

ABSTRACT

This study investigates vocabulary learning strategies adopted by non-English majors in China, as well as their beliefs about how vocabulary should be learned. It aims to get a better understanding of the differences in vocabulary learning beliefs and strategies between high- and low-proficiency students.

Although some studies have explored the Chinese learners' beliefs and strategy use in vocabulary learning by employing a quantitative approach, consensus is still lacking. To gain further information, the researcher used a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to conduct the current study. The data for the study was obtained through three instruments: an English vocabulary placement test, questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions, and interviews. Based on their scores in the vocabulary placement test, 80 second-year non-English majors, including 40 high-achievers and 40 low-achievers, were drawn from Southwest Jiaotong University, Emei campus. The questionnaires were aimed at eliciting information about beliefs and strategies adopted by the participants, and interview data were used to supplement the findings from the questionnaires.

The results indicate that the differences in vocabulary learning beliefs between high-achievers and low-achievers were significant only in the 'acquisition belief', but not in the 'memory belief' and 'learning belief'. Most of them believed that vocabulary learned should be put to use and many of them took a negative view of the belief that vocabulary must be learned by memorizing wordlists. The acquisition belief that vocabulary can be picked up through extensive reading was held more strongly by the higher level learners than the lower level learners. However, not many of them believed that there was a single method for learning vocabulary effectively. They held that it is better to combine different methods in vocabulary learning.

Significant differences between the two groups of learners were found in the use of

six categories of vocabulary learning strategies. The most striking difference lay in the fact that most high-achievers consciously accessed various sources to learn vocabulary, while low-achievers relied too much on textbooks and wordlists. Both groups of learners were found to use memory strategies frequently, but high-achievers employed more complex and thoughtful memorization than low-achievers. High-achievers used more strategies more frequently than their lower level counterparts. Even so, they failed to apply a wider range of strategies, and their strategies mainly served to help them achieve high marks in examinations. There was hardly any correlation between the participants' learning beliefs and their test results, but strong correlation was found between their vocabulary learning strategies and their test results. The correlation between the vocabulary learning beliefs and vocabulary learning strategies was also found to be positive but relatively weak.

It is expected that knowing learners' strategies will enable teachers to make training in strategy use a part of a vocabulary development programme, thereby strengthening the learners' study of English.

