



## EXAMINE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN LANGUAGE GETTING TO KNOW AND HOW TO STUDY

Dr. Sudesh

House No. 1704, Sector-9, Karnal, Haryana (Indian)

Email: [sonia086.rajpoot@gmail.com](mailto:sonia086.rajpoot@gmail.com)

**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 (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008) In this article, I summarize important research on the importance of vocabulary and explaining many techniques used by English teachers when teaching English, as well as my own personal view of these issues. The main purpose of the present study is to examine the role of visual materials in teaching English vocabulary. The first-mentioned researcher took a sample of grade 8 students and their English language teachers teaching in three Second Cycle Primary Schools in Robe town and its surrounding in Bale Zone. One hundred and twenty students out of 580 and all eight English language teachers were participated in the study. Four research instruments: questionnaire, observation, interviews and document analysis were used to collect the data. The questionnaire was filled in by the entire subjects, while interview was conducted to sixteen students and four teachers. Eight lessons were observed while teachers were presenting vocabulary in three sample schools with the help of checklist. Accordingly, it was recommended that teachers should use various types of visual materials that enhance students' vocabulary knowledge as much as possible. Knowing the importance of visual materials is not enough unless teachers use them in the actual teaching of the meaning of words. Hence, it is recommended that teachers should use easily available materials in order to help the students in understanding the meaning of words. Moreover, since the student's textbook does not include adequate number of visual materials; it is advisable to incorporate more visual materials to facilitate students' vocabulary learning.

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**Introduction:** Vocabulary is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Wilkins (1972) wrote that “. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (pp. 111–112). This point reflects my experience with different languages; even without grammar, with some useful words and expressions, I can often manage to communicate. Lewis (1993) went further to argue, “lexis is the core or heart of language” (p. 89). Particularly as students develop greater fluency and expression in English, it is significant for them to acquire more productive vocabulary knowledge and to develop their own personal vocabulary learning strategies. Students often instinctively recognize the importance of vocabulary to their language learning. As Schmitt (2010) noted, “learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books” (p. 4). Teaching vocabulary helps students understand and communicate with others in English. Voltaire

purportedly said, “Language is very difficult to put into words.” I believe English language students generally would concur, yet learning vocabulary also helps students master English for their purposes. The concept of a word can be defined in various ways, but three significant aspects teachers need to be aware of and focus on are form, meaning, and use. According to Nation (2001), the form of a word involves its pronunciation (spoken form), spelling (written form), and any word parts that make up this particular item (such as a prefix, root, and suffix). An example for word parts can be seen with the word uncommunicative, where the prefix un- means negative or opposite, communicate is the root word, and -ive is a suffix denoting that someone or something is able to do something. Here, they all go together to refer to someone or something that is not able to communicate, hence uncommunicative. Nation (2001) stated that meaning encompasses the way that form and meaning work together, in other words, the concept and what items it refers to, and the

associations that come to mind when people think about a specific word or expression. Use, Nation noted, involves the grammatical functions of the word or phrase, collocations that normally go with it, and finally any constraints on its use, in terms of frequency, level, and so forth.

#### **Review of Literature:**

Vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Underscoring the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language” p. 55) Nation (2001) further describes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. The importance of vocabulary is demonstrated daily in and out the school. In classroom, the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary. Researchers such as Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) and others have realised that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful second language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. In English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2011). Rivers and Nunan (1991), furthermore, argue that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because without an extensive vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions we may have learned for comprehensible communication.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs) have been examined from two main strands: (1) from a cognitive psychological view point, and (2) from a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective (Kudo, 1999). The scope of this paper focuses on the latter. The term learning strategy has been defined as any “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situation” (Oxford, 1990; p. 8). The research on vocabulary learning and/or acquisition has not received the primary attention until the early 1980s. To most applied linguists, vocabulary learning was known “as a ‘neglected aspect of language learning’ ” as noted by Meara (1980), who criticized and characterized its negligence in SLA research (Meara, 1980; p. 1; Lightbown, & Spada, 2006, p. 96). Meara (1980) argued that there were no clear theories on

