A Study of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies used by Chinese Students

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Contents

Abstract:

This essay aims on the study of the strategies used by Chinese English major students in vocabulary learning, the differences between effective and less effective learners in using vocabulary learning strategies. The study is based on qualitative research, in which 35 college students were investigated. The participants were asked to take a vocabulary tests and complete a questionnaire. The data of the research indicates that there are significant differences between effective and less effective learner, and common points between effective learners. Effective learners use several learning methods and have a positive attitude. Meanwhile, there are six methods they use in common, they are, having interest in English, listening and reading, learning words in sentence, using bilingual dictionary, reading English books in spare time and studying the spelling. Acquisition of vocabulary has been acknowledged as primary important and being central for second language acquisition. Vocabulary is always a hindrance to Chinese students. However, there is little research has been done on the vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese English majors.

 Key words: vocabulary-learning strategies, effective, common point

1. Introduction

Vocabulary, as an integral part of a language, plays a crucial part in the language learning process. The primary thing in learning a language is the acquisition of a vocabulary, and practice in using it. Vocabulary is the basic factor necessary for mastering a language. The purpose that we learn second language is for communication. When we learn a language, we need to master four skills, which are listening, reading, speaking and writing. Meanwhile, vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to them. One cannot understand a sentence without knowing what most of the words mean. The lack of vocabulary knowledge affects all the four language skills.

Unfortunately, many students find it hard to acquire vocabulary. Lack of adequate vocabulary knowledge is an obvious and serious obstacle for many students who learn English as second language. Learners themselves readily admit that they experience considerable difficulty with vocabulary, and most learners identify the acquisition of vocabulary as their greatest single source of problems (Meara,1980). Meanwhile, vocabulary is an area which has been neglected in foreign language teaching for a number of years. Vocabulary is a great problem, especially for the students in Asian countries. A large dictionary contains about 128,000 'word families'. The average college students turned out to know approximately 58,000 common 'basic words', 17,00 rare 'basic words' and 96,000 derivatives and compounds. The overall total comes to over 150,000. (Aitchison, 2003:7) Vocabulary is huge and its acquisition takes time, even for a native speaker.

English is a world language. In China, more and more people start to learn English. Children start to learn English at a very young age, already in primary school. Research on vocabulary acquisition used to be minimal compared to what was going on in other areas, such as syntax and phonology. The lack of vocabulary resulted in many Chinese learners having difficulties in language study.

However, second language learning in recent years has moved away from the quest for the perfect teaching method, focusing instead on how successful teachers and learners actually achieve their goals (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990). Vocabulary is important，and, as stated. Actually, it is indeed a challenge to most learners. To deal with this problem, we have to explore the knowledge of vocabulary and offer efficient strategies of vocabulary learning. Learning strategies can indeed facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and influence second language acquisition as well. The present study is going to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by Chinese college English major students and find a relationship between the strategies they use and their learning efficiency.

1.1 Aim

The aim of the present investigation is to get the efficient strategies used by Chinese English major students in vocabulary learning, and to find what strategies have a positive effect on the students' vocabulary learning. In addition, research will be done in order to investigate what methods the students with good learning efficiency have in common.

1.2 Material

To carry out this investigation, both the participants and materials are selected with deliberation. The primary material consists of two articles from *China Daily*. One article is about entertainment, named *Pink Floyed founder Barrett put painting before pop*, and the other is an article about life, named *Life on this side of Firewall throws up a pleasant surprise*. The basic reason for choosing these two articles from *China daily* is that it is a widespread newspaper. The articles in it may be close to our daily life, so the words used in the articles

are likely to be commonly used in our daily life. There will have 30 target words will be selected randomly from the two articles.

1.2.1 Target words

In the vocabulary test, there are 30 target words in total. These 30 words are selected from two articles from *China daily*. The two articles are from *China daily* which is a widespread newspaper and is close to our daily life. Therefore, most words in the articles are pragmatic and not remote words. These words are selected randomly. There are both difficult and easy words, and may some participants already know some of the words. All of the participants are from the same class, and get the same education. So if there are some participants know the target words already, it just shows that their vocabulary is larger than others.

1.2.1 Participants

The participants in this study are a class of college students who are in their first year at university. There are 35 students in this class. The university is located in a middle-sized city in the south of China. The first language of all the participants is Chinese. The students are about 18 years old and are consequently free to decide for themselves if they want to participate in the research or not. They have learned English for about 7 years. However, they do not use English in their daily life. They cannot speak English fluently. They are English major students in university now.

All of the students who are included in the study are anonymous. They are not required nor encouraged to specify their name, gender, or ethnicity as that has no relevance to the outcome of this survey. Each of them will get a student number in this test.

1.3 Method

The materials consist of two parts: a test of target words and questions relating to the strategies that the students have used. In the research, there are three stages. In stage 1, the participants got the 30 target words and two articles, from which the target words are selected. In the stage 2, they had an exam of vocabulary about the target words. In stage 3, every participant finished a questionnaire about learning strategy. Then, we got the goal of this test. The relationship between learning effectiveness and learning strategies is obvious. So, at the beginning, the participants were asked to learn some certain words in their own ways. They were given the target words, two articles and one week's time. In this week, they can do the same things as in their normal life and study in their own ways as everyone has his own method and habit of vocabulary study. In addition, it is not necessary that everyone should make use of the two articles when they are learning the target words. It is depend on participants themselves. The difference between the students is the effectiveness of their language study.

In stage two, the materials were handed out and collected by their teachers. After one week, they were given the target words. The teacher was responsible in this stage of the test. After one week's learning, they have to interpret these words. After they have finished the test, the teacher collected the papers. The papers were analyzed and classified according to the number of the words which are correctly interpreted by the students.

Immediately after the test, the students received a questionnaire and they have to complete this vocabulary-learning questionnaire. The questionnaire contains many choices of vocabulary learning strategies. The students were expected to select those that they have used in language vocabulary learning. In addition, there was a blank area for the other strategies they may use. Since everybody has his own style and method of learning, the selection cannot cover comprehensively. The data will also be collected by the teacher.

At last, we analyzed and contrast the two data, one is the vocabulary test and the other is the questionnaire. The first data reflects the vocabulary learning efficiency of the students. The second data is the strategy of the students used in vocabulary learning. Then we got the relationship between the learning efficiency and the strategies.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Didactic theory

Language learning strategies can indeed facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary, and influence second language acquisition as well. There is much research in the field, and there are many theories about second language acquisition. From the perspective of didactics, we will get some ideas of how languages are learned.

2.1.1 The behaviourist perspective

There is some research on how children learn in their early language development. Then teachers get some inspiration on second language learning. Traditional behaviousrism hypothesized that when children imitated the language produced by those around them, their attempts to reproduce what they heard received 'positive reinforcement'. (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:11) Children would continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until they formed a 'habit' of correct language use. According to this view, the quality and quantity of the language the child hears, as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the environment, would shape the child's language behaviour (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:11).

This theory had a powerful influence on second and foreign language teaching between the 1940s and the 1970s (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:34). We can get some inspiration as to second language acquisition. The behaviourists viewed imitation and practice as the primary processes in language development. The behaviourist theory explained learning in terms of imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habit formation. Based on this theory, there is no doubt that those fours aspects play an important role in second language learning.

The process of imitation and practice is that when a learner hears a new word, he should imitate the pronunciation of the word and read it repeatedly. What is more, he must form a habit of learning. This means that he needs to insist on learning everyday. Learner should be engaged in practice most of the learning time. There is a psychological justification, since, other things being equal, the quantity and permanence of learning are in direct proportion to the amount of practice.

2.1.2 The sociocultural perspective

Socio-cultural theory views speaking and thinking as tightly interwoven. Speaking and writing mediate thinking, which means that people can gain control over their mental processes as a consequence of internalizing what others say to them and what they say to others. Learning is thought to occur when an individual interacts with an interlocutor within his or her zone of proximal development (ZPD) ---that is, in a situation in which the learner is capable of performing at a higher lever because there is support from an interlocutor (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:47).

What all theories of language acquisition are intended to account for is the ability of human learners to acquire language. Based on this theory, we can get that we can acquire language from talking and reading. In Krashen's i+1 the input comes from outside the learner and the emphasis is on the comprehensibility of input that includes language structures that are just above the learner's current developmental level (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:47). It means that

learner knowledge is based on learners' interaction with their interlocutors. When they choose reading, their interlocutor is a book, a magazine, and so on. When they choose talking, the interlocutor is the person they have conversation with. Based on ZPD, the interlocutors should just above the learner's ability so that the learners will have a chance to see unknown words. Reading and talking is the best way for learners to extend their vocabulary.

