The Use of Vocabulary Notebooks for EFL Non-majors' ESP Vocabulary Acquisition

Tran Thi Cuc[1*], Do Manh Cuong[2]

[1] Faculty of Foreign Languages, Saigon University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

[2] Faculty of English Language, HUTECH University, Vietnam

[*]Corresponding author's email: ttcuc@sgu.edu.vn

[*] https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9696-7132

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ABSTRACT

English for Special Purposes (ESP) students often struggle with vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary notebooks are a potential solution. This study investigates the effectiveness of vocabulary notebooks in supporting vocabulary expansion and retention for 30 intermediate-level ESP students in a 15-week International Relations class. The study utilized a mixed-methods approach based on a questionnaire, pre-test, post-test, and data analysis. The results show a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary acquisition and retention among students who used vocabulary notebooks. The findings suggest that vocabulary notebooks are a useful tool for ESP students, particularly in the acquisition of specialized vocabulary. Hence, the study also identified areas where the implementation of vocabulary notebooks could be improved, such as the need for explicit instruction and scaffolding to support effective use. This study highlights the potential of vocabulary notebooks and provides insights into how they can be effectively used to support ESP vocabulary acquisition.

Introduction

English has been considered an essential foreign language in the world, and in Vietnam since English has been taught with the expected and required practical outcomes, and at many levels of schools, from primary as a local content and/or compulsory to secondary and tertiary as a compulsory subject (BC, nd; Choi & Chung, 2016; MOET, 2018). However, based on the effectiveness of teaching and learning English, it has been pointed out that it has its own in teaching and learning English, especially English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in many parts of the world and Vietnam.

Despite being given little priority in EFL classrooms in the past, vocabulary teaching and learning has currently been considered the core and prerequisite component of language

acquisition in the innovative nature of vocabulary and its role in English teaching and learning. As the means and outcomes of communication, vocabulary acquisition influences how well students speak, write, read, and listen (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Nation, 2006; Schmitt, 2010; Coxhead, 2013; Chirobocea-Tudor, 2018; Nguyen & Tran, 2019; Vu & Peters, 2021). Students' lack of vocabulary knowledge affects their language skills, and students cannot express a wider range of meanings. Nor can they, especially English non-majored students, obtain L2 communication in a meaningful way (Nation, 2001).

Vocabulary, linguistically, is not just words but also their lexical meaning, context, pronunciation, orthography, and conjugation. With these as the challenging factors in learning English, memorizing and retaining vocabulary has always been contended to be the most challenging (Nation, 2008; Townsend et al., 2013). Vocabulary teaching and learning, as a result, has played an indispensable part in language acquisition in many fields of study for both teachers and learners, especially ESP vocabulary, since vocabulary moved from the peripheral role into a central position (Nation, 2001; 2008; Schmitt, 2010; Dennison, 2014; Chirobocea-Tudor, 2018). Something is wrong with the way that vocabulary learning can be easy to recognize and memorize the words in general English and ESP. Furthermore, as vocabulary is not specially taught in both general English and ESP classrooms, limited language proficiency in the English language and their being unfamiliar with ESP lexical words are other reasons that lead to students' difficulties in learning ESP vocabulary.

Various research tools of numerous studies on vocabulary teaching and learning, hence, have postulated the paramount role of vocabulary in language acquisition (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Nation, 2001; Thornbury, 2002; Walters & Bozkurt, 2009; Nation & Meara, 2010; Coxhead, 2013; Nguyen & Tran, 2019). Under the positive perspectives of the research tools on vocabulary teaching and learning, the benefits of word notebooks have outweighed if compared with its disadvantages at many different English levels of learners and their fields through a large number of studies (Walters & Bozkurt, 2009; Coxhead, 2013; Vella & Rushidia, 2016; Dubiner, 2017; Chirobocea-Tudor, 2018). Its effects on ESP classes, therefore, are not exceptions.

Although English of International Relations (IR) comprises diverse topics based on the characteristics of this field, a vocabulary notebook has not been specially conducted as a research tool in ESP classes of International Relations. This paper, thus, aimed at using vocabulary notebooks to help students expand, use, and retain the ESP vocabulary of IR. The present study also investigated their willingness to use vocabulary notebooks in ESP lexical acquisition in a 15-week IR class at Saigon University.

