

Vocabulary Acquisition: Practical Strategies for ESL Students

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“Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”
(Wilkins, 1972, p. 111)

The English language is considered to have the largest vocabulary in the world (Crystal, 2002). Educated native speakers of English are expected to know approximately 20,000 word families or 70,000 words (Nation, 2001); however, educated non-native speakers of English know less than one quarter of the native speakers' vocabulary (Laufer & Yano, 2001). Non-native speakers of English must increase their vocabulary knowledge in order to become successful in their academic endeavors in English-medium educational environments. A solid foundation of vocabulary knowledge is essential at every stage of the learner's second language (L2) development. Regardless of the degree of the learner's competency in grammar and pronunciation; one cannot have effective communication without sufficient vocabulary knowledge. Developing the learner's vocabulary skills ultimately facilitates richer listening and speaking abilities (Chang, 2007; Joe, 1998; Joe, Nation, & Newton, 1996; Newton, 1995), reading abilities (Cobb, 2008; Haynes, 1993; Laufer, 1992; Nation, 2001; Nation & Coady, 1988; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000), and writing abilities (Engber, 1995; Ferris, 1994; Hinkel, 2004; Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Nation, 1995). Research highlights that learning words in a systematic manner is very important for both word retention and the facilitation of the learner's later production (Carter, 1998; McCarthy, 1996; Nation, 2009; Roberts, 1999). This paper presents effective vocabulary learning strategies that students who use English as their second language (ESL) can use to enhance their vocabulary acquisition and the learning of English.

Process of Vocabulary Acquisition

There have been two differing perspectives about L2 vocabulary acquisition: implicit learning and explicit learning. The implicit vocabulary learning theory holds

that subconscious vocabulary acquisition during reading is more effective than learning words through purposeful vocabulary exercises because the learner's conscious focus is on the story, not on the items to learn (Krashen, 1987, 1993). However, numerous studies have convincingly shown that extensive reading is not sufficient to improve the learner's L2 vocabulary knowledge (Carter 1998; Carter and McCarthy 1988; McCarthy, 1996; Nation 2009; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000). Although solely relying on reading for vocabulary development may lead to the learner's ability to recognize a large number of words, it is not likely to advance the learner's ability to use words in a productive mode (Folse, 2004; Nation, 2008; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Vocabulary learning through extensive reading is most effective when the reader's L2 proficiency level is advanced because the reader should know when and how to use contextual clues and be aware of word families and affixes for analyzing words (Folse, 2004). Individual learners have different styles of acquiring L2 vocabulary, and inferring words from context during reading does not necessarily result in long-term retention (Sokmen, 1997). Most researchers and educators now agree that the greater the depth of processing involved in lexical learning, the more secure and long term the learning is likely to be (Carter, 1998; McCarthy & O'Dell, 1999; Nation, 2008; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Successful vocabulary learners should make use of efficient learning strategies to expand their vocabulary power and the learning of English.

Dictionary Potential and Dictionary Training

One of the most essential resources for language learners is a dictionary. Research points out that increasing recognition for the importance of explicit vocabulary training in L2 learning should be



accompanied by a greater awareness of the dictionary's potential (Folse, 2004; Scholfield, 1997). The three conditions for learners to be able to say they know a word are: which words it is usually associated with (lexical patterning); what grammatical characteristics it has (grammatical patterning); and how it is pronounced and spelled (McCarthy, 1996). The most important aspect of knowing a word is the collocational partnerships of the word (Folse, 2004; Sokmen, 1997). As the word parts "co" and "location" suggest, a collocation is a word or phrase that is frequently used near the target word. Learning chunks and groups of words that go together is a very effective way to expand the learner's vocabulary power (Lewis, 1993; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Sokmen, 1997). Monolingual dictionaries can help learners develop a more solid awareness of the collocational partnerships of words since meaning and other information are provided in the same language as the target word.

Research also highlights positive effects of bilingual dictionaries on the learners' L2 development especially on their reading comprehension abilities (Folse, 2004; Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993). Bilingual dictionaries help learners quickly grasp the meanings of words, especially for words that are difficult to translate into English. The immediate semantic association between the L2 word and the L1 word can help learners reinforce the meanings of words and retain them in long-term memory. However, the constant use of a bilingual dictionary holds learners back from developing both a feel or intuition for words and the skill of paraphrasing to make up for words they do not know. Using bilingual dictionaries as the only reference source may hinder them from developing writing vocabulary because bilingual dictionaries focus on the translations of words rather than usages (Nation, 2008).

