

A Phenomenological Study of EFL Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Notebooks as a Vocabulary Learning Strategy

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions and lived experiences of using vocabulary notebooks. The data collection was gained from in-depth interviewing with ten randomly selected high school senior students coming from three schools located in Ho Chi Minh City. The findings showed that the students revealed their understanding of the function as well as positive attitudes towards vocabulary notebooks. It is also suggested from the study that the students need to receive more extensive and frequent training in the use of vocabulary notebook, format selection, and notebook organization in order to maximize their vocabulary learning.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a pivotal role in the process of learning a language because it is considered as the basic building material from which learners can develop lexical competence in order to perform different language activities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Tongpoon, 2009; Nation, 2008). However, many studies on second language vocabulary learning have proved that learning vocabulary is "a long and gradual process" (Tongpoon, 2009) to learners, especially EFL ones that gain little exposure to the native English speaking environment. Henceforth, learners should be introduced to and instructed how to employ different vocabulary learning strategies to facilitate their vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Much attention has been paid to the studies of vocabulary learning strategies which are instrumental in helping students learn new words more systematically and effectively (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 1997; Gu & Johnson, 1996). Using vocabulary notebooks to write new words is one of the beneficial strategies that can "facilitate this challenging but crucial job" (McCrostie,

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2007). Although a number of teaching articles have been written to advise learners to keep vocabulary notebooks to help foster vocabulary acquisition and learner autonomy, there are few studies conducted on the vocabulary notebook strategy employed by EFL learners.

In the Vietnamese context, writing new words in vocabulary notebooks is commonplace to Vietnamese students when they start learning English. It can be said that, to the researcher's knowledge, keeping vocabulary notebooks is a must to them when they are still in primary, secondary, and high school. However, there are hardly any investigations of the vocabulary notebooks kept by Vietnamese EFL learners. For this reason, this study aims to address this gap by implementing a phenomenological inquiry into the perceptions of high school students about using vocabulary notebooks as well as other factors related to this strategy.

2. Research Question

This study attempts to answer the following research question:

What perceptions do Vietnamese EFL students have about the use of vocabulary notebooks in high school?

To address this research question, the researcher carried out in-depth interviewing with ten high school senior students, and paid attention to the emergent themes from these interviews for data analysis.

3. Literature Review

Definitions of Vocabulary Notebooks

A vocabulary notebook is defined as a kind of notebook used for the recording of new and useful words and several additional information related to those words (McCrostie, 2007). According to Bozkurt & Walters (2009), McCrostie (2007), Fowle (2002), and Schmitt & Schmitt (1995), a vocabulary notebook is considered as a personal dictionary in which new words, along with their meanings, and other aspects of word knowledge including collocations, synonyms, antonyms, parts of speech, pronunciation and even context sentences are recorded. Therefore, the use of vocabulary notebooks is widely supported as a tool and strategy for

students to acquire lexical items as well as learn independently (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

A question arises as to what format vocabulary notebooks can take. As far as the formats are concerned, McCrostie (2007) maintained that vocabulary notebooks can take a variety of formats or forms ranging from “bound notebooks with fixed pages, to loose-leaf binders with movable pages, to small index cards small enough to fit into a pocket”. However, Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) advocated the two latter forms since their advantage over the former is that “pages can be taken out and moved around to facilitate expanding rehearsal; pages with better-known words can be put further back in the binder, and lesser known words put towards the front”.

Benefits of Vocabulary Notebooks

The use of vocabulary notebooks to record new words has positive effects on learners' vocabulary learning. D'Onofrio (2009) mentioned such benefits as a structured learning approach, practicality, a personal progress tool of assessment, and learner autonomy.

A Structured Learning Approach

Vocabulary notebooks provide learners with the lexical learning process in a systematic way. Notebooks can be divided into different sections which have enough space to note down different aspects of word knowledge, together with various other activities such as collocations, derivatives, pronunciation, translation, sample sentences, semantic maps, and so on (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). In addition, in his study on the implementation of vocabulary notebooks in a Thai secondary school, Fowle (2002) acknowledged that the synthesis of several vocabulary learning strategies is incorporated in vocabulary notebooks, namely “consolidation strategies”, “discovery strategies”, and “memory strategies”. As a result, students who use these strategies to organize their vocabulary learning make more progress than those who do not (Nation, 2001).

Practicality

Using notebooks to record lexical items helps learners to take and carry them around relatively easily. Consequently, learners can retrieve the words that they have written down over

the course of the week for review. Furthermore, vocabulary notebooks can be implemented in any learning environment without depending on technology or costing too much money; instead, they can make their own notebooks with different forms or formats provided that they find them suitable for the learning purpose (D’Onofrio, 2009).

