

Original Paper

L1 Use and L2 Vocabulary Retention: Help or Hindrance?

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Abstract

Although exclusive use of the second language has long been considered as an important principle of second language teaching and the learners' first language has been suggested to have very limited role to play, recent studies have shown a different view that the L1 should be used as a tool to facilitate learners' second language learning. The present study investigated L1 use in the area of English vocabulary teaching by examining nine Chinese EFL learners who were at different proficiency levels. The findings showed that the use of Mandarin Chinese led to better immediate and lasting retention of the vocabulary they have learnt and that it benefited both lower-proficiency and higher-proficiency learners. The study also offers some implications for Chinese EFL teachers and suggests that the implementation of the English-only policy in the EFL classroom should be reexamined.

Keywords

L1 use, Chinese EFL students, vocabulary learning, immediate retention, lasting retention

1. Introduction

While there is well-established literature on the role of the learners' L1 in English language teaching, it should be pointed out that whether L1 use should be allowed in the EFL/ESL classroom remains a hotly debated issue in English language teaching.

With the emergence of the direct method, especially the communicative approach afterwards, many researchers have suggested that L1 use should be avoided in language classroom. Therefore, not surprisingly, the L1 seems to have no role to play in English foreign language teaching for a long time, which can be reflected by the views in support of either forbidding L1 use or minimizing L1 use in the language classroom.

With regard to the total prohibition of L1 use, Mattioli (2004) pointed out that for many years, research had suggested that EFL teachers only used English in their classrooms and many English language teaching professionals also believed the use of the L1 should never happen in modern communicative

language classes. Moreover, Chaudron (Duff & Polio, 1990, p. 154) wrote about the idea of minimizing L1 use by suggesting maximizing the L2 input:

In the typical foreign language classroom, the common belief is that the fullest competence in the TL (target language) is achieved by means of the teacher providing a rich TL environment, in which not only instruction and drill are executed in the TL, but also disciplinary and management operations.

Based on the above, it seems that the use of the L1 has long been discouraged in the foreign language classroom. However, in recent years, monolingual approaches has been challenged. Cook (2001), for example, noted:

It is time to open a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over 100 years, namely the systematic use of the first language in the classroom.

Ho (Mattioli, 2004), a Hong Kong secondary school EFL teacher, reported her appreciation of using the first language---Cantonese in classroom interactions after conducting the diary study with two groups of her Hong Kong students. Atkinson (1987) also proposed several advantages of the judicious use of the mother tongue. Moreover, in a study of comparing Samoan students doing academic tasks through the medium of English and through the medium of their first language, Lameta-Tufuga (Nation, 1997) found that the learners doing the task in their first language performed better than the learners doing the task in their second language.

It seems clear that there are two opposing views on the role of the L1 in EFL classrooms. Therefore, the role of the L1 in English language teaching is an issue worthy of further exploration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Arguments against Using the L1

Cook (2001) has observed one major argument keeping the L1 outside the classroom, which suggests second language learning should be based on the features of L1 acquisition. This argument mainly results from the L2=L1 acquisition hypothesis, which probably indicates that L2 learners should best learn their second language in the same way as they learn their first language. That is to say, learning the second language should completely depend on the second language itself and the L1 should not be used as a reference system to facilitate language teaching. However, with regard to this, Ellis (1994) argued that the hypothesis is only partially supported since significant differences exists when considering whether language acquisition device which leads to successful L1 acquisition is also available to L2 adult learners.

Moreover, the inefficient use of the L1, such as word-for-word translation method, should be partially responsible for the criticisms about L1 use, since it may impede the development of learners' abilities of practicing the second language as a whole and result in interlingual errors. For example, Hino (1988, p. 47) pointed out that the yakudoku, a deeply rooted word-for-word translation method in Japan, "clearly is a severe handicap for the Japanese student. It limits the speed at which the student reads,

induces fatigue, and reduces the efficiency with which s/he is able to comprehend”.

In addition, considering that learners have little exposure to the target language in the EFL context, it has been suggested that the target language should be the only language used in the classroom and L1 use should be minimized or even avoided for the purpose of maximizing the target language input. However, Auerbach (1993, p. 9) claimed that the exclusive use of target language “is rooted in a particular ideological perspective, rests on unexamined assumptions and serves to reinforce inequities in the broader social order”. Atkinson (1987, p. 242) proposed that “a ratio about 5 percent first language to about 95 percent target language may be more profitable”.

2.2 The Arguments for Using the L1

Newmark and Reibel (Ellis, 1994) stated that using the L1 is the best a learner can do to make up for what he does not know. Kern (1994) also claimed that the use of one’s L1 in the form of mental translation is inevitable, especially for L2 learners at beginning stages. He (1994) further reported that mental translation brought some potential benefits in the readers’ L2 reading comprehension processes, such as facilitating semantic processing, easing memory constraints and reducing affective barriers. Moreover, Cook (2001) argued similarly that “the L2 meanings do not exist separately from L1 meanings in the learners’ mind” and that the total prohibition of L1 use in the language classroom could only happen in the circumstances where the teacher does not speak the students’ L1 or the students speaks different L1s. Furthermore, an important argument offered by Atkinson (1987) is that allowing the use of the mother tongue in the L2 classroom seems to be a humanistic approach which enables learners to say what they want. Schweers (Mattioli, 2004, p. 23) discussed the relationship between the learners’ sense of security brought by L1 use and classroom dynamics, and suggested that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves”. Moreover, Heltai (1989) suggested several appropriate situations for using L1 translations. According to him, translation should be used when translation is an end in itself; when teaching English as a foreign language rather than a second language; when teaching learners at advanced level; when adult learners prefer conscious learning; when formal correctness is important; when the formality of the foreign language aroused learners’ interest; and when the teacher and students share the same L1.

