WCES 2014

Investigating Romanian EFL Students’ Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of Vocabulary Activities

Sanda Ligia Cristea^a, Marcela Fărcașiu^b

^aWest University of Timișoara, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Str.Pestalozzi, nr. 16, Timișoara, 300115, Romania
^bPolitehnica’ University of Timișoara, Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, Str. Petre Rămneanu, nr. 2, Timișoara, 300596, Romania

Abstract

The paper aims at finding the best method of teaching vocabulary to Romanian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduate students specialising in economics and mechanical engineering. To this purpose, the authors have delivered a questionnaire with various types of vocabulary exercises and questions to the students. The students were asked to do the exercises and express their opinions regarding their dynamics and appeal as well as the most effective way to learn English vocabulary. Then, the questionnaire was imported into the SPSS statistics software and analysed. The questionnaire showed that the students prefer the vocabulary activities that are interactive and funny and that encourage them to think in English. The authors believe that the same approach can be used in teaching grammar.

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCES 2014

Keywords: vocabulary learning; vocabulary activities; questionnaire; SPSS statistics software; pair/group work

1. Introduction

As the knowledge of English becomes more and more vital, English teachers are faced with increasing challenges in their teaching experiences. While the focus was placed on grammatical description in the past, nowadays students require the use of modern methods promoting real communication in the classroom that should help them understand the language they are learning and participate in conversations. Communicative methods emphasise the reduction of...
students’ anxiety in learning languages. There is a strong connection between the efficiency of a method of teaching a foreign language, and a person’s career. As Jivan, Talpoş, Mirica & Popovici, (2011) point out, in order to be successful, one has to focus not only on his/ her professional knowledge but also on his/ her skills (e.g. his/ her foreign language skills) and competences. The importance of learning vocabulary has been very well expressed by the British linguist Wilkins. He (1972: 111) states that “Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” In the introduction to their Cambridge English Course 1, Swan & Walter emphasise this idea by saying that “Vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner.” (1984: vii). There are many ways to teach vocabulary that have been used and discussed over time. For example, videos are widely used as instructional material because it has been noticed that students acquire new vocabulary and reinforce initially learned vocabulary when they watch movie scenes. Mayer (2001) and Paivio (2007) are of the opinion that the combination of images and verbal forms in the aural or written mode helps subsequent recall of vocabulary. Rivers, (2000: 181) sustains that playing games which involve vocabulary is one of the strategies a modern foreign language teacher should use, and he (2000: 27; 119) encourages teachers to adopt an Interactive approach – i.e. the pair/ small-group work. Other researchers focused on the importance of communication between native and non-native language speakers in second language acquisition (in vocabulary acquisition as well). Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe & Hewstone, (1996) and Clément, Baker & MacIntyre, (2003) observed that the non-native speaker’s motivation to learn the language of the native speaker is determined by the quality and quantity of intercultural contact. Second-language (vocabulary) acquisition is also closely related to cognitive psychology and teachers must take into consideration that “the brain’s working memory has a limited capacity” (cf. Sousa, 2011: 274). Their materials should be designed so as to reduce the extraneous (i.e. unnecessary) cognitive load. From experience, we know that Romanian undergraduate students (both the business and the mechanical engineering ones) are not keen on static activities (such as using dictionaries). They prefer learning vocabulary in a more dynamic and fun way. That is why we considered it was important to help ourselves and the students by cooperating and finding the best way they like to be taught vocabulary in English/ the activities they most like and appeal to them in learning vocabulary.

2. Methodology

2.1. Subjects

45 EFL students from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the West University of Timișoara, and 45 EFL students from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering of ‘Politehnica’ University of Timișoara were involved in this study. They were asked to do a questionnaire based on different types of vocabulary exercises and activities which they have done before. Most students’ level was intermediate, but a few of them were upper-intermediate or advanced level students.

2.2. Questionnaire content

The authors have come up with a questionnaire made up of 10 questions whose aim was to assess the effectiveness of the exercises in learning the vocabulary and their agreeability. The types of exercises were: fill in the gaps, paraphrasing exercises, cloze exercises, association exercises, vocabulary games. The questionnaire was then imported into the SPSS statistics software (cf. http://softadvice.informer.com/Spss_Statistics_17.0_Free_Download.html) and analysed.

