

A STUDY ON SOME STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE VOCABULARY FOR FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT HUNG YEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Hoang Thi Hoa, Le Thi Thanh Nga*, Nguyen Thi Bich Hanh**
Email: hoahoang21087@gmail.com

Received: 01/08/2023

Revised: 19/02/2024

Accepted: 27/02/2024

DOI:

Abstract: *Mastering vocabulary is one of the most critical factors that help learners improve their language proficiency. However, this also puts pressure on learners, especially language learners. This research was carried out to investigate common vocabulary strategies students use for learning the words for the first time and methods for reinforcing the learned ones. In addition, the author tried to identify drawbacks that students deal with in vocabulary acquisition. Subsequently, recommendations are provided to address the challenges encountered in vocabulary acquisition. The researcher conducted this study by analyzing related documents, delivering survey questionnaires to 46 first-year English students from class 113221, and interviewing three Faculty of Foreign Languages teachers at UTEHY. The findings reveal a diverse range of strategies students employ for vocabulary learning, highlighting both frequently utilized and underutilized approaches. Consequently, the researcher hoped that the results of this study would provide valuable insights for both learners and teachers, enabling them to adapt and optimize their learning strategies or teaching methods for enhanced progress in vocabulary acquisition.*

Keywords: *vocabulary acquisition, first-year students, strategies, difficulties, suggestions.*

I. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is challenging, and vocabulary acquisition is critical in achieving proficiency. Learning vocabulary can be approached through various methods, yet devising an effective strategy for enhancing vocabulary is challenging. Indeed, many students need help with the complexities of vocabulary acquisition. For this reason, this research focused on determining the main vocabulary methods of first-year students majoring in English Language at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education. As a result, the author can identify students' challenges and propose new learning approaches to enhance and improve their vocabulary effectively.

II. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of vocabulary

* Hung Yen University of Technology and Education

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, vocabulary refers to the words recognized and employed by an individual or all the words within a given language or field. According to Nation (2001), "Vocabulary is the words we must know to communicate effectively." Those definitions show that vocabulary is the first element that English learners should learn to master English well besides other English.

2.2. The role of vocabulary in language learning

Language learning involves listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with vocabulary being a vital component for effective communication. Extensive vocabulary correlates with better performance across all language skills, as evidenced by studies like Meara (2005) and Nation (2013). A broad vocabulary enhances comprehension of spoken and written language, facilitates understanding of complex texts, and improves the ability to produce more complex sentences. Mastering vocabulary is therefore essential for proficient communication in a foreign language.

2.3. Difficulties in learning vocabulary

To effectively teach vocabulary, it's crucial to understand the challenges students face. Thornbury (2004: 27) identifies key factors contributing to word difficulty:

Pronunciation: Words with challenging pronunciations are harder to learn.

Spelling: Inconsistencies between sounds and spellings, like silent letters, pose difficulties.

Length and complexity: Longer words are easier, but frequent short words are more accessible.

Grammar: Understanding grammatical rules, especially if different from the learner's first language, adds complexity.

Meaning: Confusion arises with overlapping meanings, such as "make" vs. "do."

Range, connotation, and idiomatic usage: Words with broad usage or ambiguous connotations, along with idiomatic expressions, present challenges.

Gower, Philips, and Walter (1995: 143) elaborate on factors affecting vocabulary difficulty: Similarity to the first language (L1): Words similar to the student's native language can mislead.

Connotation: Understanding a word's positive or negative connotations impacts usage.

Spelling and pronunciation: English spelling and pronunciation complexities, especially for students from languages with regular systems, pose challenges. In summary, the success of teaching vocabulary hinges on recognizing these challenges and tailoring instruction accordingly.

2.4. Strategies to improve vocabulary acquisition

2.4.1. Definition of vocabulary learning strategies:

Vocabulary learning strategies are techniques or activities learners use to acquire and expand their vocabulary. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2014), these strategies involve not only learning individual words but also effectively using word knowledge in various contexts. Similarly, Nation (2013) defines them as conscious plans or actions learners take to improve their vocabulary knowledge. In essence, vocabulary learning strategies encompass deliberate and systematic activities aimed at enhancing vocabulary acquisition, leading to improved reading comprehension and overall language proficiency.

2.4.2. Classification vocabulary learning strategies

Schmitt (1997) introduced a systematic classification of vocabulary learning strategies, distinguishing between techniques applied when encountering a word for the first time and those utilized to strengthen understanding of learned words.

