

An Investigation into The Effects of External Factors On Vocabulary Learning of Grade 10 Students at A High School in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning plays an integral part in learning a second language. This study was conducted to discover what external factors have the most and the least impacts on grade 10 students' vocabulary learning, and suggest some measures to improve the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching and learning at a high school in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam. Questionnaire was used as the instrument to collect data for this research. A Likert Scale questionnaire was developed on the basis of items which refer to external factors effecting students' vocabulary learning; and SPSS program was used to analyze the data collected. The study revealed that 'Teacher' is the most influential factor, which is followed by Peers, Number of exposures to the new words and Lexical items. There is not enough evidence to prove that English curriculum have strong impacts on students' vocabulary learning.

KEY WORDS: vocabulary teaching, vocabulary learning, external factors, learning strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent societies, English, an international language, undeniably is a very important language. It is considered as the link between countries all over the world. In Vietnam, due to its vital role, English is one of the core subjects in the national curriculum. Besides, mastering English obviously helps learners have better opportunities for higher education at prestigious college and university around the world as well as for international companies with high salary. However, it is the fact that despite having been taught English since they were at primary schools, many young learners still have not been able to master this language. Obviously, in learning a foreign language in general and English in particular, the role of vocabulary is irreplaceable. The more words are known, the more the learners are able to understand when reading or listening as well as the more fluently and clearly their ideas are expressed through speaking and writing. According to McCarthy (1990), "no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of second language (L2) are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in a L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way". Moreover, it is stated by Folse (2008) that the vocabulary level is a key factor that helps learners to enhance their second language proficiency. Conclusively, vocabulary is the element that links four main skills namely speaking, listening, reading and writing all together. By enriching vocabulary students will find it easy to master English in both the way they comprehend and the way they produce the language.

Actually, in Vietnam education, much efforts have been made in teaching and learning English both inside and outside schools. In each 45 – minute lesson, 5 to 7 minutes are often spent to deliver the new words or phrases and 3 to 5 minutes for small activities to check students' understanding of the new words. The time may be shorter or longer, depending on the familiarity of the topic to students. In the researcher's work place, each teacher has her own techniques of teaching vocabulary and checking understanding that are appropriate with each class setting and students' level. However, a huge number of students still cannot master the words and use them correctly; consequently, their results in the tests and examinations are not good even though they meet the questions relating to the words or phrases they have learned. In short, although both teachers and students have made great efforts, students' learning of vocabulary is not as effective as expected.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aims at finding out external factors that have the most and the least effect on the vocabulary learning of 10th grade students at PhuBinh high school (PBS) in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam. Therefore, the specific research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- *What external factors have the most and the least effect on the vocabulary learning of 10th form students at PBS?*
- *What can be done to help students learn vocabulary better?*

Subjects of the study: Participants are 200 students in grade 10 who are randomly selected from 13 classes and 13 teachers of English at PBS participated in this study.

Method of the study: The study is conducted to find the factors that have the most and the least impact on vocabulary learning of the 10th grade students. Therefore, quantitative approach which focuses mainly on understanding, explaining, exploring, discovering and clarifying situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences of a group of people is used.

Data collection instrument: Questionnaires for both teachers and students will be employed to collect data. Then data was collected analyzed by SPSS.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. An overview of vocabulary: According to Hornby (1995), vocabulary could be a list of words with their meaning. It was defined by Penny Ur (1996:60) that “the words we teach in the foreign language. However, a new item of vocabulary may be more than a single word; a compound of two or three words or multi-word idioms”. Zimmerman cited in Coady and Huckin (1997) defines vocabulary as central to language teaching and of critical importance to a language learner. Vocabulary is defined by Neuman and Dwyer (2009) as words learners are obliged to know to have effective communication. Moreover, in his study, Benettayeb (2010) states that vocabulary is the most amounts of words illustrating a given language. Without vocabulary, the learner would be incapable of using and discerning the target language. Lessard – Clouston (2013) assumes that vocabulary is implied as the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which express a particular meaning. In other words, vocabulary not only consists of single words with particular meaning but it also comprises words phrases or chunks.