When a learner is in a conversation, he needs to focus on the words which his interlocutor says. On the other hand, he needs to answer the interlocutor by using the words he knows. So conversation is one of the best ways to learn new words and strengthen the words a learner already knows in practice. When a learner is reading a book, he will encounter a great many new words. Based on his understanding to the book, he can get familiar with those new words. Talking, listening and reading provide the students a good chance to be exposed to plenty of words. The more words they are exposed to, the better vocabulary they will have.

2.2 Individual differences

It has been observed countless times that, in the same foreign language class, some students progress rapidly while others struggle along making very slow progress. Even in what seems to be ideal conditions, some learners seem to make little progress in learning. Researchers---for example, Naiman Neil and his colleagues (1995) ---have tried to identify the personal characteristics that make one learner more successful than another (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:54). There are many characteristics that have been thought to contribute to successful language learning. The table below shows a list of some of the characteristics of the 'good language learner'.

Rate each of the following characteristics on ascale of 1-5. Use 1 to indicate a characteristic that you think is 'very important' and 5 to indicate a characteristic that you consider 'not at all important' in predicting in second language learning.

A good language learner:

a	is a willing and accurate guesser	1	2	3	4	5
b	tries to get a message across even if specific language knowledge is lacking	1	2	3	4	5
c	is willing to make mistakes	1	2	3	4	5
d	constantly looks for patterns in the language	1	2	3	4	5
e	practices as often as possible	1	2	3	4	5
f	analyses his or her own speech and the speech of others	1	2	3	4	5
g	attends to whatever his or her performance meets the standard he or she has learned	1	2	3	4	5
h	enjoys grammar exercises	1	2	3	4	5
i	begins learning in childhood	1	2	3	4	5
j	has an above-average IQ	1	2	3	4	5
k	has good academic skills	1	2	3	4	5
l	has a good self-image and lots of confidence	1	2	3	4	5

The characteristics listed above are the characteristics of the 'good learner' (Lightbown & Spada, 2006:55). Many of them can be classified into several categories: motivation, intellectual abilities, personality, and learning preferences. It is certain that learners with different characteristics will get different learning results, and there are many researches on learner characteristics.

Motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/ foreign language (L2) learning (Dörnyei,

1998: 117). It is obvious that a student with high motivation will get a better learning result. In China, some students think that it is a task to learn English as a second language, not because of interest. There is an old saying in China that attitude is everything. There is no doubt that interest, willingness or motivation will play an important role in language learning. There is an article about *motivation in language learning* which points out that motivated students may have a better self image and more confidence than non-motivated ones, and such characteristics might make them feel more at ease when interacting with others (Veronica, 560). Some students have a low interest in learning English and feel it is boring to learn vocabulary. This makes them have less confidence in learning English well. This will even make them gradually give up studying English. Positive personality characteristics may be helpful in some aspects of language learning.

Some students have a high goal to achieve in learning a second language. This is their motivation in learning language. Thus, this kind of learners has a desire to learn, and strong reasons for studying hard in English. They immerse themselves in learning, and they are persistent. Veronica also argues that if students have favourable attitudes towards the foreign language and its speakers, towards the teacher and the course, they will probably be more attentive in the class, will take assessments more seriously and, willing to achieve more, would look for more situations in which they can obtain further practice in the foreign language (Veronica,560). The learner's characteristics, which determine his or her attitude and behavior, are crucial factors in learning a foreign language.

2.3 Guessing strategy and learning words in context

Reading is a skill that should never be neglected, as it is a source of new vocabulary for learners. On the other hand, the learner sees vocabulary in a context. It is also a good way of learning vocabulary. Paul Nation and James Coady propose a strategy for developing guessing skills that students must learn and use to infer the meaning of unknown words in a reading passage. Suberviola also points out the steps of this strategy in her article.

This strategy consists of five steps:

(a) Finding the part of speech of the unknown word.
(b) Looking at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context if necessary.
(c) Looking at the wider context of the unknown word. This means looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences.
(d) Guessing the meaning of the unknown word.
(e) Checking that the guess is correct.

<div align="right">(Suberviola, 2002:240)</div>

In the process of reading, learners will see many unfamiliar words. Trying to guess the meaning of the words is a good method for learners. Nation argues that "because of the large number of low frequency words and because of their infrequent occurrence and narrow range, it is best to teach learners strategies for dealing with these words rather than to teach the words themselves (Nation, 2001: 159). As the amounts of vocabulary is huge, it is impossible for a learner to know all the words of a language. It is said that "the good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser" (Rubin, 1975: 84). A good learner should have an ability of guessing the meaning of the unknown words based on the context.

Sternberg also argues that "most vocabulary is learned from context" (Sternberg, 1987:89). Learners see a word in a context and then try to guess the meaning. During this guessing process, learners need to analyze several sentences, even the whole passage to guess the meaning. Cognitive psychologists, like Craik & Tulving, believe that strategies which involve deeper manipulation of information, like guessing from context, may yield better retention and therefore are conducive to learning (Ma, 2008:8). Learners can benefit from this guessing process, that is, they will obtain a deep impression and understanding the word. In addition, they know the word from a context. Nation points out that there are many other kinds of information that can be learned from context which is important in the receptive and productive use of the word (Nation, 2001:378). The information can enrich learners' knowledge of a word. One very important value of context in learning vocabulary is that a variety of contexts will evoke a variety of

enriching instantiations (Nation, 2001:377). In addition, the grammatical pattern a word takes closely related to its collocates, which is one of the important factors of the mental lexicon. The importance of the mental lexicon will be analyzed below.

2.4 Using a bilingual dictionary

Dictionary is always a good partner of language learners. When the learners see a new word, there are two common methods available to dealing with it. On one hand, they can use the guessing strategy based on the context to try to get the meaning of the word; on the other hand, they can use a dictionary. Learners will get a proper definition and explanation of the unknown word in a dictionary. There is a hypothesis that "dictionaries often supply information about the language not found elsewhere" (Marckwardt, 1973: 369). Dictionary includes bilingual dictionary and monolingual dictionary. Many students tend to use a dictionary just for the meaning of the word. So many Chinese students prefer to use a monolingual dictionary. They just want to know the Chinese meaning of the word. However, there is some information about the word which is also important. This information includes meaning, spelling, and pronunciation, as well as grammar, usage, synonym discrimination, and application of derivative affixes. As McLaughlin points out, vocabulary development is the "prime task of L2 learners" (McLaughlin, 1978:324). This is why learners carry dictionaries, not grammars.

Although sometimes the learners can guess the meaning of a word, they also need to look it up in the dictionary, read all the definitions in the entry for that word, choose the most common uses, copy them down, and learn them by heart. Learners just can get a general comprehension of a word by guessing the meaning. Usually, a word has several meanings and different usages. Learners can find a comprehensive definition and usage of a word in dictionary, as well as association with other words. There is an article which claims that "the better learners used the dictionary extensively to learn not just the word they originally started to look up but also related words or words nearby in the dictionary"(Liu, 2001:93). Dictionary

is a good resource of learning and developing vocabulary.

2.5 Semantic network

Most authors concerned with vocabulary teaching / learning refer to the way words "settle" in the mind according to particular sets of semantic relations, so forming a mental dictionary. More recent authors as John Read, M. MacCarthy or T. Huckin, develop the theory of the Mental Dictionary and its implications for vocabulary teaching.

Words must be learned grouped in semantic fields, so that learners can establish links and associations which facilitate the receptive and productive use of new vocabulary. On one hand, learners remember words in their minds. On the other hand, they also need to retrieve the words when they need them. If learners remember words randomly, it will be difficult to learn a good amount of vocabulary, and retrieve words when they need them. Thus, it will be easier for learners to learn and use vocabulary when the words are well organized than vast of single words.

There is an article which point out that "vocabulary learning is not only a process of mapping meaning onto form, but also a process of establishing a semantic network, for the meaning of a word is defined in part by its relations with other words in the language" (Gao, 2005). It means that it is not enough for students just to remember the meaning of a word. When a word in a phrase or collocate with other words, its meaning may changed. So it is important to establish a semantic network. There are many factors for organizations of the mental lexicon. In Aitchison's book, *Words in the mind,* she points out four main types of links that exist between words which may be the most important:

1, Coordination. The commonest response involved coordinates, words which cluster together on the same level of detail, such as salt and pepper; butterfly and moth; red, white, blue, black, green. Opposites come into this category, as they are coordinates in a group consisting of only two members, as with left and right, or they are the two commonest members in a larger group, as with hot, cold, warm, cool.

