A COMPARISON STUDY OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGY USE

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ABSTRACT: *The paper adopts the think-aloud method to research the vocabulary learning strategy use of the excellent learner and the average learner, and tries to solve the questions: (1) What is the learning strategy tendency of the good English learner? (2) What is the learning strategy tendency of the average English learner? The research finding is that the key strategies adopted by the good learner is the simple use of context while the average English learner would tend to frequently use the repetition and translation strategies. The research also verifies an important view that the main difference of learning strategy use between the excellent learner and the average one does not lie in the number of strategy but in the proper choice of strategy in line with the different tasks.*

KEY WORDS: think-aloud method, the vocabulary learning strategy, the excellent learner, the average learner

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning always attracts lots of attention for all foreign language learners and is irreplaceable in developing language ability and communicative competence. It is vocabularies that make up a language, and ample evidence suggest that the vocabulary size of a learner is highly predictive of his entire language ability (Meara & Jones, 1987). Gu (1994) suggests that inadequate understanding of vocabulary is one aspect of language development, which must relate to and integrate with other aspects resulting in serious consequence.

Earlier studies focused on the vocabulary memory strategies, which benefited language learning in general. Rote repetition for vocabulary appears less efficient than using spaced recall, and silent repetition and silent writing are less effective than repeating the words aloud (Gershman, 1970; Seibert, 1927; Royer, 1970). Atkinson and Raugh (1975) has centered on the key-word method, a technique that starts with an acoustic link (finding a keyword in the first language that sounds like the foreign word) then links the keyword and the foreign word by means of an interactive image. In addition, the visual repetition of new words is the strongest negative predictor of both vocabulary size and general proficiency (Gu & Johnson 1996).Whatever it is spaced recall,

keyword method,or repeating the words aloud, it is based on the fundamental assumption that vocabulary learning largely means list learning. In fact, these previous research overlooks one of the crucial characteristics of second language learners: Beginning L2 learners most need not concept-formation but threshold-level second language skill, without which the simple retention of word lists is meaningless.

Researches now have extensively shown that vocabulary can be acquired through reading(Krashen, 1989; Parry, 1991). Vocabulary learning acquired not just retain not just their referential meaning but syntactic, pragmatic, and even emotional information from their context. Most importantly, vocabulary is no longer thought of as separate items, it is an integral part of discourse and is developed with reading strategies such as contextual guessing(Gu & Johnson 1996). They further demonstrate that the researchers need to remember two points when examining learning vocabulary through extensive reading. First, vocabulary acquisition through reading presumes a basic reading ability in the L2, a skill beginning learners possess only to a limited extent. Second, instruction should not overemphasize the incidental, or even subliminal, acquisition of words at the expense of intentional and direct studying of vocabulary. Consequently, in any context, vocabulary learning strategies, incidental or intentional, both add to the acquisition of vocabulary. Learning though extensive reading will lead to the increased retention of that new vocabulary and increased availability of those items for active use.

Researchers are always looking for the "best strategy" for vocabulary retention, in reality, learners tend to use a variety of strategies in combination (Ahmed, 1989; Gu, 1994). Learners consistently adopt types of strategies based either on their belief about their vocabulary or on other cognitive and social factors (Abraham & Vann, 1987). The consistent employment of certain types of strategies forms an approach to vocabulary learning that may considerably influence the outcomes of second language learning (Sanaoui, 1995). However, as Gu(1992) said, using more varieties of strategies and using them more frequently may not necessarily guarantee success in language learning. Therefore, how different learners adopt different combinations of vocabulary strategy in different situations and what strategies would be beneficial to the result of their learning has been the research focus of vocabulary learning process.

The vocabulary learning strategies have been studied for many years, most of which adopted the questionnaire method to survey a large number of learners. Although the questionnaire can help researchers to know about the general perception of learners' vocabulary learning and the general tendency of vocabulary learning strategies from the microscopic view, there still exist many problems in the questionnaire method. One of disadvantages is that the answers of a questionnaire are considered as the self-report of respondents so that the research reliability is not quite sure. Another disadvantage is

that researchers can not observe the thinking process because of lacking the authentic learning environment. This paper will use thinking-aloud method to study the thinking process of language learner's vocabulary learning. Since the 1970s, think-aloud method began to be used in foreign language teaching field and it plays the significant role in researching learning strategies of various field, such as translation, reading, writing, and listening, etc. Wu (2011) points out that the advantage of think-aloud method is to collect the real-time data and the thinking process of the research subjects.

