

Learning Vocabulary in L2 Contexts: Theoretical Assumptions and Implications

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Abstract

Learning vocabulary is one of the challenges second language learners face. One way to facilitate learners is to assist them in becoming independent and autonomous learners in vocabulary learning. This can be achieved by instructing learners to apply vocabulary learning strategies as efficiently as possible. The main aim of this paper is to suggest a framework for training ESL learners in vocabulary learning strategies. In doing so, an analysis of different taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies theorised by various strategy experts and a rationale for strategy training has been presented for review and consideration. Though this paper is descriptive, vocabulary learning strategy experts' views have also been incorporated into this paper to present a practical and insightful approach.

Keywords: Vocabulary, lexical, strategy, style, taxonomies.

Introduction

Vocabulary is central to language and it is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they denote objects, actions and

ideas without which learners cannot convey any intended meaning. The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in L_2 learning has been recently recognized by theorists and researchers in the field. Accordingly, many of the approaches, techniques, exercises and practices have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary (Hatch & Brown, 1995). It has also been suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping learners with strategies necessary to expand their vocabulary knowledge (Hulstijn, 1993, cited in Morin & Goebel, 2001).

Vocabulary learning strategies are part of language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies (Nation, 2001). Language learning strategies encourage greater overall self-direction for learners. Self-directed learners are independent and intrinsically motivated; they are capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning and they gradually gain confidence, involvement and proficiency (Oxford, 1990); it is the case with vocabulary learning strategies as well. Thus, students need training in vocabulary learning strategies they need most. Research has shown that many learners do use many strategies to learn vocabulary particularly when compared to such integrated tasks such as listening and speaking but they are most motivated to use basic vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997). This, in turn, makes strategy instruction an essential component of any L_2 program. Hence, based on the significance attributed to vocabulary learning strategies in the process of vocabulary learning and enhancement, this paper aims at proposing a framework for vocabulary strategy instruction in English as an L_2 context.

To this end, a brief account of various taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies and a rationale for training

students in vocabulary learning strategies are initially presented for reference. Then, some required considerations to be taken before initiating strategy training as well as the techniques for training ESL students in vocabulary learning strategies have been presented. Finally, some pedagogical implications are proposed for ESL teachers so that they can integrate such insight.

Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Knowledge of words (lexis) is an essential component of communicative competence (Seal, 1991), and it is important for production and comprehension in an L_2 . Knowing a word involves knowing:

- about its frequency of use, syntactic and situational limitations on its use,
- its underlying form and the forms that can be derived from it,
- the network of its semantic features and
- the different meanings associated with the item (Richards, 1976).

Knowing a word is considered as knowing its spelling, applied and standard pronunciation, collocations and appropriateness (Nation, 1990). Therefore, lexical competence is far more than the ability to define a given number of words and covers a wide range of knowledge which in turn requires a variety of strategies to gain that knowledge. L_2 learners may incorporate various strategies to acquire the knowledge of words. Taking this into consideration, L_2 researchers have made various attempts to classify vocabulary learning strategies employed by L_2 learners. Instances of such

classifications are the taxonomies proposed by Gu and Johnson (1996), Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001) and they have briefly been discussed below.

Gu and Johnson (1996) categorise L₂ vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Metacognitive strategies consist of selective attention and self-initiation strategies. L₂ learners who employ selective attention strategies know which words are important for them to learn and are essential for adequate comprehension of any discourse. Learners employing self-initiation strategies use a variety of means to make the meaning of vocabulary items clear. Cognitive strategies in Gu and Johnson's taxonomy consist of guessing strategies, use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. Learners using guessing strategies use their schema and linguistic clues like the grammatical structure of a sentence to infer the meaning of a word. Memory strategies are classified into rehearsal and encoding categories. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies cover such strategies as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as the structure of words (morphological analysis). Activation strategies include those strategies through which learners actually use new words in new and different co-linguistic contexts. For instance, learners may form sentences using the words they have already learned. All these suggested strategies can briefly be summarized as:

Strategies			
Metacognitive	Cognitive	Memory	Activation
Selective Attention: Identifying essential words for comprehension	Guessing: Activating background knowledge, using linguistic items	Rehearsal: Word lists, repetition, etc. Encoding: Association (imagery, visual, auditory, etc.)	Using new words in different contexts
Self-initiation: Using a variety of means to make the meaning of words clear	Use of dictionaries Note-taking		

Schmitt (1997) developed a comprehensive inventory of vocabulary learning strategies. He classifies the strategies into two groups: (1) the ones to determine the meaning of new words when encountered for the first time, and (2) the ones to consolidate meaning when encountered them again. The former contains determination and social strategies and the latter contains cognitive, metacognitive, memory and social strategies. Schmitt (1997) includes social strategies in categories since they can be used for the two purposes. To Schmitt, determination strategies are used when learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience" (p. 205). Hence, learners try to discover the meaning of new words by guessing them in the co-linguistic context, structural knowledge of the language, and reference materials. For Schmitt, the second way to discover a new meaning is through employing the social strategies of asking someone for help with unfamiliar words. Besides the initial discovery of a word, learners need to use a variety of strategies to practise and internalize vocabulary. Learners thus, for example, use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to consolidate the newly learnt vocabulary.