This categorization is based partially on the Oxford system (1990), which includes Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive strategies. Social Strategies (SOC) involve interaction for language learning, while Memory Strategies (MEM) connect new material with existing knowledge. Cognitive Strategies (COG) entail manipulating the target language, and Metacognitive Strategies (MET) involve conscious oversight of the learning process. Schmitt (1997) outlines strategies for understanding new words, such as linguistic analysis and contextual clues. Visual aids, bilingual dictionaries, and collaborative efforts are also effective. Seeking assistance from teachers and classmates enhances comprehension, with collaborative group activities supporting understanding comprehensively.

Strategies applied for strengthening understanding of learned words

In this discussion, based on Schmitt's (1997) classification, the strategies that aid in fortifying one's grasp of a word's meaning are divided into four types of strategies: Social (SOC), Memory (MEM), Cognitive (COG), and Metacognitive (MET). The following strategies collectively contribute to a comprehensive approach to nurturing vocabulary retention.

The first category, Social Strategies (SOC), emphasizes collaborative learning through group activities, flashcard reviews, and conversations with native speakers, fostering deeper vocabulary understanding.

Memory Strategies (MEM) involve 29 techniques like grouping words, using visuals, and connecting them to personal experiences, enhancing memory retention through associations and structured frameworks.

Cognitive (COG) and Metacognitive (MET) strategies focus on self-directed learning and reflection, including repetition, note-taking, engaging with English media, and spaced word practice, catering to individual learning needs.

Schmitt's (1997) theory, validated through research in Japan, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and enhancing vocabulary acquisition, making it an ideal basis for studying first-year English primary students at UTEHY.

III. Research methodology

3.1. The study context

At Hung Yen University of Technology and Education, first-year English students must study language practice subjects in the first semester, including speaking skill 1, listening 1, reading 1, and writing 1. The duration lasts two periods of 50 minutes for writing, speaking, and reading skills and up to 3 periods of 50 minutes a week for listening skills. For each skill, students will learn different topics, mainly social and travel, work or study. Because of the time limitation, students must put much effort into mastering each subject's knowledge, skills, and test-taking strategies. At the same time, students have many difficulties memorizing and consolidating vocabulary knowledge before and after each lesson.

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted at campus 1 of UTEHY. The study participants were 46 first-year English students aged 18 to 19 (11 males and 35 females) of the Faculty of Foreign

Language at UTEHY. They are all in class 113221. They are from different provinces, towns, and cities in the country's North, such as Hung Yen, Hai Duong, Thai Binh, Ha Noi, etc. Most of them come from the countryside. They have studied English since they were in secondary school. None of them has learned English in an English-speaking country. However, such variables as gender and place of living are not considered in this study. By the time of the survey, they were in the first half of the second semester of their first year. In order to have an in-depth study, three English teachers at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at UTEHY were also invited to participate in the interview. They are from 29 to 39 years old. They are three females. They all have Master's Degrees in English language. They have been teaching English at UTEHY for five to more than ten years.

3.3. Methods of the study

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore common vocabulary learning strategies, their effectiveness, student difficulties, and suggested solutions. Qualitative methodology was chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of these aspects, allowing for a nuanced exploration of students' experiences in learning vocabulary. Quantitative research collects and analyzes data across groups or explains an instrumental phenomenon. The researcher chose this method to calculate the number and percentage of each item about the frequency of students using vocabulary learning strategies to find out which strategies students use a lot. At the same time, we noted the difficulties students most often encounter when learning vocabulary.

3.4. Instruments

Document analysis laid the theoretical groundwork, followed by surveys distributed to first-year English primary students at UTEHY to gauge attitudes toward vocabulary learning and strategies. The questionnaire, based on Schmitt's taxonomy with modifications, included sections on prevalent vocabulary learning strategies. Additionally, participants were asked about encountered difficulties and proposed solutions, rating each strategy statement on a Likert scale. Interviews with three teachers provided deeper insights into perspectives, strategies, challenges, and recommendations regarding vocabulary acquisition and retention. Data analysis techniques were then applied to both questionnaire and interview data to ensure precise results for the research.

3.5. Data collection and data analysis

3.5.1 Procedures

First, interviews were conducted in English with three teachers, employing open-ended questions to encourage free expression. The session, lasting over two hours at UTEHY's Faculty of Foreign Languages office, produced transcripts analyzed for data. Insights from the interviews informed the questionnaire design and subsequent comparison with survey outcomes.