2, Collocation. The next most common response involved a word which is likely to be collocated (bound together) with the stimulus in connected speech, as with salt water, butterfly net, bright red.

3, Superordination. Less often, a superordinate occurred, the cover term which includes the stimulus word. For example, insect was elicited by 'butterfly' and colour was a response to 'red'.

4. Synonymy. Occasionally, a rough synonym was found, a word with the same meaning as the original word, as with starved beside 'hungry'. (Aitchison, 2003:86)

These are four important types of links that exist between words. Since words are organized according to these links, learners should learn words according to the semantic relations. When a learner encounters a new word, he can think about the synonym or antonym of the word, or think about the words of the same category. On one hand, this is a quick and efficient way of understanding the unknown words. On the other hand, it is a good way of remembering the word. Namely, the learner puts the word in his word-webs when thinking of the relationship between the new word with other words he already knows. Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman establish the lexical relations: Synonym antonym, hyponym, converseness, and reverseness, suggesting that:

Words should be introduced according to these links, as foreign students, unlike native speakers, only have a limited time to learn a foreign language, therefore needing clues that can facilitate their learning. Knowing the patterns in which words are organized in our mind can be of great help to make our teaching / learning easier and more efficient (Suberviola, 2002: 237).

The organization of words in minds will influence L2 vocabulary acquisition. It will be easier for learners to remember and use vocabulary. The knowledge of the relationship between two words is useful in building learners' vocabulary.

2.6 Repetition and persistence

Rome was not built in one day. Learning language requires persistence. Learners should be consistent while learning language. Nation points out that repetition is essential for vocabulary learning because there is so much to know about each word that one meeting with it is not sufficient to gain this information. Vocabulary items must not only be known, they

must be known well so that they can be fluently accessed (Nation, 2001: 96). A good way to learn vocabulary well is to use it repeatedly. This requires students have a good learning habit. According to a website named ESL Teacher, there is an article written by Mey Tseng about the importance of repetition. Mey points out that for anyone who has learned a second language, it becomes clear that we learn a language by getting used to it. We hear the same vocabulary or phrases over and over and over, and that is how we remember them.

In addition, based on Pimsleur's memory schedule, most forgetting occurs immediately after initial learning and then, as time passes, the rate of forgetting becomes slower. So repetition is necessary for learners. In order to avoid forgetting, learners should repeat the new words. There has been a great deal of research on repetition, such as the space between each repetition, the types of repetition, the number of repetition and so forth.

Table 2: Pimsleur's memory schedule:

Repetition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Time	5	25	2	10	1	5	1	5	25	4	2year
Spacing before the next repetition	secs	secs	mins	mins	hour	hour	day	days	days	months	

(from Nation, 2001:116)

According to Pimsleur's scale, we can get that the forgetting is initially very fast and then slows down. Learners should repeat the new words, such as reading them or using them, after they start to learn them. The more they repeat them, the more the learners will come to adopt them for their own. Nation points out, based on Pimsleur's scale, that the initial repetitions are closer to each other in time and the later repetitions much further apart (Nation, 2001:115). It means that the essential factor is repetition, both initial repetition and later repetition. So if students have a regular learning habit is helpful to repeat what they have learned.

2.7 Classify words

Each English word can be grouped in accordance to its root, prefix or suffix. Knowledge of the meanings of common affixes may help learners remember the meaning of words. The majority of English words have been created through the combination of morphemic elements, that is, prefixes and suffixes with base words and word roots (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004: 6). So, knowing the meanings of roots, prefixes and suffixes can help students to learn English vocabulary. Grave and Hammond also argue that:

There are three reasons for knowing prefixes: first, that there are relatively few prefixes, and many are used in a large number of words; second, that most prefixes have relatively constant meanings that are easily definable; and third, that prefixes tend to have consistent spellings. (Graves & Hammond, 1980: 99)

Grouping English words according to their categories is a good way of remembering words and their meaning. It is a more effective method than spending the same amount of time to learn or remember each word. For example, the word with either the prefix of "dis", "un", or "in" attached carrying the opposite meaning from its base word. Such as the word "unhappy", it means "not happy", "unexpected" means "not expected", "dislike" means "not like", and so forth. The word that ends in "cion", "tion", "ness" or "sion" always referr to a noun; and the word that ends in "ant", "tive" or "able" is an adjective. This method of learning vocabulary can help learners learn and remember words faster than expected. From the perspective of the mental lexicon, classifying words in a family is also a kind of relationship between words.

Moreover, Grave and Hammond also claim that this method has a positive effect of guessing method. If the learners construct a word family list, it is more possible and easier for them to guess the meaning of a new word. For example, if a learner knows that "bi" means "two", such as "biweekly" means that "a periodical that is published twice a week", then he will guess out the meanings of "bilingual", "biennial", and so on, when he encounters them. Humans are able to split up words, even though this ability is not strictly necessary for existing words, since they are stored as wholes. The primary purpose of this ability, therefore,

seems to be to enable speakers to make up new words of their own and to comprehend the novelties coined by others (Aitchison, 2001:186). If a learner knows the meaning of "biweekly", he may think that there will be a link both to the words with "bi", and then guess the meaning of the unknown words with "bi".

3. Analysis and discussion

The analysis is based on the questionnaire that the participants have finished and the result of the test. Under a comparison between the questionnaire and the result of the test, we can find the common methods of learning English vocabulary in the participants who get a higher score in the test, then we can get a conclusion that how can get a more efficient learning method.

3.1 Analysis of the questionnaire

3.1.1 Analysis of the strategies of individual characteristics

The first question is about learning habit. A good learning habit is beneficial to the efficiency of learning. Moreover, it means that the learner can insist on learning English. English learning need to accumulate. All successful English language learners know that acquiring a new language does not happen over night. Developing a proper habit of learning language is necessary.

This investigation is on Chinese college students. In China, it is not every college students learn English for necessary. Because they need not use English in their daily life, not like European students, who learn English as second language and use it most of the time in their lives. For most Chinese students, English is just a course that they have to study, or they will fail their exam or cannot graduate from college. So they learn English just by finishing the task assign their teacher. This kind of students almost do not have their own learn habit, they

just do what the teacher tell them. In this situation, as long as there is no one asks them to learn, they will have no idea what they should do. In addition, their acquired knowledge of English will not get repeated and strengthen if they are not an active learner. The data about this question is showed below:

Question 1, Do you have a regular study habit of learning English?

A, Yes   B, No

Figure 1:

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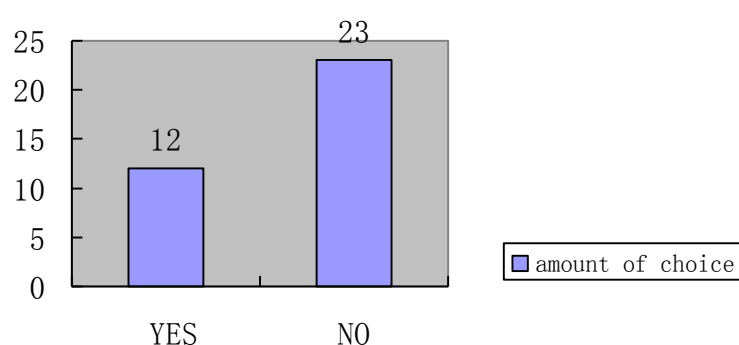
From the column above, it is clear that the majority of participants have no regular habit of learning English everyday. There is only 34 percent participants have their own learning habit. It means that this part of students spent a certain time on English everyday. Studying English at the same times each day establishes a routine that becomes a regular part of life. There are 66 percent participants do not form learning English as a part of their life. Most of students do not have a habit of learning everyday. However, learning a language needs learners acquire everyday and persistent. On the other hand, whether one can maintain a habit of learning related his personal characteristics. Rigden points out that all successful English language learners know that acquiring a new language doesn't happen over night. It requires persistence and patience.

However, some students may argue that even if they do not have a habit of learning English vocabulary everyday. They will devote themselves to English at some days, and the studying time is not short. Based on Pimsleur's memory schedule, we can know that it is more efficient of having a regular learning time than studying when you have time.

The second question is about interest in English. There is no doubt that if a student is interested in something, he will take the initiative in the learning process and do not feel boring. When a student has an interest in English, he will fit several factors of a good learner's characteristics which pointed out by Neil. Such as willing, constant and enjoy in learning.

However, as English is not used in daily life for most of people in China, students do not know the aim of learning English in college. From the questionnaire, it is clear that a great part of participants do not have much interest in learning English. The data is showed below:

Question 2, Do you have an interest in learning English?

