

A Suggestion of Tailored Vocabulary Teaching for Chinese and Korean EFL Learners Based on an Online Survey

Zhen Yang, Yanping Rui, and Leo Rimanich

Abstract—Based on an online survey of 470 Chinese and Korean college first and second year non-English major students (with 235 in each group), this study was conducted in order to examine the sources, preferred tools, as well as students' need in relation to how EFL learners acquire certain vocabulary learning strategies. By comparing the main similarities and differences of the sources, preferred tools and needs on vocabulary learning strategies between these two groups of learners, some tailored vocabulary teaching suggestions were proposed for EFL teachers to be aware of.

Index Terms—Chinese and Korean college EFL learners, online survey, vocabulary learning strategies, sources, tools, needs.

I. INTRODUCTION

David Wilkins once claimed that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” [1]. At the end of 20th century, increased attention was given to vocabulary learning with the development of language education. According to N Schmitt, “In the last 25 years, the field of second language acquisition has seen the reemergence of interest in one area of language study, vocabulary, and the appearance of newly recognized aspect--learner strategies” [2].

“Due to the fact that vocabulary is an essential part of second language learning, educators and learners continuously struggle to find the best way to teach and learn new vocabulary words” [3]. Scholars and researchers in EFL/ESL countries also have carried out fruitful research on English vocabulary learning strategies among different groups of learners [4]-[6].

Still, the vocabulary learning and teaching issue seems to be more serious in Asian countries. Nation mentioned that “Vocabulary learning, both within and outside the domain of reading has been a key part of English education in many Asian contexts where it has been traditionally stressed. There is a need for more student centered approaches that improve both the retention and usage in a progressive fashion that goes beyond rote memorization” [7].

Among the EFL or ESL countries, China and Korea are two representative countries where the governments have placed great emphasize on the importance of English

education. Students in these two Eastern countries start to learn English from an early age. Although significant research has been carried out focusing on vocabulary learning, very limited research has been done looking at the learners from these two countries as a whole.

Therefore, this study was conducted in order to find the similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean college EFL learners in the area of tools/ways used to learn vocabulary, resources for vocabulary learning strategies and the needs of students in consideration of vocabulary learning in order to provide some tailored teaching suggestions to educators who may face these two groups of learners together or separately.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of ESL/EFL vocabulary learning, a variety of research has been conducted worldwide focusing on different aspects of vocabulary learning and teaching.

For example, research focusing on the ESL/EFL students' usage of vocabulary learning strategies as a whole [4], [5]. In order to propose taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, Schmitt examine research conducted in the past and their conclusions about vocabulary learning strategies. He looked at studies on individual learning strategies through observations, surveys and discussions, then carrying out a study of 600 Japanese students to see their actual usage and their beliefs in the utility of these strategies [2]. Based on this taxonomy, several studies with students from other countries have been carried out [4], [5].

Besides the studies focusing on the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, studies have been conducted on the innovative methods for vocabulary teaching and learning worldwide as well [3], [8].

Gravelle and Lee [3] carried out a study focusing on the receptive and productive vocabulary teaching with different levels and conditions for university students. Generally speaking, the research results indicate that nine out of 12 times participants received higher scores if the words were taught receptively. Research suggests that in order to gain higher effects for retention over time, receptive words are a better choice than productive words.

With the development of technology and mobile devices, research combining vocabulary teaching/learning with mobile applications have drawn tremendous attention as well [9]-[13].

In their study, *Learning Vocabulary with Apps: From theory to practice*, Deng and Trainin discussed the usage of several mobile apps in vocabulary education with four vocabulary learning strategies: dictionary use, phonological,

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morphological analysis, and contextual understanding [13].