A Personal Progress Tool of Assessment

As aforementioned, a vocabulary notebook is considered as a portfolio; that is to say, it is a “personal word store” as coined by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995). This portfolio or personal word store allows students to retrieve the words they have recorded for review whenever and wherever they would like because it is portable. Thus, they “can monitor and assess their learning and take responsibility for their learning as well” (D’Onofrio, 2009).

Learner Autonomy

According to Fowle (2002), vocabulary notebooks help learners develop self-management strategies. This means that under the teacher’s instruction and feedback on the use of notebooks, they begin making their own decision over the organization of their notebook, entries of lexical items, objectives for their own vocabulary learning/acquisition. As a result, they can “develop a more critical awareness of their own notebook.”

4. Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and describe Vietnamese EFL learners’ perceptions and lived experiences of using vocabulary notebooks for the recording of new words. Learners’ perceptions refer to their understanding of and attitudes toward various respects of vocabulary notebooks and its implementation in the Vietnamese context of high school.

Participants

This study involved the participation of ten Vietnamese EFL students (five males and five females) who are high school seniors at the moment of the research being conducted. These

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ten high school seniors, who were randomly selected from three high schools located in Ho Chi Minh City, agreed to take part in this study. The rationale behind the selection of these subjects is that they have experienced the use of vocabulary notebooks since they started learning English in primary school. Therefore, the researcher used a phenomenological research design in order to uncover the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon (the use of vocabulary notebooks) as experienced and told by them (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Instrumentation

The primary instrument used in the data collection is the semi-structured and in-depth interview approach. In this approach, the questions to be explored in an interview were listed and served as a guide to “ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (Patton, 2002). All of the interviews with each of the participants were tape-recorded. After the completion of the interview process, the researcher analyzed the data to search for the statements that were significant and meaningful to the participants in describing their experience related to the phenomenon of using vocabulary notebooks, and then “clustered these statements into themes” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

5. Results and Discussion

The data analysis uncovered the following emergent themes concerning the high school senior students' perceptions of using vocabulary notebooks

Theme 1: Vocabulary Notebook Set-up

This theme discusses the high school senior students' awareness on the concept of vocabulary notebooks, formats, the way they organized and included new English words in their notebooks, reasons for this use, and classroom activities related to vocabulary recorded in notebooks

Definition of a vocabulary notebook. When asked about what they knew about a vocabulary notebook, all of the participants provided the definitions with quite similar meaning that can be summarized as follows “it is a personal notebook to write down new English words”. It is evident that they showed their understanding of the basic function of a vocabulary notebook.

However, they added that they did not keep a vocabulary notebook in a real sense because of the fact that to their best of their knowledge, a real vocabulary notebook is used to record new words and other relevant information only; in contrast, the so-called vocabulary notebooks that they kept were used for the recording of vocabulary and grammatical points at school.

It is worth noting that these Vietnamese high school students kept notebooks not only to record vocabulary but also grammar-related lessons. When asked about this phenomenon, all of them stated that their teachers did not guide them how to use a separate vocabulary notebook and they were expected to keep one to record both vocabulary and grammar. They commented that they need to own a real vocabulary notebook, which helps them learn more systematically without getting overloaded if grammatical points are written in another notebook.

Formats. All of the students said they could choose notebooks with any formats at their disposal without being obligated to comply with the ones stipulated by the school or teachers. The most common formats are traditional bound notebooks with between 100 and 200 fixed pages.. Selected excerpts are given below:

Student A: My English teacher permits me to use a vocabulary notebook with any format, provided that I record enough lessons. I always use notebooks with 100 fixed pages because I write a lot of new words and grammar.

Student B: I'm allowed to select my own notebooks with any format, but I have to write enough English lessons, or else I will be punished by the teacher. I bought a 200-page notebook to record vocabulary and grammar for a course of a year.

The main reason for choosing traditional bound notebooks is that they provide them with more space to take many notes of both vocabulary and grammar. Their teachers did not introduce any formats to them.

In spite of the fact that learners are individuals; therefore, they have their different learning styles, they should also be introduced to other formats which have good effects on their vocabulary learning. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (1995), the traditional fixed page

notebooks have the disadvantage to restricting students from “facilitating rehearsal” because the pages are fixed and unable to be taken out.

Vocabulary notebook organization. All of the participants commented that they followed their English teachers’ instructions on how to write vocabulary in the notebooks. The teachers wrote the new words on the blackboard, and then the students copied them into their notebooks. The recording of vocabulary included writing word pairs (L2 target words-L1 translation), parts of speech, pronunciation, and derivatives.

Student C: Before studying a reading passage, my teacher usually writes the new words on the board. First, she writes an English word, then its part of speech, after that its pronunciation, and finally its Vietnamese translation.

