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## RESEARCH INTO FACTORS AFFECTING VOCABULARY GROWTH IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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The present study is the result of the application of a vocabulary instructional programme that takes into account the factors affecting vocabulary growth in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The programme is designed to address quality, quantity, and strategy dimensions of vocabulary learning and teaching. Drawing upon research and evidence-based teaching practice, the author seeks to develop a comprehensive framework for providing effective and efficient vocabulary instruction in the EFL university classroom. The author maintains that the suggested framework, judging by the experimental data obtained, is likely to work well at any level of teaching English to university students and can be used to improve the quality of vocabulary instruction in the EFL university context.

Keywords: vocabulary acquisition, factors, English as a foreign language (EFL), vocabulary instruction, vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning strategies.

It has been conventionally thought that one of the key predictors and indicators of students' success in acquiring a foreign language is their vocabulary size. Finding out how vocabulary acquisition proceeds is, therefore, of extreme relevance and importance to the field of foreign language teaching and learning. It is also regularly noted that achieving the goals of EFL vocabulary instruction is no easy matter. Learning vocabulary through formal instruction is a complex process influenced by a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration in understanding learners' vocabulary development.

The main starting point in understanding the factors affecting vocabulary growth in a target language is the relationship between internal and external factors in vocabulary acquisition. We would agree with Laufer that the majority of factors responsible for EFL learners' vocabulary development can be classified as either (1) features of the learner (individual cognitive and affective factors, such as language aptitude, intelligence, perseverance, motivation, etc.) or (2) features of the learning situation (input quantity, vocabulary teaching strategies, etc.) [1].

An extensive body of research has investigated the roles of cognitive and affective factors in vocabulary learning [2–6]. Research maintains that affective factors are of crucial importance in accounting for individual differences in vocabulary learning outcomes. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, affective factors determine the proportion of language learner's input and intake [7].

It has also been suggested that the impacts of affective factors, such as attitude and motivation, are related to numerous cognitive factors, such as attention and working memory [3].

The effects of internal and external factors on foreign language acquisition are inextricably interwoven and very complicated. The learner brings to the language learning situation a wide spectrum of individual differences – person-dependent factors – which determine to a large extent the pace of vocabulary learning and its outcomes. All the variables are closely related to one another (e.g. learning attitude is largely affected by motivation and learning situation). It is in the light of such concerns that language teachers and scholars acknowledge the need for extensive further research of the relationship between internal and external factors in vocabulary acquisition, particularly with reference to pedagogic practice [4].

It should be noted, however, that the influence of internal factors on EFL learners' vocabulary growth is beyond the scope of this enquiry. The overarching goal of the current study is to develop a common framework for providing effective and efficient vocabulary instruction in the EFL university classroom. A core assumption here is that improved vocabulary instructional practices will be effective in improving students' vocabulary learning outcomes.

Empirical research shows that, although learners are aware of the importance of vocabulary acquisition in foreign language learning, their efforts made to learn the target vocabulary often lead to disappointing results. EFL learners generally admit that they experience considerable difficulty with long-term vocabulary learning.

To address the perceived gap between university students' vocabulary size and their vocabulary need in the context of foreign language learning, we attempted to consider the most effective ways to tackle EFL learners' challenges in acquiring the vocabulary of the target language.

As a first step, a qualitative study was carried out to uncover the factors contributing to students' success or failure in acquiring the target language vocabulary. The participants of the study were the 34 university students. The quality, quantity, and strategy dimensions of vocabulary learning were investigated through a think-aloud procedure and a detailed analysis of students' written narratives. Using a think-aloud procedure, we observed the behaviour of EFL learners (non-English majors) as they attempted to decipher the meanings of and learn the target words. Overall, the findings show that the great majority of the learning procedures participants used involved some form of repetition of the word-meaning complexes. Little attention was paid to the morphological features of the target words. As regards the use of effective vocabulary learning procedures, the majority of students were either ignorant of them or they used them ineffectively.

It has become apparent, on the basis of the above-mentioned arguments, that vocabulary acquisition cannot rely on incidental learning but needs to be directed and controlled. Language teachers are called upon to find systematic ways of helping students with vocabulary learning and facilitate this process by strategically and flexibly modelling and teaching vocabulary learning strategies.

Several major factors should be considered here.

#### 1. *Explicit* versus *implicit* instruction

Research on L1 vocabulary acquisition has shown that the primary source of vocabulary for native speakers is a wide range of contexts. Naturally, this process is not based on direct instruction, but on incidental learning from large amounts of language input [8]. When it comes to learning a foreign language, however, the answer is not that simple. Although some research findings have confirmed the assumption that L2 vocabulary can be acquired through mere exposure to various contexts, these conclusions cannot be interpreted without taking into account the factors that directly affect the efficiency of the process.

There is an abundance of research evidence showing that interacting with words in multiple ways and in varied contexts results in their long-term retention. A well-conceived plan for effective vocabulary instruction, therefore, inevitably includes teacher input. It is essential that language teachers provide frequent opportunities for students to interact with the target vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Empirical research shows that explicit vocabulary instruction should be based on a variety of procedures and techniques in order to cater for individual learning styles. It is of extreme importance to encourage learners' active participation in vocabulary learning and cooperation with their peers and the teacher. Also, learners need to be supported in their own discovery of lexical items, in finding ways of expanding their lexical knowledge (e.g. by giving them confidence in using a dictionaries and other reference works), and in a systematic and continuous expansion of vocabulary outside the classroom (by emphasising the importance of exposure to language input through reading or the media, etc.).