Apart from the importance of the taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, including the effective ways of teaching and learning vocabulary, and application of modern techniques to enhance or improve vocabulary learning, there are some important parts in this vocabulary learning process that have been largely neglected. These include the main sources for students to gain vocabulary learning strategies, the tools they use to learn new vocabulary, as well as their demand for vocabulary learning strategies learning from their teachers. No matter how effective a vocabulary learning strategy is, if learners have no knowledge of their existence or access to it, it means nothing. With new government policies, there are more and more Chinese students choosing to go to South Korea to further their studies; meanwhile for some English native teachers, they may travel from China to South Korea to teach, or vice versa. Since the previously mentioned issues have still not been dealt with, the present study was conducted based on an online survey with learners for both China and South Korea.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

In this section, research questions, participants, online survey, data collection, and data analysis are addressed.

A. Research Questions

The research questions are as followed:

- 1) What are the main sources for both Chinese and Korean college EFL learners to get their vocabulary learning strategies?
- 2) What are the main tools/ways used to learn English vocabulary by Chinese and Korean college EFL learners?
- 3) What are the main needs Chinese and Korean college EFL learners want to have from their English teachers in order to help them with vocabulary learning?

B. Participants

Four hundreds and seventy freshmen and sophomores, non-English majors, participated in this study. They were mainly from two universities in China and Korea, where they were attending English courses when the survey was conducted. Originally, 280 surveys were collected from China and 241 surveys from Korea; but because there were five Chinese students and one Japanese student collected in the Korean surveys, the data from these non-Korean participants' were taken out. In addition, there were also some participants who misunderstood the question about how many years they have studied English in Chinese, so their data were not included. As shown in Table I, the age average for Chinese students was 18.885 years old and 20.36 years old for Korean students, but due to the culture problem, Korean people tend to say their age one year older than people from other countries who were born in the same year. For example, some who was born in 2000, a Chinese person would say he or she is 15 years old in 2015. A Korean person would say he or she is 16 years old instead. So, the real age difference in this study between these two groups of

participants is only about 0.475 years, which was about half a year.

211 freshmen and 24 sophomores participated in the survey from South Korea, while 165 freshmen and 70 sophomores from China.

TABLE I: PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

| Country | Total No. | Average Age | Freshmen | Sophomores |
|---------|-----------|-------------|----------|------------|
| Korea | 235 | 20.36 | 211 | 24 |
| China | 235 | 18.99 | 165 | 70 |

C. Survey

An online survey was designed based on the vocabulary learning strategies adopted from Schmitt's study conducted in 1997 [2]. Due to the insufficient language of the participants, the survey was first designed in English and then translated into Chinese and Korean versions separately. Both versions edited by other Chinese and Korean native speakers to ensure that their meaning matched the meaning of the original English version before giving accesses to the participants. A pilot test was given to 35 Chinese English majors first. Based on the feedback from the pilot test, some terms were added, or changed in order to get more specific information from the participants. For example "How long you have studied English" was replaced by "How many years you have studied English" to avoid misunderstanding.

In this survey, three sections were designed. The first section was used to collect participants' personal information such as their age, gender, years of English study, English level, etc. The second section recorded students' opinion about vocabulary learning, strategies they often use and what they would do when encountering with new words. The third section was designed to get some idea about sources learners use to get their vocabulary learning strategies, tools or ways they used to learn vocabulary, and what kind of assistance do they need from their English teachers to learn new words. In this section, multiple choices were given in consideration of the answers they provided. As for this study, the focus would be on the third section between these two groups of learners.

D. Data Collection

After the Chinese and Korean versions of survey were edited, they were then uploaded on to a website called www.wenjuan.com, where the English version was created. Later, links to the two survey versions were distributed to teachers who were teaching freshmen and sophomores in China and Korea universities respectively. Their students were told that completing the survey was voluntarily. With the links provided, the participants could fill out the survey on their mobiles or computer devices. The survey took about six minutes to complete per participant. The data collection took place over one month period.