2.3 Using L1 Translations in Teaching L2 Vocabulary

The L1 has been suggested to be used to deal with many aspects of foreign language teaching, including eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instructions to beginners, cooperation among learners, discussions of classroom methodology, presentation and reinforcement of language, checking for sense, testing, development of useful learning strategies (Atkinson, 1987). The present study examined the use of the L1 particularly in the area of English language vocabulary teaching, because vocabulary teaching, as an element of foreign language teaching, is considered as having a central role in language teaching in recent years, which can be seen from Wilkins’ (Grauberg, 1997, p. 5) statement that “...without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing at all can be conveyed”.

Moreover, with regard to L2 vocabulary teaching, it is true that there are various ways of conveying the

meaning of a new word, such as a picture, a demonstration, a real stimulus, an L2 synonym and an L1 translation. Among these, using L1 translations seems to be one of the most popular methods of teaching L2 vocabulary. Hunt and Beglar (2002), for instance, observed that the common way of teaching the 3,000 most frequent words to L2 learners was through word pairs in which an L2 word was matched with an L1 translation equivalent. Nevertheless, there are many criticisms about using the L1 in L2 vocabulary teaching. The major arguments in the literature over this issue can be listed as follows.

2.3.1 The Arguments against Teaching L2 Vocabulary through L1 Translations

Folse (2004), in his discussion of the use of translations to learn new vocabulary, has observed several possible reasons for not using L1 translations:

One reason he (2004) offered was that no exact one-to-one translation equivalents could be found between two languages. With regard to this, he provided specific examples and further pointed out that the meaning of the words “afternoon” and “evening” in English could probably be changed when they are translated into some other languages. Moreover, this argument probably can also be demonstrated by Jiang (2004, p. 104), who noted that “translation equivalents from two languages may not always share identical semantic properties and boundaries. Subtle to substantial semantic differences may exist between two translation equivalents”.

Another important argument is that words are difficult to translate. Since most of them are polysemous, learners are very likely to mistranslate a word when dealing with a single word having many different meanings. Moreover, Folse (2004) mentioned that the process of translating a new L2 word into the L1 did not enable learners to use the word without mistakes.

2.3.2 The Arguments for Teaching L2 Vocabulary through L1 Translations

Primarily, the use of L1 translations should not be discouraged simply because exact one-to-one translation equivalents can hardly be found between two languages. According to Folse (2004), although there are a few words which have no L1 equivalents or do not translate well, the number of these words is in fact quite small. Jiang (2004) also pointed out that the central meaning of an L2 word and its L1 translation are usually equivalent and on the basis of the transferred central meaning a learner can often correctly use an L2 word both receptively and productively.

Moreover, concerning whether teaching vocabulary through L1 translations can enable learners to use a word, Jiang (2004, p. 104) indicated that to some extent the initial use of an L1 concept or translation equivalent could lead to the correct use of an L2 word although “accurate and idiomatic use of L2 words requires the development of semantic structures that are specific to L2 words”. This probably suggests that teaching L2 vocabulary first through L1 translations is helpful.

However, in spite of the two opposing views discussed above, “studies comparing the effectiveness of various methods for learning always come up with the result that an L1 translation is the most effective” (Nation, 2003). For instance, Calis and Dikilitas (2012) analyzed elementary learners’ reaction to the use of translation as a L2 learning practice and claimed that use of translation helped them memorize target vocabulary. In a study with 78 Dutch first-year university students of French, Hulstijn et al.

(Folse, 2004) found that L1 glosses of the target vocabulary led to better vocabulary learning. In a study of 128 Hebrew English learners, Laufer and Shmueli (Folse, 2004) mentioned that words with L1 glosses were always retained better than words with L2 glosses. Prince (Folse, 2004) stated that low-proficiency students could recall more items using L1 translations rather than using L2 contexts. Nation (Folse, 2004) also claimed that if the meaning of a word was conveyed through an L1 translation first, many learners could learn it faster. Moreover, in a study of 60 Malaysian elementary level ESL learners, Ramachandran and Rahim (2004) reported that the group who received translation method as treatment could recall more words than the non-translation group.

It can be seen from the above that many previous empirical studies have shown the positive role of L1 translations in vocabulary teaching. However, very few studies have investigated Chinese university EFL learners at different proficiency levels and their attitudes regarding using the L1 in English vocabulary teaching and learning. The present study is such an attempt.

3. Research Design

This section gives information about my data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Research Questions

The research questions addressed in the study are as follows:

- 1) Which way of teaching new English vocabulary can lead to better immediate retention, the L1, the L2 or the combination of the L1 and L2?
- 2) Which way of teaching new English vocabulary can lead to better lasting retention, the L1, the L2 or the combination of the L1 and L2?
- 3) Does the use of the L1 in English vocabulary teaching benefit English learners at different proficiency levels? Do low proficiency and high proficiency learners benefit from learning new vocabulary through L1 translations to the same extent?
- 4) What are the learners' attitudes towards the use of the L1 in English vocabulary teaching and learning?

