Non-English Majors' Problems in Learning English Vocabulary and Strategies Revisited

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ABSTRACT

English vocabulary learning is the focal point of English learning and has posed great difficulty to non-English majors. A survey conducted by the authors showed that non-English majors generally have such problems in English vocabulary learning as lack of English language environment, isolated vocabulary memorization, difficulty in retention, and the negative influence of the mother tongue. The corresponding strategies to tackle these problems include situational vocabulary learning, differentiation and induction, regular review and learning by association. Students should choose the learning strategies that best suit them so as to improve the effect of English learning.

Keywords: College English, English vocabulary learning, learning strategies, non-English majors.

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I. INTRODUCTION

With the acceleration of globalization and the rapid development of China's economy, English as an international language has become an indispensable skill for college students. There is an increasing demand for talents with a global perspective. Vocabulary learning is the basis of English learning. The improvement of English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills is inseparable from the accumulation and application of vocabulary. English vocabulary learning has become the focus and difficulty of second language learning. Research shows that the correct use of vocabulary learning strategies can enhance students' autonomy, independence and self-regulation in learning (Yan *et al.*, 2007). Based on the analysis of the problems existing in non-English majors' English vocabulary learning, the present study probes into the strategies that can be taken to help students solve the problems more effectively and thus improve their English vocabulary learning effect.

II. MAIN PROBLEMS NON-ENGLISH MAJORS HAVE IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING

A survey was conducted in the author's college to find out the major problems non-English majors encounter in English vocabulary learning. The questionnaire covers four dimensions: cognition, attitude, behavior and ability. 31 valid questionnaires were collected and the results are shown in Fig. 1.
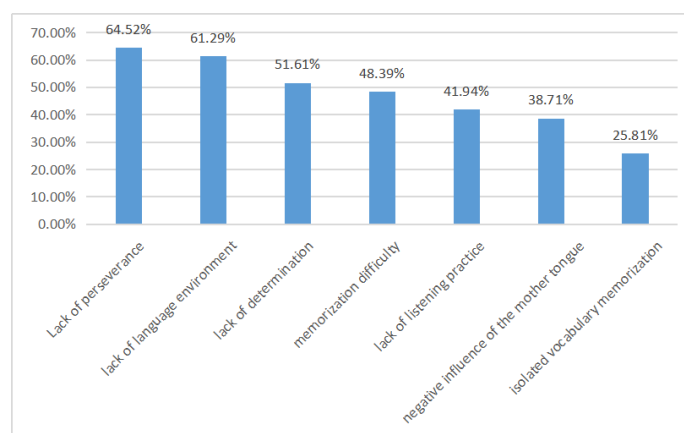

Fig. 1. Non-English majors' problems in English vocabulary learning.

A. Lack of Language Environment

It shows that 61.29% of the respondents think they lack language environment necessary for acquiring English vocabulary. Students attribute the difficulty of learning English words to the lack of use (Cai, 2012). Due to lack of use, students tend to perceive English words as unfamiliar, leading to a rapid forgetting of the word's usage scenes shortly after learning it. This issue is a significant impediment to students' English vocabulary acquisition and demands urgent attention.

B. Isolated Vocabulary Memorization

English vocabulary learning is a complex process that involves the development of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills. However, according to the questionnaire survey, 41.94% of non-English majors lack

proper training in listening to English words, and 25.81% of students rely on memorizing words in isolation. These issues severely limit students' ability to improve their English proficiency (Liu, 2008).

C. Difficulty in Retention

English vocabulary learning presents multiple challenges for most students, encompassing issues like limited vocabulary, low learning efficiency, inadequate knowledge of vocabulary, and disorganized recollection of parts of speech (Wan, 2015). Survey findings indicate that 48.39% of students find it challenging to remember English vocabulary, citing long words as a primary hindrance to memorization. However, the significant problem lies in the fact that 64.52% of students lack the necessary perseverance, while 51.61% don't have the determination needed for continuous efforts, leading to unsustainable vocabulary learning.

