

The Importance of Teaching and Learning English Words

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Abstract

English as a universal language is always ready to borrow new words from other languages and create new terms to represent new ideas. The duties of the English learners would be harder to control a large number of words on the one hand, and to understand from the texts on the other.

There is a strong connection between vocabulary and comprehension.

Readers with a stronger vocabulary ability can learn difficult or unfamiliar concepts better than can those with a weaker vocabulary ability (Baumann, Kame'Enui, & Ash, 2003). But, complete reliance on contexts to learn new words is not advisable because some natural contexts are *nondirective* or *uninformative* in that they do not direct readers toward any meaning of unknown words. They may lead readers to wrong conceptions of words.

Becker (1977) stated that lack of vocabulary knowledge is the main culprit for the low academic achievement of disadvantaged students. Consequently, to master English and succeed in learning within English environments, students have no choice but to conquer a significant portion of its large vocabulary.

So, it is important to think about vocabulary teaching activity which can be developed which involves deep processing, encourages active learning, links new words to background knowledge, gives contextual information, provides a useful vocabulary-learning strategy, and also enhances students' interest and motivation to learn new words.

Introduction

Learning language can be regarded as the most cognitively demanding duty learners may encounter. Most of the grammar of a language is basically acquired by children by the age of ten. Nonetheless, people continue learning new words all their life (Schmitt, 2000). Nagy stated that “the expansion and elaboration of vocabularies is something that extends across a lifetime” (2005: 2). No matter how much grammatical or other type of linguistic knowledge

is provided, no successful communication can be completed without the mediation of vocabulary. Vocabulary can have quite a large amount of fundamental communication with little support from other linguistic dimensions (Schmitt, 2000).

Vocabulary can have the largest portion of the meaning of any language and is also the most difficult problem for learners (Fan, 2003). Vocabulary is the hub of the four language skills, listening, reading, speaking and writing. As Decarrico (2001) argued that one of the important components of communicative competence is lexical competence.

In addition to that inferred three basic ways in effective instructional activities for helping students to develop a strong command of words, the activities have to “(a) facilitate linking new words to previous learning and background knowledge, (b) provide a personally meaningful context for using new words, and (c) present frequent practice opportunities” (Foil and Alber, 2002: 138).

Vocabulary knowledge also has a significant influence on comprehension. Their relationship is empirically validated. Students’ vocabulary knowledge in preschool is correlated with their reading comprehension in upper elementary school (Stahl, 2005). As Biemiller (2003) argued that “vocabulary has been recognized as a strong determinant of reading success” (p. 323).

The nature and significance of English as a global language

The English language is the language that possesses the largest vocabulary in the world. The English vocabulary is characterized by its richness, immensity, and complexity. The total number of English words is very likely to be over 2 million, with more than 54,000 word families (Schmitt, 2000). The number of words and word families is still continuing to grow at a relatively fast rate. As Stahl (2005) stated, “English is promiscuous in the way that it adds words and takes words from sources such as other languages, slang, and compounding” (p. 97). It is impossible for both native speakers and English language learners to master the entire lexicon of English, or even most of it. However, the English vocabulary students have to learn is still prodigious, as compared to learning other languages. Contingent upon learners’ different purposes, the number of to-be-learned words varies. The vocabulary size also differs in a wide range from person to person. As mentioned by Baumann, Kame’enui, and Ash (2003), “The average adult vocabulary appears to contain approximately 17,000 base words” (p. 774). Schmitt (2000) pointed out that “English native-speaking university graduates will have a vocabulary size of about 20,000 word families” (p. 3).

In addition to the extremely large quantity of English vocabulary that may intimidate learners, there also exists the issue of “quality” that learners must cope with. English vocabulary is rich in shades and fine distinction (Schmitt, 2000). A great number of words can share a general meaning but carry peculiar nuances. For example, words related to “throw” can include “toss,” “cast,” “hurl,” “fling,” “sling,” “pitch,” “dash,” “propel,” “project,” “bowl,” “send,” “launch,” and so forth. This long-winded list is far from complete and can be continued on and on.

