Cambodian EFL Learners' Strategies and Perceptions for Coping with Unknown Words in Reading Non-instructional English Texts: A Preliminary Study

Mok Sarom

Buriram Rajabhat University

ABSTRACT

In Cambodia, for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), encountering unknown words can be a major roadblock in reading comprehension, especially if they happen to be keywords in a particular text. The purpose of this research was to provide the information on word-attack strategy use and perceptions of unknown words in non-instructional texts of a class of sophomore students at the Institute of Foreign Languages, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (IFL-RUPP), Cambodia. It explored the differences between the three high proficient and three low proficient learners selected from the class in terms of frequency, type and outcome of strategy use, as well as how their beliefs affected their choice of strategies.

In exploratory case study approach with self-reporting techniques was employed. The research instruments for data collection employed in this study were included: (1) a questionnaire on vocabulary strategy use; (2) think-aloud protocols of two reading tasks; and (3) a delayed semi-structured interview for each of the participants.

The results of this research revealed that the target sophomore year class relied more on outside sources and guessing strategies, but least on strategies related to word form. The six high- and low-achievers showed considerable differences in their strategy use. The three high-achievers adopted a wider range of strategies with significantly higher frequency of use than what the three low-achievers did. The high-achievers preferred the use of the more independent strategies, but the low-achievers relied much more on outside sources, especially on the use of dictionary. The participants' perception of the purpose of English free reading has significant impact on shaping their choices of approaches they used to cope with unknown words.

Introduction

During the last two decades, research on reading for foreign language learners has grown remarkably, initiated by the research in English as a foreign language (EFL). The importance of reading proficiency in academic setting at university level has gathered momentum for the last few decades. It has been widely recognized that scholastic success in many disciplines depends largely upon learners' reading skills, making them one of the essential, determining factors in predicting learners' achievement. Despite its critical role, sufficient reading ability to fulfill the rigorous demand of university study is often lacking among the freshmen (Simpson and Rush, 2003). In Cambodia the challenges confronting the undergraduate students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) seems to transcend those of their monolingual counterparts in English-speaking countries. For these students, sufficient reading skills in the foreign language become an indispensable matter for two reasons. For one thing, they begin to be introduced to some content bibliographic materials written in English, occasionally as early as the first semester of their study. Second, they are expected to not only comprehend concepts in these materials literally as they used to in high school but also apply critical thinking while reading. Critical reading is definitely essential to ensure optimum intellectual development among this community of learners in the universities, but their effort to construct content knowledge by reading critically is frequently hindered by inadequate mastery of the foreign language.

Anecdotal and personal reports from the undergraduates indicate that encountering unfamiliar words still becomes one of the significant obstacles in reading comprehension, probably due to the insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Nurweni and Read (1999) estimated the Cambodian freshmen's vocabulary size as merely 1, 226 words, which were much below the expected one of 4, 000 words. Such a lexical problem deserves considerable attention from educators because it has been a widely common understanding nowadays that the difficulty levels of vocabulary substantially affect the readability of reading texts and—sequentially—comprehension (Nation, 2001; Alderson, 2000; Coady, 1993;

Stoller and Grabe, 1993; Williams and Dallas, 1984) and abundant research has also provided empirical support to this (Calvo, Estevez and Dowens, 2003; Martino and Hoffman, 2002; Lotto and de Groot, 1998).

By informally interviewing the Cambodian undergraduate students studying at Buriram Rajabhat University to probe further their preferred solution to the vocabulary difficulties, the researcher found that most of them usually resort to a dictionary to get the most appropriate meaning. Although a reasonable use of a dictionary may effectively aid word attack during reading (Summers, 1988), it is necessary to caution against the drawbacks of excessive reliance on it, such as decrease of motivation on the part of the learners and the inadequate, inaccurate or inappropriate meaning supplied in the dictionary. As a matter of fact, in addition to dictionary use, there are some other vocabulary strategies they can employ, such as inferring the meaning of the unknown words from surrounding context in the reading materials. However, an individual study the researcher surveyed with Cambodian university students demonstrated a significant lack of the EFL undergraduates' ability in the intelligent guessing. Given 40 unknown English words presented in context-rich reading passages, in average they failed to deduce the meaning of 50.15% of these words. They seemed hardly aware that pluralistic strategies—apart from seeking meaning in a dictionary—did exist to help them in coping with the unfamiliar lexical units.