D. Negative Influence of the Mother Tongue

The results of the survey indicate that 38.71% of students experience negative transfer from their mother tongue, which poses another challenge to their English proficiency. Transfer phenomenon refers to the impact of existing knowledge on learning another type of knowledge, either positively or negatively. Negative transfer from the mother tongue occurs when the learner's language knowledge from their own country hinders their acquisition of a foreign language. For instance, students may assume that there is a direct correspondence between Chinese and English words when learning English vocabulary, without recognizing the differences in language and culture, resulting in negative transfer from their mother tongue.

Overall, the current situation of college students' English vocabulary learning appears bleak. Many college students still cling to the ineffective learning strategies employed in junior high and high school, oblivious to the errors in their approach, which negatively affects their English learning efficiency (Liu, 2020). Students should implement effective learning strategies, to optimize their learning outcomes.

III. STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING

Employing effective learning strategies can assist students in achieving better results in vocabulary learning with less effort (Meng, 2016). To address the aforementioned issues, the following strategies can be employed to enhance the efficacy of vocabulary learning.

A. Situational Vocabulary Learning

The situational English learning approach aids in the acquisition of vocabulary usage by providing learners with specific scenarios in which to apply new vocabulary. This method effectively addresses the issues of "insufficient contextual exposure" and "isolated word memorization" during vocabulary learning. According to Zhao (2017), "the appropriate use of situational teaching methods can not only increase interest and inspiration in vocabulary learning but also enable students to genuinely and effectively master and utilize new vocabulary."

Teachers can integrate situational teaching with micro-lessons, using movie clips to create genuine contexts for

vocabulary usage. By providing multi-sensory experiences such as visual and auditory cues, students can more effectively grasp and employ new vocabulary in real-life situations through multi-modal vocabulary instruction.

B. Differentiation and Induction

The occurrence of negative transfer from one's native language is known as bias. To promote student's enthusiasm towards learning and encourage initiative, it is essential to understand and analyze this bias (Qu, 2013). Wang (2013) suggests that differentiating and summarizing the similarities and differences between English and Chinese words in terms of meaning, parts of speech, and usage scenarios can effectively mitigate this bias.

Regarding word meaning, though English and Chinese share several semantic concepts, their extended meanings differ significantly. This lack of distinction causes students to misunderstand and misuse words. For instance, assure, ensure, and insure all convey the same idea of making sure, but they should be used in different contexts. Assure indicates informing someone about something that will happen, ensure means guaranteeing that an action takes place, and insure implies purchasing insurance to get compensation for the damages. Therefore, Chinese learners should understand the particular context while using these words.

Moreover, the part of speech of English words is more diverse than that of Chinese words. A single English word can have two or more parts of speech, causing students to struggle with learning English vocabulary. For instance, "live" can be a verb indicating to remain alive or to dwell, an adjective depicting the state of not being dead, or an adverb emphasizing the aspect of being broadcast, played or recorded at an actual performance.

Lastly, cultural differences can also lead to varying emotions and use of specific words in different environments. For example, the term "dog" can elicit diverse emotions among individuals from varying cultures. In China, being called a "lucky dog" might be considered an insult, whereas in Western countries, it is a compliment. These deviations can make it challenging for Chinese students to learn English vocabulary.

By teaching students how to distinguish and summarize the similarities and differences between English and Chinese words in meaning, parts of speech, and usage scenarios, students are more likely to avoid incorrect use of words and better understand the nuances of the English language. Therefore, this approach can reduce the negative impact of mother tongue transfer and facilitate English vocabulary learning.

C. Regular Review

There is a widespread belief among students that short-term and quick memory is easier to retain, but it rapidly fades away after a few days. Such a situation poses a challenge to their English vocabulary retention, and may also dampen their confidence in memorizing words, leading to giving up, thereby affecting long-term perseverance. The reason behind this conundrum is that students usually just mechanically memorize the words without engaging in any review exercises.