The key terms in the questions are defined as follows:

Immediate retention: ability to recall the meanings of new English words after learning without delay.

Lasting retention: ability to recall the meanings of newly learnt English words after one week.

The first two questions investigate immediate and lasting word retention, for Carter (1998, p. 202) pointed out,

A definition of learning a word depends crucially on what we mean by a word, but it also depends crucially on how a word is remembered, over what period of time and in what circumstances it can be recalled, and whether learning a word also means that it can be retained.

Moreover, the methods of giving L1-only and the combination of L1 translations and English definitions were both examined for the purpose of providing a complete picture for the use of the L1 in English vocabulary teaching. The third question is included since the role of English proficiency is

seldom addressed in the previous studies in this area, and the fourth question is about learners' attitudes, which may have direct effects on the use of the L1 in English vocabulary teaching.

3.2 Subjects

The present study investigated nine Chinese EFL learners who were participating in a four-week college summer program in the UK. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22, and all of them have learnt English as a foreign language for at least seven years. When the study was carried out, they were in the second week of their stay in the UK.

The nine subjects were chosen from five English classes--three intermediate, one low intermediate and one upper intermediate. One of the subjects came from the low intermediate group, one from the upper intermediate group and the other seven from the three intermediate groups.

In the study, these nine participants were treated as a mixed group and given three different treatments--English definitions, Chinese translations and the combination of Chinese and English respectively in the three teaching sessions.

3.3 Methods

The Chinese EFL learners were tested in the study in order to determine the effectiveness of three types of vocabulary teaching, that is, teaching vocabulary through Chinese translations, English definitions and the combination of Chinese and English. The immediate retention tests were conducted immediately after each teaching session, while the delayed retention tests were carried out after one week. Both the immediate and delayed retention tests were conducted respectively for three times for each type of vocabulary teaching, and in the teaching sessions all the learners were treated as one group.

Moreover, as this study also aimed to investigate the learners' attitudes towards the use of their mother tongue in EFL classrooms, some of the learners were interviewed, including those who had the greatest and slightest increase in their scores when receiving either Chinese translations or the combination of Chinese and English as treatments as compared to receiving English-only as treatment.

3.4 Materials

In the study, sixty lexical items which are new to the nine subjects were selected and used as target words. For this purpose, seventy lexical items were extracted from the "English Vocabulary in Use: Upper-intermediate and advanced" (McCarthy & O'Dell, 1994) and sixty of them which are new to two advanced learners and cannot be easily inferred by them based on the knowledge of words, prefixes and suffixes they have already known were chosen preliminarily. Moreover, the sixty selected target words were classified into three groups that were all presented in the word lists in the three treatment sessions of this study.

In addition, one of the most widely used vocabulary measures---the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (Folse, 2004) which has five levels of "knowing a word" was applied and given as the five options for each target word in both the immediate and delayed retention tests. Each group consisting of twenty target words was tested by using a multiple choice question format. In the tests, the subjects were asked to choose one from the five given options to indicate their level of knowing each target word and

meanwhile were required to provide either English definitions or Chinese translations of the words learnt when choosing comparatively higher level options of “knowing a word”.

Regarding this, an interesting point to note is that two important resources of the data--what learners say they know (as shown by their choices) and what they actually know(as shown by their test scores), can be obtained from the tests at the same time by using the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale. It should be pointed out that although there is a large overlap between them, differences may also exist. Students may not choose an option that reveals their actual knowledge of a target word, if thinking they know the word that they actually do not know or feeling embarrassed when choosing low level options. Therefore, the learner’ choices in the tests were also used as a measurement in the present study.

3.5 Procedures

This study comprised three teaching sessions and six retention tests---three immediate retention tests and three delayed retention tests one week later.

In the teaching sessions, the 60 target words were taught to learners over a period of three days, that is to say, twenty target words were taught once a day for a particular treatment (See Table 1). Moreover, the time used for each treatment session was approximate 15 minutes.

Table 1. The Division of Target Words Taught Per Day for Each Treatment

Day	The number of target words	Treatment
Day 1	20	English definitions
Day 2	20	Chinese translations
Day 3	20	The combination of English and Chinese

At the beginning of each session, the teacher used slides to show the twenty target words for that particular session. The learners were first asked to confirm whether they knew the meanings of any target words, and then were provided with the meanings of target words. Furthermore, given the accuracy of the meanings, both the English definitions and Chinese translations of 20 target words for each session were extracted from “the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary”(6th edition, 2004). Moreover, the teacher used English-only as the medium of vocabulary teaching when giving the learners English definitions as the treatment while she spoke both English and Chinese when teaching vocabulary through Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese. In addition, during the teaching sessions, the learners were permitted to take notes if they liked. However, having a peep at their notes when tested was not allowed.

After each teaching session, the learners were given an immediate retention test, in which they were asked to choose the level of their knowledge about each target word according to the five options and write down the English definitions or Chinese translations of those words when choosing comparatively higher level options of “knowing a word”. Additionally, the delayed retention tests were

administered similarly over a period of three days one week later and the testing papers used in the immediate tests were also used in the delayed tests.

