Original Paper

Non-English Major Freshmen's Perception and Practice of the Vocabulary Notebook as their Vocabulary Learning Strategy

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Abstract

Freshmen English is one of the compulsory courses in universities in Taiwan. Vocabulary notebooks are frequently advocated as a way for students to take control of their vocabulary learning (Fowle, 2002). This study focuses on the perception and practice of 157 freshmen, who were all non-English majors, of the vocabulary notebook as their vocabulary learning strategy. The major data in this study included vocabulary notebooks, self-evaluation of keeping vocabulary notebooks, and instructional PowerPoint files. The freshmen in this study had a positive attitude toward vocabulary notebooks, because vocabulary notebooks helped them learn English words and increase their word knowledge, particularly of word families. They used the vocabulary notebooks to review the lessons and prepare for the exams. One interesting finding was that participants in this study preferred making their vocabulary notebooks in hard copy on paper because they could easily carry the notebooks around and review the lessons. Moreover, of all the required elements of the vocabulary notebooks, the learners found that word families were the most useful, because they could memorize word families and use them to make sentences. Suggestions are provided for how to make vocabulary notebooks an effective vocabulary learning strategy.

Keywords

freshmen, non-English major, vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary notebook, word families

1. Introduction

Freshmen English is one of the compulsory courses in universities in Taiwan. Through the required textbooks, learners not only learn English words, sentence structures, and reading strategies, but they also learn the content knowledge. However, the majority of Taiwanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners do not like learning English, because they struggle to memorize vocabulary. Even if they memorize a lot of vocabulary, they may not be able to use it accurately and fluently.

Vocabulary notebooks are frequently advocated as a way for students to take control of their vocabulary

learning (Fowle, 2002), with the added benefit of improvements in vocabulary learning (Laufer & Nation, 1999; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Most of the current studies focus on the effects of vocabulary notebooks on learners' receptiveness to vocabulary learning (Bozkurt, 2007; McCrosti, 2007; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009). This study focuses on the perception and practice of 157 freshmen, who were all non-English majors, of the vocabulary notebook as their vocabulary learning strategy. The major data in this study included vocabulary notebooks, self-evaluation of keeping vocabulary notebooks, and instructional PowerPoint files.

One interesting finding was that participants in this study preferred making their vocabulary notebooks in hard copy on paper because they could easily carry the notebooks around and review the lessons, even though they were provided with other format choices such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint files, and online versions. Moreover, of all the required elements of the vocabulary notebooks, the learners in this study found that word families were the most useful, because they could memorize word families and use them to make sentences. Three suggestions are provided for how to make vocabulary notebooks an effective vocabulary learning strategy.

2. Literature Review

The literature discusses word knowledge, definitions, benefits, and effects of vocabulary notebook on learners' acquiring word knowledge.

2.1 Word Knowledge

Many words have different meanings (e.g., sage: a wise person; an herb) and serve different functions in different sentences, texts, and even conversations (e.g., "give" in "give a hug," or "give a presentation") (Nagy & Scott, 2000; Stahl, 2005). Teaching words in isolation or only word meanings is insufficient for building learners' word knowledge, and research demonstrates that building knowledge requires more than accumulating facts about specific elements such as word definitions (Nagy & Scott, 2000; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Stahl, 2005). Therefore, teaching vocabulary should go beyond word meanings and include linguistic, social, and cultural factors behind academic language (Scarcella, 2003). Nation (1994) identifies aspects of word knowledge such as knowing related grammatical patterns, affixes, common lexical sets, associations, how to use words receptively and productively, and so on. Teachers should provide definitions, translations, parts of speech, sentences, word families, synonyms, homonyms same word but different meanings, and expressions when teaching a word or academic language.

2.2 Definitions of Vocabulary Notebooks

A vocabulary notebook is a kind of language learners' dictionary in which learners record the words they encounter, along with their meanings and aspects of the word, such as parts of speech, other word forms, collocates, synonyms, antonyms, and perhaps a context sentence (Walter, 2009). Vocabulary notebooks are frequently advocated as a way for students to take control of their vocabulary learning

(Bozkurt, 2007; Fowle, 2002), with the added benefits of improvements in vocabulary learning (Bozkurt, 2007; Kung, 2009; Laufer & Nation, 1999; Leeke & Shaw, 2000; McCulloch, 2004; Mercer, 2005; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Weng, 2011), improved ability to use dictionaries and guess words from their context (Ledbury, n.d.), keeping teachers informed about learners' progress (Fowle, 2002; Nation, 1990), and enhancing learner autonomy (Fowle, 2002).