The quest for efficient, scientific, and persistent

vocabulary retention has been a long-standing challenge for students. So how can short-term memory be converted into long-term memory? From a biological point of view, short-term memory is closely associated with the hippocampus in the cerebral cortex, while long-term memory maybe linked to the development of new synapses. This new synapse formation necessitates continuous practice and review (Xie *et al.*, 2023). From a psychological perspective, the renowned German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus conducted research on forgetfulness, where he proposed the famous Ebbinghaus forgetting curve (Zhou & Wang, 2021; see Fig. 2).
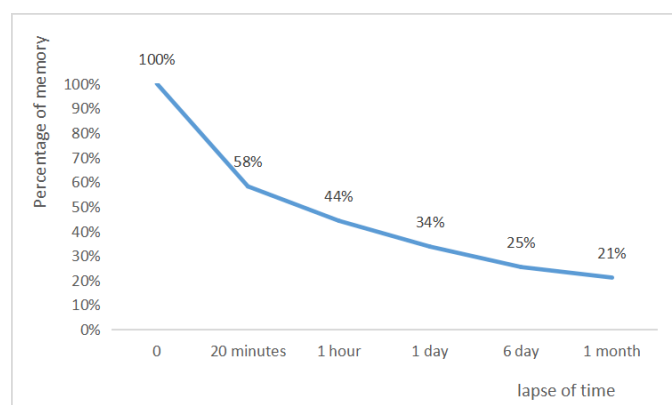

Fig. 2. Ebbinghaus forgetting curve (Zhou & Wang, 2021).

As depicted in Fig. 2, 20 minutes after study, the retention rate drops to around 58%, which further declines to 44% after an hour, 34% after a day, 25% after a week, and 21% after a month. The forgetting curve follows a typical pattern in which forgetting is initially rapid and then slows down. While forgetfulness cannot be avoided, understanding this pattern can facilitate better memory and more efficient learning. Some scholars recommend reviewing material around 8-9 hours after initial study, as this is believed to be the optimal time for review (Li, 2019). By reviewing at intervals of 1 day, 3 days, 7 days, 15 days, and 30 days, short-term memory can be transformed into long-term memory.

D. Learning by Association

Nowadays, students have an extensive need for vocabulary. According to Deng (2001), a minimum of 5,000 words is necessary for college. To address the challenge of memorizing such a substantial number of words, associative memory using divergent thinking can be an efficient technique. Divergent thinking involves a diffuse mode of thinking. When acquiring English vocabulary, students can utilize divergent thinking memory to link a word with a series of related terms, making it easier and more regular to memorize a large volume of words. For instance, when learning the term tract, students can naturally associate it with a range of words such as attract, abstract, extract, distract, and contract. Additionally, from the verb attract, one can generate related words like attraction and both positive (attractive) and negative (unattractive) adjectives and adverbs. A visual representation of this process is displayed in Fig. 3.
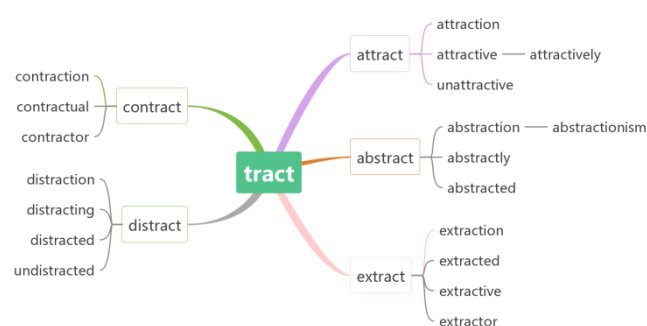

Fig. 3. Association diagram of *tract*.

By utilizing divergent thinking in English vocabulary learning, one can effectively review related words by associating them with a single word. This method is particularly useful for reinforcing learned words. However, learning by association can also be applied to new words. Take the word "antipathy" as an example. One can make a bold association by linking it to its cognate "sympathy", which shares the suffix "pathy" meaning "emotion". The prefix "Anti" indicates resistance, leading to the accurate assumption that "antipathy" means a strong feeling of dislike. Therefore, when encountering unfamiliar or complex words, one should first split them and associate them with similar words in order to better comprehend their meanings.

IV. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary, as the foundation of English learning, plays a crucial role in foreign language teaching and learning. However, college students commonly face challenges in learning English vocabulary, including the lack of language environment, isolated memorization, difficulty in retaining new words, and negative influence from their mother tongue. Effective solutions to these problems can be found through the utilization of situational learning, differentiation and induction, regular review, and learning by association. Nevertheless, students should identify and apply the learning strategies that best fit their individual needs and situations in order to optimize the effectiveness of vocabulary learning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Shuoying Wang, Shan Ge and Chang Tang declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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