E. Data Analysis

In order to better understand the similarities and differences between these two groups of learners, bar charts and tables were used--which were also generated automatically on the survey collecting websites based on the feedback of the participants.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Main Sources Used to Learn Vocabulary Learning Strategies*

The survey results from Table II show that there are some similarities and differences between these two groups of learners. For the first three highly selected sources to learn vocabulary learning strategies, “English teacher” is the highest for the two groups. There were 191 votes for Chinese participants and 154 votes for Korean participants. This result corresponds to the researchers’ prediction that English teachers are the main sources for EFL learners to gain their vocabulary learning strategies. This also means that EFL teachers should be aware of their importance in helping learners to find appropriate vocabulary learning strategies. According to the survey, Chinese learners incorporate “Books about vocabulary learning methods/strategies” as the third choice for a source to gain vocabulary learning strategies (105). This ranks the second highest among Korean learners (63). This can be seen as an indication that these learners are aware of looking for a variety of vocabulary learning strategies to help them learn vocabulary better. As for the differences, the data stimulates deeper consideration of the subject. The second highest voted source (133) for Chinese students is “personal experience from daily study.” This was ranked third by Korean learners (48). This survey result may indicate that Chinese learners are better at reflecting on their studies than Korean learners are. However, the third highest voted source for Korean learners is “off-school English class,” with 62 votes. On the other hand, this source has the lowest votes (22) among Chinese participants. For researchers, this figure can be an indication that the English courses set by Korean universities does not meet the needs of its students, so they tend to look for extra help from off-school English classes. It might also show that Chinese students really do not want to spend more time studying after the school day, but the Korean students are just opposite. The source from videos received lower votes from the two groups, 34 votes from China and 19 votes from Korea. This might suggest that the learners have either limited access to this media or they are just too time-consuming to watch one.

TABLE II: MAIN SOURCES FOR LEARNING VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

| Items | Chinese Selected No. | Korean Selected No. |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. from my English teacher | 191 | 154 |
| 2. videos on vocabulary learning | 34 | 19 |
| 3. off-school English classes | 22 | 62 |
| 4. books about vocabulary learning methods/strategies | 105 | 63 |
| 5. classmates with higher vocabulary level | 61 | 26 |
| 6. personal experience form daily study | 133 | 48 |
| 7. others | 12 | 16 |

B. *The Main Tools and Ways Used to Learn English Vocabulary*

As for the main tools/ways for learning English vocabulary, “Vocabulary lists in English textbooks” received

the highest votes from Chinese participants with 172 votes. This may indicate that Chinese learners are more accustomed to use the provided vocabulary list to study vocabulary. However, the tools/ways with the highest votes from Korean learners is Item 3 “Computer and internet.” This may be a result of the wide use of Wi-Fi in Korea, learners can access to the internet easily wherever they go, but the use of Wi-Fi in China is just beginning and the fee for using the internet is also expensive and still costs prohibitive as well in China at the moment when compared to Korea. Next, both groups voted “Paper or electronic dictionary” as the second highest choice (160 votes from Chinese learners and 91 votes from Korean learners). “Graded vocabulary book” (94 votes from Chinese learners and 83 votes from Korean learners) ranked as the second and third most frequently used tools or ways for their vocabulary learning. This data may indicate that dictionaries and graded vocabulary books play an important role in the students’ vocabulary learning process. The least used tools/ways to learn vocabulary in both countries is Item 4 provided in the survey: library resources (20 votes from Chinese learners and 2 votes from Korean learners). This data shows that the library resources are either not useful or too limited to be used for vocabulary learning, as shown in Table III.

TABLE III: MAIN TOOLS AND WAYS FOR LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY

| Items | Chinese Selected No. | Korean Selected No. |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. audio or video clips along with English textbooks | 59 | 24 |
| 2. paper or electronic dictionary | 160 | 91 |
| 3. computer and internet | 82 | 107 |
| 4. library resources | 20 | 2 |
| 5. vocabulary lists in English textbooks | 172 | 41 |
| 6. graded vocabulary book | 94 | 83 |
| 7. others | 9 | 20 |

