Learning Vocabulary: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is an essential part in foreign language learning as the meanings of new words are very often emphasized, whether in books or in classrooms. It is also central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner. Recent research indicate that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times don't know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning. In this article, different challenges will be illustrated in order to clarify the difficulties which learners may face. Strategies to learn vocabulary more practical is another part which will be explained in the study.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Vocabulary learning challenges, Vocabulary learning strategies

1. Introduction

Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Cameron, 2001). Harmon, Wood, and Keser, (2009) as well as Linse (2005) state that learners' vocabulary development is an important aspect of their language development.

Vocabulary, as the foundation of any language, holds an important rank in the linguistic systems. Wilkins points out: "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972). Vocabulary learning is vital to foreign language acquisition. However, the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching has long since been far from satisfying. In addition, research shows that the vocabulary level of English majors at college is not optimistic at present. This is partly due to the fact that many English teachers deal with English vocabulary teaching in the traditional way, which has many problems. For example, it costs a great deal of time of the teacher to explain and analyze the usages of the words, usually in isolation. The class is teacher-centered and there is no activity in class to help the students to internalize the knowledge of the new words. The students cannot use the vocabulary flexibly and they feel bored of the traditional teaching model. Thus, the efficiency of vocabulary learning is rather low.

In learning a mother tongue or any foreign language, vocabulary is the most significant component. Language acquisition cannot take place without learning its lexis with unlimited shifts in meaning caused by various contextual variables (Yang & Dai, 2012). Vocabulary is one of the most essential parts, along with phonetics/pronunciation and grammar, required to learn a foreign language (Pan & Xu, 2011). In addition, vocabulary is the basis for language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without learning the vocabulary, it is difficult to attain any language proficiency. Vocabulary is the basis of acquiring a second language. Rohmatillah (2017) asserts that without learning the vocabulary communication in the second language becomes harder. Further, vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of the language; it is central to communicative competence. Low vocabulary knowledge poses severe problems to its learners, which consequently impedes the learning of English language (Alqahtani, 2015). Schmitt (2002) argues that vocabulary plays a vital role in teaching and learning the second language as lexical knowledge is fundamental to communicative effectively. The language of the human beings depends on the vocabulary used or gained. Thus, without vocabulary, the learners will be demotivated to use the language (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The term vocabulary has a variety of meanings proposed by teachers. To some, it represents sight-word vocabularies as the immediate recognition of words by students. Others describe it as meaning-vocabularies representing the words understood by students; it is also considered as

listening-vocabularies or students' understanding of the heard and spoken words. The content teachers further describe it as an academic vocabulary that reflects the content-specific words or students' understating of the oral and print words (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2011). Hiebert and Kamil (2005) provide another definition for the term vocabulary, which is the knowledge that the learners should have about the meanings of words. They argued that words come into two types, oral and print and the knowledge, too, comes in at least two types: receptive (understand or recognize) and productive (write or speak). The oral vocabulary belongs to a set of words for which the learners know the meanings while speaking or reading orally. The print vocabulary consists of words for which the learners know the meanings when they write or read silently. To Hiebert and Kamil, the productive vocabulary is a set of words that are well- known and used frequently by the learners in speaking or writing. The receptive vocabulary is a set of words, which are less frequent and for which learner assign meanings while listening or reading (Hiebert & Kamil, 2005).

In addition, the vocabulary has two types as active and passive. The active vocabulary refers to the words taught to students, and they can use these words in speech or writing as oral or written expressions. The passive vocabulary refers to the words that students recognize and understand in a context. Such a passive type of vocabulary occurs in a listening or reading material (Harmmer, 2007). Besides, Webb (2009) advocates that students recognize the receptive vocabulary when it is used in a context, i.e. the one seen in a reading text and the one that cannot be produced by students in a written or spoken form. To Neuman and Dwyer (2009), vocabulary refers to the words in spoken (expressive vocabulary) and listening (receptive vocabulary) forms that the learners need for a competent interaction. Hatch and Brown (1995) consider vocabulary as a group of words that the language users use differently. Vocabulary knowledge usually indicates the learners' progress. Learning the vocabulary has always been a skill taught and evaluated in other language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Schmitt, 2000). Instead, it promotes the development of language skills (Mart, 2012).

Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning. The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been recently recognized by theorists and researchers in the field. Accordingly, numerous types of approaches, techniques, exercises and practice have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary (Hatch & Brown, 1995). It has been suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping

learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge (Hulstjin, 1993, cited in Morin & Goebel, 2001).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The language learners must enrich their word-repository and develop linguistic repertoire by enhancing vocabulary. However, vocabulary-learning is challenging, particularly, for the nonnative speakers of English who face problems relating to the meanings of new words, spelling, pronunciation, correct use of words, guessing meaning through the context and so on. The reasons for such difficulties can be multifaceted.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is collecting and gathering the information given by different researches which have been done to identify the challenges of learning vocabulary and highlighting different strategies that can be utilized to simplify the process of learning vocabulary.