vocabulary acquisition until the late 1970s. Researchers of vocabulary learning, such as Nation (1990), Laufer (1986), and Schmitt (1998), have come to agree that more research is needed to investigate in this area, which has been the focus of several SLA researchers for the last three decades. ELLs acquire different amounts of vocabulary than native speakers. On the one hand, a recent study showed that the volume of vocabulary acquired by native English speakers is 1,000 words annually before college level, which then becomes 2,000 words per year (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). On the other hand, for language learners, the studying time for vocabulary acquisition and/or learning must be doubled especially for academic purposes. In addition to that, most recent research and studies on teaching vocabulary have focused on the necessity to expose ELLs to new words through oral and written resources from several contexts within the curriculum (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Accordingly, in order to capture the global and functional meaning of new vocabulary, language learners are highly encouraged to be exposed to the word knowledge explicitly. For instance, Nation (1990) has claimed that language learners need at least 5-16 times the exposure to master new words. Far from curriculum-based instruction in learning vocabulary, language learners spend an estimated hundreds of hours each week studying or communicating by themselves in which they are exposed to a huge amount of vocabulary per day. Like first language acquisition, second language acquisition is maintained gradually by the learning environment that surrounds ELLs and language learners of a particular language. However, ELLs usually develop vocabulary incidentally through conversation as they network socially with English speakers inside school and out (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). In doing so, learners must select the right strategy to reach a better understanding of the new texts they read or study. Hence, it becomes important to know how ELLs study vocabulary and which strategies they follow. It is also important to know which of these strategies are more effective. These are the core questions that guided my research to identify vocabulary learning strategy. There are several VLS introduced in language learning studies. Research has shown that second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 readers to overcome (Huckin, 1995). In production, when we have a meaning or concept that we wish to express, we need to have a store of words from which we can select to express this meaning or concept. “When students travel, they don’t carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries” (Krashen, as cited in Lewis, 1993, p.25) Many researchers argue that vocabulary is one of the most important-if not the most

important- components in learning a foreign language, and foreign language curricula must reflect this. Wilkins (1972) states that: “There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say ... While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” p97). Other scholars such as Richards (1980) and Krashen (1989), as cited in Maximo (2000) state many reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary. “First, a large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language. Second language acquirers know this; they carry dictionaries with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that the lack of vocabulary is a major problem”. On the other hand, vocabulary has been acknowledged as L2 learners’ greatest single source of problems (Meara, 1980). This remark may possibly reflect that the openness of a vocabulary system is perceived to be a cause of difficulty by learners. Another possible reason is that, unlike syntax and phonology, vocabulary does not have rules the learners may follow to acquire and develop their knowledge. In other words, it is not clear in L2 vocabulary learning what rules apply or which vocabulary items should be learned first. Oxford (1990) also claims that vocabulary is “by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language, whether a foreign or one’s mother tongue, because of tens of thousands of different meanings” Despite these difficulties that language learners face in L2 vocabulary, they still have to deal with it in their examinations as “vocabulary has traditionally been one of the language components measured in language tests” (Schmitt, 1999, 189). Furthermore, many learners see second language acquisition (SLA) as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary and therefore they spend a great deal of time on memorising lists of L2 words and rely on their bilingual dictionary as a basic communicative resource. As a result, language teachers and applied linguists now generally recognise the importance of vocabulary learning and are exploring ways of promoting it more effectively. Some of this research takes the form of investigation of strategies learners use specifically for vocabulary (VLS), which is our focus of attention.

#### **Vocabulary Knowledge:**

In vocabulary teaching researches, vocabulary knowledge can be divided into internal knowledge and external knowledge, including the definition or conceptual meaning, its grammar, connotations, pragmatic rules and the socio-cultural message it carries. Vocabulary does not only refer to the single words but also the —chunks such as phrases and

idioms. Thus, integrated vocabulary teaching should include following parts:

A. Pronunciation and Spelling In Standard pronunciation and correct spelling are the essential parts of vocabulary teaching and learning. The college students have to know what a word sounds like (pronunciation) and what it looks like (spelling). When teaching vocabulary, teachers should draw them attention to pronunciation and spelling together, and clarify the relationships between them.