2. The importance of vocabulary in language learning: The learning of vocabulary is taken into account as an essential part in learning a distant language. Therefore, as one of the knowledge aspects in language, plays an integral role for learners in language acquisition (Cameron, 2001). According to Schmitt (2000: 55) “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language”. Furthermore, Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000) and Read (2000) approving of the idea that to succeed in using second language, vocabulary acquisition is one of the most important factors. Obviously, when having an extensive vocabulary, students can use the structures and language functions they have been taught before to communicate comprehensibly. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge and language use have corresponding relationship. To be more detailed, the more vocabulary is acquired, the more appropriately and correctly language is used and, on the other hand, language use leads to an improvement in knowledge of vocabulary. Many other researchers such as Richards (1980) and Krashen (1989) cited in Maximo (2000) state some reasons for which vocabulary need to be devoted special attention to when students learn second language. Firstly, to master a language, it is necessary to have a large vocabulary. Secondly, it is reported that, the lack of vocabulary is a main reason why language acquirers carry dictionaries with them instead of grammar books.

3. External factors affecting vocabulary acquisition : External factors are the factors outside the learners and have effects on their learning. External factors refer to particular language learning condition including foreign language curriculum, the teachers, learning task, the partners, the classroom atmosphere, motivation, the support of family, and the availability of input and output opportunities.

Foreign language curriculum : In terms of curriculum, according to Nation and Macalister (2010), the act of analyzing, sequencing the course materials, evaluation, format and presentation of materials is indispensable. Undeniably, materials are focused entirely on in foreign language learning in general, and second language vocabulary learning in particular.

Teachers: Teachers' personalities may have a great influence on students' performance and their final results. In addition, teachers' performance in the classroom, teaching style and methodology are part of the process variables (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). The teacher's age may also be an important factor. It has a strong relation with teaching experience, which helps explain the teacher's (1) efficiency in the language learning class; (2) activity, energy and movement in the classroom; (3) openness to innovations and new methodological approaches; (4) enthusiasm and degree of hopefulness, which may decrease with age; (5) willingness to strive and improve teaching and learning conditions, etc.

Learning task: The traditional, broader understanding of task as in Williams and Burden (1997) indicates that the learning task includes the materials being learned as well as the goal the learner is trying to achieve by using these materials. As stated by Crookes (1986), task is a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or at work.

Number of exposures to the new words: The number of exposures and recycling is also important in acquiring vocabulary. Nation (2001) states that five to more than 20 repeated meetings are needed to learn words according to the various criteria in the different studies.

Peers : Lantolf and Thorne (2004) claims that peers is a factor that affects the developmental process of learning occurring through participation in cultural, linguistic, and previously formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction. Besides, Shah (1999: 107) also suggests that "aspects such as an inappropriateness in the use of second language, show of dislike, boastfulness, showing off, and formality second language use are several other factors".

Access to native speakers: According to Felix (1977) as cited in Leontiev and James (1981), an important factor that affects vocabulary learning is the frequency of the learners' contact with the language. It would be a great advantage if second language learners have opportunities to communicate with native speakers both within and outside of the classroom. Interacting with native speakers, learners can receive appropriate feedback so that they can make quicker progress, particularly in the oral/aural aspects of language acquisition. Moreover, when learners can understand what native speakers say and can give response, it means that they have a certain amount of vocabulary and know how to use them.

Interlexical factors : Interlexical factors refer to the relationship between the new words and the words learners know in their first or second language. This relationship includes similarity of form of the first and the second language and meaning relations between words in the first and second language.

Intralexical factors : According to Laufer (1997), intralexical factors arise from intrinsic word properties. He also states that intralexical factors that affect the learnability of lexical items include pronounce ability and multiple word meaning.