As Ahamed (1989) demonstrated it may well be the micro strategies and processes of learning that determine the success or failure of learning outcomes. The think-aloud method can help teachers to record the specific mental process of students in the authentic language learning circumstance. Therefore, the study is designed to explore and describe vocabulary learning strategy employed by two Chinese learners of English with the think-out method, and then make a comparison to see if the vocabulary learning strategy choice is related to the result of learning and different tasks.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Research subjects
In order to compare the difference of vocabulary strategies use between the excellent learner and the average learner, we selected two Chinese learners of English, One of them gets excellent degree in TEM-8, the other does not pass TEM-8. Both of them are rather extrovert, and is relatively efficient at speaking out while thinking.

Research questions
As the attempt to improve the English learner's vocabulary strategy, this research aims to record the vocabulary learning strategies that are used by the good and average learners under the guidance of think-aloud method and then tries to answer the following two questions: (1)What is the learning strategy tendency of the good English learner? (2)What is the learning strategy tendency of the average English learner?

Research procedures
During the think-aloud research process, the recording devices are indispensable to collect the utterance spoken by subjects. The online vocabulary test, word cards for subjects also are the prerequisites for studying the vocabulary learning strategies.

Determination of target words
The four subjects are required to join the website *https://www.arealme. com/vocabulary-size-test/zh/* to test their vocabulary size and record the uncertain words for them. Based on this test, we determines the nine target words which will be learned by subjects. The words are: **incipient, baneful, drab, absolve, accomplice,**

recondition, hightail, trigger-happy, workmanship. The target words must meet the following conditions:

(1) The target words must be unknown for every subject.

(2) The target words must represent the familiar object, concept or behavior in two subjects' daily life.
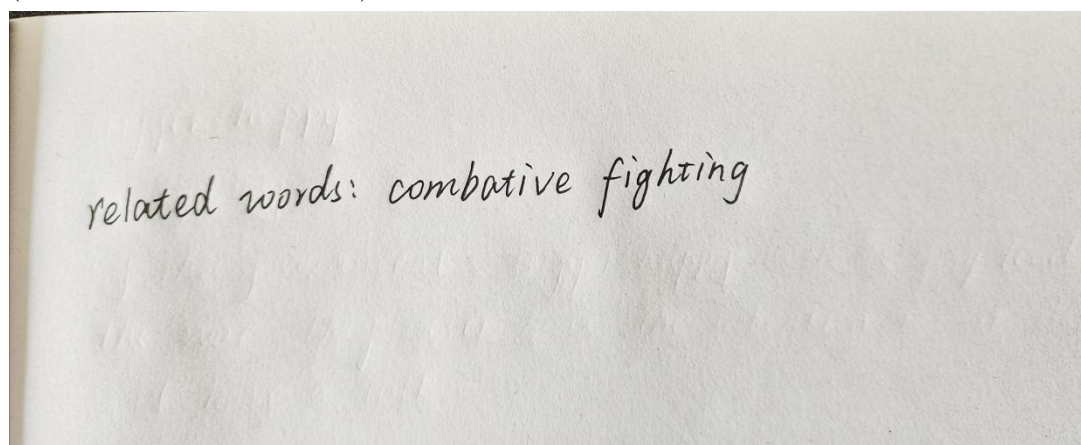
Training of think-aloud method

The training needs to be implemented before the real experiment. In order to prevent the unqualified subjects, four subjects(all English major students) are selected in the beginning of research, but only two of them are trained successfully, because they are more accustomed to speaking out what they are thinking. Another two subjects are relatively introvert and can not perform well in speaking loudly while thinking, so finally the researcher determines to survey two subjects (one excellent learner and one average learner). The researcher explains the procedure, data collection of think-aloud method, and what do the subjects need to do during the experiment. Some math equations are told to the subjects and it is required to speak out the thinking procedure of calculation. The subjects need to use one electronic equipment to receive the math questions, which is sent by the researcher. At the same time, the subjects use their telephone to record what they are saying. In order to attract their attention on speaking out, the researcher asks the subjects to record andpractice the process of solving the exercises for three times. The formal experiment begins the next day.