Based on my experience of learning English as a foreign language and teaching ESL writing courses for over 15 years, a very useful resource that can help learners understand the collocational partnerships of words is the encoding dictionary. It is a monolingual dictionary, but it is not a typical dictionary. As the name "encoding" suggests, in the encoding dictionary, words are systematically grouped together by meaning not by alphabetical order. It presents how semantically similar words have different syntactic and pragmatic usages. The most common encoding dictionary available on the market is *the Longman Language Activator: the World's First Production Dictionary*. As an example, the entry "consist of/be made of" from the dictionary is

presented in the Appendix. The encoding dictionary can promote a deeper level of processing words and can help learners increase their knowledge of collocational partnerships more effectively by comparing differences in word usages based on the specific examples. As the title of this dictionary suggests, it can help learners develop receptive (reading) vocabulary into productive (writing) vocabulary. It is crucial for the learner's literacy development that vocabulary is learned not only receptively but also productively (Nation, 2008).

The encoding dictionary can also enhance learners' awareness of the fundamental interdependence between lexis and grammar. Learners do not need to depend solely on grammar books; they can also enhance their grammatical knowledge through the dictionary. The encoding dictionary illustrates that a dichotomy between grammar and vocabulary is not always appropriate. Research highlights that it is not appropriate to divide a language into grammar and vocabulary (Folse, 2004; Nation, 2008, 2009; Sokmen, 1997). Some aspects of language that have been dealt with under grammar in the area of L2 acquisition are actually *lexical* in nature (Sonaiya, 1991). Language is a grammaticalized lexis not lexicalized grammar (Lewis, 1993). If the goal of L2 education is to develop the learner's communicative ability, then it is crucial to enhance the learner's awareness of the connection between lexis and grammar. It is important to remember that communicative competence goes hand in hand with vocabulary competence, and vocabulary competence goes hand in hand with collocational competence.

Word Unit Analysis

Words can be stored in terms of their graphological forms as well as by their meanings. Graphological forms can greatly enhance word storage and recall. There are more words in English that are related by common roots or bases than many other languages (McCarthy, 1996). A knowledge of roots and affixes (prefixes and suffixes) will help learners unlock the meanings of many English words. Knowledge of word formation is very important, especially for those whose native language is not of the Greco-Latin family group. It is crucial for ESL students to study Greco-Latin affixes and roots because such knowledge helps them learn many new words "by relating these words to known words or known prefixes and suffixes, and it can be used as a way of checking whether an

unfamiliar word has been successfully guessed from context” (Nation, 1990, p. 168). Learners can also develop inferencing skills by analyzing the left flank (prefixes), the right flank (suffixes), and the center (roots), which can ultimately lead to better word retention.

Let’s take a look at the following words: convivial, revive, survive, vitality, vitamin, vivacious, vivid, and vivisection. They all have something in common: each of them is built on the building block of “vit” or “viv”. The Latin roots “viv” and “vit” mean “life” or “to live”. By learning the common Greek and Latin roots and affixes, learners can recognize, analyze, build, and use many related words more easily and quickly. Although root prediction does not work all the time, this method will help learners make fewer trips to the dictionary both for a new word and for words they have looked up before and will help them expand their vocabulary knowledge. Another effective way to use word roots in acquiring L2 vocabulary is to match a word of Latin origin with one of Greek origin, whenever the meaning of the word and the root corresponds. Let me explain this further in the following section.

Word Parallels

The English lexicon comprises two main strands: Greco-Latin and Anglo-Saxon (Crystal, 2002). The Anglo-Saxon words in English comprise only about 35% of the lexicon as a whole with words of French, Latin, and Greek origins comprising the rest of the lexicon; and Anglo-Saxon words account for 50% of the high frequency words that are used in our everyday lives (Nation, 1994, 2001). Learning the word parallels of Greek and Latin roots that share the same meaning is a very effective strategy for solid vocabulary development. Here is an example that illustrates the word parallel method (Nurnberg & Rosenblum, 1966, 2005):

<u>Anglo Saxon</u>	<u>Latin</u>	<u>Greek</u>
teamwork	cooperation	synergy
birth	origin	genesis
song	chant	anthem
belief	tenet	dogma
ghost	specter	phantom

Anglo Saxon

drink
forgive
fatherhood
neighborhood
loneliness

Latin

experiential
irregular
selective
circumference
transformation

Latin

beverage
condone
paternity
vicinity
solitude

Greek

empirical
anomalous
eclectic
periphery
metamorphosis

Most students learn the Anglo-Saxon words in the left column first since they are more commonly used in our everyday lives than their Greco-Latin partners. Many students do not know “dogma” is the Greek word for “belief”, and “tenet” is the Latin correspondent; “beverage” is the Latin word for “drink”, and “paternity” is the Latin equivalent for “fatherhood.” As learners get to know the relationships between the Anglo-Saxon and Greco-Latin words, they can develop more awareness of formal and informal registers. Their increased understanding of connotation will ultimately help them develop their writing vocabulary as well as reading vocabulary.