3.6 Scoring and Data Analysis

For every subject in the study, there were three immediate retention scores and three delayed retention scores for the three treatment sessions. In order to mark accurately, the scores were given on the basis of the meanings provided by *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (9th edition), and double checked by a Chinese postgraduate who also had language teaching experience. In the tests, both English definitions and Chinese translations are accepted for explaining the target words in each treatment session. Moreover, minor grammatical and spellings errors were ignored as long as the general idea was clear and accurate.

In addition, the data analysis was mainly based on the scores on the immediate and the delayed retention tests. The mean of the subjects' retention scores for each treatment and the t values obtained by making comparisons were used to measure the effectiveness of the three kinds of treatments. Moreover, the percentage of each option in the tests was also used to measure the subjects' performances.

4. Results

The mean scores and the standard deviations of the immediate and the delayed retention tests are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean Retention Scores and Standard Deviations for Each Treatment

Treatment	Immediate test	Delayed test
English definitions	M=3	M=1.78
	SD=1.15	SD=1.23
Chinese translations	M=8.78	M=3.44
	SD=3.12	SD=1.34
The combination of English and Chinese	M=10.67	M=4.78
	SD=2.98	SD=2.57

Note. Maximum score=20

Furthermore, the five options in the retention tests which represented the five different levels of “knowing a word” were another important measurement in the study. Among these five options, it would be true to say that the first and second options were low levels of “knowing a word” while the third, fourth and fifth options represented comparatively high levels. Moreover, it can be seen that the percentages of each option in the immediate and delayed retention tests were presented respectively in Figure 1 and Figure 2, for the purpose of comparing the level of their knowledge of those target words after receiving the three different types of treatments.

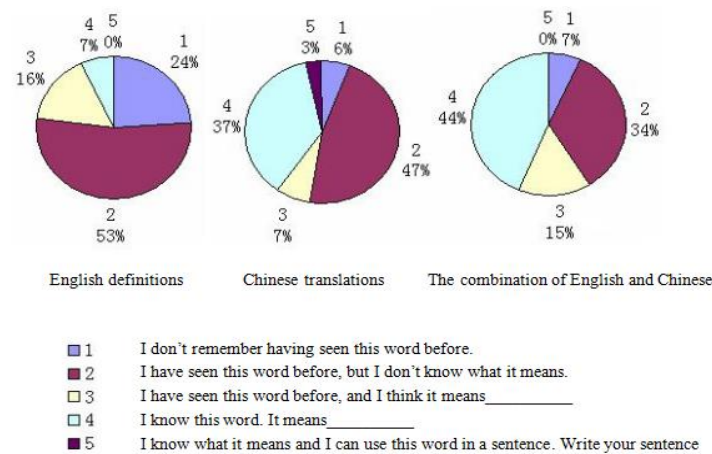


Figure 1. Percentage of Each Option in the Immediate Retention Tests for Each Treatment

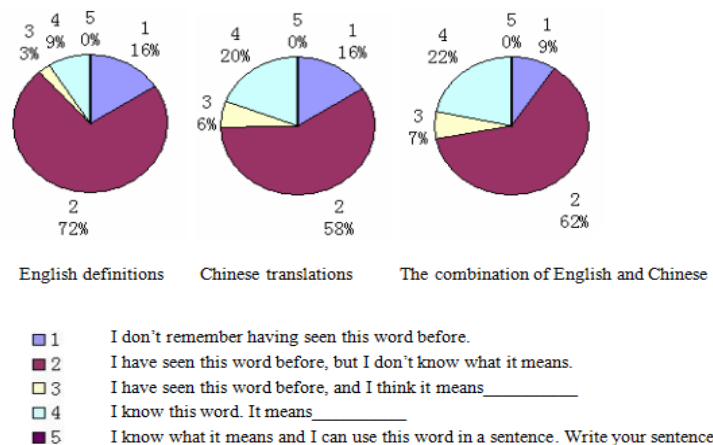


Figure 2. Percentage of Each Option in the Delayed Retention Tests for Each Treatment

4.1 L1 Use and Immediate Retention

With regard to immediate retention, it can be seen from Table 2 that the subjects seemed to perform better in the immediate retention tests after receiving either Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese translations, for they achieved higher mean retention scores for these two treatments.

Furthermore, in order to examine the effectiveness of these two kinds of treatments in terms of resulting better immediate retention, t-tests were also conducted based on the statistics in Table 2. As a result, we had two t values for comparing the subjects' performances under the circumstances of receiving Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese definitions with their performances after receiving English definitions. The t value for comparing the treatments of providing English explanations and Chinese translations indicated a significant statistical result, as shown by $t=5.25$, $df=16$ and $p<0.005$. Moreover, the t value for comparing the methods of giving English definitions and the combination of English and Chinese definitions also showed significant difference between them. The statistical result can be summarized as: $t=7.24$, $df=16$ and $p<0.005$.