A very much   B much   C not so much   D not at all

Figure 2:
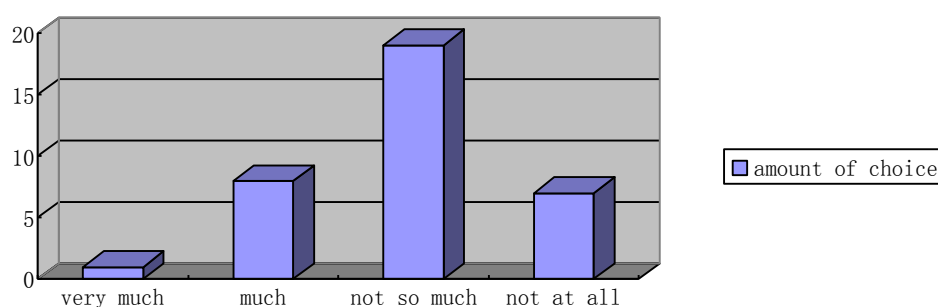
From the above column, it is clear that most of the participants have no sense to English. English is a compulsory course in college and it becomes a burden to most of students which makes them lose interest in learning English. The majority of participants represent the most of students who learn English at a regular way, listening carefully in class and finishing homework. They learn English because it is a compulsory instead of having motivation and interest in English. It is the pressures of studies that force them to study. They will fail the exam or unable to graduate if they do not go to class and listen to teachers.

There are quite a few participants have much interest in English. This part of participants also represents a large part of students in China, who have the consciousness to learn English hard.

They may have some strategies in learning English. This kind of students may spend more time on English than other courses. The two students who like English very much they also have a regular habit of learning English everyday. As long as they have very much interest in English, they will learn faster and dare to explore and experiment with new words, and have more confidence. If they like English very much, they are willing to spend much time on it and pay more attention on it, such as practicing, reading, listening when they are watching movie.

In addition, there is a direct relation between interest and motivation. One who has an interest in something, he always has a motivation to learn it well and achieve success. On the other side, interest and motivation will force the student to learn English hard. The fifth question on this questionnaire is about motivation.

Question 5, Do you have a goal that you want to achieve in learning English?

If they have a goal, they are asked to write it down. The data is showed below:

Figure 3: have a goal to achieve in learning English
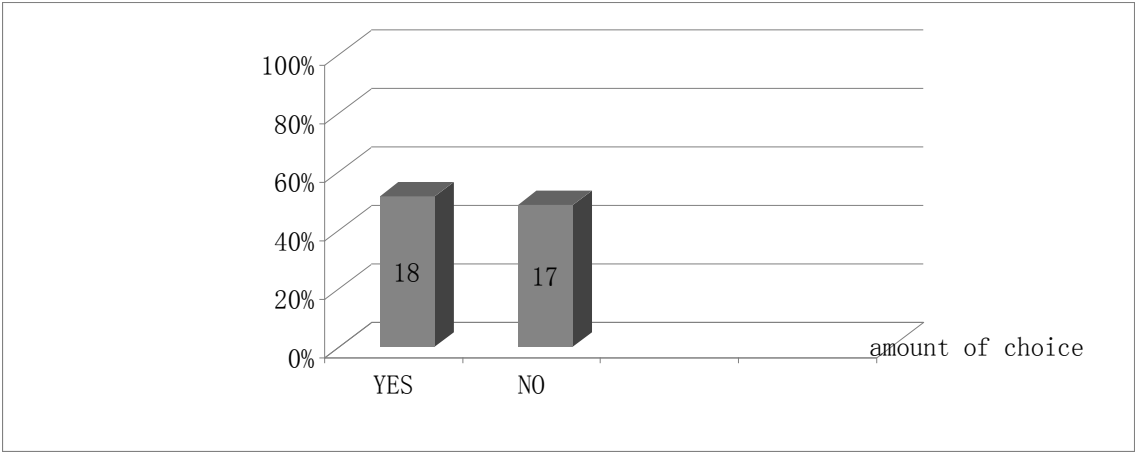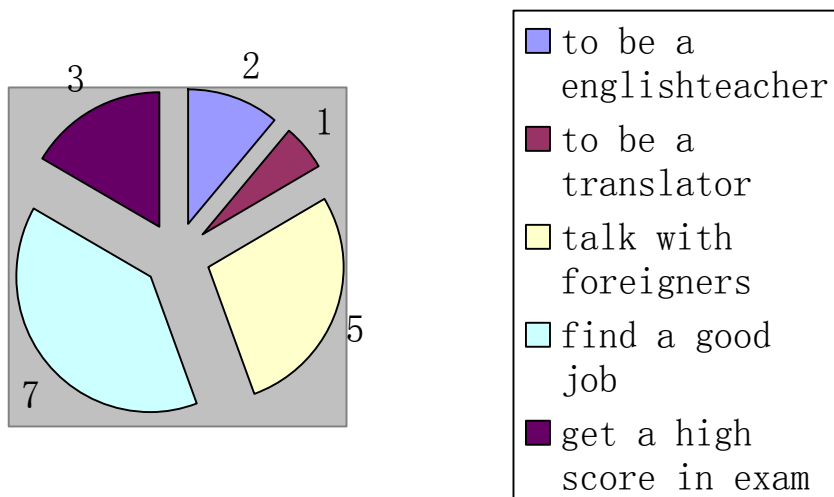

Figure 4: five main goals that the students want to achieve

These two charts are based on the data of the question 5. From the figure 3, we can know that there are about a half of the participants have a goal to achieve in learning English. It means that most of students have their own target of learning English. When a student has a goal, he will have a motivation on studying and have a positive attitude on study. The participants who have no goal in learning English, they lean toward have no interest in English.

Figure 4 shows five main goals written by the participants who chose "yes". There are seven participants' goals are about future job. They think that if their English is good, they will have more opportunity to find a good job. One participant said that "English will let me have more power in the competition of society". Their future job may not about English, but having an ability of English will be helpful to their career. Maybe what they are interested in is not English, but they will also spend an extra time on learning English, because of their goal and motivation.

There are five participants hope that they can communicate with foreigners after studying English at college. This kind of goal seems modest to a student. One of participant said that "I like travel around, so it is convenient to travel abroad if I can speak English". This kind of goal of learning English seems moderate, neither for pressures of study nor for a high target. Speaking with foreigners does not require the student have a very high ability of English. It is used in daily life, unlike the English used in formal, which need the learners more precise.

The basic requirement is that learners can express themselves and understand others. They need know a certain amounts of vocabulary. However, the requirement is not strict. The students with this kind of motivation learn English with his interest and do not feel much pressure. The vocabulary can be acquired in daily life. It seems easy for students to reach this kind of goal. Thus, the effect of motivation will be not very strong on the students.

There are three students' goal is want to get a high score in exam. One of the participants said that "I want to attend graduate school. I must learn English well so that I can get a high score in the exam." This kind of students is obedient to teachers. They will learn the vocabulary which the teacher taught in every class., finish the task which assigned by teachers well and listen to teachers carefully in class. They learn hard in English may because of the pressures of study, which makes them focus on score. Students with this kind of goal will feel much pressure. Only the students get a very high score in the exam, can they attend graduate school in China. Students with this kind of motivation will pay more attention on written English and grammar. This kind of motivation will force them learn English concerned in exams.

There are three students have higher goal in learning English, to be a translator and English teacher. One student said that she want to be a translator in the future. This is a high target which means that it needs to be paid more effort. To be a translator has very high demand for capacity. It needs a large amount of vocabulary. He must learn English at a high level and to be professional. Thus, this student is with a high motivation. The motivation concerns the direction of his behavior. Because of this motivation, he is willing to spend much time on learning English, such as making use of all kinds of resource, taking part in activities about English. Motivation will promote he keep a positive attitude on learning English. Students with these kinds of goal, they have to learn well in every aspect of English, and have a comprehensive knowledge about vocabulary.