Making of the word cards

The experiment will use two-sided cards, and the target words, corresponding phonetic symbols and its example sentences are written on the front of the card. Half of these sentences can provide the obvious context clue to guess the word meaning, (such as: The government's trigger-happy methods may lead to the war. They never have the intention to sit down and have a talk.) but another half of sentences does not have the clear clue of the word meaning (such as: This cannot absolve you from all responsibility). The front of word cards are exposed to subjects so as to create the context for subjects who did not ever know the meaning of all words. And then there are the synonyms or the related tips of the target words on the reverse side of word c

8 trigger-happy
/ˈtrɪgə hæpɪ /

eg The government's trigger-happy methods may lead to the war. They never have the intention to sit down and have a talk.

(the front side of word card)

related words: combative fighting
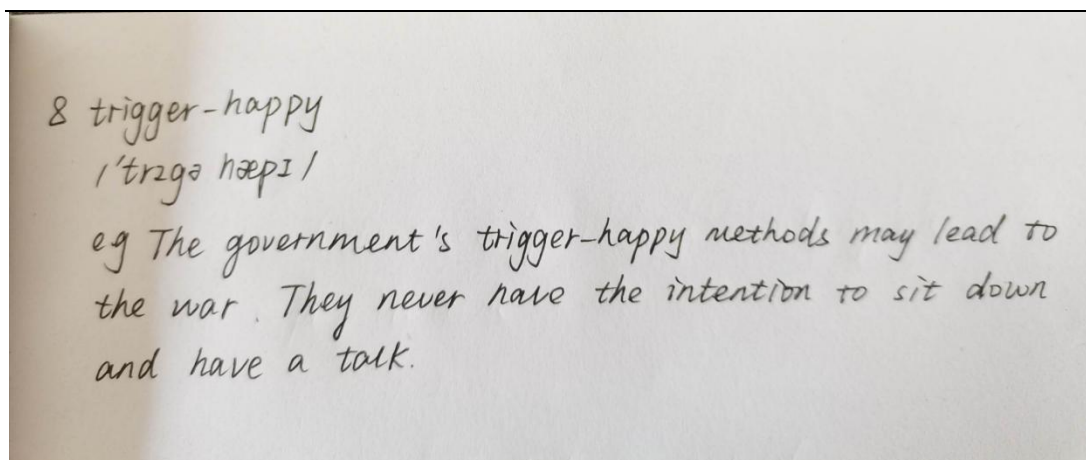
(the reverse side of word card)

Implementation of the formal experiment

After the simple training of think-aloud method the day before, the subjects are told to do the formal experiment and speak out whatever they are thinking in their minds when they are learning the unknown vocabularies. The front side of the word cards is presented to the subjects first, if they can not guess the exact meaning of the words, then the reverse side of the card is shown to them. If they still have the problem in guessing the meaning, the researcher will tell the meaning of the words to the subjects. Due to the limited conditions, one thing that we need to notice is that the whole process of experiment is finished online, and the researcher takes the photos of front side and reverse side of each word card and send them to the subjects one by one. During the experiment, the subjects are asked to use their phones to record what they are saying and thinking. After the whole experiment, a recall test is carried to check their learning outcome. The order of the learned words is mixed, and then subjects need to write down the Chinese meaning of those nine words based on their memories.

Transcript of experiment materials

During the experiment, the subjects are asked to record the whole process of guessing the target word meaning. The researcher listens and transfers the recordings for at least three times in order to make sure the reliability of record content and following analysis.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of practical learning strategies

According to O'Malley&Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) classification of learning strategies and subjects' practical strategies,we can see the learning strategies which is adopted by the two learners in the experiment. Finally, three types and eight specific strategies are summarized below in Table 1.

strategy type	strategy name	interpretation of strategy	S1	S2	Total
the word level	repetition	repeat the word pronunciation	4	8	12
	analysis of the affix	analyze the affix of the target word	5	6	11
	analysis of grammatical features	analyze the part of speech of the target word	1	5	5
	morpheme association	associate the known morpheme to guess the target word	3	1	4
the sentence/context level	simple use of context	make use of the general sentence meaning and its implication	8	3	11
	complex use of context	make use of other words in the sentence or the personal implied experience to guess the target word meaning	1	6	7
	sentence translation	translate the example sentences into Chinese	1	8	9
the related word level	tips of related words	offer synonyms or related words	7	2	9
Total			29	38	

Table 1: Analysis table of vocabulary learning strategies use in the research
(S1 represents the good learner, and S2 represents the average learner)

Table 1 has already shown the frequency of practical vocabulary learning strategies of two subjects in the process of recording the think-aloud. According to sum volume in the table above, it is suggested that the average English learner (S2) uses more learning

strategy in total than the excellent English learner(S1). Besides, the findings also show that the most frequent learning strategy is repetition (12 times), and second frequent one is analysis of the affix (11 times) and simple use of context (11 times), the least two frequent ones are analysis of grammatical features (5 times) and morpheme association(4 times).