Learning context: The learning context refers to the socio-cultural-political environment where learning takes place. The learning context can include the teachers, the peers, the classroom climate or the classroom interaction in general. With regard to classroom interaction and second language acquisition, Ellis (1994) concluded that opportunities to negotiate meaning may help the acquisition of L2 vocabulary.

Home factors: Socio - economic status consistently predicts cognitive and academic outcomes among both native English speakers and English language learners (Neuman, 2009). To be more detailed, children from low-income homes perform less well than their more economically advantaged peers. Moreover, social class differences give higher-income children better access to language-related literacy experiences including ownership of books and other reading materials (Raz & Bryant, 1990), frequency of shared reading (Adams, 1990), and opportunities to engage in experiences that build conceptual knowledge needed for understanding text (Neuman, 2009). Furthermore, research on the relationship between language use in the home and learners' literacy development in their first or second language generally indicates that children's proficiency is related to family language preferences (Duursma et al., 2007).

IV. TEACHING VOCABULARY TECHNIQUES

Using Pictures and Mimes : Using pictures and mimes is one of the beneficial ways used to the meaning of new vocabulary items. The list of pictures consists of posters, flashcards, wall charts, magazine pictures, board drawings, stick figures, and photographs. If the teacher intends to teach words like vegetables, clothes, and markets, the use of pictures will be very important because it will be very difficult and time-consuming to

explain them. Harmer (1985) states that pictures can also be used to create a situation or context. The usage of mimes in teaching new words is also considered of great value, especially with actions such as jumping, running, writing, and smoking. A type of these concepts is easily explained if the teacher pretends to do them before the class.

Using Description and Definition: Another way of teaching vocabulary is providing definitions or descriptions of new words. Bright (1970:40) indicates that “the ability to produce short, clear relevant definitions of words is important to the teacher”. It was stated by Nation (1990) that an adequate definition indicates the grammatical function or the category of the word, a noun, verb, an adjective, it also indicates the typical sentence pattern in which the word enters and finally it indicates other formal aspects of the word.

Using Real Objects: Obviously, using realia can help learners remember vocabulary better due to the fact that memory for objects and pictures is very reliable and visual techniques can act as cues for remembering words. Using this technique includes the use of visual aids and demonstrations. (Takač& Singleton, 2008). Objects can be used to show meanings when teacher want to explains concrete nouns. Introducing a new word by showing the real object often helps learners to memorize the word through visualization. Objects in the classroom or things brought to the classroom can be used.

Guessing from the Context: Learning from context not only includes learning from extensive reading, but also learning from taking part in a conversation, and learning from listening to stories, films, television, or the radio (Nation, 2001). In order to activate guessing in a written or spoken text, there should be four elements available: the reader, the text, unknown words, and clues in the text including some knowledge about guessing. The absence of one of these elements may affect the learner’s ability to guess. Furthermore, this technique encourages learners to take risks and guess the meanings of words they do not know as much as possible. This will make students more confident so that they can work out the meanings of words when they are on their own. There are many clues learners can use to establish meanings for themselves, such as illustrations, the similarity of spelling or sound in the mother tongue, and general knowledge (Walters, 2004).

Giving examples: Giving examples is another way of showing the meaning of a new word; these examples should contain the meant lexical item. According to McCarthy (1990), new vocabulary knowledge is most efficiently absorbed when it is assimilated to the already known words by using it in a context. The example sentences used to explain meaning should obviously teach the meaning of the new word. Showing meaning of words via context is very fruitful especially when the word in question is from the list-of abstract lexis like, hate, hesitate, think, and possible.

