

# Vocabulary Learning and Teaching Strategies in the Course of Reading Process

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## Abstract

Vocabulary is considered the fundamental contributing factor in the process of reading comprehension, yet vocabulary learning has long been too perplexing for EFL learners to master. This study aims to examine the nature of word knowledge, the process of vocabulary learning, and the approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning in depth. A qualitative method was adopted for this research, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students and two teachers. It is evident that word knowledge and various activities involved in the learning process can pose a challenge for both language learning and teaching. I discovered that teachers should carefully select the aspects of knowledge to be taught and design activities to ensure attention, spaced repetition, creative application, and monitoring. Teachers are responsible for promoting students' incidental learning.

## Keywords

Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Noticing, Repetition

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## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary, in the domain of second language teaching and learning, can be viewed as a significant and indispensable component of language acquisition. 'Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed' (Wilkins, 1972). Pittman (2003) also admitted that 'there is no aspect of language that is more important than vocabulary building and comprehension'. Other research has shown that vocabulary acquisition makes great contribution to reading comprehension through semantic meaning identification (Lawrence et al., 2019). Hence, in order to build up learners' language competence, a considerable amount of vocabulary is of great significance.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Processes of learning vocabulary

According to Nation (2001), there are three processes in vocabulary learning: noticing, retrieval, and creative use. The first activity involved in the learning process of vocabulary is noticing. This indicates that a word should be given attention and learners should realise its usefulness of it (Schmidt, 1990). Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) improved the hypothesis and noted that higher involvement in vocabulary would lead to better learning results.

The second process that may result in the remembering of a word is retrieval (Baddeley, 1990). Nation (2001) claimed that 'if that word is subsequently retrieved during the task then the memory of that word will be strengthened'. A crucial factor for retrieval is repetition. Baddeley (1990) held that 'it is not simply repetition which is important but the repeated opportunity to retrieve the item which is to be learned'. This means that learners should have chances to recall the word again and again later after they have learned the word for the first time in order for the word to be

remembered.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to specify the number of repetitions needed for learning. Nation (2001) gave an overview of a series of studies on it, saying that the number ranged from five to more than twenty repetitions that were said to be essential. Also, simple repetition may not be very useful unless it is properly spaced. Spaced repetition means ‘spreading the repetitions across a long period of time, but not spending more time in total on the study of the words.

The third stage of vocabulary learning is creative or generative use. As Joe (1998) claimed, memory for a word that is newly learned is enhanced if it is used in a productive or generative way. Creative use of a word can not only introduce the learner to a new meaning of that word, but apply to the knowledge of different dimensions of the word as discussed previously, including collocations, grammatical context, and references. Recent research showed that electronic device-aided vocabulary learning outside the classroom might provide EFL learners with abundant opportunities to creatively acquire high-frequency words (Rahmani et al., 2022).

Through the review of literature on the activities involved in vocabulary learning, a conclusion can be drawn that a variety of conditions should be met in order to facilitate the learning of vocabulary during each stage, and teachers are needed to reinforce the effectiveness of vocabulary learning.

## 2.2 Approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning

Originating from L1 acquisition, some researchers believed that vocabulary should be learned incidentally, which means that learners should learn incidentally from verbal conversation or through reading authentic texts (Hulstijn, 1992). Schmitt (2000) noted that incidental learning was beneficial in that it takes place for communicative purposes. However, Schmitt also contended that the process was slow, incremental, and ‘lacking focused attention’. Nation (2001) found that a small amount of vocabulary could be learned from reading incidentally. In the research carried out by Soleimani et al. (2022), assisted repeated reading contributes greatly to incidental vocabulary learning. Extra literature showed that the combination of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, and inference would benefit the comprehension task performance. (Dong et al., 2020)

Therefore, the key to encouraging incidental learning is to read extensively to make sure that learners can get a maximal amount of repetitive input. For instance, Horst (2005) uncovered that the participants learned over half of the new words they met in their extensive reading. A critical problem with incidental learning is the number of exposure that is essential for the learning. Rott (1999) discovered that six exposures resulted in better learning than two or four. Pigada and Schmitt (2006) revealed that there was no certainty, but if the exposures exceeded ten times, there was an apparent increase in learning. Besides reading extensively, being exposed to documentary videos also affects incidental vocabulary learning to different degrees in terms of recognizing and recalling words' form and meaning (Teng, 2022).

