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STUDENTS' STRATEGIES TO LEARN VOCABULARY



» Abstract

This qualitative study examined the strategies to learn vocabulary used by second level students at a Colombian University. Six college learners enrolled in an English proficiency program participated. This study comprises: direct observation, in depth open ended interviews and written documents. The results were reported according to five categories: English proficiency and habits of reading, Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning, Guessing Strategies, Dictionary Strategies and Anxiety and Motivation. The findings showed that learners appeal to one or two strategies; memorization by repetition, and the use of dictionary are the most commonly used. Context and linguistic clues are elements that students employ for deciphering the meaning of words but not to learn vocabulary. Actions must be followed to correct and improve their learning styles to have them develop fluency and accuracy when using English.

Keywords: Vocabulary, language learning strategies, fluency, accuracy, context, proficiency,

» Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo examinó las estrategias utilizadas por estudiantes de segundo grado en una universidad colombiana, para aprender vocabulario. Participaron seis aprendices del programa de aptitud de inglés. La investigación comprende: observación directa, entrevistas con preguntas abiertas, documentos y trabajos escritos. Los resultados se presentan según cinco categorías: dominio del inglés, hábitos de lectura, creencias sobre el aprendizaje de vocabulario, estrategias de predicción, uso del diccionario y, ansiedad y motivación. Se demuestra que los estudiantes recurren a una o dos estrategias; las más utilizadas son memorización por repetición, y uso del diccionario. El contexto y las pistas lingüísticas son elementos que los estudiantes emplean para descifrar el significado de palabras específicas, no para aprender vocabulario. Se deben implementar acciones para mejorar sus estilos de aprendizaje, para que desarrollen fluidez y precisión en el uso del inglés.

Palabras clave: Vocabulario, estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas, fluidez, precisión, contexto, competencia.

Introduction

“Words, so innocent and powerless as they are, standing in a dictionary; how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to choose and combine them.” — Nathaniel Hawthorne

During the last years researchers and linguists have recognized the role of vocabulary in language learning (Lawson and Hogben, 1996). Noorizah Mohd. Noor and Zaini Amir (2007) “Since reading requires accurate and automatic word recognition skills, learners would need to be equipped with sufficient vocabulary knowledge to read fluently”. The more words learners know the more proficient they will be in their reading.

This research study aims at uncovering the strategies that six second level college EFL learners use to learn vocabulary at a public Caribbean University. It has been observed that learning vocabulary is a very complex process that requires more elaborate acquisition procedures (Lawson and Hogben 1996). The purpose of this study is to know what strategies students use to learn vocabulary and to assist students in improving their vocabulary acquisition skills.

Research Question

One research question guided this study. What strategies do the students in the second level at a Colombian Caribbean University use to learn vocabulary?

Theoretical Framework

Learning vocabulary has been left aside in the process of learning English as a foreign

language (Pavicic, 2008). In our daily practice we have found out that it is a relevant skill to possess. Besides, in recent years there has been a growing interest in about this issue. Some researchers have claimed that reading comprehension is highly affected by the lack of vocabulary (Laufer, 1986; Nation, 1990; Mustapha, 2002).

“One of the most persistent findings in reading research is that the extent of students’ vocabulary knowledge relates strongly to their reading comprehension and overall academic success” (Lehr F, Osborn J., H. Hiebert E., 2004. p. 1). The more students enrich their vocabulary; their reading comprehension will be easier and more successful.

Reading fluently requires cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, extrinsic motivation as well as accurate and automatic recognition of words. (Pavicic, 2008, pp 2-4) Students need both: many words in their vocabularies and the ability to use various strategies to establish the meanings of new words when they encounter them (Lehr F, Osborn J., H. Hiebert, E., 2004. p. 6). Learners are all the time looking for strategies that can help them to increase their proficiency in this essential skill “Another part of the vocabulary consists of the strategies that individual readers use for decoding words and for gaining an overall comprehension” (Cay Dollerup, Ester Glahn, 1989, p. 30)

Most of these students have trouble comprehending what they read. “A major cause of this difficulty is their lack of understanding of abstract English words” (García, 1991; Verhoeven, 1990, p. 1) as students do not have the habit of reading;

it is difficult for them to be familiar with words that they do not use daily. The variety of reading will help them increase their vocabulary. The more conscious their reading is the more fluent speech they will have.

