

Facilitating vocabulary learning in teaching English as a second Language in Sri Lanka: A comparative study

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Abstract:

Vocabulary plays a central role in learning English as a second language (ESL) as learners rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of it is the main obstacle for ESL learners. The development of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) is one of the most crucial areas of research in ESL (Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Wu, 2006; Hiebert & Kamil, 2005; Nation, 2008; Nation & Gu, 2007; Nation & Webb, 2011; Zimmerman, 2009; Ur, 2012). In order to better understand the difficulties faced by ESL learners in learning vocabulary and adopt effective VLSs, this comparative study employs qualitative approach to investigate the VLSs adopted by ESL learners of two groups: Colombo school learners (CSL) and Sammanthurai school learners (SSL) distinguished by their region and also examines their perception to vocabulary learning. An analysis of the questionnaire combined with informal interview sessions show unanimous agreement on vocabulary instruction in the classroom. However, significant differences exist in learner preferred strategies. Compared to the CSL learners, the SSL perceive vocabulary learning to be difficult as they rely heavily on teacher directed classroom instruction. They have a strong belief in learning new words with L1 translation to facilitate better retention of words. The VLSs adopted by CSL has been through incidental learning in informal setting within and beyond the classroom. While both groups consider reading and communicating in English as good VLSs, the CSL have more faith in technology assisted vocabulary learning device monitored by mobile phone, television and computer. Subtitles of films, documentaries and Facebook also assist them to deliver and receive regular and repeated vocabulary content. Frequent encounter with new vocabulary and usage in a variety of contexts help them to enhance their retention.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategy, English as a second language, Technology assisted vocabulary learning device

Introduction

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in learning English as a second language (ESL) as vocabulary knowledge is considered important in language learning. However, vocabulary learning is one of the major challenges ESL learners face during the process of language learning. Most ESL learners feel frustrated by the enormous mass of English vocabulary. The development of vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) is one of the most crucial areas of research in the field of second language learning. With the revival of interest in vocabulary teaching, VLSs has gained

recognition among researchers (Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Wu, 2006; Nation, 2005; Nation & Gu, 2007; Nation & Webb, 2011; Zimmerman, 2009; Ur, 2012).

In order to better understand the difficulties faced by ESL learners in learning vocabulary and adopt effective VLSs, this comparative study investigates the VLSs adopted by ESL learners of two groups distinguished by their region to identify the good practices. It also examines ESL learners' perception to vocabulary learning. The questions addressed in the study are:

1. What are the VLSs adopted by ESL learners in learning vocabulary?
2. How do the perceptions and practice of VLSs of learners contribute to teaching ESL?

Owing to the longstanding controversy in regional disparity prevailing in the context of teaching and learning English in Sri Lanka, this study attempts to identify the VLSs and perception of learners from leading schools in Colombo and schools in Sammanthurai Education zone. The purpose of the study is to identify the good practices among CSL in Colombo and introduce it to the SSL.

Literature Review

The importance of vocabulary in learning ESL

ESL teachers are becoming aware of the relevance and importance of vocabulary instruction (Carter & McCarthy, 1988) and they have been looking for new direction to instruct and increase the vocabulary knowledge of learners. Zimmerman (1997) claims that Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner. This view is supported by Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) who point out the importance of vocabulary for acquiring language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In a similar vein, it is argued that the learners will not be able to use the structures or functions without the acquisition of adequate words to express thoughts, ideas and feelings for meaningful communication (Rivers and Nunan, 1991). Ruban (1975, p.42) suggest that "if we knew more about what the "successful learners" did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record". Wilkins (1972, p. 97) emphasizes the value of vocabulary "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".