In contrast to incidental learning of vocabulary, explicit learning concentrates directly on the information to be learned, which tends to be more consistent with the processes of vocabulary learning discussed above. Especially, when reading is taken into consideration, Schmitt (2000) commented that some explicit teaching was a prerequisite if a large proportion of words were new on a page. The line of vocabulary size for adult native speakers, according to Nation and Waring (1997), is about five thousand word families.

The recent trend in the field of second language acquisition is that both incidental and explicit learning are crucial, and they should be viewed as complements to each other. Schmitt (2000) concluded that high-frequency words and some technical vocabulary should be focused on explicitly. Nation (1995) put forward that the words that were worthy of the time should be taught explicitly, while infrequent words were suitable to be given to incidental learning.

## 3. Research methods

In order to find out why the vocabulary teaching and learning in my teaching environment is problematic, I carried out qualitative research based on the literature reviewed. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What factors are influencing the vocabulary learning process?
- 2) What strategies could teachers employ in order to improve students' vocabulary learning achievement?

The seven participants in my interviews are five students and their reading teachers. I chose them to conduct the research because they belonged to a similar context. One participant (I will use Student A later in my assignment.) has already got an IELTS band score of 6 to be unconditionally accepted by a university in Australia, while other

participants got an IELTS band score of 4.5 or 5, and must attend the language school before continuing to study in a receiving university. The teachers I interviewed are colleagues of mine, who have rich experience of teaching both for the purpose of IELTS intensive reading.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

All of the students' respondents believed that vocabulary is very important to second language learners. Student A said, 'Without words, I can not express myself, my feelings, my thoughts.' Student B complained, 'I do not know how to say... well, basic....' They held that vocabulary was the foundation of communication, and words enable us to convey our thoughts and feelings. And they were not confident about their current knowledge of vocabulary. One commented, 'My vocabulary size is not big enough to communicate freely. When I write and speak, I often can not find suitable words. When I read, I often can not understand because of new words.' Another also said, '...my vocabulary is poor. There are too many new words. I often do not know how to say.'

I also designed a series of questions for the students attempting to get some information about their learning processes. I noticed that all of them, seldom had any experience of self-motivated noticing. I asked them, 'What makes you feel that you need to learn the word?' Student A responded, 'The teacher asks me to read the passage, I find the words I do not know, and I look up them in the dictionary. When I write, I find I don't know how to express myself, I look up the word in the dictionary. Other students answered, 'The teacher tells me to learn, and I learn.' As I questioned them a step further about their interest and motivation. They all acknowledged that they did not like learning vocabulary, and vocabulary learning was tedious and frustrating. Also, they seldom read apart from the materials given by the teacher. Only student A said that she read a little besides the texts, and occasionally checked the Chinese translation of words when they appeared several times, but the meaning was soon forgotten.

Next, I continued to ask them questions about the methods they used or they were taught to use to remember words. Both mentioned the importance of repetition and the confusion they had about repetition. Student A stated, 'From the first day of English learning, I was told that I should memorise the word by repeating. 5 times or 10 times, till I remember. If I did not remember, it was because I did work hard. She added, 'I was told to recite again and again, and I do not have other ways'. Another student got a similar answer, and what was worse is that he tried to repeat a few times and gave up in hopes of being given a better method which can cost less time and energy.