Though many previous studies have looked into the word-attack strategy use of learners of different backgrounds and proficiency levels, to the best of my knowledge, no previous work of related nature has been done with local undergraduate students (age of 17-22), especially with the focus on boys students. The empirical data would serve to fill the gap of the existing research pool and to possibly serve as a baseline for future studies.

Through this research, the researcher looks forward to gaining a thorough understanding and provides valuable insights for reading instructions, strategy training and curriculum planning in university, as well as to the field of foreign language education of English in worldwide contexts. Hence, it is important that we know how learners cope with unknown words in non-instructional reading texts that take place outside the classroom, without the instructions and guidance of teachers.

Research Objective

This research reports a study that is conducted with a class of 31 Cambodian EFL sophomore scholarship students majoring in English and attending afternoon English class at the Institute of Foreign Languages, the Royal University of Phnom Penh, (IFL-RUPP), Cambodia. It focuses on investigating word-attack strategy use of the target students when dealing with unknown words in non-instructional English reading texts.

Research Question

The research question used to guide data collection and analysis was "what types of word-attack strategies do the target Cambodian EFL sophomore students use to cope with unknown words in non-instructional reading texts?"

Research Methodology
Subjects

The subjects of the study were 6 sophomore students of English at the Institute of Foreign Languages, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (IFL-RUPP). Three high-achievers attending "Reading 1 and 2" and three low-achievers attending "Reading 1 and 2" (which was the last of a series of reading selected by the researcher) volunteered as participants, and each of them received a pseudonym. These students scored the highest in the reading section of Institute external Test and from the researcher's vocabulary test, therefore could be considered as having high- and low achievers in reading comprehension.

Research Instrument

The research instrument for data collection employed in this study was a questionnaire on vocabulary strategy use.

A self-reported inventory of vocabulary and learning strategies for dealing with unknown words in non-instructional texts were developed (Appendix A). This questionnaire aims at eliciting the word-attack strategies used by the class of 31 second year scholarship students in the form of self-reflection and self-report. The questionnaire was an important instrument for the research as it also served as one of the selection criteria for the six participants in the second part of

the research. The twenty strategies that were grouped under the five categories in the questionnaire were also used as the model of analysis for the think-aloud protocols for the reading tasks.

Part A of the Questionnaire of Vocabulary Strategy Use elicits a respondent's personal information and background of English language learning while Part B contains the twenty statements regarding vocabulary and learning strategies when coping with unknown words in reading non-instructional texts (Appendix A). A respondent is also asked to reflect upon each statement and to rate their frequency of strategy use according to the 5-point Likert scale, namely "Never (1)", "Seldom (2)", "Sometimes (3)", "Usually (4)" and "Always (5)". A high rating on an item reflects the active use of that specific strategy for coping with unknown words in reading non-instructional texts.

The list of strategies listed in the questionnaire was a synthesis coming from the work by Harmon (2000), Gu (1997), Schmitt (1997), Haastrup (1985) and Schmitt and Schmitt (1993).

Data Collection

The research started with the questionnaire that aimed to elicit the overall strategy use pattern of the whole; it will then zoomed in to examine the in-depth think-aloud protocols of six learners selected from this class of 31 learners by investigating six participants' word-attack strategies.

During the actual administration of the questionnaire that took place on 12 September 2009 in an English lesson, each of the 31 learners in the target class was given a copy of the English instructions for completing the questionnaire. They were also provided with the English version of the questionnaire. A Khmer version of the twenty statements in Part B of the questionnaire was shown to the learners by the use of an overhead projector.

The researcher explained the instructions in Khmer and then the researcher read aloud each item and statement to the learners in both English and Khmer. About 20 seconds were allowed for the learners to reflect upon each question or statement and to record their responses or rate according to the 5-point Likert scale. Several queries from the learners on the statements were clarified on the spot by the researcher in Khmer in order to avoid misinterpretation. The whole

administration process took about 25 minutes and the process was audiotape recorded for reference.

