

SOME REVIEWS ON USING AUTHENTIC READING MATERIALS TO IMPROVE VOCABULARY LEARNING FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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***Abstract:** Many recent studies have been conducted to investigate on learning vocabulary through reading. When examining this issue, many questions have been raised. Attention has been paid to not only the amount of vocabulary or the frequency is learnt but also different aspects such the number of words taught or test formats and so on. In this research, we have reviewed the findings of some previous studies related to this topic. The results show that most of these studies support the belief that vocabulary can be learnt from reading text but not much. They also suggest that it would be more effective to learn vocabulary if useful reading is combined with authentic reading materials regularly. Besides analyzing relevant opinions for these studies, the article also provides illustrative examples to take some suggestions into consideration in applying reading references to improve the amount of vocabulary for non-English major students.*

***Keywords:** Reading skill, vocabulary learning, authentic reading materials.*

Received 4 October 2022

Revised and accepted for publication 24 October 2022

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1. INTRODUCTION

There have been many different views about learning vocabulary through reading. Wesche and Paribakht (2000) stated that the best method of learning new words was not “Reading Only”. They said if subjects read the texts combined with text-based word-learning exercises or word-focused tasks, their vocabulary knowledge would be improved more effectively. Unlike the findings of Wesche and Paribakht (2000), Yali (2010) pointed out that the two types of instruction (incidental learning and intentional learning) should be combined together so that the retention and vocabulary gains were better. Even though Pigada and Schmitt (2006) remarkably identified the role of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition, the authors said that the spelling test was one of the best methods for learning new words. Numerous researchers, however, focused on the impact of the text frequency and word frequency occurrence factors on learning word knowledge. However, the results of these studies indicated that improvement in learning new words was not significant. They also declare that the word

frequency a text encounters had an important role in learning vocabulary. This study will attempt to discuss the research methodologies of the studies above as well the strengths and weaknesses of each method. A brief study will also be conducted to explore the effectiveness of vocabulary learning among non-English majors at some universities in Hanoi.

2. CONTENT

2.1. Literature review

The research by Wesche and Paribakht (2000) with ten intermediate – level ESL students used eight text – related vocabulary exercises from the texts on the topic of Acid Rain. The target words were similar to some previous studies. Concurrent think - aloud method, immediate retrospection and delay retrospection were used in the research. Moreover, interview and observation methods were also carried out. The strength of this study is in reliability and validity because the study used several different techniques to give subsidiary data on the similar activities. Providing detailed information is the advantage of the concurrent think – aloud technique, which allows us to have some insights into what the subjects think they do. Moreover, at the end of the investigation, interview method is also used, where interview data is recorded or transcribed by a voice – activated tape recorder. The authors can listen again and recall it, so internal reliability is high. However, there are some limitations of this study. Firstly, the qualitative analysis of the data is on a small scale, so the findings cannot be generalized to the large population. Secondly, it is time-consuming to analyze and interpret this volume of the data. Hence, the technique applied in this study is not easy to conduct in the Vietnamese context.

Pigada and Schmitt (2006) conducted a case study of a 27 – year old learner of French. In a month, the subject would read four pocket-sized books consisting of 228 pages in total and about 300 words. The measurement method was one – on – one interview (pretest and posttest was similar). Two kinds of test were used on two different days. The spelling test on the first day lasted 90 minutes and the meaning and grammar tests on the following day lasted two and a half hours. Based on the findings, the subject would have had a good opportunity to learn all knowledge aspects of words if the words were repeated twenty or more times. Another result was that substantial learning of the target words happened during the treatment process, but the spelling test was the most effective, even with few exposures. The weakness of this study is that a case study method with only one participant cannot resolve the issues of generalization. Case study, therefore, is impossible to be representative of the general group or population. Mohd Noor (2008: 1603) said that “the limitation of case study was enough rigor reliability”. Moreover, external reliability is low, so the findings are impossible to replicate in other contexts. Besides the limitations above, single – subject studies also have some strengths, which enable researchers to examine in more detail the process of learning vocabulary.

A study by Subekti and Lawson (2007) was implemented with 25 Indonesian university students. All of the participants had good results in the IELTS test before taking part in this study. English was not their major, but their proficiency level was higher than student from universities. Females accounted for about 67 % of the participants. The *Word Recognition Test* and *Meaning Translation Test* were used in the study for about four weeks. Thirty target words were repeated in the two tests. The learners carried out different tasks related to the texts and

target words. The participants were asked to write 30 words in English about common individuals. Each subject's think – aloud process was recorded and then compositions written by the subjects were collected as the data of the product. After the think – aloud task, the recorded think – aloud protocols were played back to the subjects and then the subjects were interviewed immediately to see whether they could recall any unreported thinking process.