In the wake of the above idea, we want our students to develop awareness about the strategies they use to acquire vocabulary, so they can use efficient strategies in a conscious way. As a result, they might become more responsible for their language learning success. Moreover, they could also gain confidence and a sense of spontaneity when they use the foreign language.

“It is important to make students aware that learning does not only involve having knowledge of a particular strategy (competence), but rather it will become enhanced when we make use of that knowledge (performance)” (Noorizah Mohd. Noor and Zaini Amir, 2008 p. 325). First of all, we must change the way our students have been learning until now. Probably, it is the only way they know. We have to show, not to tell them, how to combine different learning strategies and negotiate their beliefs and misconceptions about learning a foreign language. In addition, we also have to consider the multiple intelligences theory and learning styles, when planning and performing the lessons. It is possible that our instruction favors one learning style, dismissing the others.

“Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning” (Ghazal, 2003, p. 86). Language learners need a wide array of target language words to be able to

tackle successfully both production and comprehension activities in the second or foreign language (Ghazal, 2003, p. 91). Getting a broad word bank allows learners to have advantages in reading proficiency. Due to the fact that words are lexical items that can hardly be viewed in isolation, it is important for us to have learners make the associations, contextualization and memorization between the word and its meaning.

Most learners learn new unknown words when they read. “Not everyone has a natural ability to memorize. However, memorization is a skill that can be learned and improved upon with commitment and practice” (Pennington, 2009). Most words are learned through reading. People that like reading get more vocabulary and become more fluent. “Good readers have good vocabularies. It is as simple as that” (Pennington, 2009). Since reading is a relevant skill for a college learner, we are keen on fostering reading both as an end and as a means.

In the same vein, Noorizah Mohd. Noor and Zaini Amir, 2008 p. 313. Emphasize that reading is a “suffocating slow process”. For example, if a student has difficulties understanding the meaning of the text, sentences or even an entire paragraph that contains a small number of unknown words, this one is able to get the general meaning guessing the overall idea in the text, as well as the context and the words (Alderson, 1984, as cited in Mohd & Amir, 2004).

A number of similar studies conducted at university levels (Ehram & Oxford, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Noorizah Mohd. Noor and Zaini Amir) have showed some similarities in the way

learners assume the learning process; “many students demonstrate considerable informal knowledge and ineffective reading skills and strategies to accommodate the reading demands of the new academic environment (Noorizah Mohd. Noor and Zaini Amir, 2008 p 2) Besides, they also assert that there are some other factors affecting learning; “lack of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, extrinsic motivation and low interest which have contributed toward the ESL students’ problems in reading” and a very significant coincidence regarding our research question “there is also the factor of insufficient vocabulary knowledge”. It seems to be a fact that subjects do tend to use more than one strategy in learning tasks. The mandatory question here is about the effectiveness of those strategies.

In sum, vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in language learning. It may guarantee comprehension and fluency, and it can certainly facilitate the students’ performance, in terms of the use of the language. We consider that the theories provided by the researchers previously mentioned contributed as expertise support to answer the early proposed research question.

Methodology

This study attempts to answer the question, What strategies do the students in the second level in a Colombian Caribbean University use to learn vocabulary in reading?

Participants

The participants are six college students from second level; three students from group A and three students from group B.

They are enrolled in an English proficiency program which is a requirement course offered by the University School of Language. There are 3 female and 3 male participants of ages that range between 18-21 years old. The students belong to working class families. Some of the participants have a good level of proficiency in English, but most of them have a very poor performance, which is evident in their low test scores in reading comprehension. Besides, the majority of them are reluctant to learn this language and express a lack of interest in the subject. In the following table, it is recorded a brief description of the participants and their academic backgrounds.

Name	University Major	English Proficiency*
Participant 1	Business Administration Student	A1
Participant 2	Mathematics Student	A1
Participant 3	Business Administration Student	A1
Participant 4	Civil Engineering	A-
Participant 5	Speech Therapy	A-
Participant 6	Civil Engineering	A1

*According to the levels of the Common European Framework for Language.

This study was based on qualitative methods such as direct observation, in depth open ended interviews and written documents (Bogdam and Biklen, 2006). We collected, transcribed and analyzed the gathered data in search for answers to the research question.