The third question is about how the participants valuate the degree of difficulty of the test. For that this investigation is about the efficient method used by the students themselves. A question about their valuation on the target words will help us to know their current abilities

of English vocabulary. There will be a relationship between their current abilities and their learning method. The data is showed below:

Question 3, Do you feel that the target words is (   )

A, very difficult   B, difficult   C, moderate   D, easy

Figure 5: valuation of the degree of difficulty
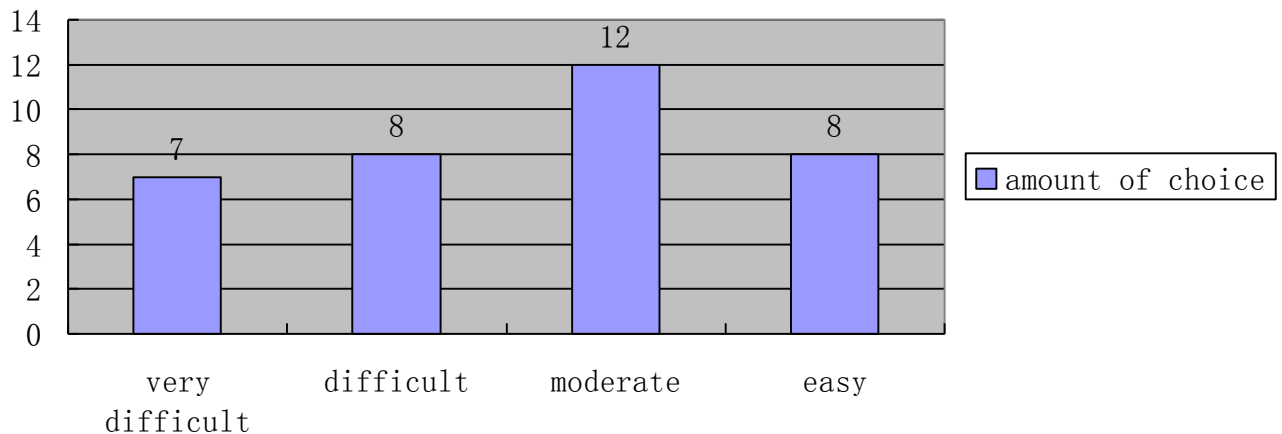
From the above column, it is clear that vocabulary is a problem to majority of the participants. There are only eight students think that the target words are easy. This small part of students is at a higher level than others. On one side, they do not feel unfamiliar with the target words. On the other side, maybe their vocabulary learning strategy is useful and they are confident when facing vocabulary, so they believe that these words are easy to acquire under several days' learning. However, most students' English is at a medium level. The number of students who think target words are moderate is more than others. This part of students also has their own strategies to learn English vocabulary. On one hand, their vocabulary is limited, so some of the target words are unfamiliar for them. On the other hand, they may learn these words in their own ways but it will cost their times and effort to fully master the target words. Their current abilities of English vocabulary are better than others. After all, these two kinds of students do not think the target words are difficult, which means that their current ability is better than others.

Meanwhile, there are fifteen students think that the target words are difficult, among which seven students thinks it is very difficult. This part of students may feel very frustrate when

learning English vocabulary. On one hand, their vocabulary is inadequate, so most of the target words are strange and difficult for them. On the other hand, their current abilities of English are poor.

Under the investigation of this question, the participants can be divided into two groups. Group 1 contains the twenty students who think that the target words are easy or moderate. Group 2 contains the fifteen students who think that the target words are difficult. The ability of the students in group 1 is better than the students in group 2. This investigation will be helpful to the discussion and comparison later.

3.1.2 Analysis of the strategies

The forth question is about learning strategies. In this questionnaire, we listed twelve learning strategies. Participants ticked out the method they used. The analysis is based on this data, the results of the test and the two groups we have divided above.

The first method is listening and reading. It seems that this is a common method of learning English vocabulary. All of the participants use this method.

**Figure 6: learning vocabulary by listening and reading**
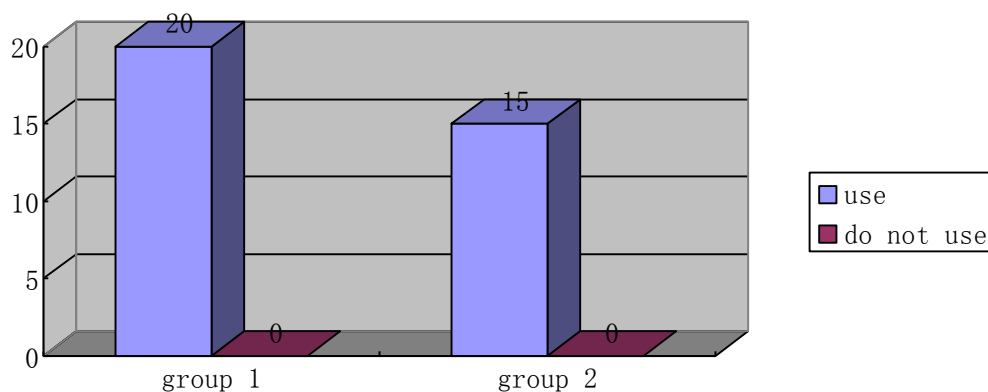
From figure 6, it is clear that twenty students in group 1 and fifteen students in group 2 all choose this method. Listening and reading is the most common method based on

behaviourism. It is also a basic method of learning a language. Every participants use this method.

Listening and reading provide students a best way to learn new words and review the words they known. They can listen to tapes, movies, music, and their teachers when they are in class. When they are listening, they need to pay attention to the sound of every word and the meaning of every sentence. On the other hand, they can memory the word if they have listened to the word time and time again. Meanwhile, reading is also important. It is helpful for students to memory vocabulary. In addition, listening and reading is a feasible way to operate. Students can read at anytime in their daily life. Basically, students will reading and listening to their teacher everyday in class.

The second method is collecting lists of words. This method does not used by majority of the participants. The data is showed below.

Figure 7: learning vocabulary by collecting lists of words
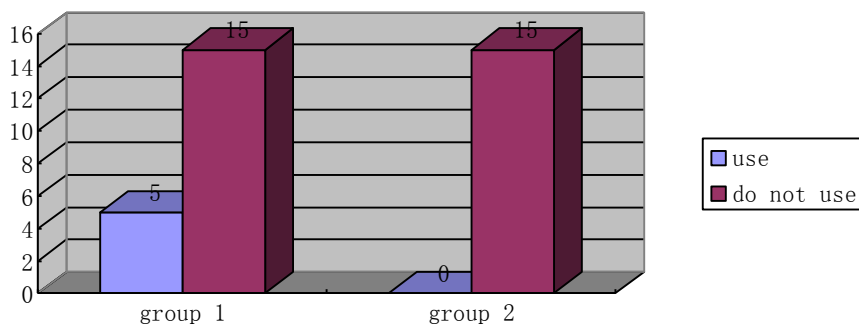
From the column above, it is clear that the five students who use this kind of method are all from group 1. However, most of students do not use this method to learning vocabulary. This method requires the students have a good learning habit and are able to insist. Firstly, as long as the students encounter with new words when they are reading books or watching movies and so on. They write them down in one text. They collect their unfamiliar words together in one text and review them when they have time. In this way, their vocabulary is growing gradually. Secondly, their unknown words are concentrated in one text, which is very

convenient for them to retrieve the words. In addition, if having a lists of words, the students can plan well of how to learn the words. They should know what their vocabulary goals are and choose what vocabulary to focus on.

There is no one in group 2 use this method. They may try to find the meaning of a word in dictionary when they are learning a word, and try to remember it. However, vocabulary can be divided into several groups, which are high-frequency words, low-frequency words, academic words and so on. If the students learn vocabulary with plan or goal, they will spend much time on learning low-frequency word. This kind of words very closely related to subject area and is not so common. Nation points out that the less effective learners seldom consider frequency, area of specialization, personal goals, or previous meeting with the words.

The five students who use this method also have a regular habit of learning vocabulary. If a student collect a list of words, but he does not have the habit to review the list often, it is useless. When using this method, persistence is very important. There are thirty students do not have a list of words. When they encounter a new word, they may find its meaning in a dictionary, and they know the meaning of the word at that time. However, they have not fully mastered the meaning of the word and it is easy to forget. Based on the Pimsleur's memory schedule, we know that even if we remember a word's meaning at the beginning, it is easy to forget. Learner should repeat to use or read the word over and over. As a Chinese saying says, you feel strange for the first time, but familiar for the second time. This is a good learning method, but there is not so many students can insist to collect words and write them down on a text.