The strength of this study is that each subject's think – aloud and writing process happened individually and their think – aloud process was natural. Moreover, through the interview, the subjects can add something that they can not gain during think- aloud process. In addition, the observation analysis is used to make the study more in depth. However, the weaknesses of the research approach are that it only focused on subjects who have a positive attitude towards think – aloud, therefore they may not perform naturally. In Vietnamese context, the methods are not practical because most students do not have IELTS scores.

Ninety – three participants aged 18 to 21 took part in a study by Yali (2010). The participants were divided into two groups: the control group (46 students) and the experiment group (47 students). They had to read two readings passages: the passage A “Going Home” and the passage B “The Date Father Didn’t Keep”. Twenty-six words were examined as target words from the passage A and repeated in the passage B. Three measures were conducted to verify the effectiveness of the different instructional techniques on learning new words. The first measure was vocabulary size test. The second measure was vocabulary multiple – choice test (pre – test, post – test and delayed test). The third measure was writing test. Furthermore, the author also carried out a pilot study so that the reliability and credibility of the test were ensured. The results showed that the participants acquired significantly in vocabulary knowledge during two treatment methods, but the intentional learning instruction or reading plus vocabulary exercises led to the higher vocabulary acquisition. The author declared that the combination of the two instructions led to better retention and greater number of new words learnt. The strength of the study is that vocabulary size test, multiple- choice test and a pilot study are used. Like some investigations above, a writing test was also used. Moreover, the data of this study strengthened the reliability and validity. The limitation of this study is that only 26 target words are examined, so the reliability will be improved if the larger number of sample word items are used. Clearly, in order to examine different types of words knowledge, using several tests will be more effective in collecting data than using one type of test. Therefore, this method may be carried out in Vietnamese context because Chinese students and Vietnamese students have many common characteristics.

Unlike the studies mentioned above, another investigation by Shang, Briody and Lin (2010) considered the influences of strategies used on extensive reading. Eleven EFL participants in this study aged from 20 to 23 were English majors from I - Shou University in China. The participants were from different groups such as “sophomores,” “juniors,” and “senior”. The subjects were required to complete tasks related to an extensive reading text with different techniques. However, the procedure of the four experiments was not the same. A pilot test, pre – knowledge and an immediate unexpected test were carried out in this study. Moreover, the different strategies were also used to compare the difference of hypothesizes. At the end of the study, the interview method was also used, where interview data was recorded or

transcribed by voice activated tape recorder. The researchers could listen again and recall it easily. In addition, the authors could gather more participants' explanations after the participants finished the questionnaires, so internal reliability was high.

The strength of this methodology is that it focuses on the qualitative data produced by the subjects in each group. Secondly, the interviews are used to collect opinions of students, so students are always willing to provide their personal information. However, there are some limitations of the study. Firstly, the authors only mention the qualitative analysis of the data. Nevertheless, it is not practical to use this method in case study to gain insights into the problems. Furthermore, it can be time consuming to analyze and interpret this volume of data. In our research context in Vietnam, the interviews have been effective methods because it is easy to gather information from the participants and the subjects are willing to take part.

Eight grade three EFL students took part in the investigation by Chen (2011). The data of the study was collected from a survey containing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Two kinds of test (*Vocabulary Level Test* and *Reading Comprehension Test*) were given to students to find out their attitudes toward using their words knowledge for reading comprehension in the English classroom. This survey was distributed to the students who were two lower – higher classes. The subjects were interviewed immediately to show whether they could recall the importance of vocabulary knowledge through reading comprehension. The results of this study have many limitations. Firstly, the author does not mention the number of words. Secondly, the statistical data is not put in tables to show the differences between the two levels. The strength of this method is that both quantitative and qualitative analyses are applied to make the study in depth. Firstly, the survey is bilingual (Taiwan and English) to meet the demands of the students at lower - higher levels. Secondly, the first and final questions are designed to be almost identical to discover any students' derivation from the beginning to the end of the survey. Thirdly, open – ended interviews may lead to student's open – ended attitudes, which may be used as qualitative data contributing to the depth of the research. Moreover, the research approach focused on subjects who had positive and negative attitudes towards the process. This method, therefore, is practical because the participants are selected through two levels, which may take them think. These approaches are chosen for a context, so they may perform naturally. In our research in Vietnamese context, this method can be applied with many students because they seem to be willing to take part in this study and answer open – ended questions. It is, therefore, easy to collect information from the participants.

