

USING VOCABULARY TO INCREASE SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

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Vocabulary has long held the attentions of teachers and scholars abroad as well as in China. With the development of college reform in China, vocabulary teaching has been an important part and is now getting more and more attention in college English teaching. More researchers are done and more new teaching methodologies are used by college English teachers.

Based on the theoretical researches as well as the reality of English teaching in China, the writer presents the framework. The paper has three main section : the importance of vocabulary teaching and the aim and meaning to do the research; the definition and function of Language Learning strategy and the Second language acquisition; the effective strategies on L2 vocabulary teaching, proposing six applicable teaching strategies for English vocabulary as well as the respective theoretical basis. The teaching strategies for vocabulary help students take more responsibility for their learning and what is more important is that it enhances the process of teaching. To sum up, through a review of the literature and personal experience, it's obvious that all the strategies have proven to be significantly effective.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For Chinese college students English vocabulary has long been their top concern as well as their big headache. So vocabulary teaching has been an important part in the past and today is getting increased attention. Because of the limited time available, teachers have not paid enough attention to the associative meaning and pragmatic meaning of vocabulary. The result is that although students passed the College English Test Band Four (CET-4) or College English Test Band Six (CET-6), they still lacked the ability to use the language appropriately and to communicate effectively.

Many teachers only focus on how to teach or how to learn vocabulary. Both are important. This paper provides a report on research related to the importance of vocabulary teaching. And the definition and function of language learning strategies involved in the second language acquisition. Special attention is give to effective strategies on L2 vocabulary teaching.

Statement of the Problem

What are the effective and suitable techniques for Chinese students to master the English vocabulary?

Definition of Terms

Language Learning Strategy. An attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic

competence in the target language.

ESL. English as a Second Language (hereafter ESL is used)

Second Language Acquisition .The process by which people learn a second language in addition to their native languages.

Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with Academic Search Elite and Wilson Index as the primary sources. Key search topics included “language acquisition”, “English vocabulary development for Chinese”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of English vocabulary development for Chinese students was conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Importance of Vocabulary in Second Language Learning

Vocabulary, composed of all the words in a language, has always been the emphasis of language. When a baby learns mother's language, baby has to begin with words. For example, when she or he says "water" to mother, she naturally knows that the baby wants to drink water. So sometimes even without grammar, words can also make communication possible.

In China, most students choose English as their second language. When they learn a language, they think that vocabulary is the most important. Most Chinese learners would probably identify this acquisition of "new words" as their single greatest source of problem in learning English. Also, there are many students who give up learning English just because they are bored by vocabulary lists and are tired of memorizing words every morning. One can see that vocabulary teaching may be the most difficult part of language learning. Just as the notable British language scholar Wilkins (1972) stated: "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p.9).

What many language teachers might have intuitively known for a long time is that a solid vocabulary is necessary in every stage of language learning. Vocabulary has been considered the major obstacles on the road of learning English to all the English language learners (ELLs). Recently, researchers found in diverse classrooms,

“that only 6% of school time was centered on vocabulary development, and in the core academic subject areas only 1.4% of instructional time was spent developing vocabulary knowledge” (Flynt, Brozo, 2008, p500). As reported by the researchers, those observations suggest problems for students given that vocabulary skills are one of the best predictors of academic success (Leikin, 2007).

In sum, the fundamental role of vocabulary in successful second language learning has been well established. It is recognized now that the mastery of vocabulary is an essential component of second language (L2) acquisition and learners (Leikin, 2007), therefore, must develop large vocabularies in order to become proficient in a second language.

The second language acquisition and Teaching

“Second Language Acquisition” can be defined as the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, insider or outsider of a classroom (Ellis, 1997). Furthermore, according to Ellis, other important factors are identifying the external and internal factors that account for why learners acquire an L2 in the way they do. (Ellis, 1997)

Vocabulary is one of the indispensable components of language system. It plays a crucial role in the learning and teaching of a foreign language. Language teaching can be defined as the activities that are intended to bring about the language teaching (Stern, 1999). L2 vocabulary teaching is a very important part of language teaching, to bring about vocabulary learning However, the subject of these two is different in

that teaching is ignited by teachers who help bring about learning that is to be carried out by learners (Llinares, Leiva, Cartaya, & St. Louis., 2008). In other words, it is usually the teacher who carried out the task to help students to master the pronunciation, spelling, and meaning of a new word. So, L2 vocabulary teaching can be the basic beginning of L2 vocabulary learning.

