

Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition in the EFL Classroom

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CHAPTER 10

Vocabulary Learning Strategies 10th Grade Students Use To Interact Orally In Class

Boris Piñeres Yanes
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Resumen

Durante el proceso de aprendizaje los estudiantes son expuestos a una serie de actividades las cuales promueven el recordar los conocimientos previos. Cuando se aprende una lengua extranjera, estos conocimientos se refieren al uso de palabras “correctas”, estructuras completas o significados precisos, de igual manera están muy relacionados con la adquisición de vocabulario y el papel que estas tienen al integrar las diferentes habilidades en clase.

Esta investigación está asociada con el uso que los estudiantes hacen de estrategias específicas para aprender vocabulario y cómo ellas están ligadas a la interacción oral en clase. Segler (et al 2002) definen las estrategias de vocabulario como una subdivisión de las estrategias de aprendizaje de una lengua, las que se pueden aplicar a una gran variedad de actividades comunicativas, que van desde las más independientes (vocabulario, pronunciación y gramática) hasta las más integradoras como la comunicación oral y comprensión lectora.

En consecuencia, el uso de las estrategias de vocabulario está directamente relacionado con una interacción oral exitosa en clase, ya que alguna de ellas, le permiten al estudiante sobrellevar su deficiencia de vocabulario al momento de hablar con otros.

El presente trabajo investigativo está organizado en (nueve) 9 secciones, de las cuales las más necesarias para apoyar nuestra investigación y muestra algunos estudios previos llevados a cabo por diferentes autores

en este campo. De igual manera, se explica la metodología empleada, las técnicas y los instrumentos pertenecientes a este.

Además, se presenta una descripción paso a paso de cómo estas técnicas e instrumentos fueron aplicadas, con el fin de guiar al lector para que entienda el proceso de recolección y análisis de datos y las categorías emergentes a partir de este.

Finalmente, en las secciones de resultados y discusión se establecen con el objetivo de interpretar los hallazgos obtenidos y posibles implicaciones que estos tienen dentro de las prácticas académicas en la escuela.

Palabras clave

Vocabulario, aprendizaje, estrategias, interacción oral.

Abstract

During the learning process students are exposed to a series of activities which promote recalling of previous knowledge. When learning a foreign language this knowledge could deal with the use of 'correct' words, complete patterns or special meanings, this is closely related to vocabulary acquisition and the role it has when integrating different skills in the class.

This research study is associated with students' use of specific strategies to learn vocabulary and how they are linked to oral interaction in class, Segler *et al* (2002) define vocabulary learning strategies as a subclass of language learning strategies, which are applicable to a wide variety of language learning task, ranging from the more isolated (e.g. vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar) to integrative tasks like oral communication and reading comprehension.

Subsequently, the use of vocabulary learning strategies is directly related to a successful oral interaction in class, since some of them allow the students to cope with their vocabulary's lacks at the moment of speaking with others.

The present research study is organized in nine sections and among these, the most relevant ones are; the description of the problem where the context is described and the problematic situation is stated. Another

important section is the theoretical framework which provides some necessary theories that support our research and presents some previous studies carried out by different authors in this field.

Likewise, the methodology employed is explained and the techniques and instruments belonging to it. Besides, a step by step description of how the techniques and instruments were applied is explained to guide the readers to understand the data collection and analysis process, and what categories evolved from them.

Finally, the results and discussion sections are intended to interpret the findings obtained from the data, and the possible influence they have inside academic practices in the school.

Key words

Vocabulary, Learning. Strategies, Oral interaction.

1. Description of the Problem

Campo Alegre school is a public institution located in the rural area of Lorica (Córdoba). It is almost 22 kilometers away from the urban area. This school offers Pre-school, primary and high-school levels. The region where the school is situated is mainly agricultural, and its main products are “yam” and “plantain”. These products have their own festivals which are kind of cultural sharing where people pay tribute to their traditions.

This institution is formally organized and has a pleasant atmosphere. The school lacks classrooms, library, labs, sports areas and teachers’ room. A total number of 957 students attend school from nearby villages and they commute by donkey, motorcycle, bike and on foot. Most of them are from low income families with many social and familiar problems.