1.3. Review of the Related Literature

Vocabulary learning helps acquire language, develop the learners' reading proficiency, and is beneficial for reading comprehension (Tozcu & Coady, 2004). Learning the vocabulary encompasses four stages: discrimination, understanding meaning, remembering, and consolidation and extension of the meanings. First, the discrimination stage involves distinguishing sounds and letters. It helps in speaking, listening, reading, and writing because by distinguishing sounds, the learners pronounce words correctly and understand them when they read or hear. Secondly, understanding meaning involves understanding the concept of words by relating them to their referents. Thirdly, the remembering stage consists of the ability to retain the meanings. Fourthly, the consolidation and extension stage refers to learning new vocabulary and its integration in the learners' vocabulary system (Grauberg, 1997). However, learning the vocabulary usually causes a heavy burden on the learners. In other words, languages are productive and they continually create and add new words to their vocabulary stock. Oxford (1990) argues that generally, no rules are followed in learning the vocabulary as used in learning the grammar. Students usually encounter hundreds of words that they need to learn and practice during their studies.

Altyari (2017) considers that the Saudi students' weak linguistic performance in English reflects their deficient vocabulary knowledge. The researcher points out two compelling facts that contribute to poor vocabulary uptake and lexical insufficiency by the Saudi students in public high schools. The participants included thirty-five students from different educational levels and nine

male Saudi teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at intermediate and secondary schools. The data were collected through questionnaire and secondary school textbooks. The results reveal that students-participants ineffectively used vocabulary strategies such as by mainly relying on a bilingual dictionary, asking others to know the meanings and so on. Similarly, the results also indicate insufficient recycling of the vocabulary items and presentation of all aspects of the vocabulary knowledge. The study strongly recommends an incremental process of teaching vocabulary.

Rohmatillah (2017) investigated the difficulties faced by students in learning English vocabulary. This qualitative research, using interviews and questionnaires, points out at several challenges that hinder vocabulary-learning practices adopted by students. This study outlines the problems such as pronouncing and spelling words (written and spoken forms do not match most of the time), choosing appropriate meanings of words (complexity of vocabulary knowledge), inflections of word forms, (inadequate understanding of grammar), and an excessive number of words that students need to learn. It also reveals some important factors of difficulty in learning the vocabulary and attributes learning difficulties to various levels of language. To cite, pronunciation difficulties are related to the sound system of English, inflections and word forms are related to the morphological system, word associations, such as collocations, and phrasal verbs are related to semantics, the word categories relevant to syntax and so on. Khan (2011) also points out the vocabulary areas in which the Saudi target language learners face difficulties. These areas include learning the vocabulary meanings, spelling, using synonyms, prefixes, and suffixes.

Elttayef and Hussein (2017) probed the difficulties that teachers face in teaching English to the Arab learners. The study argues that the learners have insufficient basic knowledge; however, they are taught English in schools. Secondly, it points out the lack of attention on the part of the teachers in highlighting the significance of English in classrooms. It also asserts that the teachers' role in teaching English is doubled because their students depend them with the expectations that they would make students learn English soon. This study claims that the sociocultural background also affects teaching English to the Arab learners who attend English classes mostly to pass the courses. The researchers argue that with this weak background, students find difficulties later at college and universities when they engage themselves in specialized courses. This study concludes that the learners encounter difficulties in practicing language skills such as listening, speaking, and highlighted problems related to teachers and curricular (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017).

Farjami and Aidinlou (2013) argue that learning a foreign or second language at various levels of proficiency requires a high number of words for which the learners make efforts to retain

words in their long-term memory. This study also elaborates the learners' problems in learning the vocabulary and offers some practical learning and teaching strategies to improve these problems. However, it places stress on the long-term vocabulary techniques than the short-term ones. For such reasons, Farjami and Aidinlou suggest one of the practical approaches to enhance the students' vocabulary knowledge. They assert that teachers should present new vocabulary items in contexts, which are rich enough and provide the learners clues to guess the meanings (e.g., see Farjami & Aidinlou, 2013).

2. Method

This study tries to find out the challenges of learning vocabulary and different strategies to boost the pace of learning. To collect the required data different journals related to the topic were investigated and through several articles, the necessary information elicited.