L2 vocabulary learning is a complex process. The students need to shift from simple word recognition to practical to complete lexical knowledge (including word's pronunciation, spelling, meaning, affixations, synonyms and colligations). Thus, the teachers have the job of managing the learning of vocabulary that the learners can do some or the things with the target vocabulary that is to be learned. Furthermore, L2 vocabulary learning generally lacks a natural learning environment and takes places against the backdrop of an already existing mental lexicon. This factor naturally brings about much difficulty for the learners in their vocabulary learning process. To express in a few words, this process cannot be carried out successfully without the involvement of teachers. Teaching and learning go hand in hand in the development of the learner's vocabulary proficiency.

It is necessary to consider the questions how do the students learn the vocabulary and how should the teacher teach vocabulary? To respond it is necessary to introduce the main vocabulary teaching process and to examine the effect of this learning from the angle of vocabulary acquisition. Hence, the suggestion that all L2 teachers should keep these factors in mind so as to apply suitable methods to improve their student's vocabulary learning interests and efficiency.

Context Cues as Vocabulary Teaching and Learning Strategy

There is some evidence that context method can be an “effective and long-lasting way to increase students’ vocabulary and reading comprehension” (Leikin & Deacon, 2007, p23). The context generally shows in what sense the word is used, in its primary sense or its figurative sense. When used literally, words have their original meaning; when used figuratively, words have symbolic meaning. The meaning of the word is defined by the context. The context determines which meaning out of all the possible meaning is to be attached to the word. The word “country” (Hornsby, & Cowie, 1994), may mean:

- 1) a nation or a state with its land or population,
- 2) the nation or state of one’s birth or citizenship,
- 3) the people of nation or state,
- 4) land with a special nature or character,
- 5) the land outside cities or towns, land used for farming or left unused.

Some examples follow:

- 1) Some of these countries are much warmer than others.
- 2) After many years abroad he wanted to return to his country.
- 3) The country is opposed to war.
- 4) What does a farming country mean?
- 5) We’re hoping to go for a day in the country if the weather’s fine tomorrow.
- 6) This is unknown country (a branch of learning) to me. (p.242)

Students understand the meaning of words by using cues contained in the context of a text. Students use a new word in a “semantic map” (Leikin & Deacon, 2007, p.24) diagram, in which the new words are surrounded by three or four descriptive cue words. For example consider the word “journalist”. The new word was placed in the following situation:

“Pam was going to work on the bus. She worked as a journalist for a newspaper. She wrote stories about things that had happened” (Leikin & Deacon, 2007, p.24). It (the sentence) contained two descriptive cues to the words meaning: newspaper and wrote stories. Students can easily identify the new words and its meaning.

One noted vocabulary specialist in learning the vocabulary of a second language (Nation, 1990) also estimated that the students of advanced proficiency could learn words at an annual rate close to 2,500 per year in a school environment. Most words are acquired by inferring the meaning from context.

Nation (1990) also illustrates a teaching strategy. The author assembles the basics steps of context strategy as follows:

1. Look at the unknown words and decide its part of speech. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb?
2. Look at the clause or sentence containing the unknown word.
3. Look at the relationship between the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and other sentences or paragraphs.
4. Use the knowledge you have gained from the above to guess the meaning of the word. (p.44)

In order to train the students with acquiring the above steps, many exercises are needed for students to practice context strategy. For example, consider the following paragraph which contains a new word **hemorrhage**: “Benny was killed because the human fist delivers enough impact, when directed against the head, to produce a massive **hemorrhage** in the brain” (Nation, 1990, p.44).

The instructor asks students to read the above paragraph once, and then look carefully at the word printed in boldface. Then, the teacher informs students to decide:

1. What kind of word it is.
2. What information is given in the sentence, which can help you to work out the meaning?

If students can not guess the word ‘hemorrhage’ from the context, the teacher helps students to analyze the word ‘hemorrhage’ like the following: First ‘hemorrhage’ is a noun because it comes after an adjective ‘massive’ and indefinite article ‘a’ and it follows ‘in the brain’, then according to the first sentence, the man was killed by the human fist, which delivers enough impact against the man's head. Finally students guess that the word ‘hemorrhage’ means ‘an injury to the brain’.

One can see that context method can be an effective and long-lasting way to increase student’s vocabulary, and, in turn, their academic success.

The Influence of Culture on Lexical Meaning

“Without understanding the cultural within a foreign language, it is unthinkable and very hard for one to master a foreign language and communicate very

well” (Ling, 1997, p.11). This relationship between language and cultural forms one important aspect in foreign language acquisition.

Learning a foreign language well means more than merely mastering the pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms. It also means learning also to see the worlds as native speakers of the target language see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and the behavior of their society, learning to understand their language of the mind, learning a language, in fact, is inseparable from learning its culture. This relationship between language and culture forms one important aspect in second language acquisition.

