Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition in the Language Classroom Using Vocabulary Notebooks

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how students respond to a vocabulary notebook assignment to understand their approaches to learning vocabulary. The data were gathered from 152 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners using self-report questionnaires. The study highlights the importance of exposing language learners to a variety of learning techniques and providing them with guidance on how to use those techniques during the learning process. The investigation reveals that learning vocabulary by keeping vocabulary notebooks is helpful to students and effective at promoting skills necessary for learner autonomy. Students reported that this learning approach improved their English learning skills. These students subsequently became more attentive to their own learning, spent more time and effort in that learning, and developed better study habits.

Keywords: EFL, vocabulary, learning strategy, notebook

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運用單字筆記本學習英語字彙

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摘要

　　此研究論文主要在探討以使用單字筆記本之學習方法,增進學生的字彙學習和促進獨立學習。152 個大學生參與這項研究。在大學的大一英文課程中,於歷時一年的期間,學生依據教師之指導,記錄單字於筆記本中,並配合使用相關之學習策略,有效的使用單字筆記本去學習生字。於第二次學期結束時,研究者以問卷方式調查學生學習情形、學習心得以及對此學習方式的看法。研究結果顯示,實施使用單字筆記本有其價值與重要性。絕大多數的學生表示,當從事於這項學習方式時,他們付出更多的努力,也更有效率的學習英語。此外,大多數學生表示考慮將來會繼續使用類似方法去學習單字。許多學生反映,相較於先前,他們學習的方法有所改變,讓學習效果更好,許多學生亦表示自己在語言能力上有所增進。對此學習方法多數學生持正面看法,也有部分學生對這此單字作業與學習方式提出建議。

關鍵詞:外語學習、字彙、學習策略、筆記本

Introduction

Researchers have found that lexical competence is an important component of second/foreign language learning (e.g., Astika, 1993; Knight, 1994; Huang, 2003; Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Nation, 1999; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010; Meara, 2009). To ensure that English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) students become successful learners, researchers have attempted to seek effective ways of fostering vocabulary acquisition with the ultimate goal to help students learn how to acquire vocabulary on their own. One factor that contributes to independence in vocabulary acquisition is to assist learners in developing appropriate learning strategies; as empirical evidence has shown, this assistance is key in promoting independence in vocabulary learning (Buehl, 2009; Koenig, 2010; Nation, 2001; Takač, 2008).

Previous research has demonstrated a positive connection between the use of various learning strategies and success in language learning. Researchers have found that successful learners use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies (Ahmed, 1989; Fan, 2003; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999; Lawson & Hogben, 1996; Sanaoui, 1995); furthermore, successful learners use these strategies more frequently (Ahmed, 1989; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999; Lawson & Hogben, 1996; Yeh &Wang, 2004) and more elaborately (Ahmed, 1989; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999) and are aware of their strategy use (Ahmed, 1989; Sanaoui, 1995).

A large body of research further supports the positive effects of strategy training (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Cohen, 1990; Huang, 2002; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, Crookall, Cohen, Lavine, Nyikos, & Sutter, 1990). To understand how learners acquire vocabulary, researchers (e.g., Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2001; Sanaoui, 1995; Schmitt, 1997) have investigated the specific strategies that learners apply as they acquire vocabulary with the goal of exploring new ways of empowering language learners to be more effective in expanding their vocabulary. Among these various vocabulary learning strategies, keeping records of unfamiliar words was found to be crucial in the vocabulary learning process (Carroll & Mordaunt, 1991; Cohen, 1990; Gairns & Redman, 1986; Lewis, 2000; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 2001).

This study addresses one strategy for more effective vocabulary learning: vocabulary notebooks. The use of vocabulary notebooks was incorporated into a language curriculum to investigate their influences on student learning habits and explore student opinions on this approach. This study reveals the aspects of word knowledge that students attend to while keeping a vocabulary notebook as well as student needs and expectations with regard to the assignment.

Literature Review

Numerous researchers (e.g., McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 2001, 2005; Nation & Waring, 1997; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009) have noted the importance of language learners keeping personal written records of new words in the form of word lists, word cards, or notebooks. Such records commonly include the unfamiliar words, their meanings, and their L1 translations or L2 synonyms; they may also include other types of word knowledge, such as phonetic transcription and part of speech. To optimize functions of the vocabulary learning tool, Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) suggested including multiple dimensions of word knowledge about the word in each written record.

Vocabulary notebooks provide learners with opportunities for repeated exposure to

target words and other related lexical knowledge. This single vocabulary learning strategy may also involve the combined use of other learning strategies, including rehearsal, dictionary, and self-regulation strategies. Learners take responsibility for their own learning by utilizing various strategies when compiling vocabulary notebooks. Schmitt (2000) and others (e.g., Fowle, 2002; McCarthy, 1990) have acknowledged the potential in developing learner autonomy through promoting self-directed and self-regulated learning.