B. Grammar The grammar of new vocabulary will need to be taught if this is not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An English word may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts or may have some idiosyncratic way of connecting with other words in sentences. For example, when teaching a new verb, teachers should give its past form if this verb is irregular (forbid, forbade), and teachers might note if it is transitive or intransitive. Similarly, when teaching a noun, teachers need to present its plural form if the noun is irregular (criterion, criteria), or draw them attention to the fact that it has no plural at all (people).

C. Word Formation Vocabulary items, whether one-word or multi-word, can often be broken down into their component bits, and how these bits put together is another piece of useful information which may be worth teaching. If students know the meaning of sub-, un-, and -able, this will help them to guess the meaning of words like substandard, ungrateful and renewable.

#### **Evaluation of Approaches to Teaching English**

With the development of scientific vision in every field of life, more attention has started to be paid to Method to be taken up to achieve an aim systematically. The method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material. The queries regarding what should be taught and how should it be taught are related in an intimate manner, for if better methods of teaching are implemented, it is possible to learn more. If we wish to gain better results, we must devise and embrace better methods. In this relation the proverb "the ways justify the end" has more truth. we must reckon those methods that assist us in achieving the desired aims. However, methods are never ends in themselves. No methods is good or bad in itself. We should examine and evaluate the method in view of the objectives in critical way.

**The Translation Method:-** The translation method that is known as Grammar-translation method or the classical method of teaching English came to India with the Englishmen who wished to originate an English knowing class of people to manage administration. Even the learned teachers of classical language like Persian, Sanskrit, Latin, German, French, English, etc. have also been taught by this

method. In this method, the purpose is to teach the pupils grammar, translation, meaning of new words, phrases and sentences. The teacher explains the meaning of each new word by translating them into mother-tongue. At the same time, he indicates the grammatical rules and forms. So it lays emphasis upon reading. Mother tongue predominates over the teaching. It is profitable that when English words, phrases and sentences are translated into the student's mother-tongue, his comprehension becomes better and quicker. The working knowledge of mother-tongue assists them in learning the grammar of a foreign language. It does not require any material aid except textbooks. It can be employed even in over crowded classes. Students 34 studying in Hindi medium schools find it easier to learn English through translation method. But now English has so many variety of use, this method is not considered as effective and workable as it was.

**Problems and Probable Solutions:-** Language is a product of a particular culture that is formed by its geographical situation, nature, climate and human beings, their manners of living, their habits and conduct etc. In return language explains all these. Everybody knows that the two cultures/races can never be the same. There is no perfect language which can explain all cultures and every environment. The idioms, phrases and vocabulary, which are evolved in the culture and surroundings of a particular country, hardly get matching equivalents in any other language. The English words like field, drawing room, ice, etc. have no equivalents in Hindi or other Indian languages. So, word-for-word translation is really impossible.

**The Direct Method:-** The direct method (natural method) that was first introduced in France in 1901 came into practice as a reaction due to the limitations of translation method. The motives of the method came from Germany and were made popular by the International Phonetic Association of French teachers founded in 1886. The exponents of the natural method presumed too much of likeness in learning the mother tongue and the foreign language. That is to say, the maximum exposure of the learner to the target language without interpositions from the mother-tongue in the smallest degree would empower the learner to learn the language, we should create the atmosphere or chances more for learning the English language in the school atmosphere than they are learning the mother-tongue in the home atmosphere. The basic principle is that an alien word or word-group must be united with its meaning directly without the habitual interference of the mother-tongue, H.E. Palmer, the exponent of this method has pointed out the following features: I. Translation in any form is banished from the classroom, including the use of

mother-tongue and of the bilingual dictionary. II. Grammar, when it is taught, is taught inductively. III. Oral teaching precedes any form of reading and writing. IV. The use of disconnected sentences is replaced by the use of connected texts.