In what follows, the questionnaire will be presented:

A. In your opinion, which of the following factors is the most important one that helps you communicate clearly and effectively?
   a) Grammar
   b) Vocabulary
   c) Pronunciation

B. How can you improve your English vocabulary?
   a) By doing vocabulary exercises
b) By reading new words out loud many times  
c) By listening and talking to native speakers  
d) By learning by heart new words  
e) By writing them down  

C. What has been the most useful type of vocabulary exercise in your opinion?  
a) Fill in the gaps  
b) Paraphrasing exercises  
c) Cloze exercises  
d) Association exercises  
e) Vocabulary games  

D. What other activities do you find useful for your vocabulary enrichment?  
a) Describing or comparing pictures  
b) Reading a text and guessing the meaning of words from the context  
c) Thematic outdoor activities  
d) Watching and commenting on documentaries or short movie scenes on different topics  
e) Solving crossword puzzles  

E. What do you think is more important?  
a) To learn a lot of words that you do not use often  
b) To speak more with a few new words that you have learnt  

F. What is the role of vocabulary exercises?  
a) To make you feel relaxed and interested  
b) To keep you entertained  
c) To increase your concentration  

G. Do you think that it is important to learn the collocations, idioms and phrasal verbs by heart?  
a) Yes  
b) No  

H. Do you think it is more useful to learn the English vocabulary at home than in the classroom, in pair/group work?  
a) Yes  
b) No  

I. How many minutes should the English teacher allot for vocabulary exercises?  
a) 15 minutes  
b) 30 minutes  
c) 40 minutes  

J. What helped you the most in improving your English vocabulary?  
a) Vocabulary exercises  
b) Discussions with teachers and colleagues  
c) Trips to other countries where you had to speak English  
d) TV, Internet  

3. Results and discussions  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question no.</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
<th>Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. In your opinion, which of the following factors is the most important one that helps you communicate clearly and effectively?</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>a) Grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47.78%</td>
<td>b) Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32.22%</td>
<td>c) Pronunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. How can you improve your English vocabulary?</td>
<td>35.56%</td>
<td>a) By doing vocabulary exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>b) By reading new words out loud many times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Percentages obtained after the questionnaire was imported into the SPSS statistics software.
As the answers given by the students reflect, vocabulary is an important tool in communicating clearly and effectively (47.78% of the students are of this opinion). At the same time, 35.56% of the participants believe that to improve one’s English vocabulary, it is better to do vocabulary exercises. As opposed to them, 33.33% of the respondents are of the opinion that listening and talking to native speakers is the best choice. As far as the usefulness of the vocabulary exercises is concerned, 38.89% of the students consider that vocabulary games help them learn English faster while 31.11% of the respondents prefer the fill-in the gaps exercises to this purpose. None of them finds cloze exercises useful in learning the English vocabulary. Watching and commenting on documentaries or short movie scenes on different topics and thematic outdoor activities prove to be the activities enjoyed by the
students (35.56% and 34.44% of them) due to the fact that they are more interactive and relaxing. Only 5.56% of them would like to solve crossword puzzles, which is not a cooperative activity.

Most respondents (58.89%) think that it is more important to speak more with a few new words that one has learnt than to learn a lot of words that one does not use often. The importance of the agreeability of the English vocabulary is stressed by another high proportion of the students (43.33%) who believe that the role of the vocabulary exercises is to make the students feel relaxed and interested. 78.89% of the respondents consider that it is more useful to learn English vocabulary in the classroom (in pair/group work) than at home. Finally, returning to the importance of the vocabulary in learning English, the time allotted for the vocabulary exercises by the teacher should be 30 minutes as 58.89% of the students think. The interaction in the classroom taking the form of discussions with teachers and colleagues seems to have helped 54.44% of the respondents the most in improving their vocabulary. 21.11% of the students believe that activities such as watching TV and surfing the internet have helped them the most in acquiring new vocabulary.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to draw the teachers’ attention to the needs of the students who learn the English vocabulary. According to the students:

- it is very important to work in pairs/groups to improve one’s vocabulary;
- the most effective English vocabulary activities are:
  - watching and commenting on documentaries or short movie scenes
  - doing thematic outdoor activities
  - doing vocabulary games
  - having discussions with teachers, colleagues and native speakers on different topics because
    - one has to think in English
    - they are funny, interesting, interactive and relaxing and thus words can be easily memorised
    - one can remember in what context the word is used
    - one is able to talk about all kinds of topics, and can share one’s thoughts fully and correctly.

With regard to further studies we believe that:

1) It is necessary to put into practice the students’ opinion about the most useful type(s) of exercises in order to see whether there is a correlation between their answers and the efficiency of the exercises;

2) It may also be helpful to use the same approach in teaching grammar.

References


http://softadvice.informer.com/Spss_Statistics_17.0_Free_Download.html [July 2013]