Literature review

Vocabulary Knowledge and Vocabulary Acquisition

Learning an additional language is closely connected to its vocabulary. Under the different approaches, vocabulary is defined in many dimensions. As defined by Evelyn Hatch and Cheryl Brown (1995), vocabulary is a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words used by a language learner. Vocabulary is a single word, or lexical chunks,

whereas vocabulary, in accordance with other scholars and experts, besides semantic features, is composed of word meaning, context, spoken and written form, collocations of words, syntactic behavior, register of words, associations of words, meaning relationships, and even frequency of words (Nagy & Scott, 2000; Coxhead, 2000; Nation, 2001; Read, 2004; Schmitt, 2010; Barcroft et al., 2011; Coxhead, 2013; Graves, 2016). In ESP, as the distinct meanings and accuracy of vocabulary use are significant, the importance of most of these aspects is concentrated on.

As the above-mentioned vocabulary notions, knowledge of vocabulary has been determined under many aspects, including the ability to use a word in a particular language context in which learners come across. Furthermore, word knowledge is asserted to be the comprehension of a new language literary text (Schmitt, 2000; Coxhead, 2013). Vocabulary acquisition, hence, is a process of learning new words. Word acquisition can be assessed through learners' vocabulary depth, size, breadth or growth, and vocabulary depth knowledge (Schmitt, 2010). As presented by many scholars and/or authors, students' word depth, size, and growth are required correspondingly to their English level and academic demands. It can be said that students can make a shift or progress in the interconnection between education and language from an emphasis on basic skills to critical thinking or solving-problem skills.

Importance of vocabulary for language acquisition

The benchmark for learners' language proficiency can be demonstrated by vocabulary acquisition. In contrast, learners' language proficiency comprises their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in both general English and ESP. From a linguistic perspective, a key command of language is based on the learners' vocabulary knowledge and acquisition so that precise vocabulary can be paramount in using English effectively and perspicuously (Krashen, 1983 cited in Fastima & Alam Khan, 2017; Coxhead, 2013).

The complementary interconnection between vocabulary knowledge and language use is analyzed and asserted in the research implemented by Paul Nation (2001) and Khosro Bahramlou and his co-author, Hooshang Yazdani (2013). Their results on the mutual interrelationship are beneficial for EFL learners. Words knowledge improves language skills, and language use, in turn, brings learners' enrichment in vocabulary knowledge and word acquisition.

Benefits and limitations of vocabulary notebooks for ESP vocabulary learning

EFL/ESL teachers have always endeavored to help students learn general English vocabulary and ESP corresponding to the different strategies and word notebooks as one personalized word-learning tool. A vocabulary notebook is referred to as a record of a word list that includes word meanings, parts of speech, and/or pronunciation. Furthermore, it can include more linguistically complicated features such as contextual meanings, meaning relationships, collocations, and/or even semantic maps in an individual manner (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Schmitt, 2010; Dennison, 2014). It can be noted that a vocabulary notebook is varied in nature and referred to as a portable personal dictionary based on individual levels of English, as presented by Cycle Fowle (2002) and Hall (2004).

Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial aspect of English language learning, and there is growing

interested in the use of vocabulary notebooks as a tool to support this process. Zhang and Wu (2020) found that the use of vocabulary notebooks can improve students' vocabulary acquisition, particularly in terms of depth of vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Hsieh (2019) found that the use of a vocabulary notebook can enhance students' vocabulary learning and retention while promoting active engagement and autonomous learning. However, the effectiveness of vocabulary notebooks depends on various factors, including the pedagogical approach and learner characteristics. Ren and Li (2020) highlight the potential benefits and challenges associated with the use of vocabulary notebooks and other technologies for supporting vocabulary acquisition in EFL learners. These studies suggest that vocabulary notebooks can be a valuable tool for EFL non-majors ESP vocabulary acquisition, but their effectiveness depends on careful consideration of various contextual factors.

