

Comparative Approaches to Teaching English as a Second Language in the United States and English as a Foreign Language in Thailand

Kirati Khuvasanond
University of Kansas

Tatiana I. Sildus, David P. Hurford, and Richard P. Lipka
Pittsburg State University

Abstract

The study examined the strategies that American and Thai teachers commonly use in teaching vocabulary to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The study, conducted with 7 ESL teachers in the United States, 16 EFL teachers in Thailand, 34 ESL students in the U.S., and 52 EFL students in Thailand, took the form of an interview for teachers and a survey for students. Teachers in the US and Thailand were asked to identify the types of strategies that were being used. In addition, the teachers in the study were asked about the frequency of use of teaching strategies for vocabulary and the types of common mistakes made by their students. Students in both countries were also asked about teaching strategies and their own mistakes. To determine the effectiveness of various strategies that were used to teach English, a vocabulary test was given to students in which they were asked to produce synonyms and antonyms for common words. The Hotelling's T^2 and MANOVA indicated that active learning strategies (speaking strategies) were used more than passive learning strategies (listening strategies) in ESL classrooms in the United States. EFL classrooms in Thailand used a different approach, which showed their preference in utilizing recognition and listening learning strategies more. The results of the students' vocabulary tests also indicated significant differences across nationalities. The study provides suggestions and recommendations for educators on improving English vocabulary learning of their students.

Keywords: active learning, passive learning, ESL/EFL, strategy, vocabulary

Comparative Approaches to Teaching ESOL in the United States and Thailand

A hallmark of effective strategies for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves assisting students to comprehend and communicate using the appropriate function of words (Gallo-Crail & Zerwekh, 2002). Such strategies include cooperative learning (Hansen, 2006) and games (Nguyen & Khuat, 2003). Involvement in conversation and activities in class also helps English learners acquire new vocabulary (Collins, 2005). Many of the strategies used to teach ESL students in the United States are different from the strategies used to teach EFL students in Thailand. For example, games, storytelling, and role playing (Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson & Francis, 2005) are included in the American classroom, while vocabulary lists and spelling tests are mostly used in the Thai classroom (Maskhao, 2002).

Currently, Thai students who study EFL are faced with the problem of acquiring applied vocabulary. Gu (2003) found that one of the first problems a foreign language learner encounters is how to commit a large number of foreign words to memory. Students in Thailand are taught vocabulary by repeating words spoken by their teachers and memorizing the word's spelling and meaning, which are passive learning strategies. Students do not have the opportunity to apply their vocabulary in real-life situations, that is, through active learning strategies. Teachers in Asian countries generally require students to memorize a large corpus of words for vocabulary tests, but the majority of the words are forgotten within a relatively short time. As a result, this strategy does not seem to result in effective learning in terms of application and long term retention, (Idoine – Shirai, 2007; Wei, 2007).

Asian students may view vocabulary as a list of new words that they must associate with their native language meaning without any real practice that involves a context. This strategy can inhibit the learning of correct word meanings (Huyen & Nga, 2003). Moreover, dictionaries provide abstract and difficult definitions for ESL/EFL students. This leaves students guessing the meaning of the word and/or its use (Taylor, 2004). Passive learning strategies to teach vocabulary may not be sufficient to teach vocabulary to students. Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf Jr. and Moni (2006), and Wiriyachitra (2002) argued that the traditional Thai education system, which focuses on passive strategies, requires that students must “wait” for knowledge. Manchak and Manchak (2006) indicated that this may be one of the reasons why only half of Thai students' English proficiency scores meet the entrance criteria into English-speaking universities.

