strategies enable learners to plan, observe and assess the best way of learning vocabulary in order to achieve better results (Schmitt 1997: 205).

In order to cope with new words when they occur and to learn unfamiliar words, learners have to be able to get information about the words. According to Levelt (1989:9, 188, cited by Nation 2001: 38), the lexicon can be divided into two parts, one that contains lemmas and one that contains forms. Learners need to be aware of both aspects of word knowledge. Generally speaking, the main concern of a vocabulary learner is to know the meaning of the word, but the need to use a word in speaking or writing requires attention to other aspects. Learners have to be able to know the word form itself, the context in which the word occurs, a reference source or analogies and connections with other languages.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 137) further divide these kinds of strategies into directed attention and selective attention. The former is defined as deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore other distractions, and remaining focused during task execution. The latter refers to deciding to attend to specific aspects of language input or situational details that assist in performance of a task, attending to specific aspects of language input, which is also in advance.

2.2.4 Encoding

Encoding involves various techniques for committing new words to memory, such as analysis, association and grouping.

Analyzing target words into Latin roots and affixes can facilitate recall. It can be used to help the learning of unfamiliar words by relating these words to known words or to known affixes, and it also can be used as a way to check whether an unfamiliar word has been successfully guessed from context (Nation 1990: 168). Nation also suggests three concrete skills involved in using these kinds of strategies. These skills are breaking new words into parts, knowing the meaning of each part and seeing a connection between the meaning of each part and the dictionary meaning of the new word. This strategy is similar to the keyword technique, which will be discussed later, in the association of form and meaning.

Association is important because a new word can be integrated into existing knowledge like previous experiences or known words, or images can be custom-made for retrieval, which can be helpful in memorizing a new word (Schmitt 2000: 135). Grouping can aid recall, and learners seem to organize words into groups naturally without prompting. If words are organized in some way before memorization, recall is improved (Cofer, Bruce, & Reicher, 1966; Craik & Tulving, 1975, cited by Schmitt 2000: 135)

The keyword method is also investigated as a part of this category. The keyword method is defined by Gu and Johnson as

a technique that starts with an acoustic link (i.e., finding a keyword in L1 that sounds like the foreign word) then links the keyword and the foreign word by means of an interactive image (1996: 644).

Although Cohen (1987), Meara (1980), Nation (1982) and Paivio and Desrochers (1981) provide sufficient evidence that this keyword method is favored more than any other strategy. Gu and Johnson still believe vocabulary learning is not merely list learning, though this belief is the basic assumption of the keyword method and some other mnemonic techniques.

Nation (1990 : 166) considers the keyword technique to be an effective way to remember new words. Craik and Lockhart (1972) even believe that it is only one of several learning techniques that can be used to master foreign vocabulary. Their belief is based on the general principle of the “levels of processing” theory, which says that the more words are analyzed and enriched by association or images, the longer they will stay in the memory.

2.2.5 Activation

Activation is defined by Gall-Craik and Zerwekh as

a cognitive strategy that reflects repeating, practicing with sounds and writing, practicing the new language in a variety of authentic situations, using reference, and so forth (2002: 60).

Spreading activation, which is an effective vocabulary learning strategy, is the activation of one concept in the long-term memory that activates other concepts to which it is connected by meaning or use. The availability of connections in the long-term memory makes new information meaningful (O’Malley & Chamot 1990: 232). The importance of this strategy lies in that associations are linked hierarchically to the initial concept, and are activated depending on their relationship in the propositional network to the initial concept. Anderson even suggests to define working memory as the range of nodes reached by spreading activation (O’Malley & Chamot 1990: 232). Activation is a learned response that has been built up over a certain period of time.

2.2.6 Management

Management is a kind of metacognitive strategy defined as understanding the conditions that help one successfully accomplish language tasks, arranging for the presence of those conditions, and controlling one’s language performance to maximize the use of what is already known (O’Malley

& Chamot 1990: 137). It equips the students with the ability to link words previously learned to new words, to set goals, to make a plan, and what is more important, to learn from errors by reviewing (Crail & Zerwekh, 2002).

Gu and Johnson (1996) believe the combination of strategies and their effect on vocabulary learning to be a more important research topic than the effect of one individual vocabulary learning strategy. Their research proves that the most successful learners are those who actively draw on a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies. Successful strategy users need a strategy for controlling their strategy use, which involves picking the most appropriate strategy from a range of known options and deciding how to pursue the strategy and when to turn to another strategy.

2.2.7 Sources

This “sources” category was established because the sources for encountering new words are of great importance in the process of learning (Fan 2003: 226). Sources may include textbooks, radio programs, English movies and prior work.

Source strategies are cognitive strategies involving interacting with the material to be learned, manipulating the material mentally or physically, or applying a specific technique to a learning task (O’Malley & Chamot 1990: 138). Two specific cognitive strategies are resourcing and note taking. Resourcing is defined as using any available reference sources of information about the target language. Note taking is defined as writing down key words and concepts to assist in performing a language task.

