Exploring Strategies for Vocabulary Learning and Teaching for ESL Learners–A Literature Review

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Abstract

There is much interest about how ESL vocabulary should be taught to learners, particularly at the elementary level in an attempt to give learners a good foundation of the target language and to enable them to deal with spoken and written texts with confidence. In this paper we discuss the issues surrounding vocabulary learning and teaching, namely, context, number of repetitions, type of words chosen, number of words chosen and level of processing. We then build upon that discussion to provide a literature review of the strategies adopted for the teaching of ESL vocabulary and which have been found to produce favourable results in the contexts they were applied. Implicit learning and explicit teaching notions are examined and incidental and intentional vocabulary learning strategies are explored as probable options that could be supported to suit individual needs.

Keywords: Implicit learning; explicit teaching; vocabulary learning strategy

Abstrak

Terdapat banyak minat mengenai bagaimana kosa kata bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua harus diajar kepada pelajar, terutama di peringkat awal dalam usaha memberi pelajar asas yang kukuh dalam bahasa sasaran, juga memperkasakan pelajar apabila berdepan dengan teks sama ada secara lisan atau bertulis. Di dalam artikel ini kami membincang isu-isu sekitar pengajaran dan pembelajaran kosa kata, iaitu persekitaran, bilangan ulangan, jenis perkataan pilihan, bilangan perkataan pilihan dan tahap pemprosesan. Berdasarkan perbincangan tersebut kami mengutarakan sorotan literatur mengenai strategi pengajaran kosa kata bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua yang terbukti memberi dapatan menyenangkan di persekitaran strategi tersebut dilaksanakan. Pembelajaran mutlak dan pengajaran tegas dikaji dan strategi pembelajaran kosa kata secara kebetulan dan disengajakan diselidikki sebagai pilihan yang boleh diikuti mengikut kehendak sendiri.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran implisit; pengajaran eksplisit; strategi pengajaran kosa kata

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Words are the basic building blocks of a language. Knowing the lexical items in the target language is a requirement as it reflects one's proficiency and competence in that language. Upon knowing a sufficient number of words, learners would be able to chain these words together to construct meaning for communication. According to Nation (2006), between 6000 to 7000 families of words needed to be known in order to deal with spoken texts; and between 8000 to 9000 word families needed to deal with written texts. Another discovery is that, there is a great variation of vocabulary coverage in the first 1000 words and in proper nouns, which cover 78 to 81 per cent of written texts and 85 per cent of spoken texts. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge is essential to understand the simplest written texts (Cohen and Johnson, 2011).

The English Language Curriculum in Malaysia adopts the communicative approach which requires teachers to teach English vocabulary communicatively (Sharimllah Devi Ramachandran and Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2004). This means that L1 should be avoided at its best in the classroom with maximum exposure to the L2 (Zimmerman, 1997). Taking into account learners' minimal command of the L2 in the Malaysian context, they would face difficulty in comprehending classroom instructions. Studies

have also shown that the use of English alone may only be suitable for the intermediate and advance level learners (Sharimllah Devi Ramachandran and Hajar Abdul Rahim, 2004). Hence, slow learners might be left out in English lessons as they do not receive comprehensible input. According to Krashen (1982), new information needs to be presented in a comprehensible way for learners to understand and to process in their brains. This explanation could be a contributing factor to many learners' poor grasp of English as they could not understand lessons conducted fully in the target language.

Besides, students do not realise the importance of the English language as an international language because they communicate almost completely in their L1 within their community. This also indirectly causes them to be less motivated. As a result, learning English is deemed unimportant and is sidelined. As these students proceed to the secondary level English teachers would face difficulty in teaching them when they discover the learners' unexpectedly low level of proficiency in the target language. Many lessons, such as group discussions, brainstorming and presentations would fail to be carried out because of the learners' limited knowledge of vocabulary and command of the language (Koh, 2004).

■2.0　KNOWING VOCABULARY

A knowledge of vocabulary entails knowing a quantity of words (vocabulary breadth) and knowing the quality of those words (vocabulary depth) (Nation, 1990). Knowing an item means more than knowing its meaning per se from the perspectives of concept, referents and associations. It requires learners to know its form in terms of spelling, pronunciation and word parts as well as its use in terms of its functions, collocations and constraints (Nation, 2001).