As a token of their definitions, vocabulary notebooks play a crucial role in language learning and vocabulary acquisition through their particular benefits despite their limitations. Although learners confront some limitations, including choosing words, determining the usefulness or frequency of words, and time consuming, the benefits of a word notebook outweigh its limitations.

Besides teacher's requirements, however, EFL learners can individually create their own word notebooks, depending upon their English levels and needs. Students' creativity and independence in word preparations improve their engagement in the English learning process and awareness of word learning and develop learner's autonomy, which helps learners become more active in using dictionaries, guessing word meanings, and language learning as asserted by Cycle Fowle (2002), and Vjosa Vela and Jeta Rushidia (2016). Moreover, through vocabulary instructions, building learners' vocabulary skills can also be developed. In terms of tangible results, student's attitudes towards the implementation of vocabulary notebooks are positive, and word notebooks are found useful owing to their repetition of unknown words through in-class and after-class activities (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Coxhead, 2000; Walters and Bozkurt, 2009; Coxhead, 2013; Chirobocea-Tudor, 2019; Nguyen & Tran, 2019).

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey sought to answer the following research questions:

What are the EFL non-majored students' attitudes toward ESP vocabulary notebooks in an IR classroom?

Methods

Mixed methods research design is the procedure of mixing both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study (Cresswel, 2003). This process also consists of collecting and analyzing data qualitatively and quantitatively. The combination of both methods in a study is greatly important as they can utilize the advantages and overcome the disadvantages of each. This present study was implemented in a 15-week International Relations class with thirty third-year students, all of whom were at the intermediate level of English and had no previous exposure to the use of vocabulary notebooks. The mixed research methodology with both

qualitative methods and quantitative methods was applied based on the questionnaire, the pre-test, and the post-test.

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The research explored the students' attitudes toward using vocabulary notebooks for ESP vocabulary acquisition. This investigation was conducted in an English non-majored classroom in the first 15-week semester of schoolyear 2021-2022 at Saigon University, where one of the two authors is teaching English of International Relations in the 30-student Intermediate-level class. At the beginning of the course, based on the informal interview with the students, the author found that most students in this class were confronted with vocabulary learning and retention, even though vocabulary learning and acquisition was the most difficult.

The objectives of the course were listed by the syllabus specially designed for the academic program as (1) raising students' awareness of ESP vocabulary notebooks; (2) providing learners with the awareness of strategies for ESP vocabulary learning; (3) creating opportunities for students to apply analytical skills through vocabulary notebooks; and (4) helping students with the ability of ESP vocabulary acquisition.

In order to complete the objectives of this paper, there were thirteen ESP lessons on IR, including the texts and news articles accompanied by further readings. Students' vocabulary notebook was presented, discussed, and submitted every week except for week 1, 8, and 15. In addition, the class discussion and group presentations on preparations of vocabulary notebooks were organized, corresponding to the beginning of each unit.

Design of the Study

The research is a three-stage process of defining the research objectives and collecting and analyzing the information to provide the data to answer the research question. It employed a descriptive survey to mix both qualitative and quantitative features.

The instruments of collecting information for this paper were (1) vocabulary notebooks for English of International Relations, (2) the pre-test and the post-test on vocabulary assessment, and (3) the questionnaire to explore the benefits of using word notebooks.

Vocabulary notebooks

A vocabulary notebook is a tool that gives guidance on the required vocabulary features and tells students what to include in their work. It helps the students prepare, review and retain their vocabulary by themselves for multiple skills to reach their expectations of learning ESP lessons. The format of vocabulary notebooks used in the research was divided into two broad parts: one adapted from the above-mentioned notions of vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary acquisition, and another included word use and retention, which reminded students of vocabulary learning strategies and acquisition. The student's vocabulary notebook, divided into two parts, was formed as the following sample:

PART A: Self-learning vocabulary

Word	General English (GE)	ESP meaning	Word Family	Example with the word
Capital				

PART B: For peer-view or group activities

Word	Do not remember or vaguely remember	Remember clearly	Vietnamese meaning		Example with the word
			From G.E meaning	From ESP meaning	
Capital					

Pre-test and Post-test

All the participants were required to take the pre-test at the beginning of the course and the post-test in the middle of the course. In terms of administering two tests, in charge of an IR English course, one of the researchers prepared and had the tests administered by the participants. Participants were required to do two 45-minute tests. Participants took a pre-test in week one before the use of word notebooks and a post-test in week 12 after using them for eleven weeks so that students' word acquisition could be investigated. Both intermediate-level English tests focused on the assessment of pronunciation, meanings, word forms, collocations, contextual meanings, and meaning relationships in terms of ESP vocabulary of International Relations.