2.3 Benefits of Vocabulary Notebook on Vocabulary Learning

Compared to students who kept their vocabulary notebook in a semantically related way, sixth graders in Weng's (2011) study who were required to keep their vocabulary notebook in alphabetical order achieved a significant improvement in their acquisition of vocabulary from pretest to posttest. Vocabulary notebooks positively affected the pre-intermediate proficiency level vocabulary acquisition of adult Turkish learners in Bozkurt's (2007) study, because learners benefited from the vocabulary notebook for their receptive controlled productive, and free productive vocabulary acquisition.

Forty-three eighth graders in Kung's (2009) study recorded more L1 (Mandarin Chinese) and phonetic transcription than L2 (English) definition and collocations in their vocabulary notebooks. Quite a few students in this study appreciated the implementation of vocabulary notebooks and considered it an effective and beneficial way of learning vocabulary. Moreover, their interests and motivation for learning vocabulary had increased as a result. Walters' and Bozkurt's (2009) study affirms the previous research studies that vocabulary notebooks can be an effective learning tool in EFL classrooms, because using vocabulary notebooks helped learners perform better in the receptive and controlled productive vocabulary tests, and also in receptive and productive knowledge of target words.

2.4 No Significant Effects

However, Walters' and Bozkurt's (2009) discovered that the implementation of vocabulary notebooks had no positive impacts on learner autonomy, as claimed by Fowle's (2002) study. Moreover, D'Onofrio's (2009) study focused on secondary English learners using two notebook templates, one that focused largely on definitions and another that engaged learners in creating personal knowledge links. The study concluded that there was no difference in the learners' retention of the words that were entered in the notebook.

McCrostie's (2007) study found that 124 freshmen English majors in a Japanese university drew the words for their notebooks overwhelmingly from textbooks, favored certain parts of speech, had difficulty identifying high frequency words, and viewed all words they did not know as equally important. He strongly suggests that teachers need to spend more time guiding their students in the proper use of vocabulary notebooks. Will Taiwanese freshmen in this study have the same problem on selecting words for their vocabulary notebooks as happened among Japanese freshmen in McCrostie's (2007) study? This study aims to focus on the keeping of vocabulary notebooks by Taiwanese EFL learners who were non-English majors in terms of format, elements, word choices, numbers of words, perceptions, practice, or challenges. This study discusses what type of word knowledge Taiwanese EFL

learners benefit the most from the vocabulary notebooks.

3. Method

This is a qualitative case study. The study was conducted for one semester from the late February to June 2012. The participants included one instructor and four freshmen English classes of a total of 157 students. The class met two hours each week between March and June 2012. Douglas' (2010) Reading Explorer 3 was the required textbook and this has twelve units. Each unit includes two reading passages on different topics such as sports, endangered animals, arts, life, and so on.

This study aims to answer one research question: What are non-English major Taiwanese freshmen's perception and practice of the vocabulary notebook as their vocabulary learning strategy? This study discusses the following six sub-questions: (1) What elements were most often included or missed in vocabulary notebooks? (2) How many words did learners record for each unit in their vocabulary notebooks? (3) In what format did learners keep their vocabulary notebooks, paper-based or computer-based? (4) What problems did freshmen encounter when keeping words in their vocabulary notebooks? (5) How else did vocabulary notebooks help learners in vocabulary memorization and recognition? (6) How did students' respond to keeping words in their vocabulary notebooks?

The major data in this study included the (1) freshmen's vocabulary notebooks, (2) freshmen's self-evaluation of keeping vocabulary notebooks, and (3) instructor's PowerPoint files for teaching. At the first class the instructor explained the vocabulary notebook and grading rubric, as shown in Table 1. Freshmen were given the template for the vocabulary notebook, as shown in Table 2, and required to maintain the vocabulary notebook for each unit. They could either make their vocabulary notebook a traditional hard copy notebook or keep their vocabulary words in files on the computer. The instructor introduced twenty key words from each unit.

Table 1. Vocabulary notebook scoring rubric

Criteria is: 2 = well fulfilled   1= satisfactory   0= insufficient
_Notebook includes at least 1 word from each unit.
_Notebook includes all necessary elements (e.g. word, definition, phonetic symbol).
_Information on the notebook is accurate.
_Organization is simple and clear.
_Notebook is submitted within required time.

