

The Importance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract: This article reveals the importance of learning vocabulary in ESP and the types of vocabulary learning strategies. The article says that learning strategies make a profound sense in acquiring the vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary, strategies, lexical approach, high frequency words, communicative competence.

Teaching vocabulary especially in ESP courses is becoming a challenge for English Language Teachers. Vocabulary is an inseparable part of any teaching syllabus and vocabulary should be taught in a well-planned and regular basis. It is essential to carefully decide what vocabulary will be selected for teaching, and what approach or activities will be used to teach it to the students. English is becoming the primary foreign language in the Republic of Uzbekistan. English has been taught in primary schools from the first grade for several years. However, starting from last 2010, it is a required subject from the first grade where the students attend two classes a week. The traditional textbooks have been changed and the students are provided with more modern books that include pictures and focus on language skills. The same situation exists in high schools where the students attend two to four English classes a week. English teachers are being trained in using modern methods of English teaching and attend local and international conferences. Old teaching methods are rapidly being replaced with modern ones. The teachers at Universities in the country design curricula based on the students’ needs and interests.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) are of the opinion that ESP teachers should not teach /technical vocabulary but should check if the learners understood technical vocabulary that appears as carrier content for an exercise. I believe that ESP teachers should teach words. I agree with Krashen Stephen who points out that “learners who know scientific field may have little difficulty with technical words; but a teacher who doesn’t may have a great deal”.[6.p24] A suitable approach for teaching ESP words is the lexical approach. The lexical approach follows the principle that lexis is the most important part of any language and should be treated that way. Chunks are used in communication a lot especially by LF learners as they strive to meet their basic communicative needs. LF learners sometimes try to be creative and combine one part of the lexical phrase with another word in order to produce a better utterance.

Vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for foreign language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Underscoring the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language”[5. p 55] Nation (2001) further describes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. [9. p 43]The importance of vocabulary is demonstrated daily in and out the school. In classroom, the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary. Researchers such as Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) and others have realized that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful second and foreign language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. In English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Rivers and Nunan, furthermore, argue that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful foreign language use because without an extensive vocabulary, we will be unable to use the structures and functions we may have learned for comprehensible communication. It is clear that foreign language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 readers to overcome. In production, when we have a meaning or concept that we wish to express, we need to have a store of words from which we can select to express this meaning or concept. “When students travel, they don’t carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries” [6. p25] Many researchers argue that vocabulary is one of the most important-if not the most important- components in learning a foreign language, and foreign language curricula must reflect this. Wilkins states that: “There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say ... While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” [10.p97]. So vocabulary plays an important role in learning a particular language. But the problem is that we have a lack of methods for teaching vocabulary and we should investigate the new methods of teaching vocabulary being easily accepted by students not being challenging.

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Research into the area of language strategies began in earnest in the 1970s as part of the movement away from a predominantly teaching-oriented perspective, to one which included interest in how the actions of learners might affect their acquisition of language (acquisition and learning will be used interchangeably in this chapter). Concurrently, there was a growing awareness that aptitude was not the governing factor in language learning success, implying that language achievement depended quite heavily on the individual learner's endeavours. This naturally led to a greater interest in how individual learners approached and controlled their own learning and use of language.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) divide language learning strategies into three major types: metacognitive (strategies for over viewing the processes of language use and learning, and for taking steps to efficiently plan and regulate those processes), cognitive (strategies which involve the manipulation of information in an immediate task for the purpose of acquiring or retaining that information) and social/affective (strategies dealing with interpersonal relationships and those which deal with controlling one's emotional constraints). Each of these major categories describe a large number of strategies, so more detailed taxonomies are possible. Oxford (1990) has attempted one of the most comprehensive classification systems to date. It includes six major strategy categories, including Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social.

In choosing vocabulary learning strategies, the frequency of occurrence of a word is also relevant; Nation suggests that teaching students strategies is especially important when it comes to dealing with low frequency words. He argues that vocabulary can be considered from a cost/benefit viewpoint: high frequency words are so essential that the 'cost' of teaching them is justified by the resulting benefit, but low frequency words will not generally be met often enough to merit individual explicit teaching. Since teaching time is not justified on these low frequency words, he suggests teaching three strategies to help students deal with them: guessing from context, using mnemonic techniques, and using word parts [8. P 65] One description of the various levels of vocabulary with the goal of designing the vocabulary component of a language course (Nation, 2001) divides vocabulary into four levels: high frequency words; academic vocabulary; technical vocabulary; and low frequency words. High frequency words are the most frequent 2,000 words of English. [9. P 43] West (1953) called these words a general service vocabulary because they were of use (or service) no matter what the language was being used to do. This vocabulary typically covers around 80% of the running words of academic texts and newspapers, and around 90% of conversation and novels. It includes virtually all of the function words of English (around 176 word families), but by far the majority of high frequency words are content words [9.p13-16]. For learners with academic goals, the 570 word family Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) is like a specialised extension of the high frequency words. It covers on average 8.5% of academic text, 4% of newspapers and less than 2% of the running words of novels. This vocabulary has been called academic vocabulary (Martin, 1976), sub-technical vocabulary (Cowan, 1974) or semi-technical vocabulary (Farrell, 1990). There has been a lot of discussion and some research on academic vocabulary [4. P 215]. This vocabulary is common to a wide range of academic fields but is not what is known as high frequency vocabulary and is not technical in that it is not typically associated with just one field. It is however more closely related to high frequency vocabulary than to technical vocabulary. It was thought that the third level of vocabulary, technical words, covered about 5% of the running words in specialised texts, and was made up of words that occurred frequently in a specialised text or subject area but did not occur or were of very low frequency in other fields [9. 18-19] Technical vocabulary is largely of interest and use to people working in a specialised field. The fourth level of vocabulary consists of all the remaining words of English, the low frequency words. There are thousands of these words and they typically cover around 5% of the running words in texts.

Vocabulary learning is a very important part of the curricula in higher education in Uzbekistan and the students who study here need to learn English for different purposes: to deal with the foreign business partners in their jobs, to know it for their studies, to travel abroad to meet other cultures or on holiday, to read literature in English, etc. Knowing a word is complex in that it involves not only the ability to recognize its form, or memorizing its definition provided in the dictionary, it also includes knowledge of using it correctly and appropriately in communication and writing.

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