Student feedback questionnaire

A twelve-item questionnaire listing statements about students' feedback towards using vocabulary notebooks was designed in a mixed format with 10 closed-ended yes-no statements and two open-ended questions. The first section aimed to make students express their agreement or objections to the benefits of using vocabulary notebooks for their IR English course. The second section included two questions that assisted in exploring the students' challenges in using word notebooks and the causes of their trouble.

Data collection & analysis

Research procedure

There was an informal interview and a pre-test in the first week of the course to provide the students to use vocabulary notebooks and assess students' vocabulary knowledge. Then, in the second week, the teacher carried out a workshop on using vocabulary notebooks. After that, the teacher randomly asked some students to submit the vocabulary notebooks from week 3 to week 14. The researcher prepared and had the post-test administered by the participants in week 12. Then, the individual students were coded by their ordinal numbers from the student list of the course. The student feedback questionnaire forms were collected in week 15. Every week from week 2 to week 12, students' vocabulary notebooks were given to one another in their group to check themselves by their peer's words. Then analyses were made to find out how effectively students learned and memorized ESP vocabulary of IR and thought about the vocabulary notebooks.

Results/Findings and discussion

From the results of the following data analysis and discussions, the objective of this research can be fulfilled through the following parts.

The effectiveness of using vocabulary notebooks

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyze the data for this paper. In a pretest-posttest design, the form of a pair samples t-test was manipulated to draw the conclusion on comparing the results between the participants' results of pre-test in week 1 and post-test in week 12. Therefore, the research procedure could not reflect biased information, and the biased values did not affect the results.

The two tests were used to evaluate participants' vocabulary knowledge and acquisition. The scores of the tests were analyzed by deploying inferential SPSS 19.0 analysis such as pair samples t-test. The data analysis of pre-test and post-test results was shown that data of tests was collected with p values (i.e. significance level = .002, and .002 respectively) of the high significance coefficient. This illustrated that using word notebooks enabled students to expand, retain, and acquire the ESP vocabulary of IR.

Furthermore, the post-test mean scores were higher than their pre-test, illustrating the students' developing vocabulary knowledge and enhancing their vocabulary acquisition after they implemented word notebooks. The mean value of the pair sample t-test between pre-test and post-test was illustrated in table 1 below.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics of pre-test and post-test

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PRE-TEST	6.1200	30	1.00364	.12360
POSTTEST	8.0863	30	1.05521	.14685

In table 1, it can be shown that the mean scores of the pre-test (M= 6.120, SD=1.003) were lower than those of the post-test (M=8.086, SD=1.055). This means that students got higher scores on the post-test than on the pre-test. However, there was no high deviation in the scores of each test. These values illustrated that the students performed lexical ability better in doing the post-test after they used vocabulary notebooks since having taken the pre-test. The contrastive analysis between the mean scores of the pre-test and mean scores of the post-test explained that students given instructions and guidance for using vocabulary notebooks got their achievements and progress after fourteen weeks. The figures from the two tests proved the students' significant improvement in vocabulary knowledge and acquisition.

In perspectives of the effectiveness of the vocabulary notebook-based course, the students' vocabulary competence was developed by the detailed analysis of the following grading scheme. In terms of the grading scheme related to the regulations of credit-based training at university, learning performance was evaluated by the instrument of a 10-point scoring scheme and converted into letter-rate equivalents such as A = 8.5-10; B = 7.0-8.4; C = 5.5 -6.9; D = 4.0-5.4, and F = 0-3.9. The following table shows the differences in the number of students at the particular bands of pre-test and post-test.