Data Analysis

As mentioned in research instrument, the questionnaire served several purposes in this research. Apart from its aid in the selection of the participants, it also had its crucial functions in data analysis. One of these uses was that its help in producing a class profile that would give us an overall picture on the class' use of word-attack strategies when coping with unknown words in non-instructional reading texts of the target sophomore class. The class profile is consisted of two main dimensions of strategy use. The first one concerned the use of the twenty individual word-attack strategies while the second illustrated the use of the five pre-determined categories of strategy (Appendix B).

To obtain the results of the first dimension, the total loadings of each of the twenty items in the questionnaire as rated by the 31 learners in the class were calculated in order to get the class mean. The twenty strategies then ranked according to the mean values of these items. Regarding the second dimension, the ratings of the items grouped under the same strategy categories were added up for each learner. Hence each learner had five different total loadings for the five strategy categories (see the blanks under the twenty strategies in Appendix A). Lastly, the total loadings of the same category from all thirty-one learners were calculated, followed by the class means. The five strategy categories were ranked according to these results.

The data gathered through the questionnaire also functioned as a source for triangulating the data collected from both the introspection and the retrospection. During the semi-structured interview, each participant was shown the questionnaire that s/he filled in before and was asked to comment on the choices that s/he made; they were also asked if they had any further adjustments to make. This was done in order to enhance data validity so that the data could act as reliable information for triangulation and to sort out any discrepancies observed in other sources.

Results

The results of this research revealed that the target sophomore class relied quite a lot on the Outside Sources (OS) (e.g., consulting dictionary or other

people) and guessing strategies. Strategies related to Word Form (WF) were least used as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Frequency Count, Mean & Ranking of the Twenty Word-attack Strategies

No.	Word-attach Strategy	Frequency Count	Mean	Ranking
1	I ask other people for the meanings (e.g., teachers, parents, classmates, etc.).	147	3.675	12
2	I make use of my past experience to help to guess the meanings of the words.	147	3.675	20
3	I try to guess the meanings by looking at the clues provided in the text.	142	3.550	6
4	I consider what the rest of the sentence says to figure out the meanings.	138	3.450	9
5	I make use of the logical development in the context (e.g., cause and effect).	136	3.400	5
6	I consider what the rest of the paragraph says to figure out the meanings.	134	3.350	14
7	I look at the pictures, graphs or titles to understand the meanings of the words.	131	3.275	17
8	I use my background knowledge of the topic to discover the meanings.	130	3.250	15
9	I use my common sense and knowledge of the world to find the meanings.	129	3.225	10
10	I just make mere guesses.			1
11	I look up the meanings of every unfamiliar word.	126	3.150	2
12	I skip the unknown words and come back to them later for the meanings.	125	3.125	16
13	I look up the meanings in a dictionary.	124	3.10	7

Table 1 (Continued)

No.	Word-attach Strategy	Frequency Count	Mean	Ranking
14	I consider what the rest of the whole text says to figure out the meanings.	123	3.075	19
15	I check their part of speech (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, etc) to discover meanings.	109	2.725	8
16	I note whether each unknown word looks like another English word that I know.	104	2.60	18
17	I note the spellings of the words to discover meanings.	88	2.20	3
18	I break each word into smaller parts to discover its meaning.	85	2.125	13
19	I just skip or ignore the words without trying to understand the meanings.	72	1.80	11
20	I use punctuation to help guessing the meanings.	63	1.575	4

As mentioned in the research methodology, the frequency count and the mean for each of the twenty strategy statements in the questionnaire were calculated and ranked in descending order from those most frequently used (Table 1).

As the researcher has explained previously, the class profile on broad categories of word-attach strategies of the 20 items come from five broad categories of work-attack strategies. When we look at these five broad categories of word-attack strategies, we see a slightly different picture (Table 2).