Referring to the teachers who work in Campo Alegre School, it is noticed that all of them are graduated in education, but some of them do not have job stability. However they do their best despite the situation.

Tenth grade students with an average age of fifteen years were chosen for this study. Although some of them present difficulties during the language learning process, most of them are cooperative and dynamic and seem to be students with a great ability to interact.

Learning vocabulary has become a very demanding matter for students in this institution. It is observed that students present difficulties to retrieve many words they have already studied when trying to communicate. Furthermore, it seems to be hard for them to recognize the function of the different words and how to use them when they are taking part in an oral exchange. Besides, it is noticed that they can only produce oral communication without hesitating when they first write down and then perform or participate in the proposed activities.

The above mentioned aspect is revealed in the majority of the classroom activities which involve students’ use of oral communication. For instance, performing a conversation or a dialogue, interviewing somebody, reporting about a reading, giving opinion or simply answering teacher’s questions in the class.

2. Research Questions

- › Which Vocabulary learning strategies do 10th grade students at a public rural school from Lorica use to interact orally in class?
- › Which strategies students use are successful to produce oral interaction?
- › Which strategies are not successful to produce oral interaction?

3. Objectives

3.1 General Objective

- › To identify vocabulary learning strategies 10th grade students at a public rural school from Lorica use to interact orally in class.

3.2 Especific Objectives

- › To classify successful and not successful learning strategies students use to produce oral interaction in class.
- › To evaluate vocabulary learning strategies 10th grade students use in oral interaction.

4. Theoretical Framework

According to Read (2000) our everyday concept of vocabulary is dominated by the dictionary. We tend to think of it as an inventory of individual words with their associated meanings. This view is shared by many second language learners, who see the task of vocabulary learning as a matter memorizing long list of L2 words. However, when we look more closely at vocabulary in the light of current developments in language teaching, Read suggested that it is necessary to address a number of questions that have the effect of progressively broadening the scope of what we need to assess. Such questions could be; what is a word? What about larger lexical items? What does it mean to know a lexical item? Answering these questions we can have other opinions about what vocabulary is.

4.1 Learning Strategies

‘Language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviour, steps or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of new language; Strategies are tools for self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability’ (Oxford, 1990). In terms of communicative ability development, students usually make use of different strategies to achieve their communicative goals. It is possible to suggest that most of these strategies are related to vocabulary acquisition, conceiving vocabulary as a basic tool that gives self-confidence to students in participating in oral exchanges.

4.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Many researchers especially linguistics and language teachers have been interested in vocabulary learning strategies for a long time, it is maybe because of the need to have specific answers on how students can improve their ability to use the language, not only reading and writing but listening and speaking too.

With regard to VLS, Schmitt (2002) says, it seems that many learners use strategies for learning vocabulary especially when compared to language tasks that integrate several linguistic skills (e.g., oral presentations that involve composing the speech content, producing comprehensible pronunciation, fielding questions, etc.).

Schmitt (quoted in Coady, 1997 chapter 7, p. 217) provides a very useful overview of the rise in importance of strategy used in second language learning, noting that it grew out of an interest in the learners’ active role in the learning process, There are numerous VLS classification; however Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) propose a group that reflects the differences among vocabulary learning process:

- › Determination Strategies (DET) this can be done through guessing from one’s structural knowledge of a language, from an L1 cognate, guessing from context, or using reference material.
- › Social strategies (SOC) use interaction with other people to improve language learning.

- › Memory strategies (MEM) (traditionally known as mnemonics) involve relating the word to be retained with some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery, or grouping.
- › Cognitive strategies (COG) exhibit the common function of manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner. (Oxford, 1990, p. 43).
- › Metacognitive strategies (MET) involve a conscious overview of learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best way to study. It also includes which words are worth studying and which are not, as well as persevering with the words one chooses to learn (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997, p. 7)

In this study, the research group expects the students to use the above mentioned strategies specially the social strategies because these promote the interaction in the classroom among students and teachers.