The difficulties in learning and teaching vocabulary

There is a growing concern among the ESL teachers that low proficiency learners face difficulty in language learning due to lack of vocabulary knowledge. Meara (1980) claims that vocabulary is acknowledged as an area of weakness for L2 learners. In a similar vein, the vast size of the vocabulary system is perceived to be

a cause of difficulty for learners. This view is supported by Oxford (1990) who states that vocabulary is by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language, because of the complexity in possessing different meanings. It is also acknowledged that second language learners rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for ESL learners. Recent research indicate that teaching vocabulary may be problematic as teachers are not confident about best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). The study conducted by Nation (2001) reveals that readers need to know at least 97% of the vocabulary in a text to fully comprehend it. Without knowledge of the key vocabulary in a text, a learner may encounter difficulties in understanding the message. Word knowledge is crucial for reading and writing and this will determine how well students will be able to communicate in the target language. Vocabulary also helps students with language production. Hubbard (1983) states that the more words a student knows the more precisely that student can express the exact intended meaning. Based on this view, vocabulary is an essential component to determine how much a student is able to communicate effectively. Hence, ESL teachers should focus on effective vocabulary instruction to develop the vocabulary knowledge of learners.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach. A questionnaire was administered to two groups of learners of grade 11, 12 and 13. One group consisting of 90 learners studying in leading schools in Colombo and the other with the same sample size from the same grades in Sammanthurai to compare their perception and learning strategies to learn vocabulary. Both sample groups were second language learners following the centralized curricula with at least ten years of schooling. The selected two groups are distinguished on the basis of their place of schooling with different vocabulary learning environments. Gender, English language proficiency and the language spoken at home were not taken into consideration. After administering the questionnaire as the main data collection instrument, three informal group interviews were held with each set of the sample and analysed qualitatively.

Table.1 Results of the questionnaire
SSL

CSL

	1	2	3	4	5	tot	%	1	2	3	4	5	Tot
1.Vocabulary needs to be taught in English as a second language classroom	23	21	16	13	8	90	77.22	3	5	5	12	64	89
2.Self-learning is the best way to learn vocabulary	1	5	4	15	55	86	74.71	23	21	16	13	8	81
3. Systematic vocabulary instruction in classroom is essential to learn English	8	9	11	21	32	88	69.03	1	5	4	15	55	80

4. Learning vocabulary is as important as learning grammar	7	6	13	28	36	86	88.08	8	9	11	21	32	81
5. Vocabulary is central to language learning	2	6	13	16	35	90	74.44	7	6	13	28	36	90
6. Knowledge in vocabulary is needed to use language	5	5	5	20	44	88	74.15	2	6	13	16	35	72
7. I like when my teacher gives us wordlists and their meaning	1	5	5	30	37	89	59.55	5	5	5	20	44	79
8. Encountering the word many times in different forms in more than one context helps me retain the word.	5	5	5	16	36	87	85.63	1	5	5	30	37	78
9. I am unable to communicate well due to poor vocabulary knowledge	5	5	5	16	36	87	51.15	5	5	5	16	36	67
10. I like to learn a new word in a sentence or context	0	0	0	1	89	89	82.87	5	5	5	16	36	67
11. I like to learn vocabulary using first language translation	1	3	5	18	49	85	48.53	0	0	0	1	89	90
12. I learn vocabulary by memorizing individual words	6	6	12	19	25	86	37.50	1	3	5	18	49	76
13. I learn vocabulary by reading	0	0	2	14	71	88	76.42	6	6	12	19	25	68
14. I like to increase my vocabulary power	13	14	13	17	19	84	88.99	0	0	2	14	71	87
15. I take a great effort to improve my vocabulary	29	22	13	6	6	88	65.06	13	14	13	17	19	76
16. When I learn a new word, I want to learn all its forms	13	15	14	16	16	85	59.12	29	22	13	6	6	76
17. Maintaining vocabulary note book is useful to learn vocabulary	2	23	34	21	8	88	52.84	13	15	14	16	16	74

Discussion

Learners from both groups share their preference for vocabulary instruction in the classroom. This is reflected by 86.24 % of SSL and 77.22 CSL agreeing that “vocabulary needs to be taught in English as a second language classroom”. While

both groups agree that vocabulary is central to language learning, The SSL feel that more priority should be given to grammar. This is reflected by only 68% of SSL against 88% of CSL expressing vocabulary as important as grammar. While the CSL prefer classroom instruction, they believe that learning vocabulary through incidental and informal learning is more effective. This shows that learners need to be given opportunities to be exposed to English use within the classroom . This tendency is reflected in only 69.03% CSL agreeing on the need of systematic vocabulary instruction in the classroom while the SSL have a high perception indicated by 86.88 % preference. A closer look at the analysis of the questionnaire combined with informal group interview sessions reveal significant differences in learner preferred strategies to learn vocabulary.