Second, a survey questionnaire, created on Google Forms, was distributed to 46 first-year students at UTEHY. Online distribution was chosen for its accessibility via smartphones with internet connections. Participants rated their frequency of utilizing learning and memorization strategies for new words over one week, marking applicable levels from always to never, with clear instructions provided.

3.5.2. Data analysis

3.5.2.1 The students' attitudes toward the role of learning English vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies.

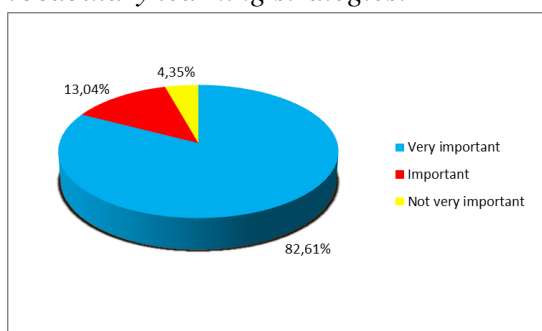


Chart 1: The students' attitudes toward learning English vocabulary

According to chart 1, most students (82,61%) appreciate the vital role of learning English vocabulary. Only 13,04 % said learning vocabulary is essential. 4,35% of students thought that vocabulary could be more important or more important. It means that students have enriched vocabulary knowledge; they could be better at the other four language learning skills, like reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The result of the interview with the teachers: "Accumulating much vocabulary is significant for first-year students." All teachers interviewed admitted, "This will help reduce obstacles when students learn listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills."

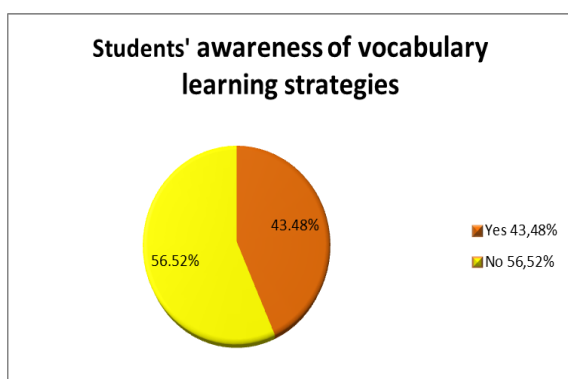


Chart 2: The students' awareness of vocabulary learning strategies

Regarding the popularity of vocabulary learning strategies for students, the questionnaire results highlight an exciting division among the students regarding their awareness of vocabulary learning strategies. Nearly half of the respondents, precisely 43.48%, reported that they possess some knowledge of these strategies. A considerable portion of the student population is acquainted with vocabulary learning methods. However, it is noteworthy that a slightly larger group, comprising 56.52% of the surveyed students, expressed a need for more familiarity with such strategies. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing this disparity in awareness and offering guidance to ensure that all students can benefit from effective vocabulary acquisition strategies.

3.5.2.2. Common Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by first- years English primary students

Strategies for learning new words

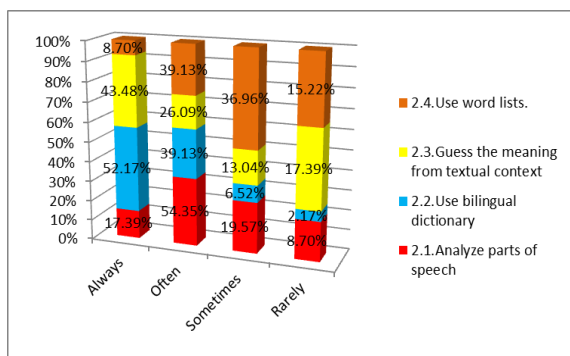


Table 1: The frequency of using DET strategies

Observing Table 1, 17.39% of students always used, 54.35% often used, 19.57% sometimes used, and 8.70% rarely used the strategy "analyzes parts of speech." This strategy requires learners to remember existing roots to guess the meaning of a word, so it also takes them much time to put it in their minds. Based on the table, the author found that using a dictionary was the most frequently utilized in vocabulary acquisition, with 52.17% always using it, 39.13% often, 6.52% sometimes, and 2.17% rarely resorting to this method. This choice is because learning the meaning of words through a dictionary is the fastest and most convenient way for students. However, students must also pay attention to using it properly; otherwise, it will reduce their ability to judge words and slow their reading speed. For the next item, 43.48% of students consistently employed the strategy of "guessing the meaning from textual context," while 26.09% frequently utilized this approach. Additionally, 13.04% reported using it on occasion, and 17.39% rarely applied this method. Notably, for English primary students, deducing meaning based on context proves beneficial for enhancing reading skills. Analyzing context aids readers in maintaining focus during reading while also facilitating the rapid and accurate interpretation of word meanings. Regarding using word lists, survey findings reveal that 8.7% of students always create word lists, 39.13% do it often, 36.96% do it sometimes, and 15.22% rarely group words together for study. Creating word lists is a common practice among students for enhancing their vocabulary. This approach is considered adequate, and students can enhance it further by incorporating tree or bubble diagrams into their lists, making the learning process more dynamic and enjoyable.