Some researchers claim that depth of vocabulary knowledge lies in the semantic networks in which learners link a word with other necessary information to truly understand and use them (Batty, 2012). Learners are encouraged to map out the words learnt and engage in semantic network building, for example, creating intentional links between the target word and other words the learner knows, including morphological similarity, syntactic similarity and collocational similarity (Henriksen, 1999). In this paper we attempt to address, firstly, some of the issues related to vocabulary learning and teaching; and secondly, to suggest some incidental and intentional learning and teaching strategies that could be adopted to enhance vocabulary development.

2.1　Issues in Vocabulary Learning

There are several issues that teachers have to deal with regarding vocabulary teaching and learning; namely context, number of repetitions, type of words chosen, number of words chosen and level of processing.

2.1.1　Context

Context plays a part in either direct or indirect vocabulary learning. In direct or intentional vocabulary learning, a conscious effort is made to learn vocabulary either in context or in isolation, for instance, by learning lists of word forms and their meanings, by doing vocabulary learning exercises, or by studying affixes and roots. In indirect vocabulary learning, new words are learned incidentally while reading or listening, usually as a result of information provided by the context. As pointed out by Nation (1982), a bulk of vocabulary is acquired through context as a result of indirect or incidental learning. Exposure to a large amount of input is said to contribute to vocabulary gain.

Blachowic *et al.,* (2006), however, believe that it is hard to predict what words can be learned through an examination of the context because context does not always reveal meaning, wherein it is sometimes misleading. This is supported by a study done by Moore and Surber (1992) who found no significant differences between keyword and semantic methods when they compared unstructured learning with keyword and semantic learning for English speakers enrolled in first, second, and third-year L2 German classes. Learners in the semantic contextualisation group were provided with three sentences contextualising the new L2 word together with instructions on how to attend to contextual clues. Results showed that both the keyword and semantic contextualisation methods aided more than unstructured learning in the appropriate use of new words in context (fill-in-the-blank German recall), although the contextualisation method did not prove more effective than the keyword method in this regard. In addition, the keyword method has been found to be more effective as compared to contextualisation for elementary learners.

2.1.2　Number of Repetitions

Another issue is that of repeated exposure to a word. Some literature has addressed this issue, for instance, Crothers and Suppes (1967) revealed that almost all of their participants recalled all 108 Russian-English word pairs after seven repetitions, and about 80 percent of 216 word pairs were learned by most participants after six repetitions. Similarly, Lado, Baldwin and Lobo (1967) presented their intermediate level college students of Spanish with a list of 100 words, and found that only one exposure sufficed for an average of 95 percent recognition and 65 percent recall. In short, these results suggest that, if remembering word pairs is the aim, a surprising number can be learned within a relatively short time (Webb, 1962), and not many repetitions are needed before the L2-L1 word pairs can be remembered. Linking to this current study, both treatments will have students encounter the target words for at least seven times with the new L2 words and their L1 equivalent. The teacher would first read the text and the subsequent treatment carried out would exceed seven repetitions per word including oral instruction.

Besides, repeated exposure also encompasses the learners' word-rich environment which is said to support general vocabulary development (Blachowic *et al.,* 2006). Deliberate attention drawn on vocabulary would also build knowledge of a particular word through repeated exposure and from multiple sources of information. For example, to ensure repetition of vocabulary for instruction related to text that is to be comprehended, teachers are to highlight vocabulary before reading, question students after reading, or discuss the reading in ways that call on them to use the designated words meaningfully, and then engage the students with post-reading activities with the words (Beck and McKeown, 1983; Blachowicz and Obrochta, 2005; Duke, Bennett-Armistead, and Roberts, 2003). This type of instruction, along with thematic instruction, ensures that learners will see, hear, analyse and use the target words actively in speaking and writing, making learning meaningful.

2.1.3　Type of Words Chosen

Type of words to be chosen is another issue confronting teachers. Some of the suggestions are to pick words that are not well established in the students' vocabularies and that will be encountered frequently in the future (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002), selecting words that are important to what is being

read, and choosing words based on generativity (i.e., the ability to use this word or word parts to learn other words (Graves, 2006). Many also recommend that words encountered most frequently in English are good items for learning and that various word lists can help teachers select words appropriate to various grade levels and content areas (Blachowic *et al.,* 2006).