Table 2 Frequency Count, Class Mean & Ranking of the Categories of Strategies

No	Category	Ranking	Frequency Count	Class Mean
1	Guessing/Skipping/Ignoring (GSI)	3	465	11.625
2	Outside Sources (OS)	2	540	13.500
3	Word Form (WF)	5	389	9.725
4	Local Context (LC)	4	458	11.450
5	Wider Context (WC)	1	542	13.550

Table 2 shows that the three most frequently used word-attack strategies of target class of foundation year students include "I ask other people for the meanings (teachers, parents, classmates, etc)" (Mean=3.675, Rank=1), "I make use of my past experience to help to guess the meanings of the words" (M=3.675, R=l) and "I try to guess the meanings by looking at the clues provided in the text" (M=3.55, R=3). On the other hand, the three least frequently used strategies are "I break each word into word parts to discover its meaning" (M=2.125, R=4), "I just skip or ignore the words without trying to understand the meanings" (M=1.8, R=5) and "I use punctuation to help guessing the meanings" (M=1.575, R=6).

Figure 1: The class profiles on Five Broad Categories of word-attack Strategies
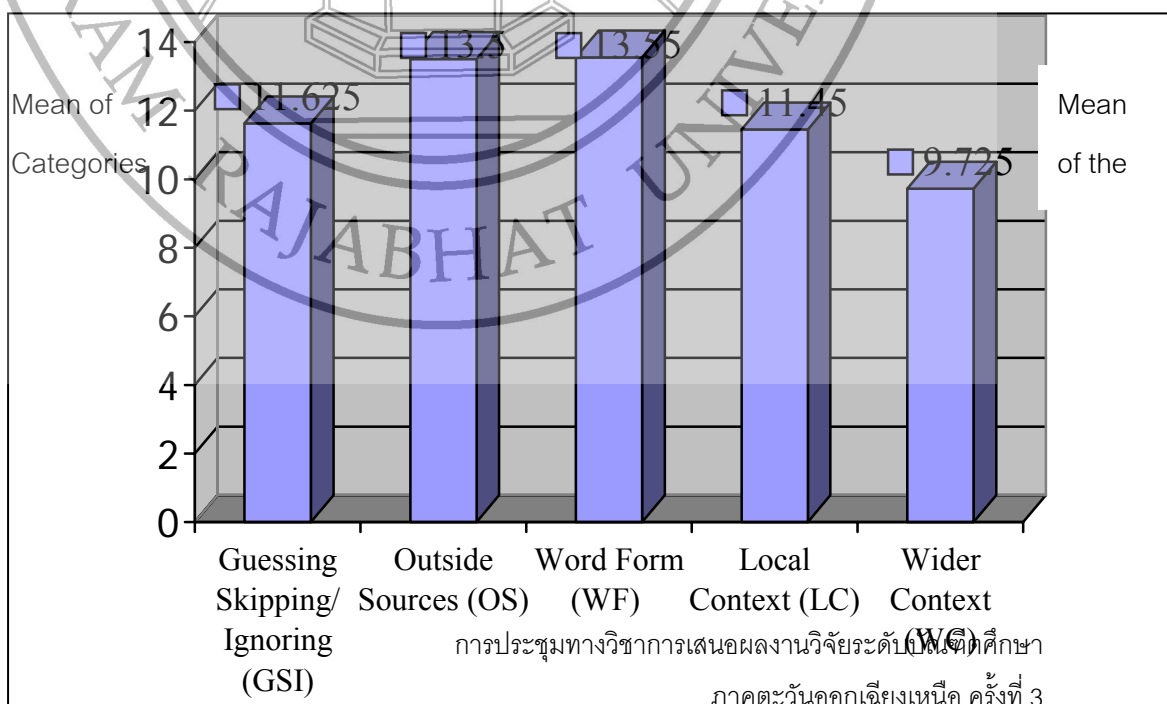
Categories of word-attack Strategies

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the mean of the each category of strategies (please refer to Table 3 for the names of categories). It can be seen that the "Wider Context" category got the highest ranking (M=13.55) while the "Outside Sources" (OS) category got the second (M=13.5). The "Guessing/Skipping/Ignoring" (GSI) category came third (M=11.625), followed by the "Local Context" (LC) (M=11.45) and "Word Form" (WF) (M=9.725) categories.