For this research study we used open-ended interviews. The interviews are divided into two parts. The first part contains questions to collect background information such as English proficiency and habits of reading. The second part consists of five categories:

1) Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning 2) Guessing Strategies, 3) Dictionary Strategies, 4) Memory Strategies, 5) Anxiety and Motivation. (Adaptation of the vocabulary strategy questionnaire proposed by Gu & Johnson (1996).

We also conducted direct observations in ten sessions. During these sessions, the observers were paying attention to the vocabulary tasks. The lessons were conducted mainly in this particular aspect of the language, since vocabulary was the core of this study. Moreover, we wrote notes in a field diary providing as many details as possible. The notes focused on the way the students appeal to express ideas, no matter if they were oral or written. Besides, we studied the students' written tests and compositions to obtain more detailed information about the way they write a simple composition. We considered bearing in mind the participants' written skill since it has a significant connection with vocabulary acquisition. The participants' written production is reflected by their size of vocabulary. "An adequate knowledge of words is a prerequisite for effective language use" (Read 2000 p. 83)

Results

The analysis of the data focused on the strategies that students use when learning vocabulary. This was possible by doing a

triangulation of the data we collected during the research process. Below, we report the findings according to the categories already mentioned in the methodology.

English proficiency and habits of reading

When we asked the participants how frequently they read and the kind of text they accustom to read, we obtained the following information: Participant 1, a Business Administration student replied "not very often, I only read what the English teacher assigns me to read or when I am interested in a particular topic I search it on the web."

Otherwise, the majority of them claimed that the kind of texts they prefer to read are those related to songs or entertainment magazine news. They only do this from time to time, which shows us that they do not read as much as they should. Participant 3, a student from the school of Business, mentioned: "one is concerned about music... when a song is very catchy, "I look for the lyrics on a web site and I learn it by heart." While Participant 1 said: "When I like a song I just download its lyrics." This attitude lets us know that these students do not use English for academic purpose but just for entertainment. We do not dismiss their behavior, it is useful but it is not the intention of instruction we are orienting at the university.

Beliefs about Vocabulary Learning

The gathered data reveals that the students use memorization as the main way to learn vocabulary. Oral repetition is the most common strategy they appeal to learn new words. However, from the observation and the tests scores, we realized that they cannot recall most of the vocabulary

previously studied in further activities. Participant 4, a Civil Engineering student said; “I think that repeating word by word several times is the best way to learn vocabulary”. Meanwhile, Participant 2, from the faculty of Mathematics, expressed; “I consider that mental repetition is helpful when learning words, sometimes my classmates and I get together to practice memorizing that way”. According to this participant, they usually work in groups at home, and take this opportunity to help each other when practice and study for a test.

The above mentioned positions are surprising to us since we took it for granted that the learners already knew how to approach to English. We overvalued their mastery of learning tools, due to the fact that they are college students. Though, they are still using the same learning style of high school students. On the other hand, language learners are usually influenced by previous experiences and their own cultural backgrounds. As a consequence, they often hold different beliefs and misconceptions about language learning.

Guessing Strategies

The interviews provided more details about the individual learning strategies and in depth information about the conditions of strategies use.

When we asked what they did to understand a word, most of the interviewees answered that they used the context of the reading to infer the meaning. Participant 1 stated, “I use the context of the reading, I read once and try to get the general idea, sometimes it is not literally, I try to find something to hold on to.”

Meanwhile, Participant 2 claimed: “well... when I read in the English language ...usually words that are unknown... I try to find words that I know or part of the text that I can understand and I get a general idea and then... I try to itemize or guess what I do not understand”. The context is a choice for students when they are confused while reading an unknown text. According to what we have witnessed and the last students’ answer, we can assert that most of the time this strategy works. It helps them to be closer to the meaning. When the students are working on a reading comprehension activity and they do not have at hand any dictionary or another source to get the translation, they get the meaning just by appealing to the context.

Only two students mentioned transparent words as a safer manner to approach the text. Participant 3 claims; “when I am getting the meaning of a word, I rely on its form, which is similar to the word in Spanish.” The features of these particular words give students the possibility to use them as key words detected in reading or listening tasks. Participant 6 referred to anaphoric and cathaforic references to approach to the meaning of the unknown words: “I look for the words that are before and after the one I don’t understand to see what they refer to”. From this asseveration, we can state that the use of one or another strategy does not obey to deliberate actions, they just appeal to them by intuition. We consider that the learner’s actions should be purposeful so that the outcome would be better.

