

**Perception and Actual Use of Thai EFL Students toward Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

การรับรู้และการใช้กลยุทธ์เรียนรู้คำศัพท์ของนักเรียนไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะ  
ภาษาต่างประเทศ

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was carried out to investigate the students' perceptions and their actual use of strategies. As different learning tasks require different strategies, it is worthwhile looking at how learners learn vocabulary and the strategies they use to discover and retain word meaning. The number of selected sample included 200 grade 12 students studying at Romburipittayakhom School, derived through purposive random sampling. In order to have an in-depth study, 20 high proficient students were selected for the think-aloud vocabulary tasks and semi-structured interviews. The research instruments were vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire, think-aloud vocabulary tasks, and semi-structured interviews. Collected data were analyzed using both quantitative data from the questionnaire, and qualitative data from the think-aloud vocabulary tasks and the semi-structured interviews.

The results of the study were summarized as follows:

1. The students in general favored strategies focusing on contextual guessing when they encountered new words. Some reported that dictionary strategies were used to confirm guess and prior knowledge including word features, context, and world knowledge would lead to successful guessing.
2. The students in the study tended to study word form to consolidate new words and enhance retention but most of them did not systematically keep track of their learning or initiate learning outside class time.
3. It was found that the high proficient students used similar learning strategies as their counterparts but they were more effective in manipulating the strategies. As a result of this study, it is strongly suggested that teachers should make learners aware of their own responsibility in vocabulary learning and expose them to different approaches and strategies in enhancing vocabulary acquisition.

**Keywords:** Perception, Actual Use, Thai EFL Students, Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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### บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยในครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการรับรู้และการใช้กลวิธีเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ของนักเรียนไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ การเรียนรู้ที่แตกต่างกันย่อมต้องการกลวิธีที่แตกต่างกัน ดังนั้นสิ่งที่สำคัญคือการค้นหาวิธีการในการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์และกลวิธีที่นักเรียนใช้ในการค้นหาและการจดจำความหมายของคำศัพท์ กลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ใช้ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ เป็นนักเรียนไทยชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 6 โรงเรียนนวมัยรุธิพิทยาคม จำนวน 200 คน ซึ่งได้มาโดยการเลือกแบบเจาะจง เพื่อศึกษาในเชิงลึกนักศึกษาที่มีความสามารถภาษาอังกฤษสูง จำนวน 20 คน ถูกเลือกสำหรับระเบียบการคิดในใจของภารกิจคำศัพท์และการสัมภาษณ์ถึงโครงสร้าง เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ประกอบด้วย แบบสอบถามกลวิธีการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ ระเบียบการคิดในใจของภารกิจคำศัพท์ และการสัมภาษณ์ถึงโครงสร้างข้อมูลที่ได้จากแบบสอบถามได้รับการวิเคราะห์เชิงปริมาณและข้อมูลที่ได้จากระเบียบการคิดในใจของภารกิจคำศัพท์และการสัมภาษณ์ถึงโครงสร้างได้รับการวิเคราะห์เชิงคุณภาพ

