Research into Practice: Strategies for teaching and learning vocabulary

Feng Teng

Nanning University, China

u3034981@uni.canberra.edu.au

Abstract

This article presents an overview of current research on second language vocabulary learning and proposes eight strategies for teaching and learning vocabulary. First, to facilitate effective vocabulary teaching, choosing high-frequency words is essential. Teachers of vocabulary also need to add explicit, intentional teaching to incidental learning. In addition, vocabulary learning strategies including morphological awareness and lexical inference provides a platform by which learners can improve both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. This article also suggests that productive vocabulary knowledge needs more attention than receptive vocabulary knowledge, and that available textbooks seldom address vocabulary sufficiently. In summary, it is very important for all learners and teachers to acknowledge that learning vocabulary is incremental in nature, and we should develop a principled, long-term program for teaching and learning vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, incidental and intentional learning, vocabulary teaching, EFL

Introduction

It was in reading course that I coincidentally noticed an English reading book that was inscribed between the lines by *Hu* (a pseudonym for a student), was full of inundated meaning explanations in Chinese. Checking her book, it is natural to contemplate how she struggled withreading it. I realized that *Hu*, is probably not alone in being bogged down by the process of struggling to read in English. Many EFL learners, especially those with a low proficiency level, sense their linguistic competence is not matched with the large amount of vocabulary in reading materials, which in turn makes reading a difficult skill for them. Reading, described by Paribakht and Wesche (1997, p.175) as "unpredictable," is a cultural model in which, while recalling individual life experiences that match with the passage and further probing into its deep meaning, the reader, text, and context meet and become a transactional zone (Pearson, 2009). To do this, a high vocabulary level and linguistic competence are needed (Grabe and Stoller, 2002, p.259). Unfortunately, this is what most English as a foreign language (EFL) learners lack (Nation, 2001). In other words, when EFL students are required to conduct reading, they do not have enough linguistic competence to interact with what the book conveys, and thus, fewer opportunities to incidentally pick up on unknown words. In addition, their sense of reading difficulty comes not only from their limited vocabulary load, with which they are unable to decode the deeper meaning of the book, but also the rate of forgetting words that occurs in learning vocabulary (Waring & Takaki, 2003). This restricts learners from accumulating words incrementally (Schmitt, 2010). It's not surprising then, that they will encounter difficulties in proceeding with their post-reading activities.

People learn to read by reading, and the ability to read proficiently is best achieved through extensive reading (Renandya, 2007). However, unlike listening and speaking, reading provides limited opportunities for the learners to ask for interactive clarification (Nation, 2001). In addition, reading requires a heavier vocabulary load than listening and speaking (Stanovich, 2000, p. 252). Research shows that learners need to know 98% coverage of the words in written materials in order to understand them well (Nation, 2006, p.71). For this percentage of coverage, there are about 5,000 to 8,000 word families. Therefore, it is difficult for learners with a restricted vocabulary level to achieve adequate comprehension of reading texts and acquire words incidentally as a native speaker would. However, learning vocabulary is an incremental process involved with strategies, and propitious application of these strategies will facilitate the learning of vocabulary (Nation, 2008).

Therefore, it is suggested that instead of imposing large quantities of difficult reading materials for EFL learners and hoping they will eventually gain adequate reading comprehension automatically, teacher should reflect on learners' difficulties in reading, and why or how the difficulties existed. They should then adopt appropriate approaches for teaching vocabulary. I will present some pedagogical strategies for teaching and learning vocabulary in the following section.