Another strength of maintaining vocabulary notebooks lies in its potential to meet the diverse needs of all learners and support different learning styles. The learning task is designed to be flexible to accommodate individual needs. Several researchers (e.g., Kramsch, 1979; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 2005)) have stressed the importance of addressing students' individual differences and preferences by giving them the freedom to make their own vocabulary learning decisions when acquiring vocabulary; they have suggested having students choose words that match their proficiency levels, learning goals, and personal interests. When learners are allowed to make their own learning choices and to study at their own pace, learning becomes even more meaningful.

In support of this learning method, there are a number of practical and theoretical issues to consider. For example, Carroll and Mordaunt (1991), Cohen (1990), and Kramsch (1979) suggest using word cards or vocabulary notebooks (either loose-leaf or index card binders) to select words and organize learning materials based on the learner's own needs. Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) discuss the fundamental theories of memory and vocabulary acquisition and provide pedagogical guidelines for integrating the use of vocabulary notebooks into classroom activities. In addition to suggesting ways to organize vocabulary notebooks, the researchers describe effective techniques to enrich learners' word knowledge by repeatedly exposing learners to the target words and reviewing learned vocabulary at increasingly longer intervals. Important strategies for practicing include the following: learning words from the same word family; learning synonyms and antonyms; creating semantic maps; learning collocations; and studying common prefixes, roots, and suffixes (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Gairns & Redman, 1986; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Sökmen, 1997).

Vocabulary knowledge, in both breadth and depth aspects, is critically important in language learning (Meara, 2009; Qian, 2002). The depth, or quality, of vocabulary knowledge refers to how well one knows a word (Meara, 2005; Read, 2000). It is generally acknowledged that knowing a word entails an understanding of multiple aspects of the word. To address the complexity of the word knowledge, several researchers have attempted to identify the aspects of what is involved in comprehending a word (e.g., Nagy & Scott, 2000; Nation, 1990, 2001; Richards, 1976). According to Nation (2001), knowing a word requires understanding its form, meaning, and use. Nagy and Scott (2000) also identify five aspects of vocabulary knowledge that indicate the complexity of word learning: incrementality, multidimensionality, polysemy, interrelatedness, and heterogeneity. These components of word acquisition are considered important in vocabulary learning. As Schmitt (2000) asserts, word knowledge is essential for effective use of language in various contexts. Although learning vocabulary via word cards cannot help students learn every aspect of word knowledge, certain important aspects are involved, including the written form of the word, learning the concept of the word, making connection between form and meaning, and understanding the grammatical use of the word (Nation, 2001). Ellis (1994) indicates that the knowledge aspect of language learning (semantic meaning) requires close attention and elaboration.

Dictionaries also serve as valuable references for language learners; they accelerate vocabulary development by providing learners with extra vocabulary-related information

and increasing learners' exposure to words in other contexts (Summers, 1988). Dictionary consultation processes involved deliberate and explicit study of words (Nation, 2001), and empirical evidence suggests that the use of dictionaries can increase vocabulary knowledge (Luppescu & Day, 1993; Shore & Durso, 1990). Because language learners can benefit through deliberate study of words, they are often advised to use dictionaries when recording new vocabulary in notebooks (Fowle, 2002; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Learners may obtain various information about a word, such as its meaning, pronunciation, and grammatical information and may record what they found useful into their notebooks for later review. During the process of looking up newly acquired words in dictionaries and adding the useful elements to their notebooks, language learners are deliberately learning new vocabulary. Such learning activities involve deliberate, language-focused learning and may help cultivate vocabulary development.

Several studies have examined the use of vocabulary learning strategies in second/foreign language learning. Among these studies, some researchers discovered that for many learners, making notes about unknown words in vocabulary notebooks or on word cards and internalizing the words using mnemonic techniques, metacognitive strategies, and cognitive strategies was an efficient means of developing lexical competence (e.g., Gu, 2003; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Sanaoui, 1995). For example, Sanaoui (1995) conducted case studies investigating the vocabulary learning strategies of adult learners of English and French though the use of their learning dairies and records as well as interviews. Sanaoui identified two distinct learning approaches: "structured," i.e., a systematic and organized approach to study; and "unstructured," i.e., a less systematic approach in learning. The results showed that those who adopted the structured approach recorded and reviewed extensive and systematic records of vocabulary items. Similar findings were reported by Gu (2003), who used think-aloud protocols and interviews to investigate how two successful Chinese EFL learners improved their vocabulary during and after reading. The results also demonstrated that compiling and reviewing word lists was an important vocabulary learning strategy. The combined findings of Gu and Sanaoui reveal that keeping vocabulary notes in conjunction with extensive use of learning strategies to practice and memorize lexical items could promote vocabulary acquisition.