Additionally, Folse (2006) pointed out that when he was perusing issues of *Newsweek* to identify potential target words, he found a large number of verbs unknown to participants. He then eliminated the non-verbs as he would like to study a uniformed part of speech as the part of speech of a word affects its difficulty. Ludwig (1984) further elucidates that the differential performance on tasks involving nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, indicating that the form class of a word is a reasonably potent variable in verbal tasks. Laufer (1990) loosely summarises that certain grammatical categories are more difficult to learn than others—nouns seems to be the easiest, adverbs are the most difficult while verbs and adjectives are somewhere in between the continuum.

2.1.4 Number of Words Chosen

Still another is the issue of number of words chosen. Schmitt (2010) highlighted that time constraints have a certain impact on the number of lexical items that can be incorporated into a study. He stresses that it is important to have a large sample population of words (e.g. the target words on a test) from which to generalise to the whole population of vocabulary one wishes to make statements about (e.g. a learner's total vocabulary size). However, Meara (1996) mentioned that learning a set of 20–40 words may pose some difficulties for short-term memory. Most studies deal with 10 to 13 target words of various parts of speech in vocabulary research (Blachowic, Fisher, Ogle & Watts-Taffe, 2006). However, the various sizes of word list depend on the difficulty level of the words on the list (Gu, 2003a). When many words are difficult, small list sizes are better and when words are easy, large sizes are more efficient (Crothers and Suppes, 1967).

On another note on deliberate learning from word list, Nation (1980, as cited in Elgort, 2011) noted that people are able to learn between 30 and 100 new words per hour from bilingual word pairs. Furthermore, retention rates under intentional learning are, averagely, much higher than under incidental conditions (Hulstijn, 2003). Hence, the number of words selected for a study is dependent on the difficulty of text and learners' intention of learning the lexical items.

2.1.5 Level of Processing (LOP)

The final issue is that of level of processing. Craik and Lockhart (1972) explained this phenomenon with the notion of depth of processing within the levels of processing framework. According to the levels of processing (LOP) framework, semantically oriented tasks increase memory performance more than structurally oriented tasks (tasks in which one focuses on the structural or formal properties of a word, such as the number of letters or syllables in the word) because semantically oriented processing is inherently deeper than structurally oriented processing.

2.2 Strategies to Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

There are two main strategies to vocabulary learning and teaching –implicit and explicit (Dakun, 2000). Language teachers are expected to know how to incorporate these implicit and explicit vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) into their lessons. However, not many are certain about how to do so in the language classroom (Read, 2004). To learn new words, Nation (2001) claims, requires explicit learning activities which focus on the target words.

2.2.1 Implicit and Explicit Vocabulary Learning

Implicit learning is typically defined as "acquisition of knowledge about the underlying structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operation", while explicit learning is said to be characterized by "more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure" (Ellis, 1994: 3). For instance, focusing on the learning of vocabulary, Ellis advocates that acquiring phonetic features of a word is implicit as being due to exposure and input. Likewise, the articulation of the words is also implicitly learnt as it comes with practice. On the contrary, meanings of words are developed explicitly as the conscious effort comes from the learners to remember the meanings using various strategies. A certain level of cognitive processing and meta-cognitive learning strategies are used to make the form-meaning connections.

2.2.2 Incidental Versus Intentional Vocabulary Learning

Incidental vocabulary acquisition is generally defined as the learning of vocabulary as the by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning and is contrasted with intentional vocabulary learning, defined as "any activity geared at committing lexical information to memory" (Hulstijn, 2001: 267). The main distinction between these two vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) stems from the learner's intention of learning the lexical items.

2.2.3 Incidental Vocabulary Learning Strategy

Incidental vocabulary learning is said to be an effective way of learning from context (Day, Omura, and Hiramatsu, 1991) and it is likely to motivate learners for extensive reading because it promotes deeper mental processing and better retention. Harmer (2003) and Nation (2001a) define extensive reading as a pleasurable reading situation where a teacher encourages students to select what they want to read for themselves from reading materials at a level they can understand. While reading, the learners are fully involved in the process of deciphering the meaning using the clues available in the text. This is parallel to the findings of Ahmad (2011) who found that learners who used incidental vocabulary learning while reading (i.e. based on contextual clues) performed better than the group which used intentional vocabulary strategy (i.e. word-meaning association or synonym). This could be due to the fact that readers would think and rethink about the new words encountered, which involve a certain level of cognitive processing, which help the learners retain the words for a longer period of time. Reading new words and inferring the meaning through context will be more productive because it sharpens the ability for guessing. Learners would make an effort to understand not only the meanings in the text, but also the related grammatical patterns and the typical word association with its corresponding context.

