

Investigating vocabulary instruction strategies for non English majored freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University

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Abstract:

Vocabulary, as an integral part of a language, plays a crucial role in the language learning process. Deciding on proper goal to instruct specific terms need to be considered scholarly. The main target of this study is to identify the strategies for teaching English vocabulary for non English majored first year students at Dong Nai Technology University. A group of 122 students consisting of 52 males and 70 females aged from 19 to 21 took part in the study. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied in the paper including questionnaire, interview, and observation for collecting reliable, valid, and accurate findings. Generally, the finding indicates students' attitude toward teacher's techniques for instructing English vocabulary. In addition, it is advisable for providing teachers appropriate teaching strategies to help learners overcome the obstacles when acquiring vocabulary.

Keywords: English vocabulary; vocabulary teaching; strategies

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English is certainly the most dominant world language. It is true that English as an international language is the most powerful language. It is used mostly in science, technology, politics, business dealings as well as daily life. It is also the common language on the Internet, popular music, movies, books, magazines, and television programs. Becoming proficiency in English will make you a global citizen, and bring you significant opportunities. Many students find it difficult to be successful in life without knowing English. Realizing how important English is, more and more people are learning it. This is the reason why English is taught as a compulsory subject from elementary schools to high schools in Vietnam.

When studying English, students need to learn vocabulary. As a matter of fact, it is the necessary fundament for mastering a language. We cannot understand a sentence if we do not know what the words mean. Without some knowledge of vocabulary, it would be impossible to have language comprehension as well as language production. When learning a language, learners need to master four basic language skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Meanwhile, vocabulary knowledge is essential for them. In order to express themselves, understand others, and communicate their ideas fluently and exactly, people need vocabulary. The lack of vocabulary knowledge affects all the four language skills. Therefore, vocabulary learning is an important and indispensable part of any language learning process.

However, many students find it is too hard to learn vocabulary. Students usually say that vocabulary appears to be the most difficult aspect of language learning for them to master. The biggest problem is the huge number of lexical items and the complication of English vocabulary with many

layers of meaning and different usages. Learning vocabulary is really a challenge to students. Many students think that learning a long list of new vocabulary is too difficult. In addition, most of them get bored to remember too many lexical items. "I forgot most of the new words after some days even though I tried to learn them by heart", a student said. Therefore, one of the most vital missions that a teacher of English needs to do is to help students learn vocabulary.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND REALITY

1. Theoretical background

Vocabulary acquisition is the foundation for further development of English language learners. Wilkins (1972) stated, "While without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Lewis (1993) went further to argue, "Lexis is the core or heart of language". Students are hard to understand others or present their own opinions without adequate vocabulary. Furthermore, students will achieve better performance in the English test if they have more words as their disposal. According to researchers, 85% of achievement test results are based on how well students understand the vocabulary.

Nevertheless, there are over a million words in English language. According to Nation and Meara (2010), for intermediate level performance in English 4,000-5,000 word families are required, and at least 6,000-9,000 for advanced proficiency. This large number of English words is really an obstruction to most English language learners. Moreover, English vocabulary is complex, with three main aspects related to form, meaning, and use, as well as layers of

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meaning connected to the roots of individual words (Nation & Meara, 2010). Students need to know much more about a word than just its meaning so that they can use it properly and accurately. So learning vocabulary can seem to be very discouraging. "Vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner." (Swan & Walter, 1984). Meara (1980) stated that language learners admit that they still have a lot of difficulties with vocabulary even when they upgrade from an initial stage of acquiring a second language to a much more advanced level. The findings in Macaro's survey (2005) indicate that secondary language teachers consider vocabulary as a topic they most need research to shed light on to improve the teaching and learning in their classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary to have implications for teaching and learning vocabulary from substantial research.

Acquiring vocabulary is mainly about memorising. Normally, a student has to pronounce, observe, and write new words many times until he is able to remember them. The deeper the mental processing that a learner engages in when learning a new word, the more likely he is to remember it (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Moreover, Gairns and Redman (1986) pointed out that 80% of the information we forget is lost within the twenty-four hours of initial learning. As a result, in the learning process, forgetting seems to be unavoidable unless students frequently put the vocabulary they have learnt in use. Therefore, recycling is necessary. It is ideal to practice regularly within one or two days after the initial input. Then, teachers can design weekly or monthly tests to check on previously taught vocabulary.

Traditionally, teachers do not have many new approaches when teaching vocabulary in class. They often use unsystematical strategies and have the tendency to leave their students to study vocabulary on their own without much instruction or guidance. Oxford and Scarcella (1994) recommended a new research-based approach to vocabulary teaching. Teachers following this approach focus on lexical items students are expected to meet frequently, and present them systematically based on a careful consideration of needs analysis. Students are given vocabulary instruction according to their learning needs, goals, and styles. In addition, they are also given vocabulary learning strategies. This helps them become independent language learners inside and outside class.