Contemporary language learning, especially its aspect of vocabulary acquisition, is inevitably linked with mass media. Mass media can include, but is not limited to, radio programs, the television, the computer, and the Internet. Mass media plays an important role in learners’ lives because it provides them with rich and natural language input. Kooststra and Beentjes (1999) find that learners, especially children, benefit greatly from watching movies, subtitled or not.

2.3 Previous Studies

Many studies on vocabulary learning strategies have been conducted due to a growing interest. These studies have been general, but have also focused on different strategies. Various researchers search for differences between good and poor language learners' employment of vocabulary learning strategies.

2.3.1 Studies on vocabulary learning strategies

People have been learning second languages for at least two thousand years, thus various perspectives on vocabulary have been formed. Sometimes vocabulary has been given high position in teaching methodologies, and sometimes it has been neglected (Schmitt, N., 2000: 10). In order to better understand the current state of vocabulary studies, this section will briefly review previous studies on vocabulary learning.

Stoffer (1995, cited by Kudo, 1999: 6) devises a Vocabulary Learning Strategy Inventory consisting of 53 strategies. Through factor analysis it is found that the strategies are clustered into nine categories: strategies involving authentic language use, strategies used for self-motivation, strategies used to organize words, strategies used to create mental linkages, memory strategies, strategies involving creative activities, strategies involving physical action, strategies used to overcome anxiety and auditory strategies.

In Gu and Johnson's (1996:668) study of vocabulary learning strategies, employed by Chinese college students and the relationship between their strategies and outcomes, they conclude that self-initiation and selective attention are two closely related factors to students' success, while memorization strategy and visual repetition of word lists are found to be ineffective strategies.

Lawson and Hogben (1996) examine vocabulary learning strategies by means of a think-aloud procedure, which enables them to look at which strategies learners actually use. The results of the study show the popularity of repetition strategies and a neglect of word feature analysis. While

the strategies of complex elaboration receive far less attention from the students when compared to simple elaboration.

It is important to note that these scholars are typically dealing with advanced learners of English as a second language who need to use the language on a very advanced academic level. Consequently, their proposals must be considered as most appropriate for very advanced users of the language who, in general, already have some significant competence in the language.

2.3.2 Difference between “good” and “poor” language learners’ vocabulary learning strategies

Early researchers tend to make lists of strategies and other features which are presumed to be essential for all “good L2 learners”.

Rubin (1975), who is among the first to do the research of comparing different strategies used by good and poor language learners, suggests that a good language learner is: willing to guess intelligently, willing to communicate with others, taking advantage of any opportunities, monitoring his or her performance and most of all, paying attention to the meaning of unknown words.

For Naiman et al. (1975), a good language learner should be able to: identify the language situation, participate in that situation, use the language to communicate and address the demands when it comes to the affective aspects.

Ahmed (1989) investigates 300 Sudanese learners of English to find out the micro-strategies they use and the frequency of the strategies employed. More importantly, he investigates whether there are any differences in the strategies exploited by “good” and “poor” language learners. The good learners are found to be more aware of what they can learn about new words and words’ collocation, spelling and context. In contrast, the poor learners refuse to use the dictionary and almost always ignore new words. They are generally characterized by their apparent passiveness in learning. They also take each word as a discrete item, unrelated to previously learned words.

Ahmed concludes that these micro strategies and processes of learning are what determine the learning outcome.

In past years, there have been numerous research studies regarding the relationship of language learning strategies and language learning proficiency. Various researchers have agreed that effective language learners have conscious usage of language learning strategies. Oxford (1993) suggests that a good language learner, in general, uses more and better language learning strategies than those who are poor learners. Thus an active use of strategies is found to be the strongest positive predictor of a student's high proficiency and successful performance (Green & Oxford 1995). This conclusion is in line with Chamot and El Dinary (1993), who believe good learners to be more skillful in monitoring and adapting various strategies to different tasks; poor learners adhere to ineffective strategies. The opposite learning outcomes may result from the fact that good learners tend to treat the task as a whole while poor learners pay too much attention to details (cited by Gall-Crail & Zerwekh, 2002:57).

Porte's (1998) small-scale study of 15 adolescent students reveals that some of the vocabulary learning strategies employed by the poor students, such as noting down the translations of new words and looking up meanings of words in a dictionary, are similar to the ones usually associated with good learners. However, the poor learners are found to be demonstrating less sophistication and a less suitable response to such activities. Liu (2004) reveals that the higher a learner's English proficiency is, the more he uses different combinations of learning strategies. On the other hand, the lower a learner's English proficiency is, the less strategies he uses.

