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THE USE OF VOCABULARY NOTEBOOKS AND ITS EFFECT ON WORD RETENTION

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of vocabulary notebooks on word retention among Thai university students enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. It aims to: 1. Investigate the effectiveness of vocabulary notebook use and its vocabulary retention; 2. Compare the results of vocabulary notebook use among different groups of language proficiency level; and 3. Study students' attitudes towards their use of vocabulary notebook to help on word retention. Twenty-four participants were divided into a control group and an experimental group, categorized into three sub-groups based on English proficiency – low, proficient, and high. The research employed a mixed-methods design, utilizing pretest-posttest assessments, questionnaires, and a semi-structured interview. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, and frequency counts. Results showed that 60% ($\bar{X}$ 0.6) of students using notebooks improved posttest scores, compared to 44.44% ($\bar{X}$ 0.44) of those who did not. High-proficient

learners showed the most consistent gains, with all participants improving. Notebook use varied by proficiency in format, color, and content. Qualitative data (analyzed by coding) indicated generally positive attitudes, though some students considered it outdated and preferred digital alternatives. Findings suggest vocabulary notebooks can effectively enhance retention, especially when adapted to learners' proficiency and preferences, offering pedagogical implications for ESP instruction.

Keywords:

Vocabulary Retention, Vocabulary Notebook, English for Specific Purposes, Language Proficiency, Thai University Students

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of second language acquisition (SLA), enabling learners to comprehend texts, express ideas, and communicate effectively in academic and professional contexts (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). Insufficient vocabulary limits learners' ability to construct sentences and interpret meaning, thereby constraining overall language proficiency (Behjat, Nematollahi, & Kargar, 2017). Vocabulary knowledge is commonly conceptualized in terms of breadth (the number of words known) and depth (knowledge of meanings, usage, and relationships between words) (Anderson & Freebody, 1981). Both dimensions are essential, as knowing many words without understanding their appropriate use can still hinder effective communication (Alhatmi, 2023). Strong vocabulary knowledge is consistently associated with improved performance in reading, writing, and speaking (Schmitt, 2008).

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts, vocabulary learning is particularly important because learners must acquire both general English and specialized terminology relevant to their field. In Thailand, ESP courses aim to prepare students for workplace and academic communication in areas such as engineering, business, and hospitality. However, vocabulary instruction in Thai ESP programs has received relatively limited attention, with most studies focusing on general contexts rather than ESP-specific tools such as vocabulary notebooks

(Thiendathong & Sukying, 2021). This gap is significant, as ESP learners often struggle to retain technical vocabulary over time.

Vocabulary notebooks are widely recommended as an effective learning tool. They enable learners to systematically record vocabulary, including meanings, collocations, examples, and pronunciation (Dennison, 2014; Alhatmi, 2023), thereby promoting repeated review and deeper cognitive processing (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). This structured and personalized engagement enhances retention and supports learner autonomy. Previous research demonstrates that active use of vocabulary notebooks improves acquisition and long-term retention (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995; Laufer & Sim, 1985; Nguyen & Tran, 2019). Accordingly, this study proposes that vocabulary notebook use enhances vocabulary retention, with proficiency level as a potential moderating factor in Thai ESP contexts.

2. Review of Literature

Vocabulary acquisition is vital for language proficiency, especially in English for Specific Purposes, where it supports comprehension, communication, and academic achievement (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008; Read, 2000). A strong vocabulary enables learners to engage with specialized texts and enhances reading skills through improved semantic access and metalinguistic awareness (Moody et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2022). Explicit instruction helps bridge gaps in academic discourse by equipping students with the tools to understand specialized terminology (Beck et al., 2013; Winkler et al., 2021; Mukhtar et al., 2023).

Vocabulary notebooks offer a structured and personalized approach to vocabulary learning, promoting active engagement, metacognitive awareness, and autonomous learning (Coady & Huckin, 1997; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Schmitt, 2010; Nation, 2001). Effective notebooks typically include word meanings, collocations, example sentences, pronunciation, and part of speech, which provide multiple contexts for each word and support deeper semantic processing (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). Through documentation and repeated exposure, learners improve lexical retrieval and comprehension, particularly in ESP contexts (Webb & Nation, 2017; Gu, 2003). However, despite their widespread use among Thai students, research on their effectiveness across proficiency levels and learner attitudes remains limited (Singleton, 1999; Karami & Bowles, 2019; Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021).

