
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WAYS OF IMPROVING VOCABULARY

Pius M. MONDAY, *Ph.D*

Department of Linguistics & Communication Studies

Golden Gate University

536 Mission Street

San Francisco, CA 94105

California

The United States of America

ABSTRACT

The paper critically analysis the ways of improving vocabulary. Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and it provides much of the basis on how to speak, listen, read, and write. This paper reviewed that learning vocabulary encompasses four stages: discrimination, understanding the meaning, remembering, and consolidation and extension of the meanings. It also provides the types of vocabulary such as listening, speaking vocabularies, etc., ways of improving vocabulary includes: developing a reading habit, making friends with the dictionary and thesaurus, practice using new words in conversation games, etc. and the difficulties in learning vocabulary. In conclusion, vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of the language proficiency as well as central to communicative competence. One of the recommendations was that learners, writers as well as readers should use more of newly discovered words in their day to day conversation, which in turn will help enhance their vocabulary skills.

KEYWORDS: Vocabulary, Types, Vocabulary Learning/Difficulties, and Vocabulary Improvement

Introduction

Vocabulary is the basis of language learning. The ability of an individual to communicate effectively depends on a good knowledge of vocabulary, which they continue to expand throughout their life span. Just as Wilkins (1972) in Zhi-liang (2010) stated, "without grammar, little can be conveyed, but without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed." Therefore, without vocabulary, skills of language learning, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, cannot be successfully achieved. Pan and Xu (2011) added that vocabulary is one of the most essential parts of English, along with phonetics, pronunciation, and grammar. Without learning vocabulary, it is difficult to attain any level of language proficiency. Vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of the language; it is central to communicative

competence (Rohmatillah, 2017). Vocabulary is central to second language (L2) acquisition. Vocabulary has occupied a special place in applied linguistics for the past twenty years. Following decades of neglect by scholars of linguistics and education, there has been an enormous expansion in second language vocabulary research in recent years, as well as the arrival of a number of influential books on vocabulary (ELESCDIEB, 2009).

Literatures on vocabulary learning, however, received little attention during the 1950s and 1960s. Recently, it has attracted more and more interest from researchers, scholars, educationalists, and teachers (Zhi-liang, 2010). And many linguists, both at home and abroad, have pointed out the significance of vocabulary. The following quotations can show their views on vocabulary learning. McCarthy (1990) stated in Peppard (2010) that "no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of the L2 are mastered, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way" without words to express a wide range of meaning. Laufer (1989) in Ruixue (2012) also expressed that "no text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text's vocabulary." Therefore, we can say that one cannot deny the fact that vocabulary plays a very important role in language learning and that having a large vocabulary will help an individual improve their language proficiency.

Concept of Vocabulary

Learning a new language cannot be separated from vocabulary. This means that when learning a new language, people must be familiar with its vocabulary. Vocabulary can be defined in various ways. Experts have proposed some terms for vocabulary. According to Renandya and Richards (2002), vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how learners speak, listen, read, and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them, such as listening to the radio, listening to the native speaker, using language in different contexts, reading, or watching television. The other definition of vocabulary comes from Hatch and Brown (2005). They say that vocabulary refers to a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words that individual speakers of a particular language might use. Hatch and Brown (2005) also state that vocabulary is the only system involved in alphabetical order. Heibert and Kamil (2005) define "vocabulary" as the knowledge of the meanings of words. The term "vocabulary" has a range of meanings. For example, some teachers use the term to mean sight-word vocabularies,

referring to students' immediate recognition of words in print; other teachers refer to words students understand as their meaning vocabularies. Still, other teachers use the term to mean listening vocabulary, or students' understanding of words that they hear in the spoken language. In addition, Schmitt and McCarthy (2007) state that vocabulary is knowing a word's meaning, how often it occurs, the company it keeps, its appropriateness in different situations, its syntactic behavior, its underlying form and derivations, its word associations, and its semantic features.

Types of Vocabulary

There are basically four main types of vocabulary, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking vocabulary.

Listening Vocabulary: This type of vocabulary refers to the words we hear and comprehend. A good listener is able to link the words being spoken to their meaning. This level of understanding is aided by word context, intonation, and, if there is visual contact with the speaker, by gestures and facial expressions (Wollacott, 2012).

Speaking Vocabulary: Speaking is one of the types of vocabulary that demonstrate a person's knowledge of words. Most people use almost 5000–10,000 words for communication (for conversation and giving instructions). Speaking vocabulary is an active demonstration that can also rely on other elements such as facial expressions, intonation, pitch, and gestures to help others understand its meaning. Knowledge of a word is demonstrated by its good usage and pronunciation.

