

Vocabulary Learning and Strategies Used by Teacher Education Students

Esperanza F. Carranza, Anabell A. Manga, Ryan V. Dio, Michael John A. Jamora, Fe S. Romero

Sorsogon State College, Sorsogon City, Philippines

chingcarranza@yahoo.com, dioryan@yahoo.com, sorsogonstatecollege.edu.ph@gmail.com

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Abstract - *One way to assess a person's communicative competence is through his ability to express his thoughts and ideas in appropriate words and meaningful sentences. Vocabulary learning then is critical to learning a language – be it the first, second or even foreign. However, test results, daily communication and English proficiency exams show that students have difficulty in learning vocabulary. This descriptive-evaluative study assessed the vocabulary learning and the strategies used along context clues, word analysis and dictionary skills of the 100 randomly selected second-year education students of the Sorsogon State College. The study utilized survey-questionnaire, teacher-made test and unstructured interview in gathering data.*

The study revealed that most of the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) and Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) students oftentimes used strategies in learning vocabulary such as reading books and other materials, looking for clues in sentences and use the dictionary to unlock the unfamiliar words. The students attained nearly competent vocabulary performance along context clues, word analysis and dictionary skills. The context clues and word analysis skills are significantly related to the use of learning strategies when tested at 0.05 level. The developed vocabulary module to enhance the skills of the students can be validated and utilized for instruction.

Keywords: *vocabulary learning, strategies, context clues, word analysis, dictionary skills*

INTRODUCTION

One way to assess a person's communicative competence is through his ability to express his thoughts and ideas in appropriate words and meaningful sentences. Coady and Huckin (1997) stress that there is now a general agreement among vocabulary specialists that lexical competence is at the very heart of communicative competence, the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately. Hence, a person can only be said to have satisfied his goal in communicating if she is able to effectively get his or her message across. Vocabulary learning then is critical to learning a language – be it the first, second or even foreign. One must be equipped with knowledge of words and their meanings to build confidence in communication and cope with the increasing demands of education, business, science, technology and other fields.

In the sphere of second or foreign language learning, it is widely acknowledged that vocabulary is an indispensable part of the four language skills. Vocabulary is one of the important language elements that support the skills of speaking, listening, reading

and writing as McCarthy (1990) points out that “no matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 cannot just happen in any meaningful way.”

Therefore, acquiring an extensive vocabulary skill in a target language poses a big challenge to students. To language learners, vocabulary learning strategies help (VLS) facilitate their vocabulary learning. According to Nation (2001), a large and rich vocabulary can be acquired with the help of VLS. VLS has been increasingly recognized as essential to language learning as can be seen from the body of researches on VLS, particularly in the last two decades (Khatib & Hassandeh, 2011).

Vocabulary learning strategies are the “actions, set of techniques or language learning behaviors that learners take to help themselves to discover the meaning of new words and retain them in long-term memory (Cameron, 2001; Intraprasert, 2004; Hamzah, et.al, 2009).” While it is imperative for the teachers to help students learn how to acquire vocabulary items of

their own, learner independence has long been recognized by a number of linguists in the process of vocabulary acquisition (Hamzah et al, 2009). Vocabulary learning strategies foster learner autonomy, independence and self-direction.

In the study conducted by Boonkongsan (2012) in Thailand, he considered the different factors that affect the vocabulary learning strategies of the students. He found out that the factors were belief, attitude, motivation, language learning experience, field of study, course type, class level, language learning environment, language achievement, language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge. A similar study was conducted by Nemati (2009) where she attempted to compare the impacts of teaching through memory strategies on experimental group in comparison to control group where students were taught the meaning of vocabulary items through giving synonyms and mini-contexts. The results indicated that the students of experimental group outperformed both in short-term and long-term scores, portrayed the superiority of memory strategies in short-term and long-term retention. Then, in his article, Schmitt (2008) concluded that vocabulary learning partners – students, teachers, materials, writers, and researchers – need to contribute to facilitate adequate vocabulary learning process that paves the way to better performance and improved competence

In the Philippines, for instance, where bilingualism exists in educational institutions as per demanded by the Constitution, the need to be competent in the English language is exemplified in the academe. This explains the exposure of college students, specifically Education students to English proficiency tests to assess their competence in the use of the second language before being qualified for Practice Teaching course and even after graduation, before becoming eligible for employment. Inasmuch as the EPT aims to evaluate the students' level of competence in comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and the like, ESL learners should, above all, be given impetus to meet the demands of their academic endeavors.