In the study of Luchini and Serati (2010), they also conducted research in Argentinian context and with different level English students. The study consisted of five teachers and five groups with 25 participants aged from 13 to 17. The participants were from various levels of language: “elementary,” “low - intermediate”, “intermediate”, “upper –intermediate”, and “advanced.” They received totally four hours of English instruction per week. The authors used written and oral tests to investigate the effect of word form recognition test. Moreover, the authors used classroom observation method in their data collection. The data showed that newest incidental words could be learnt by learners.

Like the studies mentioned above, the strength of this study is that the classroom

observation method can be used for qualitative analysis. The authors observe and record five different reading classes directed by five teachers (Observation during about five weeks). After observation, the authors discuss with five teachers and ask for reasons why they use various techniques in their classes. In our research context, this method is also not practicable because it takes a lot of time to collect data.

Asgari and Mustapha (2011) focused on learning new words through different kinds of strategies. There were 10 Malaysian students joining in this research. Most students were from Faculty of Education studies in University Putra Malaysia. The authors used open – ended interviews to collect data in this study. The researchers interviewed and noted seven randomly – selected reading class directed by students to find out their attitudes toward learning new words by each of strategies in the English classroom. The strength of the method is that qualitative method is mainly used. The interview method is used to collect information on the frequency and attitudes of both teachers and students in class. Conversely, the weaknesses of the methods are also the same with previous studies. The number of participants is small and the description of subjects is not clear, therefore, the findings of this research cannot be applied to other situations. Therefore, the interviews with the students are not effective. Like the techniques mentioned above, the techniques that carried out in this study will not be easy to apply in the Vietnamese context.

2.2. Applying in a case study

Learning vocabulary through reading in EFL classroom in Vietnam is very popular, especially in our teaching context. As mentioned above, from the teaching experience at a university, we realized that most students do not seem to be interested in learning vocabulary. Clearly, there are some reasons. Firstly, students do not have opportunities to practise vocabulary everyday because they only had four periods per week. Secondly, they always look up for new words in the online dictionary or ask their teachers about the meaning of new words, so they do not have rich vocabulary. Thirdly, the number of students in each class is often thirty or more and they are of different proficiency levels in the class. For better teaching and learning process, the researcher would like to implement some of the research methods in the previous studies to explore students' vocabulary learning through reading in our teaching context.

As analyzed in the above research, the qualitative method was mainly used in most studies. Cresswell (2008: 205) remarkably emphasized: “Qualitative research as an investigative method for understanding a phenomenon based on separate methodological traditions of inquiry that elicit human conditions or social problem”. The methods in the study of Wesche and Paribakht (2000) and Subekti and Lawson (2007) may be appropriate. There are two methods of data collection: interviews and classroom observations. There are some appropriate reasons to apply these methods in our research context. Firstly, these two methods are not difficult to carry out and statistical analysis can be put into tables for further analysis. Secondly, students' responses are reliable because they do not have to provide personal information.

Pigada and Schmitt (2006), Shang, Briody and Lin (2010) and Asgari and Mustapha (2011) state that the interview is an important element in collecting students' information. The open-ended interviews can be used in Vietnamese context, so both high and low proficiency

students can understand the requirements and give comments. Moreover, through interviews, students can show their feelings and attitudes towards learning vocabulary through reading and give their responses about teaching and learning process.

To sum up, the interview and classroom observation methods can be used for qualitative analysis. The combination of the two methods should be carried out together to lead to better findings. However, the research methods that are selected for our possible research topic have some threats to validity. Firstly, it is threat to external validity - the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the sample size. Secondly, it is threat to internal validity, which may be background knowledge of participants, sources of data and environment learning. Thirdly, it is threats to construct validity because it is impossible to conduct constructs directly about abilities and attitudes. The interview methods, therefore, may be not effective when applied to participants who are unwilling to provide responses and comments. In short, the threats mentioned above are possible threats to the validity when using the research methods.