Writing Vocabulary: This type of vocabulary represents those words that we use while writing to express ourselves. It is very easy to explain ourselves verbally by using facial expressions and voice modulation, but using the same words to communicate the same concept or thought through writing is not that easy (Wollacott, 2012). Our writing vocabulary is intensely affected by the words we can spell. Thus, writing vocabulary is equivalent to reading vocabulary. Reading is one of the core skills needed for someone to be literate. In writing, we demonstrate our knowledge of a word in terms of its meaning, how to spell it, and how to use it correctly.

Reading Vocabulary: This vocabulary refers to the words we recognise when we read any text. We read and understand many words, but we do not use them in speaking vocabulary. If a person is a reader, then this type of vocabulary happens to be the second largest vocabulary. Needless to say, vocabulary grows with reading.

Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning helps acquire language, develops the reader's or learner's reading proficiency, and is beneficial for reading/writing comprehension. According to Anderson and Freebody (2009), the extent to which a reader knows word meanings directly detracts or enhances comprehension. Learning the vocabulary encompasses four stages: discrimination, understanding the meaning, remembering, and consolidation and extension of the meanings. First, the discrimination stage involves distinguishing sounds and letters. It helps in speaking, listening, reading, and writing because, by distinguishing sounds, the learners pronounce words correctly and understand them when they read or hear them. Secondly, understanding meaning involves understanding the concept of words by relating them to their referents (Afzal, 2019). Thirdly, the remembering stage consists of the ability to retain the meanings. Fourthly, the consolidation and extension stage refers to learning new vocabulary and its integration into the learner's vocabulary system (Grauberg, 2007). However, learning the vocabulary usually causes a heavy burden on the readers, as languages continually create and add new words to their vocabulary stock. Oxford (2010) argues that generally, no rules are followed in learning the vocabulary as used in learning the grammar. Learners usually encounter hundreds of words that they need to learn and practice during their studies.

According to Cunningham and Stanovich (2008), it is the volume of reading that becomes the primary contributor to differences in vocabulary knowledge between readers. Stanovich's (1986) in Paige & Smith (2018) reciprocal model of vocabulary hypothesizes that a virtuous cycle occurs where the reader's vocabulary knowledge facilitates engagement with texts, which results in greater word knowledge, which in turn encourages more reading. Perfetti (2007) stated differently that word knowledge begets word knowledge, which enhances readers' text comprehension. Stahl and Nagy (2006) viewed this virtuous reciprocal cycle of reading and learning words as the most likely scenario accounting for vocabulary growth in readers, as those who read more expand their breadth and depth of word knowledge. To further understand this cycle, Perfetti and Stafura (2014) made two points about effective readers. First, they are more skilled at understanding words and integrating them into mental models of a text than those who are less effective (Perfetti, Yang & Schmalhofer, 2008). Secondly, when encountering a new word, skilled readers are more effective at acquiring orthographic and semantic information about the word (Bolger, Balass, Landen & Perfetti, 2008). The extent to which a skilled reader can read with

fluency is a fundamental characteristic defining a skilled reader. This suggests that vocabulary learning may differ based on the degree to which a learner possesses the indicators associated with fluent reading.

Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary

The first steps in successfully learning vocabulary are to identify the difficulties faced during improvement. Thornbury (2004) proposes some factors that make words more difficult as follows:

Spelling and Pronunciation: Sounds-spelling mismatches are likely to be the cause of errors, either of pronunciation or of spelling, and can contribute to a word's difficulty. While most English spelling is fairly law-abiding, there are also some glaring irregularities. Words that contain silent letters are particularly problematic: foreign, listen, headache, climbing, bored, honest, cupboard, muscle, through, though, thought, tough, thorough, etc.

Length and complexity: Long words seem to be no more difficult to learn than short ones. But, as a rule of thumb, high frequency words tend to be short in English, and therefore the learner is likely to meet them more often, a factor favouring their "learnability."

Grammar: Also problematic is the grammar associated with the word, especially if this differs from that of its L1 equivalent. Remembering whether a verb like enjoy, love, or hope is followed by an infinitive (to swim) or an —ing form (swimming) can add to its difficulty.

Meaning: When two words overlap in meaning, learners are likely to be confused. *Make* and *do* are a case in point: *you make breakfast and make an appointment, but you do the housework and do a questionnaire.*

Range, connotation and idiomaticity: Words that can be used in a wide range of contexts will generally be perceived as easier than their synonyms with a narrower range. Thus, *put* is a very wide-ranging verb, compared to *impose, place, position*, etc. Likewise, *thin* is a safer bet than *skinny, slim, slender*. Uncertainty as to the connotations of some words may cause problems too. Thus, *propaganda* has negative connotations in English, but its equivalent may simply mean *publicity*. On the other hand, *eccentric* does not have negative connotations in English, but its nearest equivalent in other languages may be *deviant*. Finally, words or expression that are idiomatic (like *make up your mind, keep an eye on...*) will generally be more difficult than words whose meaning is transparent (*decide, watch*).