Table 2. Vocabulary notebook sample

word	Deposit
definition	to put or leave something in a place
translation	放下, 放置; 寄存

Phonetic symbol	[dɪ`pɑzɪt]
Parts of speech	v.
Sentence	The female deposits her eggs directly into the water.
Word families	deposit (n.), depository, depositor
Synonym/antonym	synonyms: bank
	antonyms: withdraw
Expressions	deposit something into something, deposit something with somebody

The instructor checked the learners' vocabulary notebooks twice a semester, once in the mid-term week and again in the final-exam week. After the mid-term exam, students were asked to reflect on their vocabulary notebook practice by answering the following questions: (1) Do you like the assignment "vocabulary notebook"? What are your reasons for liking or disliking it? (2) How else do vocabulary notebooks help you in vocabulary memorization and recognition? (3) What problems do you encounter when keeping words in your vocabulary notebooks? (4) How did you choose words? Students wrote these answers on a piece of paper either in Chinese or English.

Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes by organizing the data into more abstract units of information (Creswell, 2009; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Guided by the research questions, data were categorized into units of information, such as format, elements, word choices, numbers of words, perceptions, practice, or challenges. Trustworthiness was performed through triangulation. Qualitative researchers gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source (Creswell, 2009; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In this study triangulating multiple sources of data (vocabulary notebooks, freshmen's self-evaluation, and instructor's PowerPoint files) adds texture, depth, and multiple insights to an analysis and it can enhance the validity or credibility of the results.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Format and Elements of the Vocabulary Notebook

The most popular format for the vocabulary notebook was paper-based (41%), followed by Microsoft Word (36%), and PowerPoint (15%). Learners learn in different ways and also demonstrate their knowledge in many different ways. Learners should be provided with various opportunities and choices to demonstrate what they know (Gregory, 2007).

The majority of learners used the instructor's template to make their vocabulary notebook, so the content of the notebooks included "word," "definitions," "Chinese translation," phonetic symbol," and "parts of the speech." However, not all learners included "expressions," "word families," and "synonyms" for every word.

Language learners should have word knowledge, as in Figure 1 (Benjamin, & Crow, 2010). Words are

not directly linked to their definitions in people's brains (Benjamin & Crow, 2010). Having students learn nothing more than words and their definitions do not significantly improve their reading comprehension of texts that contain the targeted words (Benjamin & Crow, 2010). Therefore, the vocabulary notebook can help learners equip themselves with word knowledge (Bozkurt, 2007; Fowle, 2002; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009).
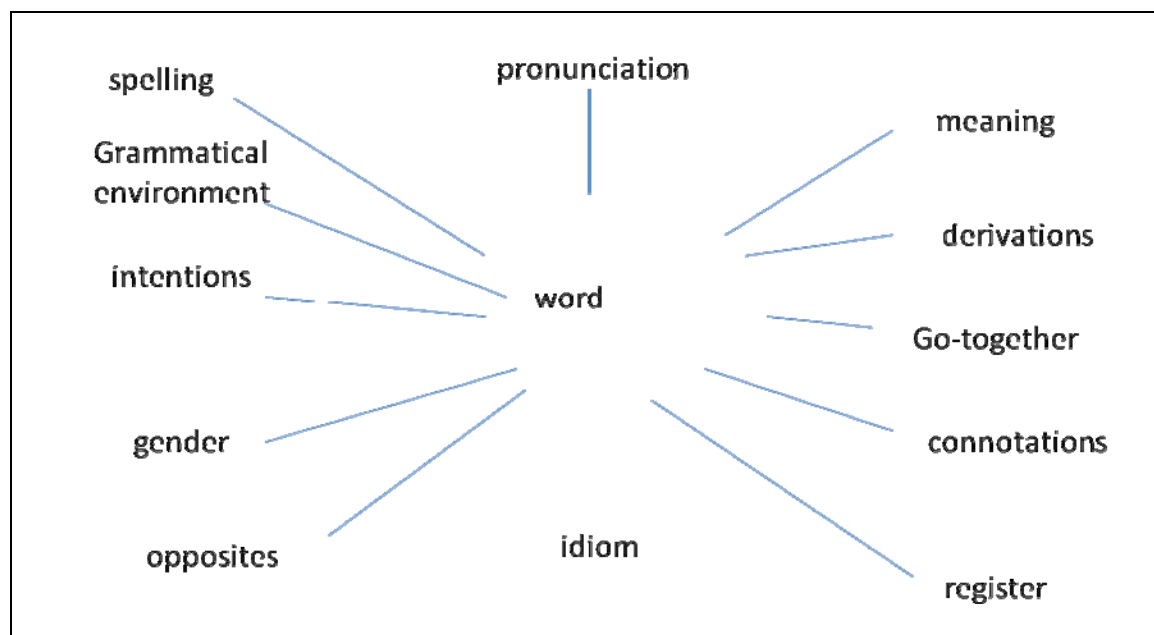

