

Optimizing Vocabulary Acquisition for Chinese Students in Rural-Urban Fringe Areas through Learning Strategies

Weiwei Cheng*

Claro M. Recto Academy of Advanced Studies, Lyceum of the Philippines University, Manila 1002, Philippines

*Corresponding author: Weiwei Cheng, weiwei.cheng@lpunetwork.edu.ph

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Abstract: The interplay of academic atmosphere, learning motivation, and strategies inherently influences English learning. Effective vocabulary acquisition strategies significantly influence the achievements of English acquisition. Vocabulary mastery, a cornerstone of middle school English education, raises a critical question: How can vocabulary strategies optimize students' memory, understanding, and vocabulary application? This article elaborates on the importance and characteristics of vocabulary learning in Chinese junior high schools, analyzes definitions and theories of learning strategies, and proposes specific vocabulary approaches tailored to junior high school students in rural-urban fringe areas.

Keywords: Academic atmosphere; Learning motivation; Vocabulary learning strategies; Vocabulary memorization skills; Vocabulary learning strategy training

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1. Introduction

Proverbs like “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” emphasize the foundational nature of vocabulary accumulation, which is also essential to effective communication. Wilkins asserts the importance of precise and unambiguous vocabulary ^[1]. Efficient vocabulary acquisition is achieved through “learning strategies,” defined as observable behaviors and internal cognitive activities ^[2], and is the ideal regulation learning process ^[3].

Chamot and O'Malley argued that the integration of multiple learning strategies involves specific thoughts or behaviors that learners use to comprehend, process, or retain new information. Compared to primary school, junior high school students are marked by significantly larger vocabulary requirements ^[3]. According to the Chinese National English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education, junior high school graduates are expected to master 1,500–1,600 words and 200–300 fixed expressions, making vocabulary acquisition an indispensable component of junior high school English education ^[4].

2. Current status of English vocabulary learning in rural-urban fringe schools

Traditional vocabulary teaching methods still dominate vocabulary instruction in many schools in China. Teachers devote excessive time to explaining words in isolation, disregarding their connections within a broader linguistic context. Moreover, limited attention is given to guiding students in adopting effective vocabulary learning strategies, such as utilizing acquired knowledge to understand and internalize new words. Cognitive and memory strategies are frequently neglected, leaving students reliant on rote learning that fails to support long-term retention or practical application.

The most common approach to vocabulary instruction involves a standardized five-step process: first, the teacher introduces the new words through oral reading, followed by students repeating practice; third, the teacher explains the usage of key vocabulary, after which, students are expected to memorize the new words; finally, a dictation test is conducted to assess retention. While this structured approach offers consistency, its repetitive and rigid nature often makes students feel fatigued and disinterested, potentially fostering a negative cycle that ultimately discourages their broader engagement with English learning and limits their progress. Additionally, although textbooks are designed with inherent patterns, teachers do not always follow a logical organization of vocabulary teaching and fail to differentiate vocabulary items. This approach unnecessarily increases the cognitive burden on students, making vocabulary acquisition appear disorganized and overwhelming.

In practice, effective vocabulary educators should incorporate appropriate extracurricular extensions to help students acquire additional vocabulary beyond the prescribed curriculum, aligning their instruction with the requirements of the English vocabulary curriculum. While some words merely need recognition, others demand deeper understanding and flexible application. Teachers should go beyond the basic pronunciation and definitions of words to explain their usage, metaphoric meanings, extended connotations, and rhetorical implications. Notably, few educators emphasize using learning strategies, leading students to rely heavily on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction. Students are rarely encouraged to identify vocabulary learning patterns or explore personalized strategies to suit their exploration. Additionally, assessment methods remain limited and focus primarily on textbook words, limiting students' motivation to engage in extracurricular reading or expand their vocabulary through independent effort. However, many educators face significant challenges due to a lack of professional training in vocabulary teaching strategies, as standardized courses or guidelines for effective vocabulary instruction are still unavailable in most regions. From Chinese teachers' and students' perspectives, English vocabulary learning in rural-urban middle schools presents significant challenges due to its complex semantic variations and lack of clear rules.

