Learning vocabulary. Some challenges and solutions

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Abstract: *Vocabulary plays an important role in any language. Without sufficient vocabulary, a good command of grammatical rules is of no use as people can neither provide nor understand full messages in communication. Vocabulary learning, therefore, takes time and effort of any language learners who may have problems due to linguistic features. In this paper, the author would like to make a list of challenges faced by English learners like Pronunciation, Spelling, Sound and spelling misidentification, Range, connotation and idiomaticity and then give some suggestions to better learners' vocabulary acquisition.*

Keyword: *Vocabulary, communication, language acquisition, spelling, sound*

1. Introduction

English language now is considered as a crucial requirement for young people to broaden their knowledge and better their communication. Millions of learners are learning this language at training centres both online and on site, either with guidance of English teachers or on their own. Each of them has their own difficulties to the extent of grammar, listening, speaking, reading or writing. Of which, vocabulary often hinders their language acquisition as communication is believed to be hard without grammar rules. This paper looks into typical challenges faced with by learners and then gives some suggestions to better the learners' learning process.

2. The importance of learning vocabulary

2.1. Vocabulary - a key role in the acquisition of a foreign language

Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), and Nation (2011) and other linguistics have realized the need of acquiring vocabulary in the success of learning a foreign language in terms of understanding written and spoken texts and producing communicative ones. Nation (2011) believes that 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.

For English learners, the lack of vocabulary knowledge leads to a deficiency of improving their skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. McCarthy (1990) points out that "no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way" (p.

viii).

2.2. Vocabulary - the utmost important in communication

Vocabulary knowledge is considered as a critical tool for foreign language learners because a limited vocabulary in the foreign language hinders successful communication. Emphasizing the importance of vocabulary, Schmitt (2000) states that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" (p. 55)

Many researchers have shown that foreign language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the major and the biggest obstacle for them to overcome (Huckin,1995). In production, when foreign language learners have got the meaning or concept that they wish to express, it is essential for them to have a store of words from which they can select to express the meaning or concept properly. "When students travel, they don't carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries" (Krashen, as cited in Lewis, 1993, p25. It is also argued that vocabulary is of the utmost importance in learning a foreign language, and foreign language curricula must reflect this. Many reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary are also cited by Richards (1980) and Krashen (1989) in Maximo (2000): "First, a large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language. Second language acquirers know this; they carry dictionaries with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that the lack of vocabulary is a major problem". This is also confirmed by The famous linguist Wilkins in his comments: "Without grammar, little can be expressed; without vocabulary, nothing can be expressed"(Wilkins, 1978, p.111). Word knowledge is a necessary competence, and it is important for production and comprehension in a

second language.

2.3. Difficulties in leaning vocabulary

Thornbury (2004: 27) proposes some factors that make some words more difficult as follows:

Pronunciation

Research shows that the more difficult to pronounce the words, the more difficult to learn it.

Spelling

The spelling of many English words can cause problems for students who speak languages with very regular spelling system. Particular spelling patterns can also cause confusion where the pronunciation is concerned.

Sound and spelling misidentification

The mismatches between sounds and spelling often cause errors to identify and remember a words. As a letter in English can be pronounced in different sounds in different words or two letters may sound the same.

Length and complexity

Longer words are not more difficult to learn than shorter ones. However, words of highly frequent use tend to be short in English, and therefore the learners are likely to meet them more often, which enables learners' "learnability". Similarly, English vocabulary contain words from French, and Latin which appear uneasy to be memorized and reproduced.

Grammar

There are also rules in English language that requires knowledge of gerunds or infinitives, prepositions, collocations etc... This, can be a problem for English learners as there is almost no rules to follow.

Range, connotation and idiomaticity

Words that can be used in a wide range of contexts will generally be perceived as easier than their synonyms with a narrower range.

Gower, Philips and Walter (1995: 143) explain what makes a vocabulary item is easy or difficult. How easy or difficult a vocabulary item is can depend on a number of factors:

Similarity to learners' first language

It is unexpectedly revealed that learners may be misled by that words or phrases in a foreign language which are similar to those in their first languages. This may be because of the their confusion as the way English people think is far different from that of Vietnamese people.

Similarity to English words already known

Clearly, words or phrases that are related to an English word learners are familiar with are easier to acquire than the brand - new ones. This is especially true when learners take the vocabulary learning strategy of word families.