The third method is learning a word in a sentence. The data is showed below:

**Figure 8: learning a word in a sentence**
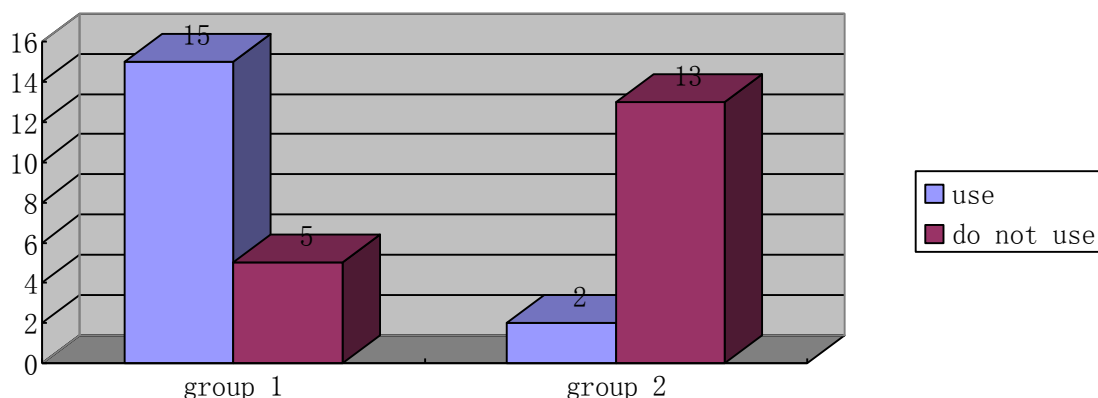
From figure 8, we can find that most students in group 1 and almost a half of all the participants use this method. Words are used in sentences. When we learn a word in a sentence, we can understand the meaning and usage of a word better. Most students prefer to learn a word in a sentence than a single word. In addition, it is easier for the students to retrieve the meaning of the word if they read the word in a sentence, or students can try to create a sentence with the word when learning a word. Putting a word in a sentence helps students understand the meaning of the word deeply. Generally, a word has several meanings or part of speech in different context. It will be easier for students understand those meanings when putting the word in a sentence. Meanwhile, it seems more interesting for students to learn word in a sentence than a single word.

On the other hand, when students create a sentence with the new word, it means that they are using the word with their own understanding. In the book *learning vocabulary in another language,* Nation states that the less effective learners focused on the meaning of the words in copied sentence rather than also exploring the range of collocations and uses, and creating their own sentence (Nation, 2001: 365). The students in group 1 are more likely to use this method.

To some degree, this method is alike the method of learning words in context. Both of the two methods require students to put vocabulary in a sentence or in a paragraph. The data of this method is showed below:

**Figure 9: method of learning words in context**
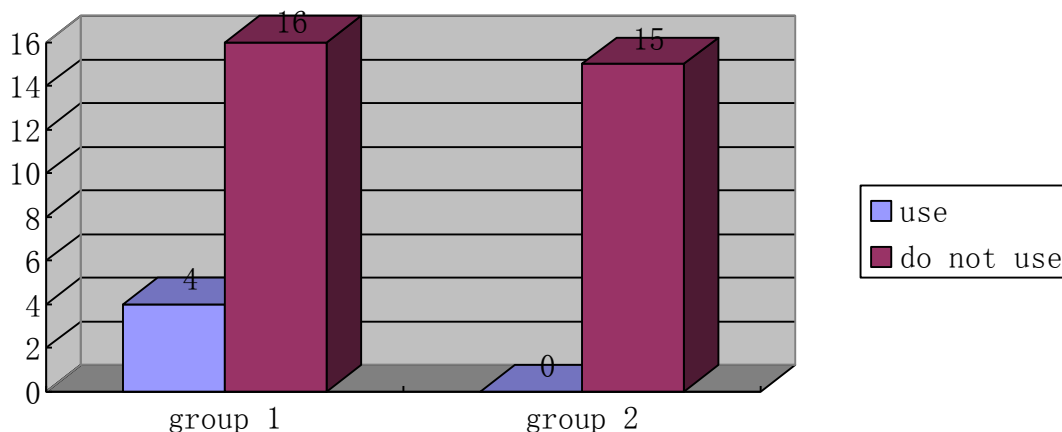
From figure 9, we can know that there are not so much students use this kind of method to learn vocabulary. All of the students who use this method are from group 1. Learning words in context is based on the guessing method. When a student encounters an unknown word in a paragraph, he can try to guess out a basic meaning of the word under his understanding of the whole paragraph and the relationship between the surrounding sentences. During the process of guessing, students will understand deeply about the usage and meaning of the words and the relationship between clauses. So the context can help students to understand the unknown word, and memory new word.

There are four students use this method, all are from group 1. When learn new vocabulary, they prefer to spend some time on the article where the vocabulary comes from. There are amount of students like to ask dictionary for help as soon as they encounter an unknown word. However, it is very easy to forget the word if just know the word's meaning of Chinese. For a student, it will let he feel frustrate and down if that he has spent time on a word and has remembered the word, but forget it latter. Thus, because of their low learning efficiency, there are many students who are afraid of learning vocabulary.

The fourth question is about reading in spare time and the data is showed below.

Figure 10: reading English books or magazines in spare time
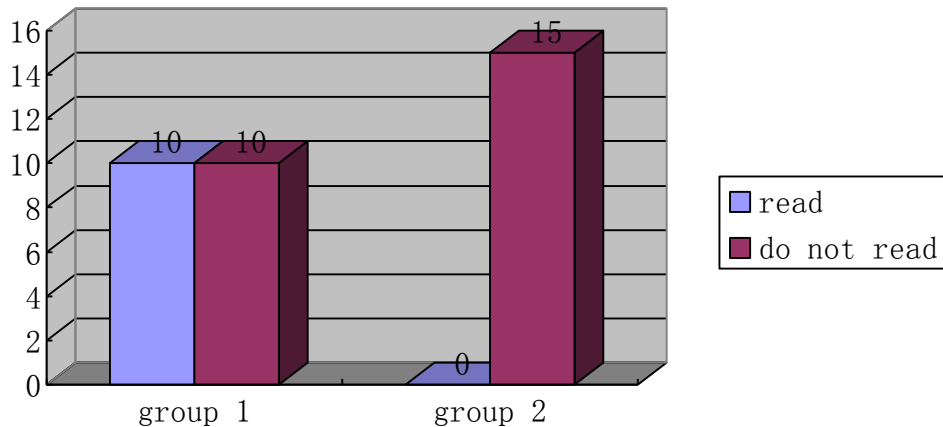
From the column above, it is clear that the students who read in their spare time all are from group 1. The ten students will read English materials except textbook after class. In this situation, their input of vocabulary is larger than others'. Reading widely is one of the best ways to learn a language and extend vocabulary. When reading an English book, they may encounter so many words. On one hand, their known words get strengthen. On the other hand, they can get familiar with many new words. In addition, they know the word in context. No matter what kind of English book or magazine they read, it is beneficial to them. This method seems interesting and easy. As long as there is time, they can read. This method even can be an interest. Some of the students like reading English novel and English fashion magazine. In this way, students have a chance to know all aspects of vocabulary expect for the textbook. Their vocabulary gets expanded. To some degree, this method also can improve student's interest in English. The ten participants who choose this method also have a positive attitude in learning the target words.

The fifth method is using a bilingual dictionary and the data is showed below.

**Figure 11: using bilingual dictionary in English vocabulary learning**
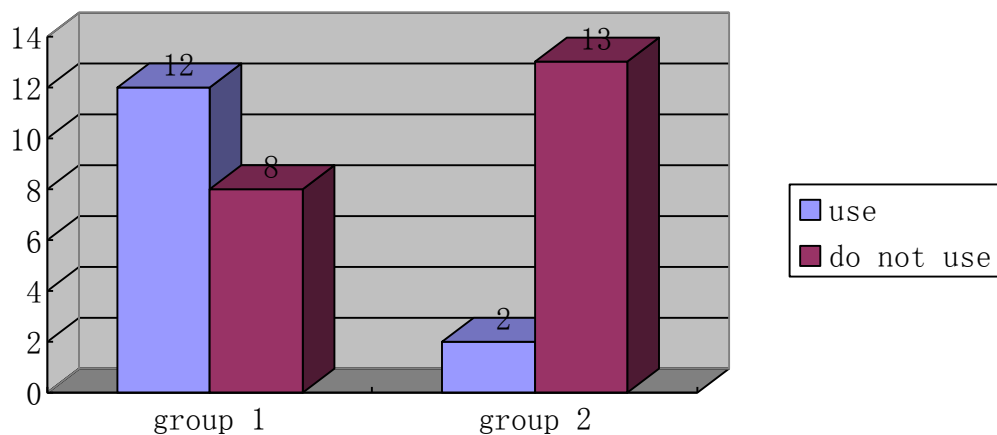
The figure 11 clearly shows that there are more than half of the students do not use a bilingual dictionary in vocabulary learning. There are fourteen students using a bilingual dictionary and twelve students are from group 1. Nowadays, more and more students prefer to take an electronic dictionary. It is convenient and easily carried in hand. Electronic dictionary only provide a simple meaning of a word in Chinese. This is not enough for a student to learn a word fully. However, the students who use an electronic dictionary just want to know a simple meaning of a word when they encounter it.