In addition, it can be seen from Figure 1 that after receiving the treatment of Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese definitions, the subjects seemed to achieve higher levels of knowing the target words in the immediate tests, because of the greater total percentage of the third, fourth, and fifth options which demonstrated the learners' ability to recall the meanings of the target words, although they probably could not always provide correct explanations for the target words when choosing the higher level options. Based on the above findings, it appeared that providing Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese was more effective in terms of resulting in better immediate retention.

4.2 L1 Use and Lasting Retention

It can be observed from Figure 2 that compared to the greater total percentage of the first and second options for the treatment of giving English definitions, the subjects seemed to report comparatively higher levels of their knowledge of those words taught through either Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese definitions, on the basis of the greater total percentage of the third and fourth options. Therefore, it can be inferred that the treatments involving the subjects' L1 in vocabulary teaching such as providing Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese definitions could probably lead to better lasting retention.

Moreover, Table 2 seemed to show that the subjects had better performances when taught through Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese definitions in the delayed retention tests, for they attained comparatively higher mean retention scores for those two treatments.

In addition, according to Table 2, t-tests were also conducted for the purpose of comparing the subjects' performances after receiving Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese definitions with their performances after receiving English definitions in the delayed tests. The t value for the comparison of the treatments of giving English definitions and Chinese translations indicated a significant statistical result, which could be summarized as: $t=2.72$, $df=16$ and $p<0.01$. Moreover, the t value for the comparison of the treatments of providing English definitions and the combination of English and Chinese definitions also showed significant difference between them, as presented by $t=3.16$, $df=16$ and $p<0.005$.

4.3 A Comparison of the Treatments of Providing L1 Translations and the Combination of the L1 and L2

It seemed that there was a need to compare the levels of the subjects' knowledge of the target words after receiving two types of treatments--Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese both in the immediate and delayed retention tests, based on the statistics in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

In the immediate retention tests, it can be seen that the total percentage of the high level options (the third, fourth and fifth options) under the circumstance of receiving the combination of English and Chinese definitions as treatment were slightly greater than the total percentage of the high level options under the condition of receiving Chinese translations. However, in the delayed retention tests, the total percentages of the high level options for these two treatments were very similar. Therefore, it would probably be true to say that no significant difference existed between the subjects' performances after

receiving these two types of treatments respectively.

Moreover, Considering that the subjects could not always respond to a word correctly even if they thought they were sure about its meaning, the statistics in Table 2 still need to be analyzed to compare the effectiveness of using the L1 and the combination of the L1 and L2. A cursory glance at the mean retention scores on the immediate and delayed retention tests seemed to reveal slight difference between these two treatments. However, the two *t* values for comparing the effectiveness of these two treatments in terms of resulting immediate and lasting retention indicated insignificant statistical results. The findings about immediate retention can be shown as: $t=1.31$, $df=16$ and $p>0.05$, while the statistics about delayed retention can be summarized as: $t=1.38$, $df=16$ and $p>0.05$.

4.4 The Role of the Chinese EFL Learners' English Proficiency

In order to examine the role of the Chinese-speaking EFL learners' English proficiency, it seems that it is better to compare the performances of the upper intermediate student and the low intermediate student in the immediate and delayed retention tests. Their scores on the immediate and delayed retention tests are presented respectively in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3. The Retention Scores of the Low Intermediate Student

Treatment	Immediate test	Delayed test
English definitions	1	1
Chinese translations	10	3
The combination of English and Chinese	10	2

Note. Maximum score=20

Table 4. The Retention Scores of the Upper Intermediate Student

Treatment	Immediate test	Delayed test
English definitions	5	3
Chinese translations	13	4
The combination of English and Chinese	14	7

Note. Maximum score=20

As can be seen from Table 3 and Table 4, the use of Chinese in vocabulary teaching could help both the low proficiency student and the high proficiency student to recall the meanings of the target words immediately, because their scores were much higher when receiving Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese definitions in the immediate retention tests. Furthermore, it seems that they could benefit from the use of Chinese to the same extent in the immediate tests.

Moreover, the results of the delayed retention tests showed that their scores for the treatment of Chinese translations had no big difference with the scores they had for the treatment of English

definitions. However, when receiving the combination of English and Chinese as treatment, the high proficiency student attained much higher scores than the low proficiency student did. Therefore, it would probably be true to say that the high proficiency student could benefit more from the combination of English and Chinese in terms of lasting retention.

4.5 Learners' Attitudes towards L1 Use in English Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

In the study, six subjects were selected and interviewed. Five of them had much higher scores when provided Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese, whereas the other one had slightly higher scores when provided the same treatments.

First of all, with regard to how they felt about the three types of treatments, one of the subjects, Henry, who had very different scores in the retention tests for the three different treatments, said:

I prefer to learn the English words presented together with the combination of English and Chinese definitions or just Chinese translations instead of those words simply presented with English definitions, because I found that I could get a better understanding of the target words through Chinese.

Meanwhile, Lily, who had very similar scores in the retention tests for the three different treatments, mentioned:

Personally speaking, I feel no significant difference between learning new English vocabulary through English explanations and through Chinese translations. Sometimes English seems to be more vivid for me because they are usually more detailed.

However, according to their self-report, it seemed that the method of teaching English vocabulary through the combination of English definitions and Chinese translations was more preferable to teaching vocabulary through just Chinese translations, since English definitions were also considered to be very helpful, especially when several English synonyms shared the same Chinese equivalent. Furthermore, they found that Chinese translations became more meaningful and much easier to remember when provided after English definitions.