Strategies for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

Strategy 1: Choose high-frequency words to teach

Currently, the perspective of frequency is a dominant view in the area of researching vocabulary because it is the best criterion for determining which words to be concentrated on for teaching (Lessard-Clouston, 2013). In essence, words with a higher frequency level are easier to be acquired than the words with a lower frequency level (e.g., Pellicer-Sanchez & Schmitt, 2010; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Teng (2014a); Waring & Takaki, 2003). In other words, "more frequent words are more useful than less frequent words" (Zimmerman & Schmitt, 2005, p.165, cited in Lessard-Clouston, 2013), which is why researcher (Browne, 2013) has created a new general service list vocabulary (NGSL) following Michael West's publishing of a remarkable list of 1,964 words known as general service list (GSL) in 1953. This new list includes approximately 2,368 high-frequency words based on scientific, objective analysis of a 273 million word subsection of the 1.6 billion-word Cambridge English Corpus (CEC). Comparison of the two lists is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Coverage within the CEC

Vocabulary List	Number of Word Families	Number of Lemmas	Coverage in CEC Corpus
GSL	1964	3623	84.24%
NGSL	2368	2818	90.34%

Source: Browne (2013, p.16)

Likewise, following Coxhead's (2000) academic word list (AWL), Gardner & Davies (2013) also created a new academic vocabulary list (NAVL) from a 120-million-word academic subcorpus of the 425-million-word Corpus of Contemporary American English.

The continual updates of word lists show the importance of choosing frequent, relevant words to teach. For example, in teaching the low-intermediate students, we should choose the NGSL word list, while NAVL list is appropriate for teaching students of an upper-intermediate level.

Strategy 2: Supplement explicit vocabulary learning to incidental learning

Although researcher (Laufer, 2009) has shown that learners could incidentally learn words, some researchers (e.g., Nation, 2001, 2008; Saragi, Nation, & Meister, 1978; Teng, 2014a; Van Zeeland and Schmitt, 2012; Waring & Nation, 2004) have pointed out that incidental vocabulary learning is very limited, and teachers should supplement deliberate vocabulary teaching into classes to facilitate learners to develop the depth and the breadth of vocabulary knowledge, so that they can improve their receptive and productive vocabulary. Direct vocabulary teaching was found to be empirically useful for learners of a low proficiency (Teng, 2014b). Therefore, in practical teaching, teachers should give attention to particular words and "formulaic language" (Schmitt, 2010, p.117), use various types of direct vocabulary-enhancing activities or tasks in class, and give repeated attention to frequent, related words during class.

Strategy 3: Know how useful each strategy is

Nation (2008) presented, in detail, active vocabulary learning strategies that students can use for memorizing new words or phrases and reviewing already known words. These

strategies are practical and useful. Teachers need to model and practice vocabulary teaching in

our classes. For example, I introduced and modeled a new strategy for enlarging students'

vocabulary size. I prepared target words on the board and asked students to create more words

semantically related to them. Some students in my class have used dictionaries to find more

words, while others asked the teacher for interactive clarification. Consequently, not only can

they remember some target words forms and meanings, but also form a deeper form-meaning

link for other non-target words. Students will be more likely to use more strategies if they see

how they will improve their vocabulary learning. Schmitt (1997) outlined a detailed taxonomy of

vocabulary learning strategies.

Table 2.
A Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Strategy	Use%	Helpful%
DET Analyze part of speech	32	75
DET Analyze affixes and roots	15	69
DET Check for L1 cognate	11	40
DET Analyze any available pictures or gestures	47	84
DET Guess from textual context	74	73
DET Bilingual dictionary	85	95
DET Monolingual dictionary	35	77
SOC Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word	42	86
SOC Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word	24	78
SOC Ask classmates for meaning	73	65
SOC Discover new meaning through group work activity	35	65

Source: Schmitt (1997, p.209)

Table 2 summarized the results of the survey of vocabulary learning strategies. The *USE* figure refers to the percentage of total respondents who indicated they use that particular strategy, while the *HELPFUL* figure indicates the percentage who felt the strategy was helpful for learning vocabulary. Understanding how useful that these strategies are will help learners as well as teachers adopt appropriate strategies in learning and teaching vocabulary.