Coady (1997) says that there have been a number of attempts to develop taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, usually as part of a piece of research into learners' strategy use. Gu and Johson (quoted in Coady, 1997, p. 217)

'developed a substantial list divided into: beliefs about vocabulary learning, metacognitive regulation, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note taking strategies, memory strategies (rehearsal), memory strategies (encoding) and activation strategies'.

Besides, Coady proposes a taxonomy which tries to separate aspects of vocabulary knowledge (what is involved in knowing a word) from sources of vocabulary knowledge and learning processes.

Despite variety of taxonomies suggested by different authors, it is decided to select Schmitt's one, because it specifies some processes observed in class, such as the use of dictionary, ask the teacher or ask a classmate, etc.

4.3 Features of Communication Activities that Encourage Vocabulary Learning

As Nation & Newton (2001) say there are different features to be considered to develop communication activities that encourage vocabulary learning:

The first one deals with the face to face nature of communication in group activities that can help the students to set their speech to suitable level for the particular listeners and to adjust it when listeners indicate a lack of understanding. Second, the meaningful context these kinds of activities generate. Third, the repetition of new items during the course of the activity, fourth, having encountered new items, learners are likely to be required to use them productively in the activity. (Long & Porter quoted in Nation & Newton 200, p. 244) consider that a group-based peer interaction typically provides a learning environment in which learners can make errors and express misunderstanding without the adverse effects of exposing their weakness to the whole class or to the teacher (Nation & Newton, 2001, p. 244).

To sum up Nation expresses the following:

There are some psycholinguistic and pedagogic reasons for integrating communication activities for improving learners' vocabulary knowledge. But whether and to what extent a learners' vocabulary knowledge will be extended through these activities is dependent on certain features of the activities themselves (Nation, T. & Newton, J. 2001, p. 244).

4.4 Oral Interaction

The final aim of any foreign language learning process is to develop on the learners abilities to communicate. However, it is thought as one most difficult aspect, because it requires some previous knowledge and current practice, which assure learners to be able to interact in the target language. Bygate (1987) considers that:

'One of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language. How this preparation is done and how successful it is, depends very much on how we as teachers understand our aims. For instance, it is obvious that in order to be able to speak a foreign language it is necessary to know a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary. By giving learners 'speaking practice' and 'oral exams' we recognize that there is a difference between knowledge about a language and skill in using it. A fundamental difference is that while both can be understood and memorized, only a skill can be imitated and practiced' (Bygate, 1987, p. 3).

According to Bygate, there are two basic ways in which something we do can be seen as a skill. First there are motor-perceptive skills, but in addition to this there are also interaction skills.

- › Motor-perceptive skill: they involve perceiving, recalling, and articulating in correct order sounds and structures of the language. It is the context-free kind of skill. Some authors discussed about it because it did not solve some learning problems, an important one is that of ensuring a satisfactory transition from supervised learning in the classroom to real life use of the skill. This transition is often called 'transfer of skills'. As Wilkins points out, if all language produced in the classroom is determined by the teacher, we are protecting the learner from the additional burden of having to make his own choices. (Bygate, 1987, p. 5).

The point is that in addition to the motor-perceptive skills there are other skills to be developed, which as Wilkins (quoted in Bygate, 1987, p. 6) says, are those of controlling one's own language production and having to make choices. This kind of skill is called 'interaction skill'. This is the skill of using knowledge and basic motor-perceptive skills to achieve communication.

- › The aspects stated above are relevant in our research because they make a difference in whether a piece of communication is carefully prepared or whether it is composed in the spur of the moment. This can affect the student's choice of words and their style. They can help to identify ways in which learners effectively use knowledge for reciprocal interaction under normal processing conditions.

