

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Vocabulary has been commonly recognized as one of the most important aspects of language learning by second or foreign language researchers (Candlin, 1988; Chen, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Krashen, 1989; Knight, 1994; Laufer, 1997; Lewis 1993; Lin, 2000; Nation, 1990; Yang, 2002). Research has also shown that many ESL/EFL language learners consider vocabulary their first priority and spend lots of time learning vocabulary (Chi & Chern, 1989; Cortazzi & Jin, 1993; Hedge, 2000; Horwitz, 1988). Horwitz (1988) found in her survey that many of her ESL university subjects agreed or strongly agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is leaning vocabulary. Chinese learners also deem vocabulary very important as they often spend plenty of time memorizing vocabulary (Chi & Chern, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 1993). Vocabulary is essential when learning a language; nevertheless, learning vocabulary is not an easy task. Most learners view vocabulary as their language learning difficulty (Candlin, 1988) and feel that their lack of vocabulary poses a serious problem and results in a big obstacle when learning a foreign language (Krashen, 1989; Nation, 1990).

Vocabulary learning difficulty has also been encountered by Taiwanese EFL English learners. Students were frustrated by too many new words that occurred in an English text and thus caused their reading failure or difficulties (e.g. Chi & Chern, 1989; Hsieh, 1996, 1999, 2000; Huang, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Lee, 1987). In addition, a lot of research has reported students' lack of an adequate vocabulary is the major obstacle that hinders them from successfully comprehending English reading

texts or academic readings (e.g. Chern, 1993; Chen, 1998, 1999; Huang, 2000, 2003; Vanniarajan, 1997; Yang, 2002; You, et al., 2000).

Although vocabulary is widely acknowledged as a crucial language element when learning a language and vocabulary difficulty is experienced by many language learners, research has shown that in the past vocabulary was neglected; grammar and pronunciation were emphasized in the classroom (Allen, 1983; Channell, 1981; Gairns & Redman, 1986; Hedge, 2000; Huang, 1997; Laufer, 1997). Despite the fact that more attention has been paid to vocabulary in recent years, it seems that such negligence has not changed significantly (Hedge, 2000; Laufer, 1993). This negligence has not changed much as well in Taiwan's English teaching and learning context. Huang (1999) claimed that usually little or no attention was paid to vocabulary teaching by senior high school English teachers with the assumption that students would automatically learn vocabulary by themselves. Huang (1997) indicated that grammar-translation teaching method was still predominantly used in high school or college level classrooms and students had to learn vocabulary on their own. Consequently, vocabulary instruction has been continuously neglected in schools. McCarthy (1990, viii) is against such negligence and asserts:

No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The researcher of the present study is a junior high school English teacher and

has been teaching English for nine years—four years in senior high school and five years in junior high school. Many of my junior high school students who later became Senior I students complained that they had a huge amount of vocabulary to learn and it was difficult for them to deal with. Many senior high school English teachers have also expressed that their Senior I students feel pressured and frustrated by too many new words to learn. Many teachers think there is a big gap between junior high and senior high vocabulary amount. In fact, a number of studies on senior high school English teaching have reported such a gap. For instance, Huang (1999) mentioned that vocabulary is a big obstacle to many Taiwanese senior high school students and that a serious gap exists between senior high school and junior high school English education. He further reported that Senior I students had to face a huge amount of vocabulary, which is three times more than the junior high vocabulary amount. In Yang's (2002) study, he noted that junior high students in Taiwan have to learn 1,000 words<sup>1</sup>, while senior high school students have to learn 2,800 words<sup>2</sup>, almost three times more than words to be learned in junior high school. He also indicated that many English teachers have found that there is a vocabulary gap of vocabulary level between junior high graduates and Senior I students. Lee (1987) also indicated that it is not easy to go through the transition from junior high school English education to senior high school English education because of the vocabulary learning gap between them.

The above mentioned senior high school vocabulary amount, that is, 2,800 words is only the basic requirement prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Recently, the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Junior High School English Curriculum Guidelines (國民中學英語課程標準) (1994), junior high school students are required to learn 1,000 words.

<sup>2</sup> According to Senior High School English Curriculum Guidelines (高級中學英文課程標準) (1996), senior high students are required to learn 2,800 words.

College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC) (1995) has announced the most frequently used 7,000 words<sup>3</sup>, which are used as a standard of word choice for English textbook designing and test developing. Moreover, Chang et al. (1995) compiled an important word list with the total of 7,390 words for CEEC as a guideline for English test item development. In view of this, it seems that the required 2,800 words are not enough if senior high school students want to have good performance on college entrance English examinations. As Yang (1997) mentioned that students needed to learn 5,000 to 6,000 words in order to do well on the College Entrance English Examination. Huang (1997) mentioned that vocabulary is a heavy learning burden for EFL students in Taiwan. Yang (2002) compared the number of words needed to be learned by senior high school students from Taiwan, China, Korea and Japan. He found that Taiwanese high school students had the heaviest vocabulary learning burden.

It is very obvious that, due to the severe gap between 1,000 words and 2,800 words (or 5,000 or even 7,000 words mentioned above), many senior high school students have difficulties in learning vocabulary and their vocabulary learning load is heavy. Disappointedly, little research has been carried out to investigate senior high school students' vocabulary learning difficulties, not to mention studies particularly focused on Senior I students' vocabulary learning difficulties. Most of the studies are mainly focused on college or university students' vocabulary acquisition related issues. In light of this, more in-depth research is needed to explore senior high

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3 大學入學考試中心(CEEC)公佈高中常用字彙表 (1995)

school students' vocabulary learning and vocabulary difficulties with the aim to improve students' and teachers' vocabulary learning and teaching.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of the current study was to (a) seek for reasons to account for vocabulary learning difficulties encountered by the Senior I students, (b) investigate the vocabulary teaching techniques used in Senior I class, (c) find out the vocabulary practice activities used in Senior I class, (d) examine the vocabulary assessments given to Senior I students in class, and finally (e) explore vocabulary learning strategies used by Senior I students. It is hoped that teachers can benefit from the present study and have more effective ways to present, practice and measure vocabulary so as to help students learn vocabulary. As for students, it is hoped that they will be equipped with more vocabulary learning strategies to confidently cope with vocabulary and reinforce their vocabulary learning.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

For the purpose of the study, five research questions were addressed:

1. What are the reasons that account for vocabulary learning difficulties for Senior I students?
2. What vocabulary teaching techniques are used in class?
3. What vocabulary practice activities are used in class?
4. What vocabulary assessments are given to Senior I students in class?
5. What vocabulary learning strategies are used by Senior I students after class?