2. Reality

Most of the participants are not good at English and do not like learning English vocabulary. Many students consider most of the English words in their textbooks as their new words. My students often have the same comments about the challenges and difficulties of English words and of learning them such as "There are so many new words", "It is so difficult to learn English vocabulary", "I cannot remember many English words and do not know how to use them even though I learnt them carefully", "I do not know how to improve my vocabulary knowledge" and so on. What can we do to solve these problems? Needless to say, a variety of possible solutions have to be handled.

One of the most common ways of teaching English vocabulary in my school is to give students a list of new words accompanied by their forms and Vietnamese

equivalents. Then the teachers conduct choral and individual repetition of the new words. After that, they ask the students to learn the new words by heart at home.

The above way of teaching vocabulary clearly shows some problems. Firstly, students feel bored and frustrated with the long list of the new words. They have no interest in learning English vocabulary and they learn the new words just because they are forced to do so. Secondly, students don't know how to use the new words. Trying to remember the Vietnamese equivalents of the new words is not enough. More importantly, students should see differences in meaning and know how to use the words appropriately and correctly. Thirdly, students lack revision. It is easy to forget previous words very soon. So, teachers should provide students with recycling opportunities. Finally, students do not know how to learn English vocabulary at home. Many students try to learn all of the new words they have just been taught in a single time. As a result, they are overwhelmed by so many new words and what they have learnt can easily be forgotten.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

The questions arising from the above problems are 1) Did teacher's vocabulary teaching make students feel interested in learning English words and remember them better? 2) Did the revision activities help students consolidate the vocabulary better? 3) What is students attitude towards learning English vocabulary?

IV. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used in spite of the differences between them. Hinchey (2006) stated that researchers were able to apply three methods in their study which is called triangulation in order not to get ambiguity. Therefore, it is beneficial to collect data to address the research issues by using both methodology.

V. INSTRUMENTS

Observation:

By using observation form with clear principles, the information will be collected as well as the observers' opinions will be analyzed easily

Questionnaire:

Questionnaire is a very useful data collection tool because we can gather more information in a less cost way. Using questionnaire researchers can avoid the bias in interview which affects the validity and reliability of findings. Questionnaire will be delivered for all participants at the end of the semester.

Interview:

Semi-structured interview is conducted to explore participants' attitudes. Information from interview stage can strengthen and reinforce the findings of observation and questionnaire.

VI. RESULTS

First, when teacher instructed vocabulary in an interesting and memorable way, most of the students had great

concentration on the lessons. There is a more positive attitude towards learning vocabulary. More students wished to give the answers of the questions. Even the weak students would like to participate in the lessons. The students were really interested in learning vocabulary. So they were able to memorize the vocabulary better and were inspired to review them after school.

Class	Total	not at all		a little		a lot	
		quantity	%	quantity	%	quantity	%
1	44	0	0	5	11.4	39	88.6
2	37	1	2.7	7	18.9	27	72.8
3	41	3	7.3	10	24.4	28	68.3

From the table above, we can clearly see that more than two thirds of the students found that these approaches of teaching vocabulary made them feel greatly interested in learning English words and memorize them better. These factors improved learning and encouraged students to learn more. When comparing with the way of giving a long list of new words and their Vietnamese equivalents, these teaching techniques gave students more knowledge about the vocabulary and accomplish better results.

Second, when the participants did the revision activities that teacher has already recommended, they showed great attention. A cooperative, exciting and joyful atmosphere filled the classroom. As a result, the students could evoke the learnt vocabulary easily and rapidly.

Class	Total	not at all		a little		a lot	
		quantity	%	quantity	%	quantity	%
1	44	1	2.3	3	6.8	40	90.9
2	37	0	0	8	21.6	29	78.4
3	41	2	4.9	13	31.7	26	63.4

The table above obviously showed that more than two thirds of the students found that all revision activities helped them a lot in consolidating the vocabulary. My students took part in the revision activities actively. This created a dynamic and lively atmosphere in class. Most of the students stated that they liked these activities better than the written exercises which they needed to finish individually on the worksheets. Hence, the retention of certain vocabulary was maintained effectively.

Finally, after having my instructions in learning vocabulary, many students said that they could increase their self-confidence and a long list of vocabulary did not make them frighten any more. Therefore, they study English seriously. Consequently, it helped enhance the learning outcomes.

Class	Total	Like		Dislike	
		Quantity	%	quantity	%
1	44	39	88.6	5	11.4
2	37	27	73	10	27
3	41	23	56.1	18	43.9

+ Students' scores in English:

Class	Total	< 3.5		3.5 → 4.9		5 → 6.4		6.5 → 7.9		> 7.9	
		Quantity	%	quantity	%	quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
1	44	0	0	0	0	5	11.4	20	45.4	19	43.2
2	37	1	2.7	9	24.3	20	54.1	4	10.8	3	8.1
3	41	2	4.9	18	44	16	39	4	9.7	1	2.4

VII. CONCLUSION

Teaching vocabulary is one of the dilemmas that each teacher of English may encounter and concern the most. What students achieved at the end of the semester; however, reveals the effectiveness of the strategies used in this research. Hence, these solutions can help other teachers enhance their vocabulary teaching as well. Obviously, each teacher has their own ways of instruction, but whatever strategies chosen, the final purpose is students' progress throughout their learning process.

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