CHAPTER ONE

INTRODOCTION

## 1.1 Background and Motivation

In Taiwan, the use of the grammar translation method in EFL teaching remains prevalent in senior high school for the purpose of passing the college entrance examination. Thus, grammar and vocabulary naturally take precedence over listening, speaking, and writing abilities. As a result, grammar teaching has been regarded as the main method of school instruction for decades; nonetheless, vocabulary teaching deserves little attention.

Grammar instruction is not necessarily compatible with the development of English proficiency. The statistics provided by Chang (1998: 139) show that the mean of the TOEFL score of 458 of students in Taiwan only indicates their grammatical competence levels rather than their proficiency in vocabulary or listening. This mean score disqualifies many Taiwanese students from applying to US colleges that require a minimum TOEFL score of 550. Moreover, in Kang's study (1995: 53), the subjects receiving instructions in translation and definition-based approaches expectedly perform the worst in many recall tests.

Nonetheless, vocabulary size rather than grammatical difficulties is always the students' greatest hindrance and problem in reading and learning English (Nation, 1982: 20; Meara, 1980: 221). Huang (1997: 322) states that grammatical problems

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can be naturally solved as one grows older; however, vocabulary is not easily

expanded at the later ages. Undoubtedly, Chen (1999: 90) finds that only 6% of

NTOU students (in Taiwan) reach the 5,000-word level for receptive vocabulary; for

productive vocabulary, more than 68% students do not reach the 2,000-word level.

Furthermore, according to Yu (1998: 77), many of the 180 third-grade students at

Kaohsiung Senior High School inevitably choose to ignore unknown words when

reading owing to their deficiency in vocabulary.

A large vocabulary not only contributes to the students' academic achievements

but also is highly correlated with their reading comprehension level (Cronin et al.,

1986: 8-9). Therefore, the teaching of vocabulary should be given higher priority than

the teaching of grammar, phonology, and syntax (Laufer, 1986; Ward, 1999).

Consequently, in many foreign countries the instruction of morphology is suggested to

help students memorize unknown words (Caramazza et al., 1988; Cole et al., 1997;

Laudanna et al., 1994). However, in Taiwan, morphological knowledge is seldom

instructed in high school and little research about the morphological instruction in

high school has been conducted. Only few teachers, like Li (1998: 73-74), empirically

consent to the teaching of morphological analysis in high school.

## 1.2 Problems of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide some solutions to the following

problems that students or teachers may encounter while memorizing or teaching

vocabulary.

First, memorizing English words appears boring and tedious for senior high

school students in Taiwan. Although elements of the vocabulary items, such as their

pronunciations, the explanation of their definitions, and the description of their usages are taught, memory strategies are sadly lacking. From many English teachers' viewpoints, vocabulary instruction is a part of their teaching routine and vocabulary memorization is a task that students should carry out on their own. Consequently, without the aid of any memorization techniques from the teachers, students rely more dominantly on the graphic features of words and keep them in mind by rote (Tsai, 1999: 88). In a short period of time, students accomplish the memorization of a large number of words. Unfortunately, rote learning easily leads to quick forgetting. That is, most of words are ultimately dropped from the students' memories. Obviously, there is little success in rote memorization as students easily forget and quickly lose interest in learning English. Subsequently, their passion to learn English will disappear soon.

Second, both teachers and students are not familiar with morphological knowledge. Mahony et al. (2000: 193) point out that morphology receives less and less attention because morphological awareness is hard to understand and complicated. However, morphological awareness contributes to both vocabulary memorization (White et al., 1989: 284; Yu, 1998: 78) and reading comprehension (Nagy & Anderson, 1984: 327). In addition, Carlisle's statistics (2000: 180) indicate that a person's morphological awareness proves to be significantly related to his English ability. No wonder, Chinese readers, often unaware of morphological analysis, easily confuse new words with their familiar ones (Wang, 1997: 111). Consequently, many of them fail to expand their vocabulary size significantly. Because of the teachers' misconception of morphological analysis, morphological instruction cannot be effectively conducted throughout a student's career in senior high school. Evidently, the instruction of morphology is not well supported in Taiwan. Therefore, both

English teachers and students should be encouraged to learn morphological analysis, which may facilitate the memorization of unknown words and differentiation of similar words.

