

Shortcuts to Memorizing English Academic Vocabulary: A Case Study of English-Major Students in the Self- Regulated Learning Environment

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Abstract. As the scores of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is required in lots of major companies in Thailand, every English-major student in the Bachelor of Arts Program (B.A.), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University (BSRU), has to enroll in the course focusing on self-preparation for the TOEIC. Despite being trained in test-taking strategies throughout the semester, a number of students' test results were below the standard set by the university corresponding to B2 (Independent User) – C1 (Proficient User) based on the CEFR Levels. The key problems reported by the students were limited time for self-preparation for the TOEIC, insufficient English academic vocabulary knowledge size, and lack of self-regulation. To help the students, the study was conducted with the aims 1) To explore English academic vocabulary memorization strategies suitable for the self-regulated learning environment and 2) To investigate to what extent the participants could memorize the vocabulary in The Oxford 5000 CEFR Level word list within three weeks by implementing the most preferable vocabulary memorization strategy. The participants were six students selected using the purposive sampling method. They were divided into two groups. Each group of three participants explored vocabulary memorization strategies, chose one that they preferred the most, and planned on implementing the strategy or technique in the allotted period to memorize the academic vocabulary in The Oxford 5000 CEFR Level word list. Group A tested the writing memorization technique and Group B experimented the recording memorization technique. The data was collected from the participants' vocabulary pre-test and post-test results, learning logs and notes, and interviews. It is found that both vocabulary memorization techniques chosen by the participants increased the size of the academic vocabulary learned within the three-week time. However, a remarkable increase was found in one of the participants in Group A due to flexibility of self-regulated learning environment and time management.

Keywords: English Academic Vocabulary, Vocabulary Memorization Strategies, The Oxford 5000 by CEFR Level, Self-Regulated Learning

INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the global languages that people all over the world use as a mean to communicate in a variety of contexts such as for business, education, relationship, and so on. In Southeast Asia, English was established as "the working language of ASEAN" [26]. Teaching and learning the language has been paid attention to and continuously supported by government agencies and private organizations. Since the establishment of the ASEAN Community and the role of English in the countries in the ASEAN Community, many institutions tried to develop English communication skills and other business-related skills of their learners in order to be competent enough to work or live their life in the Community in the future [4]-[5], [24] and of teachers of English language in order to prepare their learners effectively [10]. English language courses alone are only the first step for learners. To see their progress or achievement and decide whether a person is competent enough to work in a field or a company, the scores of English proficiency tests has been used to indicate such skills of English communication. One of the tests used as one of the criteria for personnel recruitment in companies in the ASEAN countries including Thailand is the Test of English for International Communication known as TOEIC.

As the TOEIC score widely serves as a criterion for job application, learners of different fields, especially those majoring in English, who would like to work in an international setting should achieve the standard score set by a company. The Bachelor of Arts in English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University (BSRU), referred by the author as EPBA, where the study took place and the author has been working in, also sees the importance of preparing the students to be ready to work in such international context. Therefore, the past and current curriculum of the program have required every student in the program to enroll and pass the subject titled *English for Standardized Test* which focuses mainly on self-preparation for TOEIC Listening and Reading test. The subject content includes test-taking strategies and

techniques, the language focus on vocabulary and grammar, listening and reading strategies, and test item analysis. The students are required to take the TOEIC test, and the test result is calculated as part of the summative assessment of the subject.

TOEIC AND ENGLISH PROFICIENCY LEVEL

Since the required scores of TOEIC for job application in each corporation are different, the standard scores to be calculated in the summative assessment for this subject must be set based on the framework. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [9] was therefore used by BSRU as a reference and standard to elevate learners' English proficiency as part of the operational plans. The expected CEFR level stated in the plan on development of English proficiency for students in BSRU is B2, and the students majoring in English programs should be at C1. As stated by ETS Global in its TOEIC Tests - CEFR Correlation Table, out of 495 in each section of the TOEIC Listening and Reading, achieving B2 requires at least 400 in Listening and 385 in the Reading section (total 785). In order to be categorized in C1 which is interpreted as 'the proficient user', the scores of 490 and 455 (total 945) are needed respectively in both sections. The expected CEFR levels at B2 and C1 also conforms to the Cambridge English Scales and Qualifications [7] describing the business qualifications as equal to the levels of B1, B2, and C1 of the CEFR. This means achieving these levels indicates that a person is competent to communicate in business contexts. This is why EPBA would like to help students achieve the scores and meet the criteria so that they will be qualified in the future career.