ผลการวิจัยสรุปได้ดังต่อไปนี้

1. นักเรียนโดยทั่วไปใช้กลวิธีเดาคำศัพท์ตามบริบทเมื่อเจอคำศัพท์ใหม่ ในขณะที่นักเรียนบางคนรายงานว่าใช้กลวิธีใช้พจนานุกรมเพื่อตรวจสอบการเดาคำศัพท์ นอกจากนี้ ความรู้เดิมหรือความรู้ภูมิหลัง ได้แก่ คุณลักษณะของคำรอบข้าง บริบทและความรอบรู้ทั่วไปจะนำไปสู่การเดาความหมายคำศัพท์ได้สำเร็จ
2. นักเรียนในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ มักจะเรียนรู้รูปแบบคำศัพท์เพื่อรวบรวมคำศัพท์ใหม่ๆ และเพิ่มพูนความคงทนในการจำ แต่นักเรียนส่วนใหญ่ไม่ได้รู้ทฤษฎีวิธีการในการเรียนรู้อย่างเป็นระบบหรือไม่ริเริ่มการเรียนรู้นอกเวลาเรียน
3. จากการศึกษาพบว่า นักเรียนที่มีความสามารถภาษาอังกฤษสูงใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ที่คล้ายคลึงกันกับนักเรียนคนอื่นๆ แต่พวกเขาสามารถใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ผลการศึกษาในครั้งนี้ได้เสนอแนะว่า ครูผู้สอนควรทำให้นักเรียนมีความตระหนักถึง ความรับผิดชอบในการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ของพวกเขา และครูผู้สอนควรสอนนักเรียนให้เข้าใจถึงวิธีการและกลวิธีที่แตกต่างกันในการเพิ่มพูนการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์

**คำสำคัญ** การรับรู้ การใช้จริง ของนักเรียนไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ  
กลวิธีเรียนรู้คำศัพท์

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### Background of the Study

Learning a second language involves the manipulation of four main skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. One crucial factor in all four skills that underlies the success of second language acquisition is the amount of vocabulary one possesses. As Hill and Laufer (2003: 1) noted in their recent work about the importance of vocabulary teaching and learning that while grammar is important, words are the building blocks to communication. This implies that knowledge of the grammatical structure plays an important part in language learning and equally important is that of knowing the meanings of words in a text. A similar argument is made by McCarthy in an interview for Cambridge Connection (2001, cited in Fan, 2003: 222), in which he commented that vocabulary not only forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, it is also the biggest problem for most learners.

In light of this, mounting concern has arisen over vocabulary acquisition and particularly, vocabulary learning strategies in many Asian classrooms (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Fan, 2003; Gu, 2007). The striking message concerning university students' lack of vocabulary and limited choice of learning strategies sets out to uncover whether similar deficiencies exist among secondary students since the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition stresses the importance of building a strong vocabulary foundation at early age. There is a compelling need to understand how students acquire vocabulary by looking at the strategies they employ in lexical learning in the early years of schooling.

Though it seems likely that limited L2 vocabulary would affect elementary school EFL learners in carrying out the basic skills in English, L2 vocabulary learning at early age is still largely un-researched. Given the importance of vocabulary to oral and written language comprehension, it is astounding that there have been few experimental studies on English vocabulary learning among elementary school children. This problem not only affects local students but also worries many language teachers. Recent evidence of growing concern about inadequate vocabulary of L2 learners is pointed out by the English language education section (Ministry of Education, 2002: 56) in its report.

“... there is mounting evidence that many learners, particularly in EFL contexts, are not developing their lexicons to levels that would permit them to communicate, read, or write adequately in English, despite years of formal study.”

To compensate for this, the Ministry of Education (2006) has developed an English vocabulary lists for Thai schools to raise students' awareness of how words are formed and related to each other, such as synonyms, antonyms, collocations and idiomatic uses of words. Nevertheless, teaching of vocabulary as a discrete topic or introducing the vocabulary learning strategies is still rare in Thailand secondary schools. Therefore, it is high time to focus on vocabulary learning strategies for younger learners in the local school context.

### Purposes of the Study

1. To investigate which discovery strategies and consolidation strategies are most frequently used by the Thai EFL students and their perceptions of the usefulness of the strategies.
2. To examine the features and behaviors of “high proficient students” by means of a think-aloud task and semi-structured interview.

### Research Questions

1. Which discovery strategies and consolidation strategies do the grade 12 students and the high proficient students use most frequently?
2. Which discovery strategies and consolidation strategies do the grade 12 students and the high proficient students perceive as most useful?
3. Is there a significant difference between the use of strategies by high proficient students and other participants in the study?
4. How do the grade 12 high proficient students perceive vocabulary learning?