Barcroft (2004) strongly argued that instructional activities must increase the number of activities used in the classroom so that students can successfully acquire word form, meaning, and specific word usage. Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) discovered that a frequent and elaborate strategy usage was associated with a higher level of achievement in vocabulary learning. For example, video projects in which teams of students plan, prepare, and perform on videotape in specific conversation situations using target vocabulary were instrumental in the process of learning vocabulary (Sildus, 2006). Vocabulary parades of students dressed up and illustrate a particular word are enjoyable activities that increase word knowledge (Frasier, 2000). Many researchers argue that engaging children in wordplay activities and replacing overused words with new words that have different and varying meanings is crucial in boosting students' vocabulary growth (Duke & Moses, 2003; Feldman & Kinsella, 2004; Wilcox, Murphy, Bacon,

& Thomas, 2001). These strategies have a common element: they actively engage and involve students.

The objective of the present study was to determine what strategies were the most useful in developing vocabulary when learning a second language. Of particular interest was comparing and contrasting the strategies of teaching English vocabulary that were used by teachers in the United States and Thailand.

Method

Participants

The survey questions for ESL/EFL teachers and students in the United States and Thailand were administered to 7 ESL teachers in the United States (all were female) and 16 EFL teachers in Thailand (4 male teachers and 12 female teachers). The American teachers had an average of 9.7 years teaching experience (ranged from 2 to 20 years) and had an average of 8.7 students in their classrooms. The Thai teachers had an average of 16.8 years teaching experience (ranged from 8 months to 22 years) and had an average of 42.9 students in their classrooms. All of the students who participated were either in the 7th or 8th grades; 34 EFL students in the United States (19 male students and 15 female students) and 52 ESL students in Thailand (29 male students and 23 female students).

Measures

Appendices A and B include selected information from the questionnaires used to interview ESL/EFL teachers and students in the United States and Thailand. The questions were designed to determine what strategies and activities were employed in the various classrooms. The interview questions for the teachers focused on the strategies used to teach vocabulary. The response format for these questions involved a 10-point Likert Scale. The student survey focused on the way ESL/EFL students learned vocabulary in their classes. The students also completed a short vocabulary test involving generating synonyms and antonyms of high frequency words.

Procedure

ESL/EFL students completed the surveys during class time. The survey of EFL students in Thailand was administered by a representative, who held a Bachelor's degree in Education, but had no direct authority over the students surveyed. ESL/EFL teachers in the United States

were interviewed individually in person. EFL teachers in Thailand were interviewed individually by telephone.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative Analysis

The major themes discovered as a function of evaluating teacher surveys included: 1. Thai teachers felt that they used pictures to assist their students to learn vocabulary while American teachers used activities that helped the students to discover the function of vocabulary. 2. American teachers indicated that they used computers and the Internet to teach vocabulary to their students. 3. American teachers required their students to speak to each other during classroom lessons, and 4. Both American and Thai teachers were aware that Asian students were more likely to be shy, inhibited and fearful of making mistakes when they spoke. As a result, many Asian students were less likely to fully engage in activities that required them to learn vocabulary through speaking and interacting with classmates and the instructor.

Both American and Thai teachers indicated that they used recorded conversations, pictures and gestures as teaching strategies in assisting their students to learn vocabulary. However, American teachers were much more likely to endorse that they used teaching strategies that actively engaged students in learning vocabulary.

Quantitative Analyses

To examine the potential differences in teaching strategies between American and Thai teachers, Hotelling's T^2 was used to examine their responses to the speaking and listening sections of the survey.

The results indicated that there were significant differences between the strategies that teachers from the United States and Thailand use in teaching vocabulary, Wilkes Lambda = .24, $F(9,13) = 4.53$, $p < .007$. Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc analyses indicated that the significant multivariate effect was due to American teachers requiring their students to spend more time engaging in conversation to use their newly acquired vocabulary and in class/group discussion than their Thai peers ($p < .05$). For all other strategies there were no significant differences (See top panel A. of Figure 1).

Significant differences were also determined between the strategies that teachers from the United States and Thailand use in teaching English vocabulary, Wilkes Lambda = .22, $F(7,15) =$

7.54, $p < .0006$. Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc analyses indicated that American teachers use synonyms and word meanings as teaching strategies significantly more frequently than do Thai teachers ($p < .05$; see bottom panel B. of Figure 1).