Fan (2003) finds that good learners use vocabulary strategies more often than the less proficient students by conducting a large-scale investigation at a university in Hong Kong. The research instrument includes a vocabulary test, to determine the proficiency of the students in English vocabulary, and a questionnaire for examining vocabulary learning strategies. The questionnaire is based on Gu and Johnson (1996), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Oxford (1990), etc., and organizes 56 vocabulary learning strategies into nine categories as follows: management, sources, guessing, dictionary, repetition, association, grouping, analysis and knowledge of words. The result reveals that the students perceive vocabulary learning strategies as useful while not

resorting to use them often. The students tend to prefer dictionary strategies. This finding is in line with Ahmed, Gu and Johnson, Kudo, and Schmitt's. Other strategies related to known words are also used frequently. The keyword technique is found to be the least popular and considered useless among the students. The result of Fan's study also supports the conclusions made by Gu and Johnson, namely that the students do not believe in the memorization of words, which is a direct objection to the conclusions made by Schmitt.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion section is divided into two subsections. The first subsection consists of general information about vocabulary learning strategies employed by the group of students and the author identifies the most frequently used strategies, which is the second part of the current study's aim. The following section deals with the seven kinds of strategies, namely: dictionary use, guessing, perception, encoding, activation, management and sources. The difference between the high level- and the low level- groups will be represented and the reasons behind such findings will also be discussed. In each subsection, comparisons between the current study's result and previous studies, especially the study done by Ming Wei (2007), will also be given.

3.1 Frequency of vocabulary learning strategies

Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, which included means and standard deviation (SD) for each item, and an independent-samples t-test were computered in the procedure. The results will be presented and analyzed based on the research aims that guide the whole study.

3.1.1 Results of the current study

In order to identify the strategies most and least often used, the average mean score for each of the twenty-six strategies was calculated and rank ordered. In statistics, the mean is the mathematical average of a set of numbers, which is calculated by adding up all scores and dividing the total by the number of scores. In this case study, the mean represents the average score given to each strategy either by all the students or one group of the students.

Standard deviation (SD) shows how much variation or dispersion there is from the average. That is, it shows us how much the students within a group differ from each other in each strategy's employment.

The main aim of this case study is about the employment of each category by all the students and the difference between the high level group and the low level group of students, which is shown by the mean values. The value of SD is out of discussion unless it stands out.

Table 1 Means of Vocabulary Learning Strategy in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Category	Item No.		Means	SD
1	Dictionaryuse	3	I carry a pocket dictionary (including an electronic dictionary) to look up the words I don't know.	4.50	.674
2	Perception	7	I pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word.	4.25	.754
3	Management	18	I highlight the words that seem important to me.	4.08	.996
4	Perception	9	I pay attention to the examples of how a word is used in English.	4.00	.739
5	Source	24	I listen to English songs, radio programs, watch English movies etc. to increase my vocabulary.	3.92	1.165
6	Source	23	I use my textbook to learn new words.	3.83	.937
7	Guessing	5	I guess the meaning of words I don't know.	3.83	.937
8	Dictionaryuse	4	When I look up a word in the dictionary, I read all the meanings of new words.	3.83	.835
9	Guessing	6	I check to see if my guesses about the words are right or wrong.	3.75	1.138
10	Encoding	12	I associate new words with those I already know.	3.67	.651
11	Perception	10	I pay attention to the unfamiliar usage of a known word.	3.67	.778
12	Encoding	13	I try to remember the Chinese equivalent of the word.	3.67	.985
13	Encoding	14	I try to remember the sentence in which the word is used to remember the word.	3.58	.900
14	Dictionaryuse	1	I look up new words in an English-Chinese dictionary.	3.50	.905
15	Perception	8	I pay attention to the grammatical patterns (e.g. parts of speech, countable/uncountable) of a new word.	3.50	.798
16	Source	26	When I come across a new word, I make a note of it.	3.42	.996
17	Encoding	15	I distinguish words with similar meanings.	3.42	.900
18	Encoding	11	I analyze the structure (root and affix) of a new word to remember it (e.g. in-formal, color-less).	3.33	1.073
19	Management	20	I keep a vocabulary notebook to jot down new words I want to learn.	3.17	1.030
20	Source	25	I read stories, magazines etc. outside class to increase my vocabulary.	3.08	1.084
21	Management	21	I make plans for my vocabulary learning.	3.00	.739
22	Management	19	I group words in my own way to remember them.	2.92	.900
23	Management	22	I review my vocabulary regularly.	2.83	1.030
24	Activation	17	I use the newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing	2.58	1.084
25	Activation	16	I make up my own sentences using the words I just learned.	2.50	1.000
26	Dictionaryuse	2	I look up new words in an English-English dictionary.	2.25	.965

As the results show, both good and poor language learners used many effective strategies for vocabulary learning (see Table 1). This is proved by the relatively high means for all the strategies: none of the strategies receiving “almost never” rating nor “rarely use” rating, and only five strategies received a mean below three. On average, four strategies out of twenty-six were used “often”, and five strategies were used between “rarely” and “sometimes”, while the other seventeen strategies were employed “sometimes” by the students. This overall relatively high means suggested that this group of students widely employ vocabulary learning strategies, which are definitely good for their learning.

Among all the strategies listed in the questionnaire, item 3 received the highest mean (4.5) while item 2 received the lowest mean (2.25), coincidentally both of them belong to the dictionary category. It means this group of student tended to carry a pocket dictionary (including electronic dictionary) to look up new words while they were least likely to look up new words in an English-English dictionary.