The following things can be possible threats to the reliability of our chosen research methods. Firstly, it is the threats to internal reliability. The data collection of students' level seems to be inconsistent with what is shown in students' responses through the interviews. In addition, the number of students in each class may cause many difficulties during class observation. Secondly, threats to external reliability should be mentioned. The study is conducted in a specific context, and the contexts are varied, so the classroom observation method has to be changed. To strengthen validity and reliability in our future research, the interview and classroom observation methods should be used to collect data. As mentioned above, being a teacher with fourteen years of experience, the researcher realizes actually that English is learned in a passive way; students get structures and vocabulary from teachers and then practice by doing relevant exercises, so they have to deal with many difficulties in learning English including four skills

As a specialized English teacher, the researcher is teaching the third – year students including 310 (303 males and 7 females) third – year students of Information science at universities in Hanoi such as Hanoi Metropolitan University, Hanoi University of Science and Technology and FPT University. The students are from various areas of country, mostly from the Northern provinces and other cities. Before entering these universities in Hanoi, the students have studied the subject of English for seven years in Secondary and High school. The researcher asks students why their English proficiency level is not good although they have learnt it for a long time. Many of them say that they do not have any motivation to learn English. Some of them say that although it is quite important, they only focus on the main subjects such as Mathematic, Chemistry, Literature, and Physics that are important for the university entrance examinations. From my teaching experience, the students of information science are often not very good at English language usage, especially vocabulary.

The methods chosen to collect data for the research include classroom observation and interview. In this research, the author decides to use class observation because it is considered as one of the suitable approaches to collect data on a large scale: “collect information from the large scale, the observation was more efficient than other approaches” [Brown, 2000: 29].

Patton [1990: 203] also emphasizes that observation is “attractive as they afford the research the opportunity to gather live data from live situations”. During five weeks of innovation implementation, the author observes and makes notes related to the topic using an open - ended observation sheets.

The researcher not only uses classroom observation but also carries out this research by using the interviews. Classroom observation does not allow the author to understand the students’ views about using authentic reading texts to improve vocabulary. The students are interviewed individually with the same questions after class observation to seek their ideas. The purpose of interviews is to understand students’ attitudes and opinions towards the coursebook and extra authentic reading texts combined with the course book as well. The interviews include eight questions, which are divided into two main parts. The first part consists of two questions to find information about the contents and levels of the reading texts in the course-book. The second part is six questions to focus on the opinions of students about the extra authentic reading texts. The interviews are designed in Vietnamese, the mother tongue of the students so that they can understand the questions more thoroughly. In analyzing the interviews, the author translates the students’ interviews into English.

2.3. Findings and Discussion

a) Results from the class observation

Students’ reaction and responses were observed carefully during five weeks. The researcher found that most students who took part in this research had positive attitudes toward using authentic reading materials combined with the course book to develop their vocabulary. 281 out of students (accounting for 90,65%) seemed to be more eager to join in the reading lessons. They felt that authentic reading texts made reading lessons more enjoyable and memorable.

In analyzing observation data, the use of pre-reading activities helped students to comprehend the texts more easily. Pre – reading activities not only assisted students to feel more relaxed but also provided them with the chances to enhance their vocabulary. Nevertheless, the findings of the classroom observation showed that 103 students (accounting for 33,23%) still lacked confidence and took part negatively in the reading process. The findings also showed that the traditional method of vocabulary teaching and learning asked students to memorize words; however, it was nearly impossible to teach every single word in the reading lessons. Instead of encouraging memorization, the researcher had to provide students with some other vocabulary learning strategies, such as using context clues, consulting a references source, and analyzing word parts. However, 103 students (accounting for 33,23%) had many difficulties in understanding the new words. There is no ambit on vocabulary of authentic reading texts, so students might have to deal with their vocabulary by using language tools, such as dictionary or learning strategies.

b) Results from the students’ interview

The researcher started by analyzing the interview data by asking students about reading lessons of the course – book. Most students raised some issues for their point. Firstly, the contents of reading lessons of course – book were not exploited effectively. Therefore, they did

not or absolutely did not perceive the reading lessons effective with contents. Secondly, they said that the levels of course – book, particularly the reading lessons, was very difficult. This led to the situation that most students felt bored. From their point, if the teacher knew how to combine well the contents of the reading lessons, the situation would be improved. The students also emphasized that if the reading lessons were conducted without changing the teaching strategies, it would be boring. Moreover, the students revealed that it was very comfortable for them to attend the class with reading lessons when teacher used most of the time giving lessons and forgot to ask the students for their participation in the lessons. Obviously, this may decrease the interaction between the teacher and students, and among the students themselves.

From the findings, the students responded positively when asked about the extra materials and their selection process. All interviewees said that authentic reading texts were helpful and effective in reaching the objectives of vocabulary enhancement. Moreover, authentic supplementary reading materials contain many words that are related to the words in the coursebook, which helps students to understand or memorize the words better. Furthermore, the researcher asked the interviewees to explicate how authentic reading texts combined with the course- book helps them improve their vocabulary. Most interviewees said that authentic reading texts not only had a tendency to expand their vocabulary size in the coursebook, but also provided the meaning and use of words.