In summary, first-year students heavily rely on using a bilingual dictionary and often analyze parts of speech and guess meanings from textual context as their vocabulary learning strategies. Using word lists is less common, with very few students using this strategy.

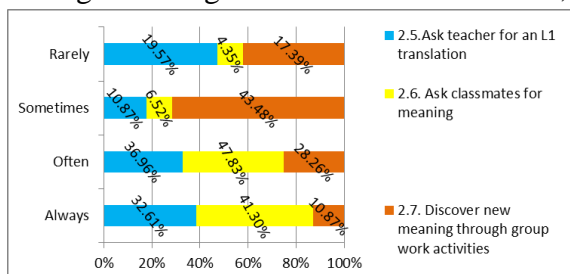


Table 2: The frequency of using SO strategies

It was presented in Table 2 that a significant percentage of respondents used 32.61% as always, 36.96% as usually, 10.87% as sometimes, and 19.57% as rarely ask their teacher for an L1 translation to learn the meaning of a new word. Understandably, many students choose this strategy because they will always receive reliable answers from their teachers. At

the same time, the teachers are also very willing to answer their students' questions. However, learners should not abuse this method because they are easily passive in learning. Besides, students also like to ask their friends for the meaning of the words (43.30% always, 47.83% often, 6.52% sometimes, and only 4.35% rarely use). This result could be due to the interactive activities in class and the fact that they feel free when talking to their friends. Using a word list in the textbook is another high-frequency method students use (28.26% always, 32.61% often, 26.09% sometimes, and only 13.04% rarely use). Thanks to the word list, students can immediately check the spelling and meaning of the word.

The last item indicates that discovering new meanings through group work activities is another common strategy among students, with 10.87% always used, 28.26% often, 43.48% sometimes, and 17.39% rarely used). Although it is less used than two other strategies,

Overall, the data analysis suggests that the "SO strategy" for learning a new word's meaning varies in terms of its popularity among respondents. The most common strategy is asking classmates and teachers for the word's meaning.

Strategies that were used to reinforce learned new words.

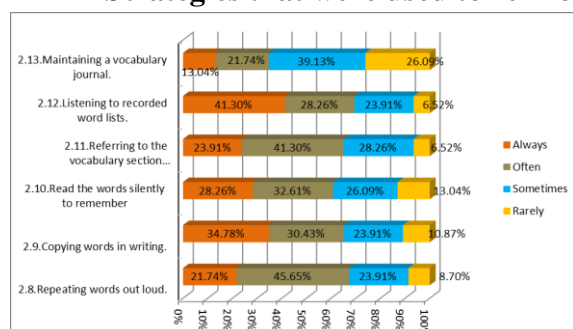


Table 3: The frequency of using strategies for learning the meaning of new words

Survey results in Table 3 show that repeating words out loud was the most frequently used procedure among the other strategies (21.74% always, 45.65% often, 23.91% sometimes, and only 8.07% rarely). Numerous students believed that this approach could assist them in enhancing their vocabulary, refining their verbal abilities, and improving their pronunciation.

Another widely adopted strategy among students is the act of copying words in writing or engaging in writing repetition. This method garnered significant usage, with 34.78% employing it always, 30.43% using it often, 23.91% employing it sometimes, and 10.87% using it rarely. This method helps learners remember the word's spelling and retain the word for the long term. For the next item, the table shows that the number of students engaging in silent reading to retain and remember new words appears to be a practical approach for learners, with 28.26% always, 32.61% often, 26.09% sometimes, and 13.04% rarely. This method allows them to internalize words and extend their memorization duration.