Table 2 Means of Dictionary Use Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Dictionary Use Strategies	Mean	SD
1	3	I carry a pocket dictionary to look up the words I don't know	4.50	0.674
14	1	I look up new words in an English-Chinese dictionary	3.50	0.905
26	2	I look up new words in an English-English dictionary	2.25	0.965

New technologies are invented to make our life and learning more convenient, pocket dictionary, electronic dictionary and online dictionary are utilized more often than before to improve the learners' efficiency of dictionary use. As looking up a new word through a pocket dictionary takes much less time and is easier to use, this strategy ranked as No. 1 in the list is beyond dispute. However, as for what kind of dictionary is the best for a learner to use: monolingual, bilingual, or semibilingual has been much debated. Semibilingual dictionaries may not so popular as monolingual or bilingual dictionaries, which combine the features of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. The result that the monolingual dictionary using strategy was rated as the least frequently used by this group of students, challenged the pride of place this strategy has been given in English language learning. What Thompson (1987: 283-284) found may explain its

unpopularity: students might be in trouble with looking up the right word and with understanding the definitions. Even though a monolingual dictionary can provide a more detailed overview of the lexical system of a foreign language (Bejoint & Moulin, 1987, cited by Laufer & Hadar, 1997: 189), the difficulty of looking up the right words and understanding the definitions makes it seldom used by the students.

Apart from carrying a pocket dictionary to look up new words, the other four strategies are frequently used by this group of Chinese sophmores: paying attention to the pronunciation, highlighting the words that seem important, paying attention to the examples of how a word is used in English and listening to English songs, radio programs, watching English movies, and so on, to increase the vocabulary.

Two of four strategies in the perception category received a mean above four, while the other two received a mean between three and four. It revealed that the students often used this kind of strategy in their learning. As knowing a word is not merely memorizing its dictionary definition, the learner has to learn how to pronounce it in speaking, how to use it in actual communication in its correct form and also how to use the known word in different sentences. The relatively high means showed this group of students did well in this respect. The students were clear that the purpose of vocabulary learning is to use a word appropriately.

Table 3 Means of Perception Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Perception Strategies	Mean	SD
2	7	I pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word	4.25	0.754
4	9	I pay attention to the examples of how a word is used in English	4.00	0.739
11	10	I pay attention to the unfamiliar usage of a known word	3.67	0.778
15	8	I pay attention to the grammatical patterns of a new word	3.50	0.798

Another strategy often used was an strategy in management category named “I highlight the words that seem important to me”.

Table 4 Means of Management Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Management Strategies	Mean	SD
3	18	I highlight the words that seem important to me	4.08	0.996
19	20	I keep a vocabulary notebook to jot down new words I want to know	3.17	1.030
21	21	I make plans for my vocabulary learning	3.00	0.739
22	19	I group words in my own way to remember them	2.92	0.900
23	22	I review my vocabulary regularly	2.83	1.030

It was interesting to find that this group of students favored one kind of management strategy much more than the other four strategies in the management category. The other four strategies in the same category received low means, and ranked quite low in the list. The importance of active management of strategy use was given by Ahmed (1989) and Sanaoui (1995), who believe that the consciousness of learning and taking steps to regulate the learning process are two important characteristics of a good language learner. They believe that using a variety of strategies, structuring vocabulary learning, reviewing and practicing new words, and linking the new word to previously learned words are good to learners (cited by Schmitt, N. 2000:133). Gu and Johnson also cited Sanaoui's (1995) words to show the importance of management: consistent employment of certain types of strategy forms and approaches to vocabulary learning that may influence the outcomes of L2 learning. Fan (2003:224) also thinks that good learners take the initiative to manage their vocabulary learning. However, despite the importance emphasized by different experts, the findings in the current study seemed to imply that the students did not favor management strategies or lacked learning awareness and control.

Other strategies reported to be often used were two kinds of source strategies.

Table 5 Means of Source Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Source Strategies	Mean	SD
5	24	I listen to English songs, radio programs, watch English movies etc. to increase my vocabulary	3.92	1.165
6	23	I use my textbook to learn new words.	3.83	0.937
16	26	When I come across a new word, I make a note of it	3.42	0.996
20	25	I read stories, magazines etc. outside class to increase my vocabulary	3.08	1.084

Fan explained why the sources should be treated as a separate category in the study: the sources for encountering new words are very important in the process of learning, but this category of strategies has seldom been investigated in its own right (Fan, 2003: 226). Learners' exposure to the target language is quite limited in China, because the English stories, magazines etc. are not so easy to access as in English-speaking countries. That is why item twenty-five was ranked last. However, English songs, movies, and radio programs are easy to access thanks largely to the Internet, so this kind of vocabulary learning strategies are favored by the students.

In a similar vein, the five least frequently used strategies are also identified: looking up new words in an English-English dictionary, making up my own sentences using the words I just learned, using the newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing, reviewing my vocabulary regularly and grouping words in my own way to remember them. All of these five strategies fall toward the range of medium-level "often", with mean scores between 2 and 3. It is not much of a surprise to find that two of the least frequently used strategies are involved in management category. The reason lies in that this kind of strategies need long time practice and much effort.