Traditional studies of incidental vocabulary learning involve learners being told just to read for comprehension, recent twists to the incidental vocabulary learning concept have included more demanding tasks beyond reading such as looking up new words in dictionaries for comprehension (Laufer and Hill, 2000) and recalling and retelling what is read (Joe, 1998). Results tend to suggest that the more demanding a task is, the more vocabulary items will be learned through reading. According to Ahmad

(2011), learning vocabulary through extensive reading also improves learners' fluency as learners are exposed to a group of words rather than each individual word while reading. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) add that the words that learners encounter in incidental vocabulary learning will be retained in the long term memory and could be used more confidently in different situations.

Other researchers also found that extensive reading is the key to vocabulary gain as learners are able to independently make meaning-form connections while processing meaningful and contextualized input (Brown, 2000). However, the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading is questioned as learners with low language proficiency might not have enough background knowledge to rely on the context to understand meaning of text read. In addition, incidental vocabulary acquisition when reading a text for meaning is reported to have small gain in vocabulary gain (Horst, Cobb and Meara, 1998). Therefore, a more concrete vocabulary learning strategy is needed to address the issue of vocabulary acquisition for beginner language learners, such as an intentional vocabulary learning strategy.

2.2.4 Intentional Vocabulary Learning Strategy

Various intentional vocabulary learning strategies are available for a language teacher to adopt in the second language classroom. Blachowic *et al.,* (2006) noted that there are characteristics of effective instructions that are applicable across teaching contexts. Firstly, learners should be actively involved in the generation of word meanings rather than being passive learners who receive the information. The existence of prior knowledge is important as the foundation for new information to be built on. Secondly, instruction should provide both definitional and contextual information about the words to be learned as well as multiple exposures and opportunities to use them.

To build on learners' prior knowledge for effective word learning, Eeds and Cockrum (1985), revealed that word meanings are best taught by expanding learners' schemata and helping them to fit new words into their existing knowledge. Most ESL students are strongly proficient in their L1, this could be effective to trigger students' existing schemata and relate it to the target words to teach vocabulary. The teacher takes on an important role in this process of intentionally learning new lexicons because the teacher needs to be constantly interactive to activate and scaffold learners' background knowledge. For example, to teach the word *peculiar*, the teacher can pose questions like "Have you encountered anything strange in your life or that you have heard of? Tell me about it." The teacher generates several examples and students jot them down. Next, the teacher can ask students to write incidents that are not peculiar as a non-example. Lastly, students should write from their own understanding, in their own words, on what is peculiar. A mind map can be created out of this. In this context, vocabulary is learnt explicitly and intentionally with the teacher playing an active role in stimulating learners' vocabulary learning.

Meta-Cognitive Strategies

Explicit teacher instruction on intentional vocabulary learning strategies is also an area explored whereby the teacher consciously teaches cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies during regular lessons. The cognitive strategies are, for example, vocalisation of the words, use of collocations, writing and oral rehearsal, imagery strategies, grouping of semantically connected words, linking words to familiar synonyms and antonyms, prefixes and suffixes use, vocabulary notes and cards strategy. The related meta-cognitive strategies are as follows: conscious

preview of new vocabulary, learn ways of expanding one's vocabulary learning and retention, target-situating of the vocabulary, allocating time for vocabulary learning, the actual application of newly learnt vocabulary, testing them and finally aiming to remember a certain number of words (Mizumoto and Takeuchi, 2009). Researchers found that the explicit teaching of meta-cognitive strategies leads to significant vocabulary learning and instructions and VLS is deemed to be more beneficial than instructions without them (Rasekh and Ranjbary, 2003; Zaki and Ellis, 1999).

Besides, these meta-cognitive strategies should be taught hand in hand with the mentioned cognitive strategies to achieve the best results of vocabulary retention. Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) revealed that some learners gained awareness of the applicability of these strategies that they had not been exposed before the explicit strategy instruction. Upon the exposure of these VLS, the subjects try to use them in their own vocabulary learning. Association strategies are said to be the most effective as one learner reveals in an interview that he had never known the strategy of relating target words with already known synonyms or antonyms, using prefixes and suffixes and grouping them semantically. The subject felt this is an effective way of learning which should be taught when he started to learn English. Hence, the explicit way of teaching vocabulary intentionally can draw learners' attention to the process of word learning and it requires the teacher's active role in imparting this knowledge of VLS in a regular classroom instruction. Students who receive explicit instruction of words through meaningful context not only are able to define words better but also are able to define words more quickly (Brett, Rothlein, and Hurley, 1996).

