# A CHALLENGE FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS AND TEACHERS: STUDENTS' ENGLISH VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

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## ABSTRACT

*Technical vocabulary in business English has been challenging for EFL learners in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. This study focuses on the students' vocabulary learning strategies and their understandings of English vocabulary selected from one of their ESP courses, Business Correspondence (BC). The participants were 30 university students in their third semester. In addition to the students' scores obtained from the final test of Business Correspondence course, the researchers used 5-point self-report Vocabulary Knowledge Scale and the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire. The results of the study indicate that students' vocabulary knowledge in relation to business English is low, the students' vocabulary knowledge has no significant correlation with their comprehension on Business Correspondence and only determination strategies are significantly correlated with the students' vocabulary knowledge. The paper concludes with the discussion of implication for teaching and learning ESP vocabulary. This will benefit both the students and the teachers of ESP course in improving their understanding of the importance of vocabulary in business English.*

*Keywords: ESP, business correspondence, vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary knowledge*

## INTRODUCTION

Business Correspondence (BC) as one of the ESP courses focuses on letter-writing as an essential part of business. This course is aimed at enhancing students' ability to write English letter for business purpose and familiarizing students with procedures and conventions in business. The topics cover the effective BC, such as: parts of the letter, the letter forms, how to write and reply the letter. Therefore, technical vocabulary in relation to business is crucial in this sphere of teaching. In order to develop students' communicative competence, language teachers should encourage them to learn as many words as possible in order to improve the students' understanding of certain technical words that are usually used in business correspondence.

Schmitt (2000) highlights that transferring lexical information from the short-term memory, also called working memory where it resides during the process of manipulating language, to the permanent long-term memory as the storage area of information is the object of vocabulary learning. One approach of facilitating vocabulary learning that has attracted increasing attention is vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) (Schmitt, 2000). There are numerous different VLS, with one list containing fifty-eight different strategies (Schmitt, 1997). First, he divided the list into two major categories: (1) strategies that are useful for the initial discovery of a word's meaning, and (2) those useful for remembering that word once it has been introduced. This reflects the different processes necessary for working out a new word's meaning and usage, and for consolidating it in memory for future use. Second, the strategies are further classified into five groupings. The first contains strategies used by an individual when faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise *(Determination strategies* [DET]). *Social strategies* (SOC) use interaction with other people to improve language learning. *Memory strategies* (MEM)

(traditionally known as *mnemonics)* involve relating the word to be retained with some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery, or grouping. *Cognitive strategies* (COG) exhibit the common function of "manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (Oxford, 1990 in Schmitt, 2000). Lastly, *Metacognitive strategies* (MET) involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study.

The students should become aware of the importance of VLS in learning vocabulary in ESP. Being able to apply the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context emphasizes what is taught and improves their motivation in learning English. Based on that reason, this study focuses on the students' vocabulary learning strategies and their understandings of English vocabulary selected from one of their ESP courses, Business Correspondence.

## METHODS

There were 30 third-semester students participating in this study. These students were selected from two classes of Business Correspondence. The participants were 22 females and eight males ranging in age from 18-21 from the same department in a state university in East Kalimantan, Indonesia.

The research instruments applied in this study were: (1) The teacher-made test which was used to get the data of students' scores on the final examination of Business Correspondence, (2) The vocabulary test consisting of 30 English words: 10 nouns, 10 verbs, and 10 adjectives, and (3) The Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) Questionnaire which used five-point scale, with the options ranging from "never" to "always" showing the frequency of the strategy use in learning English vocabulary and consisted of 25 items related to VLS which were grouped into six categories of Discovery and Consolidation strategies.

To collect the data, the researchers provided the vocabulary test for the students to carry out in 30 minutes. On the same day, after the vocabulary test was accomplished, the questionnaire was distributed to the students to discover their vocabulary learning strategies. The students were told to answer the questions based on their learning experiences and their responses to the questionnaire would not affect their course grades. In order to gather the data from the teacher-made test, it was conducted when the students were scheduled to have their final examination of Business Correspondence course. The lecturer of the course scored the students' work and the researchers used the scores to see whether or not they correlated with the students' vocabulary knowledge.