The result, that both strategies in the activation category ranked low, would not surprise Gu who believes that this kind of strategies demand the management of learning time and effort (1996: 654).

Table 6 Means of Activation Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Activation Strategies	Mean	SD
24	17	I use the newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing	2.58	1.084
25	16	I keep a vocabulary notebook to jot down new words I want to know	2.50	1.000

The SD value of both strategies are relatively high. It means the data are spread out over a large range of values in statistics, and it shows us that this group of students differs from each other greatly in the employment of activation strategies. Some students use this kind of strategies often while others seldom use them. The reason is assumed to lie in that, the students do not know this kind of strategies well, they do not know how to apply them to their learning. Consequently, it is

an indication that these students need to be made aware of the management and activation that can be used in the learning process, although much learning time and effort and guidance from the teacher may be needed.

All five strategies in the encoding category ranked among the middle of the list. It is interesting to note that two strategies of this kind even received the same mean.

Table 7 Means of Encoding Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Encoding Strategies	Mean	SD
10	12	I associate new words with those I already know	3.67	0.651
12	13	I try to remember the Chinese equivalent of the word	3.67	0.778
13	14	I try to remember the sentence in which the word is used to remember the word	3.58	0.900
17	15	I distinguish words with similar meanings	3.42	0.900
18	11	I analyze the structure of a new word to remember it	3.33	1.073

The results in Table 7 indicate that the students can apply these kinds of strategy in their learning process well.

Both strategies in the guessing category received relatively high means.

Table 8 Means of Guessing Strategies in Descending Order (N=12)

No.	Item No.	Guessing Strategies	Mean	SD
7	5	I guess the meaning of words I don't know	3.83	0.937
9	6	I check to see if my guesses about the words are right or wrong	3.75	1.138

The participants do not only guess the meaning of new words, but also go back to the passage to check if their guesses are right or wrong.

3.1.2 Comparison of the vocabulary learning strategies' use frequency between the current study and previous studies

It is interesting to compare the employment of vocabulary learning strategies between the current study with the previous studies, especially the one done by Ming Wei (2007), who used almost the same questionnaire as this study.

The result of the current study is in alignment with Ming Wei (2007) in three strategies, i.e. paying attention to the pronunciation of a new word, paying attention to the examples of how a word is used in English and carrying a pocket dictionary to look up new words, are among the most frequently used five strategies. The rehearsal section is not taken into comparison because of the revision of the questionnaire.

Table 9 The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies

No.	The current study	Ming Wei's study
1	I carry a pocket dictionary to look up the words I don't know	I pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word
2	I pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word	I use my textbook to learn new words
3	I highlight the words that seem important to me	I try to remember the sentence in which the word is used to remember the word
4	I pay attention to the examples of how a word is used in English	I pay attention to the examples of how a word is used in English
5	I listen to English songs, radio programs, watch English movies etc. to increase my vocabulary	I carry a pocket dictionary to look up the words I don't know

The students in both studies are fully aware of the importance of developing speaking skill in the learning process, so they all pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word. If you do not know

how to pronounce a word, you can not use it in communication. If you mispronounce a word, the man you are taking to may not understand what is being communicated. How to use a word in English also gets its due attention from the students. Sometimes a learner may use a dictionary to find the definition of a new word in Chinese instead of looking at word usage or examples of English words in sentences. Even though he knows the meaning of a new word, he still can not use it in communication correctly. It is also worth noting that specific examples of using words in sentences would help the students better comprehend the meaning of the item. Pocket dictionaries are favored by the students because they are convenient for personal carrying and quick to look up words.

However, the group of students in the current study favored a kind of source strategy more than the students in Ming Wei's study. Ming Wei takes her study in 2007 while this study happens in 2011. These five years saw great progresses happened in mainland China, especially the Internet became more popular. Authentic English material, like songs, radio programs, movies, and so forth, are much easier to access in 2011 than in 2007, thanks to the popularity of the Internet. These materials provide the students opportunities to learn new words outside of the classroom. The students are likely to employ this kind of strategies in their vocabulary learning, which is proved by the high mean value rank in Table 9. In 2007, when Ming Wei's study took place, the students were likely to stick to their textbooks to learn words.

Even though the data were drew from different students using different questionnaires, the results of this case study verify the conclusion made by Gu and Johnson (2006) that the students employ more meaning-oriented strategies (like managing their learning process, using more authentic sources, etc) than rote strategeis (like keyword methods, note taking, etc) in learning vocabulary. Skillful use of dictionaries was also found to be positively correlated with the learners' vocabulary size and general English proficiency. Dictionaries are favored not only in China, but also in other Asian countries. Schmitt (1997) surveyed a sample of 600 Japanese students, and found that the learners used more dictionary and repetition strategies and considered them more useful than other strategies.

A comparison of the five least frequently used strategies between the current study and Ming Wei's study is also given in Table 10. It is interesting to note that three strategies among the five least frequently used strategies are identical in both studies.