Vocabulary Teaching

Most teachers do not spend sufficient time and effort teaching new words; nor do they employ effective methods when teaching vocabulary. More often than not, teachers just introduce vocabulary and give related assignments. They seldom design elaborate and multifaceted activities to help students learn new words (Baumann, Kame’enui, & Ash, 2003).

it is impossible to learn the words incidentally from contexts when they represent new or complicated concepts, rather than known or easy ones (Baumann, Kame’enui & Ash, 2003; Cunningham, 2005).

learning vocabulary from natural contexts is sometimes not as efficient as learning vocabulary from direct teaching, especially when the meanings

of specific words have to be learned during the period of time. Cunningham (2005) contended that waiting for students to encounter new words during normal reading and then incidentally learning one word out of twenty is inefficient. Learning words from contexts during normal reading has an influence on vocabulary learning. Reading on the regular bases, obviously, is one of the major ways to enhance vocabulary knowledge.

Effective key factors of methods to teach vocabulary

Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) found three key factors that can impact a method's effectiveness. These three factors can be used as principles to assess the existing instructional methods or to design new methods (Stahl, 1986).

1. The first factor is whether a method provides students with both definitions and context. McKeown and Beck (2004) stated that rich vocabulary instructions should include a breadth of information and that, in addition to definition, contexts and examples should also be presented.

To obtain a clearer understanding of effective vocabulary instruction, it is helpful to make a comparison between definitional information and contextual information. The vocabulary teaching methods that give a balanced mixture of contextual information bring about significantly better vocabulary achievement than the methods offering merely one kind of information. "The power of a combination of contextual information appears to be robust across instructional modalities" (Baumann, Kame'enui & Ash, 2003, p. 765). Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) stated that the methods involving both definitional and contextual information about target words produced the highest effects on comprehension.

2. The second factor is the degree to which teaching activities involve the depth of processing. "Depth" here can be regarded as the amount of cognitive and affective resources invested in the learning process (Nunan, 1991).

Students should learn to engage in vocabulary learning deeply, for example, connecting new words to already known information or prior experiences (Stahl, 2005). Deep processing transfers information about to-be-learned words to long-term memory from short-term memory, which is limited with respect to storage

capacity and duration (Decarrico, 2001). As Ellis (1995) stated, “Shallow processing like oral rehearsal does not lead to long-term retention of words but deep processing, whereby semantic associations are accessed and elaborated, does” (p. 12). Lawson and Hogben (1993) suggested, if students do not realize the advantages of elaborative procedures, it is necessary to directly teach students elaborative strategies during language instruction. Researchers have demonstrated that learners prefer relatively shallow strategies to deeper ones and favor mechanical strategies over complex ones that demand active manipulation of information, in addition, memorization were the most frequently reported vocabulary learning strategies by learners whereas the more involved manipulation of information (Schmitt, 2000: 137).

3. The third factor is the number or kind of exposure to meaningful information about new words. Researchers reiterated the importance of frequent vocabulary practice to the target word enhance the learner’s understanding of it (Scott, 2005).

Teachers should help their students acquire difficult words through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A word is more likely to enter a learner’s active vocabulary through repeated exposures (Summers, 1988). However, multiple exposures to new words do not mean mere repetition or drills of the words and their meanings, but rather learning them in various contexts and situations (Stahl, 2005).

Other researchers also tried to discover key factors in the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching methods. The main principles for effective vocabulary instruction that Scott and Nagy (2004) clarified are:

- “(1) Create multidimensional word schemas with students,
- (2) Create multiple opportunities to see and use concepts, and
- (3) Help students build connective links in the associative network surrounding the words,
- (4) Help students develop subtle distinctions between related words that occur in the same semantic field” (p. 85).

Conclusion

There are effective methods and useful strategies that can be taken to help students learn new vocabulary independently. Carr and Wixson (1986) suggested that it is critical for students to learn how to discover the meanings of difficult words by themselves because mature readers have to understand a great number of words. Word-learning strategies, making up a major portion of generative word knowledge, are steps taken in order to discover or understand the meaning of difficult words. In contrast to individual word knowledge, generative word knowledge is defined as “vocabulary knowledge that can transfer to the learning of new words” (Nagy, 2005, p. 29).

Moreover, Ruddell (1986) stated that motivation and desire to learn new words is a factor contributing to effective vocabulary learning. In addition to interesting activities, clear learning objectives, and well organized instructional plans, learners’ understanding of the academic and personal value of vocabulary knowledge can foster this motivation.

Practicing the above mentioned methods and strategies for teaching English words by the teachers; students can develop easily. They also can enjoy learning vocabulary and appreciate the beauty of words.

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