Students' Perceptions of Teacher Strategy Usage

To examine the differences between students' perception of their teachers' strategy use in learning vocabulary, the data were subjected to a 2 (Nationality) x 2 (Gender) x 10 (Strategy) repeated measures analysis of variance with repeated measures on strategy (i.e., games, role playing, conversation, class/group discussion, retelling a story, film, song, synonyms, antonyms and word meaning). The results indicated that there were main effects of nationality, $F(1, 82) = 40.74, p < .0001$, gender, $F(1, 82) = 6.58, p < .0121$, strategy, $F(9, 738) = 48.55, p < .0001$, and interactions of Nationality x Strategy, $F(9, 738) = 7.05, p < .0001$, Gender x Strategy, $F(9, 738) = 2.39, p < .0113$, and Nationality x Gender x Strategy, $F(9, 738) = 2.79, p < .003$. Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc analyses further substantiated that there were significant differences in student perceptions in terms of strategy use by teachers. American ESL students perceived that their teachers used games, role playing, class/group discussion, retelling stories, and using film more frequently than the Thai EFL students ($p < .05$).

Interestingly, although there was some variability in the ratings among ESL/EFL students, they generally agreed with their teachers' perceptions of the speaking strategies used to teach vocabulary. In addition, there is considerable consistency between American teachers and their ESL students and Thai teachers and their EFL students for speaking vocabulary strategies. However, Thai teachers believed that they used games and role playing more than their EFL students did while American ESL students believed that their teachers used role playing more than their teachers did. There is considerable agreement between ESL/EFL students and their teachers in terms of the frequency of use of listening strategies.

Vocabulary Test

A vocabulary test that was comprised of ten words was given to each of the student participants in the study. The students were to answer each question in English. Half of the test asked the students to provide as many synonyms for the word that was presented and half of the test asked the students to provide antonyms for the word that was presented. In each case, students were assessed on the number of correct synonyms or antonyms (meaning) and the correct spellings (spelling) of each of the words provided.

Meaning. To examine the results of the vocabulary test with regard to meaning, the data were subjected to a 2 (Nationality) x 2 (Gender) x 2 (Type of Task) x 5 (Words) repeated measures analysis of variance with repeated measures on type of task (Synonym vs. Antonym) and words (words within task: Synonyms: “get,” “want,” “give,” “good,” “bad”; Antonyms: “small,” “slow,” “like,” “stupid,” “ugly”). The results indicated that there were main effects of gender, $F(1, 82) = 7.05, p < .01$, type of task, $F(1, 328) = 109.24, p < .0001$, and words, $F(4, 328) = 36.24, p < .0001$ and interactions of Nationality x Task, $F(1, 328) = 5.20, p < .025$, Gender x Words, $F(4, 328) = 3.15, p < .0157$, and Task x Words, $F(4, 328) = 21.97, p < .0001$.

Student-New-Keuls post-hoc analyses indicated that the main effect of gender was due to males outperforming females with the words “good,” “bad” and “small.” ESL/EFL students were asked to produce synonyms for “good” and “bad” and an antonym for “small.” The main effect of type of task indicated that synonyms were more difficult for ESL/EFL to produce than antonyms. The main effect of word was confounded with task in that different words were used for the two types of tasks, producing synonyms or antonyms. As a result, further analyses involving the word main effect will not be discussed. Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc analyses indicated that the Nationality x Type of Task interaction was due to American ESL students outperforming Thai EFL students on the Synonym Task and both groups performed significantly better on the Antonym Task.

Spelling. To examine the results of the vocabulary test with regard to spelling, the data were again subjected to a 2 (Nationality) x 2 (Gender) x 5 (Words) repeated measures analysis of variance with repeated measures on words (“get,” “want,” “give,” “good,” “bad,” “small,” “slow,” “like,” “stupid” and “ugly”). The results indicated that there were main effects of gender, $F(1, 82) = 5.30, p < .02$, and words, $F(4, 328) = 33.75, p < .0001$ and an interaction of Gender x Words, $F(4, 328) = 2.76, p < .03$.