Table 10 The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies

No.	The current study	Ming Wei's study
22	I group words in my own way to remember them	I make plans for my vocabulary learning
23	I review my vocabulary regularly	I make up my own sentences using the words I just learned
24	I use the newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing	I group words in my own way to remember them
25	I make up my own sentences using the words I just learned	I keep a vocabulary notebook to jot down new words I want to learn
26	I look up new words in an English-English dictionary	I look up new words in an English-English dictionary

Three strategies found to be least frequently used in both studies were: looking up new words in an English-English dictionary, making up my own sentences using the words I just learned, and grouping words in my own way to remember them.

The students' preference for bilingual dictionaries rather than monolingual dictionaries was discussed in the previous sections. This preference of dictionary use may lead the learners to the predicament that they do not know how to make up a sentence using the newly-learned words. Bilingual dictionaries provide the learners with the meaning of a new word, but they do little to promote their ability to use words to communicate in the target language. On the contrary, meaning was related directly to the target language without the step of translation in the monolingual dictionaries (Schmitt, 2000: 12). Thus monolingual dictionaries provide the learners sufficient exposure to the target language, and the learners will know how to use the newly-learned words naturally.

Grouping is a kind of memorization strategies for committing new words to memory, it differs from the repetition strategy in that it involves deep processing (Fan 2003: 226). A “deeper” level of information manipulation leads to better learning (Schmitt 1997: 201). However, such memory strategies are found to be unpopular, not only in the current study and Ming Wei (2007), but also in Schmitt (1997) and Gu and Johnson (1996). Schmitt (1997), which was mentioned earlier, found that the learners used fewer imagery and semantic grouping strategies than other strategies and considered them to be the least useful in his large-scale investigation. Gu and Johnson (1996: 655) expressed the grouping strategies in a more concrete way: “I remember a group of words that share a similar part in spelling”, and “I associate a group of new words that share a similar part in spelling with a known word that looks or sounds similar to the shared part” in the association category. The association category got a mean value of 3.69 and ranked as No. 19 in their 23-category questionnaire. The result of a relatively low mean value and ranking showed that the students in their study are also least likely to employ this kind of strategies.

3.2 Difference between good and poor learners

An independent-samples t-test which was run to evaluate whether the answers given by the high-level group differ in every strategy from the answers given by the low-level group. Besides mean and SD values of both groups, a p value is also calculated. When a p value is above 0.05, the result is not significant, while a p value under 0.05 means the result is significant.

The result of the data analysis will be given in the first subsection and the reasons behind the differences will be discussed. The second part of this section is devoted to comparing the result of the current study to previous studies.

3.2.1 Results of the current study

The t-test proves that the high-level group gets a higher average result than the low-level group, i.e. the mean of the high-level group is higher than the low-level group in 21 strategies, while three of the remaining five are equal. Among all the 26 strategies, the low-level group receives slightly higher scores than the high-level group in only two strategies.

Table 11 Difference between High Group and Low Group

Category	High Group	Low Group	High Group	Low Group	
	Mean	Mean	SD	SD	p
Dictionary Use 1	3.50	3.50	1.05	0.84	0.55
Dictionary Use 2	2.67	1.83	1.21	0.40	0.08
Dictionary Use 3	4.83	4.17	0.40	0.75	0.22
Dictionary Use 4	4.33	3.33	0.52	0.82	0.64
Guessing 1	3.83	3.83	1.33	0.41	0.00
Guessing 2	3.67	3.83	1.21	1.17	0.75
Perception 1	4.67	3.83	0.52	0.75	0.58
Perception 2	3.67	3.33	1.03	0.52	0.02
Perception 3	4.17	3.83	0.75	0.75	1.00
Perception 4	4.17	3.17	0.41	0.75	0.22
Encoding 1	3.83	2.83	1.17	0.75	0.32
Encoding 2	3.67	3.67	0.82	0.52	0.21
Encoding 3	3.83	3.50	0.98	1.05	0.55
Encoding 4	4.00	3.17	0.89	0.75	0.70
Encoding 5	4.00	2.83	0.63	0.75	0.44
Activation 1	2.67	2.33	1.03	1.03	1.00
Activation 2	2.83	2.33	1.33	0.82	0.05
Management 1	4.50	3.67	0.84	1.03	0.33
Management 2	2.83	3.00	1.17	0.63	0.20
Management 3	3.33	3.00	1.21	0.89	0.29
Management 4	3.17	2.83	0.75	0.75	1.00
Management 5	3.33	2.33	1.03	0.82	0.30
Source 1	4.00	3.67	0.89	1.03	0.73
Source 2	4.50	3.33	0.84	1.21	0.24
Source 3	3.33	2.83	1.37	0.75	0.27
Source 4	3.67	3.17	1.03	0.98	0.67

This result fully proves that the high-level group employs a greater number of strategies more frequently than the low-level group, as expected. However, the difference is insignificant in most strategies except for Perception 2 and Activation 2.

Poor students received a slightly higher score than good students in guessing strategies 2 and management strategy 2. It seems that they are more willing to check if their guesses about the new words are right or wrong and group words in their own ways in order to remember them. Both strategies are related to new words rather than words which are already known. The detailed information will be given in Table 12.