**Problems and Probable Solutions:** Though, the several educationists consider the direct method as a perfect method for teaching English as a second language, yet we can not ignore the difficulties related to it. This signifies that the meaning of the new phraseology of an alien language tends to make the student think and express in his own mother tongue. According to D.H. Scott "The clever youngster thrives on the direct method by defeating it". Second, this method lays emphasis on aural-oral appeal; but the spoken sounds of it may be profitable for some pupils but not for all. There are many pupils who benefit more by visual appeal. Visual presentation is more fruitful for them than merely vocal. This method is not productive for such students because it ignores reading and writing work. The students may suffer from defects in reading and writing if this problem is not cured by employing other methods. Third, grammar that is essential is not taught in a systematic manner. According to this method grammar should be taught inductively and indirectly, but such text-books in which grammar and reading material are closely related are not in the syllabus. Fourth, this method demands an environment of English and that environment is almost impossible to create in such rural and remote schools. It is essential for providing practice in oral work that classes should be of the little strength as well as of 43 the same kind. This is not suitable for overcrowding classrooms. The conditions become more serious in some schools where enough materials and devices are not furnished. The managing system of them is very bad. So it can not be called a perfect method.

#### **English in the Saudi Educational System**

In the field of education, including English (from personal experience), education in Saudi Arabia is still dominated by the view that knowledge is a set of facts that have to be memorized. Teaching learning process as focuses on the teacher as a prominent source of knowledge. As a result, students may have problems to understand academic concepts as what they usually get is something abstract. Many students can serve a good level of memorization of teaching material but in the end of teaching learning process," they actually do not understand it at all. Nation (2011) states Knowledge "is constructed by humans. Knowledge is not a set of facts, concepts, or laws waiting to be discovered. It is not something that exists independent of knower. Humans create or construct knowledge as they attempt to bring meaning to their experience. Everything that we know, we have made. Based on this opinion, a

learning process that focuses on the teacher is no longer suitable. It is because our brain is continuously finding meaning and saving meaningful cases, and learning processes have to involve students in finding meaning. Teaching and learning processes have to make it possible for the students to understand the meaning of their learning material. Students as the learning subject are the starting point in teaching and learning, which measure the success of the teaching learning process. Teaching and learning can be successful when the students can directly feel the advantages of learning materials by experiencing and learning it.

Going back to English in the Saudi educational system, children are eligible to go school consisting of pre-school, six years of primary school starting at the age of seven, and three years of intermediate (aged 13-15) and high (secondary) school (aged 16-18). English as a foreign language was added to the curriculum starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school (age 9). Students receive four 45-minute lessons of English per week and they have to pass examinations in all subjects, including English, to move from one level to another. From my personal experience over the many years I have been teaching in Saudi Arabia, I have become more and more aware that some of the most basic principles of vocabulary teaching and learning have been forgotten or ignored. In other words, I found that although teaching still focuses more on grammar than on vocabulary, students majoring in English rely heavily on their knowledge of vocabulary rather than on their knowledge of grammar in learning English. The more vocabulary students have at their disposal, the better they learn, regardless of their grammatical knowledge, although this is not to say that they should neglect grammar completely.

### Teaching vocabulary

Recent research indicates that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about the best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Teaching words is a crucial aspect in learning a language as languages are based on words (Thornbury, 2002). It is almost impossible to learn a language without words; even communication between human beings is based on words. Both teachers and students agree that acquisition of the vocabulary is a central factor in teaching a language (Walters, 2004). Teaching vocabulary is one of the most discussed parts of teaching English as a foreign language. When the teaching and learning process takes place, problems would appear to the teachers. They have problems of how to teach students in order to gain satisfying results. The teacher should prepare and find out the

appropriate techniques, which will be implemented to the students. A good teacher should prepare himself or herself with various and up-to-date techniques. Teachers need to be able to master the material in order to be understood by students, and make them interested and happy in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The teachers should be concerned that teaching vocabulary is something new and different from student's native language. They also have to take into account that teaching English for young learners is different from adults. The teachers have to know the characteristics of his/her learners. They moreover need to prepare good techniques and suitable material in order to gain the target of language teaching.

### Kinds 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, namely 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).

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11/20/2022

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