The acquisition of vocabulary in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language through Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

The advantage of acquiring vocabulary in the complex process of acquisition of a foreign language (L2), specifically English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is indisputable and easy to prove. To be convinced of this advantage is enough to make a simple question: When people travel to a foreign country, specifically in an English-speaking, what do they take with them: a dictionary or a grammar book? Vocabulary is a central component of language and has great significance for foreign language learners. Words are blocks that constructed a language, because they label objects, things, actions, ideas without which people can not convey meanings that they want to express. The primary role of the acquisition of vocabulary in learning the second language (L2) or foreign language (EFL) is unequivocally accepted 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. 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. Vocabulary learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies. Language learning strategies encourage greater overall self-direction for learners. Self-directed learners are independent learners who are capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning and gradually gaining confidence, involvement and proficiency.

Key words: acronyms, VLS, EFL, F&SLL, strategies, vocabulary, taxonomy, memory, guess meta-cognitive, activation, context, encoding, decoding, semantic tables, sorting

Introduction

Research has shown that many learners do use more strategies to learn vocabulary especially when compared to such integrated tasks such as listening and speaking. But they are mostly inclined to use basic vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). This in turn makes strategy instruction an essential part of any foreign or second language program. Hence, based on the significance attributed to vocabulary learning strategies in the process of vocabulary learning and enhancement, the present paper aims at proposing a framework

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for vocabulary strategy instruction in EFL contexts. To this end, a brief account of various taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies and a rationale for training students in vocabulary learning strategies are initially presented. Then, some required considerations to be taken before initiating the strategy training as well as the techniques for training EFL students in vocabulary learning strategies are presented. Finally, some pedagogical implications are proposed for EFL teachers.

Taxonomies of vocabulary acquisition strategies (VAS)

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

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 meta-cognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Meta-cognitive 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:

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      a. *Meta-cognitive 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

b. *Rehearsal*: Word lists, repetition, etc.

c. *Encoding*: Association (imagery, visual, auditory, etc.)

      d. *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. 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 practise and retain vocabulary. Learners thus, use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to consolidate their vocabulary knowledge.

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 (i.e., source) 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.

The process is the last category in Nation's 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. Generating strategies include rule-driven generation, as well; such as, creating context, collocations and

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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 (Nation, 2001).

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.

The reasons for the exercise of vocabulary acquisition strategies (VAS)

It has been suggested that one way to accelerate the learning of a second or a foreign language is to teach learners how to learn more efficiently and effectively. To this end, teachers are recommended to train their students in different learning strategies. Learning strategies instruction can help "*EFL learners become better learners. In addition, skill in using learning strategies assists students in becoming independent, confident learners*" (Chamot, 1999, p.1).

Research has also demonstrated that there is a relationship between strategy use and success in second or foreign language learning. For instance, Cohen and Aphek (Cohen and Aphek, 1981, cited in Chamot, 2001) taught students of Hebrew to remember vocabulary items by making paired mnemonic associations and found that those who made associations remembered vocabulary more effectively than those who did not.

In another attempt, Sanaoui (1995) carried out a study to demonstrate the relationship between vocabulary strategies use and success in acquiring and retaining vocabulary items. The study demonstrated that adult learners of L2 vocabulary were likely to fall into two categories: Those who adopted a structured approach to their learning and those who did not. Learners in the first group took control of their vocabulary learning. They did not merely rely on what the language course provided them with. They used their own initiative in regularly creating opportunities for vocabulary learning by listening to the radio, watching movies, reading and using self-study. They kept systematic record of vocabulary they learned by using vocabulary notebooks and lists. They reviewed what they had done several times a week. However, the learners in the second group who followed unstructured approach relied mainly on course material. If they made lists of vocabulary items, they did not review them and they occasionally lost them. Sanaoui concluded that students who had a structured learning approach were more successful in retaining the vocabulary items taught in their classrooms than learners who had an unstructured approach.

The research suggests that helping learners gain control over processes for managing their own lexis is an important task in vocabulary learning and teaching in L2 classrooms. Thus, going through the literature, one encounters empirical evidence that strategy use will result in more effective vocabulary acquisition and recall among L2 learners. This, in turn justifies why teachers should embark on strategy training. Moreover, the significance of strategy training is pointed out even by scholars who believe that context is a major source of vocabulary learning. These scholars have expressed their concern over how well students

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can handle context on their own. Therefore, they have strongly emphasized the teaching of specific learning strategies to students so that they can effectively learn from context (Coady, 1997).

Some precautions to exercise vocabulary acquisition strategies (VAS)

Before strategy training can be carried out, several issues need to be addressed: First, teachers need to find out what strategies and in particular what combination of strategies should be taught. Second, the learning strategies known and preferred by learners should be identified and taken into account. Third, some learners may need to be convinced that strategy training is to their own benefit (Ellis, 1994). Fourth, after deciding what strategies to give attention to, teachers should decide how much time to spend on training the learners in strategy use, and they should work out a syllabus for each strategy that covers the required knowledge and provides enough independent practice (Nation, 2001). Fifth, when considering which vocabulary learning strategies to recommend to students, teachers should notice not to take strategies as inherently good. They should bear in mind that effectiveness depends on the context in which strategies are used (Schmitt, 1997). The effectiveness with which learning strategies can be both taught and used depends on such variables as *proficiency level, task, language modality, background knowledge, context of learning, target language and learner characteristics* (Chamot & Rubin, 1994 pp.71-6). Finally, teachers should bear in mind that learners need to understand the goal of each strategy and the conditions under which it works best.