Table 12 Strategies Favored by Low Group

Strategy	Mean of High Group	Mean of Low Group	P
I check to see if my guesses the words are right or wrong	3.67	3.83	0.75
I group words in my own way to remember them	2.83	3.00	0.20

Although the difference is insignificant, the poor students in the current study employ more checking and grouping strategies in their learning process.

It is interesting to note that the high group and the low group got the same mean value in three strategies.

Table 13 Strategies Favored by both Low Group and High Group

Strategy	Mean of High Group	Mean of Low Group	p
I carry a pocket dictionary to look up the words I don't know	3.50	3.50	0.55
I guess the meaning of words I don't know	3.83	3.83	0.00
I associate new words with those I already know	3.67	3.67	0.21

All three strategies got a mean value higher than 3.50, which is a rather high mean value. It meant that these three strategies are favored by both good and poor language learners. It is not unexpected that pocket dictionaries are favored by both groups because they are quick and eminently portable.

Guessing is also a strategy favored by many students. Students can guess the meanings of words by using background knowledge or by using linguistic clues (Gu & Johnson, 1996: 650). Guessing strategies are closely related to the incidental learning rather than intentional learning and establishing the meaning of new words (Fan 2003:224). Students have reported an extensive employment of guessing strategies in many studies. In Fan's study (2003), the mean values for guessing strategies were significantly higher than those for other categories. It indicated guessing strategies were most often used.

Although favored by both good and poor students, guessing strategies have some disadvantages (Fan 2003: 224). Firstly, sometimes students may fail to guess the correct meaning. And they will not know the right meaning if they do not check it, which involves another strategy. In Kelly's study (1990), she first distinguishes two kinds of guessing: one is based on formal word features, like root or affixes, the other relies solely on context. She claims that the formal guessing strategy is more helpful and reliable than the latter. She finds out that even when every word except one in a passage is understood, contextual guessing alone seldom allows the reader to arrive at the correct meaning. Secondly, guessing strategy does not necessarily result in long-term retention and it does little to help promote the learner's language learning. Mondria and Wit de-Boer (1991) identified contextual factors that influence the correct guessing of new words, then how these factors influence retention and also the relationship between guessing and retention. The conclusion of the study is that

the factors that are conducive to guessing are not conducive to retention, at least not when after guessing a learning stage occurs with the aid of the same context as in the process of guessing Mondria and Wit de-Boer (1991: 252).

The result of the current study revealed that both good and poor learners employ associating strategy often whereas the results of Fan (2003) indicated the opposite. In Fan's study, associating strategy was reported least often used.

Table 14 Strategies used frequently by good learners

Category	Strategy	Mean of HighGroup	Mean of LowGroup	P
Dictionary Use	I look up new words in an English-English dictionary.	2.67	1.83	0.08
Dictionary Use	I carry a pocket dictionary to look up the words I don't know.	4.83	4.17	0.22
Dictionary Use	When I look up a word in the dictionary, I read all the meanings of new words.	4.33	3.33	0.64
Perception	I pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word.	4.67	3.83	0.58
Perception	I pay attention to the grammatical patterns of a new word.	3.67	3.33	0.02
Perception	I pay attention to the examples of how a word is used in English.	4.17	3.83	1.00
Perception	I pay attention to the unfamiliar usage of a known word.	4.17	3.17	0.22
Encoding	I analyze the structure of a new word to remember it.	3.83	2.83	0.32
Encoding	I try to remember the Chinese equivalent of the word.	3.83	3.50	0.55
Encoding	I try to remember the sentence in which the word is used to remember the word.	4.00	3.17	0.70
Encoding	I distinguish words with similar meanings.	4.00	2.83	0.44
Activation	I make up my own sentences using the words I just learned.	2.67	2.33	1.00
Activation	I use the newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing.	2.83	2.33	0.05
Management	I highlight the words that seem important to me.	4.50	3.67	0.33
Management	I keep a vocabulary notebook to jot down new words I want to learn.	3.33	3.00	0.29
Management	I make plans for my vocabulary learning.	3.17	2.83	1.00
Management	I review my vocabulary regularly.	3.33	2.33	0.30
Source	I use my textbook to learn new words.	4.00	3.67	0.73
Source	I listen to English songs, radio programs, watch English movies etc. to increase my vocabulary.	4.50	3.33	0.24
Source	I read stories, magazines etc. outside class to increase my vocabulary.	3.33	2.83	0.27
Source	When I come across a new word, I make a note of it.	3.67	3.17	0.67

Most of the strategies investigated in the current study were employed more frequently by the high group than the low group. Good learners employed more dictionary use, perception, encoding, activation, management, source strategies in their learning. All of them are listed in Table 14.

Good learners do things such as pay attention to the pronunciation and grammatical patterns, the examples of how a word is used, and the unfamiliar usage of a known word. That is, the good learners employ all four kinds of perception strategies more frequently than the poor learners. Good learners are also conscious of their learning and regulate it step by step. Poor learners lack this awareness and control.

3.2.2 Similarities between the current study and previous studies

There are some similarities between the results of the current study and of those of the previous studies. Firstly and most importantly, good learners are found to use vocabulary learning strategies more frequently than poor learners. Secondly, good learners favor perception, activation, management, and source strategies more than poor learners. These two similarities will be discussed in detail later.

