

A Survey on English Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Chinese Middle School Students in Shangcheng District, Hangzhou City

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Abstract

This study focuses on investigating English vocabulary learning strategies utilized by Grade 9 middle school students in Changsha District, Hangzhou City. The research aims to address two primary questions: 1) What are the most employed English vocabulary learning strategies by these students? 2) Which strategies are least utilized? The study involves 180 participants, spanning first-year to third-year students, who completed a questionnaire survey to contribute valuable insights for educators and learners. The results indicate that, among Cognitive, Cognitive, Memory, Resource, and Flexible use Strategies, Cognitive Strategies were most frequently employed, while Flexible use Strategies were least utilized. The study recommends promoting the use of more Flexible use strategies, encouraging exposure to learned English words across listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.

Keywords: Chinese middle school students, Vocabulary Learning Strategies; Students in middle school; Questionnaire; Hangzhou City.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the continuous improvement of China's economy and international standing, the country's engagement with the global community has intensified. An increasing number of people recognize the paramount importance of English learning, a sentiment particularly prevalent among middle school students. Proficiency in English, a language viewed as crucial in the international arena, is often perceived as a gateway to future opportunities.

For learners aspiring to master English, vocabulary acquisition is deemed foundational, akin to a steppingstone in language proficiency. Wilkin (Kan, 2022, p. 88) aptly remarked that grammar alone cannot convey diverse meanings; it is vocabulary that breathes life into expression. Consequently, the quantity of vocabulary a learner grasps becomes a pivotal indicator of their success in English acquisition, directly influencing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Bollinger (Xiang, 2019, p.32) echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that anyone proficient in a foreign language recognizes that a significant portion of their time is devoted to mastering the language's vocabulary.

1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

The importance of vocabulary is unequivocal for language learners, a sentiment resonating with Wen Qiufang's assertion that the primary and often distressing challenge learners encounter is the vocabulary problem (Liu, 2017, p. 193). This assertion holds true for middle school

students learning English, who perceive vocabulary acquisition as a formidable and sizable task. This perception can lead to a gradual erosion of confidence in vocabulary learning. However, overcoming this hurdle is imperative for students to achieve clarity in listening, speaking, and understanding English. The crux of English learning lies in vocabulary mastery, and only by acquiring a substantial vocabulary can students establish a solid foundation for subsequent English language learning.

Recognizing vocabulary learning as a long-term endeavor, middle school students must employ effective vocabulary learning strategies. The correct and strategic use of these methods can significantly enhance the efficiency of English learning, aiding students in achieving tangible gains. Understanding the specific vocabulary learning strategies employed by middle school students are particularly crucial, as it enables researchers to offer reliable guidance and insights that cater specifically to this demographic. In recent years, numerous experts and scholars have delved into this area, providing comprehensive discussions and detailed classifications of strategies designed to empower middle school students in their English learning journey.

2 Literature Review

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 23:11 November 2023

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2.1 Learning Strategies

Learning strategies, stemming from the dynamic nature of psychology, have been approached from various perspectives and research methodologies, yet a unified understanding remains elusive. American psychologist Bruner (2017) initially introduced "cognitive strategies" during the study of artificial concept formation. Subsequently, scholars such as Newell, Shaw, Simon, and Rubin (2017) delved into learning strategies, defining them as specific methods and means adopted by language learners to acquire knowledge of a second language. Rigney (2018) viewed learning strategies as operational procedures for acquiring, preserving, and extracting knowledge and assignments, while Duffy (2017) considered them implicit rule systems. Danserau (2019) characterized learning strategies as processes promoting knowledge acquisition and storage, and Stern (2017) referred to them as the general trends in methods used by language learners.

Jones, Amiran, and Katims (2017) emphasized that learning strategies involve intellectual activities or thinking steps used to encode, analyze, and extract information. Nisbet and Shucksmith (2020) defined learning strategies as operational processes for selecting, integrating, and applying learning techniques. Mayer (2020) viewed learning strategies as methods or skills to learn, and Chamot & O'Malley (2017) described them as techniques, methods, and conscious behaviors facilitating learning. Oxford (2018) referred to learning strategies as special actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more autonomous, more effective, and adaptable to new situations. Cohen (2019) proposed that learning strategies are learners' conscious or semi-conscious behavioral and mental activities with clear goals, aiming to ease language knowledge acquisition and application.