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## Research Methodology

### 1. Research Samples

The samples were 200 grade 12 students, aged between 16-18 years old. Despite the limited exposure and resources to learn English outside class time, the students in this study demonstrated a considerable degree of English proficiency as they are studying at a high school, where English is the only compulsory subject. In order to have an in-depth study, twenty students, who is belonging to the top end of the proficiency scale according to the total marks of reading, writing, listening and speaking papers in the first-term examination, were selected for the think-aloud vocabulary tasks and semi-structured interviews to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies used by high achievers.

### 2. Research Instruments

#### 2.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (QVLS)

A questionnaire was used to measure the used of vocabulary learning strategies. One questionnaire was designed to find out the general pattern of the strategy use among 200 grade 12 students. The questionnaire drew on both Discovery Strategies and Consolidation Strategies proposed by Schmitt (1997). The draft questionnaires then were modified and revised with the advisors' suggestions after discussion. In addition, the Thai translation of the strategy questionnaire was conducted, as this helped maximize ease of administration and ensure greater accuracy of results, especially with the low-ability students. The translation was done by the researcher and then checked for the validity and reliability with the thesis advisors and experts, respectively. The questionnaire was included 26 vocabulary learning strategies grouped into two domains: Discovery Strategies and Consolidation Strategies. The grouping was based on the findings of previous work on vocabulary learning strategies (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Fan, 2003).

#### 2.2 Think-aloud Vocabulary Task

The think-aloud protocol is an introspective method borrowed from psychology to trace cognitive processes in real time. Given that the questionnaire in the first stage was based on self-report of students' belief and behaviors of vocabulary learning, think-aloud data complements the questionnaire data and provides an indication of what is on the participants' mind during the task and might reveal the kinds of strategies used, the kinds of knowledge employed and the kinds of representations constructed. Interestingly, during the think-aloud tasks, 20 high proficient students performed individually by verbalizing the meaning, part of speech and pronunciation of the ten target words. The think-aloud sessions were conducted in Thai or English at their own discretion and audio-taped for data analysis.

#### 2.3 Semi-structured Interview

The purpose of using semi-structured interviews after the questionnaire was to obtain additional information that would support the information gained from the questionnaires. These are the information that the subjects may have missed or did not have time/space to express in detail in the questionnaire, and/or some additional details that the subjects found difficult to express in English in the questionnaire form.

### 3. Data Collection Procedures

In order to answer the research questions for the present investigation, questionnaire on vocabulary strategy, think-aloud protocols, and semi-structured interviews were described as figure follows:

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The 3<sup>rd</sup> STOU Graduate Research Conference

Figure 1: The Flow Chart of the Research Design

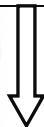
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**Stage 1: Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire**

**Number of Samples:** 200

**Format:** The strategies were categorized into two groups: Part 1 (Discovery Strategies) and Part 2 (Consolidation Strategies). Samples self-reported their actual use of strategies in learning vocabulary and their perception of the usefulness of the strategies.

**Data Collection:** quantitative data of students' perceptions of strategy use.




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**Stage 2: Think-aloud Vocabulary Task**

**Number of Samples:** 20 High Proficient Students

**Format:** The task consisted of 10 sentences and a target word is underlined in each sentence. The samples reported the meaning, part of speech, pronunciation of the target words. The task was carried out individually.

**Data Collection:** qualitative data of actual strategy use by high proficient students.




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**Stage 3: Semi-structured Interview**

**Number of Samples:** 20 High Proficient Students

**Format:** The samples interviewed individually and a list of questions was given to the participants 15 minutes prior to the interview. The interviews were audio-taped.

**Data Collection:** qualitative data of the opinions on vocabulary learning and use of strategies in regular practice.

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**4. Data Analysis and Statistical Procedures**

4.1 The quantitative data was generated from the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire in the first stage. The subjects self-reported their actual use of strategies and the usefulness of each strategy were added up to reflect the general pattern of the strategy use among 200 grade 12 students.

