

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

### Background and Motivation

Vocabulary is vital for language acquisition. Without comprehension of it, language would not be acquired since the meaning of key components in the utterance could not be understood (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Wilkins (1972) emphasizes the need for vocabulary learning by stating that “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p. 111). That is, while grammatical accuracy can help the message to be conveyed, without the words no message can be conveyed (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). Moreover, in the process of learning a foreign language, vocabulary is often reported to be one of the biggest challenges faced by learners. Some might argue that extensive reading is an effective way for learners to gain vocabulary, but that is probably true for native speakers and advanced learners who have already had some vocabulary to comprehend the reading and then acquire vocabulary from incidental learning. As for those EFL learners who have limited vocabulary, they need explicit vocabulary instruction and intentional learning to reach the threshold level to read (Hunt & Beglar, 2002).

In Taiwan, reading and grammar are emphasized in class instruction; vocabulary is usually taught through English-Chinese correspondence, or English definition. Teachers think their job is done once vocabulary is taught, and students will memorize it on their own without any difficulty. Rarely are students instructed how to learn vocabulary effectively. In fact, many students spend a lot of time memorizing vocabulary but forget it easily; gradually they feel frustrated, and some of them may finally give up learning English. According to Huang’s (2004) investigation of vocabulary knowledge of 721 senior high and vocational high school students, the 12<sup>th</sup> graders from senior high schools knew nearly 2000 word families; their

counterparts from vocational high schools knew only 426 word families. However, with exposure to about 1000 high frequency words in their junior high textbooks (Huang, 1997), senior high school graduates are expected to gain a vocabulary size of at least 5000 words so that they can comprehend college English textbooks (Chen, 1998). Based on Lin's (2006) quantitative analysis of the vocabulary in the first volume of Taiwanese senior high school English textbooks, senior high school freshmen who own 2000 common words recommended by Ministry of Education will still encounter 20 % of unlisted new words. Apparently, there is a wide gap between the students' actual and ideal vocabulary sizes. Most of senior high school students, especially the freshmen, encounter difficulties in learning numerous new words. However, it seems impossible for teachers to spoon all the English words to learners. Teaching people how to fish seems much more beneficial than giving them a fish directly. Therefore, it appears necessary for teachers to incorporate instruction of vocabulary learning strategies (hereafter VLS) in their teaching to help students to learn vocabulary efficiently. To provide teachers with empirical evidence, the main purpose of this study is to explore the effects of vocabulary learning strategy instruction on strategy use, vocabulary learning, and motivation of senior high school students by means of both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

### **Research Questions of the Study**

The present study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How well are the vocabulary learning strategies used respectively by all of the participants as a group and by each of the two groups (experimental vs. control groups) before and after the instruction? Which strategies are mastered the most or the least well?
- (2) Is there a significant difference between the experimental group and the

control group in mastery of the instructed vocabulary learning strategies before and after the instruction?

- (3) Is there a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in performance on vocabulary reception and production tests conducted before and after the instruction?
- (4) Is there a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in vocabulary learning motivation before and after the instruction?
- (5) What are students' attitude and feedback toward vocabulary learning strategy instruction? What are the difficulties the students have in applying vocabulary learning strategies?

### **Significance of the Study**

According to the literature and previous studies, vocabulary learning should not be left to the learners alone. However, most English teachers at high schools in Taiwan tend to let students to take care of their vocabulary learning on their own. Some students might be able to deal with the huge English vocabulary well, whereas other students may be frustrated and even overwhelmed. Based on the researcher's teaching experience with senior high school students and vocational senior high school students, while reading and taking the exams, they often feel frustrated due to the overwhelming number of unfamiliar words. Instruction of vocabulary learning strategies seems to be a potential way to help senior high school students enrich their vocabulary and cultivate the habit of independent word building. Therefore, the researcher of the present study attempts to explore the effects of vocabulary learning strategy instruction on senior high school students by teaching them a number of vocabulary learning strategies reported to be successful in the literature. It is hoped

that this study can shed light on the effects of strategy instruction and offer implications for English vocabulary instruction in senior high schools.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

In this study, **vocabulary** refers to either “one-word” items or “multi-word” phrases, and vocabulary learning strategies are techniques and methods adopted to discover the meaning of a new word and memorize vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000). Thus, **strategies**, techniques, methods, and skills are used interchangeably through the whole thesis. **The vocabulary learning strategies selected to be taught** in this study include “using dictionary,” “keeping vocabulary cards,” “phonological analysis,” “word-part analysis,” “using keyword,” and “using words in a context” (see next chapter for further explanation). **Explicit vocabulary learning strategy instruction (VLSI)** represents explicit teaching of vocabulary items by means of vocabulary learning strategies demonstrated in the following ways: “a definition of the strategy, an example of how the strategy can be used, and explanation of why and when the strategy is useful” (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999). Besides, VLSI involves direct training of learners’ strategy use by raising learners’ awareness, providing learners with practice, reinforcement and self-monitoring of their strategy use while learning vocabulary (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations in the present study. First, the results can not be generalized to other senior high school students because only two intact classes of the participants were recruited from a comprehensive high school (綜合高中) at a vocational senior high school in Kaohsiung City by convenient sampling, and 80 percent of the participants were male. Compared to other ordinary senior high schools,

the participants had fewer English class periods per week. They had four periods of English a week while students in other regular senior high schools usually had five periods. Second, due to time limit, only six vocabulary learning strategies were instructed. The results could not be generalized to other strategies. On the other hand, because a cluster of six strategies were simultaneously taught in the training program, the effects of individual strategy on vocabulary learning independent of other strategies taught could not be detected. It should be noted that the purpose of this study is not to claim that the six strategies selected here are the best strategies, but to evaluate the effectiveness of possible beneficial vocabulary learning strategies on senior high school students. According to Oxford (1990), Nation (2001), and Gu (2003), learners should be introduced a variety of strategies so that they can choose the suitable one in certain context. Besides, this study involved only twelve-week instruction. The instruction time may not be enough for the participants to master vocabulary learning strategies taught in the present study. Third, the vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire was answered in a self-reported way, so the results from the questionnaire may not represent participants' actual use or mastery of those strategies. Finally, the researcher in the present study was also the instructor of the participants, so the researcher expectancy problem may arise.

### **Organization of the Study**

The present study consists of five chapters. Chapter One describes background and motivation, research questions, significance, limitations, organization of the study, and definition of key terms. Chapter Two provides a review of the historical trends in vocabulary instruction, the development of vocabulary learning strategy taxonomies, and previous studies of vocabulary strategy instruction in Taiwan. In Chapter Three, the overall design of the experiment on vocabulary learning strategy instruction is

detailed. In Chapter Four, the results of the study are presented, explained, and discussed according to the research questions proposed. Chapter Five focuses on major findings of this thesis, pedagogical implications, and suggestions for further research.