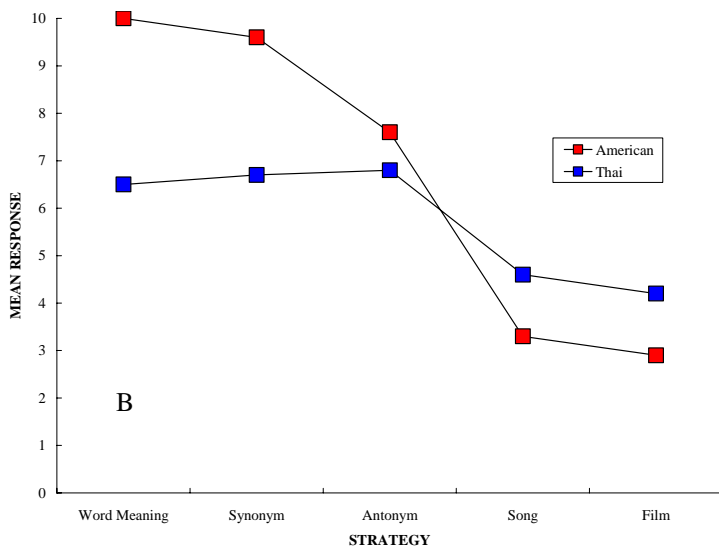
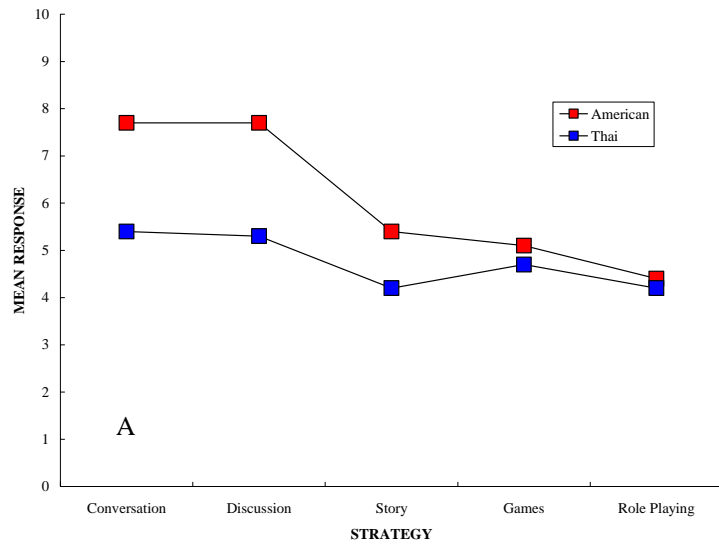


Figure 1: Mean response of usage of speaking (A.) and listening (B.) strategies by type of strategy and nationality of teacher.

Student-New-Keuls post-hoc analyses indicated that the main effect of gender was due to males outperforming females on the word “good.” Males outperformed females on all of the words; however, significance was only reached on the word “good.” The main effect of word was due to relatively good spelling performance for the words “good,” “small,” “slow,” “stupid” and “ugly” and relatively poor performance on the words “get,” “want,” “give,” “bad” and “like.”

Examining the frequency and types of vocabulary mistakes made by American ESL and Thai EFL students, indicated that when there were significant differences, Thai EFL students were making more of almost every type of mistake than American ESL students. The vocabulary test confirmed that differences between the two nationalities favored American ESL students. Thai ESL students made more errors in pronunciation, word choices, meaning and spelling.