Other researchers investigated learners' prior experience of compiling vocabulary records (e.g., Leeke & Shaw, 2000), examined learners' vocabulary notebook assignments (e.g., McCrostie, 2007), or implemented a vocabulary notebook program (e.g., Fowle, 2002; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009) to explore and document the impact on vocabulary acquisition. In Fowle's (2002) study, a language program in Thailand adopted the use of vocabulary notebooks based on prior researchers' training guidelines (e.g., Gairns & Redman, 1986; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). Feedback from teachers and students showed that this approach improved students' study skills and cognitive strategies; the students subsequently became more actively involved in learning. Adapting the training models proposed by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) and Ledbury (n.d.), Walters and Bozkurt (2009) investigated the impact of notebook keeping in EFL learners' vocabulary learning by comparing learners who implemented the use of vocabulary notebooks and those who did not. The results showed that the treatment group outperformed the control group in the use of the target words; after four weeks, researchers observed significantly greater performance in vocabulary tests and more frequent usage of the words in compositions. Although empirical findings generally indicate that overall positive attitudes toward vocabulary notebook use were reported by students and instructors alike (Fewle, 2002), Walters and Bozkurt noted that long-term positive effects of self-initiated learning brought about by vocabulary notebooks are questionable. In their study, the participants generally did not tend to be intrinsically

motivated to learn English, and many of them would likely not continue using the learning tool. This phenomenon was also discovered by Leeke and Shaw (2000), who found that many learners who had been compiling their own word records were unable to maintain the habit.

In general, research findings (e.g., Fowle, 2002; Gu, 2003; Leeke & Shaw, 2000; Sanaoui, 1995; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009) suggested that vocabulary workbooks could make an effective learning tool; however, caution has been raised with regard to the effective implementation of a vocabulary notebook approach. Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) stress the importance of guiding learners to create sound vocabulary notebooks and instructing them on how to make the best use of vocabulary notebooks to achieve learning goals.   Without extended training and proper guidance, such methods may be insufficient in generating the desired learning outcomes. The results of a study by McCrostie (2007), for example, revealed flaws in the vocabulary notebook method caused by a lack of training and monitoring by the course instructor. The major problem appeared to be that students had difficulty selecting words on their own; they did not choose words purposefully and could not distinguish between important and unimportant words.

Given the importance of vocabulary knowledge to language learning and the current concern for promoting learner autonomy, increased attention has been given to the use of vocabulary notebooks in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Despite comprehensive discussions regarding the theories and guidelines for the use of vocabulary notebooks, very few studies have touched upon the details of actual vocabulary notebook implementation.   In this regard, an investigation of challenges facing the implementation of vocabulary notebooks would be of interest to language teachers.

Method

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in the study are as follows:

1. What aspects of word knowledge do students attend to when they look up words in the dictionary?
2. What types of dictionaries do students use, and what are their preferences after being introduced to a variety of dictionary types?
3. What are student perceptions of the vocabulary notebook technique?
4. What are student reasons for selecting vocabulary words, and where do they encounter the words?
5. What suggestions do students offer for improving the vocabulary notebook technique?

Participants

The participants were 152 students from 4 freshman English classes at a university in Taiwan and included 70 females and 82 males. These students represented the population of EFL learners at universities in Taiwan in terms of native language, cultural background, English learning background, and chronological age. The participants had been studying English for at least six years as a required course before entering college. The first language of this population was Mandarin Chinese, and their age ranged from 18-20 years old.

Instruments

The researcher developed two questionnaires: the Background Questionnaire (see

Appendix A) and the Vocabulary Notebook Questionnaire (see Appendix B). To improve the reliability of the instruments, a pilot test was performed with a sample of 20 students enrolled in the freshman English program. The researcher revised survey questions that were poorly worded or problematic or that did not yield useable data.

At the beginning of the first semester, the participants completed the Background Questionnaire, which elicited information about their previous experience with vocabulary note-taking and dictionary consultation. This process allowed for a comparison of the students' learning habits before and after implementation. All the questions addressed in the Background Questionnaire were check-off items.

At the end of the second semester, the participants completed the Vocabulary Notebook Questionnaire and were encouraged to reflect on the following points:

1. Student perceptions concerning vocabulary notebook implementation;
2. Student opinions regarding the usefulness of the information they recorded in their vocabulary notebooks;
3. Student reasons for their word selections and the sources of their words;
4. Student preferences regarding use of the dictionary; and
5. Student suggestions for the vocabulary notebook assignment.

The Vocabulary Notebook Questionnaire consisted of both check-off type items and open-ended questions. Students' responses for the three open-ended items, which inquired into the reasons for their word selections and collect their opinions and suggestions for the assignments, were coded by combining similar responses into categories before they were summarized.

Data Collection

The researcher explained the purpose of the study and data collection procedures to the students at the beginning of the academic year. The students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and it was not a part of the course grade. As stated on the informed consent form, the students were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The students could decide whether they would like to participate in the research by filling out the surveys and returning them to the researcher.

To participate in the study, students had to complete both the Background Questionnaire and the Vocabulary Notebook Questionnaire. To enhance the accuracy and reliability of the data, the researcher presented Mandarin Chinese versions of the questionnaires to the students via PowerPoint and explained the questions in Mandarin Chinese before the students started working on the questionnaires. This ensured that the possibility of failure to understand the instructions or questions would not affect students' responses. The students answered the open-ended questions in Mandarin Chinese. The qualitative data were analyzed in Mandarin Chinese and the results were translated into English.