2.2 Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies encompass the conscious processes and actions language learners undertake to enhance language learning or usage. These strategies, defined as thoughts and actions consciously selected and manipulated by language learners, assist them in various tasks from initial learning to achieving proficiency. The term "language learning strategy" sometimes combines language learning and language use strategies, acknowledging the

blurred line between the two, as moments of using a second language can also serve as opportunities to learn.

Introduced in 1975, language learning strategies entered the literature, initially aiming to document the strategies employed by successful language learners. The focus in the 1980s shifted to the classification of language learning strategies, categorized as direct or indirect and later as cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, or social. O'Malley and Chamot (2019) further categorized language learning strategies into three types: Metacognitive Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Affective Strategies. Metacognitive Strategies involve thinking about the learning process, planning, monitoring, and self-evaluating. Cognitive Strategies refer to mental manipulation or transformation to enhance understanding, acquisition, or memory. Affective Strategies include using social interactions and emotional control to aid understanding, learning, or memory.

2.3 Concepts and Classifications of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies, integral to language learning strategies, play a crucial role in English language acquisition. The concept of vocabulary learning strategies is closely intertwined with broader learning strategies. Definitions of vocabulary learning strategies vary, reflecting the myriad perspectives of researchers. Building upon various concepts and definitions, vocabulary learning strategies can be defined as a series of methods consciously adopted by learners to enhance their vocabulary learning efficiency and language acquisition. The classification of vocabulary learning strategies has evolved over time. Early research focused on direct and indirect strategies, later expanding into cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, and social categories. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) divided strategies into Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Social or Emotional, while Cohen & Nation provided a detailed breakdown, including associative, word list, word formation, and classification strategies. Wen Qiufang (1996) categorized vocabulary learning methods into distinguishing negative and positive words, using context to guess, looking up dictionaries, combining guessing and checking dictionaries, word formation, and categorical memory.

Li Songhao (Mao, 2021) extended the classification into Metacognitive, Cognitive, Memory, Resource, and Flexible Use Strategies, with each category comprising sub-strategies. This paper adopts Li Songhao's framework for classifying vocabulary learning strategies.

2.4 Research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies Abroad

Foreign research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies has a longer history, showcasing maturity and depth. O'Malley & Chamot (1990) conducted a study on beginner and intermediate second language learners, identifying three common vocabulary learning strategies: rote memorization, contextual vocabulary learning, and vocabulary learning through application. Other scholars, such as Wenden & Rubin, compared strategies employed by excellent language learners and their counterparts, finding that non-top students utilized vocabulary strategies as effectively as outstanding students (Ye, 2021, p. 13).

2.5 Domestic Research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies

While the exploration of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in China commenced later, recent years have witnessed significant research in this area. Xiang Qunxing and Zhang Yanmei (2019) investigated Vocabulary Learning Strategies among non-English-major students, revealing diverse strategies employed by this demographic in English vocabulary learning. Wu Xia, Wang Qiang (1998), Luo Yuzhi, and Wang Ruojun (2017) conducted research on Vocabulary Learning Strategies among college students, uncovering noticeable differences in strategy use between students with high and low grades. Kan Ting (2022), Qin Xiuwen, and Zhou Qilin (2020) focused on English Vocabulary Learning Strategies among high school students, discovering substantial differences in strategy utilization between male and female students, with girls generally exhibiting better use of strategies for learning English.

3 Research Design

This study adopted a two-phase data collection approach, utilizing pre-questionnaires to examine the attitudes of middle school students in Shangcheng District, Hangzhou City, toward English vocabulary learning. The subsequent post-questionnaire aimed to analyze the vocabulary learning strategies employed by these middle school students, providing them with suitable learning methods.

3.1 Research Questions

The study revolved around two primary questions:

- 1) What English vocabulary learning strategies are most frequently used by middle school

students in Shangcheng District, Hangzhou City?

2) What English vocabulary learning strategies are least utilized by middle school students in Shangcheng District, Hangzhou City?

3.2 Research Object

The research focused on middle school 180 students in Shangcheng District, Hangzhou City, encompassing various grades within the middle school system.