Another point worth highlighting is that effective vocabulary instruction is characterized by deliberate selection of words to be learnt. Both teachers and students should be involved in the selection of words for study. We support the view that engaging students in the selection process helps to make vocabulary learning more relevant to students and, therefore, more meaningful; it elevates their metacognition and increases their awareness of the way language works.

Ultimately, effective vocabulary learning reflects in the meaningful retrieval of receptive and productive knowledge and requires deep processing which enhances long-term retention of the target vocabulary [9]. The Involvement Load Hypothesis states that "the amount of mental effort or involvement" induced by a task facilitates vocabulary retention [10]. Hence, vocabulary instruction should

be designed with an aim to activate learners' deeper processing and provide a higher degree of involvement.

## 2. *Productive versus receptive* vocabulary

Progress toward establishing a model of effective vocabulary instruction to guide vocabulary acquisition research requires precise specification of the various dimensions of vocabulary knowledge. An important consideration for planning vocabulary work is the distinction between productive and receptive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary knowledge implies the ability to comprehend a word when the learner hears or sees it, while productive knowledge refers to the ability to use this word in writing or speech. There are a number of relevant teaching points to be made here.

The first one is to reinforce the importance of *language input*, in particular the sources of language input, the quality, and quantity. The importance of language input is highlighted by various theories and theoretical frameworks for L2 acquisition. One of the most influential hypotheses concerned with the role and importance of language input in L2 acquisition is the input hypothesis [7]. According to Krashen, language acquisition can take place if language learners are directly involved in intensive exposure to language input.

The second point worth noting is the importance of *meaningful output*. By using words in a meaningful context learners create mental links. A variety of tasks and multiple encounters of a word ensure a more systematic coverage of various aspects of lexical knowledge and enable learners to build up sufficient vocabulary knowledge and consolidate it in long-term memory.

Research shows that immediate practical use of the target vocabulary is a critical factor in the learners' vocabulary development. Automaticity occurs through continued practice and successive exposure based on direct/explicit instruction. It is also assumed that personalisation (e.g. relating a word to real events or personal experience) makes vocabulary learning psychologically mature and authentic.

The third point – the importance of *processing instruction* – is no less crucial to classroom teaching. It is evident that it is not simply the number of words but also how they are used that is important. To be effective, vocabulary instruction should give due attentiveness to the base of language organization. A number of major studies have demonstrated the importance of learners' level of language awareness for their vocabulary growth. It is claimed that having students engage in deeper processing will lead to better vocabulary learning [5, 8]. Research maintains that receptive knowledge gradually becomes productive when students learn more about the vocabulary items. Tasks providing additional information on lexical items, implying the analysis of word formation, grammar categories, and forms seem worthwhile in this respect.

We support the view that language teachers should make provision for extending learners' language into more abstract domains associated with increas-

ingly advanced language competence. The most effective instruction teaches word meanings as concepts, using a variety of techniques to help students establish connections among context, their prior knowledge, and the concepts or words being taught.

It seems important to point out that vocabulary lessons make for genuine opportunities in facilitating the creation of links and semantic networks, as well as providing a deep level of processing by applying the procedures based on semantic elaboration (e.g. semantic feature analysis; semantic mapping/visual representation of links between words; ordering and classifying; pictorial schemata, etc.). Procedures based on semantic elaboration require learners to deeply process the target vocabulary by organising words and collocations. In the process of creating the links, new words become more meaningful and organised, and thus easier to learn.

The final point is the importance of *review and consolidation* of the target vocabulary. Vocabulary teaching strategies referring to these procedures aim to get learners to review the vocabulary items, for this review is necessary to consolidate them in long-term memory [9].

Explicit vocabulary instruction should be based on a variety of teaching techniques and activities in order to cater for individual learning styles. The basic premise underlying the application of vocabulary learning strategies is that these strategies are inseparable parts of one total instructional process. Each of them is developed through direct/explicit instruction and an abundance of practice.

Drawing upon a review of research and our experience in working with university students, we developed a framework for describing effective vocabulary instruction that takes into account the major factors affecting vocabulary growth in a foreign language:

- teaching, modelling, and encouraging the application of effective word-learning strategies;
- providing a deep level of vocabulary processing (semantic elaboration);
- seeking opportunities for immediate practical use of the target vocabulary;
- linking classroom learning with vocabulary activation beyond the class setting (e.g. making shared class multimedia dictionaries, etc.);
- introducing personalisation into the learning situation;
- stimulating meaningful, purposeful real life language use and practice;
- fostering diversity and inclusion by giving learners meaningful choices both in and outside the classroom;
- developing a habit of reflection on vocabulary learned;
- allowing for and encouraging individual and collaborative research on lexical patterns;
- allowing space and time for developing learner autonomy (e.g. by sharing helpful technology strategies; teaching efficient use of reference resources, etc.).

This study assessed the positive impact of the suggested instructional strategy on both the quantity and quality of the participants' vocabulary knowledge. The above-mentioned characteristics of systematic vocabulary instruction appeared to encourage and support most of the effective variables, i.e. promoting motivation and positive attitudes, reducing anxiety, urging perseverance, as well as embracing different learning styles.

The overall vocabulary instructional strategy has proved to be effective in helping university students become autonomous EFL learners, changing them from passive knowledge receivers into active and conscientious participants of the teaching/learning process, intensifying learners' educational involvement and, ultimately, increasing their vocabulary learning outcomes.

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