Empirical studies show that consistent use of vocabulary notebooks enhances recall and supports deeper semantic processing, especially among higher-proficiency learners (Karami & Bowles, 2019; Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021). In Thailand, while bilingual dictionaries are commonly used, vocabulary notebooks are moderately valued but inconsistently applied, with engagement influenced by perceived usefulness and available guidance (Panduangkaew, 2018; Pookcharoen, 2016). Sukpinit (2018) studied “A survey of vocabulary learning strategies used by Thai graduate EFL learners” and found that vocabulary notebook was not very popular among vocabulary learning strategies; students preferred guessing from context and dictionary use. Whereas, Komol (2011) did a study on “The relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary knowledge of Thai undergraduate students” and found that vocabulary notebook-keeping had positive correlation with vocabulary knowledge, but students did not prefer to use it to learn vocabulary.

Research highlights vocabulary notebooks’ role in short- and long-term retention. Nguyen and Tran (2019) found learners using notebooks scored higher on immediate and delayed tests, while Dubiner (2017) reported sustained gains from structured use. Writing words significantly improves recall both immediately and after a delay (Jin & Webb, 2021), and meta-analyses confirm note-taking and review strongly support long-term retention (Jin & Webb, 2023). Thus, vocabulary notebooks foster durable knowledge when paired with regular review and active engagement.

Unlike previous studies, this research examines how participants used vocabulary notebooks and integrates qualitative data from interviews to capture attitudes across three proficiency groups. Insights reveal perceptions of usefulness and challenges faced. Combined with proficiency-based grouping, this approach offers a nuanced view of how notebook use and attitudes interact with retention, providing practical implications for tailored vocabulary instruction.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Due to COVID-19, 24 undergraduates were sampled and grouped into control (9 participants) and experimental subgroups (15 participants) by proficiency (they were grouped by

their derived grades of English foundation course from the previous semester); only experimental participants used vocabulary notebooks independently.

3.2 Tools

This study used pretest–posttest assessments, questionnaires, and interviews to measure retention and perceptions; all instruments were validated by three experts and revised accordingly.

3.2.1. Pretest-Posttest Assessments

The pretest-posttest assessments, each comprising 70 identical items, evaluated vocabulary retention in an ESP course. Administered via Google Forms, they included spelling, meaning, and application-based questions to comprehensively measure vocabulary knowledge and track the impact of notebook use on learner progress. The pretest was done at the beginning of the semester, while the posttest was done at the end of the semester (about 16 weeks after the pretest).

3.2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire, administered to vocabulary notebook users, comprised three sections: personal information, a nine-item Likert scale assessing attitudes and engagement, and an open-ended question for qualitative feedback. This design provided both quantitative and qualitative insights into learners' experiences and perceptions.

3.3.3. Semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews, based on the questionnaire's ten items, were conducted with willing participants (from experimental group: 2 from each sub-group) to gather detailed responses. Each session lasted 10–15 minutes, was recorded and transcribed, providing rich qualitative data for in-depth analysis of learners' experiences with a vocabulary notebook.

3.3.4. Data Analysis

Due to the small sample size, data analysis relied on basic descriptive statistics – percentages, means, and frequencies – to summarize response patterns and highlight key trends. This approach enabled meaningful interpretation and provided a foundational understanding of the study's variables despite the limited dataset. Coding (thematic analysis) with 0.93 of reliability which is highly agreed (Holsti, 1969) was also used for qualitative data (from open-ended part and semi-structured interview).

4. Results

4.1 Research Question 1. Does a vocabulary notebook affect vocabulary retention in a university level? If the answer is "yes" how much does it help?

This study compares pretest and posttest scores to evaluate whether vocabulary notebooks improve word retention.

Table 1: *Comparison of Students Who Used and Did Not Use Vocabulary Notebook*

Vocabulary Notebook Use/No use	Total number	No. of students with increasing scores	$\bar{X}$	S.D	No. of students with no increasing scores	$\bar{X}$	S.D
Use of vocabulary notebook	15	9 (60%)	0.6	0.49	6 (40%)	0.4	0.49
No use of vocabulary notebook	9	4 (44.44%)	0.44	0.5	5 (55.56%)	0.56	0.5
Total	24	13 (54.17%)	0.54	0.5	11 (45.83%)	0.46	0.5

As shown in Table 1, 60% of notebook users improved their scores, compared to 44.44% of non-users, suggesting a positive effect on word retention.