However, English proficiency test results, along with other assessments given to BEED and BSED students of Sorsogon State College reveal that they have poor vocabulary knowledge. It was also observed that their daily communication in the class, processing of the materials read, and comprehension of the lessons, are hindered by their difficulty to grasp

the meaning of unfamiliar words they meet in the communicative events. This is alarming especially among teacher education students since they will be in the field where they have to communicate to different people and will be looked upon as models.

Students, specifically College students should have the ability to learn and retain in their memory as many words as they can to enhance their learning capabilities and carry on the increasing complexity of academic needs. In this paper, with the belief that vocabulary development is contributory to the performance, experience and achievement of Teacher Education students, the given concern is addressed. Hence, this study was made at the Sorsogon State College being the primary higher education institution producing professional teachers in the province of Sorsogon.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study assessed the vocabulary learning and strategies used by Teacher Education students of the Sorsogon State College-Sorsogon City Campus, AY 2012-2013. Specifically, it aimed to determine the strategies used by the students in learning vocabulary, determine the vocabulary performance in English subjects along: context clues, word analysis, and dictionary skills; test whether there is a significant relationship between the utilization of learning strategies and the students' vocabulary performance, and to develop instructional materials to enhance the vocabulary skills of the students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The descriptive-evaluative research design was used in this study. Two sets of the teacher education students comprised the samples of the study – the BEED and the BSED students during the AY 2012-2013. Fraenkel and Wallen (2007) recommended the minimum of 100 subjects for a descriptive study. Random selection of the 100 out of 250 second year students in the list of Teacher Education program was applied to compose the respondents of this study. Of these, 50 were taken from the different classes of BEED group and another 50 from BSED classes for an equal allocation. The list of the participants for each set of respondents has been identified through lottery method to avoid biases.

This study utilized the survey questionnaire, unstructured interview and teacher-made test in data gathering. The survey- questionnaire was utilized to determine the vocabulary learning strategies of the

teacher education students. This instrument was developed through unstructured interview and focus-group discussions with the selected college students and faculty in the Teacher Education department of the College. A dry-run was also conducted to improve the face validity, content validity, and the reliability of the questionnaire. This used the rating scale for the frequency of use of the vocabulary strategies as follows: 5 – Always, 4 – Oftentimes, 3 – Sometimes, 2 – Seldom, and 1 – Never.

On the other hand, the teacher-made test containing 20 items for context clues, 10 items word analysis, and 10 items for dictionary skills was also designed to assess the vocabulary performances of the Teacher Education students along the identified areas. Items included in the test have undergone thorough review and analysis by the experts in the field. Only those items which possess the good discriminating power and accepted level of difficulty gathered through a consolidated test bank materials of the English language professors were included in the test. Prior to the test administration, this teacher-made test has already undergone dry run for two semesters to ensure the validity of the material. Below is scale used for the interpretation of the performance level (PL) of the students:

PL	Verbal Description
75% and above	Competent
51% - 74%	Nearly Competent
25% - 50%	Moderately Competent
Below 25%	Not Competent

Results of the vocabulary learning strategies and the performance in vocabulary were used to test whether there is significant relationship in the frequency of utilization of the vocabulary learning strategies and the performance of the Teacher Education students. This also became the basis in the development of the vocabulary module in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 presents the strategies used by the Teacher Education students in learning vocabulary. Out of 14 strategies, 9 were considered as used *oftentimes* by the respondents and only 5 were identified as *sometimes* utilized by the education students.