3.3 Research Methods

Quantitative research methods and descriptive analysis formed the foundation of this study. A questionnaire served as the research tool, with two distinct questionnaires falling under the quantitative research umbrella. The first questionnaire elucidated subject selection and gauged the attitudes of middle school students toward English vocabulary learning. The second questionnaire delved into specific research questions, probing the utilization of students' vocabulary learning strategies. Descriptive analysis was employed to articulate questionnaire results, providing a qualitative exploration of the data and addressing the research questions. In this study, the initial questionnaire aimed to investigate attitudes toward English vocabulary learning strategies. A total of 180 questionnaires were distributed, and 177 were collected. The questionnaire included the following inquiries:

- 1) Do you find it challenging to memorize words in English learning?
- 2) Do you find it easy to memorize words in English learning?
- 3) Do you employ any English vocabulary learning strategies (methods) in your English learning?
- 4) If recommended, would you use effective vocabulary learning strategies (methods) in your English learning?

Previous questionnaire:

Table 2 Content of the Previous Questionnaire

Do you find it difficult to memorize words in English learning?	Very hard	Difficult	Not Difficult	Easy
Do you find it easy to memorize words in English learning?	Often	Occasionally	Never	
Do you use some English vocabulary learning strategies (methods) in English learning?	Often	Occasionally	Never	
In English learning if there are some effective vocabulary learning strategies (methods) recommended that you use?	Often	Occasionally	Never	

3.3.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire

The questionnaire of this study is a questionnaire produced by Li Songhao (2019) based on the research of predecessors to comprehensively and in detail classify the classification of Vocabulary Learning Strategies.

The questionnaire is divided into five areas: Metacognitive Strategy, Cognitive Strategy, Memory Strategy, Resource Strategy and Flexible Use Strategy, and each field is divided into different subcategories. There are a total of 49 questions to answer. The questionnaire was distributed through the questionnaire star, 180 copies were distributed, and 175 valid questionnaires were returned. Here is the content of the questionnaire:

Table 3 Questionnaire Tabulation System

	Categories	Sub-Categories	Related Topics
Vocabulary Learning Strategies	Metacognitive Strategy	Self-reflection and regulation	T1,T2,T3,
		Making plans	T4,T5,T6
		Adjust the depth of	T7,T8,T9

		learning	
		Communicate learning questions	T10,T11,T12
	Cognitive Strategy	Guessing the meaning of words	T13,T14,T15,T16
		Using context	T17,T18,T19
		Taking notes	T20,T21,T22
		Looking up the dictionary	T23,T24,T25
	Memory Strategy	Repetition (word lists, mechanical, verbal repetition)	T26,T27,T28,T29
		Association	T30,T31,T32
		Connection	T33,T34,T35
	Resource Strategy	Using extracurricular reading materials	T36,T37,T38
		Using of living resources (Internet, advertising, etc.)	T39,T40,T41
	Flexible Use Strategy	Creating contextual and using words	T42,T43,T44,T45
		Writing or verbal communication	T46,T47,T48,T49

3.3.3 Scoring Criteria for the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire

The questionnaire uses a Likert-style five-point scale. In the questionnaire, "1=never; 2 = occasionally; 3=sometimes; 4 = often; 5=Always" is scored for five points, and the scores are written as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

The author analyzes the five strategies of Metacognitive Strategy, Cognitive Strategy, Memory Strategy, Resource Strategy and Flexible Use Strategy, and judges the use of each strategy according to the average score of the strategy. The following table is the basis for judgment:

Table 4 Interpretation and Scale (Mao, 2021, p. 43)

Rating	Score	Scale	Interpretation
Always	5	4.21-5.00	Highest
Often	4	3.41-4.20	High
Sometimes	3	2.61-3.40	Moderate
Seldom	2	1.81-2.60	Low
Never	1	1.00- 1.80	Lowest

As shown in the table above, a score of 1-5 corresponds to never, seldom, sometime

often, and always in the questionnaire. To study the usage of each strategy, it is necessary to obtain the average corresponding to each strategy, and correspond to the numerical range in the table above based on the average. If the average is in the range of 4.21-5.00, it means that the score of use of the strategy is the highest the average number is in the range of 3.41-4.20, it means that the score of use of the strategy is high, the average number is 2.61-3.40, the score of use of the strategy is moderate, the average is 1.81-2.60, the score of use of the strategy is low, and the average is 1.00-1.80 indicates that the score of use of the strategy is lowest.