Surprisingly, the results indicated that EFL teachers in Thailand used synonyms and meaning more frequently than ESL teachers in the United States. However, the results of the vocabulary test (test on synonyms and antonyms) showed the opposite; that is, that ESL students in the United States performed better than EFL students in Thailand. This may be because of the strategies that were used in teaching students. Active strategies (speaking strategies) were used more to teach ESL students in the United States, and passive strategies (listening strategies) were used more to teach vocabulary to EFL students in Thailand. This finding is consistent with Hwang, Lui, and Tong (2005) who also determined that students in active learning classrooms performed better than students in a passive learning classroom.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

The present study intended to compare and contrast the various strategies of teaching vocabulary to ESL students in the United States and EFL students in Thailand. This study indicates that active learning strategies appear to be more effective in teaching vocabulary than passive learning strategies. Active learning strategies may allow students to practice their newly acquired vocabulary in ways that are more comparable to English language environments and may offer greater opportunities for students to practice or experience what they have learned. These strategies could be a helpful additional tool for ESL/EFL teachers to improve their students’ English proficiency.

Additional research is necessary to determine if passive learning strategies can be effective in teaching specific areas of English vocabulary, and if so, what these specific areas are and in what circumstances. It is clear; however, that active teaching strategies appear to result in stronger vocabulary development in student who are learning English as a second language.

Thailand is promoting a change to more active learning strategies. However, Thai EFL teachers still tend to use the same passive strategies that focus on textbook-based grammar and translation (Maskhao, 2002). For successful change to take place in EFL classrooms in Thailand, teachers need to be trained to apply the active learning strategies in the most effective way. Teachers trained to use active learning strategies should learn and practice to feel more comfortable in using the strategies in their classroom, in order to create a more desirable environment for the students.

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Appendix A

Selected Survey Data - Teacher Survey

II. Speaking

2.1 What ways of vocabulary teaching do you use in speaking activities to increase your students' vocabulary and how often do you use each activity (1 = never, 10= always)? **Place an "X" on the line to represent your answer.**

1. Teach words through games
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Ask students to use the word they learned in role play
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Ask students to use the word they learned in conversation
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Whole class/group discussion
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Read students a story and ask students to retell the story
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

III. Listening

3.1 What ways of vocabulary teaching do you use in listening activities to increase your students' vocabulary and how often do you use each activity (1 = never, 10 = always)? **Place an "X" on the line to represent your answer.**

1. Teach words by showing films
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Teach words by using songs
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Give students the synonyms
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Give students the antonyms
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Provide the meaning of words
Never, _____, Always
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix B

Selected Survey Data - Student Survey

II. How do you learn words?

Please select the way you learn words. (1 = never, 10 = always). **Place an “X” on the line to represent your answer.**

1. Teacher teaches words through game **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Teacher asked you to use the word you learned in role play **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Teacher asked you to use the word you learned in conversation **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Whole class/group discussion **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Teacher reads you a story and asks you to retell the story **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Teacher teaches words by showing films **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. Teacher teaches words by using songs **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8. Teacher gives the synonyms (words that have the same meaning) **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9. Teacher gives the antonyms (words that have opposite meaning) **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10. Teacher tells you the meaning of words **Never**, _____, **Always**
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Bio-data

Ms. Kirati Khuvasanond, originally from Thailand, received her M.S. in teaching degree with emphasis in ESOL from the department of Curriculum and Instruction at Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas, in 2008. Ms. Khuvasanond is currently a doctoral student in Curriculum and Teaching at the University of Kansas. Her research interest is TESOL.

Dr. Tatiana I. Sildus holds a Ph.D. from the Kansas State University in curriculum and instruction with emphasis in second language acquisition. She is currently an associate professor of TESOL at Pittsburg State University. Dr. Sildus served as Ms. Khuvasanond's Master's thesis advisor. Dr. Sildus' research interests include language and cognition, vocabulary strategies/retention, communicative language teaching and cooperative learning.

David P. Hurford received his Ph.D. from the Department of Psychology, University of Akron, and is currently a professor of psychology and counseling and directs the Center for the Assessment and Remediation of Reading Difficulties at PSU. His research interests include reading disabilities/dyslexia, information processing and educational strategies.

Richard P. Lipka received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. He is a professor-emeritus at Pittsburg State University. His research interest is affective development with emphasis upon self-concept and self-esteem. In addition, he has written book chapters and articles for variety of professional journals.