

# STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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**Summary:** *Having a good command of English vocabulary plays an important role in second language acquisition because without sufficient vocabulary learners cannot understand English speakers or express their own ideas in English. This study conducted a literature review about the necessity to apply some effective strategies to improve learner's English vocabulary instruction. The results indicated that it is advisable for teachers to use different vocabulary teaching techniques i.e. explicit, implicit and independent vocabulary teaching. Based on three approaches, some pedagogical implications for vocabulary development are put forward as resourceful references for teachers of English to exploit effective vocabulary teaching opportunities through different vocabulary teaching strategies.*

**Keywords:** *second language acquisition, vocabulary instruction, techniques, pedagogical implication, vocabulary teaching strategies.*

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary can be regarded as the core component of verbal communication. The structure of a simple sentence including 3 basic factors; subject, verb, and object comprises two things, namely keywords or content words, and function words. Keywords are those which carry the meaning of the sentence while content words are grammatical structure. Although they are normally combined to form a sentence, content words and function ones are separately used. However, without keywords, a message cannot be understood thoroughly but function words may be conjugated incorrectly or missed from the sentence, its purposeful communication could be deduced from the utterance. In fact, individuals who

can express themselves precisely with appropriate language are likely to make a good impression on the minds of people who are addressing [1].

Vocabulary can be defined as the words of a language, counting single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do. Vocabulary addresses single lexical items, words with specific meaning(s), but it also includes lexical phrases or chunks [2]. Vocabulary knowledge implies knowing a word in the spoken form and the spoken form can be recognized and understood in and out of context rather than guessed at. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge is often defined as the ability to give a target language paraphrase. This means that vocabulary

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knowledge requires the ability to react to words that students do not need to think about. The words just come into student's minds to be used in an effective and natural way. When students have knowledge of a word, they do not take much time thinking about the word. They just have to use the word naturally and appropriately [3].

Vocabulary knowledge requires not only word meanings knowledge, but it also requires the usage of the words in the appropriate context and in a natural way and also includes the relationship between new words acquired and the ones already acquired. Hence, governesses should use techniques that teach the meaning of words in context and help apprentices associate the new vocabulary learned and what they already knew and help apprentices memorize the words and their meanings [2]. Vocabulary teaching is one of the most important components of any language class. As pointed out by [4], "Words are the building blocks of language and having a good supply of them is very important for students right from the beginning of their English learning". In fact, without vocabulary communication in a second or foreign language, it is not possible in a meaningful way. No matter how well the student learns grammar and how successfully the sounds of second language are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in a second language just cannot happen in any meaningful way. Therefore, teaching vocabulary is very important in language learning since it is seen as a key element to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language. Overall, teaching vocabulary plays a significant role in language acquisition since vocabulary

will help students develop the language skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing. Vocabulary can make the practice of English language structures easier; having a stock of words is useful for describing daily life ideas and feelings that students express in their native language. In this review paper, the researcher reviewed some effective strategies of teaching vocabulary. This paper intended to increase teachers' awareness of the strategies of teaching vocabulary so that suitable and effective actions can be adopted in English language teaching.

## **2. Some challenges in teaching vocabulary**

Since a good knowledge of vocabulary has a great effect on the learner's improvement of other aspects of languages such as reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking and writing. There are difficulties that lessen the student's word knowledge. The following are the most fundamental obstacles.

*a. The size of the task:* The number of words that students need to learn is exceedingly large. On average, students add 2,000 – 3,000 words a year to their reading vocabularies [5]. This means that they learn from six to eight new words each day for an enormous achievement. Individual differences in vocabulary size also involve large numbers.

*b. The complexity of word knowledge:* Knowing a word involves much more than knowing its dictionary definition, and simply memorizing a dictionary definition does not guarantee the ability to use a word in reading or writing [6].

*c. Lack of creating genuine communication:* Determining how to create genuine communication within the classroom setting presents challenges to

teachers. However, in general, teaching vocabulary is not easy, clearly more than just presenting new words [6].

*d. Students with limited or no knowledge of English:* English used in textbooks and printed material is different from spoken or conversational English [7].

*e. Students with reading and learning disabilities:* The amount of time spent on reading. For instance, a student who reads 21 minutes per day outside of school reads almost 2 million words per year. A student who reads less than a minute per day outside of school reads only 8,000 to 21,000 words per year [7].

*f. Students who enter school with limited vocabulary knowledge:* At first-grade, high performing students know about twice as many words as low-performing students [8].