Figure 1. Word knoweldge (Benjamin, & Crow, 2010)

4.2 Word Selection and Amount

With regard to word selection, 139 learners (almost 90%) chose words that they did not know the meaning of. Of the remaining 18 learners, six chose words that they easily forgot and four chose words that they had marked in red in the spotlight vocabulary word list offered in the instructor's PowerPoint files. Highlighting words in red signifies that learners did not know the meaning of and could not use them in their sentences. Only one learner chose the words that she could easily make into a sentence, while two learners preferred to choose words that were practical. Five learners randomly chose the words.

Learners should be taught how to choose words for their vocabulary notebook, rather than randomly choosing words or choosing words that they could easily make into sentences. Learners do not have to memorize all words that they do not know from reading an article, so which words should learners learn? Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) categorize words into Tier 1, 2, and 3 words, as set out in Table 3. English teachers should introduce different types of words, explain their importance and functions, and give examples of these words. Learners who expect to improve their reading fluency

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should focus on Tier 1, so they can be familiar with general words and enhance their reading fluency. Freshmen studying for specific majors should focus on Tier 3 words, so they can be familiar with the specialized vocabulary in their field.

Table 3. Tier 1, 2 and 3 words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002)

Tier	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Types	General word	Specialized vocabulary	Technical vocabulary
Definitions	Words are basic for reading	Words are those high-utility terms that often change meaning in different contexts	Words that are bound to a specific discipline
examples	area, east, land, map, place	globe, hemisphere, legend, region	ecology, pointillism, hieroglyphic

When choosing words learners should bear in mind representation, repeatability, transportability, contextual analysis, structural analysis, and cognitive load (Frey & Fisher, 2009). They should ask themselves the questions set out in Table 4 (Frey & Fisher, 2009; Graves, 2009)

Table 4. Questions to consider in word selection

Categories	Questions
Representation	. Is the word representative of a family of words that students should know?
	. Is the concept represented by the word critical to understanding the text?
	. Is the word a label for an idea that students need to know?
	. Does the word represent an idea that is essential for understanding another concept?
Repeatability	. Is the word used again in this text? If so, does the word occur often enough to be redundant?
	. Will the word be used again during the school year?
Transportability	. Will the word be used in group discussions?
	. Will the word be used in writing tasks?
	. Will the word be used in other content or subject areas?
Contextual analysis	Can students use context clues to determine the correct or intended meaning of the word without instruction?
Structural analysis	Can students use structural analysis to determine the correct or intended meaning of the word without instruction?
Cognitive load	Have I identified too many words for students to successfully integrate?

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Learners worked on the vocabulary notebook assignment as required in the syllabus, but about 87% of freshmen worked on only one word for each unit in their vocabulary notebook. Only 9% of learners worked on two to four words and 4% worked on six or more words per unit.

Teachers can get learners to take ownership of their word learning by teaching them metacognitively as they acquire vocabulary knowledge or learning strategies for helping (Frey & Fisher, 2009). Moreover, a more powerful category of reward is intrinsically driven from within the learner. When behavior stems from needs and wants, or is desired within oneself, the behavior itself has the potential to be self-rewarding. So learners need to become autonomous and make a firm habit of keeping vocabulary notebooks and using them frequently (Brown, 2002).

4.3 Perception of Vocabulary Notebook

About 86% of the learners liked this vocabulary notebook assignment, because they thought it helped them review vocabulary and learn more about it. One learner wrote, "I have never used an English-English dictionary before. Because of this assignment, I got the chance to use English-English dictionary." Another learner said, "I made this vocabulary notebook into my own English dictionary."

However, 8% of learners disliked this assignment. The principle reason why they disliked this assignment was "Making vocabulary notebook was time-consuming," followed by "It was not useful." About 6% of the learners thought this assignment was acceptable.

There is no one vocabulary learning strategy or training that is better than another. Folse (2004) strongly recommends that teachers should teach learners how to keep a neat and spacious vocabulary notebook, because a vocabulary notebook actually promotes students retrieval practice.