Table 2. Comparison of the number of students according to the grading scheme

GRADE	Number of students	
	PRETEST	POSTTEST
A	2	9
B	6	12
C	14	7
D	5	2
F	3	0

In table 2, there was a significantly increasing number of students who got higher grades in the post-test compared to the number of students in the pre-test. There was a remarkably lower number of students with grades C and D. As can be seen that there was a significant increase in the highest grade, while two students got a grade A on the pre-test, and nine students got a grade A on the post-test. In grade B, the number of students doubled in the post-test compared to the pre-test. That illustrated that the number of students at grades C, D, and F dramatically decreased. No students got an F grade on the post-test, while three students had an F on the pre-test. With a total decrease of 3 students, it was the same number of changes in students getting grade D from five students down to two. Together with the downtrend of students with grades D and F, the number of students with grades C on the pre-test and post-test was fourteen and seven, respectively. To the end of this comparison, using word notebooks allowed the teacher to employ pedagogic methods to help the students with vocabulary acquisition through the greatly improved grades of A and B.

Students' attitudes towards using vocabulary notebooks

The data from the students' feedback questionnaire illustrates how students highly appreciated the role of vocabulary notebooks and their benefits for the student's ESP vocabulary acquisition in IR classrooms.

Table 3. Learners' attitudes towards their use of vocabulary notebooks through the questionnaire

Statements about the use of vocabulary notebooks	**Yes**	**No**
1. It is a useful self-study learning tool for vocabulary learning.	30	0
2. I have used it for every lesson and any language task/activity.	28	2
3. It helps me understand the objectives of using vocabulary notebooks.	30	0
4. It helps me systematize and recycle my vocabulary quickly and more efficiently.	28	2
5. It helps me be more specific in searching and using my vocabulary.	25	5
6. It helps me be more confident in completing the tasks/activities of language skills.	27	3
7. It helps me gain and develop my creativity while learning ESP vocabulary on my own.	27	3
8. With the vocabulary notebooks, I can be aware of using accurate vocabulary.	27	3
9. I can foster, expand and retain my vocabulary on my own.	28	2
10. I am motivated and engaged in English learning because of preparations and collaborations during the course.	28	2
Total	**278**	**22**

The objectives of the course were listed by the syllabus specially designed for the academic program as (1) raising students' awareness of ESP vocabulary notebooks; (2) providing learners with the awareness of strategies for ESP vocabulary learning; (3) creating opportunities for students to apply analytical skills through vocabulary notebooks; and (4) helping students with the ability of ESP vocabulary acquisition.

As the findings of many other studies on using vocabulary notebooks by numerous researchers, table 3 proves the advantages of word notebooks in increasing students' achievements, such as (1) raising students' awareness of ESP vocabulary notebooks; (2) providing learners with the awareness of strategies for ESP vocabulary learning; (3) creating opportunities for students to apply analytical skills through vocabulary notebooks; and (4) helping students with the ability of ESP vocabulary acquisition (Fowle, 2002; Vela & Rushidia, 2016). Furthermore, 29/30 participants agreed that the vocabulary notebooks helped them become actively engaged in their English classes. They all also understood the objectives of using vocabulary notebooks (30/30 respondents). The benefits of using word notebooks were significantly positive, corresponding to the fairly high number – 28 out of 30 students – with the chance to foster, expand and retain their ESP vocabulary independently. With the same number, 28 students found using vocabulary notebooks beneficial and creative thanks to the peer-to-peer and group collaboration of exchanging their vocabulary notebooks with one another, which enables students' engagement and develops their vocabulary besides their autonomy in English learning.