Using Translation : One of the most common techniques is translation that is to translate the word in question into a learner’s native language. Translation is simple, clear, and quick for reaching the goal; particularly when teachers give examples then students give the word translation. Nation (1990) thinks that the value of translation depends on how and when we use it. Translation into the mother tongue presents the same processes as translation into a picture, a description in English. Hill (1965) criticizes translation into the mother tongue as a way of communication or teaching meaning. They believe that generally there is no exact correspondence between one language and another. Besides, the use of the mother tongue takes time which could better be spent in using English.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results from questionnaires for students

Factor C (Curriculumm)

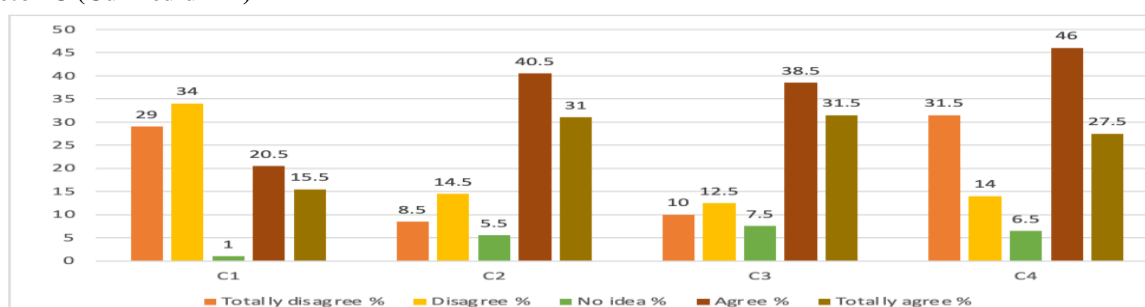


Figure 1. Descriptive statistics - factor C

As can be seen from the table, more than a half of participants (63%) disapproved of the idea that three 45-minute lessons with a Vietnamese teacher per week are enough for them to improve their vocabulary. In contrast, a large number of participants (147 students, accounting for more than 70%) agreed and totally agreed that different topics in the textbook provide me with a lot of vocabulary. Moreover, more than two – third of participants (approximately 71.5%) thought that all the five parts (Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Language Focus) of each unit in the old textbook - English 10 - provide a lot of vocabulary concerning the topic of the unit. A majority of participants agreed the form of written tests at school require much knowledge of vocabulary.

Factor T (Teachers)

T1: I learn vocabulary effectively when teachers use different techniques to teach vocabulary. (e.g: pictures, explanation, examples, games...)

T2: I learn vocabulary effectively when teachers usually let me guess the meaning of a new word in a text.

T3: I feel well when my teacher has good pronunciation.

T4: My teacher has a dynamic and interesting style in teaching vocabulary.

T5: I learn vocabulary effectively when my teacher has good knowledge of vocabulary so he/she is a good supporter of my vocabulary questions.

T6: I like my teacher to patiently check the pronunciation of new words.

T7: I prefer my teacher to point out my mistakes in using new words.

T8: I want my teacher to give me different vocabulary exercises so that I can remember words.

T9: Teachers often check my vocabulary and give marks so I learn vocabulary harder.

T10: I learn vocabulary effectively when teachers use only English while teaching new words.