In the data analysis, the researchers calculated the mean scores of the teacher-made test, the vocabulary test, and the vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire with SPSS 19.0. After the results were obtained, tests of correlation were utilized. The data were analyzed statistically to find out the relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge (VK) and their tendency on the use of vocabulary learning strategies, and the correlation between students' vocabulary knowledge and their comprehension on Business Correspondence.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the vocabulary test was given, the overall result of students' vocabulary knowledge along with the calculation of the mean score was gained as seen in the following table.

Table 1. Mean score of students' vocabulary test.

| Student | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Score | 2,63 | 2,40 | 2,60 | 1,53 | 2,33 | 2,57 | 3,40 | 2,60 | 2,37 | 3,20 |

| Student | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
|---------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Score | 3,50 | 2,67 | 2,40 | 2,23 | 2,10 | 3,70 | 2,47 | 2,67 | 2,47 | 2,40 |

| Student | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Score | 2,63 | 2,50 | 2,63 | 3,63 | 2,50 | 3,17 | 3,13 | 3,00 | 3,40 | 3,83 |

Mean score: 2.76

From the obtained mean score, the students' vocabulary knowledge is low because it does not even reach Level III, which means that most of the meanings of the words tested are not known despite the familiarity with the English words.

The questionnaire of vocabulary learning strategies was the next research instrument the students had to complete. The calculation of the frequency of the strategy use from each strategy group is displayed in the following table.

Table 2. Score averages of the five groups of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

| CATEGORIES | SCORE AVERAGE |
|------------|---------------|
| 1. Determination Strategies | 3.26 |
| 2. Social Strategies 1 (Discovery Strategies) | 3.07 |
| 3. Social Strategies 2 (Consolidation Strategies) | 2.82 |
| 4. Memory Strategies | 3.06 |
| 5. Cognitive Strategies | 2.97 |
| 6. Metacognitive Strategies | 2.96 |

The following information is about each group of strategies which reveals different mean scores.

(1) Determination strategy has the highest score average, 3.26. It shows that this strategy was the most frequently used by the students. The most frequent strategy used in this category was *use a bilingual dictionary to translate English words into Indonesian language*; while the least frequently used strategy was *use pictures illustrated in the textbook to find the word meanings.*

(2) Social strategy under Discovery Strategy was fairly frequent, with a score average 3.07. *Learn some new words when working in groups* was the most frequently used strategy in this category. The least frequent strategy used was *asking the teacher to put an unknown word into a sentence to help the students to understand the word meaning*.

(3) Compared to other categories, Social strategy under Consolidation strategy was the least frequently used strategy with a score average 2.82. The most frequent strategy in this category was *practice English when completing assignments in small groups* and the least frequent one was *ask native speakers for help*.

(4) Memory strategy with a score average 3.06 was almost equal to Social strategy under Discovery Strategy. *Write a new word in a sentence so students can remember it* was the most frequently used strategy, while *use physical actions when learning words* was the least frequent one.

(5) Cognitive strategy was ranked after Memory strategy. It had a score average 2.97. *Write new words on flash cards* was the least frequent strategy used by the students, while the most frequent strategy use was *try to remember a word, then write or say it repeatedly*.

(6) The last category was Metacognitive strategy with a score average 2.96, almost equal to Cognitive strategy. *Listen to English songs and news* was the most frequently used strategy, while *does not worry very much about the difficult words found when reading or listening and skip them* was the least frequent one.

The teacher-made test was given to the students at the end of the semester. The following is the overall scores of the written test with the calculation of the mean score.