RATIONALE AND MAJOR CHALLENGES

After teaching *English for Standardized Test* for five years, the author found that the TOEIC results of most of the students were surprisingly low. In the past academic year, only 3 out of 51 students achieved more than 600 in total, which is only 2.16% of the students. Therefore, the author assigned all students who enrolled in the subject to videorecord a small self-reflection on their preparation for TOEIC; their experience and feelings before, during, and after studying this subject and taking the real TOEIC test; and their attitudes towards themselves regarding the TOEIC test. They were allowed to talk about anything related to the subject as it was not graded. From the reflection, the author learned that there were some major challenges which the students found:

First, more than half of the students reported that their major problem was time management. The common feedback was regarding the number of subjects enrolled in the same semester and the workload of each subject. EPBA students need to enroll three compulsory subjects including *English for Standardized Test* and other 3-6 elective subjects in the seventh semester before the last semester of internship. Apart from assignments, the students had to hold a public event and a seminar and take the TOEIC test to pass those three compulsory subjects. Moreover, a few students reported that they were working part-time, so they did not have much time to finish every assignment neatly and they could not spare some time for preparation for TOEIC.

Second, the students lacked essential vocabulary for TOEIC, especially academic vocabulary. Many of them reported that they did not understand the meaning of the words they heard in the Listening section or those they saw in the Reading tests. Moreover, they did not know how to guess the words, so they could not find the right answers to each test item.

The last major problem is due to the first reason stated above. Many students saw themselves as a person who lacked self-discipline or self-regulation as they could not manage to finish everything neatly and could not submit their assignments on time.

From these reasons, the author concluded that the students need some vocabulary memorization strategies or techniques to memorize and learn essential vocabulary for TOEIC within short time, and they should organize their time for learning. This study was conducted to solve the problems. It consists of two objectives:

1. To explore English academic vocabulary memorization strategies or techniques suitable for the self-regulated learning environment
2. To investigate to what extent the participants could memorize the vocabulary in the Oxford 5000 by CEFR Level word list within three weeks by implementing the most preferable vocabulary memorization strategy or technique.

VOCABULARY LEARNING AND MEMORIZATION FOR TOEIC

To be able to communicate effectively in a language, learning language and communication skills alone is not possible if a learner does not know enough vocabulary to understand what other people say or write and to make others understand the messages that he/she tries to communicate. Learning vocabulary is a primary when a person learns a language, and it is "a never-ending task" [23]. Not only is vocabulary essential for daily communication

in various contexts, but it is also the key of TOEIC. It is important that learners who would like to achieve high TOEIC score have a certain extent of vocabulary to understand the test questions, answer choices, monologues, and conversations of speakers in the Listening section, and passages in the Reading Section especially Part 5 [15]. Various strategies for learning vocabulary should be employed by learners to achieve the expected score of TOEIC.

To achieve the goal, learners need self-regulation in learning. Learners who tend to become successful are self-regulating. They are in charge of their own learning. They are able to analyze task requirements; set goals for learning; and select, employ, adapt, or develop their own strategies to reach the goals set. As [27] concluded, self-regulated learners can organize which tools or methods to use to help them learn and achieve the goals. Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) are tools or techniques which learners use to develop vocabulary acquisition. There has been considerable amount of research on vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) and proposed VLSs since 1970s [2], [11], [13], [19], [21], [28]. VLSs are significant as learners who use more strategies tend to become successful in their learning achievement unlike unsuccessful learners who do not use or use few strategies [25]. Not only for the learners' side, the VLSs which the teachers of English language employ in classrooms affect the language learning strategies a learner use [29]. Researchers and English language trainers explored the effectiveness of VLSs and their frequency of use by learners [1], [16]-[17], [30], among which was studied in relation to other factors [12], [16]. Nation's [13] taxonomy listed the sources of vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary learning processes. His VLSs were categorized into three groups: Planning, Sources, and Process. Although there are many strategies and techniques proposed, only a few have been discussed on their effectiveness in relation to time allocation for implementation of them [2], [6]. The author aimed to explore a few strategies and techniques to see how effective they are if the strategies and techniques are limited to time allocation.

METHODOLOGY

In order to find out ways to solve the problems mentioned by the students in the previous year, six students were chosen as the samples of the study by purposive sampling. All six samples were students in English Program (B.A.), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bansomdejchopraya Rajabhat University, who enrolled in *English for Standardized Test* in the same semester—the first semester of the academic year 2021. Three samples were from Section 1, one from Section 2, and the other two from Section 3. Their accumulated grade point average (GPAX) is at different levels.

The instruments used in the study were 1) the English vocabulary pre-test and post-test, 2) the samples' learning logs and notes, and 3) the informal interviews. Moreover, the vocabulary list, *The Oxford 5000™ by CEFR Level* was introduced to the students enrolled in the subject including the samples. The word list was developed by Oxford University Press. It is aligned with the CEFR levels of B2 and C1.