4.2 The Think-aloud Vocabulary Task provided hands-on experience for 20 high proficient students to exhibit their actual use of strategies in sentence-context and demonstrate their breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge such as meaning, part of speech and pronunciation of a word. The analysis was carried out at two levels. At the general level, responses from the tasks transcribed and compared among the high achievers to check whether there was patterns of the actual use of strategies by them. At the detailed level, the researcher looked at how individual participants make use of the strategies to discover word meanings in sentence-context.

4.3 The last instrument used in the study was a semi-structured interview. The twenty high proficient students interviewed individually immediately after the think-aloud tasks. To complement the data from the closed questions in the questionnaire, the interviews were conducted to explore their opinions of vocabulary learning, patterns of strategy use and characteristics of high achievers. The tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed in English and recurring and salient responses identified and included in the discussion of results.



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The 3<sup>rd</sup> STOU Graduate Research Conference

## Results

### 1. Quantitative Analysis

This part presents the results of the vocabulary learning strategies of grade 12 students through a questionnaire. Table 1 below summarizes the strategies used by the grade 12 students to discover a new word meaning.

Table 1: Consolidation Strategies Used by the Grade 12 Students (N=200)

Ranking	Consolidation Strategies	No.	%
1	Guess its meaning from the context	168	84.0
2	Look up the word in a Thai/English dictionary	163	81.5
3	Use an electronic or online dictionary	159	79.5
4	Ask my classmates or peers for the meaning	155	77.5
5	Learn words from the mass media	147	73.5
6	Try to think of an English word that is similar	128	64.0
7	Look up the word in an English dictionary	126	63.0
8	Ask my teacher(s) for the meaning	118	59.0
9	Look at the parts of speech	108	54.0
10	Look for the clues in the word itself	92	46.0
11	Learn words from word lists or glossary	78	39.0
12	Ignore it	62	31.0
13	Learn words through ICQ or chat room communication	54	27.0
14	Interact with native speakers (e.g. the NET)	40	20.0

An overview of the Discovery Strategies used by the high proficient students is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Discovery Strategies Used by the High Proficient Students (N=20)

Ranking	Discovery Strategies	No.	%
1	Guess its meaning from the context.	18	90.0
2	Look for the clues in the word itself.	15	75.0
3	Look up the word in an English dictionary.	10	50.0
4	Learn words from the mass media.	8	40.0
5	Look at the parts of speech.	7	35.0
5	Look up the word in a Thai/English dictionary.	7	35.0
5	Learn words from word lists or glossary.	7	35.0
8	Use an electronic or online dictionary.	6	30.0
9	Ask my teacher(s) for the meaning.	4	20.0
10	Interact with native speakers (e.g. the NET).	1	5.0
11	Try to think of an English word that is similar.	0	0
11	Ask my classmates or peers for the meaning.	0	0
11	Ignore it.	0	0

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The 3<sup>rd</sup> STOU Graduate Research Conference

Table 3 presents the strategies used by the students to consolidate a word in memory.

Table 3: Consolidation Strategies Used by the Grade 12 Students (N=200)

Ranking	Consolidation Strategies	No.	%
1	Hear it spoken in English.	139	70%
2	Divide the target word into syllables.	137	69%
3	Study the spelling of the target word.	134	67%
4	Use English words similar in sound.	125	63%
5	Read it in a text.	124	62%
6	Connect it to other English words on the same topic.	101	51%
7	Put it in a sentence.	89	45%
8	Study the word list.	88	44%
9	Keep a vocabulary notebook.	80	40%
9	Relate it to a visual image.	80	40%
11	Use Thai words similar in sound.	73	37%
12	Study the word over time.	70	35%

Table 4 describes the strategies used by the high proficient students to commit a word in memory.