Findings show that students *oftentimes* read books and other materials of their interests (3.99); know the meaning of new words according to how they are used in the sentence (4.10); look for the clues used in the

sentence (4.27); figure out what it means from the context each time a new word is encountered (3.82); pay close attention to roots, prefixes and suffixes (3.56); use dictionary to unlock unfamiliar words (4.47); when looking up a word in the dictionary, pay attention to the different definitions and the context in which each is appropriate (4.29); work crossword puzzle (3.50); and play word find game (3.68), respectively.

Based on the data in the table, the top three strategies utilized by the students include using the dictionary to unlock unfamiliar words as rank 1; when looking up a word in the dictionary, paying attention to the different definitions and the context in which each is appropriate as rank 2; and looking for the clues used in the sentence as the rank 3 strategy. Dictionary is found to be the students' most reliable tool in determining the meaning of an unfamiliar word. It can be attributed to an insight of denotation where a term has an established and universal dictionary meaning. Along with denotative meaning, a word has also its connotative meaning. This attributes the students' preference to the second and third strategies. While the dictionary provides a meaning of the term, its appropriateness is dependent on the context since a single term may have many different meanings. Hence, by paying attention to contexts and looking for clues, the students may arrive at the exact meaning of an unfamiliar word after they refer to the dictionary.

Meanwhile, the least frequently used strategies are applying knowledge of foreign languages (2.76), playing scrabble or boggle (3.31), and connecting the words to some common prefixes and suffixes (3.38). Students rarely use the strategy of applying knowledge of foreign languages since their curriculum does not include any course for foreign languages. Teacher Education students sometimes used playing scrabble or Boggle as a strategy for learning vocabulary because the actual playing does not provide a discussion of context-dependent meaning of word. Then, the least strategy, connecting the words to some common prefixes and suffixes, is attributed to the students' lack of knowledge to break down words into affixes and meaningful units to arrive at its meaning. Results imply that the Teacher Education students are aware and conscious of the importance of learning vocabulary using different strategies to unlock unfamiliar words. Further, Fan (2003) emphasized that students who use strategies more often are the ones who exhibited high proficiency in vocabulary tests.

Table 1. Strategies used by the teacher education students in learning vocabulary

Strategies	WM	Description	Rank
1. Read books and other materials of your interest.	3.99	Oftentimes	5
2. Know the meaning of new words according to how they are used in the sentence.	4.10	Oftentimes	4
3. Look for the clues used in the sentence.	4.27	Oftentimes	3
4. Each time a new word is encountered, figure out what it means from the context. If can't figure out the word, look it up and make a note of it.	3.82	Oftentimes	6
5. List down words with their meaning and use them in speaking and writing.	3.49	Sometimes	10
6. Learn the meaning of new words through structural analysis.	3.44	Sometimes	11
7. Connect the words to some common prefixes and suffixes to form new words.	3.38	Sometimes	12
8. Pay close attention to roots, prefixes and suffixes.	3.56	Oftentimes	8
9. Use the dictionary to unlock unfamiliar words.	4.47	Oftentimes	1
10. When looking up a word in the dictionary, pay attention to the different definitions and the context in which each is appropriate.	4.29	Oftentimes	2
11. Apply knowledge of foreign languages, especially those related to Latin, such as Spanish, French And Italian. English has many cognates or words with similar meanings from these languages.	2.76	Sometimes	14
12. Work crossword puzzle	3.50	Oftentimes	9
13. Play scrabble or Boggie	3.31	Sometimes	13
14. Play word find game	3.68	Oftentimes	7

This claim could be supported by the idea of Nation (2001) that a large and rich vocabulary can be acquired with the help of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). It has been increasingly recognized as essential to language learning as can be seen from the body of researches on VLS, particularly in the last two decades (Khatib and Hassandeh, 2011). While it is imperative for the teachers to help students learn how to acquire vocabulary items of their own, it fosters learner autonomy, independence and self-direction.