Learners also need enough practice to feel confident and proficient in using strategies. Therefore, teachers should provide ample time for strategy training (Nation, 2001). After these issues are settled, teachers can adopt an appropriate framework for training students in using vocabulary learning strategies. Below is an instance of such frameworks which seems to fit the EFL context in the country of L1.

A model for vocabulary acquisition strategies (VAS)

The recommendation of a standard model of vocabulary acquisition strategies is not possible because, as we noted above, there are a number of variables such as the level of language proficiency, linguistic modality, age educational level of students, assignments, goals texts, etc., which have an impact on the effectiveness of strategies that are used and exercised. Therefore, a researcher of VAS can only provide options or suggestions that EFL teachers may have in mind and can use, but always find the most suitable trends in the context of their class, by determining which strategies are most effective and what VAS model is more efficient for their class. Teachers should decide which strategies to give attention to and how much time they need to spend on training. In order to catch a glimpse of the strategies learners need and the ones they are currently using, students should be asked to draw up a list of strategies they employ to learn English words in small groups. They report their lists to the class. The students and the teacher can then, collaboratively construct a list of strategies the learners employ. After this brainstorming session, the teacher can decide what strategies learners lack and need most.

The teacher should model the strategy for the learners. Then the steps in the strategy should be practiced separately. Learners are asked to apply the strategy in pairs

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while helping each other. They report back on the application of the steps. The teacher monitors and provides feedback on learners' control of the strategies. She or he also systematically tests learners on strategy use and gives them feedback. Learners report on the difficulty and success in using the strategy outside classroom and they ask for teachers' help and advice on their use of strategy (Nation, 2001).

Learners should be given opportunities to examine the effectiveness of their vocabulary coping strategies. For instance, in activities like guessing from context, teachers can see what learners do (Porte, 1988), and learners can assess how effectively they can apply the inferring strategies they were taught. Moreover, teachers should be cognizant of the interaction between learners' awareness of their own learning style and their ability to take charge of their own learning. Teachers have two options at their disposal to foster this interaction: They can provide learners with opportunities to do different vocabulary exercises. This will in turn expose them to different strategies, and learners will discover which one feels right for them.

Teachers can provide learners with questionnaires to help them gain insight into what strategies are more suitable for them. The questionnaire might include such questions as "*Do I learn vocabulary more easily doing speaking activities with my classmates?, Am I comfortable with analyzing word parts?, Does it work better for me to collect words on index cards or make word lists?*" (Sokmen, 1997, p.256).

Teachers should also recognize that some typical vocabulary learning strategies such as using notebooks, dictionary and expansion exercises like semantic mapping are highly beneficial and could be introduced as early as possible. Learners can write the words they encounter on their vocabulary notebook and add L2-L1 translation or other knowledge they gradually acquire about the words such as collocations, semantic associations, frequency tallies, roots and derivations. Learners can be reminded to go through their notebooks regularly in order to add more information and rehearse what they already recorded (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).

The vocabulary notebook could then serve as a valuable resource. Semantic mapping is also a useful strategy that can be introduced to learners at any level of proficiency. It involves drawing a diagram of the relationships between words according to their use in a particular text. Semantic mapping has the effect of bringing relationships in a text to consciousness for the purpose of deepening the understanding of a text and creating associative networks for words. It is best introduced as a collaborative effort between the teacher and the class (Stahl & Vancil, 1986, cited in Nation & Newton, 1997). Such a diagram "*visually shows how ideas fit together. This strategy incorporates a variety of memory strategies like grouping, using imagery, associating and elaborating and it is important for improving both memory and comprehension of new vocabulary items*" (Oxford,1990, p.62). In a guided semantic mapping, learners work with the teacher to develop a semantic map around a topic, the teacher deliberately introduces several target vocabulary items and puts them on the map as well as elaborating on them with the learners who then use the semantic map to do a piece of writing. If the writing is done in a group, a learner in the group can be assigned to ensure that the target words are used.

Summary

The practice of learning a foreign language shows that vocabulary can be acquired in two ways: randomly, by presenting indirectly words and intentionally, through direct explanations of specific words and strategies learning the words.

A very good way to increase vocabulary randomly is reading books, magazines, newspapers, or comic books written in foreign languages. Finding reading materials that look interesting themes that helps me a lot in recognition of words that way. On what criteria is based selection of vocabulary when the intention to present / teach students intentionally?

A general criterion is one which the students are taught concrete words in the initial levels, and abstract words more advanced levels. It is easier to learn specific words, words that are before the eyes of students and easily explained. Abstract words which can not be physical appearance are more difficult to explain why the information should be given to them in the most advanced stages. Another requirement of vocabulary selection when the intention to present / teach students in a deliberate is the frequency of use. The scientific criteria on which is based the selection of vocabulary is the criterion of the frequency of their use.

In conclusion, learning a new vocabulary is a challenge for students of foreign languages, but they can overcome by dealing with diverse strategies of vocabulary acquisition. Students should be trained for those strategies that were missing. To this end, teachers must be aware of the students' willingness and eagerness to exercise and to think about which are the most appropriate ways to implement these strategies

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