Vocabulary learning has been considered to be one of the major difficulties that students face when learning English. Nevertheless, a high value has not been placed on vocabulary in English classes, and it has been left to students to learn on their own. According to the implementation of Elementary Foreign Language Activities, a smooth introduction of reading and writing is expected at the beginning of junior high school from the perspective of the connection of English education. This study aims to explore the difficulties that Japanese junior high school students have in learning English vocabulary and to make some suggestions to eliminate these difficulties and enhance their vocabulary learning.

This thesis is composed of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a review of earlier research findings. The field of vocabulary learning has been studied from various points of view, and a number of earlier studies approaching the field from three angles, namely vocabulary knowledge, the vocabulary learning process, and vocabulary learning strategies, led to the method of exploration used in this study.

Chapter 2 provides the purpose and method of this study. The research questions pursued were as follows:

1) Do the connections among three facets of vocabulary knowledge: ‘meaning,’ ‘sound’, and ‘spelling,’ have distinct features or tendencies?
2) Do the vocabulary learning strategies that students use have distinct features or tendencies?
3) Does the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary learning strategies have distinct features or tendencies?

The participants in this research were 182 second-year students and 165 third-year students at a public junior high school. The instruments for data collection were a questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies and a vocabulary test. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of careful examinations of the relevant earlier studies of vocabulary learning strategies. The vocabulary test was also developed for each grade to investigate students’ vocabulary knowledge, focusing on the relationship among ‘meaning’, ‘sound’, and ‘spelling’. The vocabulary used for the testing was selected using three criteria: parts of speech, syllables, and word familiarity.
Chapter 3 provides the results and analysis. First, the vocabulary test is explored in detail. The test results are classified into five types according to the breakdowns that occur among three facets of vocabulary knowledge: ‘meaning’, ‘sound’, and ‘spelling.’ The breakdowns are then compared in visual and auditory reception. Various sample groups are also extracted and compared quantitatively in both the productive and receptive phases. Next, the vocabulary learning strategy used is compared among grades and various groups. The correlation between the vocabulary test score and the strategy used is then analyzed. Finally, the open-ended questionnaire is analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the findings suggested by the results and analysis in Chapter 3. Three or four findings are provided for each research question as follows. The findings for question 1 include the following: (1) ‘sound’ reception was the most difficult of all types of reception to perform successfully; (2) poor ‘sound’ reception caused poor ‘spelling’ production in both grades, and also caused poor ‘meaning’ production in the second grade; and (3) strong ‘meaning’ reception led to strong meaning production. The findings for question 2 were as follows: (1) strategies were used more frequently by the students whose learning had improved than by those whose learning did not improve yet; (2) the ‘romaji’ strategy was used by many students, but the ‘just looking strategy’ was used only by the students who showed improved learning. The findings for question 3 included: (1) three strategies, namely ‘self-testing’, ‘connection to synonym or antonyms’, and ‘writing rehearsal with meaning’, showed correlations with test scores; (2) the correlations changed step-by-step in accordance with students’ progress; and (3) the actual use of strategies differed from the correlations; in other words, students tended to use some strategies that were ineffective for them or not to use some strategies that were effective for them.

Chapter 5, the final chapter, summarizes the research, and offers the following pedagogical implications: First, ‘sound’ should be considered more important in English classes and tests. In order to enhance students’ ‘sound’ reception, more ‘sound’ use should be practiced in English classes and tests. Next, vocabulary learning strategies should be taught in accordance with students’ learning development. Concrete examples of effective strategy use should be shown to students, which could direct students to adopt more effective vocabulary-learning strategies. Moreover, the administration of the questionnaire on strategy use itself would encourage students to focus on vocabulary learning strategies.

This chapter concludes with a final note emphasizing the importance of teachers question on their own teaching.