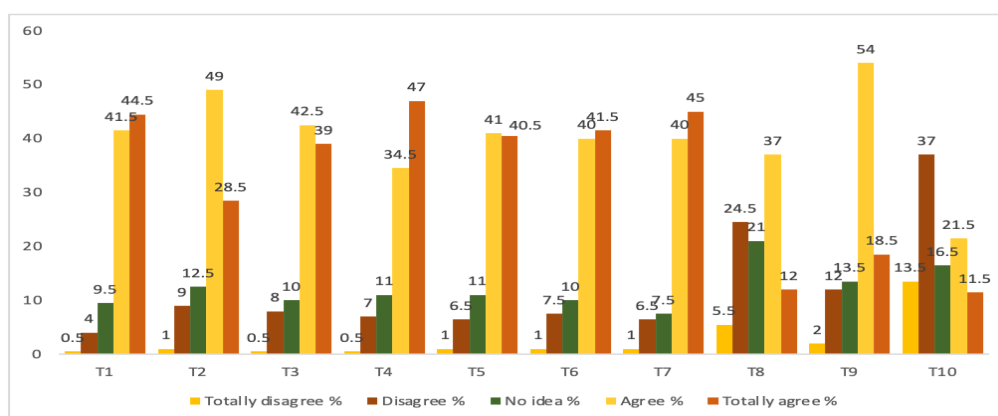


Figure 2. Descriptive statistics - factor T

The above chart indicates that a large proportion of students (more than 70%) agreed and totally agreed that teacher – related factors have a great influence on their vocabulary learning. Specifically, most of respondents (accounting for 86%) agreed that they learn vocabulary effectively when teachers use various techniques to teach vocabulary such as pictures, explanation, examples, games and other techniques. Besides, more than 80% of students indicated that they learn vocabulary more effectively when the teacher let them guess the meaning of a new word in a text and they like teachers with good pronunciation. Moreover, most of students asked (81,5%) agreed that their teachers' teaching styles are very dynamic and interesting. They also said that teacher's good knowledge of vocabulary would support their vocabulary questions. What's more, a large number of students expected the teacher to patiently check the pronunciation of new words and point out my mistakes in using new words (accounting for 81.5% and 85% respectively). Additionally, 72.5% participants showed that the act of often checking students' vocabulary and giving marks motivate students to learn vocabulary harder. However, nearly half of students (49%) wanted to do vocabulary exercises given by teachers and only one third of them (66 students, accounting for 33 %) thought that they could learn vocabulary effectively when teachers use only English to explain new words

Factor E (Exposure to native speakers)

E1: Repeating a word aloud helps me remember it quickly.

E2: I can remember a new word if it appears in different parts of the lesson.

E3: I can remember a new word if my teacher uses the word frequently.

E4: I can remember a new word if my friends and I speak together using the word.

E5: I can remember a new word if it appears many times in a film, TV programs or on the Internet...

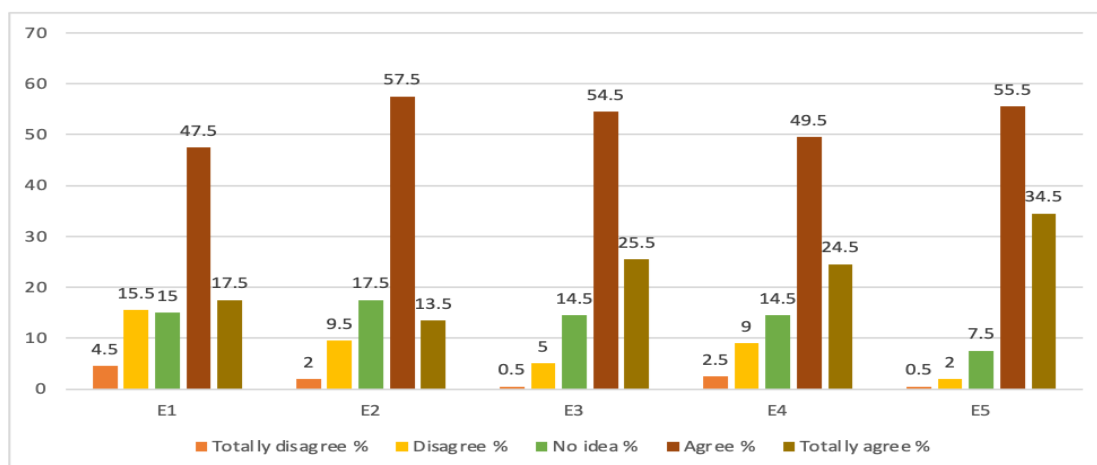


Figure 3. Descriptive statistics - factor E

As can be seen from the chart above, the number of participants who agreed that number of exposures to new words affect their vocabulary learning makes up a large proportion. Specifically, 90% of students agreed that they can remember a new words if it appears many times in a film, TV programmes or on the Internet. Besides, 80% of learners responded that they can remember a new word if it is used frequently by the teacher. Three – fourth of participants agreed that repeating the new words aloud helps them remember them quickly and they can remember a new word if it appears in different parts of the lesson or they and their friends using the word to talk.