In analyzing the interview data, 281 students (accounting for 90,65%) agreed that the reading texts were relevant and 29 students (accounting for 9,35%) had no answer. After three lessons, 254 out of students (accounting 81,94%) said that the design of the authentic reading materials was tasks that best motivate spirit and helped them have better gain in vocabulary when reading. Based on the results of interview, 203 students (accounting for 65,48%) stated that vocabulary of authentic reading texts was the main concern when they comprehend the reading. They preferred to understand the meaning of all words in the text before reading. The findings showed that these students improved their reading rate and had pleasant reading experiences. Other students believed that vocabulary of authentic reading texts improved their English ability and enabled them to accurately understand information from the articles. By analyzing the interviews and classroom observation, a number of assumptions can be made. Firstly, most students claimed that the authentic reading texts were necessary and helped them better understand the specific vocabulary items as well as gather the general vocabulary knowledge. Secondly, they were motivated through using the authentic reading texts. Thus, it was recommended that the authentic reading materials should be chosen and modified carefully in order to fit with students' knowledge levels.

c) Some limitations

Clearly, there were a number of limitations that needed to be acknowledged during the implementation of the study. Firstly, the study was carried out in a short time, only five weeks. This period was not enough to realize much change and effectiveness of the innovation process. Secondly, the researcher in this innovation played the role of both implementer and change agent, other teachers of universities were not involved in the innovation. Moreover, there was not the comparison between the effects of two genders, the researcher only mentioned students

in his class in common. Nobody managed or judged the innovation process. Therefore, the results of the study might be inaccurate or under/overestimated. Finally, it was the first time the researcher has ever carried research, so he had many difficulties during innovation process. Lack of interview experience, for example, meant that the researcher was not able to prompt students to provide answers that are more detailed.

3. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the findings of previous researches and conducting a case study, the researcher found that most of the students confirm positive vocabulary development through reading than in previous investigations, especially it is more effective when combining with text-based activities. One of the most interest points is that they highly appreciate the role of the occurrence of words and texts. However, the investigation was conducted with relatively short reading texts and the number of the target words did not appear so frequently to be tested. Therefore, further research should examine a larger number of target items with the reading plus text-based vocabulary exercises. Furthermore, knowledge decay and retention should be also taken into consideration in the future study. Numerous studies will be needed on the issue of vocabulary learning through reading, especially in Vietnamese context. Reviewing what have been done about vocabulary learning through reading is very important. However, applying the methods and findings to Vietnamese context requires much time to prepare and find out appropriate methods.

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MỘT VÀI NHẬN XÉT VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG TÀI LIỆU ĐỌC THAM KHẢO NHẪM NÂNG CAO VIỆC HỌC TỪ VỰNG CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN VÀ MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU ĐIỂN HÌNH

Tóm tắt: Gần đây có nhiều nghiên cứu tiến hành tìm hiểu về việc học từ vựng thông qua việc đọc. Nhiều câu hỏi đã được đặt ra khi tiến hành công việc này. Họ không chỉ quan tâm đến lượng từ vựng được học hoặc tần suất xuất hiện mà còn tập trung vào các lĩnh vực khác nhau như số lượng từ được giảng dạy hay như các dạng bài kiểm tra số lượng từ được giảng dạy... Trong nghiên cứu này, chúng tôi tiến hành xem xét một vài ý kiến có liên quan đến chủ đề về việc sử dụng tài liệu đọc tham khảo nhằm nâng cao việc học từ vựng. Kết quả cho thấy hầu hết các nghiên cứu này đều cho rằng từ vựng có thể học được từ việc đọc văn bản nhưng không nhiều. Họ cũng gợi ý rằng sẽ hiệu quả hơn để học từ vựng nếu có sự kết hợp với các hoạt động dựa trên bài đọc hoặc có sự bổ sung của các tài liệu tham khảo một cách thường xuyên hơn. Ngoài việc tập trung phân tích các ý kiến có liên quan cho các nghiên cứu này, bài viết cũng đưa ra một ví dụ minh họa để làm rõ thêm những điểm cần lưu ý khi tiến hành áp dụng tài liệu đọc tham khảo nhằm nâng cao vốn từ vựng cho sinh viên không chuyên.

Từ khóa: Kỹ năng đọc, học từ vựng, tài liệu đọc tham khảo.