To address these issues, the Chinese Curriculum Standards for Compulsory English Education introduced heightened requirements for vocabulary teaching and learning, setting significant emphasis on the role of vocabulary strategies in high-achieving language competencies, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as shown in **Table 1** ^[5]. Notably, the standards highlight vocabulary mastery and usage, requiring students to understand fundamental and contextual meanings of vocabulary, describe behaviors and attributes, and articulate abstract concepts.

Table 1. Chinese Curriculum Standards for Compulsory English Education of Level 2 and Level 5

Level	Grade	Goals
Level 2	Graduation from primary school	1. Learn about 600–700 words and about 50 idioms related to the topic of this level; 2. Understand that words are made up of letters;
Level 5	Graduation from junior high school	1. Understand English vocabulary, including words, phrases, idioms, and fixed collocations; 2. Know and understand the basic meaning of words and their meaning in a specific context; 3. Use vocabulary to describe things, behaviors, and characteristics, and explain concepts; 4. Learn to use 1500–1600 words and 200–300 idioms or fixed combinations

Aligning to these requirements, educators should improve students' vocabulary proficiency and accuracy while expanding their lexicon. In junior high school English teaching, educators should move beyond simply having students recite and memorize words and integrate vocabulary instruction into real communicative practices.

3. Challenges in vocabulary learning for rural-urban fringe junior high school students

Despite its importance, many rural-urban fringe students struggle with vocabulary retention and using it effectively, often leading to errors in word recognition and application. A common issue is the overreliance on rote memorization, which fails to provide students with effective strategies for learning engagement. Consequently, this approach produces suboptimal outcomes and causes students to be disinterested in English learning, and eventually, a portion of the students abandon English learning. Although vocabulary learning is crucial in Chinese junior high school education, several issues hinder progress:

- (1) Overemphasis on knowledge teaching over strategy cultivation: Teachers often prioritize word definitions, pronunciation, and spelling in isolation, neglecting the development of students' learning strategies. Techniques like inferring word meanings from roots and affixes or organizing words based on semantic relationships are rarely incorporated into teaching practices. Additionally, frequent dictation-based assessments fail to develop comprehensive language skills, leaving students with an isolated understanding of vocabulary. Consequently, students rely on mechanical memorization, which often leads to rapid forgetting and poor outcomes despite significant time investment. This inefficiency undermines students' learning enthusiasm and motivation.
- (2) Insufficient contextual integration and cultural awareness: Language serves as a carrier of culture, and cultural differences are imbued with the connotations and associations of words. However, some teachers focus solely on literal meanings, isolating vocabulary explanations from their contextual and cultural dimensions. This approach causes students to have the misconception that English vocabulary is directly equivalent to Chinese, leading to pragmatic errors in word usage. By ignoring cultural nuances and contextual associations, students are deprived of a full understanding of language in its authentic use.

4. Strategies for enhancing English vocabulary acquisition among middle school students in urban-rural fringe areas

4.1. Improving vocabulary memorization skills

Enhancing vocabulary retention through association strategies: Associative strategies, which establish inherent relationships between lexical items, have been shown to effectively facilitate vocabulary retention. By engaging in appropriate associations, students may expand their vocabulary and enhance divergent thinking. In phonetic association, students can recall words by recognizing similarities in pronunciation or spelling. Since many English words appear in similar spellings but convey distinct meanings, targeted instruction in phonetic breakdown can enhance retention. For instance, educators may guide students to review phonetic symbols and break down words into phoneme combinations to facilitate memorization. Examples include the words “someday,” “handle,” “typical,” “incredibly,” “custom,” and “tender.” Furthermore, vocabulary or contextualized sentence audio clips can be played to allow students to repeat and mimic proper pronunciation and improve retention. For instance, sentences such as “That football, being such a simple game to play, is perhaps the basis of its popularity” can enhance vocabulary recall through auditory reinforcement and oral repetition.