Rote Rehearsal

Ahmad (2011) finds that intentional vocabulary learning based on synonyms, antonyms, word substitution, multiple choice, scrambled words and crossword puzzles, regardless of context, is not so effective, because learners are more prone to rote learning. Learners are said to memorise the meaning of the new words without undergoing cognitive process. He further explains that this method of word learning is less likely to transform the target words learnt into active process.

However, rote learning is one of the easiest strategies for L2 learners to pick up words and commit them to memory by repetition until they can be recognized. The process of repeating words over and over again until they are memorised is called rote memorisation (Richards, Platt, and Platt 1992). Though this is viewed as a bad practice because it involves learning facts without having a deep understanding of them and empirical evidence suggests otherwise (Khoii and Sharififar, 2013). Laufer (2010) mentioned that memorisation contributed to most of the retention of the meaning of words, more than inferring word meaning from context, followed by checking meanings from the dictionary. Although this is an out-dated practice, many learners still resort to this practice especially to motivate low proficiency or beginner learners. To make rote memorisation more interesting and appealing, Khoii and Sharififar (2013) suggest different ways for rote memorisation of vocabulary items, for example singing songs, using flashcards, playing games, etc.

Note-Taking

Upon learning new L2 vocabulary, learners are encouraged to jot them down and take notes in the form of vocabulary notebooks, vocabulary cards, or simply notes along the margins or between the lines (Gu, 2003a). Yet, learners differ in what they do in note-taking, when they take notes, and how they take notes (McCarthy,

1990). These differences, among other things, may well distinguish the good from the poor learners.

In a study designed to examine what two successful adult Chinese EFL learners do in vocabulary learning, Gu (2003b) specifically noted how these learners conduct rote learning such as memorizing word lists. During the second reading, the first learner took two types of notes. For words that he thought are interesting and useful to him, he noted the meanings, usage and examples on a piece of paper, serving as his notebook and he included pronunciations of words that he thought were difficult (e.g. *sewerage*) and synonyms from the text and from his own vocabulary repertoire. He also recorded the words according to their grammatical functions. As for the second learner (Gu, 2003b), she used vocabulary cards where she copied vocabulary on one side of the card and its pronunciation and meaning on the other side. She would then look at the copied English word and try to recall its pronunciation and meaning. Gu's study showed that vocabulary learning is successful with the use of rote learning by note-taking and from word list by these two L2 Chinese high achieving learners.

Mnemonics

Mnemonics is a memory strategy that has been used for thousands of years (Oxford, 1990). According to Atkinson and Raugh (1975), the presupposition underlying this research tradition is simple: 1) mnemonic devices work amazingly in boosting memory; 2) vocabulary learning is fundamentally a memory issue; and therefore 3) mnemonics should work for foreign language vocabulary learning as well. It involves "relating the word to be retained with some previously learned knowledge using some form of imagery, or grouping" (Schmitt, 1997). Mnemonics help learners to learn faster and recall better because they aid integration of new material into existing cognitive units because they provide retrieval cues (Thompson, 1987).

One of the most studied mnemonics is *the keyword method*, in which a novel word is remembered by being linked to a keyword that could sound alike with native words (the acoustic link), or through an interactive image that involves both the foreign word and the native word (the imagery link) (Atkinson, 1975). It is hoped that the similar sounds of the words with target words would trigger and activate the retrieval of the real meaning of the target words. Sagarra and Alba (2006) revealed that participants used a keyword that looked like the target word only one percent of the time, whereas they use a keyword that sounds like the target word 99 percent of the time. This shows that the keyword method is an intentional vocabulary strategy that is helpful for learning new words. It might benefit absolute beginners as they need to remember many words of arbitrarily paired-associates or advanced learners who have established a target language system (Gu, 2003b).

■3.0 CONCLUSION

As had been discussed in the preceding sections about the strengths of choices available for vocabulary learning and teaching, teachers have a pivotal role to play in making the decision about which strategy to adopt in relation to the background, experiences and exposure of their learners to the target language. Every context of learning and teaching would demand specialised study of the variables for achievement of the desired outcome. Additionally, the issues presented on vocabulary learning and teaching should raise teachers' awareness of the challenges posed by the task and should deepen their knowledge of the future course of vocabulary teaching. Insights gained from research in vocabulary learning and teaching help strengthen teachers' and learners' quest for better teaching and control of the vocabulary of the target language.

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