3.4.1 Pre-questionnaire Data Analysis

The results showed that more than half of English-major students found it difficult to memorize words and were easy to forget, and students said they would not use English vocabulary learning strategies to memorize words, but if there were vocabulary learning strategies, most students said they would use them.

3.4.2 Data and Analysis of the Vocabulary Learning Strategy Questionnaire

The author analyzes the overall usage of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and the use of sub- categories in each strategy.

3.4.2.1 Overall Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

In this article, vocabulary learning strategies include five dimensions, namely Metacognitive strategies, Cognitive strategies, Memory strategies, Resource strategies, and Flexible use strategies. This article performs a descriptive statistical analysis of the usage of these five policies, and the analysis results are as follows:

Table 5 Use of vocabulary learning strategies by English-major students

	Number of Questions	Average Score for Each Question
Metacognitive strategy	12	2.97
Cognitive strategy	13	3.25
Memory strategy	10	3.21

Resource strategy	6	2.70
Flexible use strategy	8	1.86

As can be seen from Table 4, in the descriptive statistical analysis results of vocabulary learning strategies of English-major students, English-major students showed the highest score of "cognitive strategy" with 3.25 points. English-major students showed the lowest score for "flexible use strategies" with a score of 1.86. It can be seen that the use of various vocabulary learning strategies by English-major students in order of average is: cognitive strategies (3.25 points), memory strategies (3.21 points), metacognitive strategies (2.97 points), resource strategies (2.70 points), and flexible use strategies (1.86 points).

4 Conclusion

4.1 Research Findings

The study's results reveal that among the five dimensions of vocabulary learning strategies—Metacognitive Strategy, Cognitive Strategy, Memory Strategy, Resource Strategy, and Flexible use Strategy—the most frequently used is Cognitive Strategy, with an average score of 3.25. Conversely, Flexible use Strategies had the least utilization, with an average score of 1.86.

4.2 Research Implications and Suggestions

Considering the research findings, this study offers insights into teaching implications:

English Teachers:

English teachers play a crucial role in imparting knowledge. To enhance students' word awareness, teachers should incorporate various strategies into their teaching, including metacognitive, flexible, and resource strategies. Integrating traditional English vocabulary learning strategies with contemporary approaches is essential for effective teaching in the 21st century.

English Students:

Students should strive to become 21st-century learners by actively engaging with diverse vocabulary knowledge. While teachers provide valuable guidance, students must take

initiative in integrating vocabulary into their daily lives, applying their English knowledge in real-world situations. The study suggests exploring additional strategies, particularly those fostering independent learning, such as Metacognitive Strategies, Flexible use Strategies, and Resource Strategies.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study faces several constraints and suggests potential avenues for future research.

Primarily, the study's sample size is confined to 180 middle school students in Shangcheng District, Hangzhou City. Consequently, the findings may lack generalizability to other grades and academic levels within the institution.

Moreover, the exploration of vocabulary learning strategies does not consider additional variables such as age, gender, vocabulary proficiency, and learning motivation. Future research should account for these factors to evaluate their influence on the adoption of diverse strategies in English vocabulary learning.

Lastly, the study exclusively relies on a questionnaire survey, neglecting the real-time observation and tracking of students' learning situations. Subsequent research could enrich insights by incorporating post-questionnaire interviews, offering a more holistic understanding of the dynamic shifts in middle school students' learning processes.

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Appendix

英语词汇学习策略问卷调查

请你根据你自己策略使用的情况(√) 选出其中的一种情况, 1-5 的数字:

1	2	3	4	5
从不	偶尔	有时候	经常	总是

该问卷分为元认知策略、认知策略、记忆策略、资源策略和灵活使用策略 5 个领域。

元认知策略

自我反思与调控

1.我会严格按照自己制定的背单词计划来执行。	1	2	3	4	5
2.我知道哪些词汇学习方法对我来说更有效。	1	2	3	4	5
3.我会反思自己词汇学习的进步与不足。	1	2	3	4	5