For data matching purposes, the participants were asked to write their student identification number on both questionnaires. Because the author served as both the instructor and the researcher, the students were informed that their identification numbers would be eliminated before being reviewed by the instructor; this elimination minimized the possibility that the participants might be reluctant to give their honest responses or opinions, which may have impacted the quality of the data. The class leaders collected the questionnaires and matched up students' Vocabulary Notebook Questionnaires to their Background Questionnaires before handing them to the instructor. Students who did not complete both of the questionnaires were excluded from the study.

Procedures

On the first day of class, the instructor (the researcher of the current study) informed the students that they were required to keep a vocabulary notebook throughout the academic year as part of the course requirements. General guidelines for the assignment were also given.　The students were introduced to two notebook formats, an index card binder and a loose-leaf binder, from which they were free to choose. Students had to add 16 unfamiliar words to their notebooks each week. At least half of the words were from their course textbooks. The other half could be obtained from other sources, such as conversations, movies, class discussions, or outside readings. The students were advised to record words that were useful, important, or relevant for them personally.

To build students' lexical competence, the participants were required to include aspects of word knowledge other than word meaning in their vocabulary notebooks, such as part of speech and phonetic transcription. The exercises practiced during this assignment included parts of speech, phonetic transcription, definition or synonym, example sentence, and additional parts of speech for the word. Participants were also encouraged to include other relevant information in their exercise books to make their vocabulary learning more efficient and effective, such as collocations, semantic maps, negative or positive connections, and illustrations of word meanings.

Training in vocabulary learning skills was embedded in the course and the students were guided to practice the strategies involved in the vocabulary assignment over the academic year. In addition to guiding the students in developing their vocabulary through exploring different dimensions of word knowledge, effective tips on how to organize vocabulary learning were also introduced. These tips addressed word selection, vocabulary memorization, and scheduling time for review of the newly acquired vocabulary. Most of these learning techniques were embedded in the course content and included in Gu and Johnson's (1996), Nation's (2001), Oxford's (1990), and Schmitt's (1997, 2000) and learning strategy taxonomies. Specific skills for practicing new vocabulary mentioned in previous research (e.g., Cohen, 1990; Gairns & Redman, 1986; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990; Sökmen, 1997) were introduced to the participants.

According to the results of the Background Questionnaire, the majority of participants (88%) reported having used only English-Chinese bilingual dictionaries, which translate words or phrases from English to Chinese. Researchers have acknowledged the usefulness of bilingual dictionaries to develop vocabulary learning (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993); yet, there is still some debate with regard to whether monolingual or bilingual dictionaries are better at facilitating vocabulary acquisition (see Carter & McCarthy, 1988). The researcher believes that introducing new types of dictionaries to learners is worthwhile. It may be that some of the participants find that unfamiliar dictionaries, either bilingualized (dictionaries that provide L2 definitions, L2 example sentences, as well as L1 translations) or monolingual dictionaries, are more helpful for learning English. Therefore, three major types of dictionary (i.e., bilingual, bilingualized and monolingual dictionaries) were introduced to the students.

In the first semester, the students were required to use monolingual or bilingualized dictionaries when working on their vocabulary assignments; they were asked to write the English definition and/or a synonym for each word. In the second semester, the students were allowed to use their dictionary and could choose to write either an English or a Chinese definition in their notebooks. With regard to example sentences of target words, in both semesters, students had the freedom either to copy the example sentences from dictionaries or make new sentences of their own. However, the students were reminded that if they were unsure about the accuracy of their sentences, they should consult their

instructor.

To monitor student progress and ensure that students had written the correct information, the notebooks were collected and checked once a month. Ten-minute review sessions were held bi-weekly during class time. In these sessions, pairs of students exchanged notebooks and quizzed each other on the words and the additional vocabulary-related information they had recorded.

Results

The data collected through the Background Questionnaire indicated where students were in their learning process prior to the implementation of the vocabulary learning approach. The results revealed that 53% (N = 80) of the participants (N = 152) had previously kept vocabulary cards or notebooks; approximately half of those participants reported that they had been required to do so as part of their English language course requirements.

Word Knowledge
Research Question 1: What aspects of word knowledge do students attend to when they look up words in the dictionary?

As reported by the participants on the questionnaires, when consulting dictionaries prior to entering college, most of the students "always" or "usually" paid attention to a word's "definition" and "part of speech." However, more than 70% of students tended to ignore "example sentences" and "other word forms" (see Table 1). Regarding information students previously recorded on their word cards or in their vocabulary notebooks (Table 2), only 24% (N = 36) of students indicated "other word forms," 8% (N = 12) cited "sentence using the words," and only l% (N = 2) noted the "English definition/synonym."