Strategy 4: Focus more on productive vocabulary

Receptive and productive vocabulary learning are interrelated, albeit separable, issues. In the process of learning vocabulary, learners are able to recognize more receptive knowledge than productive knowledge (Schmitt, 2010). Laufer (2005) proposed that there is a major gap between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. In her study, only 16% of receptive vocabulary was known productively at the 5,000 frequency level, and 35% at the 2,000 frequency level. However, Melka's (1997) study proposed that 92% of receptive vocabulary is known productively. Although there is inconsistency of these figures, they all agreed that receptive vocabulary knowledge is easier to acquire than productive vocabulary knowledge. Thus, in order to facilitate learners' vocabulary knowledge, gradually shift their receptive mastery towards productive vocabulary. Doing little more than reading or hearing a new word is not sufficient (Laufer, 2003). What they need is more explicit vocabulary exercises to enable productive use.

For example, the more they engage with the productive use of a word (say or write it, and create grammatical and collocational comparisons), the more likely that he/she is to master it (Schmitt, 2010; Lessard-Clouston, 2013). As also stated in Schmitt (2008, pp.339), promoting

"engagement" with the usage of a new word is the most fundamental task for teachers, students, and material writers. For example, in my teaching of morphology, I found out that about 20% of inflectional words, 35% of derivational words, and 64% of compound words were not known productively. This is not a positive result, especially the knowledge of compound words. Although learners can recognize most of them, it might be difficult for them to produce them correctly. Therefore, it is highly suggested that teachers address the productive usage of some difficult words in teaching.

Strategy 5: Foster learners' morphological awareness

A limited vocabulary level also affects learners' awareness of morphological structures. A word family consists of three morphological structures: the root (*promote*), the inflections (*promotes, promoted, promoting*), and the derivatives (*promotion, promotive, promoter*). To the learners, the awareness of the morphological structures is the ability to manipulate the morphemes of words (Kuo & Anderson, 2006), and they are required to use morphological information in words to infer the lexical meaning as well as the meaning of the reading texts. However, the nature of lexical inferencing is a complex one because it is concerned with 'linguistic cues,' 'contextual clues,' and 'linguistic knowledge' (Haastrup, 1991, p. 40), which are what EFL learners with a low vocabulary level often lack. Fostering learners' morphological awareness can facilitate the improvement of their vocabulary knowledge directly and indirectly through the mediation of lexical inferencing ability (Zhang & Koda, 2011). In addition, morphological awareness can improve learners' reading comprehension (Zhang & Koda, 2013). In practical teaching, students can be trained with using contextual clues as they come across

unknown words, by asking them to break down the words into prefixes, roots, and suffixes, then brainstorming the potential meanings. This strategy of fostering word consciousness has also been proposed by other researchers (Lessard-Clouston, 2013; Nation & Meara, 2010; Zimmerman, 2009). In my teaching, I used a new context of learning English songs to develop students'morphological awareness over one academic term; my study showed that all three groups with different vocabulary sizes demonstrated significant improvement in morphology.

Strategy 6: Train students' lexical inferencing ability

Lexical inference is described as a cognitive top-down process of resorting to different resources to identify the meaning of a word (Harley & Hart, 2000; Qian, 2004). Students are encouraged to use familiar attributes and contextual guessing (Paribakht and Wesche, 1999; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2008) and "clues" (Haastrup, 1991, p. 40), including orthographical, morphological, phrasal, and sentential to a more global level from a whole passage (Qian, 2004). Research has shown that guessing from context is one of the most frequent and favored strategies for learners when meeting new words in reading (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). In Walters's study (2006), she invited learners with different proficiency levels and found out that both learners with a low or an advanced proficiency level benefited from instruction in general inferencing procedure. In my practical teaching, I teach my students how to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context, i.e., use simple words to explain the context, they are often very active to figure it out and express the meaning loudly. I can sense my students' enjoyment in doing this.