While the SSL rely heavily on teacher directed classroom instruction, they strongly believe that glossary of new words presented in a list with L1 translation is beneficial. SCL value L1 equivalents as one of the best ways to learn words. This is reflected in 99.72 % agreeing on their willingness to learn vocabulary using first language translation. This finding is contradictory to CSL with only 48.53% agreement. Both groups reveal that learning words in context facilitate better retention. It is notable that VLSs adopted by CSL has been through incidental learning in informal setting within and beyond the classroom. They have more faith on vocabulary learning devices monitored by mobile phone, television and computer which they believe to have a profound effect on vocabulary development. Special reference was made to SMS written in English and voice mail on mobile phones, face book and social media, subtitles of films and documentaries. Using electronic devices assist them to be exposed to regular and repeated learning content and such frequent encounter with new vocabulary and usage in a variety of contexts helps them to enhance their retention of new vocabulary. This confirms that CSL rely more on teacher initiated informal vocabulary learning activities both within and beyond the classroom.

The responses to Q 12 “I learn vocabulary by memorizing words” shows discordant views between the two groups. While 86.51% of SSL prefer to learn vocabulary by memorizing lots of individual words, only 37.50% of CSL use this strategy. Both groups reflect strong agreement in expressing their preference to learn vocabulary in context and learn through repeated encounter. While both groups CSL 76.42% and SCL 68.75 % show the strength of developing vocabulary by reading and communicating in English as good VLSs, the CSL are motivated by learning new words by guessing the meaning in context and using dictionary skills to check for accuracy. It is notable that both groups expressed that the newly learnt words should be put in practice in order to use in real life situations.

Significant differences are shown by the respondents of the two groups in perceiving their own vocabulary power. With regard to the threshold vocabulary, there were four options given as approximately less than 500 words, between 500-1000, between 1000-2000 and more than 3000 words. In considering the CSL, 31% for more than 3000 and 35% between 2000-3000 and none below 500 words reveal

that they have faith in their own ability, which comes from their confidence as high proficiency English learners whereas the SSL reveal a contradictory finding with 30 % believing to possess below 500 and 51 % between 500-1000 words and 19% between 1000- 2000 words. In considering the two groups, there is a significant difference in the perception of the degree of difficulty in learning vocabulary. While there is high perception among CSLs, reflected by a majority of respondents, almost 51% agreeing it to be somewhat difficult, 36% perceive as not difficult with only 10.6% claiming it to be difficult and just 2% very difficult. This perception is in sharp contrast with the other group, with a majority of 79% perceiving it to be difficult, of whom 26% say it is very difficult.

Response to motivational beliefs indicates that most respondents from both groups demonstrate a high level of motivation. The response to “I like to increase my vocabulary power” reveal that 88.99% of CSL and 94.83% SSL reflect strong agreement and the need for vocabulary to use language is indicated by 74.15% of CSLs and 76.39% of SSL.

Conclusion

In light of the learner beliefs, all learners irrespective of their different learning environments place high value for the role of vocabulary in English language learning and report high motivation to learn vocabulary. It is mandatory that learners are provided opportunities to identify effective VLSs apart from the traditional word lists with mother tongue equivalents and memorization. Skilful use of dictionary skills and repeated encounter of the newly learnt words need to be promoted. In the context of teaching, it is necessary to present the required vocabulary prior to encountering it in the delivery of the lesson. As revealed by the CSL, teachers should adopt technology mediated vocabulary teaching within the classroom so that it could be extended beyond the classroom.

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