The current study found good learners used 21 strategies more frequently than poor learners among all 26 strategies investigated. This result is in line with Ming Wei's study (2007). She found learning problems are negatively related to the frequency of strategy use, i.e. the more frequently learners use vocabulary learning strategies, the fewer problems they will face. Ming Wei believed this result revealed that conscious vocabulary learning helps increase the number of words at the command of learners. Moreover, problem rating was negatively related with activation and management strategies in Ming Wei's study (2007). It indicates that the low use of these two kinds of strategies may result in bad performance in the long-term retention of words.

However, Gu (1994) believed it is not only the frequencies of strategy use that deprive the poor of improvement in vocabulary learning. The learning problem can not be solved by merely telling poor learners to use their strategies more often. Sometimes, poor learners employed inadequate strategies for too long. Good strategies can only have a positive impact if the learners know how

to choose the right words to focus on, and how to monitor and evaluate her own strategy use and her learning process. This kind of strategy was also investigated in the management category in the current study, and good learners were found to employ this kind of meta-cognitive strategy more often than poor learners. This result implies that poor learners need systematic guidance on how to manage their learning strategies.

Good learners also employed more perception, activation, and source strategies to learner words in this case study. However, in Takeuchi's (2003) study, Japanese good language learners were more likely to employ verbal and written repetition to learn new words. Perception is also employed by successful learners in Gu's study (2003). He investigated two successful non-English-major EFL learners by a think-loud and an interview, and found out that these learners demonstrated high levels of self-initiation and selective attention, meanwhile they employed a wide range of vocabulary-learning strategies.

4. Conclusion and Implication

This essay has investigated the situation of using vocabulary learning strategies among Chinese good and poor college students through a questionnaire.

The result of the questionnaire clearly shows that the employment of vocabulary learning strategies is widely spread among Chinese college students, which is proved by the relatively high means in both high and low groups for all the strategies listed in the questionnaire. In China, a typical input-poor EFL environment, students are expected to learn vocabulary on their own. This makes vocabulary strategies even more important in the learning process.

However, both good and poor language learners did not like employing monolingual dictionaries in their study or employing activation and management strategies to facilitate their learning. The dislike of English-English dictionaries reveals that the students still cling too much to the first language. Combined with the low use of management and activation strategies, this kind of strategy ignorance may lead the students to a dilemma: they know the meaning of a word, but they do not know how to use it in real communication; they know they should be able to use a

word, but they do not know how to achieve this goal. Pedagogically, it is important and feasible that teachers give specific instruction on how to use management and activation strategies in student's learning and encourage students to use more monolingual dictionaries to look up new words.

Through the detailed analysis and discussion which is based on the questionnaire, this case study also finds that that strategy use is positively related to the language outcomes. The better the students are, the more frequently they employ various strategies in their learning. The good learners are found to use 21 strategies more often than the poor learners in the 26 strategies investigated.

This was a case study that only caught a glimpse of the current status of vocabulary learning by Chinese sophomores. It is expected that more studies can focus on this research topic to various extents so that students can learn vocabulary with more efficient and advantageous strategies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Questionnaire about the vocabulary learning strategies

Grade of CET-4 _____

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire about the strategies used in second language vocabulary acquisition.

Please, based on your own process of learning vocabulary, rate the following strategies, 1 indicates “I almost never use this strategy” 2 indicates “I rarely use this strategy” 3 indicates “I sometimes use this strategy” 4 indicates “I often use this strategy” and 5 indicates “I almost always use this strategy”.

1. I look up new words in an English-Chinese dictionary.
2. I look up new words in an English-English dictionary.
3. I carry a pocket dictionary (including an electronic dictionary) to look up the words I don't know.
4. When I look up a word in the dictionary, I read all the meanings of new words.
5. I guess the meaning of words I don't know.
6. I check to see if my guesses about the words are right or wrong.
7. I pay attention to the pronunciation of a new word.
8. I pay attention to the grammatical patterns (e.g. parts of speech, countable/uncountable) of a new word.
9. I pay attention to the examples of how a word is used in English.
10. I pay attention to the unfamiliar usage of a known word.
11. I analyze the structure (root and affix) of a new word to remember it (e.g. in-formal, colorless).

12. I associate new words with those I already know.
13. I try to remember the Chinese equivalent of the word.
14. I try to remember the sentence in which the word is used to remember the word.
15. I distinguish words with similar meanings.
16. I make up my own sentences using the words I just learned.
17. I use the newly-learned words as much as possible in speaking and writing.
18. I highlight the words that seem important to me.
19. I group words in my own way to remember them.
20. I keep a vocabulary notebook to jot down new words I want to learn.
21. I make plans for my vocabulary learning.
22. I review my vocabulary regularly.
23. I use my textbook to learn new words.
24. I listen to English songs, radio programs, watch English movies etc. to increase my vocabulary.
25. I read stories, magazines etc. outside class to increase my vocabulary.
26. When I come across a new word, I make a note of it.