Dictionary Strategies

The research team also questioned the participants on the use of tools to learn the meaning of words. To this question

the participants asserted that they use an English-Spanish dictionary or a search engine to find the meaning. Participant 5 a Speech Therapy Student said: “I have to appeal to the dictionary if I have it on hand and I try to learn the words”, Participant 6 also mentioned the use of a dictionary. “I use a dictionary, I repeat a word several times and I do not forget it.” The dictionary is one of the most common devices that students use when they are reading or translating any kind of text. Sometimes they use a translator online dictionary if they have it at hand or a simple bilingual dictionary. But in both cases this is the easier way for them to get meaning of words. Another drawback occurs when they do not know how to select the suitable option if the word has more than one connotation. So they may mistranslate the content.

Anxiety and Motivation

When we asked the participants about how they feel when they did not understand something, all of them replied that they felt frustrated when they did not understand specific details of a sentence or text. For example Participant 2 said: “well... it is frustrating because you feel like an ignorant”. The need to know the content becomes the main motivation factor. This statement tells us that one of the difficulties our students have is that they do not combine different strategies to increase their word banks. These actions tend to solve the problem while they are reading, but it does not warrant to acquire new vocabulary.

Conclusions

This study was conducted to uncover the strategies that six college students use to

learn vocabulary. After analyzing the data, the researchers can conclude that each learner appeals at least to one or just two strategies, but they do not engage more strategies to enhance their learning. The strategies most often used by them are: memorization by repetition, and the use of the dictionary. This is one of the reasons why they are not succeeding in acquiring vocabulary. The participants do not apply any meta-cognitive strategies. This means that students have to become more strategic thinkers to understand the way they are processing information. They must question, visualize, and synthesize information in order to store it to reuse it later. For instance, they do not make associations or a process concerned with obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information in order to learn. The use of context and linguistic clues are actions that students do just for deciphering the meaning of a specific word but not to learn vocabulary.

Only one student mentioned that he associated the word with a mental image. Participant 2 said: “I do not have a plan when I forget a word, but ...I just ... link or ... associate words with objects or things”. Having a weak vocabulary can interfere with comprehension. Some students have difficulties with receptive language. This means they have trouble learning, understanding and retaining concepts or ideas or retrieving words immediately. This idea has been concluded according to what we observed during the sessions. Our students must be able to create associations that will facilitate retention and produce a review system to increase a retrieval words.

We can also state that they do not have good reading habits. When we asked the

participants how frequently they read texts in English, most of them answered they only read what they were assigned to read in the class sessions. Participant 1 for example said: "I just read something in English just when I have to do homework or when I have to study for a test or something like that". It is well known that they are studying other subjects, and they are just taking these English courses as a requirement to get a college degree. They just give the necessary time to do homework and study for a test or another activity proposed by the teacher.

Now, we as teachers must follow some actions to correct and improve their learning styles to have them develop fluency and accuracy when using the foreign language. One conclusion we can draw from the collected data and from our observation is that the strategies they are using are not working because they are passive action they take. Besides, the respondents are using a limited number of strategies. For instance, repetition does not mean retention of meaning. We need them to develop a vocabulary domain for the long term.

Educational Implications

The results showed us a clearer path to follow in terms of the strategies that students are not using and those they are employing in a wrong way to enrich their vocabulary. Regarding to memorization strategies, teachers must provide the kind of instruction to have students develop meta- cognitive strategies. Besides, we must find a strategy to have them create mental images, association (mnemonic) Otherwise, since the results revealed that learners do not read so much, and they prefer just entertainment readings. It is recommended

to work on texts of their preferences to catch their attention. On the other hand, we have to redesign the syllabus, conceiving one that encourages learners to read. They are college students who must become fluent readers in order to approach to knowledge, technology and science.

From the analysis of the data and from our experience we can assert that the size of the vocabulary is a relevant factor for an English learner. We are deeply convinced that it affects fluency and any other skill. Reading is affected in the way they misunderstand the meaning, most of the time. Speaking is even more difficult when a person cannot get the words to express ideas or feelings. Writing is much harder if you do not find the appropriate words to deliver a comprehensive message.

In addition, we did not notice and neither did the students express the use of note taking or keeping a vocabulary note book to enhance their bank of words. It is obvious that they do not draw upon on another technique to help them memorize new words.

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