### **3. Approaches to teaching vocabulary**

Different teachers have their own teaching styles and what students learn depends on how and what they are taught according to their developmental level, their interests, and their experience, which requires teachers to flexibly adapt their teaching methodology to different groups of students. Obviously, no effective instruction can be used in teaching vocabulary. Effective instruction is not practically a set of generic practices but it is a set of context-driven decision about instruction. In order for teachers to be successful at language teaching, they should not use the same set of practices for every lesson. Instead, they should intensively reflect about their work, supervise whether students are interested in learning or not, and then they themselves adjust their teaching practices accordingly to meet different kinds of learner's expectations.

#### **3.1. Explicit vocabulary teaching**

Explicit teaching can be defined as an approach in which information about a language is given to learners directly by teachers or textbook. A highly effective approach to teach vocabulary is done by explicit vocabulary teaching, which is regarded as the efficient approach to be employed by teachers for learner's retention of new words. In order for learners to develop vocabulary intentionally, they should be provided with the opportunities to have access to rich contexts of authentic use of visual aids rather than isolated vocabulary drills, which is considered as robust vocabulary learning. The use of visual aids gets students actively engaged in using and thinking about word meanings and in creating relationships among words [9], [10]. For explicit vocabulary teaching, the role of teachers is to supply their learners with abundance of authentic visual aids, which help learners feel more convinced to develop new vocabulary than their teachers's lectures on vocabulary teaching [10].

#### **3.2. Implicit vocabulary teaching**

Implicit teaching involves non-conscious operations. That is, learners are studying without awareness of what has been taught. Some authors express their concerns about implicit vocabulary teaching. Channel [11] believes that the learning of vocabulary implicitly is probably considered more efficient in intermediate and advanced students through extensive reading and listening. At these levels, high-achieved students can deduce word meanings from context only if they know a large number of word meanings used by speakers or writers. As a result, teachers are advisable not to apply implicit

vocabulary teaching for low achievers of English since low-level students have difficulty deducing word meanings in a text or while listening to the teacher or to someone else. Therefore, implicit vocabulary instruction used by teachers can be effective depending on the level of the student's vocabulary knowledge [12]. In this aspect, the role of teachers in learner's vocabulary development can be viewed as a facilitator, supporter and resource person [13]. Teachers are in charge of leading activities for low-level students to improve their vocabulary bank.

### **3.3. Independent vocabulary teaching**

It is necessary to define firstly the independent learning; it is considered as a process, a method and a philosophy of education whereby a learner acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for enquiry and critical evaluation. That means the role of teachers in this approach is not remarkable, which is shifted to learner's responsibility, and learners then are so-called autonomous ones. In regard to language learning, learners have the ability to take charge of their own learning and to be responsible for decisions concerning the goals, learning processes, and implementation of one language learning needs. As for learner's vocabulary development, learners are instructed to use dictionaries to take information, to look up word meanings, or to translate the targeted words into student's first or second languages autonomously. Obviously, it is important for teachers to guide their learners how effectively to use dictionaries in this aspect. By this way, dictionaries are seen as "passports to independence" and using them is one of the learner-centered language teaching approach [14], [15].

## **4. Effective strategies of teaching vocabulary**

Before starting an English course, it is necessary for teachers to consider how to teach vocabulary for a multi-level learners. Thereotically, there is a variety of teaching techniques teachers can take them into consideration. In reality, no best technique is claimed to be effective for learners as they have different learning style preferences [16]. Supposing that when teachers applied the same techniques teaching vocabulary for a group of learners, they might receive dissimilar feedbacks from their learner's perceptions on their teaching methodology. Among three methodologies, i.e. explicit, implicit, and independent teaching approaches, learners should be trained to become independent or autonomous ones as the matter of fact that they do not stay at educational setting forever [17].

Teaching vocabulary does not simply convey the word meanings to learners who are then expected to turn those words into rote learning. In reality, if teachers believe that words are active and worth for learning, teachers should use efficient and different techniques in teaching English vocabulary to motivate the learners, enrich their vocabulary and enable them to speak English properly. In order for teachers to employ effective strategies to teach vocabulary, they should keep four factors in mind such as whom they are teaching, the nature of word they choose to teach, their instructional purposes in teaching each of those words, and the techniques they employ to teach words [18]. Meaning in context is one of effective ways with respect to teaching vocabulary. It is essential for learners to have opportunities to use new words in terms of review

and practice, or drill them via role play, guessing games or right and wrong word choices. Teaching and drilling new words in context is a very important technique which is engraved on learner's minds [19]. For the details, contextualization is discussed in length below.