In order to have a further study of the relationship between subjects' practical learning strategy and their foreign language proficiency, the researcher calculates the following table which reveals the relationship between guessing the word successfully and learning strategy use in Table 2. The strategies such as analysis of grammatical features and morpheme association are omitted in Table 2 because they are the least frequent strategies of two subjects.

Subjects	repetition	analysis of the affix	Simple use of context	Complex use of context	Sentence translation	Tips of related words
S1	2/4	4/5	7/8	0/1	1/1	7/7
S2	3/8	3/6	2/3	2/6	3/8	2/2

Table 2:the relationship between guessing the word successfully and learning strategy use

The strategy use analysis of the good English learner (S1)

In the above tables, we find that simple use of context is one of the most useful and frequent methods. S1 adopts the strategy of simple use of context for 8 times, then she successfully guesses the target words for 7 times. S1 adopts the strategy of related words tips for 7 times, she finally achieves 100% success. In addition, due to the affix and example sentence on the front side of cards, subjects will make use of affix and context first, the importance of affix cannot be denied. Statistics also shows that subject 1 successfully gets the word meaning for 4 times, therefore, there is no denying that the affix aid is a crucial strategy for vocabulary learning.

The good English learner relies crucially on the affix and simple use of context to guess the meaning of the words when S1 only notices the front side of word cards. For example,when the S1 guesses the word "**baneful**", the learner said Bane refers to something toxic, the suffix 'ful' represents that this word is adjective. Racism has baneful impact not only on globalization but on multi-culture as well. The racism may cause the bad impact, so the word 'baneful' represents poisonous, bad meaning.
bane 有毒药的意思吧，而且后面-ful 是形容词词尾, Racism has baneful impact not only on globalization but on multi-culture as well,这里的 racism 是不好的影响，所以 baneful 是有毒的，不好的意思.

Apparently, the solid vocabulary foundation is crucial for learning the related words (Gu & Johnson, 1996). Taking another word as example, when S1 learns the word"**accomplice**", the learner said

According to the sentence 'the gunman ran to motorcycle being ridden by an accomplice', I guess that the gunman and accomplice should be a gang. I guess that the 'accomplice' refers to the man who assists the gunman. In addition, the accomplice should be one of a gang based on the meaning of accompany.
根据 the gunman ran to motorcycle being ridden by an accomplice 就知道 gunman and accomplice 应该是一伙儿的，accompany 有同伴的意思，感觉 accomplice 是同伙的意思

In Table 2, we notice that S1 achieves 100% success after the learner sees the related word tips. As the context and affix can not help the learner to guess the exact meaning of the words, S1 resorts to the strategy of related word tips. This strategy is also seen as the verification process of guesswork in reading tasks in terms of many good language learners. For instance, when S1 learns the word"**workmanship**", S1 said the following words：

To do this work requires good workmanship, I can see that it may be relative to the craftsman. But I am not quite sure of the exact meaning. (after seeing the reverse side of the word card, related words: skill; tact), it refers to the skill.
To do this work requires good workmanship 可以看出应该与工匠有关，但是还是不确定是什么意思"(after seeing the reverse side of the word card, related words: skill; tact), 是 "技巧" 的意思。

Obviously, the learners gets the exact meaning from the related word tips.

In sum, from the excellent learner's point of view, the simple use of context and affix, together with the related word tips, are the major strategies to imply the meaning of the unknown words. S1 adopts the learning strategies such as complex use of context and sentence translation as the complement for their vocabulary learning. Therefore, this excellent English learner knows how to regulate the different strategies and use some certain strategies to learn various types of words.

The strategy use analysis of the average English learner (S2)
In Table 1, we can figure out the total number of learning strategies which are adopted by the S2 is more than the S1. Even so, the successful rate of guessing the word for S2 is not high. According to Table 2, the repetition and sentence translation are the most frequent learning strategies for the average English learner. S2 resorts to the strategy of repetition for 8 times, and then she successfully gets the word meaning for 3 times. The

same result is for the strategy of sentence translation.

