Teaching Vocabulary to Non-English Majors: A General Perspective

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Tasleem Ara Ashraf*

Abstract: Taking vocabulary problem as a colossal one for Non-English Majors into consideration, this article analyses the main factors for the problem. Enriching vocabulary is one of the major ways of acquiring better skills in any second or foreign language. It is assumed that a person with a stronger vocabulary stock finds it easier to carry on communication. The principal focus of language teaching has been on the grammar of the language for much of the last century across many non-English countries. Despite the introduction of the communicative language teaching, vocabulary is still taught as an integrated skill. For, vocabulary knowledge is important for all the four skill areas. There are several effective explicit (intentional, planned instruction) and implicit (spontaneous instruction as a child comes to new words in a text) strategies that teachers can employ for learners of any age. The article proposes a set of strategy like the use of context, the use of morphological clues, the use of outside references and extensive reading.

Keywords: Strategic device, Context clue, Morphological clue, Extra-textual reference, Extensive reading.

Introduction

The teaching and learning of vocabulary has never aroused the same degree of interest within language teaching as have such issues as grammatical competence, contrastive analysis, reading, or writing, which have received considerable attention from scholars and teachers. The apparent neglect of vocabulary reflects the effects of trends in linguistic theory, since within linguistics the word has only recently become a candidate for serious theorizing and model building. The paper at hand considers the role of vocabulary in the syllabus in the light of the assumptions and findings of theoretical and applied linguistics. A consideration of some of the knowledge that is assumed by lexical competence is offered as a frame of reference for the determination of objectives for vocabulary teaching and for the assessment of teaching techniques designed to realize these objectives.

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Vocabulary is one of the major problems while learning and teaching English in a non-English country like Bangladesh. My students are non-English majors coming from different parts of the country and most of them are from Bangla-medium schools and colleges. I have observed that these students greatly suffer from vocabulary problems. They fail to understand so many words in English and frequently complain "*I know all the reading skills in grammar but still can't understand the exact meaning of the passage.*" Some of them say "*We have never thought of English as a language before. From the very beginning of our school days we have been thinking that, English is a subject and to learn this subject we need to study a lot of English Grammar.*" Yet some others say, "We *feel more comfortable to speak and understand Hindi than English".* Speaking in English and understanding English compositions seem to them too difficult since they always keep worrying about making grammatical errors. Learning English should be interesting and a fun. It has to be made an act of pleasure and a process of stimulation. In a journal of Stamford University Bangladesh, an author in his research expressed: *"It is assumed that a person with a stronger vocabulary stock finds it easier to carry on communication. The communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is now in application in Bangladesh , puts thrust on the importance of fluency that implicitly refers to the ability to keep communication ticking over, even if the placement of the words is not correct and even if they are not pronounced correctly. The moot point is here is to get across the intended message."* (Hossain, 2007).

The major problem in reading at the graduate and postgraduate stages is vocabulary as, "*word meaning knowledge influences reading comprehension*" (Harris & Sipay, 1990)

The Main Factors for the Vocabulary Problem and Assumptions
There are some factors that account for the vocabulary problem. In a country where medium of instruction is not English, teachers always pay more importance on learning English grammar instead of vocabulary and such a process creates fear among the students. As a result, they gradually fail to learn how to communicate in English through adequate and competent vocabulary. In another Journal of Language Teaching and Research, the author expressed:
"*I once did a survey on student's feelings on vocabulary learning at undergrad stage. Two thirds of them said they were not taught enough words in class, words they needed when talking to people, watching TV, and*

reading. They felt their teachers were very keen on teaching them grammar (since middle school years) and on improving their pronunciation, but that learning words came a poor third (Zhou, 2010).

For many years vocabulary has been a poor relation of language teaching. Its neglect has been in part due to a specialization in linguistic research on syntax and phonology which may have fostered a climate in which vocabulary was felt to be a less important element in learning a second language. The following statement by Gleason, while strangely appearing to suggest that vocabulary does not have "content" or "expression" typifies attitudes held by not a few teachers: *In learning a second language, you will find that vocabulary is comparatively easy, in spite of the fact that it is vocabulary that students fear most. The harder part is mastering new structures in both content and expression.* (Ronald Carter, 1998).

Encountering and understanding a word are seldom enough as with meeting people, there needs to be depth and interaction for the encounter to be memorable. Some teachers either do not recognize or neglect such a need. They take it for granted that postgraduate students should be able to develop their own learning systems, and thus put the vocabulary at the disposal of students" memory capacity". Some teachers suggest that students should go home every evening and learn a list of fifty words "by heart". Such a practice may have beneficial result, of course, but it avoids one of the central features of vocabulary use, namely that words occur in context. In the Syllabus, words are listed alphabetically with the correspondent meaning in the native language of the learner. Students are required to master all the words that teachers teach them. The main purpose of learning words in the Syllabus or from other source (by heart) is to pass the national proficiency tests or to score higher in TOEFL or GRE tests. Many words recited appear only once especially in GRE test after which they will not be used again by students. Therefore, many words are only stored in students "*short-term memory*" as passive words and will never become active ones. The kind of vocabulary learning does not have much long-term effect.