Moreover, with regard to dictionary use, all of the subjects reported that bilingual dictionaries were the tools they would like to resort to rather than monolingual dictionaries and that when they looked up a new word in a bilingual dictionary their attentions often focus on Chinese translations. The possible reason they offered for this was that Chinese translations were usually clearer and shorter as compared to English definitions.

In addition, the subjects agreed that using Chinese in their English vocabulary learning was inevitable. For example, they were very likely to expect to get a Chinese translation from the teacher when taught a new English word through its English synonyms and if the teacher did not share the same first language with them, they would certainly struggle to search for a Chinese translation of the target word in their minds. Moreover, they found that “knowing a word” happened usually when they had a Chinese translation of it.

What's more, an interesting point to note here is that although the subjects actually used Chinese

translations very often in their English vocabulary learning, almost all of them revealed that they were the advocates of the English-only policy widely implemented in current China and one of their aims of joining the summer training programme before coming to the UK was to improve their English level in the monolingual L2 classroom, especially enlarging their English vocabulary. However, after studying in the UK for around two weeks, most of them found that monolingual classroom environment was not as helpful as they expected. For instance, as Tommy said:

It is more difficult for me to remember those new English words taught through English explanations by native English teachers, as compared to those words taught through either Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese definitions by my Chinese English teachers, which probably because sometimes even understanding an English synonym of a target word is difficult for me.

4.6 Summary of Results

The study mainly suggested that L1 use had a crucial and positive role to play in English vocabulary teaching. Furthermore, regarding the two different forms of L1 use--L1 translations and the combination of L1 translations and English definitions, the results of the tests indicated that no one was more effective than the other. However, according to the interview, the learners strongly preferred to learn new vocabulary through the combination of the L1 and English rather than L1-only. Moreover, this study examined the role of English proficiency and found that both the low proficiency learner and the high proficiency learner could benefit from L1 use in terms of word retention and that probably the high proficiency learner benefited more from the combination method in terms of lasting retention. Additionally, based on the interview, the L1 was a tool that these EFL learners would like to resort to in their English vocabulary learning.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Superiority of L1 Translations

The subjects' better performances in the retention tests after receiving Chinese translations or the combination of English and Chinese as treatments seemed to indicate that for EFL learners, L1 translations may be superior to English synonyms in the following several aspects.

Firstly, it has been suggested that vocabulary learning can be considered as a process of acquiring and developing concepts (Dale & O' Rourke, 1971, p. 3) and the use of L1 translations is a direct and effective way that enables learners to associate new English vocabulary with the familiar concepts they have already known. With regard to this, a revised bilingual hierarchical memory model proposed by Kroll and Stewart (Gao, 2005, p. 55) can be seen to indicate that the conceptual links between the L1 lexical items and concepts are stronger than those between L2 lexical items and concepts, and lexical links from L2 to L1 are stronger than those from L1 to L2 (see Figure 3). Thus it can be seen that "the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in the L2" (Nation, 2003).

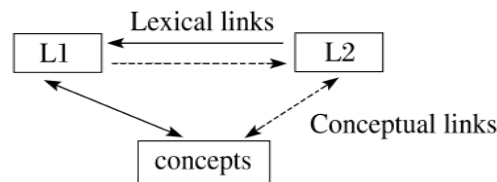


Figure 3. A Revision of Bilingual Hierarchical Memory Model

Secondly, L1 translations are usually shorter as compared to English definitions. Therefore, it is not surprising that for most learners, L1 translations seem easier to remember. Regarding this, Mckeown (Nation, 2003) also suggested that L1 translations usually have the qualities, such as clarity, brevity and familiarity, which are very important in effective teaching.

Thirdly, it cannot be denied that for the learners who have limited knowledge of English vocabulary, especially for those who are at the early stage of learning English, L1 translations are usually more meaningful than L2 definitions. Furthermore, for those learners who are not proficient in English, using L1 translations can gradually help them get rid of embarrassment and build their confidence.

What's more, for the learners who cannot concentrate on the "boring" instructions in an "unfamiliar" language, reasonably involving L1 translations probably can arouse their interests, since as Ramachandran and Rahim (2004, p. 173) pointed out, the use of L1 could make learning new vocabulary less tedious than struggling to understand various L2 definitions.

5.2 The Combination Method

Although the results of the retention tests indicated the method of providing the combination of English and Chinese were not more effective than giving Chinese translations, the subjects showed strong preferences of using the combination method in the interviews after the tests. One of the main reasons they offered was that Chinese translations seemed to be more impressive when provided after they tried to understand English definitions, even if they failed to get the idea of English definitions. Another reason they provided was that English definitions were found to be useful for distinguishing several English synonyms sharing the same Chinese equivalent.

Furthermore, using the combination method in the present study was not only because it was a common method that many non-native English teachers actually used in their vocabulary teaching, but also because this method was a form of combining explicit vocabulary instruction (providing Chinese translations) with implicit vocabulary instruction (providing English explanations) which according to Sokmen (Ramachandran & Rahim, 2004, p. 162), could promote better vocabulary learning. Moreover, as we can see, many studies on vocabulary acquisition were to "explore the points at which explicit vocabulary learning is more efficient when it becomes implicit vocabulary learning" (Carter, 1998, p. 202). Exploring the combination of explicit and implicit teaching in this study probably can provide us with another perspective on these issues.