Strategy 7: Choose appropriate textbooks

One of the responsibilities that teachers should take is to ensure that the learners can acquire different aspects of vocabulary knowledge through textbooks. In order to achieve this, teachers need to ensure that frequent encounters with new words and phrases occur in the textbooks. However, textbooks seldom address the learning of vocabulary sufficiently (Lessard-Clouston, p.21). Teachers should not rely too much on textbooks, because students cannot learn a large amount of vocabulary simply from textbooks. In O'Loughlin's (2012) study, he analyzed the frequency of word occurrence in three levels of the textbook series, *New English File,* and proposed that learning these textbooks only covered a small percentage of GSL and AWL words. Therefore, it is necessary for the teachers to choose appropriate textbooks, contrive new reading materials, or look for supplementary sources of suitable reading input. Of all the available reading materials, graded reader is prominently suggested, and extensive reading of graded readers with a controlled number of repeated vocabulary can facilitate learners read and learn vocabulary with pleasure (Teng, 2014b). For this, I recommend one website with various online resources for extensive reading and vocabulary learning [http://extensivereading.net/resources].

Strategy 8: Vocabulary learning is incremental

The process of learning vocabulary is incremental, which means that the acquisition of vocabulary is incremental both in acquiring sheer volume of vocabulary or various aspects of individual lexical items (Schmitt, 2010, P.19). In other words, learning the form, meaning, and use of vocabulary occur over time. Zimmerman (2009) outlined a detailed incremental scale of learning words and phrases.

Table 3.
An incremental scale of learning words and phrases

I have never seen this word before	I have seen the word but am not sure what it means	I understand the word when I see or hear it in a sentence	I have tried to use this word, but I am not sure I am using it correctly	I use the word with confidence in either speaking or writing	I use the word with confidence in both speaking and writing

Source: Zimmerman (2009, p. 116)

Table 3 shows the learning of word knowledge goes from zero to partial acquisition to full acquisition. Therefore, teachers should help students understand that it is a long-term process of learning vocabulary. Rather than trying to memorize all the words at a time, it is better for students to spend some time reviewing their lists of unknown words each day, and teachers should develop a principled, long-term program for teaching and learning vocabulary.

Conclusion

The pedagogical suggestions articulated in this study cannot sufficiently address the core issue of vocabulary. In addition, the variable factors in learning vocabulary affect vocabulary teaching, and there will never be a "best" strategy to settle this (Nation, 2008). For instance, choosing high-frequency words to teach and adding intentional learning to incidental learning via reading is effective. Learners are motivated and become more familiar with some already known words. Lexical inferencing is helpful for teaching vocabulary; students are quite intrigued to conduct lexical inferencing. However, the density of unfamiliar words in a text often plays a role in their success or failure in this type of guessing. Some strategies, e.g., choosing appropriate textbooks requires teacher's additional efforts, because most textbooks are not

appropriate for teaching vocabulary (Lessard-Clouston, 2013). Teachers need to analyze the vocabulary load of the textbooks and the vocabulary size of the learners, and thus find appropriate textbooks for teaching, or, contrive new textbooks by themselves. In addition, it is difficult to demand students move efforts from short-term memory to long-term memory; some students expect an expeditious way to acquire vocabulary, neglecting that the process of learning vocabulary is incremental. More research on how to facilitate learners accumulating words incrementally is needed. One thing to bear in mind, however, to some extent, these eight strategies can make learning vocabulary more focused, intriguing, and efficacious, and teaching more goal-oriented, and effective.

Our main job as teachers of foreign language vocabulary is to assist our students develop the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge, i.e., the vocabulary size and quality of knowing a word. In achieving this, we may need to devote some time teaching students some vocabulary learning strategies. For instance, the bulk of our classroom time should be used to raise students' awareness of strategies in learning vocabulary, the kind of strategies in which they can actually know how to learn vocabulary independently, meaningfully, and efficiently.

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