#### **4.1. Teaching vocabulary in context - Contextualization**

##### *4.1.1. Definition of contextualization*

Contextualization is a technique of teaching vocabulary through reading texts, in which learners are provoked to guess meanings of new words from contexts or clues. As for independent learners, this is the best way of both developing their vocabulary in a foreign language and encouraging learner's skills of visualization and reading comprehension [20], [21]. Some research findings [20], [22] claim that contextual word teaching is more effective than non-contextual one. As a result, it is very important for teachers to provide meaningful learning experiences for learners to enrich their vocabulary via authentic materials and chances for them to use new vocabulary so the effective manner to develop and retain vocabulary is to teach words in context. In contrast, words presented separately from their surroundings result in decreasing the likelihood of comprehension. That is why new vocabulary should be taught in sentences and meaningful contexts [21], [23].

The popular principles [24] are put forward as ways to enhance the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary using contextual clues as follows:

- Highlight textual clues that lead to the meaning of the target word. This will enhance student's capability to recognize textual clues. Clues include synonyms,

definitions, antonyms, contrasts, and examples.

- Select texts in which the target words occur a few times.

- To enhance accuracy of student's inferences of target words, teach them background knowledge of the text.

##### *4.1.2. Types of contextualization*

Contextual clues are regarded as indicators of the meanings of words which can appear in the sentence containing the words or somewhere else in the text within close proximity. Contextual clues are denoted as definitions, examples, synonyms, antonyms, summary, comparison, and contrast [20].

- *Definition:* Often the writer defines the meaning of the word right in the sentence or gives enough explanation for the meaning to be clear.

- *Example:* Helps the reader get the meaning of a word by providing examples that illustrate the use of the word.

- *Comparison and contrast:* Comparison and contrast usually show the similarities and differences between persons, ideas and things.

- *Summary:* A summary clue sums up a situation or an idea with a word or a phrase.

- *Synonyms:* Very often the reader can find in the same passage a familiar word that relates to a subject in a manner similar to the way that the unfamiliar term does.

- *Antonyms:* Words with opposite meanings may be found in the same context.

#### **4.2. Collocation**

Vocabulary knowledge does not only involve just knowing the meaning of a word in isolation, but includes knowing the word that usually co-occurs

with it. These words that co-occur with high frequency are called collocations. Collocation refers to the restrictions on how words can be used together, for example which prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together. For example, in English the verb *perform* is used with *operation*, but not with *discussion*.

Collocations are classified into two types: lexical and grammatical collocations [25]. Firstly, lexical collocations refer to the combinations of nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs such as verb + noun (e.g. have a break, have lunch), adjective + noun (e.g. heavy traffic, best regard), noun + noun (e.g. language school), verb + adverb (e.g. thanks a lot), and adverb + adjective (e.g. very happy). Secondly, grammatical collocations are combinations of content words (nouns, adjectives or verbs) and a grammatical word such as a preposition or certain structural patterns, e.g. do on duty, tired of, look after, and so on. Collocations are widely accepted that they are very important part of knowledge and essential to non-native speakers of English in order to speak or write fluently [26], [27], [28].

#### **4.3. Teaching vocabulary with semantic field**

Semantic field refers to the organization of related words or expressions into a system which shows relationship to one another. When teaching vocabulary, several aspects of lexis are thought to be in consideration such as synonym, antonym, homonym, hyponym, and polysemy [29], [30], [31].

##### **4.3.1. Synonyms**

Synonym is defined as a word which has the same, or nearly the same, meaning as another word. Teachers should remind

learners that many synonymous words have exactly the same meaning and can be used interchangeably in different connotations, but some synonyms have to be paid attention to the contexts they are used. Consequently, teachers have to emphasize the fact that “true” synonyms are relatively rare and the alternation words can be “near” synonyms [29]. In order for learners to enrich their vocabulary bank, they are instructed to make crosswords, word snakes or other puzzles for each other using the synonyms.

##### **4.3.2. Antonyms**

Antonym is a word which is opposite in meaning to another word. One activity helping learners develop their antonym words is to make a list of opposite words; this activity can be done in groupworks or pairworks. Teachers assign different themes for targeted groups or pairs, then each party has to write as many opposite words in comparison with the others as possible. As a result, the groups or pairs writing down more opposite words than the others win the contest. This word game requires learners to brainstorm lexis so that they can recall or learn new words better [31], [29].

##### **4.3.3. Homonyms**

Homonyms are words which sound the same or are spelled the same as another word but have different meanings. When teaching new vocabulary, teachers should guide their learners to have a small word book to write down the homonyms they frequently use in learning English [29]. In particular, homonyms are divided into two types. Firstly, homonyms are written in the same way and sound alike but they have different meanings, i.e. fly (a kind of insects) and fly (the action of a plane operating in the sky), lie (not

tell the truth) and lie (put the body in a flat surface, not stand or sit). Secondly, homonyms are words which sound alike but are written differently, and often have different meanings, for instance, ant/aunt, eye/I, ate/eight, fare/fair, and so on.