Regarding using the list of the words in the textbook, 23.91% of students always used it, 43.30% often used it, 28.26% sometimes used it, and 6.52% rarely used it) it. Thanks to this, students can look for the meaning of words without any difficulties. Listening to the CD tracks of word lists emerged as another commonly employed technique, with 41.30% of participants indicating they always used it, 28.06% using it frequently, 23.91% considering it a normal practice, and 6.52% rarely using this method. Listening to CD tracks of word lists

can be an effective and versatile method for vocabulary acquisition, catering to different learning styles and providing valuable pronunciation and contextual learning opportunities. The last item, maintaining the vocabulary journal, is the least frequently used in Chart 5, with 41.30% always used, 28.06% frequently used, 23.91% normal, and 6.52% rarely used. Although only a few students chose this method, maintaining a vocabulary journal is valuable for language learners as it promotes active learning, memory retention, and personalized progress tracking. It can improve language skills, increase confidence, and deepen understanding of the language and its culture.

Overall, based on the information presented in Table 3 regarding methods for memorizing new words, most students preferred repeating words out loud, writing repetition, or using the list of the words in the textbook to help them memorize once they understood their meanings.

3.5.2.3. The difficulties that the first-year English primary students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education faced in learning vocabulary

Students' difficulties in learning vocabulary	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
a. Discovering the meanings of new words	2,17%	32,60%	54,34%	10,87%
b. Retaining new words in your memory	4,35%	6,52%	60,87%	28,26%
c. Using new words in context	4,35%	8,7%	26,08%	60,87%
d. Pronouncing new words	6,52%	19,57%	43,48%	30,43%
e. Recognizing new words	19,57%	36,95%	26,08%	17,39%
f. Memorizing new words	13,04%	15,22%	45,65%	23,91%
g. Difficulty in memorizing the prefix and suffix of words	10,87%	4,35%	65,21%	19,57%
h. Remembering words without understanding their meaning	10,87%	39,13%	26,08%	23,91%
i. Spelling new vocabulary	6,52%	17,39%	45,65%	30,43%
j. Understanding the grammatical form of a word known as inflections	15,22%	19,57%	34,78%	30,43%
k. Not enough supports from teachers	6,52%	13,04%	67,39%	13,04%
l. Lack of time to learn	8,7%	10,87%	58,7%	26,08%
n. Lack of books/references books for learning	10,87%	6,52%	43,48%	39,13%

Table 4: Difficulties faced by the first-year English significant students

As revealed by the survey results in Table 4, students face various difficulties in learning vocabulary. The most prevalent challenges include retaining new words in memory (60.87%) and using new words in context (60.87%). Therefore, students may focus more on rote memorization than practical application, hindering their ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations. For the next point, pronouncing new words (30.43%) and understanding the grammatical form of words, known as inflections (30.43%), are also common issues.

Recognizing new words (36.95%) and remembering words without understanding their meaning (39.13%) pose additional hurdles. The result noted that students might encounter difficulty transferring passive recognition into active vocabulary use, highlighting the need for strategies to bridge this gap. There, 30,43% of students need help spelling new vocabulary words and encounter difficulty memorizing the prefixes and suffixes of words (19.57%). Furthermore, a significant proportion of students express concerns about a lack of support from teachers (67.39%) and insufficient time for learning (58.7%). %. These findings underline the importance of effective teaching methods and time management in language instruction. Adequate support and time allocation are essential for successful vocabulary acquisition.

Additionally, students need more books and reference materials for learning vocabulary (43.48%). The result showed that access to diverse learning resources can significantly aid students in their vocabulary-building efforts, highlighting the need for improving resource availability.

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of students' difficulties in vocabulary acquisition and emphasize the need for comprehensive support and resources in their language learning process.

3.5.2.3. Suggested solutions to improve the vocabulary of the first-year English primary students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education

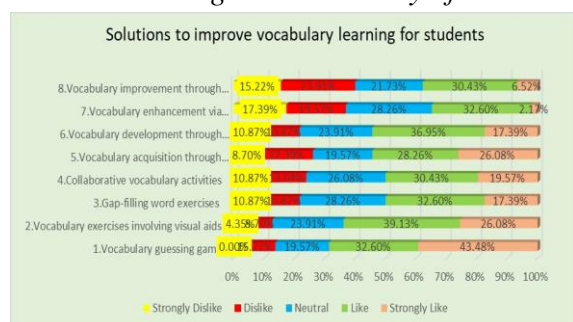


Table 5: Suggested solutions to improve the vocabulary of the first-year English primary students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education

As we can see from Table 5, vocabulary guessing games and vocabulary exercises involving visual aids garnered considerable favor, with a combined percentage of 76.08% and 65.21% in the like and strongly like, respectively. The following categories, "vocabulary acquisition through auditory learning" and "vocabulary development through oral communication," were voted for like and strongly like by students with the same percentage of 54.34%. The "collaborative vocabulary activities" is the next item chosen by almost all students, with 50% of both like and strongly like. Doing "gap-filling exercises" is another strategy 49.99% of students like and strongly like. Observing the table, the researcher also noticed that the two least preferred strategies are "vocabulary enhancement via text-based materials" and "vocabulary improvement through written exercises," with percentages of 36.96% and 39.13% in strongly dislike and dislike, respectively.

V. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary learning strategies are essential for language learners, enhancing their word bank, language skills, and communication abilities. Students, especially English primary students, have various options for these strategies, and choosing the right method tailored to each learner's abilities is crucial. The study found that students recognize the importance of vocabulary in language learning and value the use of strategies to memorize and consolidate learned words effectively. First-year students employ diverse strategies, including social strategies for understanding word meanings and repetition techniques for consolidation. However, they face challenges in pronunciation, contextual usage, and word retention. Solutions preferred by participants include interactive and visually oriented approaches. Understanding these preferences can guide educators in designing vocabulary enhancement methods that suit students' varied learning styles. Due to subjective limitations, the study only covered certain strategies, suggesting further research to explore additional

strategies and different student groups, such as second-year or non-major students at UTEHY.

References

- [1]. Gower, Roger, Phillips Diane & [5]. Nation, I. S. P. (2001). Learning vocabulary in another language. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- [2]. Schmitt, N. & McCarthy, M. (Eds.) (1997). Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition, And Pedagogy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3]. Schmitt, N. (2014). Size and depth of vocabulary knowledge: What the research shows. Language Learning, 64(s1), 913-951.
- [4]. Schmitt, N., & Zimmerman, C. B. (2002). Derivative word forms: What do learners know? TESOL Quarterly, 36
- [5]. Thornbury, S. (2004). How to teach vocabulary. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- [6]. P., (1998). A course in language teaching. Cambridge University Press.
- [7]. Walters Steve (1995). Teaching Practice: A Handbook for Teachers in Training. Edited by Underhill Adrian. Macmillan, n.d.
- [8]. Hu, M., & Nation, P. (2000). Unknown vocabulary density and reading comprehension. Reading in a Foreign Language, 13(1), 403-430.
- [9]. Laufer, B., & Nation, P. (1995). Vocabulary size and use: Lexical richness in L2 written production. Applied Linguistics, 16(3), 307-322.
- [10]. Meara, P. (2005). The contribution of vocabulary testing to describing students' general language proficiency. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning (Vol. 2, pp. 743-755).

NGHIÊN CỨU MỘT SỐ CHIẾN LƯỢC NÂNG CAO TỪ VỰNG CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH NĂM NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM KỸ THUẬT HÙNG YÊN

Hoàng Thị Hòa[†], Lê Thị Thanh Nga, Nguyễn Thị Bích Hạnh

Tóm tắt: *Nắm vững từ vựng là một trong những yếu tố quan trọng nhất giúp người học nâng cao trình độ ngôn ngữ của mình. Tuy nhiên, điều này cũng gây áp lực cho người học, đặc biệt là người học ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu các chiến lược từ vựng phổ biến mà học sinh sử dụng khi học từ lần đầu và các phương pháp củng cố những từ đã học. Ngoài ra, tác giả cố gắng chỉ ra những hạn chế mà học sinh gặp phải trong quá trình tiếp thu từ vựng. Sau đó, các khuyến nghị được đưa ra để giải quyết những thách thức gặp phải trong việc tiếp thu từ vựng. Nhà nghiên cứu thực hiện nghiên cứu này bằng cách phân tích các tài liệu liên quan, phát bảng câu hỏi khảo sát cho 46 sinh viên tiếng Anh năm thứ nhất lớp 113221 và phỏng vấn ba giáo viên Khoa Ngoại ngữ tại UTEHY. Các phát hiện này cho thấy một loạt các chiến lược mà sinh viên sử dụng để học từ vựng, nêu bật cả những phương pháp được sử dụng thường xuyên và không được sử dụng thường xuyên. Do đó, tác giả hy vọng rằng kết quả của nghiên cứu này sẽ cung cấp những hiểu biết*

[†] Trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Hùng Yên

có giá trị cho cả người học và giáo viên, giúp họ điều chỉnh và tối ưu hóa các chiến lược học tập hoặc phương pháp giảng dạy để nâng cao tiến bộ trong việc tiếp thu từ vựng.

Từ khóa: tiếp thu từ vựng, sinh viên năm thứ nhất, chiến lược, khó khăn, gợi ý.