Table 1
Percentage of Respondents Reporting the Information They Paid Attention to When Consulting Dictionaries Prior to Entering College, by Frequency

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Word's phonetic transcription	0%	7%	33%	32%	28%
Word's part of speech	0%	7%	19%	31%	43%
Definitions	0%	0%	10%	23%	67%
Example sentences	3%	40%	37%	12%	8%
Other word forms	1%	22%	50%	18%	9%

Table 2
Percentage of Respondents Reporting Different Aspects of Word Knowledge They Recorded on Word Cards or in Vocabulary Notebooks

Word Knowledge	% of students
Phonetic transcription	52%
Part of speech	75%
Chinese translation	96%
English definition/synonym	1%
Sentence using the words	8%
Other word forms	24%

The results of the post-course questionnaire show the changes in the students' perceptions of vocabulary knowledge. In general, students thought highly of the acquisition of word knowledge. More than 80% of students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the "part of speech," "Chinese translation," "English definition," and "example sentence" were very beneficial in learning vocabulary. Less than 10% of students held the opposite view. When asked about the usefulness of "phonetic transcription," "other word forms," and "creating new sentences," the percentage of students who gave positive responses for these features were 75% (N = 114), 56% (N = 85), and 23% (N = 35), respectively. The "English definition" and "a sample sentence containing the word," which were previously neglected, were found to be very helpful in learning by the participants after working on a yearlong vocabulary assignment. More than 80% of students either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this viewpoint based on the results of the questionnaire completed at the end of the academic year.

Dictionary Use

Research Question 2: What types of dictionaries do students use, and what are their preferences after being introduced to a variety of dictionary types?

A comparison of dictionary-consulting behaviors of the participants before and after the vocabulary notebook implementation showed several significant differences. Prior to entering college, bilingual dictionaries were clearly noted as the primary dictionary preference. Nearly four-fifths (78%) of students mentioned a bilingual dictionary as their primary choice; approximately one-tenth (12%) of students reported that they had used monolingual dictionaries before. It is worth noting that by the end of the academic year, however, there was an increase in the popularity of both monolingual and bilingualized dictionaries. The percentages of students who reported using bilingual, bilingualized, and monolingual dictionaries by the end of the academic year were 64% (N = 97), 76% (N = 116), and 45% (N = 68), respectively (students were instructed to indicate all dictionary types that applied). The number of students who preferred using dictionaries that provided English definitions, namely bilingualized and monolingual dictionaries, increased. When asked whether monolingual or bilingual dictionaries better aided their learning of English language, 43% (N = 65) of the students picked the monolingual dictionary. One-fifth of the students (N = 30) considered monolingual and bilingual dictionaries equally helpful. From the above results, it was determined that after trying out the three types of dictionaries, many students discovered that dictionaries providing English definitions of new words (monolingual and bilingualized dictionaries) were useful in helping them learn English.

Student Perceptions of Vocabulary Notebook Implementation

Research Question 3: What are student perceptions of the vocabulary notebook technique?

Students were generally positive about the use of vocabulary notebooks. Sixty percent of students (N = 91) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that notebooks had been beneficial, while only 10% (N = 15) of students disagreed. Furthermore, among students who expressed an intention to continue learning English, 76% (N = 116) gave a positive response and answered they would consider a similar approach in learning more vocabulary in the future. A high percentage of students (83%) affirmed the idea of being given the freedom to make their own decisions about vocabulary acquisition appealed to them, which was indicated by marking "agree" or "strongly agree."

Another result involved the instructor's role as the facilitator of the vocabulary notebook technique. The majority of students (80%) "strongly agreed" that it is important

for the instructor to check their assignments regularly. The students also replied affirmatively regarding the in-class cooperative vocabulary reviewing session; sixty-seven percent of students (N = 102) gave positive responses to this query.

Qualitative data generated through an open-ended question concerning students' perceptions of the vocabulary notebook were organized and categorized. In general, the participants perceived the vocabulary notebook implementation as rewarding. The majority of students (88%) stated that the assignment had a positive effect on their learning. More than half of the respondents claimed that the learning approach helped them improve their lexical competence (63%, N = 96) and facilitated memorization of target vocabulary (51%, N = 78). Students were also more engaged in the learning experience. Thirty percent of students (N = 46) reported spending more time and/or greater effort studying English, and 13% (N = 20) sought out new learning opportunities and materials outside the classroom more frequently.

Some students reported the use of metacognitive learning skills, such as planning, goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluating. Eighteen percent of students (N = 27) reported that the approach promoted their self-responsibility and encouraged them to have greater self-discipline in their learning. Some students reported that they had become better at planning and managing their own learning; others said that they set up and adhered to a regular study routine.

Word Selection

Research Question 4: What are student reasons for selecting vocabulary words, and where do they encounter the words?

For the vocabulary assignment, at least half of the words in students' notebooks had to come from their course textbooks. The other half could come from other sources. Thirty-eight percent of all the words recorded in the student notebooks came from sources other than their course textbooks. The students' reasons for word selection were categorized. The ten most common reasons are listed in Table 3. "Words that are important (reasons not specified)" was the most popular reason for word selection, with 86% of students listing it. "New or unknown" and "useful" words also ranked high on the list (items 2 and 3). Another important consideration was whether the words students chose were important for their academic studies (items 4 and 10). To qualify for graduation, the students must pass English comprehension tests; this requirement most likely led to the students' stronger interests in learning words that were likely to appear on their English comprehension tests. It is also interesting to note that some students liked to include important words or terminologies that they encountered while studying other textbooks written in English. Another notable finding was that aside from "new words," which were prioritized by most students, approximately one-fifth (19%) of students selected words that "they had learned before but had found confusing or hard to memorize." The results clearly indicate that the students purposefully chose their words and that they considered their own learning goals and objectives in deciding which words to include in their notebooks.