#### 4.3.4. *Hyponyms*

Hyponym or superordinate is a word with a particular meaning that is included in the meaning of a more general word, for example 'dog' and 'cat' are hyponyms of 'animal' [29]. When introducing new words, teachers point out the differences between a hyponym and other words in accordance with the possibility that learners are guided to study new vocabulary as hyponyms. As such, McCarthy [32] states that many course book writers directly or indirectly use this frame work as a technique of organizing vocabulary items.

#### 4.3.5. *Polysemy*

Polysemy is a word which has two or more closely related meanings. A polysemous word may have in different contexts or denotations [21]. For example, in English, people talk about the "head" of a pin, the head of a person or the head of an organization. To solve this problem of polysemy, learners need to see the appropriate representation of words and practice the word meanings in context since context allows students understand the meaning of words.

#### 4.4. *Using dictionary*

Students need to use dictionaries, print or online, during their schooling and throughout their lives. In most cases, adults use a dictionary after a word is read in context and they are unable to determine the word's meaning. Since adults have more life experience, they are generally able to use context clues to help them select the correct meaning in the dictionary. Students,

however, often have difficulty with this. They tend to select the first definition or the shortest definition. Teachers must show students how to identify and select the most appropriate meaning of the word based on how the word is used in context [30]. Students also need other skills in order to use the dictionary, such as knowing how to alphabetize and knowing how to use the guide words at the top of each page to locate specific words. To help students learn how to select the appropriate meaning in the dictionary, teachers can use the following steps [19]. Similar to other strategies in this book, the teacher models this process approach to solving words, and students will internalize it with more practice:

- Read the sentence containing the unknown word;
- Before looking in the dictionary, think aloud and guess the meaning of the word based on the clues in and around the word;
- Explain that many words have several meanings and then read all of the dictionary's definitions for that word;
- Decide which definition makes sense within the context of the text being read;
- If the meaning is still unknown, provide further discussion about the context and look at word parts;

#### 4.5. *Vocabulary network*

The notion of vocabulary network or so-called word web, word map, mind map, and word association explains that beyond sameness, oppositeness and inclusion of meanings of words, there is a complex interconnection or network among group of words. In other word, vocabulary network can be defined that the semantic relationship in relation with synonym and antonym tends to simplify the complex

nature of the mental lexicon [32]. Similarly, Schmitt [33] confirms that words are not stored in mind in isolated pattern but in an organized and systematic manner. That organization is suitably explained as association or network. Grasping this organizational principles, teachers are supposed to change the curriculum, taking advantages of the task-based language learning approach to help learners to get the best achievement of vocabulary network technique which is believed to function as a convincing framework of organizing lexical items; the scholar's idea ensures that vocabulary can be taught better through vocabulary network.

### 5. Conclusion

Vocabulary which is considered as the most important component of

communicative competence conveys messages in conversations. Quite different from function words, vocabulary supports speakers to exchange what they want to communicate in a dialogue. Of the 4-micro English skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing, learners cannot be successful in second language acquisition without a good command of lexical English. In terms of teaching vocabulary, teachers should not only understand the student's difficulties of word study but also use some useful strategies and methods. This review of literature examined the strategies of teaching vocabulary with the hope that the research findings contribute to the improvement of the strategies of vocabulary instruction in English language teaching./.

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## TỔNG QUAN NGHIÊN CỨU CHIẾN LƯỢC NÂNG CAO DẠY TỪ VỰNG TIẾNG ANH

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**Tóm tắt:** Có vốn từ vựng tiếng Anh tốt đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc học ngôn ngữ thứ hai bởi vì nếu không có đủ vốn từ vựng người học khó có thể hiểu người nói tiếng Anh hoặc diễn tả quan điểm của mình bằng tiếng Anh. Bài viết này thực hiện tổng quan nghiên cứu về sự cần thiết áp dụng một số phương pháp hiệu quả để nâng cao việc giảng dạy từ vựng tiếng Anh. Kết quả đã chỉ ra rằng, giảng viên nên sử dụng các thủ thuật giảng dạy từ vựng khác nhau, như giảng dạy từ vựng chủ động, tự nhiên, và tự học. Dựa vào 3 phương pháp này, một số khuyến nghị sư phạm về phát triển từ vựng được đề xuất như là nguồn tham khảo hữu ích cho giảng viên tiếng Anh khai thác các cơ hội giảng dạy từ vựng hiệu quả thông qua các chiến lược giảng dạy từ vựng khác nhau.

**Từ khóa:** học ngôn ngữ thứ hai, giảng dạy từ vựng, thủ thuật, khuyến nghị sư phạm, các chiến lược dạy từ vựng.

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