C. *The Need for Learning English Vocabulary from English Teachers*

The results show that both groups of learners want their English teachers to “give useful methods/strategies according to the types of new words presented.” This survey result ranked the highest among five items (165 for Chinese learners and 106 for Korean learners). This could be a very good reminder for English teachers to suggest some practical strategies to their students according to the type of vocabulary that has been learned. Participants from both countries also want to have “more practice with the new words” in order to help them better understand and retain recently introduced new vocabulary. As shown in Table III, Chinese learners voted for 104, the third highest; and 82 for Korean learners, which is the second highest. This may also indicate that these EFL learners have realized the importance of practicing with the new words in order to remember them. The main difference in these data is that Chinese students preferred to “have courses on vocabulary learning methods/strategies,”—which got the second highest votes for 109. On other hand, Korean learners viewed this as a secondary need with only 29 votes. This difference may indicate that Korean English teachers may have introduced

different vocabulary learning methods/strategies during class time, while Chinese English teachers have not. If this is the case then English teachers in China should be aware of their students' need and introduce more methods/strategies on vocabulary learning. Among the given five items, Item 5 showed that dictation with new words was given the least votes from participants from China and Korea, 71 and 26 respectively. The survey result may indicate that EFL/ESL learners still don't want to have word dictation during vocabulary learning. But from some researchers' perspective, it is better to do dictation for vocabulary learning, as Nation and Newton once pointed out that "Dictation will be the most effective when it involves known vocabulary which is presented in unfamiliar collocations and constructions" [14]. This survey result may be caused by the traditional way that vocabulary dictation has carried out in the past. Therefore, teachers need to adjust the way they do dictation with their learners, as illustrated in Table IV.

TABLE IV: LEARNERS' NEED FOR LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY FROM THEIR ENGLISH TEACHERS

| Items | Chinese Selected No. | Korean Selected No. |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. more vocabulary reading | 75 | 78 |
| 2. more practice with the new words | 104 | 82 |
| 3. give useful methods/strategies according to the types of new words presented | 165 | 106 |
| 4. have courses on vocabulary learning methods/strategies | 109 | 29 |
| 5. more dictation with new words | 71 | 26 |
| 6. others | 8 | 33 |

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The survey results show that there are some similarities and differences between these two groups of learners in consideration of their sources, tools/ways, as well as need to learn vocabulary and related strategies. As for sources to learn vocabulary learning strategies, these two groups of learners selected "English teacher" as their first choice and "Books about vocabulary learning methods and strategies" as their second. The unique difference between these two groups is that South Korean learners tend to use more off-school English classes while Chinese learners tend to form their own vocabulary learning strategies from their personal learning experience.

As for tools/ways for learning English vocabulary, the survey results show that the two groups of learners vary greatly in their number one choice: "Use the vocabulary lists in their English books" gained the highest score for Chinese learners, whereas "Use computer and internet" was the highest for South Korean learners. Both groups showed similar results regarding "Paper or electronic dictionary" and "Graded vocabulary books" as some tools/ways for learning English vocabulary.

Both groups show a similar need from their English teachers for "Giving useful methods/strategies according to the types of new words presented" and "More practice with the new words." The main difference is that Chinese learners prefer to "Have courses on vocabulary learning methods/strategies," while South Korean learners ask for

"More vocabulary reading."

The implications for this study are as following. First, with the survey of students from South Korea and China, it can be seen that EFL learners from Eastern Asia share some similarities in vocabulary learning strategies. This is good news for some educators and researchers, since that they can find some common patterns among these groups of learners so that they can create and design better vocabulary learning strategies accordingly. Second, there are also some differences among Eastern Asian EFL learners, so teachers who are teaching these students together, should be aware of the differences and provide strategies and suggestions accordingly. Lastly, since English teachers have influence over their students because of their position, they should familiarize themselves with vocabulary learning strategies in order to help their students reach their full potential in language education. Most importantly, For those ESL/EFL teachers who are teaching (or will teach) mixed classes of Chinese and South Korean students and those English native teachers who will be teaching English in both countries as well, they should be aware of their students' similarities and differences in order to best improve the outcomes of vocabulary teaching. In addition, EFL teachers should also realize their importance in assisting in vocabulary learning as an important first source for learners. This is indispensable for helping learners acquire more effective vocabulary learning strategies.

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