Factor P (Peers)

P1: I can remember a word more easily when in pairs or in small groups in vocabulary learning activities.

P2: I think practicing pronouncing new words with my friends is effective.

P3: I think checking the meaning of new words in pairs or in groups is effective.

P4: I think practicing speaking with my friends in pairs or in groups helps me remember words better.

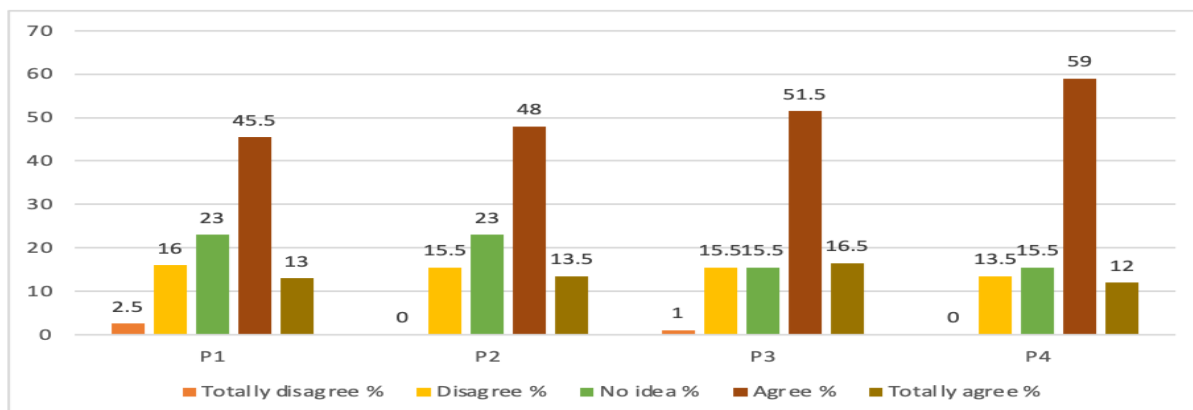


Figure 4. Descriptive statistics - factor P

As can be seen clearly from the chart above, working in pairs or in small groups has certain impacts on students' vocabulary learning. Specifically, 71% of students asked agreed and totally agreed that practising speaking with their friends in pairs or in groups helps them remember words better. The number of students agreed that it is effective to check the meaning of words in pairs or in groups accounts for 68%. More than half of students in this survey agreed that working in pairs or in groups help them remember the words easily and practice pronouncing new words effectively.

Factor N (Access to native speaker)

N1: Talking to native speakers helps me practice using my vocabulary and learn vocabulary better.

N2: Attending classes with my native teacher every week helps me learn vocabulary effectively.

N3: Attending classes with native teachers helps me have good pronunciation.

N4: Watching films in English helps to improve my vocabulary.