Strengthening vocabulary retention through word formation: Effective learning strategies enhance the improvement of vocabulary acquisition with less effort. Vocabulary learning is based on the same principle: once students master systematic memorization strategies and develop proper learning habits, their vocabulary accumulation significantly improves. While secondary school students generally possess foundational vocabulary learning skills, many still take up passive learning approaches, necessitating explicit guidance and reinforcement from educators. To promote autonomous retention through effective vocabulary acquisition strategies, teachers should provide comprehensive instruction on various memory techniques and help students internalize them into ample learning practices. Common word formation strategies which are particularly beneficial in retaining vocabulary include:

Derivation: This strategy involves adding prefixes or suffixes to the root words and modifying word meanings or grammatical functions. For example, prefixes (e.g., “dis-,” “un-,” “in-,” “im-,” “non-,” “mis-,” “ir-”) can convey negation, producing antonyms, such as “agree”/“disagree,” “able”/“unable,” “correct”/“incorrect,” and “possible”/“impossible.” Additionally, suffixes frequently change root words’ part of speech without altering its core meaning, including “-ence” (state/quality), “-(e)r/-or” (agent/person), “-ese” (nationality), “-ess” (female), “-ian” (expert), “-ist” (professional), “-ment” (state), and “-tion” (action/process). The use of common derivation further helps students grasp word meanings by understanding how different affixes modify root words.

Compounding: This strategy combines two or more independent words to form a new word. Compound words are quite prevalent in English, giving rise to compound nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Examples are “someday” (n. future occasion), “earthquake” (n. seismic event), “bathroom” (n. washroom), “housework” (n. domestic chores), and “football” (n. sport). Recognizing compound word structures facilitates students in deconstructing and retaining vocabulary more effectively.

Conversion: This strategy refers to the grammatical category transformation of a word without altering its form, endowing it with a new meaning to function across multiple lexical categories depending on context. For example, in the sentence “Don’t trouble trouble before trouble troubles you,” the first and the last “trouble” function as verbs, while the second and third serve as nouns. Recognizing and applying such flexible conversion rules can improve students’ vocabulary comprehension in diverse contexts.

Polysemy: Some words have multiple meanings and function as different parts of speech without requiring any morphological modifications. There are examples, such as seat (n. “a place to sit” / v. “to assign a seat”), smoke (n. “visible vapor” / v. “to inhale tobacco”), and fight (n. “a conflict” / v. “to engage in combat”). Recognizing such polysemy enables students to infer meanings contextually, decreasing the cognitive burden of memorizing isolated definitions.

Abbreviation: This strategy condenses longer phrases into acronyms or initialisms. For instance, the World Trade Organization is commonly abbreviated as WTO. These techniques facilitate understanding of commonly used abbreviations and enhance students’ ability to decode and remember complex terminologies. By guiding students through these word formation strategies, educators can improve students’ overall vocabulary acquisition.

4.2. Expanding vocabulary through extensive reading

Extensive reading is widely recognized as one of the most effective strategies in vocabulary acquisition, particularly in reinforcing previously known vocabulary and ultimately broadening learners’ overall lexical repertoire. Previous studies across psychological, cognitive science, lexicology, semantics, and pragmatics, proposing strategies such as metacognitive, practice-based, focused learning, and lexical chunking approaches, have underscored the importance of reading in vocabulary acquisition ^[6,7].

While there is no universally superior strategy, strategies should be adopted based on individual learners and contexts. In recent years, the role of extracurricular reading and strategies in guiding students’ independent reading has gained scholarly attention. As an extension of classroom instruction, extracurricular reading enriches the learning experience and significantly expands students’ vocabulary.