The English vocabulary pre-test and post-test were delivered online through a quiz platform. The tests consisted of 30 multiple-choice items resembling Part 5 (Incomplete Sentences) of TOEIC which were both adopted and adapted from two TOEIC preparation books [15], [18]. The test items in the pre-test and post-test were the same, though the items were in a random order. The answer choices were also randomized so that each sample did not follow the same order as that of the others. The pre-test had been given to the samples before they received the vocabulary list. After three weeks (21 days), the vocabulary post-test was given to the samples in both groups. The time allocation for the test was 20 minutes.

In addition, the samples were asked to keep their learning logs of activities they did when they learned or memorize the vocabulary. The notes they made during learning or memorizing vocabulary were also analyzed. Learning logs could be in any forms including written texts, typed texts, video records, or voice records. To gain insight, a semi-structured interview and the informal interviews were conducted. The author interviewed all samples both individually and altogether once a week to keep track of their activities and look deeper into different areas. Data triangulation and content analysis of the samples' learning logs, notes, and interviews were employed.

The samples were divided into two groups—Group A and Group B. Each group consisted of three samples and had been assigned to look for vocabulary memorization strategies or techniques. Then, both groups were asked to pick up, adjust, or develop a technique for memorizing the vocabulary for their own group to use in the following three weeks.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Group A developed a visual vocabulary memorization method which involved writing vocabulary using different colors. The part of speech and meaning of each word was also written as shown in Figure 1.

assign (v)	กำหนด, มอบหมาย
assistance (n)	การช่วยเหลือ
assumption (n)	การสันนิษฐาน
assure (v)	ทำให้มั่นใจ, ให้ความมั่นใจ
considerable (adj)	สำคัญ, สำคัญ
confusion (n)	การสับสน
consistently (adv)	สม่ำเสมอ, อย่างเป็น
accommodate (v)	อำนวยความสะดวก
accountant (n)	นักบัญชี
affordable (adj)	มี, คุ้มค่า
ancestor (n)	บรรพบุรุษ
annually (adv)	ปีละครั้ง, หนึ่งปี
adequately (adv)	เพียงพอ, พอใช้
Circuit (n)	วงจร
completion (n)	การเสร็จสิ้น
compulsory (adj)	บังคับ
conspiracy (n)	การสมคบคิด

FIGURE 1. One of the Samples in Group A's Written Vocabulary Notes in Different Colors

The samples could choose and write down any words they would like to memorize at a time regardless the order of the words in *The Oxford 5000 Vocabulary by CEFR Level* word list. The samples spent two hours per day to write the vocabulary repeatedly and try to memorize it. In the first hour, the samples wrote the vocabulary with color pens repeatedly. In the latter, they tried to memorize the vocabulary by writing it in phrases or sentences. According to Group A's notes, the vocabulary was written with four different color pens.

Group B chose the auditory vocabulary memorization technique. First, the vocabulary in *The Oxford 5000 Vocabulary by CEFR Level* world list was cut into seven sets to make a smaller number of words to memorize at a time. The duration of each audio clip was 17-22 minutes depending on the number of the words in each set and the pauses made during the audio record as presented in Figure 2.

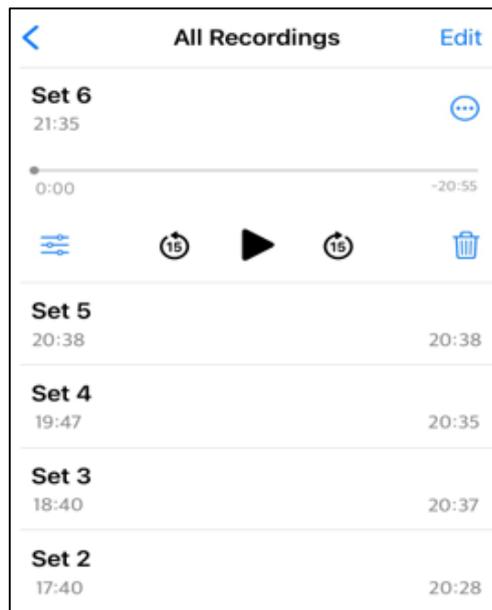


FIGURE 2. The Audio Clips of the Vocabulary in *The Oxford 5000 Vocabulary by CEFR Level* World List Divided Into Sets Recorded by the Sample in Group B

Each set of vocabulary was in the memorizing process for three days. On the first day, the samples recorded an audio clip of the first set of the vocabulary including the meaning of each word in their mother tongue. One the other two days, the samples listened to an audio clip repeatedly for 40 minutes to one hour at the scheduled time. After the three-day process had finished, another set of vocabulary was going on. The last set of vocabulary was completed on the 21st day—3 weeks in total.