Bilingual dictionary is a good resource for second language learners. It concludes comprehensive meanings of a word which are expressed in English, example sentences of each meaning, usage of the word, synonyms and so forth. If students look up a word in the dictionary, he can acquire plenty of knowledge about the word. Most participants in group 1 tend to use a bilingual dictionary. In addition, all the participants are freshman and they are just begins their professional study in English. Using monolingual dictionary will be difficult for them, because that they are in a primary level or middle level in English. If the dictionary is full of English words, without a Chinese definition of a word, it will difficult for them to understand the word in Chinese meaning.

The sixth method is rote memorization. The data is show below.

Figure 12: rote memorization
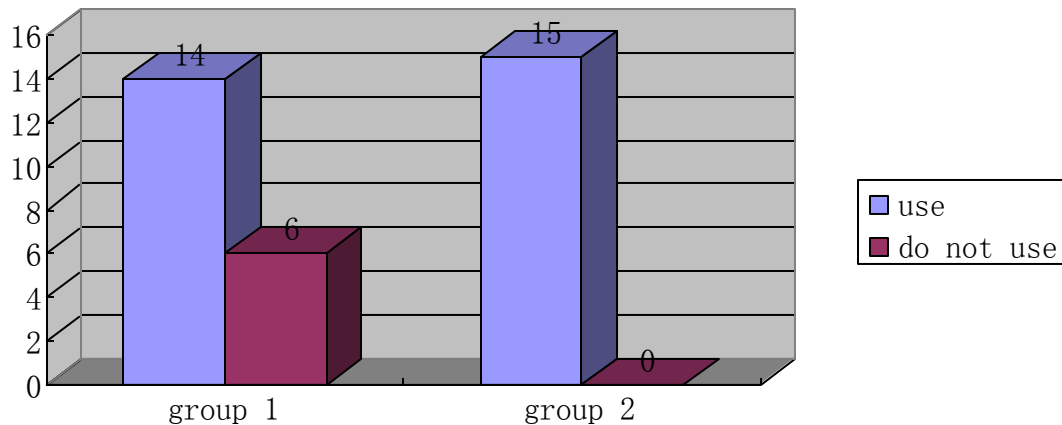
Form the above column, it is clear to see that majority of the participants use rote memorization to learn English vocabulary. There are only six participants do not learn vocabulary by rote memorization. Rote memorization is considered an inefficient way to learn a language. Students remember a word by sheer repetition and without a developing a deep understanding of the word. It is impossible to grasp and use the word if students are lack of understanding of the word.

However, rote memorization has a position in Chinese education system. Most of students used to rely on rote memorization to remember some knowledge for passing the exams. They are used to learning words one lesson after another and learn them repeatedly. They can remember words in a short time, but soon forget them. On the other hand, students will feel that it is boring to learning vocabulary, and gradually lose confident and interest in vocabulary learning. It takes to much time and yet the result is not good. This is one of the reason why there are amount of students are afraid of learning vocabulary. However, most of students tend to use this method to learn vocabulary and remain inefficient in vocabulary learning process.

The seventh method is studying the spelling of words. The data is showed below.

Figure 13: studying the spelling
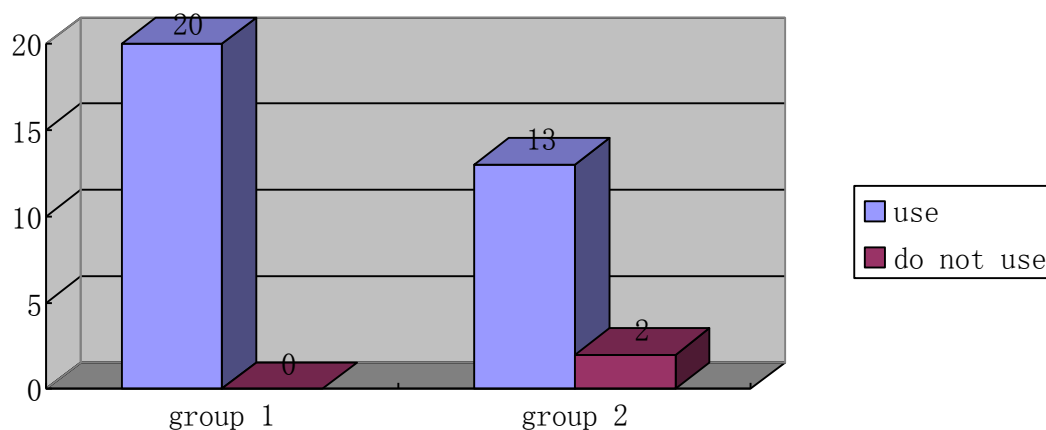
From figure 13, we can know that this is a common method that is used by almost of all the participants. There are only two students from group 2 do not use this method. This method is about memorizing word by sound. On one hand, the words are stored according to its pronunciation, so the pronunciation can help students spell out the word. The spelling connection provides a rich foundation for expanding students' vocabulary. The investigation shows that most students prefer to use this method. It does not take the students much time. On the other hand, there are a number of words with a same part or rhythm. It needs not to spend much time on remembering all of them. Such as "misunderstand", "understand", "under" and "stand". If students know the word "under" and "stand", they can easily spell out "understand" or "misunderstand".

However, this kind of method is just helpful to remember the spelling of a word. Students may be able to spell out a word but do not know its meaning. On the other hand, it is easy to mix up the words with familiar pronunciation, such as "whole" and "hole", "warn" and "worn" and so forth. Students also have to spent time on distinguishing them. Nevertheless, studying the spelling of words is a helpful method to learn vocabulary.

The eighth method is studying the synonyms, antonyms of the word. The data is showed below.

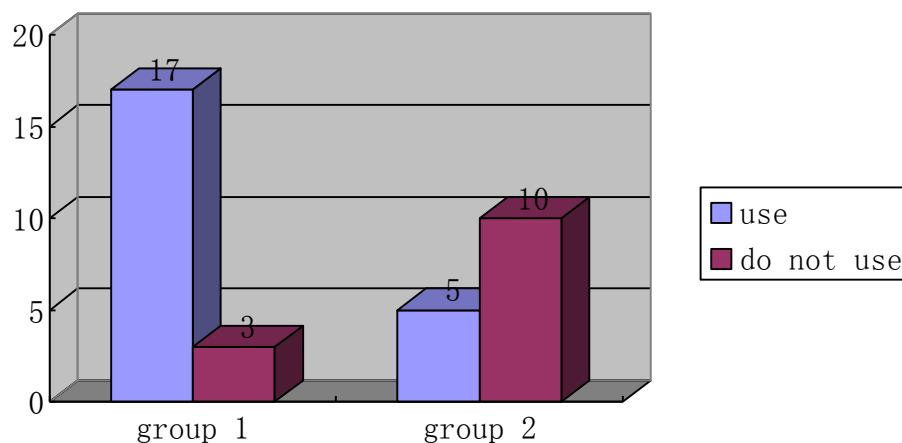**Figure 14: studying the synonyms, antonyms of the word**
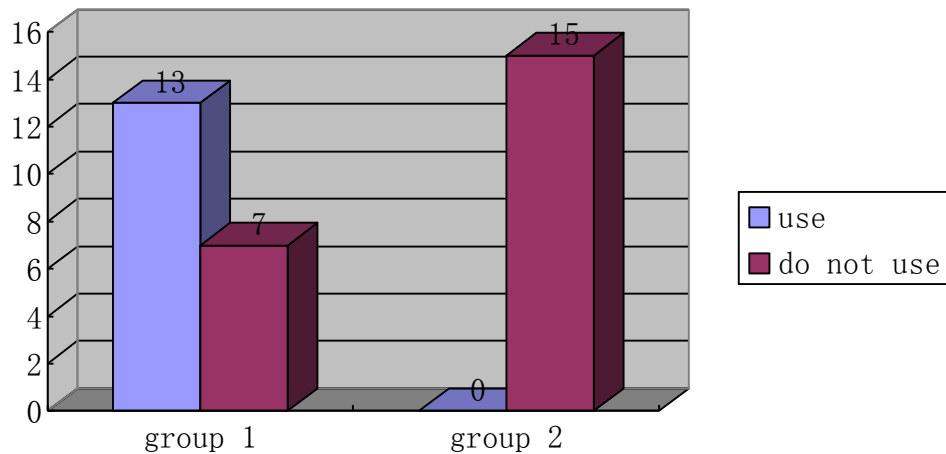
From figure 14, it is clear to see that students who use this method are all from group 1, and above half of the students do not use this method. Majority of the participants are at a basic level of English. Vocabulary is always a problem to them. It is not easy for them to learn several words, not to speak of their synonyms and antonyms. They do not willing to spend some time on synonyms and antonyms, later, they will be easy to mix up the words with familiar meaning or use a word incorrectly. However, this is a good method to help students built network frameworks. Firstly, it will be easy for students to retrieve the word among several words with familiar meaning. Secondly, students can understand the word better under the contrast of synonyms and antonyms.