Another factor that leads to the vocabulary problem involves the teaching materials used. Most materials applied nationally have been used for decades. The out-of-date materials obviously do not contain words appearing everyday with the development of the world. Learners, thus, do not have the chance to absorb new words they urgently need to gain access to the new world and the new age. Much material has not become authentic only until recently. *Authentic materials are an integral part in vocabulary learning since they*

provide valuable opportunities to teach new vocabulary and to practice approaches to vocabulary building (Silberstein,1994).

Hence some common assumptions related to probable solutions are as follows:

Some Strategic Devices To Solve The Problem
Let us open the part with an observation*: A well-planned, systematic and continuous program is required for vocabulary instruction to be effective. Such a program should include concept development, generating and sustaining an interest in words and a desire to increase one's vocabulary, direct teaching of word meanings, helping pupils learn how to determine word meanings on their own, and providing frequent opportunities for reading* (Harris & Sipay,1990). Teachers can help students build and develop their vocabulary by giving direct instruction and self-help techniques. Direct attention to vocabulary should supplement vocabulary growth through reading. Researchers strongly suggest that planned or/ and direct instruction is superior to a casual or incidental approach. Planned instruction can be built right into the regular course work and can yield returns in learning subject matter.

A. **Use of Context Clues:** There is an important distinction between deriving the meaning of an unfamiliar word from context and learning the meaning of that word independently from dictionary. *"The strength of learning word meaning from context lies in its long-term cumulative effects."* (Harris & Sipay, 1990) The ability to determine the meaning of vocabulary items from context is one of the most important aspects of successful reading. While bringing reading passages into the classroom, instructors can introduce new vocabulary through the use of teacher-developed vocabulary item from context formats. These activities are valuable in two respects. First, practice of inferring meaning from context teaches an important skill. Second, the additional contexts introduced by the teacher may provide semantic links that aid readers in remembering vocabulary items.

Successful vocabulary from context items provide adequate context to suggest meaning without providing a formal definition. It is generally sufficient for students to gain a general sense of an item without its specific parameters.

It is a fact that the more advanced the learner becomes, the more "inferential" or "implicit" and learner-centered vocabulary learning strategies will have to become. One method, with particular reference to reading, has been proposed by Paul Nation (1988). It involves the learner in seeking clues to meaning by following a number of defined steps which lead from the form of the word itself to its immediate context, and then to its operation in the surrounding context.

In his New Ways in Teaching Vocabulary (1994), Nation claims that *"Guessing from context is the most important of the strategies, it is the way native speakers most often expand their vocabulary."* The skill of guessing and of using contextual clues in making inferences is important, especially in reading in a foreign language and especially if the learner is to become more self-reliant. Students can look for word parts they recognize. They should try to determine the meaning of the word by removing prefixes and /or suffixes, by identifying the root or the base word .They also should look up the word in the dictionary . Since many words have more than one definition , they must find the right definition for the word as it is used in the text they are reading . Students must install a speaking dictionary in their computers for having a quick look at the words and learn the pronunciation as well. They can also make flash cards by writing words on one side and short definitions and sentences on opposite sides of index cards to practice with. Afterwards they should practice writing their own sentences with the new word .They should write a sentence that demonstrates their understanding of the word's meaning . Then they can leave out the new word and try other words that would make sense in its place.

B. Use of Morphological Clues: Knowledge of frequently recurring (roots, prefixes, suffixes, infixes), when used in conjunction with context clues, can give students another important self-help technique to unlock the meanings of words. Students can be taught Greek and Latin stems and affixes that supply clues to meaning. When we give students a working stock of common Greek and Latin word parts and teach them to use the words in combination with context revelation, we help them acquire meanings of many related English words. And we give many of them a self-help technique through structural analysis—an added means of increasing their word power in an ongoing, lifelong process.

Morphology is also known as structural analysis and refers to the study of word parts, such as the Greek roots *tele-* and *graph-* in *telegraph*. Structural analysis draws students' attention to the morphemes that compose a word, and from an analysis of the meanings of the individual morphemes, students are helped to understand the meaning of the whole word. A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in a language. The following words have two morphemes each: cats (*cat* and the plural *s*) and uncut (*un* plus *cut*). Some words as immoveable have several morphemes.

