Issues Involving Vocabulary Learning and Teaching: A Study of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will attempt to bring out the discussion and studies that have been carried out in the domain of second language vocabulary learning and teaching. To this end, I have examined the existing literature to highlight the conditions required for vocabulary learning and types of vocabulary learning. I have also presented a discussion on the different types of vocabulary teaching and the factors affecting it. The paper begins with a general introduction to vocabulary as a language component and its role in building second language proficiency. It ends with a discussion on the need to recognize the various vocabulary learning types and conditions by the teacher, so that they can make changes in their teaching techniques to maximize the scope for vocabulary learning.

Key words: Incidental learning, contextual learning, rich instruction, strategies, vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in determining the overall language proficiency of a second language learner. Schmitt (2000) maintains that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" (p. 55). Speaking in a similar tone, Nation (2001) describes vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary to each other. Given that a fair amount of vocabulary knowledge is indispensable for building second language proficiency, it is pertinent to investigate how second language vocabulary is learnt and taught, and the various issues involved in the process. In the following sections, I will discuss various aspects of vocabulary learning by delving into the existing literature.

VOCABULARY LEARNING

Vocabulary learning is a lifelong process. This is because although there is a limited set of grammatical rules in any given language, a person is unlikely to ever stop learning words throughout his/her life for the number of words is huge. Further, word learning is incremental in nature. We keep learning new words and new meanings to old words even in our first language (Thornbury, 2002).

Vocabulary learning can happen in various ways, depending upon the types of input that the learners receive, the types of exposures that they have and the kinds of strategies that they make use of to learn vocabulary. In the following sections, I will discuss some of these issues.

CONSCIOUS/INSTRUCTIONAL LEARNING

Instructional learning or intentional learning is a result of planned teaching and is very different from incidental learning. Here, the learners are conscious of their learning processes and thus can use various learning strategies to control and facilitate their learning. The most important aspect of instructional learning is the selection of the target words. This selection is done by the teachers, who decide which words to teach and how much time to spend on each word. Apart from classroom teaching, conscious learning of vocabulary can also take place if the learner decides to focus explicitly on vocabulary while reading or listening to a text. It is quite common for highly motivated learners who understand the role of vocabulary in academic success and beyond, to prefer intentional/conscious learning of vocabulary over incidental learning.

INCIDENTAL LEARNING

A good part of vocabulary acquisition or learning is incidental. Incidental learning is facilitated by exposing learners to language inputs from teachers, peers, the media, and through extensive reading. Keeping the enormity of English vocabulary in mind, all the words of the English language cannot be taught explicitly. Thus, there should be a provision for incidental learning of vocabulary in the curriculum. In incidental learning, learners do not explicitly focus on vocabulary learning. For example, while carrying out a reading task, the learners' focus is on the comprehension of the text and the follow-up comprehension questions. Vocabulary learning therefore takes place as a by-product of reading. With multiple exposures to unfamiliar words, the learner is more likely to learn and retain the meanings of these words. Incidental vocabulary learning can also take place through listening to audio materials and through contextual guessing, which has been discussed in the following section.

CONTEXTUAL LEARNING

Learning from context refers to the subconscious or incidental learning of vocabulary while engaged in reading or listening. This type of learning is often contrasted with direct intentional learning and teaching of vocabulary. The main focus of the learners' attention here is on the message of the text and not on the form. Learning from context requires the learner to gloss the meaning of the target word from the context in which it is used. However, for the learners to be able to gloss the meaning of the word using the clues, they need to be familiar with 95 per cent of the running words in the text (Liu & Nation, 1985). The coverage of 95 per cent implies that in every 20 running words (two lines), there is only one unknown word.

Another prerequisite for vocabulary learning from context is learner proficiency. Studies have shown that learners with high proficiency are able to gloss the meanings of unknown words from the context much better than learners who are less proficient. Richness of the context also has an impact on contextual vocabulary learning. That is to say, not all texts have equal scope for contextual guessing. Some texts are rich with contextual clues and thus make the job of the learner easier, whereas there are texts which are context-reduced. In such texts, learners might not be able to guess the meanings of the unknown words for there is little help from the context.

LEARNING IN ISOLATION

Vocabulary learning in isolation may not always result in successful vocabulary production. This is because learning in isolation does not provide scope for a learner to understand the typical contexts in which a word is generally used. Teaching vocabulary in context or integrated vocabulary teaching is a relatively new concept (Nation, 1983; Carter, 1987). In the *structural* paradigm, where language was viewed as system of systems, vocabulary used to be taught and learnt in isolation (Howatt, 1984; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The common belief was that the greater the number of words a learner remembered, the more it would help him/her in language activities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, with the advent of communicative approach to language teaching, it was suggested by the experts of pedagogy and theoreticians that vocabulary should always be taught in integration with other language skills so that learners do not just learn vocabulary for the sake of learning; rather they learn vocabulary with the objective of using it in real world situations.