3. Findings

3.1. Different types of vocabulary

Some experts divide vocabulary into two types: active and passive vocabulary. Harmer (1991) distinguishes between these two types of vocabulary. The first type of vocabulary refers to the one that the students have been taught and that they are expected to be able to use. Meanwhile, the second one refers to the words which the students will recognize when they meet them, but which they will probably not be able to pronounce. Haycraft, quoted by Hatch and Brown (1995), indicate two kinds of vocabulary, these two types are called receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary.

a. Receptive Vocabulary

Receptive vocabulary is words that learners recognize and understand when they are used in context, but which they cannot produce. It is vocabulary that learners recognize when they see or meet in reading text but do not use it in speaking and writing (Stuart Webb, 2009).

b. Productive Vocabulary

Productive vocabulary is the words that the learners understand and can pronounce correctly and use constructively in speaking and writing. It involves what is needed for receptive vocabulary plus the ability to speak or write at the appropriate time. Therefore, productive vocabulary can be addressed as an active process, because the learners can produce the words to express their thoughts to others (Stuart Webb, 2005).

3.2. Classification of vocabulary learning strategies

Word knowledge is an essential component of communicative competence (Seal, 1991), and it is important for both production and comprehension in a foreign language. Richards (1976) believes that knowing a word involves knowing:

• a great deal about its general frequency of use, syntactic and situational limitations on its use,

• its underlying form and the forms that can be derived from it,

• the network of its semantic features and,

• the various meanings associated with the item.

Knowing a word is also defined as knowing its spelling, pronunciation, collocations (i.e. words it co-occurs with), and appropriateness (Nation, 1990). Therefore, lexical competence is far more than the ability to define a given number of words and covers a wide range of knowledge which in turn requires a variety of strategies to gain the knowledge. Foreign language learners may then use various strategies to acquire the target language word knowledge. Taking this into consideration, second and foreign language researchers have made various attempts to classify vocabulary learning strategies employed by foreign and second language learners (F&SLL). Instances of such classifications are the taxonomies proposed by Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001) which are briefly discussed below.

Gu and Johnson (1996) list second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Metacognitive strategies consist of selective attention and self-initiation strategies. F&SLLs who employ selective attention strategies know which words are important for them to learn and are essential for adequate comprehension of a passage. Learners employing self-initiation strategies use a variety of means to make the meaning of vocabulary items clear. Cognitive strategies in Gu and Johnson's taxonomy entail guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. Learners using guessing strategies draw upon their background knowledge and use linguistic clues like grammatical structures of a sentence to guess the meaning of a word. Memory strategies are classified into rehearsal and encoding categories. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies encompass such strategies as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word structure (i.e., analyzing a word in terms of prefixes, stems, and suffixes). Activation strategies include those strategies through which the learners actually use new words in different contexts. For instance, learners may set sentences using the words they have just learned. All these suggested strategies can be summarized in a table as follows:

Table 1. Different Strategies in Learning Vocabulary

Strategies			
Metacognitive	Cognitive	Memory	Activation
* Selective Attention: Identifying essential words for comprehension * Self-initiation: Using a variety of means to make the meaning of words clear	* Guessing: Activating background knowledge, using linguistic items * Use of dictionaries * Note-taking	* Rehearsal: Word lists, repetition, etc. * Encoding: Association (imagery, visual, auditory, etc.)	* Using new words in different contexts

A comprehensive inventory of vocabulary learning strategies is developed by Schmitt (1997). He distinguishes the strategies into two groups: The ones to determine the meaning of new words when encountered for the first time, and the ones to consolidate meaning when encountered again. The former contains determination and social strategies and the latter contains cognitive, metacognitive, memory and social strategies. Schmitt includes social strategies in both categories since they can be used for both purposes. To Schmitt, determination strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience" (p. 205). Hence, learners try to discover the meaning of a new word by guessing it with the help of context, structural knowledge of language, and reference materials. For Schmitt, the second way to discover a new meaning is through employing the social strategies of asking someone for help with the unknown words. Beside the initial discovery of a word, learners need to employ a variety of strategies to practice and retain vocabulary. Learners thus, use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to consolidate their vocabulary knowledge. Cooperative group learning through which learners study and practice the meaning of new words in a group is an instance of social strategies for consolidating a word Memory strategies, traditionally known as Mnemonics, involve relating the word with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of imagery or grouping. Cognitive strategies in this taxonomy are similar to memory strategies but are not focused on manipulative mental processing. They include repetition and using mechanical means such as word lists, flash cards, and vocabulary notebooks to study words. Finally, metacognitive strategies in Schmitt's taxonomy are defined as strategies used by learners to control and evaluate their own learning, by having an overview of the learning process in general. Testing oneself is an instance of metacognitive strategies which provides "input to the effectiveness of one's choice of learning strategies, providing positive reinforcement if progress is being made or a signal to switch strategies if it is not" (Schmitt, p.216).