Sometimes to generate words, we put whole words and word parts together in new configurations, new concatenations. With apparent ease and enjoyment humans create words in living languages, including sign language. This ability manifests itself at an early age, for example, "While I was making rock candy, my daughter asked, "Mommy, is the candy *rocketing* yet?"

"Morphology" refers to the mental system involved in word formation or to the branch of linguistics that deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed. A morpheme is an indivisible unit of meaning-- a prefix, suffix, root, or base. English contains words with morphemes seamlessly joined together, as in "*sym+phon+ic*" , " *achieve+ment+s*". However, many words do not fit into this structure--and that's worth teaching, too. The English language is flexible, tolerant, and expansive. The Greek root *morph* denotes 'structure, form' and a morphologist is interested in how all words are formed and understood, including words with variant, irregular morphemes "*teach-taught*", " *child-children*" . Morphological processes are also involved when we construct <u>linguistic blends</u> like*, skort, FedEx, smog* etc.

Morphological awareness has been defined as, "*The ability to reflect upon and manipulate morphemes and employ word formation rules in one's language*" (Kuo & Anderson, 2006).It is conceptualized as one aspect of word consciousness or one aspect of Meta linguistic awareness. It is also thought that, in the mental lexicon, morphologically related words like *sweet, sweeten, sweetener, sweetly, sweetness* co activate, priming and nudging each other. Thus, in general, we recognize words faster and more accurately if they are reinforced by a large morphological family and/or if they are high-frequency words.

C. Use of Extra-textual References: Students often benefit from instruction and practice using a monolingual English dictionary, "Advanced students can (and should) use their monolingual dictionaries as their chief source of information about meaning, pronunciation and grammar. There is no better resource for the learner." (Harmer, 1991) The elements of a dictionary entry should be introduced before students are asked to use dictionaries independently.

Vocabulary items that are used in an unfamiliar way are good candidates for dictionary practice. Students can learn more new words while practicing finding the appropriate definition in an English-English Dictionary.

Glossing is a technique available while bringing into the classroom, passages containing difficult vocabulary that is frankly not worth teaching. A short definition is provided, usually in the form of a footnote or marginal note, or provided orally by the teacher. Low-frequency item that students are not likely to encounter often but that may impede comprehension can be appropriately glossed. This technique can facilitate bringing authentic, unedited texts, such as magazine articles into the classroom. Before glossing, however it is important to determine that the item really may impede comprehension. If not, students can be encouraged to sustain the ambiguity of authentic reading.

D. Extensive Reading: Wide reading accounts for much of the vocabulary growth of competent readers. Through reading they spend countless hours in a world of words. They meet new words repeatedly in similar and different settings, often with some increment of meaning at each encounter, and gradually incorporate them into their vocabulary. All teachers can encourage students to read widely and to approach their reading with a conscious effort to notice unfamiliar words and to make selected ones their own. Vocabulary learning does occur in the absence of instruction, and this growth is impressive. When compared with almost any instructional approach, incidental learning of vocabulary appears to be ineffective in the short run, but even a moderate amount of regular feeding is beneficial. Research suggests that vocabulary growth through wide reading is cumulative and especially noted in terms of its long-term effect.

Wide reading not only increases knowledge of word-meaning but can also produce gains in topical and world knowledge that can further facilitate reading. Wide reading also broadens the base of words that students can use in employing morphological clues, thus making their use even more effective. By providing extensive practice, wide reading can lead to the automatization of skills (e.g. rapid word recognition and lexical access) that also may improve reading comprehension. Therefore, extensive reading should be encouraged (Harris & Sipay, 1990).

Conclusion

Thus teachers can have a better chance of success if they can manipulate the proper tools, methods and techniques efficiently and effectively. However, teachers should remember that, they can only help and assist those who want to acquire the language or in other words, those who are motivated enough to do so. Students do not devote their efforts to learn a language unless they have a need or desire to learn it. So, the teachers should help them to become motivated, involved in their own learning, or self-sufficient endeavor. Teachers can motivate students by encouraging them to read interesting stories, stage dramas, prepare wall magazines, debate on controversial topics , etc., making the students the active participants and acting themselves as directors , organizers or counselors. We also should remember that these communicative activities may not fit well when applied to the traditional setting of Bangladeshi classrooms where students mostly come from old-fashioned families and are not willing to respond. The method of "sensible dictionary use" may also interfere with other methodological concerns. Students are likely to be checking every word of a reading text in their dictionaries when they should be reading for general understanding, so overstress on reading for the dictionary can be deterrent to both vocabulary development and reading enjoyment. To overcome such obstacles, the teacher needs to use his/her own understanding, experience and judgment and should not depend on any particular method or style.

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