Conclusion

The researcher compared the word-attack strategy use profiles of the high- and low-achievers in research results and have observed a significant relationship between proficiency level and patterns of strategy use in the following dimensions: (1) The three high-achievers adopted a considerably wider range as well as higher frequency of the use of strategies than the three low-achievers did. (2) The high-achievers preferred the use of the more independent strategies like "guessing from context" but the low achievers relied much more on outside sources, especially on the use of dictionary. (3) The success rate of getting the unknown word meanings of the high-achievers was higher than that of the low-achievers in an overall sense. (4) The high-achievers outperformed the low-achievers in the use of "guessing" and "dictionary" strategies.

This research identified different patterns of word-attack strategy use of high- and low-achievers. The quantitative data agree with the findings obtained from a number of past studies in that higher-achievers used a wider range of strategies more frequently than did the lower achievers.

However, strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but are only so depending on the context in which they are used, as well as determined by the effectiveness of their use (Cohen, 1998). In this research, the high-achievers demonstrated a higher effectiveness in strategy use as well as a greater consciousness than what the low achievers did.

Bibliography

Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Calvo, M. G., Estevez, A., & Dowens, M. G. (2003). Time Course of Elaborative Inferences in Reading as Function of Prior Vocabulary Knowledge. *Learning and Instruction, 13*(6), 611-631.

Carnine, D., Sylbert, J., & Kameenui, E. J. (1990). *Direct Instruction Reading*. Ohio: Merril Publishing Co.

Coady, J. (1993). Research on ESL/EFL Vocabulary Acquisition: Putting It in Context. In T. Huckin, M. Haynes & J. Coady (Eds.), *Second Language Reading and Vocabulary Learning* (pp. 3-23). Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language*. London & New York: Longman.

Gu, Y.Q. (1997). *Vocabulary Learning Strategies and English Language Outcomes: A study of Non-English Majors at Tertiary Level in China*. Unpublished master dissertation. Faculty of Education. The University of Hong Kong.

Haastrup, K. (1987). "Using Thinking aloud and Retrospection to uncover Learners'Lexical Inferencing Procedures". In Faerch, C. & Kasper, G. (ed.).*Introspection in second language research*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Harmon, J. M. (2000). "Assessing and Supporting Independent Word Learning Strategies of Middle School Students". *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. 43(6X518-527.

Lotto, L., & de Groot, A. M. B. (1998). Effects of Learning Method and Word Type on Acquiring Vocabulary in an Unfamiliar Language. *Language Learning, 48*(1), 31-69.

Martino, N. L., & Hoffman, P. R. (2002). An Investigation of Reading and Language Abilities of College Freshmen. *Journal of Research in Reading, 25*(3), 310-318.

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nurweni, A., & Read, J. (1999). The English Vocabulary Knowledge of Indonesian University Students. *English for Specific Purposes, 18*(2), 161-175.

Schmitt, N. (1997). "Vocabulary Learning Strategies". In Schmitt, N. & McCathy, M. (ed). *Vocabulary: Descriptions, Acquisition and Pedagogy.* Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, pp. 199-227.

Schmitt, N & Schmitt, D. R. (1993). "Identifying and Assessing Vocabulary Learning Strategies". *Thai TESOL Bulletin.* 5(4), 27-33.

Simpson, M. L., & Rush, L. (2003). College Students' Beliefs, Strategy Employment, Transfer, and Academic Performance: An Examination across Three Academic Disciplines. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 33*(2), 146-156.

Stoller, F. L., & Grabe, W. (1993). Implications for L2 Vocabulary Acquisition and Instruction from L1 Vocabulary Research. In T. Huckin, M. Haynes & J. Coady (Eds.), *Second Language Reading and Vocabulary Learning.* Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Summers, D. (1988). The Role of Dictionaries in Language Learning. In R. Carter & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary and Language Teaching* (pp. 111-125). London: Longman.

Williams, R., & Dallas, D. (1984). Aspects of Vocabulary in the Readability of Content Area L2 Educational Textbooks: A Case Study. In J. C. Alderson & A. H. Urquhart (Eds.), *Reading in a Foreign Language* (pp. 199-210). Essex: Longman.