In addition, students can expand their vocabulary by using this method. When they encounter a new word, they also get familiar with its synonyms or antonyms. However, this method needs students to spend more time on studying vocabulary. And the result of this method will not be obvious in short time. So above half of the participants do not use this method. The investigation shows that he participants who use this method also use bilingual dictionary in vocabulary learning. Because students can find a comprehensive explanation of synonyms and antonyms of a word, there is a part of students use these two methods together.

The ninth method is classifying words. The data is showed below.

Figure 15: classifying words

From figure 15, we can know that this method is popular. There are twenty-two students use this method, and most of students in group 1 use this method. This method is similar with the eighth method, studying synonyms and antonyms of a word. That is they both are helpful to build a network frameworks. Firstly, classifying words according to prefix, suffix and so on, this is a great way to improve vocabulary quickly and remember vocabulary. Students just have to remember the meaning of the prefix, they can probably guess out the meaning of a new word which with the prefix. It is very efficient so most of students prefer to use this method. Secondly, students can classify words according to different field. For example, when need to describe a person, we can think of "beautiful", "robust", "muscular", "brawny", "fragile", "spiritless" and so on. Then we can put these words into a group.

Students can classify words according to many aspects. Most of the participants like to use this method. As long as they are familiar with prefix, prefix or the group of words they divided by themselves, they can save much time which spend on studying each word.

3.1.3 Other strategies which are not listed in the questionnaire

As there are various learning method, students can write down the method they use but is not listed in the questionnaire. There are five students answered this question. Four students gave

a same answer that they watch English movies in their spare time. This method is alike the method of reading English book. By using both of these two methods, students can encounter plenty of words and learn words in context. There is one student wrote that learn English definition of a word. Learning English definition of a word instead of Chinese meaning can help students do not rely on mother tongue and do not affected by Chinese meaning of the word. In addition, students can understand the word more deeply. This method has a relationship with the method of using a bilingual dictionary, because the dictionary provides students a good definition of a word in both Chinese and English.

3.2 Analysis of the results of the test

After analyzing the questionnaire, we divided the participants into two groups according to their valuation to the target words. Then we can easily find that there is a distinct difference between the students in these two groups. In short, so far we can get a conclusion that most of the students in group 1 tend to use many kinds of method to learning English.

In the test of the target words, the students are asked to write down their understanding of the target word. There are only 30 words in this test. If the full score is 100, then the passing grade is 60. So if students correctly wrote the meaning of above 18 words, they will pass the test. And if students correctly wrote the meaning of above 25 words, they will get a very good score. The results of the test can be divided into three levels. The data is showed below.

Figure 16: The results of the test
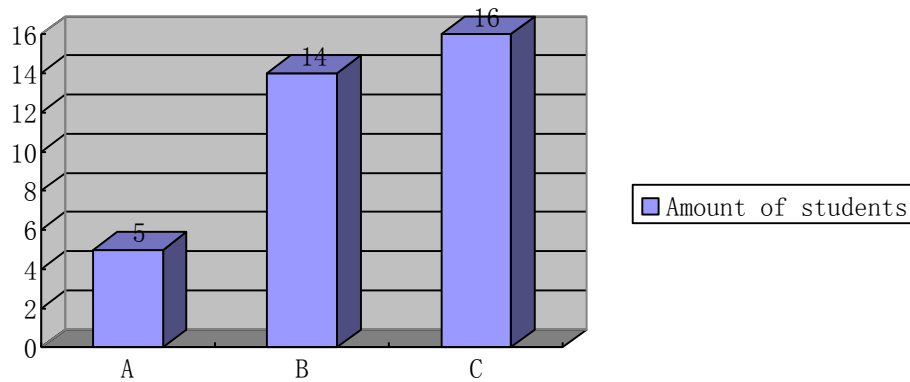
The students of level A: They correctly wrote the meaning of above 25 words in Chinese. In addition, they also wrote down an English definition of several words. They have a good learning efficiency.

The students of level B: They correctly wrote the meaning of above 18 words in Chinese. Their learning efficient is moderate.

The students of level C: They correctly wrote the meaning of under 18 words in Chinese. Their learning efficiency is low.

3.3 Comparison of the questionnaire and the results of the test

From the results of the test, we can know that the five students of level A have better abilities and more efficient learning method. Under analysis of the questionnaire, we can find that there is something in common among these five students. The comparisons are showed below.

Figure 17 (1): learning methods and characteristics of these five students

methods	Regular study habit	Have interest in English	Listening and reading	Collect lists of words	Learning words in a sentence	Reading English books in spare time	*Using bilingual dictionary*
Student A	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	*Yes*
Student B	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*Yes*
Student C	Yes	Yes	Yes	no	Yes	Yes	*Yes*
Student D	no	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*Yes*
Student E	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*no*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*

Figure 17 (2): learning methods and characteristics of these five students

methods	Rote memorization	Studying the spelling	Studying the synonyms and antonyms	Classifying words	Learning words in context	*Whether has a goal want to achieve*
Student A	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*Yes*
Student B	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	*Yes*
Student C	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	*Yes*
Student D	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	*Yes*
Student E	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*No*	*Yes*

From the table above, we can clearly find that all of these five students use several kinds of learning methods. There are seven methods they used in common. They are "have interest in English" "listening and reading" "learning words in sentence" "using bilingual dictionary"

"reading English books in spare time" "studying the spelling" and "have a goal".

After analyzing the questionnaire, it is clear that these thirty-five students all use methods in their vocabulary learning. However, their abilities and the efficiency of their learning are different. We also can find some difference between the students of level A and level B and the students of level C. The first one is that they have different attitude towards English. This kind of difference belongs to individual characteristics difference. Most students of level A and level B have interest or goal in English learning, which is an important motivation for them. Besides, they can insistently use these methods. There is a part of students lack perseverance. They use methods in learning vocabulary when they remember or have time. There is a Chinese saying says that the development of things depends fundamentally on internal causes. Individual characteristics play an important role in learning a language. So, having a good learning habit and attitude is helpful to learning efficiency.

4. Limitation of this investigation

The participants of this investigation are thirty-five freshmen from a middle size university. They may be not typical and the numbers of the participants is limited. There are only 30 target words. If there were larger number of students and target words, the reliability of this study could be promoted. In addition, we cannot exclude the possibility that there is student with a good memory recite the meaning of the words without using a method.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the results of this study shows the common point of the students who have a good learning efficiency. They are willing to use several kinds of learning methods, and they have a good learning habit and positive attitude toward English. This study gets five learning methods used by efficient learners, they are, listening and reading, learning words in sentence, using bilingual dictionary, reading English books in spare time, studying the spelling. In addition, two common characteristic of the efficient learners, they are, having interest in

English and having a goal. Thus, students with a positive attitude, using those methods frequently and keeping a good learning habit can lead to a better learning efficiency.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1, Do you have a regular study habit of learning English? (   )

    A, Yes   B, No

2, Do you have an interest in learning English? (   )

    A, very much   B, much   C, not so much   D, not at all

3, Do you feel that the target words is (   )

    A, very difficult   B, difficult   C, moderate   D, easy

4, Please tick the methods you used in English vocabulary learning.

    ☐ Listening and reading

    ☐ Collecting lists of words

    ☐ Learning a word in a sentence

    ☐ Reading English books, magazines in spare time

    ☐ Using a bilingual dictionary

    ☐ Rote memorization

    ☐ Studying the spelling

    ☐ Studying the synonyms, antonyms of the word

    ☐ Classifying words

    ☐ Learning word in context

5, Do you have a goal that you want to achieve of learning English?

    ☐ No

    ☐ Yes, _____

6, Please write down any other strategies that you used but which are not listed on the questionnaire

Student No.:_____

Target words

elevation	sophisticated
default	erratic
perplex	tribute
surplus	aggressive
coat	deranged
charity	dispel
sympathy	seclusion
villain	eccentric
caustic	doodles
stentorian	candid
callused	witty
vitriol	affectionate
patriotic	dedicated
crooning	stardom
urbanite	celebrity