Table 3
Top 10 Reasons for Word Selection

Rank	% of students
1. Words that are important (reasons were not specified)	86%
2. Words that are new or unknown	64%
3. Words that are useful	63%

4.	Words that might appear on tests (including the course mid-term exam, final exam, or other English language comprehension tests)	43%
5.	High frequency words	27%
6.	Words the instructor emphasizes	24%
7.	Words that one might encounter or use in the future	22%
8.	Words that one had learned before, but were confusing or hard to memorize	19%
9.	Words that one couldn't think of or failed to use correctly when trying to express himself/herself (including oral and written)	13%
10.	Words related to one's field of study	8%

(Respondents could give more than one reason, so the percentages will not add up to 100%)

Student Suggestions for Vocabulary Notebook Implementation

Research Question 5: What suggestions do students offer for improving the vocabulary notebook technique?

Students offered many suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the vocabulary notebook assignment. The most frequently raised suggestion was the need for instructors to monitor the learning process regularly. Eight percent of students suggested that the instructor collect and inspect the notebooks more frequently—with weekly being widely suggested. Two main reasons were as follows: (1) students sometimes procrastinated completing their homework assignments; and (2) they were not capable of seeing and correcting their own errors. The students believed these errors would interfere with their learning. The following comments from students are typical.

"It is better for the instructor to collect and check my assignments once a week. Sometimes I am too busy or lazy to do the homework every week."

"Discipline from the instructor could prevent me from falling behind with my assignments."

"I like to create sentences using the words I just learned, but I do not know if the sentences I made were correct or not. I know I could have asked the teacher for help, but I was shy."

"It would be nice if the instructor could check our assignments once or twice a week and mark the mistakes I made."

Many students requested additional guidance and assistance. Several students suggested that the instructor give more explicit suggestions on word selection. Some students mentioned that they were not good at distinguishing more important words from less important ones. As one student wrote, "I don't know which words are more important. I did record most of the words that the teacher specifically emphasized, but I picked the rest of the words randomly. Maybe teacher could give us a word list each week." Another wrote, "I am unsure whether the words I chose to memorize were high frequency words or not. I hope I am not learning words that are not useful. I think that the instructor should help us select words." Among the less frequently mentioned suggestions were offering recommendations for English learning materials that students can read outside of class and giving students class time to work on their assignments.

Students also expressed a desire for more flexibility in completing their assignments. The following are some of the suggestions and comments from the questionnaire:

"I practice pronouncing words using my electronic pronouncing dictionary. Copying down phonetic spellings does not do me any good."

"I find using bilingualized dictionaries helpful because they contain both

English definitions and their Chinese equivalents. I always read words'
English definitions, but writing them down takes too much time."
"We should include other important language elements in our notebooks, such
as grammar points and idioms."
"It would be better if we were not required to select words from our textbooks.
The textbooks already contain vocabulary sections, which makes vocabulary
learning and reviewing convenient. It is more important for me to organize and
record new words I encounter outside the classroom."

As shown above, some students wanted to decide for themselves which aspects of
word knowledge to include in their workbooks. Some students wanted to omit certain
aspects of word knowledge, while others suggested that it would be better if they could
decide the proportion of words they needed to choose from the course textbooks and
outside of class. Overall student feedback makes it clear that the instructor must identify
learner needs and offer ongoing guidance.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how students respond to a vocabulary
notebook assignment and better understand their approaches to learning vocabulary. The
vocabulary notebook assignment aimed to help students become more effective and
independent in acquiring new English vocabulary. Overall, students reported that the
implementation of a vocabulary notebook learning approach was beneficial and that it
positively affected their learning. The students claimed that while undergoing the learning
process, they became more attentive to their own learning, spent more time and effort in
that learning, and developed better study habits.

The findings from student reflections and perceptions regarding the implementation
revealed that learning vocabulary by keeping vocabulary notebooks, with appropriate
instructor guidance, is helpful to students and effective at promoting skills necessary for
learner autonomy. Many students cited the use of metacognitive learning skills, including
planning, goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluating and reflections on learning, which
have proven to be critically important in language learning (Abraham & Vann, 1987;
Green & Oxford, 1995; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wharton, 2000).

Based on results of this study, some recommendations and implications are offered
below. This study demonstrated the importance of compensating for differences among
individual learners by allowing them to explore different ways of learning and find the
best one for them. The comparison of dictionary-consulting behaviors before and after the
vocabulary notebook implementation showed that given the opportunity to test different
types of dictionaries, many students discovered that dictionaries providing English
definitions were useful. During the second semester, bilingualized dictionaries became the
most popular dictionary type. This finding suggested that though students found English
definitions helpful, they were more confident using dictionaries that contained both
English definitions and their Chinese equivalents.