Student D: I copy all of the vocabulary written on the board by the teacher into my notebook. Besides L2-L1 word pairs, other aspects of word knowledge include word families, collocations.

They articulated that they were heavily dependent on their teachers as to the way to write vocabulary in the notebooks and that the teachers rarely checked and gave feedback on the contents of their notebooks. They did not feel motivated with such vocabulary notebook organization, hoping that they would receive more innovative recording methods as well as frequent training from their teachers in order to facilitate learning process.

Reason for keeping vocabulary notebooks. All of the students said that they were obligated to do so by their teachers. They also added that they would be punished if they did not write the vocabulary in the notebook. Besides their teachers’ obligation, they admitted that it was necessary for them to keep vocabulary notebooks which helped them memorize the new words.

Classroom vocabulary notebook activities. When the students were asked whether their English teachers designed classroom exercises which used the words in the notebooks to help them memorize these new words, all of them answered that their teachers did not except for asking them to learn all of the new words by heart and recite them in the next class session.

Additionally, they said they did not like this activity because they felt nervous and could not memorize these new words for long.

Student E: we have to learn the vocabulary in the notebook by heart and our teacher will check our memorization by asking some of us to recite these new words in front of the class. If we don't recall them, we will receive a penalty.

Student F: I have to learn all of the new words by heart as required by my teacher who will check my memorization. However, the next day I forget almost most of them.

It can be observed that the activity of learning the new words in the notebooks and then reciting them in the next class session is one way to check the students' memorization, but it only works for short-term memory. In order to enhance vocabulary learning and retention, Schmitt and Schmitt (1995), Nation (1990), and Fountain (1980) suggested that teachers should integrate the vocabulary in the notebooks into a variety of classroom activities including word card games such as bingo, writing short stories which consist of some words from their notebooks, and so on.

Theme 2: Students' Perceived Benefits of Vocabulary Notebooks

Attitudes towards vocabulary notebooks. When asked if they liked using their vocabulary notebooks, six out of ten students provided positive responses with such reasons as memorization and handwriting enhancement. Some of their comments are given below:

Student H: Of course, I do. Writing new words in the notebook helps me not only memorize them but also improve my handwriting.

Student I: I liking using the vocabulary notebook because it is easy to study and retrieve the new words whenever I want. In addition, writing vocabulary in the notebook helps me remember and I can also practice my handwriting.

On the other hand, the remaining four responded that they were not really interested in using the vocabulary notebooks, even though they did not deny their benefits. They explained

that they had their own vocabulary learning strategies such as taking notes right in the textbooks, using word cards.

Student D: I don't like writing vocabulary in the notebook because I feel it's not convenient. Instead, I prefer taking notes in the English coursebook, which helps me see and understand the new words in the context.

Student J: Although the recording of new words in the notebook is useful, I like writing them in small word cards which I usually stick on the wall, or in the book.

This finding indicated that not all of the participants showed their interest in or liking for using the vocabulary notebooks. This may be interpreted that the students have not recognized many real benefits that vocabulary notebooks bring to them since many of their high school teachers “are not sure how best to advise them on setting up well-organized and pedagogically-sound notebooks of their own.” (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).

Perceived benefits of vocabulary notebooks.

As mentioned above, while sixty percent of the students showed their positive attitudes towards keeping vocabulary notebooks, the remaining forty percent did not like using them. However, all of them admitted that vocabulary notebooks are useful in terms of facilitating systematic learning. This means that keeping vocabulary notebooks helps them organize and develop their learning habits in a systematic way. All of the new words are stored in one place, so they can be studied and reviewed anytime, anywhere without spending much time for retrieval.

Student C: This vocabulary notebook is useful for our vocabulary learning. It helps me record all of the new words and I can retrieve them when I forget.

Student I: I liking using the vocabulary notebook because it is easy to study and retrieve the new words whenever I want. In addition, writing vocabulary in the notebook helps me remember and I can also practice my handwriting.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that Vietnamese high school students revealed their understanding of the function as well as positive attitudes towards the usefulness of the vocabulary notebooks. Consequently, it is suggested from the study that English teachers need to instruct their students in using vocabulary notebooks properly. First of all, students should use a notebook for the recording of vocabulary only; that is to say, this notebook should not be used to include new words and grammatical points at the same time because it makes students get overwhelmed with the entry information. Furthermore, students need more extensive and frequent training in notebook format selection and organization to enhance their learning independence without depending heavily on teachers. Simultaneously, it is necessary for teachers to check their students' vocabulary notebooks regularly and give timely feedback so that the students can improve their vocabulary notebooks. Finally, teachers need to incorporate vocabulary notebooks into "as many as activities as possible" (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995) to increase students' motivation as well as vocabulary acquisition.

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