The aim of foreign language teaching is not merely to teach learners how to master the correct ways of expressions in the target language, to express what has already been in their minds, but also to enable them to acquire a set of cultural knowledge that is different from their own. Cultural involvement in foreign language teaching will, not only strengthen students’ understanding and mastery of the target language, but also enhance their cultural competence which is the ultimate goal in foreign language acquisition.

However, one can see that, in vocabulary teaching or intensive reading, if students make mistakes in pronunciation, teachers deliberately put emphasis on words definitions, word formation collocations and vocabulary exercises, but little attention is attached to cultural differences and the cultural influence on vocabulary. English has most synonyms of any language in the world because the English language has grown over many centuries by incorporating words from other language (Ling, 1997).

That is to say, to choose words wrongly is to leave a mistaken impression on the reader. To choose words well is to communicate with one another successfully. A number of synonyms in English are made up of British English and American English. So it is very important to compare the way American and British English have adopted different terms when referring to the same concept. The words that have the same concept but different terms or have the same word but differences in style.

English Idioms

English idioms are an important part of the English vocabulary and also another important cultural reaction on lexicon (Ling, 1997). They have existed for many centuries and are still in use. The English language is a flexible language, so it is very rich in idiomatic expressions. One researcher (Ling, 1997) holds that the general tendencies of present day English are towards more idiomatic usages. Therefore, English idioms form an essential part of the general vocabulary. Many hundreds of idioms are now accepted not only in spoken English but also in written English. They can appear in a colloquial style, or in a formal style, or even in slang. In fact, it is difficult to speak or write English without using idioms. But learning English idioms well is not an easy thing. One needs everyday practice and observation. The correct use of idioms English must be one of the main aims of none—native learners, because learning and using idioms is the best way to master the language. It is a sound method for learners' self study. It also helps one to improve one's English and reach the goal of the second language acquisition.

Rich Instruction

One researcher (Douglas, 2008) has described the method of teaching vocabulary, called “rich instruction”. According to the author, he think the “rich instruction” includes explaining words meaning in student-friendly language, providing multiple examples and multiple contexts, and requiring students to process words deeply by identifying and explaining appropriate and inappropriate uses and situation and creating multiple contexts. Instruction is focus on asking students to use such words in a variety of context to increase their comprehension and require them to engage in constructive activities with each word. One example is used to teach the words feast, exhausted, and cautionary.

First, the teacher defines each word in the context of the story and offers a definition. Students are then asked to read aloud. Next, the word is presented in different context, and students are asked to make judgments about whether examples of the word used in different context were accurate. Last, students are given the definition and asked to recall the target word (Douglas, 2008, p. 37).

Teachers can easily adapt this approach in the class. This kind of method can help students master more sophisticated vocabulary than they might typically learn, and it shows that the addition of such words to young students’ vocabulary is enhanced by providing reinforcing activities at intervals after initial instruction.

Read Aloud

Read-aloud provide an ideal “teacher-centered” (Chard, Baker, Howard, and Santoro, 2008) approach for introducing and talking about new word. Reading aloud and facilitating text-based discussions about words provide contexts and opportunities for students to learn new words before they have the reading skills necessary to spacing acquire vocabulary independently (Chard, Baker, Howard, and Santoro, 2008). In addition to generally discussing vocabulary within the context of a read-aloud text, vocabulary must also be taught directly. Teachers must consider several issues when deciding how to structure read-aloud and incorporate comprehension instruction with a series of lessons. The first thing to discuss is whether the text was a story or an information book, and predictions. If it is a story, one should know about what happened first, next, and at the end. In an information text, teachers guided students about what they thought they knew about the text’s topic.

The read aloud for the first was centered on story structure and the information students would be needed for retellings. When selecting words, Chard, Baker, Howard, and Santoro (2008) advise teachers that selected words from each text to explicitly teach and discuss. They have listed following strategies:

“a) Functional and meaningful; b) Rich, varied, and interesting without, comprising the text’s overall meaning; c) Important to understanding the story” (Chard, Baker, Howard, and Santoro, 2008, p402).

During Read-aloud, teachers would pause and ask students to discuss a particular comprehension question. A focus question was always used to direct the

student-to-student discussions. After the read-aloud, teachers would use a large story retelling chart, or a transparency for an overhead projector, to model a story retelling. Finally, vocabulary was taught or reviewed if it occurred in the text. After reading, teachers would model a story or information book retelling using the vocabulary. The read-aloud focused on confirming student predictions, drawing conclusions, making connections, and learning vocabulary. It can promote comprehension and vocabulary with explicit comprehension instruction and engaging discussions about text (Chard, Baker, Howard, and Santoro, 2008).