Ways to Improve Vocabulary

In many ways, a language is its vocabulary. Other skills, such as grammar, pronunciation, etc., all revolve around the correct, meaningful use of words. Improving vocabulary is important, and this can be achieved through developing a reading habit, making friends with the dictionary and thesaurus, practice using new words in conversation, etc.

- ✓ **Develop a Reading Habit:** Vocabulary building is easiest when you encounter words in context. It is undeniable that reading is the most effective way to acquire new vocabulary. Seeing new words appear in a novel or a newspaper article can be far more helpful than seeing them appear on vocabulary lists. However, with context information surrounding each new word, there is a good chance you can guess its meaning just by understanding the overall text. Not only do you gain exposure to unfamiliar words, but you also see how they are used.
- ✓ **Make Friends with the Dictionary and Thesaurus:** Dictionaries and thesauruses are the two most effective and necessary tools for improving vocabulary. If they are used properly, they can jog your memory of words' synonyms and antonyms, their precise meaning, spelling, and alternate definitions, and provide additional useful information about those words. Thus, by committing a few words to your memory, you will have the ability to say the same thing in a number of different and more eloquent ways.
- ✓ **Use Flashcards:** A quick way to build a large vocabulary is to study a number of words via flashcards. In today's digital age, a wide array of smartphone apps makes flashcards convenient and easy to organize. Aiming for one new word a day is reasonable. You can always go for more, but it may not be reasonable to assimilate dozens of English words every single day.
- ✓ **Practice using new words in conversation:** It is possible to amass a huge vocabulary without actually knowing how to use words. This means you have to take it upon yourself to put your personal dictionary into use. If you come across an interesting word in your reading, make a point of using it in conversation. By experimenting in low-stakes situations, you can practice the art of word choice and, with a little bit of trial and error, hone in on the right word for a particular context.

Likewise, Tracy (2018) noted that there are plenty of effective vocabulary activities that can be used to put the words learners or readers learn into

practice as well as learn new vocabulary words in the process. He noted these vocabulary activities as follows:

- ✓ **Vocabulary Games:** There are a wide range of online and offline games designed to help improve vocabulary. These games can serve as a fun and entertaining way to learn new words and put the words that you already know into practice. However, classic games like Scrabble and Boggle can function as a fun way to expand your English vocabulary as well as crossword puzzles. If you really want to be efficient, follow up rounds of these word games with a little note-taking. Keep a list of the words you learned while playing the game and review it from time to time.
- ✓ **Vocabulary Test:** Vocabulary tests allow learners to test their current vocabulary and receive a score at the end of the test, which also lets them know what level they are. In addition to improving vocabulary by exposing yourself to new words, these tests also allow learners as well as readers to gauge their progress so that they will know if and by how much their vocabulary is improving.
- ✓ **Vocabulary Quiz:** Vocabulary quizzes are similar to vocabulary tests, but are typically shorter and may not provide a very detailed analysis of your vocabulary level once the quiz is complete. Nevertheless, vocabulary quizzes are still a great way to practice your vocabulary and measure your results.

Conclusion

Vocabulary is the basis of very language learning. The ability of an individual to communicate effectively depends on a good knowledge of vocabulary, and that vocabulary is one of the most essential parts of English, along with phonetics, pronunciation, and grammar. However, vocabulary learning helps acquire language, develops the reader's or learner's reading proficiency, and is beneficial for reading/writing comprehension. Thus, one cannot deny the fact that vocabulary knowledge is an integral part of the language proficiency as well as central to communicative competence.

Recommendations

1. Learners, writers as well as readers should use more of newly discovered words in their day to day conversation, which in turn will help enhance their vocabulary skills.

2. It is feasible that all individual need to have their attention focused, at different times (mostly on their leisure), on form and meaning of words to improve vocabulary.
3. Learners should also focus their attention on key vocabulary, to retrieve the forms and meanings of the new words, and encourage themselves to identify and develop a personalized inventory of strategies for vocabulary learning.
4. It is also important for all individual to work more effectively in lessening difficulties in acquiring vocabulary knowledge.
5. Generally, the educational board should develop effective programme for teachers' and learners' on the importance of doing extensive reading in an autonomous way, in order to improve vocabulary.
6. Persons at all level should focus less on learning individual words and focus more on tools that can be used to facilitate word knowledge across a variety of contexts.

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