Pronunciation and Spelling for Word Power

To learn a new word, one must learn three things: meaning, pronunciation, and spelling. Learning the exact pronunciation of the new word is very important for L2 vocabulary acquisition (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Laufer, 1998). Lower-level learners may especially benefit from perceiving acoustic and orthographic similarities in words (Hennings, 2000; McCarthy, 1994). Many simple words are mis-spelled because they are mispronounced. English is not an easy language to spell. The differing spellings are the result of the complex linguistic history since English was not created at one time or from one source (Crystal, 2002). When learners get in the habit of pronouncing words with care and acquire the habit of looking closely at the word, as they read the word or write it down, their spelling is bound to improve. Taking into consideration that the relationship of spelling to sound of the English language is quite irregular, the importance of learning exact pronunciation with vocabulary needs to be highlighted.



Vocabulary Journal

Ideally, one word form would only have one meaning, and each meaning would be associated with only one form. A language such as English, however, has a great number of homonyms (same in spelling and sound but different in meaning), polysemes (word of multiple meanings), synofoms (similar spelling), and synophones (similar sounds). Thus, organizing words in a systematic manner and reviewing them at regular intervals are very important for both word retention and facilitation of the learner's later production. Numerous studies indicate that reviewing vocabulary at regular intervals is a very effective technique for learners to develop a feel for their learned vocabulary and to enhance their learning of English (Carter, 1998; Folse, 2004; McCarthy, 1996; Nation, 2008, 2009; Roberts, 1999). Learners acquire new lexical items by meeting them at least seven times (Huizenga & Huizenga, 2000), and a minimum of 12 exposures is needed for them to develop solid vocabulary knowledge (Meara, 1987).

In a vocabulary journal, learners can include various pieces of information about the target word such as pronunciation, part of speech (noun, verb etc), lexical and grammatical patterns, register, etc. One feature that learners should include in their vocabulary journal is a synonym or antonym of the word, which can greatly increase their ability to use and retain the word (Bromberg & Gale, 1998; Folse, 2004; Nurnberg & Rosenblum, 2005). Learners can also include any personal examples (anecdotes, memories, or feelings) that can help them develop a feel for the target word and retrieve the word later. Learners can organize their vocabulary journal in various styles. They can draw images or create grids and sets to visualize semantic networks of words, which will lead to better retention.

Basically, keeping a vocabulary journal provides learners with opportunities to experiment with words. The journal is a space where they can practice words and expand meaning while they are acquiring new vocabulary, which will ultimately help them develop both their writing and reading vocabulary. Keeping a vocabulary journal will also help them become more aware of the interdependence between lexis and grammar, and it can prevent learners from being preoccupied with grammatical rules.

Conclusions

Effective vocabulary acquisition training is integral for

effective reading and writing processes. The ability to read and write fluently requires learners to reach a "lexical threshold" (Laufer, 1997). Reading and writing cannot be separated from each other: the more in-depth reading they do, the more in-depth writing they can do. The more English reading learners do, the more English vocabulary they will be exposed to. However, as noted earlier, relying solely on reading to develop English vocabulary is not an effective way to expand vocabulary. It is essential for learners to combine an *explicit* approach to vocabulary learning with extensive reading to maximize their vocabulary power and the learning of English.

Lack of vocabulary knowledge is a problem across all areas. As Wilkins (1972) powerfully argues, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Learners should know that vocabulary plays a prominent role in their L2 acquisition and development. Learners should utilize efficient vocabulary learning strategies and resources to increase effectiveness in their vocabulary acquisition more actively. In essence, the more active they are in their vocabulary acquisition process, the more active readers and writers they will become. It is important to remember that effective storage of words will ultimately lead to effective retrieval of words: effective input always precedes effective output.

Appendix

CONSIST OF / BE MADE OF

Ways of saying that something is made of or contains a number of parts, substances etc

Consist of: Bolognaise sauce consists of minced beef, onion, tomatoes, mushrooms, garlic and seasoning. / Lorna's whole wardrobe consisted of jeans, tee shirts and sweaters. / The senior management team consists of John, Betty, and Ken. / He mixed a special drink, consisting of gin, vodka, and cherry brandy.

Be made of: The candlesticks are made of brass. / She mixed a batter made of flour, eggs and water. / What's this carpet made of?

Be made up of: The US government is made up of two legislative assemblies – Congress and the Senate. / The United Nations is made up of more than 200 individual nations. / The jury was mostly made up of women.

Be composed of: The earth's atmosphere is composed mainly of nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon dioxide. / The human body is composed of billions of tiny cells.

Comprise: The house comprises 2 bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. / The city's population comprises mainly Asians and Europeans.

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