制定计划

4.我会合理安排记忆词汇的时间和数量。	1	2	3	4	5
5.我会制定词汇学习的短期目标和长期目标	1	2	3	4	5
6.我会定期制定词汇学习的计划表	1	2	3	4	5

调节学习深度

7.我知道在一篇文章中，哪些单词或短语对理解全文起重要作用。	1	2	3	4	5
8.当我面对一个新词或词组时，我清楚的知道我是否要记住它。	1	2	3	4	5

9.我能意识到哪些词我能猜测而哪些不能。	1	2	3	4	5
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交流学习问题

10.我会与老师或同学交流词汇学习的心得。	1	2	3	4	5
11.我会与老师交流自己在词汇学习中遇到的困难。	1	2	3	4	5
12.我会与同学探讨词汇学习中遇到的问题。	1	2	3	4	5

认知策略

猜测词义

13.我只掌握老师所教的单词的含义，其他搭配或意义 我无暇顾及。	1	2	3	4	5
14.我通过词形（前缀、后缀、词根）来分析来猜测意 义。	1	2	3	4	5
15.我会利用语法结构来猜测词义。	1	2	3	4	5
16.我利用线索猜测单词。	1	2	3	4	5

利用上下文语境

17.我利用上下文中其他的单词和词组来验证我猜测的 词义是否正确。	1	2	3	4	5
18.我会利用语境来猜测词义。	1	2	3	4	5
19.我会利用上下文的逻辑发展来推测一个词的含义。	1	2	3	4	5

记笔记

20.当我认为我碰到的生词比较常用时，我会在笔记中 记下它的含义。	1	2	3	4	5
21.记笔记时，我会记下所查词的搭配。	1	2	3	4	5
22.见到一个有用的用法或短语我就把它记下来。	1	2	3	4	5

查字典

23.对我感兴趣的生词，我会去查字典。	1	2	3	4	5
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24.当我想知道一个已知词的用法时，我就查字典。	1	2	3	4	5
25.查字典时我会记下它的语法内容。	1	2	3	4	5

记忆策略

重复（单词表，机械，口头重复）

26.我主要是背书上的单词表。	1	2	3	4	5
27.我通过大声朗读来背诵单词。	1	2	3	4	5
28.我用自己制作词汇卡、词汇表来背单词。	1	2	3	4	5
29.我在本子上反复写一个单词来帮助记忆。	1	2	3	4	5

联想

30.我会把某一单词与动作联系起来记忆。	1	2	3	4	5
31.我会通过联想把生词和已学的词联系起来记忆。	1	2	3	4	5
32.我会将拼写、发音相似的词放在一起记忆。	1	2	3	4	5

关联

33.我会把生词连同它的语境一起记忆，比如：连句子一起记。	1	2	3	4	5
34.我把一串有一个共同部分的生词放在一起记。	1	2	3	4	5
35.我遇到一个生词是，会在大脑中搜索我有没有学过该单词的同义、反义词或发音、形式与它相近的词。	1	2	3	4	5

资源策略

利用课外读物

36.我在学唱英文歌曲时，学习英语词汇。	1	2	3	4	5
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37.我会收听或收看广播、电视中的英语节目或英文原声电影。	1	2	3	4	5
38.除了课本，我看我感兴趣的英语课外读物。	1	2	3	4	5

利用生活资源（网络，广告等）

39.在练习中，出现我没有学过的单词时，我会把那道题放一放。	1	2	3	4	5
40.我会注意生活中所碰上的一切英语单词，如：衣服上的、广告上的。	1	2	3	4	5
41.我通过网络来学习英语词汇。	1	2	3	4	5

活用策略

创造语境使用词语

42.我把刚学到的单词自己造句。	1	2	3	4	5
43.我尽量在真实语境中运用新学的词。	1	2	3	4	5
44.我会用大脑创造语境，来运用新词。	1	2	3	4	5
45.我会尽一切机会说和写出新学的单词。	1	2	3	4	5

书面或口头交流

46.我和朋友用英文写信。	1	2	3	4	5
47.我会在课内外活动中积极用所学词汇与同学交流与沟通。	1	2	3	4	5
48.我会大量阅读，把我所能记住的单词运用起来。	1	2	3	4	5
49.我用英语讲故事。	1	2	3	4	5

感谢您的作答！

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