Table 4: Consolidation Strategies Used by the High Proficient Students (N=20)

Ranking	Consolidation Strategies	No.	%
1	Connect it to other English words on the same topic.	17	85%
2	Hear it spoken in English.	15	75%
3	Divide the target word into syllables.	14	70%
4	Study the spelling of the target word.	13	65%
5	Relate it to a visual image.	11	55%
6	Read it in a text.	10	50%
7	Put it in a sentence.	8	40%
8	Study the word list.	4	20%
9	Use Thai words similar in sound.	3	15%
10	Use English words similar in sound.	2	10%
10	Keep a vocabulary notebook.	2	10%
12	Study the word over time.	1	5%

In conclusion, this section had summarized the perception of strategies by the full cohort of 200 students and the 20 high proficient students. It was concluded that most of the students believed that keeping a vocabulary notebook helped them to retain word meanings and studying the word form was also a favorable strategy for most learners. In the next section, the actual use of strategies by the high proficient students will be discussed along with the think-aloud protocols.

## 2. Qualitative Analysis

### 2.1 Guessing from Context

The following excerpt demonstrates how a high achiever made use of the linguistic and contextual clues to discover the target word meaning successfully.

#### *Excerpt 1*

##### Test Word in Context:

He was identified as John Ssabunnya, a boy who had disappeared three years earlier after his mother was murdered and his father went missing. John was only two years old when he **vanished**.

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The 3<sup>rd</sup> STOU Graduate Research Conference

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Think-aloud Protocol:

Student A:

The first sentence describes the situation about the boy (John) and why he had disappeared. Because of his mother was killed and his father went missing. I think the word ‘van-ish’ means disappeared. Because it is mentioned in the first sentence. The second sentence repeats the first one.

2.2 Use of Dictionaries

Excerpt 2 shows that a high proficiency learner was aware of the different dictionary explanations of the target word ‘company’ and how he settled on the most relevant meaning suitable for the context.

*Excerpt 8*

Test Word in Context:

They never smiled or showed any interest in human company, and the only emotion that ever crossed their faces was fear.

Think-aloud Protocol:

Student H:

‘Company’ is something to do with money and business, but it seems that ... it’s not really business in this case. Can I check it in the dictionary?

Teacher:

Sure! There are several dictionaries on the bookshelf.

Student H:

I see. Here... it means a group of people together... human company ... people...no, maybe this one is better. Being with somebody else and not alone? I enjoy Jo’s company (the student is reading an example from the dictionary). I think this is better. ‘Company’ means being with somebody and they do not like to stay with human. Am I correct?

2.3 Spelling and Pronunciation

One of the high proficient students described the relationship between knowing a word and written word form in the interview and his response was transcribed in Excerpt 3.

*Excerpt 3*

Semi-structured Interview:

Student I:

I think knowing a word means ... I know the meaning and the spelling of the word. For example, in the dictation, we need to know the spelling in order to get the marks. Sometimes, we need to know how to read the word but it can be quite difficult for me. I always find it hard to pronounce the last part of the word correctly, for example, shop-ped, want-ed. You told me the –ed ending can have different sounds depending on the part in front of it...

For excerpt 3, student I reported that learning vocabulary in second language involved three major aspects: meaning, spelling and pronunciation of the word. Most of the teachers and students would likely agree with that and that explains the needs to introduce students with more strategies to consolidate new words and enhance retention, such as strategies that involve deep processing.

2.4 Lack of Time Spent on Vocabulary Learning

A student responded that learning vocabulary was “time-consuming” and he could “naturally pick up vocabulary” in English lessons.



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The 3<sup>rd</sup> STOU Graduate Research Conference

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*Excerpt 4*

*Semi-structured Interview:*

*Teacher:* Do you think vocabulary learning is important?

*Student J:* Yes, it is important because we need to know the word in order to understand things around us.

*Teacher:* Do you plan your vocabulary learning?