It is considered that in spoken interaction, speaker and listener do not merely have to be good processors of the spoken word that also have to be able to produce coherent language in the difficult circumstances of spoken communication. It is also useful if they are good communicators, that is, good at saying what they want to say in a way which the listener finds understandable

5. Methodology

The methodology chosen for this research study is phenomenography which is a qualitative research methodology that investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience something or think about something (Marton, 1986). So, in this study, it attempts to describe the phenomenon of students' use of vocabulary learning strategies when interacting orally in class. Besides, this kind of method allows researchers to describe a group behaviour without conditioning it, giving the opportunity to analyse the data from a less subjective viewpoint. Then the focus of the phenomenon description depends on actor's experiences and in the "ways of seeing something" as experienced and described by the researcher (Bowden, 2005). Likewise, Marton (1994) suggests that as phenomenography is an empirical research, the researcher (interviewer) is not studying his or her awareness and reflection, but that of the subjects (interviewed)

Phenomenography method aims to interpret the information based on reactions and opinions in a group, in order to identify the needed information. As Van Lier (quoted in Ellis, 1997, p. 18) points out 'where confirmatory research seeks causes, interpretative research looks for reasons'. According to this, phenomenography method lets the researchers to access people's experience during social practice without intervention and permits the data to be reported with validity and reliability.

The main results of phenomenography research are categories of description of the various conceptions of the phenomenon. Enlwestle (1897) exposes that it involves identifying the conceptions and looking for their underlying meanings and the relationship between them.

5.1 Data Collection Techniques

Qualitative research depends on a variety of techniques for gathering data. The use of multiple data collection techniques contribute to the true worthiness of the data. Bearing in mind the question emerging from this study, the most suitable data collection techniques are; Observations because they allow members of the group to reflect on their interaction in class activities giving the possibility to give a feedback by themselves.

Another technique is in depth interviews, since they provide a more comfortable atmosphere for students to talk freely about the reactions and viewpoints they assume when facing oral interactions in class activities.

Likewise, it could be relevant to apply the focus group technique as, students could provide information about their vocabulary learning strategies and choices in oral activities inside class.

Observations were developed in four sessions making use of two instruments: Field- notes format and video-recordings. The first instrument was selected in order to keep an individual register of the participants' use of vocabulary learning strategies. The second instrument allowed us to make a feedback on subjects' vocabulary learning strategies choices during the activities in real time.

The in depth interview was applied following the observation stage and held in a different place outside the school in order to create a better atmosphere and to assure the quality of the audio recordings. The aim of this instrument was to go deeper into participants' opinions, conceptions and beliefs about their teacher, the subject matter and oral participation in class.

Regarding the focus group, it was carried out after designing and organizing the list of topics based on the observation from the video-recordings. The chosen place for developing this technique was a pleasant site outside the school, with the purpose of providing a confident environment for the selected participants to talk. The exercise was directed towards self-evaluating the choices made by students during the oral class activities.

After applying these techniques and instruments, we continued with the analysis of the data collected, with the aim to address questions raised at the beginning of this research study. From this information emerged two new categories, different from the priori ones.

5.2 Categories

5.2.1 Priori categories

The priori categories on which this study is based on Schmitt's taxonomy about vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), which is considered to be one of the most completed effort to create a real taxonomy in this field. However, some sub-strategies were not taken into consideration according to the study's aim. They are described below:

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	DEFINITION
Social strategies (SOC)	Ask the teacher Ask the classmate	Use interaction with others to improve language learning.
Memory strategies (MEM)	Word sound spelling Key word method Physical action Use of cognates Paraphrasing word meaning	Relate new material with the existing knowledge.
Cognitive strategies (COG)	Verbal/written repetition Note taking	Exhibit the common function of manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner.
Metacognitive strategies (MET)	Test yourself Skip/pass a new word	Strategies involve a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring or evaluating the best way to study.
Determination strategies (DET)	Consult the dictionary Use of word lists	To face the discovery of a new word's meaning without recourse to another's person expertise.

Adapted from (Schmitt, N. 1997. Vocabulary learning strategies. In N.Schmitt & M. McCarthy (Eds.), Vocabulary: Description, acquisition, and pedagogy. (p. 199-227).

5.2.2 Emergent categories

As it was mentioned above in this study, two new categories were discovered, which helped to clarify some of students choices. They are:

CATEGORIES	DEFINITION
Students' activities likes	The tendencies that students have in regarding to the different kind of classroom activities, and in which they feel more willing to participate
Students' conception about the teacher	Students' own concept about the teacher, and ways, he or she influences their participation in class.

