

# The relationship between depth of vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary learning strategy used by Chinese ESL learners in a study-abroad context

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship among the depth of vocabulary knowledge, L2 vocabulary learning strategies and L2 contact in a study-abroad context. A total of 165 Chinese ESL students who were in the process of completing their master's study at a British university participated in the research. Quantitative data was collected via questionnaire surveys, which comprised the Language Contact Profile measure (Freed et al., 2004); the Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire (VLQ5, Version 5) (Gu, 2005), and a vocabulary test developed on the basis of the Word Associates Format (WAF) created by Read (2000). An Exploratory factor analysis revealed five types of vocabulary learning strategies commonly used by the sample: contextual guessing, dictionary strategies, selective attention, consulting dictionary for meaning, and taking notes. A stepwise regression analysis showed that the variables of contextual guessing and dictionary strategies were positive predictors of vocabulary knowledge depth. It also revealed that the gain of the depth of vocabulary knowledge was positively predicted by the variables of interacting and reading in English.

## Keywords

Vocabulary learning strategy, vocabulary knowledge depth, L2 contact

## 1 Literature review

It is commonly believed that the best way to learn a foreign language is to study in a country where the target language is spoken natively. The reason behind such belief is the constant L2 input offered both inside and outside of the classroom. Previous research focused on the study abroad context had identified a positive

relationship between such unique study experience and the improvement of various L2 skills, including overall L2 proficiency (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and expansion of vocabulary size (Collentine, 2004; DeKeyser, 1991; Dewey, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Milton & Meara, 1995). However, the development of vocabulary knowledge depth has been largely neglected mainly because of the complex nature of word knowledge in terms of the depth (Nassaji, 2006).

Similarly, previous studies have identified a positive relationship between different types of vocabulary types vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) and vocabulary size (Gu 2005; Gu & Johnson, 1996), but the relationship between L2 learners' strategic behaviours and vocabulary knowledge depth have not been investigated thoroughly. Therefore, in order to shed light on this research area, this study aims to investigate the degree to which VLS and L2 contact affect vocabulary knowledge depth in a study-abroad context.

In light of the empirical evidence of previous studies on VLS, L2 contact and L2 lexical development, the present study aims to answer the following three research questions:

1. What strategies are used for learning academic vocabulary in L2 study abroad context?
2. What is the relationship between VLS and the depth of vocabulary knowledge?
3. What is the relationship between L2 contact and the depth of vocabulary knowledge?

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

Participants involved 165 Chinese ESL students who were in the process of completing their master's degree at a British university based in

London. 69% of them were female and 31% were male students. All participants did not have any study abroad experience before the start of their MA study in the UK. All of them had taken the IELTS test with an average overall score of 7.

## 2.2 Instrument

The instrument employed in the present study consisted of four sections. The first section included questions asking about participants' background information. The second section contained items aiming to elicit various types of L2 contact, which adapted from the Language Contact Profile (Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz & Halter, 2004). The third section depicted the strategic profile of the Chinese ESL learners adopted from the Vocabulary Learning Questionnaire (VLQ, Version 5). The last section was a vocabulary test with 20 question items, developed on the basis of Word Association Format (WAF) (Read, 2000).

## 2.3 Data analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to discover the latent factor underlying the construct of Chinese ESL learners' strategic behaviors for L2 vocabulary learning. To examine the relationship between L2 contact, VLS and vocabulary knowledge depth, Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated. Finally, a step wise regression analysis was performed to determine whether a causal relationship existed between vocabulary knowledge depth and VLS, as well as lexical knowledge and L2 contact.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 VLS used by Chinese ESL learners

The results of EFA yielded a five-factor solution. The value of Cronbach's alpha of each extracted factor, ranging from 0.817 to 0.613. Each factor was named according to the items loaded on it. Factor 1 contained ten vocabulary learning strategies, all of which were related to guessing the meaning of an unknown word. Therefore, Factor 1 was named as 'Contextual guessing'. Factor 2 comprised ten items related to the strategies of looking-up information from dictionaries, thus Factor 2 was labelled 'Dictionary strategies'. Factor 3 included five items pertaining to metacognitive strategies of selective attention, so it was named as 'Selective attention'. Factor 4 consisted of four items, all of

which related to looking up dictionary for the meanings of unknown words, therefore Factor 4 was labelled as 'Consulting dictionary for meaning'. Factor 5 had four items, all of which referred to noting down useful information, so it was named as 'Taking notes'.

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