*Student J:* No. In fact, I think I can learn the vocabulary naturally from the teachers, newspapers, TV... I don't need to plan it in order to learn it.

*Teacher:* How much time do you spend on learning vocabulary outside class?

*Student J:* I'll say less than 1 hour. I am too busy and I won't spend time to revise English at home unless I have dictation or test.

Data from the interview reflects that high proficient students did not spend much time on vocabulary learning and outside class time despite its importance. This striking message commands attention of language teachers to provide more opportunities for the learners to practice and use English outside class.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

There is clear evidence that guessing from context is the most common strategy for L2 learners to discover a new word meaning. In fact, guessing strategy has been widely promoted in many contexts where English is the second language (Schmitt, 1997). In Quin's (2010) study, she found that guessing followed by use of the dictionary was the most common strategy to discover the meaning of a new word. One plausible reason for its continuing popularity among learners is that a large proportion (60% to 90%) of the unknown words proved to be guessable (Seibert, 1945). Therefore, guessing word meanings from context is widely acknowledged as a useful skill, especially vital to the reading comprehension.

Apart from context guessing and dictionary strategies, learners also resorted to the social strategies to discover a new word's meaning. As Nation and Dansereau (1988) suggest that cooperative group learning can promote active processing of information and cross modeling / imitation and prepare the participants for "team activities" outside the classroom (cited in Schmitt, 1997: 211), it is encouraging to see that collaborative learning is a common way to learn vocabulary among the Form Three learners. In comparison with the percentage of asking teacher(s) for the meaning (59%), the learners seemed to learn new word more frequently from classmates or peers (77.5%). Although teacher usually plays an important role in class, many students reported in the interview that it was "embarrassing" to ask the teacher(s) and it was "inconvenient" and "troublesome" to ask the teacher(s) every time when they encountered a new word.

Furthermore, the second most-used Discovery Strategy by the high achievers was looking for clues in the word itself (70%). It was reported that seventy per cent of the high achievers would make inference to the word part such as the derivational and inflectional features. However, Clarke and Nation (1980) warn that analysis of word parts can lead to misinterpretation and thus suggest that this strategy is better used as a confirmation of guesses. In fact, some learners in the present study failed to analyze the word parts in the think-aloud task and led to misinterpretation.

The student looked at the word feature of the target word and thought that "complexion" and "complex" belonged to the same word family. Although he misinterpreted the relationship between the two words, he managed to use his prior knowledge about word ending "-ion" and confirm the part of speech of the target word. If he had examined the surrounding context of the word such as freckles and pimples, he would have had known that "complexion" and "complex" were not related. This shows that focusing on the word itself and neglecting the context in which the word occurred can be misleading and unreliable. In fact, Seibert (1945: 300) warned that "without context" to check the meaning of the words, etymology, when faulty, may be a dangerous tool. Despite potential risk of the word study strategies, Nation (2001) suggests that a learner's vocabulary size may increase through being taught or deliberately learning new words, through learning new words by meeting them in context, and through

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recognizing and building new word by gaining control of prefixes, suffixes and other word building devices.

#### Suggestions for Further Studies

1. With a view to investigating whether language proficiency is one of the crucial factors to vocabulary learning, it would be interesting if more research is carried out among the high proficient students in other Thai secondary schools.

2. In addition, vocabulary learning strategy research should also take cultural factors and pragmatic constraints into account and, rather than finding universal “good” strategies, aim to discover vocabulary strategies that suit different groups of learners with different backgrounds and ability. Methodologically, longitudinal designs are especially needed if vocabulary development as opposed to word list retention is of interest.

Based on the findings from the present study, the researcher draws the following conclusions which are outlined in four points:

1. Vocabulary should not be left to the learners alone.
2. Learners should be well informed about vocabulary learning strategies and develop a strategy inventory through strategy training.
3. Language instructors should be well informed about vocabulary learning strategies as well.
4. The language textbook should play an active role in strategy training.

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