6. Results

Regarding to question number 1 (Which vocabulary learning strategies tenth grade students at a public rural school in Lorica use to interact orally in class?), it was found, throughout the field format observation, (see appendix 1) that the selected participants tend to use some specific strategies when carrying out oral activities in class as it is shown in the following table.

In the table, it could be said that student number 3 made use of a greater range of vocabulary learning strategies, besides, it was noticed that the most used strategies were determination (consult the dictionary activity 1 and 2), social (ask teacher and ask classmate activity 1 and 2), memory (use of cognates activity 1, 2 and 3) and cognitive (verbal/ written repetition activity 1, 2 and 3). In the contrast, it is important to mention that student number 5 did not show any evidence of using vocabulary learning strategies because he/she demonstrated to be unwilling to participate in any of the three observed activities.

Concerning to the same question, the in-depth interview also revealed that students use the above mentioned strategies when communicating orally in class. For example questions 2, 6 and 7 showed meta-cognitive strategies use (see appendix 3), question 5 and 6 indicated that the participants applied memory strategies such as study word sound and spelling, key word method and use of cognates. Likewise, some questions gave clues about the development of oral skills (question 7),

ACTIVITY	Determination strategies		Social strategies		Memory strategies						Cognitive strategies		Meta-cognitive strategies	
	Consult the Dictionary	Use Word list	ask teacher	Ask classmate	Word Sound spelling	Key word method	Physical action	Use cognates	Paraphrase word meaning	Verbal-written repetition	Note taking	Test yourself	Skip/pass new word	
1	S1 S3		S3	S2		S3			S3	S3	S1 S2 S3 S4	S1 S2 S3		
2	S1 S2 S3 S4		S1 S2 S3 S4	S1 S2 S3			S1 S2 S3			S1 S2 S3				
3					S1 S2 S3 S4		S3	S3		S1 S3		S1		

and some others questions like 4, 8 and 9 helped to discover new categories (students' activity likes and teacher's influence).

Examples of these emergent categories are presented to clarify the obtained information;

› **Students' activity likes**

- Question number 4: ¿te gusta participar en la clase de Inglés? ¿en qué forma lo haces?
- Student number 4: “muy poco si no sé me da miedo, te quedas callada. Salir al tablero”.
- Student number 3: “si me encanta, me doy cuenta cuán importante es, y como lo manejo. En las actividades como frases, diálogos, preguntas en Inglés, otras en donde se necesita expresarse”
- Student number 5: No casi, en actividades escritas y en el tablero”. (See appendix 2 and 3).

The answers show that the participants have differences in their activity's likes. However it is noticed that students 4 and 5 tend to prefer written activities rather than oral ones.

› **Students' conception about the teacher:**

- Question number 8: ¿Qué opinión tienes de tu profesor de Inglés?
- Student number 2: “explica, sabe lo que dice, dinámico, busca la forma para que entiendan”
- Student number 4: “enseña, que pone todo para que aprendamos, a pesar de que es inglés no la hace aburrida”
- Student number 3: “en mi opinión le gusta enseñar en forma divertida, es muy dinámico”.

In general, it can be said that the students possess a good opinion and conception about their teacher and his/her teaching practices, so it is seemed to be an important element promoting class participation.

The application of the in-depth interview also allowed us to corroborate the students' use of some vocabulary strategies that are held as prior categories. We have taken some examples to illustrate the findings.

› **Meta-cognitive strategies: (test yourself)**

- Question number 2: ¡Teniendo en cuenta ese tiempo!
¿Cómo crees que es tu manejo de vocabulario para usarlo en las actividades orales que se te proponen en clase?
- Student number 3: bueno necesito mucha ayuda, pero no tengo muchas dificultades y pienso que es bueno.
- Student number 1: es bueno, no tan excelente, lo que no entiendo le pregunta a el teacher.
- Student number 2: regular, más o menos, las palabras que están el texto o en la historia.

In terms of this category, it could be stated that although students do not make use of technical vocabulary to express their own knowledge about their use and control over vocabulary in oral activities, it is possible to see that they can evaluate their level about vocabulary's manage.