Table 4. Students' ideas towards their use of the vocabulary notebooks are expressed through open-ended questions

Students' opinions	No.
1. At the beginning, I thought I needed to complete vocabulary preparation for the first lesson and check it later, but I did not have enough time for my double-checking.	S2
2. At the beginning, while preparing the vocabulary, I didn't get acquainted with the format of vocabulary notebooks.	S3
3. I found it quite rather difficult to remember and retain the vocabulary in a short time.	S16

Three among 30 respondents presented their problems with that free-expression section in the questionnaire. To be faithful to the students' ideas, the three above statements were listed without paraphrasing to portray the original comments. They show how the users of the vocabulary notebooks could not manage their time for reviewing and revising their drafts with the complete vocabulary notebooks. That may come from the time constraints during the course and unacquaintance with the format of vocabulary notebooks above-mentioned in part 3.2.1. But the purpose of having them use the vocabulary notebooks for ESP vocabulary acquisition is to train them to improve their vocabulary learning techniques and to deal with learning and retaining ESP vocabulary during their learning process and future work life.

Conclusion

As the above-mentioned results from the findings and data analysis, this paper could propose the following significant recommendations:

1. Vocabulary notebooks indicate what needs to be included in the format of vocabulary notebooks. Meanwhile, it is also such a crucial tool that EFL non-majored students should be equipped with a word notebook and with more scrutiny. Despite the fact that a variety of vocabulary notebook formats should be provided, it must be noticed that teachers should apply an appropriate, consistent, simple format of self-learning vocabulary notebook companies with clear guidelines.

2. As students themselves could witness their own gradual improvements, using a self-learning vocabulary notebook in ESP classes should be assigned as part of a learning task to increase students' involvement in achieving their learning outcomes.

3. Students should be facilitated and supervised for the items required in the format of vocabulary notebooks and given the opportunities to revise and produce multiple better feedback from their classmates and the teacher.

4. There should be considerable encouragement and awarding acknowledgment for students' efforts in revising and producing the completed vocabulary notebooks to recognize their gradual improvements besides assessing their vocabulary acquisition.

Teachers and students must consider learning vocabulary as a creative and flexible process with the subsequent quality improvement of the students' take-home assignments and missions. Fostering and exploring vocabulary acquisition with self-learning vocabulary notebooks means providing an effective tool for EFL non-majored students to shift their teacher-centered learning to learner-centered autonomy. By implementing EFL students' input information and the ongoing process, they could take advantage of self-learning vocabulary notebooks to help themselves develop and acquire their ESP vocabulary and nurture their own improvement of responsibilities, vocabulary knowledge, and individuality. As a result, language skills can be developed and used efficiently during vocabulary and language acquisition and for their future profession.

Although the objectives of the present study carefully conducted over several months have been reached, there are a number of limitations worth highlighting. The first restriction is the size of the sample. There were 30 students that participated in the study. The sample size was not enough to make a generalization. Hence, the findings of this research would not be considered to represent the whole picture of the study area. In this research paper, only students of International Studies at the International Relations Department of Saigon University at an intermediate level of English were targeted. Dependent on the learning outcomes of the academic program designed by the International Relations Department of Saigon University, this research paper aims at ESP vocabulary acquisition.

As a result, this is a small-scale study, and it is recommended that further future research should be conducted on a larger scale involving more samples from various ESP courses at different levels of English. Therefore, it is recommended that further study, it should be involved a

comparison between ranges of English levels and ESP courses among students in order to examine their vocabulary acquisition. This can help significantly provide a better and more whole picture of the teaching and learning translation at Saigon University in particular and at various English teaching-learning English contexts in Vietnam.

Acknowledgment

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Biodata

Tran Thi Cuc, a lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Saigon University, graduated with master's degrees in English Linguistics from Ho Chi Minh the City University of Technology and in International Business and Finance from De Montfort University, UK. Besides higher-education teaching and doing research works on teaching-learning English methodology, and translation, she has published research articles on the Journal of Language and Life with ISSN 0868-3409 and proceedings at international conferences held in Vietnam.

Do Manh Cuong is currently a lecturer of English linguistics at the Faculty of English language, HUTECH University, Vietnam. He obtained his MA in TESOL from Victoria University, Australia. He has been teaching English as a foreign language and for specific purposes at universities in Ho Chi Minh City for nearly 20 years. With his passion for researching teaching and learning English, the research areas of interest are mainly in EFL teaching methodology,

intercultural communicative competence in ELT, discourse analysis, and translation.