Table 2 shows the vocabulary performance of both BEED and BSEd students in context clues, word analysis and dictionary skills. Results revealed that both BEED and BSEd students were *nearly competent* in context clues, word analysis and dictionary skills.

However, findings show that BSEd students are better in context clues and in word analysis, as shown by the weighted means of 62.90 and 61.54 respectively.

BEED students attained 54.50 in context clues and 54.00 in word analysis. However, they are much better in terms of dictionary skills as shown by the weighted mean of 73.80 compared to BSEd which got a weighted mean of 73.00 only. The table also shows an over-all performance of teacher education students in context clues, word analysis, and dictionary skills, which is 58.70, 57.77, and 73.40, respectively, all interpreted as nearly competent.

Findings show that both groups of education students have achieved similar performance levels in vocabulary learning which almost achieved the required competency level as education students.

Table 2. Vocabulary performance of teacher education students

VOCABULARY SKILLS	PERFORMANCE LEVEL			INTERPRETATION
	BEED	BSEd	Over-all	
Context Clues	54.50	62.90	58.70	Nearly competent
Word Analysis	54.00	61.54	57.77	Nearly competent
Dictionary skills	73.80	73.00	73.40	Nearly competent

Their similar level of performance is attributed to their attachment to their generalist orientation. In first year, both BEED and BSED students are in a general education curriculum. During the data gathering period of this research, the respondents were in that stage where they were still in the general education orientation and in the process of adjustment to specific fields of specialization. Rather than acquiring and using specific tactics of processing data apt to their fields, what the students used in answering the vocabulary test in the questionnaire were their study and thinking skills learned in first year.

Result of this study on the vocabulary performance is quite similar to the result of the study of Digo et. al. (2012) on the performance of the basic education teachers in English proficiency test (EPT) where they achieve an over-all performance of 54.82 which did not reach the required performance level of at least 75%. This illustrates that broad knowledge and improve vocabulary learning performance will lead to better proficiency in the study of English language which can be translated to better teaching of the subject as future educators.

Table 3 reveals the relationship between the frequency of use of learning strategies and the vocabulary performance of education students along context clues, word analysis, and dictionary skills. It can be gleaned from the table that the computed pearson r value of 0.36 between the frequency of use of learning strategies and context clues performance of students rejects the null hypothesis (Ho) at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, there is a significant moderate positive relationship between the frequency of use of the learning strategies and the students' performance in context clues. This means that students' learning strategies can help improve their vocabulary performance in terms of context clues. The significant relationship lies in the idea that the context clues domain of vocabulary performance necessitates the frequent use of strategies since the meaning of

words in this kind of vocabulary test needs to be analyzed and interpreted according to how it is used in the sentence. Since the definition of the term in this domain is dependent to the context, strategies play a great role in achieving good performance in this test.

Students apply these or develop their own strategies to improve their vocabulary skills. This is supported by Sanaoui (1995) who claims that strategies used by learners in acquiring new words do have greater bearing on their vocabulary acquisition than other known factors. He classifies vocabulary learning strategy to a set of strategies that dominate their approach. Independence and time, they claim, are associated with the vocabulary learning profiles of the learners. Likewise, Kelly (1990) believes that there are underlying influences and beliefs of learners to the use of strategies that are widely discussed.

The table also discloses the computed Pearson r value of 0.32 between the students' frequency of use of the learning strategies and vocabulary performance in word analysis which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis (Ho) at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, there is a significant moderate positive relationship between students learning strategies and vocabulary performance in word analysis. This means that the frequency of use of the students' learning strategies can affect their vocabulary performance. The more the students are exposed to these learning strategies the more that they could gain a better performance along this skills since it has a positive relationship.

These results can be supported by the researches of Kojic-Sabo & Lightbrown (1999) which stressed that with more frequent and elaborate use of the strategy the students will have the tendency to have higher levels of achievements in vocabulary learning. They also cited five criteria variables that distinguished among various learner types in terms of their approach to vocabulary study, time, learner independence, vocabulary notes review and dictionary use.