Third, time for vocabulary memorization is always limited. Teachers devote only a limited amount of time to vocabulary instruction in the framework of language courses. Students are totally engrossed in studying all the subjects in order to prepare for both the Subject Ability Test and the Department Required Test being held the following year. As Seamon et al. (2002: 323) state, retention is enhanced by repetition, and repetition produces familiarity. This is why students with very limited time to devote to repetitive retention are constantly looking for other strategies to facilitate vocabulary memorization.

## 1.3 Purpose of the Study

The study aims to investigate the discrepancy in the use of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots, the non-iconic morphological approach via commonly-used roots, and the traditional definition-based teaching methods in vocabulary memorization. It also explores the correlation between English vocabulary size, awareness of morphology, short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, and vocabulary spelling ability.

First, empirical evidence processed by the SPSS software[1] verifies the effects of the application of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots to

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[1] SPSS is an abbreviation for Statistical Package for the Social Science.

vocabulary instruction and memorization in senior high school. Second, this study discloses, differentiates, and compares the variances or significance of English vocabulary size, awareness of morphology, short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, and vocabulary spelling ability following the division and provision of the related statistics. Therefore, the adoption of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots to vocabulary memorization can alleviate the burden of students' academic pressures in terms of inadequate time and limited exposure to unknown words.

## 1.4 Research Questions

Based on the problems and purpose of the study, the answers to the following research questions are addressed and explored.

(1) Do students who are taught the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots perform better than those who are taught the traditional definition-based teaching method or the morphological method without icons in vocabulary memorization?

(2) Are there any differences in terms of awareness of morphology, short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, or spelling ability following instruction in the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots?

(3) Are there any differences in terms of awareness of morphology, short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, or spelling ability following instruction in the non-iconic morphological approach via commonly-used roots?

(4) Are there any differences in terms of awareness of morphology, short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, or spelling ability following instruction in the traditional definition-based teaching method?

(5) Does awareness of morphology, short-term memory for words, or long-term memory for words benefit vocabulary memorization?

(6) Does awareness of morphology contribute to short-term memory for words, long-term memory for words, or spelling ability in vocabulary memorization?

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

Because of the heavy academic pressure and limited time, senior high school students in Taiwan would prefer to adopt a more effective and efficient method to strengthen their vocabulary memory than rote learning. Since what is learned by rote is easily forgotten and is hardly retained in the long-term memory, students urgently need other techniques to facilitate their vocabulary memorization. In addition, Crow and Quigley (1985: 497) claim that those who receive word-by-word approach gain only some short-term rather than long-term advantages during the testing process. In other words, students definitely need better vocabulary memorization methods.

The experiment highlights the results and merits of the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots. Furthermore, this study shows the importance of awareness of morphology and long-term memory for words. Hopefully, students can completely shift their attitudes toward the structures, history, or cultural knowledge of words. When their interest in the formation of English words is triggered, vocabulary memorization ceases to be a difficult task for students. Subsequently, they can also

improve their other English abilities, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar.

## 1.6 Organization

This study is organized as follows: Chapter One is an introduction of study, which includes motivation, problems, purpose, research questions, significance, and organization of this study. Chapter Two is a literature review of the study, including studies that prove the necessity of vocabulary in language learning and teaching, the explanation of intra-lexical factors (i.e., phonemic, semantic, morphological features) in vocabulary teaching, and the introduction of different vocabulary teaching methods and the iconic-morphological approach via commonly-used roots. Chapter Three describes the methodology of the study, which consists of subjects, instruments, three different teaching approaches, procedures, and data analysis. Chapter Four presents the results processed by the SPSS software as well as the summary of the findings of the experiment. Chapter Five begins with the presentation of the discussions of the study, then the pedagogical implications, and finally the recommendations for further research.