The use of the vocabulary notebook also brought about changes in students'
perceptions of word knowledge. All knowledge areas are essential in vocabulary learning
(Nation, 1990); however, the participants in this study were accustomed to using some
aspects of vocabulary knowledge more than others. As asserted by Fowle (2002), Nation
(2001), and Schmitt and Schmitt (1995), dictionary use in combination with the use of
vocabulary notebooks can benefit vocabulary learning. Once engaged in the vocabulary
assignment, the participants became more focused and deliberate in gaining word
knowledge and, accordingly, much more appreciative of its value. When looking up

unknown words, students paid closer attention to the specifics of word knowledge. The findings also have practical implications for EFL/ESL vocabulary instruction. If students regard certain aspects of word knowledge as important, they should be encouraged to engage in practice activities to facilitate learning. In this study, for example, students found "English definition" and "a sample sentence containing the word" useful, although they had previously neglected these aspects   It would be imperative for the instructor to create more practice opportunities by asking students to define new words in English and create sentences using those words, both orally and in writing.

This investigation revealed the crucial role of the instructor in identifying learner needs, monitoring learner progress, and providing learners with ongoing, appropriate guidance in the learning process. Based on the students' feedback, recommending learning materials that are suited to their abilities and needs promote students' English learning and vocabulary development outside of the classroom. Similar to McCrostie's (2007) study, this study found that many students struggled to identify high-frequency words. In response to students' difficulties in selecting words that are most useful to them, instructors should give their students a list of important words chosen from course texts or activities every week. More importantly, it is imperative that teachers assist their students in identifying high-frequency words. For instance, teachers could set aside some class time to introduce students to the use of concordancers, such as the British National Corpus, and word lists, such as Hindmarsh (1980), and teach them to check word frequency by consulting the frequency markings.   In addition to providing all students with the general rules for word selection, it is vital to identify and assist those who need extra help. As McCrostie (2007) notes, more guidance from teachers is needed because some students are unable to make wise word selections.

Concordancers and corpora, which provide large amounts of authentic examples of the way words and phrases are used in context, can also serve as valuable tools for solving grammar and usage problems learners encounter. Some participants indicated that they were reluctant to create new sentences because they were uncertain about the correctness of their own sentences. With the better quality of language samples that concordancers and corpora provide, identifying and correcting their own errors would become easier for students.   Having students correct each other's work can also promote cooperative learning.

Although intermediate to advanced level learners are generally more capable of using learning strategies and making learning decisions than novice learners, this study revealed that there will always be some students who need extra learning support. In light of this finding, the importance of identifying students who are in need of extra support and offering them more extensive assistance cannot be overemphasized.

Limitations

In this study, the questionnaires were designed to elicit the participants' self-perceived changes in their study habits and their attitudes toward the vocabulary learning approach, which might provide some useful information about the effects of using vocabulary notebook in enhancing learner vocabulary development. This study, however, does not provide evidence on the students' actual vocabulary growth. The scope of this study is limited in that no formal assessments were given to measure the participants' vocabulary size, vocabulary growth, or long-term word retention, therefore, cautions should be taken in evaluating the effectiveness of this vocabulary notebook approach. Furthermore, the questionnaires did not address the participant's actual word use. For a more in-depth examination of the impact of this learning approach, the

questionnaires should also have included specific questions regarding which aspects of the learning approach actually assist the students becoming more effective or independent learners.

When interpreting the study results, the following limitations should be taken into consideration. This study relies on self-reported data, which depend upon respondents' willingness, honesty and memory to respond to questions and are subject to response error. The validity of the results is threatened if responses given by the participants do not reflect their actual behaviors or opinions.

This study is a work of educational action research, in which classroom teachers typically design and conduct investigations regarding their own teaching styles. When conducted properly, action research can be valuable and valid (Nunan, 2001). In such research, however, the role of the instructor as researcher can raise issues concerning validity. Some participants may attempt to please the instructor by doing what they think is expected of them. In the current study, it is impossible to verify whether the participants answered all questions honestly. In addition, this action research is restricted to four classes in a single setting. It aims to generate findings that are useful only within a specific context, thus the results might not be applicable to other learning situations.

Conclusion

In general, students considered the vocabulary notebook learning approach very useful and see the method as a basis for future vocabulary development. The combined findings of Fowle (2002), Gu (2003), Gu and Johnson (1996), Leeke and Shaw (2000), Sanaoui (1995), and the present study show that keeping records of unknown words is beneficial in second/foreign language learning. Furthermore, the results of this study and those of Fowle (2002) show that vocabulary notebook implementation receives favorable feedback from EFL learners and promotes successful learning strategies and learner independence.

Based upon the findings of this study, correctly incorporating vocabulary notebooks into a second/foreign language curriculum seems beneficial for vocabulary learning. To effectively assist learners in acquiring vocabulary using this tool, it is necessary that learners are provided with ongoing guidance. More importantly, one should never overlook the importance of continuous monitoring of student progress and identifying those that need additional assistance. These elements are crucial for maximizing the potential benefits of the learning activity. The effective use of the vocabulary notebook can lead to enhance outcomes in vocabulary and help equip students with learning strategies for studying independently.