Table 3. Relationship between the frequency of use of vocabulary learning strategies and the performance of students

Vocabulary Performance	Frequency of Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies		
	Pearson r value	p- value	Decision on Ho
Context Clues	0.36	0.0002	Reject
Word Analysis	0.32	0.0013	Reject
Dictionary Skills	0.10	0.3399	Do not reject

*Significant at $\alpha=0.05$

However, the table reflects the insignificant relationship between the respondents' frequency of use of the learning strategies and the vocabulary performance along dictionary skills. This could be elaborated by the computed Pearson r value of 0.10 which failed to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) at 0.05 level of significance. Although there is a positive relationship between the respondents' strategies used and the dictionary skills performance, it is not significant.

This result can be explained by their performance along dictionary skills which is at nearly competent level only despite the fact that they oftentimes use the dictionary to unlock unfamiliar words and for self-study as their strategy. Moreover, exposure of students to internet/ electronic sources leads them to disorientation of the basic dictionary skills. This findings in the locale of the study did not support the claim of Luppescu and Day(1993) that students who use dictionary score significantly better in a vocabulary tests than students who do not use one.

This suggests to search for other variables that may affect the vocabulary performance of the students aside from the learning strategies they used. Since the frequency of use of the identified strategies moderately affect their performance means there are other factors to be identified such as IQ, study habits, family background, and availability of the materials that may significantly affect their vocabulary performance which serve as the gap of the study. Moreover, the article of Schmitt (2008) concluded that four vocabulary learning partners – students, teachers, materials, writers and researchers – need to contribute to facilitate adequate vocabulary learning process that paves the way to better performance and improved competence which the present endeavor focus only on students' vocabulary learning strategies.

As an output of the study, the researchers developed a vocabulary instructional materials entitled “**World World: A Vocabulary Module for Tertiary Students**”. Its objective is to aid the Teacher Education students gain new words and will further help them acquire a rich vocabulary skills as future teachers. This is composed of a few discussions of strategies for building vocabulary and activities to work on. It is the researchers' hope that the module will be useful to both the teachers and the students.

A vocabulary knowledge is a pre-requisite and a causative factor in comprehension (De Guzman, 2005). A person's ability to understand the meaning of the word used in any communicative event facilitates

his comprehension of the whole context or thought and also enriches his expression of thought. The knowledge with large vocabulary allows people to communicate effectively. It seems almost impossible to overstate the power of words. The ability to function in today's social and economic worlds is affected by the language skills and word knowledge. Perhaps one great tool teachers can give students for succeeding, not only in their education but more in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words. It is in this perspective that this module was developed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the study, it is concluded that the different strategies in learning vocabulary are mostly *oftentimes* used by the Teacher Education students. The students achieved *nearly competent* level of performance in context clues, word analysis and dictionary skills. There is a significant moderate positive relationship between the students' frequency of use of learning strategies and the vocabulary performance along context clues and word analysis. However, there is an insignificant positive relationship on dictionary skills.

Research also shows the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension, a process that is basic to learning. Therefore, regardless of the perspective taken in explaining the reading process, knowledge of vocabulary plays a significant role. Teachers play a fundamental role in the development of their students' vocabulary. The more students know, the better understanding they will have of themselves, society, the economy, history and so on.

Based on the conclusions given, it is therefore recommended that the provisions for students' vocabulary learning activities and strategies in English subjects be further emphasized through independent and cooperative learning to improve their skills. This signifies that more intensive vocabulary trainings and activities be given to Teacher Education students to enhance and sustain their skills in this area of English study. Along this line, a vocabulary module for Tertiary Education students was developed to enhance the vocabulary skills of the students. A similar/follow-up study incorporating other variables that may affect the vocabulary performance of the students in similar or other fields may be conducted to strengthen results of this study. Furthermore, the developed vocabulary module to enhance the vocabulary skills of the

students may be validated and utilized for learning and instruction.

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