5.3 Learners' Expectations and Learning Strategies

Based on the interview, it seems that there was a discrepancy between the subjects' expectations and the

learning strategies they actually used. It can be seen that on the one hand, they advocated the use of English-only instruction and expected to perform better in the English-only classroom environment, for example, enlarging their English vocabulary quickly; on the other hand, they preferred the learning strategies like using the L1 both inside and outside the classroom, such as expecting to get an L1 translation from the teacher or trying to search for an L1 translation in their minds when learning a new English word in the classroom and using bilingual dictionaries when learning independently outside the classroom.

In fact, it should be pointed out that although most EFL learners often learn English vocabulary using translation method, they rarely recognize that it is a very effective way of learning English vocabulary and the only reason for their use of L1 translations is that it seems much easier for them. Conversely, many learners even tend to attribute their “failure” to the translation method and regard it as an inefficient way of learning English vocabulary, because of the discrepancy between their aspiration of learning English vocabulary as many as possible in a short-term period and the limited number of words they can actually learn. Therefore, it is not surprising that many EFL learners, who are currently using the L1 in their English vocabulary learning, are very likely to assume that English-only environment would be more effective. The subjects of this study are such good examples.

Moreover, it would be true to say that the subjects of this study were somewhat special since they obtained a chance to study in the UK and experienced a process of gradually recognizing the effectiveness of their learning strategies like using L1 translations in English vocabulary learning by making a comparison of their previous vocabulary learning experience in China and their current studying experience in the UK. It is very likely that they would become more confident in using those learning strategies after they returned to China. However, considering the fact that a majority of EFL learners cannot get such an opportunity, raising learners’ awareness of the value of L1 translations is an important responsibility of EFL teachers.

5.4 L1 Translations and the Ability to Use English Vocabulary

There is no doubt that the learners’ ability to use target English words in the study can be demonstrated by the percentages of the fifth option in Figure 1 and Figure 2. From Figure 1 and Figure 2, it can be seen that in most circumstances, the percentages of the fifth option were 0%. Moreover, it should be pointed out that although the percentage of the fifth option for the treatment of providing just Chinese translations in the immediate test was 3%, the sentences in which the subjects used the target words were not structured in a native way. These findings showed that the subjects developed very little ability to use the target words when learning vocabulary through the three types of treatments in the study, which to some extent seemed to support the argument that translation from English to L1 did not enable learners to use the target words without mistakes (Folse, 2004, p. 64) and the statement that “accurate and idiomatic use of L2 words requires the development of semantic structures that are specific to L2 words” (Jiang, 2004, p. 104). However, considering no any single definitions can allow this kind of development, L1 use should not be set aside because of this reason.

5.5 English and the L1

As Nation (2003) pointed out, “in some countries, English and the L1 are in competition with each other and the use of English increases at the expense of the L1”, which to some degree probably demonstrate how a majority of EFL teachers and learners currently feel about the relationship between the use of English and the L1 in English language teaching.

It should be pointed out that although the use of English and the L1 seem to be somewhat conflicting in the classroom, the relationship between English and the L1 is actually positive, for example, in this study, the use of the L1 can enhance English vocabulary learning. Moreover, it would be true to say that it was because of the positive effects of L1 use in English language teaching that the learners’ L1 started being used in English language teaching and the competition between the use of English and the L1 emerged. Therefore, it can be seen that the use of English does not necessarily compete with the use of learners’ L1 and to find the proper amount of L1 use in an English class probably should be the key not only for making good use of the L1 but also for dealing with the somewhat conflicting relationship between the use of English and the L1.

6. Conclusion

The major finding of the study was that the use of L1 translations could make English vocabulary teaching more effective since it had been observed that the subjects had better immediate retention and lasting retention when learning new English vocabulary through either Chinese translations or the combination of Chinese and English as compared to learning vocabulary through English-only. This study confirmed the positive role of the L1 in English language teaching suggested by many existing research. Furthermore, we found that using the L1 could benefit English learners at different proficiency levels and it was in fact a learning strategy that many learners would like to resort to although probably not many of them recognized the value of the L1.

The significance of the present study in English vocabulary teaching probably can be seen from the following two aspects. First, the study not only examined the effectiveness of L1 use and its possibility of benefiting different proficiency English learners, but also found the discrepancy between learners’ expectation and the learning strategy they actually used, which showed that it was very necessary for EFL teachers to arouse learners’ awareness of the value of L1 translations in addition to using it in their vocabulary teaching. Second, non-native English speaking countries need to reconsider the implementation of the English-only policy in English language classrooms and the decisions to hire more and more native English speakers in their ELT profession. Moreover, EFL teachers should choose the teaching method on the basis of their own teaching experience and judgment instead of simply following the method suggested by empirical studies.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications

As we can see, using the learners’ L1 is not only an effective way for English teachers to convey the meaning of new vocabulary but also an effective learning strategy for both high-proficiency and

low-proficiency learners to understand and remember those words. Therefore, for the purpose of making good use of the L1, there is a need to give some suggestions about how to use it effectively in practical English vocabulary teaching.