FACTORS AFFECTING VOCABULARY LEARNING

There are several factors which influence the process of vocabulary learning. Word frequency is one of the factors which determines whether a word is likely

to be learned quickly and easily or not. Research studies have shown that high frequency words are learnt faster than low frequency words. The grammatical category of words also has a role to play in their learnability. Studies (Gentner, 1982; Childers & Tomasello, 2006) have shown that nouns are more easily learnt than verbs. The imageability of a word is another factor which may affect the learnability of a word. It has been observed (Paivio, 1971; Yui, Ng, & Perera, 2017) that concrete words are more easily learnt than abstract words, as the learner can easily associate concrete words with their representations in the real world as compared to abstract words, whose representations are mostly related to emotions and ideas. Lastly, words which are cognates are more easily learnt than words which do not have equivalence in the learner's L1.

VOCABULARY TEACHING

Teachers need to be careful while dealing with vocabulary, and should design their teaching plan in such a way that it focuses on the "learning conditions of noticing, retrieval and generative use" (Nation, 2001, p. 109). Though all the words in any language cannot be taught in a formal setting covering all the aspects of word knowledge, at the very least, learners can be made to learn both the meaning and the form of a new word (Thornbury, 2002).

In fact, a well-designed vocabulary program should promote incidental learning by creating scope for explicit teaching, and include activities focusing on incidental learning. Explicit approaches to vocabulary learning, whether teacher-led in a classroom or through self-study, can provide for deeper mental processing. However, it may not help in learning all the aspects of word knowledge. "Some kinds of word knowledge, such as collocation, register constraints and frequency and can only be fully grasped through numerous exposures" (Schmitt, 2000, p.146).

While there are various techniques for effective teaching of vocabulary, the goal of vocabulary teaching should always be to make learners notice, retrieve and use the taught words successfully. Noticing can be encouraged through the use of coloured, highlighted, or flashing text; retrieval can be encouraged through the use of delay and by providing gradually increasing clues; generative use can be encouraged by meeting the vocabulary in a variety of contexts and in a variety of forms: spoken, written and pictorial (Nation, 2001).

One issue that always arises with vocabulary teaching is the dilemma of the presentation of form (orthography and pronunciation) or meaning first. As discussed by Thornbury (2002), the greater the gap between the presentation of the form of a word and its meaning, the less likely it is for the learner to make a mental connection between the two. For example, while teaching a word

like *circumvent* the teacher may ideally present the spelling, pronunciation and meaning of the word together not over a period of time so that a strong form-meaning association is made in the mind of the student. There are also some other issues which still remain unresolved—whether the written form or the spoken form should be presented first and whether words should be presented in context or isolation.

There is a strong argument in the pedagogy of vocabulary for teaching learners a core vocabulary of 2000 high frequency words as early as possible in the learning process. This core vocabulary, also known as threshold level vocabulary will serve the needs of the L2 learner in most situations. Further, most researchers recommend that the learner be exposed to a basic vocabulary of at least 3000 word families. For more specialized situations, a working vocabulary of 5000 word families is desirable (Nation, 2001).

TIME-SPACED TEACHINGC

Vocabulary acquisition is an incremental phenomenon. It takes years and years to build a sound vocabulary in a second language. One of the techniques for building a sound vocabulary is through time-spaced teaching. Time-spaced teaching refers to the re-teaching of the taught words at regular intervals, so that learners can learn all the aspects of the word. Research (Sozler, 2012; Nemati, 2009) suggests that vocabulary learning is mostly dependent on memory. However, the nature of memory is such that it loses information if it is not used regularly or reinforced through repetition. By repeating the same set of items, time-spaced teaching ensures that vocabulary is retained in the memory.

Time-spaced repetition is often contrasted with massed repetition. Massed repetition involves spending a continuous period of time, say fifteen minutes or so, in giving repeated attention to a word. In time-spaced repetition also a word is given repeated attention, but over a period of a few hours or days. For example, a small set of new words can be taught for three to four minutes, then these words can be taught again for another three to four minutes a few hours later. The same set of words can be taught for yet another three to four minutes a day later, two days later and finally a week later. According to Nation (2001), "...spaced repetition results in learning that will be remembered for a long period of time. The repetition should be spaced at increasingly larger intervals. (p-74)"

RICH INSTRUCTION

In the previous section, I described how instead of spending a lot of time on a particular word at one go, the same amount of time can be divided into time slots over a period of time. However, the basic question that arises here is, do we need

to spend time on individual words? If yes, how much time do we need to spend on each word? Do we need to spend the same amount of time on every word we teach? Or, do we need to be selective in spending time on individual words? What are the factors that we should take into consideration before deciding on the amount of time that we are going to spend on a particular word while teaching?