Table 3. Mean score of final written test of Business Correspondence

| Student | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Score | 95 | 93 | 90 | 56 | 78 | 84 | 65 | 90 | 59 | 42 | 66 | 73 | 57 | 70 | 72 |

| Student | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
|---------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Score | 76 | 100 | 42 | 78 | 70 | 90 | 67 | 56 | 76 | 68 | 76 | 77 | 66 | 90 | 90 |

Mean score: 73.73

From the result of the final written test of Business Correspondence, it is shown that the highest score was 100 and the lowest score was 42. The mean score of the final written test was 73.73 which includes as good based on standard score category. It is displayed that 9 students are having excellent comprehension, and 10 students are including as good. Furthermore, 15 students or 50% who receive up the average score and 15 students or 50% of them who receive under the average.

**Correlation between Vocabulary Knowledge and Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

The calculation by using Product Moment formula was in line with the calculation using SPSS 19.0

Table 4. The Correlation between VK and Consolidation Strategies

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | DET |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,414* |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,023 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| DET | Pearson Correlation | ,414* | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,023 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

From the calculation above, it is concluded that through applying the Pearson Product Moment Formula and SPSS v19, the r-obtained achieve from the students' vocabulary knowledge as variable X and students' vocabulary learning strategy, specifically, determination strategy as variable Y, which is 0.414. It means there is significant correlation between two variables between vocabulary knowledge and determination strategy. Positive correlation is the result of the improvement of vocabulary knowledge which is followed by good determination strategy.

Table 5. The Correlation between VK and Social Strategies (1)

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | SOC.1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -,307 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,098 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| SOC.1 | Pearson Correlation | -,307 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,098 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

Table 6. The Correlation between VK and Social Strategies (2)

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | SOC.2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,330 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,075 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| SOC.2 | Pearson Correlation | ,330 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,075 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

Table 7. The Correlation between VK and Memory Strategies

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | MEM |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -,067 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,723 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| MEM | Pearson Correlation | -,067 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,723 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

Table 8. The Correlation between VK and Cognitive Strategies

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | COG |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,087 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,647 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| COG | Pearson Correlation | ,087 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,647 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

Table 9. The Correlation between VK and Metacognitive Strategies

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | METCOG |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,252 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,179 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| METCOG | Pearson Correlation | ,252 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,179 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

Table 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 illustrated the correlation between vocabulary knowledge as variable X and social strategy 1 under discovery strategy, and all learning strategies under Consolidation Strategy: social strategy 2, memory strategy, cognitive strategy and metacognitive strategy as variable Y. It can be seen that the X and Y deliver the calculation to the result that the r-obtained value is -0.307, 0,330, -0,067, 0,087 and 0,252. The r-obtained is lower than r-table 0.361. The result implied is insignificant. It means students' vocabulary knowledge and the abovementioned strategies do not correlate each other.

**Correlation between Vocabulary Knowledge and Business Correspondence Comprehension**

The following calculation in the table below displays the correlation between VK and BC comprehension.

Table 10. The Correlation between VK and BC Comprehension.

**Correlations**

|  |  | VK | BCS |
|---|---|---|---|
| VK | Pearson Correlation | 1 | ,104 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) |  | ,585 |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |
| BCS | Pearson Correlation | ,104 | 1 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,585 |  |
|  | N | 30 | 30 |

From the calculation of Pearson correlation, it was concluded that the r-value achieved from the students' vocabulary knowledge as variable X and students' comprehension of BC as variable Y was 0.104. This r-value is lower than r-table, 0.361. It shows that there was insignificant correlation between the two variables, students' vocabulary knowledge and their comprehension of BC. In other words, students' vocabulary knowledge and students' comprehension of BC do not correlate each other.

In terms of students' vocabulary knowledge, the result confirms that most of the word meanings related to BC seem to be difficult for the students to translate into Indonesian, to find the English synonyms, or to give some definitions or explanations. According to the level of word knowledge developed by Paribabkhth & Wesche (1993), the students are familiar with the words but they do not know their meanings. This might result from several factors. One of them is associated with the capacity of short-term and long-term memories in processing information in the brain. The process of transferring lexical information from the sort-term memory might not be as smooth as expected, thus it causes forgetting information, which is the stock of the meanings of words seen or heard before. This is where the students who appear to learn new words, but cannot recall it later on-demand. There might be some reasons why it could happen. First, students probably forget a thing because they are thinking about something else so they are not listening. Secondly, they do not think the idea is important so they ignore it, and then forget it. The last, they might not have time to learn or store the material properly. It is all associated with the limited working memory as empirically investigated in some studies (Daneman & Green, 1986).