After employing the technique to memorize the vocabulary in *The Oxford 5000 Vocabulary by CEFR Level* world list for 3 weeks consecutively, the samples were given the vocabulary post-test. It is found that all samples

outperformed themselves as the post-test score increased from that of the pre-test. Listed in Table I are the vocabulary pre-test and post-test scores of all samples in Group A and Group B.

TABLE 1. Vocabulary Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of Group A and Group B

Group	Sample No.	Score (Total 30)		
		Pre-test	Post-test	Difference
A	1	23	24	1
	2	8	21	13
	3	15	21	6
	Mean	15.33	22	6.67
B	4	12	19	7
	5	15	19	4
	6	19	21	2
	Mean	15.33	19.67	4.33

Both Group A and Group B had higher scores in the post-test than the pre-test. However, in Group A, a big gap in the difference score of Sample No. 1 (increase = 1) and Sample No. 2 (increase = 13) is noticeable. The factor which might have given different increase in the scores to the samples is the number of strategies used in the technique. Based on the interview, Sample No. 2 used other strategies to help learn and memorize the vocabulary such as reading aloud, spelling each word aloud, listening to the pronunciation of the words in an online dictionary, writing the words learned in the phrases and sentences, and writing the words on paper and putting them on different places in her accommodation. The combination of strategies used to memorize the vocabulary allowed Sample No. 2 to recycle the words in contexts. According to Milton [14] cited in [20], recycling the vocabulary learned and putting it in various contexts develop long-term vocabulary memory retention, that is, it helps learners memorize the vocabulary for longer time [3]. However, it cannot be concluded that memorizing vocabulary in contexts will enhance every learner's vocabulary memorization to the same level. As seen in with Sample No. 3, the same additional strategies as those used by Sample No. 2 were also employed. Studies found the relationship between textual enhancement and vocabulary learning [6], [8]. Considering the pens used to write down the vocabulary in the study, the number of colors used does not affect the samples' use of the technique as all the three samples in Group A used the same colors: red, green, blue, and orange. Moreover, the physical environment in the place where the samples were using the techniques also affects their performance. All of the samples agreed that surrounding noise such as sounds caused by animals, vehicles, and household appliances in use including human voices such as conversation of people nearby also affected their memorization as they decreased concentration. It distracted the samples from the planned process of vocabulary learning and memorization, especially Group B who relied on listening to memorize the vocabulary.

SUGGESTIONS

Since the study is rather informal and was carried out in a small scale, the author suggested that the study be improved and continued in terms of the following:

1. The bigger size of samples should be studied. Since the study was conducted with only six samples, the data may not represent the target population clearly as there might be other factors affecting the vocabulary test results. Other learners in other different conditions and environment should also be concerned in order for the author to find the effective methods to solve the problems.
2. Certain conditions and variables should be more controlled. For example, the duration of using the strategies and techniques should be specified clearly ahead so that the results will be valid and precise. To look more deeply into the factor of time, the samples have to be controlled in terms of the period of the day when they employ the techniques. For instance, one group of samples carry out a technique for a specific number of hours in the morning while other groups will do the same, but during different time of the day.
3. Moreover, other variables such as affective factors should also be looked into together with the strategies and techniques. For example, if the samples reported on their low motivation, the author and the teacher of the subject would revise his/her lessons, activities, or teaching strategies to help the students reach the objectives of the lessons and the goal of the subject, that is to achieve the TOEIC score of at least 785 out of 990 or at B2 of the CEFR level.

4. More studies regarding long-term vocabulary memory retention should be conducted with the same samples to see if the vocabulary memorized in the study will still be remembered or it has already been acquired or lost from the memory after a period of time.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by scholars and researchers, and some techniques were developed from such strategies. The study explored two techniques developed from the strategies: 1) The visual memorization technique or memorizing the vocabulary by writing words in different colors and 2) The audio memorization technique or memorizing the vocabulary by recording and listening to the words read aloud repeatedly. Both techniques are found to be effective in increasing the number of words memorized within a short period for self-preparation for TOEIC which is 21 days or 3 weeks. The evidence is shown in the increase in the vocabulary post-test score of all samples compared to that of the pre-test. However, the increase in the score of one sample is 1 while that of the other sample who was using the same technique was 13. The two numbers are much different. The data analysis shows that such difference was due to additional strategies used together with the main technique chosen. Moreover, environmental surroundings especially noises, distracted the samples from implementing the strategies. The study suggests that any strategies may be effective if it is controlled in the self-regulated learning environment. Reversely, the strategies may not be effective depending on various factors which may not be included in this study such as time (e.g. duration, period of a day, season, etc.), environment (e.g. site, site condition, noise, etc.), or affection (e.g. motivation, self-efficacy, attitude, etc.). The bigger size of samples and more controlled conditions and variables are suggested for the future research on the same study. Moreover, the current study should be continued with well-conditioned research on long-term vocabulary memory retention to see how effective the current techniques used in the study are.

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