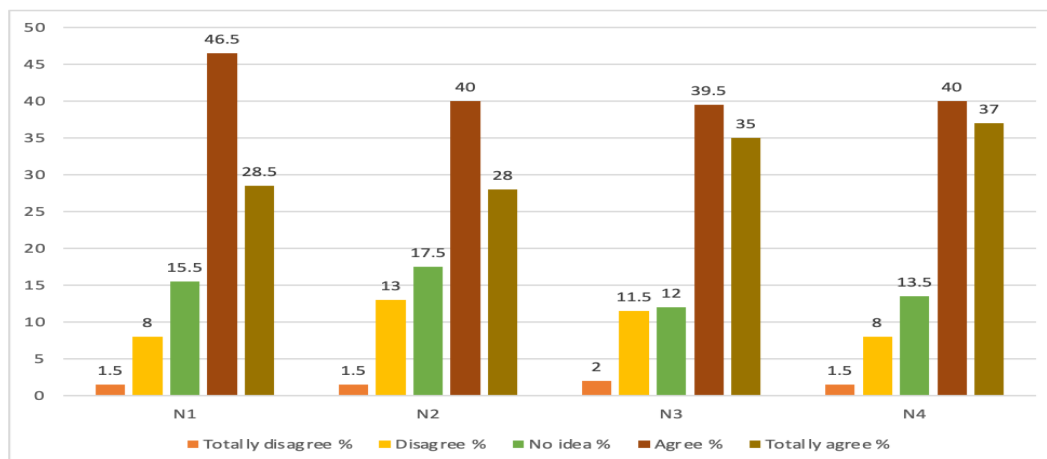


Figure 5. Descriptive statistics - factor N

As can be seen from the above chart, the majority of participants agreed and totally agreed that talking to native speakers helps them practice using their vocabulary and learn vocabulary better (85%). Besides, most of respondents agreed that attending classes with my native teacher every week helps them learn vocabulary effectively as well as have good pronunciation. Additionally, 77% of participants agreed that watching English films helps them improve their vocabulary.

Factor L (Learning vocabulary)

L1: I find it easier to learn words that are frequently used in everyday life.

L2: Analyzing words in terms of prefixes, stems, and suffixes helps me remember the words better.

L3: Learning collocations helps me learn a new word more quickly.

L4: I can learn a word with different meanings through specific examples.

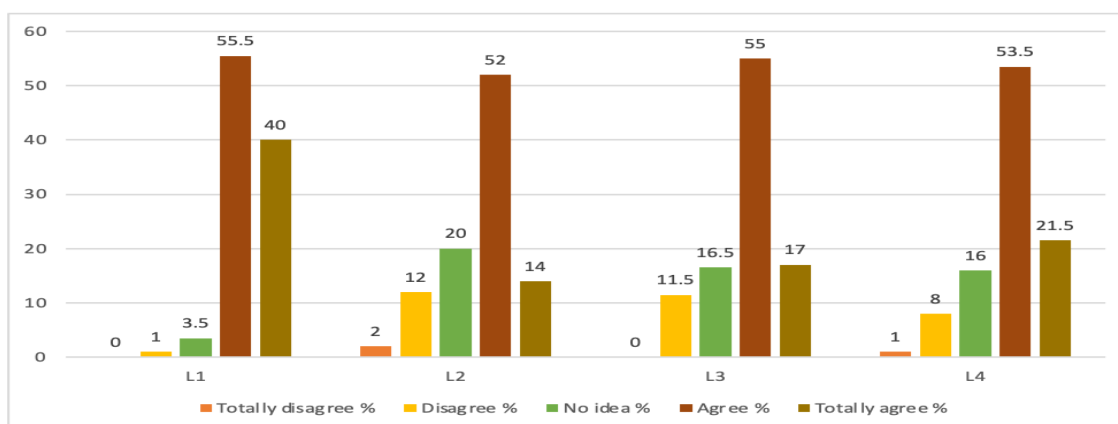


Figure 6. Descriptive statistics - factor L

The chart shows that lexical items affect students' vocabulary learning to some extents. A large proportion of participants agreed and totally agreed that they can learn a word more easily if they are given specific examples (accounting for 95.5%). Furthermore, the majority of participants supposed that learning collocations, learning common words in daily life and analyzing words have positive influences on their vocabulary learning.