- (1) Flexibility in reading material selection: While classroom materials are standardized, extracurricular reading materials allow students to explore English based on personal interests, learning objectives, and language proficiency, thereby enhancing greater engagement and retention.
- (2) The role of interest in reading: Psychological studies confirm that Interest-driven reading enhances language learning motivation and engagement. When learners find reading materials engaging, they exhibit greater enthusiasm, enhanced cognitive alertness, and increased concentration. Consequently, this increased involvement facilitates deeper cognitive processing, and highly engaging English reading materials have gained widespread popularity among learners. Studies have consistently shown that interest plays a critical role in facilitating motivation and learning outcomes ^[8].
- (3) Reinforcement of previously learned vocabulary: In addition to acquiring new words, extracurricular reading enables language learners to consolidate previously learned vocabulary. The process of vocabulary acquisition through reading is not solely about learning new vocabulary; additionally, it involves consolidating previously encountered words. High-frequency exposure to vocabulary in different contexts strengthens retention and deepens learners’ understanding of words.

4.3. Recreating language learning environments

Language acquisition strongly depends on the linguistic environment, which applies equally to foreign language learners. Less target language environment exposure often poses significant challenges to language learners. To address this, many universities’ English instructors in China often focus on creating a foreign-language acquisition environment by establishing extracurricular English corners, designing situational dialogues in class, and organizing activities. Engaging reading materials can immerse readers deep into the text, follow the author’s

narrative, and naturally acquire language skills seamlessly.

It has been argued that while participating in various English-speaking activities is beneficial, reading offers distinct advantages. Unlike interactive language-learning activities, which require collaboration, specific time, and location constraints, reading is an individual activity that is free from such limitations. Learners can choose reading materials freely and arrange their reading schedules flexibly. Therefore, educators should actively encourage extracurricular reading and recommend high-quality reading materials to enhance students' academic performance. Although vocabulary previews are common, explicit vocabulary instructions are still necessary within the context of reading and listening exercises. Furthermore, applying newly acquired vocabulary in both oral and written communication is a critical step in reinforcing lexical retention.

4.4. Integrating multiple vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary acquisition requires a process of memorization, reinforcement, and application, which involves a proper selection of appropriate memory strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies do not function in isolation; rather, students should adopt a combination of strategies to use vocabulary flexibly and appropriately. During secondary English vocabulary instruction, teachers should emphasize teaching methodologies and foster students' autonomous learning abilities. By the second year of university, students generally possess self-regulation in vocabulary learning, including skills in self-monitoring and self-adjustment. Therefore, vocabulary instruction should balance structured teaching methods with guidance that actively engages students, fostering their intrinsic motivation to learn vocabulary. Integrating metacognitive, social, and cognitive strategies can facilitate vocabulary learning.

5. Recommendations for strategy training

5.1. Tailoring appropriate vocabulary strategy training models based on student needs

Wen proposed three specific vocabulary training methods ^[3]. The first method is intensive training, which refers to dedicated time to training learning strategies. She argues that targeted and deliberate strategy training can be conducted in one or multiple sessions. The second method is integrated training, where strategy can be incorporated into regular instruction, aiming to develop students' self-assessment ability. The third is individualized guidance, which aims to identify and assist students who experience significant learning difficulties and require specific, tailored support. Similarly, Cohen categorizes strategy training into four types: Cognitive strategies involve general learning strategies training and language skills development; Metacognitive strategies involve learners being trained to control their cognition in the process of planning and evaluating by themselves ^[9]. Affective strategies refer to awareness training that aims to raise students' consciousness of learning strategies; Social strategies involve learners interacting with other learners or native speakers.

Rural-urban fringe middle school students often rely on rote memorization and have limited awareness of effective vocabulary learning strategies. At the initial stage, teachers may introduce students to metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies during intensive training. After training in planning strategies, cooperative strategies, inferencing strategies, dictionary strategies, and extensive reading strategies, students can have a comprehensive understanding of vocabulary learning.

- (1) Diversified assessment of strategy training: Teachers should not rely solely on English-to-Chinese translation or word dictation as assessment tools, as these methods fail to show the full scope of students' vocabulary learning. Vocabulary acquisition extends beyond translation; it also involves collocation and lexical associations. Additionally, the achievements of strategy training should not only

be assessed in knowledge acquisition but also encompass skill development and change in learning habits and attitudes.