Connotation

Many foreign language words can literally mean the same in the first language. However, they do not actually refer to the same thing but used in different context. Some may produce positive connotation and others, though mean the same, but produce negative one. If learners only look up the words or phrases in a dictionary, they are likely to misuse the words in some embarrassing cases.

2.4. Some strategies to improve the efficiency of learning vocabulary

2.4.1. Raise Awareness of Cultural Differences between the two languages

"Studying a language without knowing its culture is like knowing the shell without knowing its' content" (Hu W, 1988:1).

It is important to understand differences in cultures of the two languages when a foreign language is taught and learnt as knowledge of culture can improve students' metaphorical competence, which in turns better their language acquisition. So that they can efficiently produce adequate communicative texts.

For this, foreign language teachers should be aware of metaphors, which are dynamic and creative and closely bound to foreign language' history, religious beliefs and the more we understand about the thinking, cognition of one culture, the more we understand its language, and its metaphors.

As learners' metaphoric competence is improved, their ability to comprehend metaphors is upgraded and this, in the long run will help them master the target language. The better the students' metaphoric competence develops, the easier the students would feel in learning vocabulary and understanding lexical meanings.

2.4.2. More Autonomy in Learning Vocabulary on the Part of Students

Teaching and learning are interactive. However, students have been regarded as a bank to receive knowledge passively and the study process has been controlled by the teacher in schools and colleges. As a result, they are not in the habit of learning autonomously. Some students depend too much on their teachers and do not have an actual involvement in the process of learning a foreign language in terms of awareness of the use of language in general and linguistic features or the context in which the words and phrases are activated.

It is known that mastery of vocabulary is a gradual process and needs an effort invested by the learners. To

the second language learners, learning new vocabulary has always been challenging for them. It may not be possible for students to learn all new vocabulary items only in the classroom setting. It is imperative for the teacher to help students learn how to acquire new vocabulary on their own (Sokmen, 1997). Learner independence has long been recognized important by a number of linguists in the process of vocabulary acquisition (Hamzah et al., 2009). Oxford and Nyikos (1989) remark that strategies foster "learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction" (p. 291). In vocabulary learning,

Therefore, how to overcome learners' psychological dependence on the teacher is the challenge in promoting their autonomy in learning. Although they are still in need of their teachers' guidance and don't know much about the lexical system, they should have more confidence and autonomy in learning for a better language acquisition.

According to the conceptual metaphor, people can always make full use of their knowledge to acquire the new one, which can release their burden of trying to remember what they must learn. Therefore, it is the teacher's job to encourage their students' autonomy and create a relevant linguistic environment in which their students can learn to use vocabulary naturally.

2.5. Suggested Model for Teaching/Learning Vocabulary

2.5.1. Expanding Vocabulary by Mapping between Conceptual Domains

Some psychologists believed that things which are in a logical order and meaningful groups are easily to be memorized. Because vocabulary is only used correctly in their own contexts and is not just an arbitrary collection of items, it is necessary to present them in a systematic way that both illustrates their lexical meaning and at the same time enables the learners to internalize the items in a coherent way.

As concept metaphors have a unique place in the formation of languages, students should better their learning process and enrich vocabulary when they are aware of it

2.5.2. Acquiring Vocabulary on the Basis of Similarity

As words' original meaning can be used to explained d their meaning – related items, teachers should design tasks to make use of the connections.

2.5.3. Team Work

Team work will be suggested for it is a motivating factor which can give students the chances to share the information they have and learn vocabulary independently. In teams, students can have a discussion about all the information and stories related to the words they've known, and can make full use of the known to explore the unknown by mapping. Students are expected to make positive comments on the new approach of vocabulary teaching. It is believed that the new teaching approach can activate learners' interests and enthusiasm of learning English vocabulary. In terms of the systematicity of vocabulary, it is believed that the new teaching method can help learners have a deep understanding of the word in terms of its polysemy. As for the teachers, it is expected that the new teaching approach can get students actively involved in the learning. It is hoped that both teachers and students will benefit a lot from the new teaching method since it is expected to be effective for vocabulary teaching and learning.

3. Conclusion

Language acquisition and communication are impossible without a good knowledge of the language vocabulary. This paper depicts the importance of this linguistic factors by presenting opinions of some well - known linguists and then give summary of challenges encountered by language learners to the extent of language features and finally give some suggestions to both learners and teachers to better the learners' language acquisition.

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