2. Results from questionnaires for teachers

No.	Techniques	Percentage
1	I explain the new words in the foreign language.	13(100%)
2	I explain the new words in the students' native language. (i.e., use of translation)	13(100%)
3	I draw figures on the board to explain the new words.	5(53.8%)
4	I use body language, gestures and motions to explain new words.	9(69.2%)
5	I ask one or some students to explain words to other students.	3(23%)
6	I ask students to make guesses as to what the new words mean.	13(100%)
7	I ask students to look up words in their dictionaries.	10(76.9%)
8	I show pictures to explain new vocabulary items.	13(100%)
9	I use example sentences to explain and contextualize new words.	13 (100%)
10	I tell a short story, an anecdote or a joke to explain new words.	0(0%)
11	I associate new words with previously learned words to explain meaning of new words.	10(76.9%)
12	I ask students to make a mental image of something or someone to explain the meaning of new words.	7(53.8%)
13	I group words under one topic and attempts to relate them to each other in terms of meaning on the board.	10(76.9%)
14	I use objects in class and realia to explain meaning of new words.	10(76.9%)
15	I contextualize meaning of new words by bringing new texts to class and reading them aloud.	2(15.2%)

As can be seen clearly from the above table, all of the teachers (100%) in PBS used both native language and foreign language to explain the new words. Moreover, using pictures and example sentences are the most common ways of explaining new words that are used by all the teachers at this school (100%). 10 out of 13 teachers (76.9%) ask students to look up words in the dictionaries, associate new words with previously learned words to explain meaning of new words and group words under one topic and attempts to relate them to each other in terms of meaning on the board. Besides, 69.2% of them use body language, gestures and motions to explain new words. More than half of the teachers (53.8%) ask students to make a mental image of something or someone to explain the meaning of new words. Only 5 teachers (count for 53.8%) draw figures on the board to explain the new words. Only 23% of the teachers taught new words in context as well as asked students to explain new words to other students in class. None of the teachers told a short story or a joke to teach vocabulary in class.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study focuses on finding out what external factors affecting students' vocabulary learning, then suggest some ways of improving the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching and learning. Based on the above analysis, it is proved that there are some external factors affecting vocabulary learning of grade 10 students at PBS. In addition, the degree of influence of each factor is different. From the data analysis, the research questions were respectively dealt with. For the 1st research question, there were six factors that were tested, namely English curriculum, Teachers, Number of exposures to the new words, Peers, Lexical factors and Access to native speakers. Among those factors, English curriculum, Teacher, Peers, Number of exposures to the new words and Lexical factors are the factors that have more influences on students' vocabulary acquisition. There is not enough evidence to prove that Access to native speakers have impacts on 10th form students' vocabulary learning at this high school. Of those influential factors, "teacher" is the most influential one. This factor is followed by Peers, Number of exposures to the new words, lexical factors and English curriculum. For the 2nd research question, the solutions to the problem of vocabulary learning at this high school in this study will focus on the factors that have impacts on vocabulary learning: Teachers, Peers, Number of exposures to the new words, lexical factors and English curriculum. First and foremost, the most influential factor "teachers" should be paid more attention to. It is necessary for teacher to have correct pronunciation. Moreover, teachers need to

have deep knowledge of vocabulary to be good supporters to students' vocabulary questions. Furthermore, teachers need to make the teaching styles interesting as well as apply new teaching methods and techniques to motivate students to involve in the lesson and consequently, the effectiveness of students' learning can be enhanced. Additionally, giving students different vocabulary exercises, checking students' vocabulary frequently and patiently correcting students' mistakes are those things that teachers can do. Secondly, "peers" is a factor proved to have positive effect on students' vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, teachers should design activities that required students to work in pairs or in groups so that students can gain maximum benefits from them. "Number of exposures to the new words" is another influential factor. Teachers should create different tasks or activities so that students have chance to practice using vocabulary again and again. Besides, tasks and activities focusing on lexical items should be put more focus so that students can understand the words and know how to use the words appropriately. Last but not least, in terms of English curriculum, teacher should take full advantage of textbook and they can also adapt textbooks so that students can gain maximum benefits from them. Apart from the ideas above, students' responses from the open question at the end of the questionnaire suggest that teachers should use games, short videos and films in teaching English in general and in vocabulary in particular.

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