In a more recent attempt, Nation (2001) proposes taxonomy of various vocabulary learning strategies. The strategies in the taxonomy are divided into three general classes of 'planning', 'source' and 'processes', each of which is divided into a subset of key strategies. The taxonomy separates different aspects of vocabulary knowledge (i.e., what is involved in knowing a word). The first category (i.e., planning) involves deciding on where, how and how often to focus attention on the vocabulary item. The strategies in this category are choosing words, choosing aspects of word knowledge and choosing strategies as well as planning repetition. The second category in Nation's taxonomy involves getting information about the word. This information may include all the aspects involved in knowing a word. It can come from the word form itself, from the context, from a reference source like dictionaries or glossaries and from analogies and connections with other languages. Process is the last category in Nation's (2001) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. It includes establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies.

To Nation, noticing involves seeing the word item to be learned. Strategies at this level include putting the word in a vocabulary notebook or list; putting the word onto a word card and orally and visually repeating the word. He argues that although these strategies are all of recording type, they are useful steps resulting in deeper processing of words. Retrieval involves recalling the items met before. It contains recalling knowledge in the same way it was originally stored. Generating strategies include "attaching new aspects of knowledge to what is known through instantiation (i.e., visualizing examples of words), word analysis, semantic mapping and using scales and grids (Nation, 2001, p. 222). Generating strategies include rule-driven generation, as well; such as, creating context, collocations and sentences containing the new word. Besides, the mnemonic strategies and using the word in different context through four skills are also defined as generating strategies.

In general, although the taxonomies cited above may slightly differ in terms of strategies they categorize, they all provide a list of widely applicable vocabulary learning strategies. There are many words on which teachers may not be able to spend time within the class time limits. Thus, if students are equipped with a number of the strategies mentioned in the taxonomies, they can deal with these words on their own and as a result have access to a large number of target language words.

Employing this technique, the teacher encourages the students to find out word's meaning by elicitation (Takač, 2008). Elicitation maximizes learners' speaking opportunities, and acts as a way of checking learners' understanding (Thornbury, 2002). This technique also includes

personalization, which is using the word by learners in a context or sentence that is related to their life.

Related to the above techniques, Pinter (2006) argues that teachers are suggested to conduct planned presentations of vocabulary as various as possible, so it is better that teachers present word meaning and form by combining more than one technique. In addition, Takač (2008) points out that in choosing which techniques to be used in the classroom, teachers consider time availability, the content or teaching material.
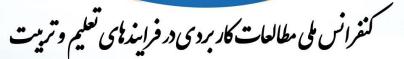
Beside the above techniques, there are also, vocabulary-learning strategies that teachers can take into account. They can train their students to use these strategies. Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) propose strategies to learn vocabulary as follows: (1) guessing from context, (2) using word parts and mnemonic techniques to remember words, and (3) using vocabulary cards to remember foreign language-first language word pairs. It is supported by Murcia (2001) who also proposes three strategies to learn vocabularies. The first strategy is guessing meaning from context; she says that a context is rich enough to give adequate clues to guess the word's meaning. The second strategy is mnemonic devices: she proposes keyword technique. When seeing or hearing the target word, the learner is reminded of the keyword. The third strategy is vocabulary notebooks; she suggests a memory aid in independent learning by setting up vocabulary notebooks.

Based on the techniques used for presenting new vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies, the experts suggest lots more techniques that are claimed to be helpful for students to learn vocabulary in an easier way. What the researcher sees as better way to teach vocabulary is by learning in rich contexts. According to Stahl (2005) in http://www.readingrockets.org, students probably have to see a word more than once to place it firmly in their long-term memories. This does not mean more repetition or drilling of the word, but seeing the word in different and multiple contexts.

Finally, teachers may encourage students to keep a vocabulary notebook because a great deal of vocabulary growth ultimately depends on the learner. They may have students who are successful vocabulary language learners share their notebook methods. For students who need help, they can demonstrate how to set up a vocabulary notebook that is neat and organized in a manner that will facilitate multiple retrievals of the words. If the notebook is not set up well, then learners are less likely to practice the words, which defeats the purpose of keeping the notebook in the first place. Moreover, in presenting one planned vocabulary item, the teacher usually combine more than one technique, instead of employing one single technique. Teachers are suggested to employ planned vocabulary presentations as various as possible (Pinter, 2006).

4. Conclusion

This piece of work aims to highlight the importance of vocabulary learning as an essential part in foreign language learning. Although it has been neglected for many decades, but nowadays it became a 'hot' topic for researchers. Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second/foreign language and a lack of vocabulary knowledge is an obstacle to learning.

An attempt is made to review the trends in the area of teaching vocabulary through various techniques ESL/EFL teachers use when teaching .Before presenting the meaning or form of vocabulary items, teachers need to notice the type of the vocabulary, the students' level and characteristics, and also the value of the techniques for the learners. In other words, students' age, level of education as well as English proficiency etc. may affect their learning, so teachers need to be aware of these differences when applying their teaching techniques. They can further provide their students with vocabulary learning strategies with opportunities to encounter words repeatedly and in more than one context.

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