Formation Strategy

The English language learners often get lost in the learning of great amount of vocabulary. That is, the study of English words offers the present-day students a great many puzzles. It has been shown that, to understand a word, the first and essential thing is to be aware of how it is built whether or not it can be taken apart into two or more constituents (Lu, 2001).

According to Lu (2001), the most helpful thing we can learn about words is that they can be taken apart and put together again, that is to say, being aware of constituents plays an indispensable role in learning vocabulary. Since constituents mainly involve roots and affixes, it is essential for the students to get familiar with. Learning one root or affix may unlock thousands of new words for them, and that will by all means help you remember them well.

Formation strategy is mainly concerned with the teachers' presentation of various word formations by which words are coined. The attention is mainly focused

on analyzing the structures of new words and giving new information of the frequently-used affixes and roots.

Glazier (1981) gives an example, the word “asymmetric” (p.76). “asymmetric” as the prefix a- (not), for example. Teachers are able to take apart the root sym (together) and the root meter (measure), which means "not measured together or not having both sides exactly alike" (p.76). Moreover, based on the above explanation, three parts of the word, namely, "asym" and "meter"(p.77) can be naturally introduced to students respectively. The prefix "a-"means "not". indeed, one can cite in words such as atypical (not typical), apathy (without feeling), atom (not to be cut), and anarchy (without ruler). The root "sym" or another form "syn" means "together", as in words like "synthetic (put together), symphony(sound together), sympathy (feel together), and symbol (throw together for comparison)". The last part of “asymmetric”-the root form meter-in words such as geometry (measure distance on earth), pedometer (measure distance by foot), diameter (measure distance through center of a circle), and centimeter (measure of 1/100 meter).

From the above examples given, one can see clearly that knowing a few affixes or roots will certainly give English language learners great help of learning dozens or hundreds of words. This strategy allows the students to enlarge their vocabulary without memorizing the new words as completely novel ones but only adding some new elements to those they already know. This will certainly save more time, offer much relief to the students and, in the long run, get them psychologically relaxed and become excited about English vocabulary. Another aspect of the advantages of

formation strategy is that with the students' gradually increasing acquaintance with the word formation processes, they are likely to get more fun in the study of English words. This will result in more curiosity and interest and, therefore, stimulate their active learning rather than require or compel them to learn the target words.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

English language learners come to be aware of the importance of English and of vocabulary learning as most essential and critical role played in second language acquisition. However, memorizing vocabulary can be time-consuming and hard work for students, to more specific, large amounts of learners feel dizzy and frustrated at English vocabulary memorization. As we know that vocabulary acquisition involves implicit and explicit learning. L2 mental lexicon is different from L1 mental and motivation and vocabulary learning strategy are quite important for the learning process. Therefore, how the teachers try best to help them store and recall target words would turn to be the focus which is expected to be paid special attention to. In this paper, the author subsequently conducts five vocabulary learning strategies: context strategy, idiom strategy, rich instruction, read-aloud strategy and word formation strategy. The above strategies attempts to exploit efficient vocabulary language strategy for Chinese ESL students. The context strategy facilitates vocabulary learning. The idioms strategy not only help students master the language, but also let you know more about the culture which is the background of language. Rich instruction can help students master more sophisticated vocabulary than they might typically learn. Read –aloud strategy is an ideal “teacher-centered” approach for introducing and talking about new word. The formation strategy is proved to be helpful for the students to guess the word’s meaning from formation of words and memorize words in the long run.

Liu's (2008) study found teachers should guide students to realizing that they are centers of English learning, they should abandon low-efficient vocabulary learning strategies and employ more efficient strategies in vocabulary acquisition. So teachers play a crucial role in the L2 learning process. Teachers can encourage students to cooperate with each other to practice vocabulary learning strategies and overcome their emotional fears. Teachers can organize some activities in the classroom such as group discussion. Teachers should try various ways to arouse students' interests in vocabulary learning strategies.

Although this paper includes a discussion of several sound vocabulary learning strategies for students and teachers, there are still many defects and limitations in this study. The current study can not demonstrate the general situations of vocabulary learning in China. There is no doubt that the findings of this study have explored some efficient vocabulary learning strategies, which can be helpful to both vocabularies learning and teaching. Many vocabulary learning strategies have been proved effective in Western countries should be tested whether they are effective in China. Further researches and studies are still expected.

In spite of the limitations, it is still hoped that this report will help educators make vocabulary development an important part of instruction, also offer several sound techniques for engaging students overcome the major obstacles to vocabulary growth.

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