The researcher believes that this approach may be adapted for use in a variety of different learning contexts. By using vocabulary notebooks, teachers can develop students' awareness of different learning strategies and assist them in discovering methods of learning that are best suited to their individual styles. Attending to individual learner needs is crucial for large, multi-leveled classes. Given opportunities to make their own choices when learning vocabulary, students can learn at their own pace and by applying their own approaches.   Thus, students are more likely to become intrinsically involved in their learning and in expanding their vocabulary.

The findings of this study encourage further refinement of vocabulary notebook usage to enable language teachers to empower their students in acquiring vocabulary. The current investigation expands our understanding of the benefits of vocabulary notebook to students' study habits. However, this study did not measure gains in learners' vocabulary knowledge. In future studies, researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of a

vocabulary notebook learning approach in terms of learners' actual vocabulary growth. Future researchers may also investigate whether training students to define words in English and generate sentences using new words, two strategies that were unpopular among the students in this study, may have positive outcomes for lexical development.

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Appendix A

Background Questionnaire

Student ID number:

Age: _____

Gender: □ Male

　　　□ Female

1.　(a) Did you keep any record of your words or phrases? (Indicate "Yes" or "No")

　　□ Yes

　　□ No

　(b) IF YES: In what forms?　(Check all items that apply.)

　　□ Notebooks

　　□ Cards

　　□ Other forms (write in the margin, between the lines, etc.)

　(c) IF YES: Was that a required assignment? (Indicate "Yes" or "No")

　　□ Yes

　　□ No

2.　Which of the following details were included on your word cards or in your vocabulary notebooks? (Check all items that apply.)

　　□ Phonetic transcription

　　□ Part of speech

　　□ Chinese translation

　　□ English definition/synonym

　　□ Sentence using the words

　　□ Other word forms

3.　Which types of dictionary do you use on a regular basis? (Check all items that apply.)

　　□ Bilingual dictionaries

　　□ Bilingualized dictionaries

　　□ Monolingual dictionaries

4.　How often did you pay attention to the following kinds of information when you looked up an unknown word in a dictionary?

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Word's phonetic transcription	□	□	□	□	□
Word's part of speech	□	□	□	□	□
Definitions	□	□	□	□	□
Example sentences	□	□	□	□	□
Other word forms	□	□	□	□	□

Appendix B

Vocabulary Notebook Questionnaire

Student ID number:

Part A. Listed below are statements and questions about your opinions concerning the vocabulary assignment, the information you recorded in your notebooks, and your preferred dictionary type(s). For item 1-13, 17, and 18, check the box which best describes whether you agree or disagree with each statement. (SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither agree nor disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree)

	SD	D	N	A	SA
Opinions Regarding the Vocabulary Assignment					
1. I like the idea that I can choose the words I want to learn.	□	□	□	□	□
2. I like the vocabulary activity of pairing students to test each other on the words listed in the vocabulary notebooks.	□	□	□	□	□
3. It is important for the instructor to check my notebook regularly.	□	□	□	□	□
4. Working on this assignment is beneficial for learning vocabulary.	□	□	□	□	□
5. I will continue to study English next year or in college.	□	□	□	□	□
6. I will consider using vocabulary notebooks to help me learn vocabulary in the future.	□	□	□	□	□
Information Recorded in the Vocabulary Notebooks					
(a) Word Knowledge					
7. Recording phonetic transcription is helpful in learning.	□	□	□	□	□
8. Recording the part of speech is helpful in learning.	□	□	□	□	□
9. Recording the Chinese translation is helpful in learning.	□	□	□	□	□
10. Recording English definitions/synonyms is beneficial in learning.	□	□	□	□	□
11. Recording example sentences from dictionaries or from original texts is helpful in learning.	□	□	□	□	□
12. Making your own sentences is helpful in learning.	□	□	□	□	□
13. Recording the other parts of speech for a word is helpful in learning.	□	□	□	□	□

(b) Word Selection
14. What proportion of the words you entered in your notebook are ones that you come across outside the classroom? (If none, indicate "0") _____ %
15. What are the major reasons behind your word selection?

<u>Use of Dictionary</u>

16. What dictionaries did you use when you worked on the vocabulary assignment during the second semester of the academic year? (Check all that apply.)
    □ Bilingual dictionaries
    □ Bilingualized dictionaries
    □ Monolingual dictionaries

17. Which type of dictionary is more useful in helping you learn English? (Tick one answer.)
    □ Bilingual dictionaries
    □ Monolingual dictionaries
    □ They are equally helpful

Part B. Please answer the following questions as fully as you can.

1. Think about what you have got out of this vocabulary learning experience. Has this method changed any of your learning habits? Did it provide you with new learning skills? Did it facilitate your learning?   How?

2. What suggestions, if any, do you have for the vocabulary notebook.