Firstly, teachers should not discourage students' use of the L1. Instead, they should help students realize that using the L1 in English vocabulary learning is not an inferior learning strategy so that students may have confidence in learning vocabulary through L1 translations instead of feeling embarrassed.

Secondly, learners probably should be encouraged to learn an English word first through its English definition and then through its Chinese translation, since Craik and Lockhart (Carter, 1998, p. 203) stated that "the more processes that are involved in the learning of a word, the superior the retention and the recall". One of the subjects in this study also reported that a target word seemed to be more impressive if its Chinese translation was provided after the English explanation.

Thirdly, native English teachers who teach EFL learners should learn learners' L1 as much as possible in order to convey the meanings of new English vocabulary more effectively. So far, not many native English teachers know much about their students' mother tongue. Therefore, not surprisingly, L1 use usually does not happen in their lessons to help explain difficult new English words to the students.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study

The present study is a small-scale research since only nine Chinese EFL learners participated in it. Furthermore, only two subjects---the low intermediate learner and the upper intermediate learner were investigated to examine the role of EFL learners' English proficiency. Perhaps more subjects should be examined in order to get a more convincing conclusion as to the question whether L1 use can benefit higher-proficiency learners and lower-proficiency learners to the same extent.

In order to better examine the role of learners' English proficiency, future research needs to select two groups of EFL learners who are at different proficiency levels and then compare their performances under the circumstances of receiving English definitions, Chinese translations and the combination of English and Chinese as three different treatments.

In addition, more studies are needed to investigate L1 use for other particular functions in EFL classrooms such as elicitation, interactions between learners, testing and classroom management.

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Appendix 1.

Please check one box for each word according to the following five options and fill in the blanks when choosing one of the last three options.

1. I don't remember having seen this word before.
2. I have seen this word before, but I don't know what it means.
3. I have seen this word before, and I think it means _____
(provide an English synonym or an L1 translation)
4. I know this word. It means _____
(provide an English synonym or an L1 translation)
5. I can use this word in a sentence. Write your sentence _____
(If you do #5, be sure to do #4 also.)

	1	2	3	4	5	
freckle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
ageism	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
jagged	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
agitation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
boutique	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
constipated	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
outlay	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
cosmonaut	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
pail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
dissuade	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
discreet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
dividend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
eccentric	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
turbulent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
apprenticeship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
slither	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
jodhpurs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
tawdry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
circumspect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
thaw	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

Name: _____ Sex: _____

Age: _____ Major: _____

Please check one box for each word according to the following five options and fill in the blanks when choosing one of the last three options.

1. I don't remember having seen this word before.
2. I have seen this word before, but I don't know what it means.
3. I have seen this word before, and I think it means _____
(provide an English synonym or an L1 translation)
4. I know this word. It means _____
(provide an English synonym or an L1 translation)
5. I can use this word in a sentence. Write your sentence _____
(If you do #5, be sure to do #4 also.)

	1	2	3	4	5	
bruise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
blustery	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
edible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
forge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
gallop	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
fiddle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
indigestion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
kip	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
meager	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
pissed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
timber	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
suede	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
somber	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
reptile	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
glider	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
dungarees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
ecstasy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
aubergine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
sleek	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
pentagon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

Name: _____ Sex: _____

Age: _____ Major: _____

Please check one box for each word according to the following five options and fill in the blanks when choosing one of the last three options.

1. I don't remember having seen this word before.
2. I have seen this word before, but I don't know what it means.
3. I have seen this word before, and I think it means _____
(provide an English synonym or an L1 translation)
4. I know this word. It means _____
(provide an English synonym or an L1 translation)
5. I can use this word in a sentence. Write your sentence _____
(If you do #5, be sure to do #4 also.)

	1	2	3	4	5	
nark	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
ideology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
idolize	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
janitor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
loathe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
lobster	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
machiavellian	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
mortgage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
pneumatic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
psychiatry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
encapsulate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
slush	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
sorbet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
tremor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
maternity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
maroon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
balcony	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
guerrilla	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
constituency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
retract	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

Name: _____ Sex: _____

Age: _____ Major: _____

Appendix 2.**Interview questions:**

- 1) Why did you decide to join the summer programme in the UK?
- 2) What do you think about English-only environment?
- 3) What do you think about your study in the last two weeks? Do you remember many words that you have learned from the native English teachers in the English only classroom?
- 4) What kind of vocabulary teaching method do your Chinese English teachers usually use? What do you think about learning vocabulary through this method?
- 5) How do you feel about the three different methods that I used to teach English vocabulary to you in the last few days? Which method do you think is more effective for your English vocabulary learning? Why do you think so?
- 6) Do you usually use Chinese translations to understand and remember new English vocabulary?
- 7) What kind of dictionary do you use, monolingual or bilingual?
- 8) When looking up a word in a bilingual dictionary, do you often choose to remember Chinese translations? If yes, do you often look at the English definitions as well or just ignore them?
- 9) When do you feel you have understood a new English word?
- 10) Do you often expect to get a Chinese translation from your Chinese English teacher when taught a new English word in the classroom?
- 11) Do you often try to associate a new English word with a Chinese translation in your mind when the teacher does not know Chinese or does not provide the Chinese translations of target words?