Not all words need to be given the same amount of time and attention while teaching. Some words need a short clear explanation, so that learners can continue with the main task of understanding a text. Other words might need a translation or a quick definition in the form of a synonym. In fact, sometimes even a quickly drawn diagram will be enough for the learner to understand the word and carry out the task. However, sometimes, because a word is very important or has high ecological validity, it needs to be given more attention, or what Beck, McKeown and Omanson (1987) call "rich instruction".

Rich instruction involves spending time exclusively on a word by drawing the students' attention to various aspects of that word, other than the context in which it is used. However, considering the huge number of words in a language, it is not humanly possible to teach every word through rich instruction. To decide whether a word will be taught through rich instruction or not, the following points may be considered. Rich instruction can be effective for low frequency words and words for which learners have special needs. Rich instruction can be provided when learners have already met the word several times, and are ready to make it a part of their usable vocabulary. Lastly, the degree of rich instruction is dependent on the learning-burden[1] of a word.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY TEACHING

> From a teaching point of view, in courses not focused on well-defined areas of use, only the words in the most frequent 2000 words of English (the high frequency words) deserve individual attention. Beyond that level, that is the words in the third, fourth, fifth 1000 levels and onwards, teaching attention should be directed more towards strategies for learning and coping with these words, such as guessing from context, memorization techniques and procedures, and the learning of word parts. (Laufer & Nation, 1999, p. 36)

Given the enormity of vocabulary in the English language, the above quotation justifies the need for enabling learners to use vocabulary learning strategies to learn vocabulary on their own. There are various vocabulary learning strategies that teachers can inculcate in the learners. Some of these are:

1.   Learners can be made to use the newly learnt word immediately in sentences

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[1]   Learning-burden is working out what needs to be taught about a word. Learning-burden differs from word to word owing to several factors such as the already existing knowledge of the second language and the ways in which the word relates to first language knowledge.

so that they understand the context in which the word has been used.

2.   Learners can be encouraged to keep a vocabulary journal where new words can be listed with example sentences.

3.   Most words in English are built from a common root, therefore learners can be helped to understand the affixation system of English language so that they begin to understand other words that use the same root.

4.   Mnemonics can be a great tool to learn new words with which learners have no prior association in their mental lexicons.

5.   Learners can be encouraged to visualize and relate the word with its real world reference so that the association between the word form and meaning is strong.

In some cases, learners might have their own strategies that may be different from the one's taught by the teacher. In such cases, the teacher needs to encourage the learners to use and share their strategies with their peers so that their peers can also benefit from them. Vocabulary learning strategies are very much a part of language learning strategies. Nation (2001) suggests a taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, which has been presented in the following table:

Table 1

A taxonomy of types of vocabulary learning strategies

General class of strategies	Types of strategies
Planning: choosing what to focus on and when to focus on it	Choosing words Choosing the aspects of word knowledge Choosing strategies Planning repetition
Sources: finding information about words	Analysing the word Using context Consulting a reference source in L1 or L2 Using parallels in L1 and L2
Process: establishing knowledge	Noticing Retrieving Generating

Source: Nation (2001, p. 218)

FACTORS AFFECTING VOCABULARY TEACHING

While teaching vocabulary, teachers must decide whether they need to devote more time to teaching high frequency words or low frequency words. They also need to decide whether they want to teach all the unfamiliar words that learners comes across while reading a text or whether they should equip them with some strategies to enable them to deduce the vocabulary on their own. Further, teachers need to be careful about the grammatical category of the word(s) that they are teaching. If they are presenting the noun form of a word, they should ensure that learners learn its other forms (such as verb, adverb, etc.) as well, so that they do not treat them as new words when they come across them in new contexts. Another factor which may pose a problem for teachers is the imageability of a word. Abstract words cannot be visualized the way concrete words can be, and thus require different teaching techniques. Similarly, cognates are easy to teach compared to non-cognate words as the teacher can always provide an equivalence for them in learner's L1. Finally, the learning burden of a word also determines the teachability of a word. If a word has high ecological validity, the teacher may decide to spend more time on that word rather than another word which the learner may not use very often.

CONCLUSION

From these discussions, it is clear that in a second language learning context, how vocabulary is taught plays a significant role in facilitating vocabulary learning for the simple reason that second language learners neither have the quality nor quantity of exposure to the target language. For second language teachers therefore, it is important to be aware of the different ways of vocabulary learning and to be able to modify their teaching techniques according to learner needs so as to maximize the scope for vocabulary learning in the classroom. Finally, the teacher should always aim to reactivate the vocabulary knowledge that the learner already possesses at regular intervals, so that the learner does not forget the words due to lack of use. For teachers to be able to do that, they need to use innovative teaching techniques and plan their lessons well.

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