The findings also indicated that the positively significant correlation only occurred when students' vocabulary knowledge was correlated using Pearson correlation formula with Determination Strategy, one of the vocabulary learning strategies under Discovery Strategies. One of the Discovery strategies which is the most frequently used by the students is using bilingual dictionaries to translate English words into Indonesian language. This demonstrates that students rely their knowledge on English words on bilingual dictionaries, English-Indonesian or Indonesian-English, as their English proficiency is considered inadequate to deal with English vocabulary. Therefore, they understand most of English words by looking them up in the dictionaries.

With regard to the students' comprehension on BC which focuses on letter-writing as an essential part of business, the students' evaluation is based on how they can identify part of business letters and write certain kinds of business letters. Thus, it is important for the students to know and understand the meaning of the words that usually used on writing business letters. Therefore, studies on the use vocabulary learning strategies in learning vocabulary in ESP is important to make students become aware of language learning strategies and get trained to use them appropriately. Moreover, McCarthy (1990, p.viii) points out that "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 wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way". Thus, the number of words learned depends on numerous exposures to a particular word and words are not learned instantaneously but they are learned over period of time. However, from the research result it can be predicted that students actually face difficulties while learning new English words. It is difficult to learn words especially ESP words in BC context because they are low-frequency words and are not encountered very often. For that reason, although their written final test score of BC is included in good category but their vocabulary knowledge in BC's context is unequal.

Whereas for their good result in the BC written final test, it possibly happened because they were only memorizing the sentences that are usually used in business letter without completely understand their meanings. They only know the words because they have seen the words in the textbook but they forget the meanings.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In general, the students of BC course reported using discovery strategies (i.e. Determination strategies) more frequently than consolidation strategies. One interpretation of this is that the students tend to be more concerned in discovering or understanding the English word meanings than in learning them. This could be due to the fact that during a letter-writing activity, the English students involved in this study just discover the meanings to understand the content of the letter or to answer comprehension questions. One of the learning strategies that need to be developed for the students in university context is metacognitive strategies which are associated with independent learning. The students are supposed to employ some metacognitive strategies, like planning their vocabulary learning and assessing their vocabulary in order to help them become aware of their vocabulary knowledge and develop it. The students' infrequent use of metacognitive strategies indicates that most of the students do not have plans or directions for their learning, which are important for success. It also reveals that the students are not independent in their learning and lack the knowledge of what to learn about words. These findings are consistent with those of Moir and Nation (2002) who discovered that the subjects of their study were not responsible for their learning and unaware of what learning vocabulary requires. Such students should be helped to become more independent in their learning through learner training.

A possible recommendation for these students is to concentrate on strategies that help them develop both their receptive and productive knowledge, since their vocabulary knowledge in business English is very low. In addition, students' understanding of parts of speech should be improved as much as possible in direct vocabulary learning through word chunks which can help maintain information in working memory (Gilchrist, Cowan, Naveh-Benjamin, 2009).

For ESP teachers, instead of teaching technical vocabulary they should confirm if the learners understood technical vocabulary that appears in the context. In line with Nation's argument that "technical vocabulary" is a type of specialized vocabulary and its occurrence is affected by factors that influence the use of all vocabulary. Language teachers should prepare their learners to deal with the large numbers of technical words that occur in specialized text (Nation, 2001).

In accordance with the previous conclusions and the data of this study which are mostly insignificant, we suggest some points. First, for further studies, it needs more participants as the research subject and more comprehensive vocabulary test. Second, it is suggested to conduct an experimental study which involves some treatments on teaching strategies for ESP vocabulary.

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