### **4.1 Lack of noticing**

Noticing a word sometimes can be brought about by teachers' teaching, but the effectiveness of learning is dependent on the interest and motivation of the students. If the students are not motivated to learn the words, or if they are not interested in learning, teachers' efforts will be in vain. Another point that teachers should notice is that what the teachers feel interested in is not necessarily to be what the students are interested in. Teachers may have distinctions with the students for a range of reasons, including cognition, schematic factors, or other personal variations.

As teachers, we should be able to avoid bias and get to understand the students' interests. Materials can be selected in accordance with the students' needs and interests. In this way, involvement may be created among the students. What's more, different classroom activities and a variety of topics of reading materials also should be brought in the classroom in order to maintain the students' interest and involvement. Otherwise, the students are easily dulled. As such, if the students can be motivated to learn, the effectiveness of vocabulary learning can be reinforced.

### **4.2 Lack of spaced repetition**

Repetition, as a significant and primary way to encourage retrieval, is another problem in learning and teaching in the previous context. On the basis of the research mentioned in the literature, the number and the intervals of the repetition will have a part in the upshot of retrieval. Whereas, the number of repetitions in learning, as well as teaching, is insufficient to enhance retrieval. Consequently, the words learned temporarily would soon be forgotten. Furthermore, there was little evidence for spaced retrieval from the accounts of the students and the teacher.

While teaching or learning vocabulary, the repetition should be designed cautiously at certain intervals to ensure the things are remembered permanently. For example, when we meet a word for the first time, we spend some time memorising the form, pronunciation, and the meaning of it, then we put it aside. The next day, we repeat the learning of the word, maybe for a shorter time. A few days later, we should review the word again for an even shorter time. As such, the intervals are spaced, and gradually the word is learned permanently.

In addition to the spaced repetition arranged during the process of explicit teaching, teachers can foster the students' incidental vocabulary learning through extensive reading. For instance, teachers may provide some suggestions for the students to read on the topics they are interested in. As the students read extensively about the topics, repetition can be facilitated through this type of incidental learning. At the same time, good reading habits may be formed accordingly.

### 4.3 More support needed from the teacher

Besides, teachers are able to provide other kinds of support to the students' vocabulary learning by monitoring and equipping them with more learning strategies. During the process of teaching and learning, teachers can plan some sorts of tests or assessments to monitor the students' learning quality and progress. With the help of monitoring, teachers can encourage the students' learning, or adjust the teaching content and the methods used.

Moreover, since vocabulary can be learned incidentally by the students themselves, teachers must equip them with learning strategies used when they read alone. First of all, teachers can teach the students to decide what kind of words should be paid attention to when they read, and the ways they can use to guess the meaning of a word needs to be focused.

Finally, teachers ought to encourage the students to make creative use of vocabulary. Vocabulary learning should be integrated into listening, reading, speaking, and writing. During the process of learning, different parts of the vocabulary knowledge will emerge. The students should be pushed to make various attempts and produce the language both in speech or written form by using these words in different contexts or sentences. Therefore, the whole vocabulary learning process can be complete, and the students can ultimately use what they have learned to communicate.

## 5. Conclusion

Vocabulary learning is undoubtedly an important part of second language acquisition, and it is an integral part of my teaching practice which needs to be deeply investigated. Word knowledge is complex in that it contains a range of dimensions and levels. Aside from the form, the pronunciation, and the meaning, knowing a word includes knowing its collocations, associations, registers, and frequency. It also differs in receptive and productive knowledge. Furthermore, different activities are involved in the course of learning. Owing to these factors, vocabulary becomes an obstacle for language learning and teaching as well. With the purpose of improving my teaching to benefit the students, I did the research and obtained some findings and implications. I discovered that teachers should carefully select the part of the word knowledge to be taught and design the activities to ensure noticing, spaced repetition, creative use, and monitoring. Teachers are responsible for promoting the students' incidental learning.

Nonetheless, many problems stay unsolved. For instance, the research did not provide any feasible solutions to boost the students' motivation to get involved in learning. Also, not much was found for designing spaced repetition and ways to help incidental learning by the students themselves. These may shed some light on the research later in this field.

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