- (2) Arousing students' vocabulary learning motivation: Research indicates there is a strong correlation between students' vocabulary learning motivations and their strategy use. Students with a higher level of vocabulary learning awareness tend to employ more advanced strategies and vice versa. Students tend to adopt learning strategies that align with their perceptions of vocabulary acquisition. To ensure the effectiveness of strategy training, teachers should guide students in integrating contextualized vocabulary learning and practical application. By fostering effective learning habits, students are expected to seek personalized learning approaches and vocabulary learning strategies to enhance learning efficiency.

5.2. Vocabulary learning strategies training in class

Chamot and O'Malley proposed a four-stage instructional model for strategy training: Planning, Monitoring, Problem Solving, and Evaluation ^[4]. As the following shows, to illustrate how this model is to be applied in vocabulary learning strategy training, Unit 1 of the junior high school English textbook is taken as an example.

- (1) Planning: In the first stage, the teacher selects the target phrase "in order to" from the text; students are asked to preview the passage, learn its meaning and synonymous phrases, and note differences. This task is self-directed, allowing students to choose their preferred learning methods. Some students may use bilingual dictionaries, others may infer meaning from context, and some may prefer to find definitions in the textbook.
- (2) Monitoring: Teachers can assist students by presenting the learning material and explaining the new vocabulary in context to reduce student anxiety. Then, students can analyze the text independently based on prior knowledge. For instance, students may recall that they knew the superficial meaning of "in order to" from their junior high school studies, and the teacher encourages students to compare it with the deeper understanding gained from the current insights. Group discussions further enhance comprehensive understanding, and students may be encouraged to explore synonyms and subtle differences in contextual applications.
- (3) Challenges solving: During this stage, students may encounter challenges, such as distinguishing "in order to" from "so as to." Using Schmitt's communication strategy, students may ask the educator questions ^[10].

"He got up very early in order to/so as to catch the first bus."

"In order to catch the first bus, he got up very early."

Through comparisons, students find that while these two expressions share the meaning "for the purpose of," "so as to" is incorrect to be put at the beginning of a sentence. Teachers can encourage students to recognize this kind of set phrase independently to reinforce analytical skills.

- (4) Assessment: Once students have completed the vocabulary learning tasks, the teacher can conduct a comprehensive review of "in order to" to ensure their comprehension. Students then assess their strategy learning and use these strategies for future vocabulary learning.

5.3. Reinforcing the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies

As English education in China undergoes continuous reform, the limitations of traditional vocabulary learning in junior high school become increasingly apparent. There is a growing need for efficient vocabulary learning

strategies to enhance students' lexical competence. To achieve this, teachers must deeply study the nature of vocabulary acquisition and the cognitive and psychological characteristics of junior high school students. By doing so, educators can implement innovative instruction with effective vocabulary strategies to foster students' active exploration, self-motivated learning, and strategic vocabulary use.

Teachers should focus on student-centered instruction, promoting active participation in vocabulary learning activities to deepen comprehension and retention. Additionally, providing diverse learning resources can enrich students' vocabulary and improve their vocabulary usage ability. Students will develop greater autonomy and creativity in language learning by integrating vocabulary learning strategies, ultimately building a solid foundation for their English proficiency.

6. Conclusion

By emphasizing the limitations of traditional rote memorization, this study highlights the vocabulary acquisition challenges faced by rural-urban fringe junior high school students in China. It advocates a student-centered and strategy-based approach, integrating cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies to enhance vocabulary retention and application.

The findings suggest that the four-stage instructional model by Chamot and O'Malley provides a structured framework for implementing these strategies, fostering students' autonomy and motivation^[4]. Integrating extensive reading and interest-driven learning is particularly effective in reinforcing vocabulary acquisition, while diversified assessment methods ensure a comprehensive evaluation of students' improvement. To address the educational gap between urban and rural areas, by adopting vocabulary instruction strategies and these innovative approaches, educators can improve students' English proficiency for academic achievement and real-world communication, and foster greater equity in language education. Dynamic, strategy-driven vocabulary learning approaches strengthen students' lexical proficiency and empower them to engage in English learning more effectively, preparing them for success in an increasingly globalized world.

Disclosure statement

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