4.2 Research Question 2. Are there any differences among each proficiency group for the use of vocabulary notebook on students' word retention? (For example, the pattern of vocabulary notebook, how often do they use it, etc.)

Table 2: *Comparison of each proficiency group in the Experimental Group*

Proficiency	N	Pretest (Mean)	Posttest (Mean)	Gain Mean (SD)
High	5	27.0	50.6	+23.6 (11.35)
Proficient	5	24.4	38.4	+14.0 (19.22)
Low	5	23.6	17.8	-5.8 (7.92)

Vocabulary notebooks most benefited high-proficiency learners, showed moderate gains for proficient learners, and limited effects for low-level learners, indicating need for additional scaffolding.

Table 3: *Comparison of Controlled and Experimental Groups*

Statistic Data (N)	Controlled group (9)	Experimental Group (15)
Pretest (Mean / SD)	23.89/ 11.54	25.00/ 7.49
Posttest (Mean/ SD)	19.67/ 5.50	35.60/ 20.90
Gain (Post-Pre) (Mean / SD)	-4.22/ 13.04	+10.60/ 17.91
Within-group change	$t(8) = -0.972, p = .360, d_p = -0.324$	$t(14) = 2.292, p = .0379, d_p = 0.592$

Vocabulary notebook users improved significantly more than controls, showing a medium effect size; results remained significant after controlling for pretest scores, confirming effectiveness.

Table 4: *Pattern of Vocabulary Notebook Use Among Each Group of Proficiency Levels*

Description	H*	P*	L*	Total	%
1. Type					
1.1 Sheet	1			1	6.67%
1.2 Flashcard			1	1	6.67%
1.3 Notebook	(4)	(5)	(4)	(13)	(86.67%)
1.3.1 big	1	4	2	7	46.67%
1.3.2 small	3	1	2	6	40%
Total	5	5	5	15	100.00%
2. Color					
2.1 monotone	3	4	2	9	60%
2.2 colorful	2		2	4	26.67%
2.3 pencil		1	1	2	13.33%
Total	5	5	5	15	100%
3. Info					
3.1 only English vocabulary	1			1	6.67%

Description	H*	P*	L*	Total	%
3.2 English vocab + Thai meaning	3	5	5	13	86.66%
3.3 English vocab + Thai pronunciation + Thai meaning	1			1	6.67%
Total	5	5	5	15	100.00%

***Note:** H = High proficient, P = Proficient, L = Low proficient groups

Most students preferred traditional notebooks (86.67%). Size varied by proficiency, 60% used monotone. Most recorded English–Thai translations, while high-level learners sometimes used English-only approaches.

4.3 Research Question 3. What are students' attitudes towards their use of vocabulary notebook to help on word retention?

Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Fifteen students completed nine Likert-scale items on satisfaction with vocabulary notebook use; an open-ended question received no responses. The Likert-scale items are as follows:

Q1. You are satisfied with the use of vocabulary notebook to learn vocabulary.

Q2. You think that the use of the vocabulary notebook can help increase your vocabulary.

Q3. You are satisfied with the use of vocabulary notebook to help on word retention.

Q4. You think that the use of the vocabulary notebook can affect word retention.

Q5. You think that the use of the vocabulary notebook is necessary for English learning.

Q6. You think that the use of vocabulary notebook is necessary for word retention.

Q7. You think that the use of vocabulary notebook is out of date for learning vocabulary.

Q8. You think that there are more appropriate techniques to learn vocabulary than the use of vocabulary notebook.

Q9. You are aware of the usefulness of the vocabulary notebook and will continue using it to memorize words.

According to Likert (1976), five scales were used to measure the satisfaction of the participants for those 9 items:

4.21–5.00: Strongly Agree

3.41–4.20: Agree

2.61–3.40: Neutral

1.81–2.60: Disagree

1.00–1.80: Strongly Disagree.

Table 5: *Questionnaire Data on Students' Satisfaction of a Vocabulary Notebook Use*

Question	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
$\bar{x}$	3.93	3.93	3.87	3.93	3.93	4.20	4.27	3.73	3.33

Students viewed notebooks as somewhat outdated ($M=4.27$), agreed on most benefits, but were neutral about continued use ($M=3.33$). Interview data supported these questionnaire findings.

4.3.1. Satisfaction with the Notebook (Q1 & Q.3)

All participants were satisfied with notebook use, though 83% found it effective for retention, while 17% reported limited effectiveness.