In the process of learning unknown vocabulary, the average learner tends to repeat the word subconsciously, especially when the vocabulary is a little bit difficult for him. Taking **hightail** as example, S2 said

Hightail down to the station and see if your mother is on the train. Literally,it is related to the the meaning of tail......hightail...hightail...The person may follow his mother quietly into the station because he wants to know whether his mother is on the train. So 'hightail' means follow somebody quietly. (after seeing the related word: go or move in hurry way). He continues to say it refers to move somewhere in hurry.

Hightail down to the station and see if your mother is on the train. 字面意思看应该是尾巴怎么样...... hightail... hightail... 是不是悄悄尾随妈妈走进了车站...... 因为这个人想知道妈妈是否在车上，所以悄悄地跟着妈妈，hightail...跟随...尾随的意思吧。(after seeing the related word:go or move in hurry way)哦，是匆忙地去，前往的意思"

Based on his analysis, the researcher found that S2 repeats the word "hightail" for four times in the analysis process. In fact, the first and second repetition is unnecessary out of subconsciousness. The third and fourth repetitions show that the learner is hesitating the exact Chinese meaning of the word. Finally, S2 still does not figure out the correct meaning due to his complex understanding of context information and too much sentence translation. Depending too much on the mother tongue is also one of the most frequent strategies for the average language learner. S2 always concentrates on translating the part of meaning of the word. For instance, when the word"**trigger-happy**"is learned by him, S2 said

The government's trigger-happy method may lead to the war...发生战争......They never have the intention to sit down and have a talk...没有坐下来谈话的想法......trigger 是扳手......happy 是快乐的......have the intention to sit down and have a talk 坐下来聊天，应该是不和平的......战争的......方法。

S2 focuses on translating each part of the word into Chinese and tries to connect the meanings into together. In Table 2, S2 adopts translation strategies for eight times among nine sentences. Only three words are got the correct Chinese meaning. So the translation strategy does not help learners to guess the meaning and even does not benefit learning vocabulary.

Comparison

Based on **Table** 1 and Table 2, it is easy to find that although the average English learner adopts more strategies in number than the good learner, the successful rate of guessing meaning is much less than the excellent one. As O'Malley &Chamot (1990)

indicates, the average language learners always adopt inappropriate learning strategies and lacks of the flexibility in learning the different tasks. They focus too much on the form of language instead of the content, thus missing out the crucial points, such as the important contextual factors.

Although the average student in this research has learned English for about ten years, there is still the vague understanding about English learning and learning strategy for him, resulting in the learning failure. On the contrary, the good learner in this research can make the most use of context, related words as the priority strategies according to different tasks (Vann & Abraham, 1987). The following table demonstrates more detail difference of the learning strategy between two subjects.

The excellent learner	The average learner
adopts the key points in the context	complicates the context information
correctly uses the affix	Sometimes misuses the affix
with the help of related words	unfamiliar with the related words
less uses the repetition and translation	frequently uses the repetition and translation

Table 3: The difference of learning strategy use between two subjects

CONCLUSION

After the comparison study of the two English learners, the key strategy adopted by the good learner is the simple use of context, while the average learner is likely to complicate the context and infer some irrelevant information. The good learner tends to successfully guess more words with the help of related words. The average English learner would tend to frequently use the repetition and translation, but the good learner does not use them very often. Besides, the average learner adopts more strategies in number than the good learners, but the successful rate is still not high. Therefore, it is shown that the main difference between the excellent learner and the average one lies in the proper choice of strategy in line with the different tasks rather than the number of strategy (Lawson & Hogben, 1996).

The analysis result of the thinking procedure of the two subjects indicates that the simple use of context is the most useful and practical method in successfully guessing the vocabulary meaning. Thus, the contextual factors should be fully considered into the vocabulary teaching progress for teachers. The language learners also need to be aware of the effectiveness of the proper strategy facing with the different vocabulary learning, such as the help of affix and related word tips. It is a suggestion that the language learners adopt effective learning strategies in line with different tasks.

Future Research

The advantage of this research is that two subjects' thinking process is recorded, so it helps the researcher to observe their thinking tendency and find out the successful and unsuccessful reasons of guessing the word meaning. Due to lack of face-to-face interview, the number of research subjects is limited. If having the opportunity, we will find more subjects to do further comparison work of vocabulary learning strategies between the good learners and the average ones. In addition, the training of think-aloud method for subjects may not be systemic and adequate because the subjects record their thinking process by themselves and have to communicate online with the researcher.

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