› **Meta-cognitive strategies: (skip/pass a new word)**

- Question number 7: ¿Cómo haces para hacerte entender?
- Student number 4: corregir lo que dije mal, busco y la corrijo para decirla bien, si no la dejo así.
- Student number 3: utilizo palabras más cotidianas, que se utilicen más en mí entorno y de manera más breve.

Throughout these answers, we can interpret that the subjects are conscious to avoid the use of some words that they think are difficult for the listener, so they change them for other common words.

› **Memory strategies: (study word sound and spelling)**

- Question number 5: ¿Cómo te sientes cuando tienes que participar en una actividad oral?
- Student number 3: principalmente nerviosa, pero estoy segura de lo que voy a decir y participo.

In regard with this category, only one of the participants showed awareness of its use, but in a very vague way. Nevertheless, it is significant for us because it consolidated the information gathered during the observation process.

› In the same vein, **Memory strategies: (keyword method and use of cognates)**

- Question number 6: ¿cómo te sientes cuando al participar en una actividad oral no logras que te entiendan lo que quieres decir?
- Student number 1: me siento aterrada, pongo vocabulario más entendible, más básicos.
- Student number 3: que todo ha sido un fracaso, necesito más práctica y especificar lo que voy a decir.
- Student number 2: nerviosa, con rabia porque creo que no me prestan atención, que no estas explicando bien, no encuentro la palabra que quiero expresar.

Here it was found that participants seek to look for options in vocabulary when they are involved in any oral exchange, like trying to use meaningful words or cognates in order to be understood by the listener.

› **Social strategies: (ask teacher)**

- Question number 7: ¿Cómo haces para hacerte entender?
- Student number 2: “le pido ayuda al profesor”.

Referring to social strategies, specially ask teacher, it can be seen that it is a consistent category that is commonly used by the participants. However, it is also perceived that only few of them are aware of it. Moreover, it is observed that participant number 2 is the one who tends to use it more.

› **Interaction Skills**

- Question number 7: ¿Cómo haces para hacerte entender?
- Student number 4: “corregir lo que dije mal, busco y la corrijo para decirla bien, Si no se la dejo así”.

- Student number 3: “utilizo palabras más cotidianas, que se utilicen más en mi entorno, y de manera más breve.

In this priori category, it was detected that the participants have the notion of what is wrong and try to correct themselves in order to develop a successful performance in class activities. (See appendix 2 and 3).

7. Discussion

This research study explored the tenth grade students' use of vocabulary learning strategies to interact orally in class. The participants were observed during different class activities, later on they were interviewed to determine their beliefs and conceptions about English learning. They also participated in a focus group interview, in which they were asked about their reasons of some vocabulary choices in class activities.

The obtained results show us that the participants apply a great variety of vocabulary learning strategies in order to cope with the difficulties that appear during an oral exchange in class. It could be said that not all of them were successful, for example, determination strategies specially list of words which do not promote real interaction, since it needs to interrupt the communication while looking for the required word to be understood.

On the other hand, there are some strategies which seem to enrich the oral interaction, because they help the students to adjust his/her vocabulary to be successful in his/her communication. For instance, social strategies (ask teacher and ask a classmate) seem to be a first hand source when the students want to continue with their oral exchange, as they allow a reciprocal feedback in the same time they are talking.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, social strategies (ask teacher & ask a classmate) seem to be the most favoured strategies to enrich oral interaction, because they help the students to adjust their vocabulary in the different activities to be successful in their communication.

On the contrary, determination strategies, especially list of words appear to be not successful in helping participants to interact orally in class activities, since it is needed to interrupt the communication while they looking for the required word to continue the interchange and being understood.

Finally, two new categories emerged from the application of the instruments, students' activities likes which demonstrates that learners are still afraid of interacting orally in the classroom because of their lack of vocabulary, and that they prefer written activities rather than oral ones. Another emergent category is students' conception about the teacher, which consolidated that social strategies are predominant in our context. In case of promoting students' class participation, the conception students possess about their teacher could be an important factor that can give them self-confidence or not to participate more in class.

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