A participant said, *"I feel satisfied with the use of vocabulary notebook because it helped me to remember the words I wrote in the notebook. It was like when we wrote them on the notebook, we could picturize the things we wrote in the notebook and we could remember the words."*

4.3.2. Perceived Effectiveness (Q2 – increase vocabulary, Q4 – affects retention)

All participants agreed notebooks increased vocabulary; 83.33% believed they improved retention, while 16.67% did not.

A participant said, *"...as from what I had written in the vocabulary notebook, I think from the lines we drew for each word, it helped us remember how each word was written because we saw the words, we also could remember the lines we drew..."*

4.3.3. Perceived Necessity (Q5 – for English learning, Q6 – for retention)

Eighty-three percent viewed notebooks as essential for learning and retention, while 17% preferred exercises or smartphone-based note-taking instead.

A participant mentioned, *"It was necessary to use the vocabulary notebook because when you wrote down the words, you would learn somethings for sure."*

4.3.4. Preference for Alternative (Q7 – out-of-date, Q8 – better techniques exist)

Half viewed notebooks as outdated, while others found them useful; many preferred digital tools like smartphones, apps, games, or flashcards instead.

A participant stated that “...it’s more convenient to note down on iPad or a smartphone now than noting into a vocabulary notebook...” while another one said “...most people may think noting in a smartphone, tablet, or an iPad may be easy but I think it could not be put in our memory comparing to while we spent time to write the words in the vocabulary notebook...”

4.3.5. Awareness & Continuance Intention (Q9)

About 67% found notebooks helpful and would continue using them, while 33% preferred smartphones or iPads for convenience and accessibility.

A participant said “...I would continue using the vocabulary notebook because I feel like writing helps me remember the words I note down in the notebook...”

4.3.6. Suggestions (Q10)

Students found notebooks effective, though some saw them as outdated and preferred digital tools, with mixed views on relevance.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The study shows that vocabulary notebooks enhance retention, with users achieving higher posttest gains (60%) than non-users (44.44%), supporting research on active engagement and repeated exposure (Bohay et al., 2011; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). This finding aligns with Laufer and Nation’s (1995) view that structured approaches promote deeper processing and with Nguyen and Tran’s (2019) evidence of long-term benefits from notebook use. High-proficient learners demonstrated the most consistent improvement, likely due to strategic practices such as compact formats and English-only entries, echoing Schmitt and Schmitt’s (2020) argument that vocabulary learning is incremental and personalized.

Usage patterns revealed a preference for bilingual entries among most learners, while advanced students adopted cognitively demanding strategies, consistent with Gitsaki’s (1998) emphasis on adapting methods to learner needs and Gu’s (2003) findings on strategy variation by proficiency. Attitudinal data confirmed the notebook’s perceived effectiveness, despite some viewing it as outdated compared to digital tools. This reflects the growing role of technology in language learning, yet supports Dennison (2014) and Thiendathong and Sukying (2021), who argue that traditional tools remain valuable when integrated thoughtfully.

However, the relatively weaker gains among low and proficient subgroups compared to the high subgroup may be explained by differences in strategy use and metacognitive awareness. Research indicates that lower-proficiency learners often rely on surface-level memory strategies (e.g., rote repetition, translation) rather than metacognitive or inferencing strategies that promote deeper processing (Gu, 2003; Gitsaki, 1998; Oxford, 2011). In contrast, high-proficient learners tend to employ self-regulatory strategies such as planning, monitoring, and reflective organization, which are strongly associated with vocabulary growth (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006). Furthermore, studies show that low-proficient learners benefit significantly from guided notebook use with teacher feedback, whereas unguided use often leads to random word selection and shallow engagement (Jang & Lee, 2021). These findings suggest that proficiency-related strategy differences, combined with the need for scaffolding at lower levels, may account for the observed performance gap.

Overall, these results underscore the importance of consistent, strategic use and tailoring vocabulary tools to learner proficiency and preferences (Krashen, 1989). They also reinforce calls for promoting autonomy through practical strategies (Tran, 2020; Chong & Reinders, 2022). Vocabulary notebooks, by encouraging self-directed learning and repeated review, fulfill this role effectively, supporting Coady and Huckin's (1997) view of autonomy as central to successful language learning. These insights highlight the need for balanced approaches that combine traditional and digital tools in ESP contexts (Mukhtar et al., 2023; Webb & Nation, 2017).

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