4.4 Practice of Vocabulary Notebook

Five learners did the vocabulary notebook for the assignment only. The rest of the learners used the vocabulary notebook to review words for quizzes, mid-term exams, and final exams. Some learners also said that they would continue to use the vocabulary notebook to prepare for the future General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) and Test of English for Interactional Communication (TOEIC). Some learners put the vocabulary notebooks in their backpacks and took them out to review words while waiting for buses.

Learners used the vocabulary notebooks to enhance their word knowledge through word families, expressions, synonyms and antonyms, sentences, English definitions, and parts of the speech. They particularly liked the word families, because they could learn all related words. One learner said, "Through the words and their word families, I can improve my reading." Learners also regarded making sentences as helpful, and one learner responded, "Making sentences helped me understand the words better. When I made sentences, I had to understand the words' parts of speech and meanings."

Brown (2002) suggests that successful mastery of a second language will be to a large extent the result of a learner's own personal investment of time, effort, and attention in the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language. Therefore,

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learners should be willing to invest in using vocabulary notebooks as one of their vocabulary learning strategies.

4.5 Challenges in Making Vocabulary Notebooks

The biggest challenges learners faced when making vocabulary notebooks included "writing English definitions," "finding word families," and "finding expressions with words in." One learner complained, "It was difficult to find the expressions or word families for some words. I felt so frustrated, so I had to keep them blank." Other learners said, "When I looked up words in the dictionary, I was not sure whether these were the words' synonyms or antonyms."

Moreover, learners responded that one word has many meanings and they did not know which meaning they should focus on. One learner said with frustration, "Some words have so many meanings. I did not know which one I should choose."

Humans have a profound ability to mimic what they see others say and do. Through observations of others, people acquire certain behaviors (Frey & Fisher, 2009). English teachers should demonstrate how vocabulary notebooks can be completed step by step. First, English teachers should provide the template and demonstrate how they find word definitions, phonetic symbols, sentences, expressions, word families, synonyms, and antonyms through online or hard copy dictionaries. Then, learners can work individually, in pairs, or in groups to complete a vocabulary notebook. Learners can share the problems they have when working on words and English teachers can guide learners to the solutions to the problems.

5. Conclusion

Vocabulary notebooks are frequently considered as a way for learners to take control of their vocabulary learning and make improvements in vocabulary learning (Bozkurt, 2007; Fowle, 2002; Kung, 2009; Laufer & Nation, 1999; McCulloch, 2004; Mercer, 2005; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Weng, 2011). This study focuses on non-English major freshmen's perception and practice of vocabulary notebooks as a vocabulary learning strategy. The findings of this study are as follows. First, the majority of freshmen made paper-based vocabulary notebooks with one word per unit. Second, freshmen worked on the words they did not know the meanings of. They included in their vocabulary notebooks the word, definitions, Chinese translation, phonetic symbols, and sentences, but some missed elements such as expressions, synonyms/antonyms, or word families. Third, these freshmen had a positive attitude toward vocabulary notebooks, because vocabulary notebooks helped them learn English words and increase their word knowledge, particularly of word families. They used the vocabulary notebooks to review the lessons and prepare for the exams. Finally, while making vocabulary notebooks, some of the participants had difficulties in writing English definitions, making sentences, and finding synonyms, antonyms, expressions, and word families.

Three suggestions are provided for making vocabulary notebooks an effective vocabulary learning

strategy. First, learners should choose words in terms of representation, repeatability, transportability, contextual analysis, structural analysis, and cognitive load. Second, English teachers should explicitly model and provide step by step examples of making vocabulary notebooks. Third, freshmen should be encouraged to become autonomous learners who use vocabulary notebooks frequently as a way to review vocabulary, as a result of which, they will become equipped with comprehensive word knowledge.

In this study, freshmen were only asked to complete the vocabulary notebooks and turn in their assignments twice, in the mid-term and final exam weeks. They were not asked to orally present their vocabulary notebook. Learners' oral presentations on vocabulary notebooks are another way of showing their word knowledge. Another study should focus on whether learners' word knowledge is accurately presented orally through the vocabulary notebook.

In this study, learners could choose any words that they would like to include in their vocabulary notebooks. Learners in this study were freshmen in different majors, such as arts and design, education, educational psychology, early children, math, and so on. Learners in different fields may encounter different specialized terms and freshmen English classes could be an opportunity for learners to learn articles in their specified subjects or content areas. Another study could focus on how freshmen use vocabulary notebooks to acquire their specialized Tier 2 words.

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