Cooperative group learning through which learners study and practice the meaning of new words in a group is an

instance of social strategies for consolidating a word. Memory strategies, known as mnemonics, involve relating the word with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of mental picture or grouping. Cognitive strategies in this taxonomy are similar to memory strategies but they are not focused on manipulative mental processing. They include repetition and using mechanical means such as word lists, flash cards, and vocabulary notebooks to learn words. Finally, metacognitive strategies in Schmitt's taxonomy are defined as strategies used by learners to control and evaluate their own learning having an overview of the learning process in general. Testing oneself is an instance of metacognitive strategies which provides input to the effectiveness of one's choice of learning strategies, providing positive reinforcement if progress is being made or a signal to switch strategies if it is not" (Schmitt, p. 216).

In a more recent study, Nation (2001) proposes a new taxonomy of various vocabulary learning strategies. The strategies in the taxonomy are divided into three general classes of 'planning', 'source' and 'processes', each of which is divided into a subset of key strategies. The taxonomy separates different aspects of vocabulary knowledge (i.e., what is involved in knowing a word). The first category (i.e., planning) involves deciding on where, how and how often to focus attention on a vocabulary item. The strategies in this category entail choosing words, aspects of word knowledge and strategies as well as planning repetition. The second category in Nation's taxonomy involves getting information about the word. This information may include all the aspects involved in knowing a word. It can come from the form of words itself, from the context, from a reference source like dictionaries or glossaries and from analogies and cognates

from other languages. Process is the last category in Nation's (2001) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. It includes establishing word knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies.

To Nation, noticing involves seeing the vocabulary item to be learned. Strategies at this level include writing the word in a vocabulary notebook or list; putting the word onto a word card and orally and visually repeating the word. He maintains that although these strategies are all of the recording types, they are useful steps resulting in the deeper processing of words. Retrieval involves recalling the items met previously. It contains recalling knowledge in the same way it was originally stored. Generating strategies include attaching new aspects of knowledge to what is known through instantiation (i.e., visualizing examples of words), word analysis, semantic mapping and using scales and grids (Nation, 2001, p. 222). Generating strategies include rule-driven generation, as well; such as creating context, collocations and sentences containing the new word. In addition, the mnemonic strategies and using the word in different co-linguistic contexts through four skills are termed as generating strategies.

In general, although the taxonomies cited and described above may slightly vary in terms of the strategies they categorize, they all provide a list of widely applicable vocabulary learning strategies, for example. There are many words on which teachers may not be able to spend time within the allocated class time. Thus, if students are equipped with at least a decent number of strategies mentioned in the taxonomies, they can deal with these words on their own and as a result, they may have access to a large number of target language words.

A Rationale for Vocabulary Learning Strategy Training

It has been suggested that one way to accelerate the learning of an L₂ is to teach learners how to learn more efficiently and effectively. In order to achieve this, teachers are recommended to train their learners in different learning strategies. Learning strategy instruction can help L₂ learners become better learners. In addition, skills in using learning strategies help students in becoming independent and confident learners (Chamot, 1999, p.1). Research insight has shown that there is a relationship between strategy use and success in L₂ learning. For instance, Cohen and Aphek (1981, cited in Chamot, 2001) taught students of Hebrew to remember vocabulary items by making paired mnemonic associations and found that those who made associations remembered vocabulary more effectively than those who did not.

In another attempt, Sanaoui (1995) did a survey to show the relationship between vocabulary strategy use and success in acquiring and retaining vocabulary items. The survey showed that adult learners of L₂ vocabulary were likely to fall into two categories: Those who adopted a structured approach to their learning and those who did not. Learners in the first group took control of their vocabulary learning. They did not simply rely on what the language course provided them with. They used their own initiative in regularly creating opportunities for vocabulary learning by listening to the radio, watching movies, reading and using self-study. They kept systematic records of vocabulary they learned by using vocabulary notebooks and lists. They reviewed what they had done several times a week.

However, the learners in the second group who followed the unstructured approach relied on the course material. They made lists of vocabulary items, but they did not review them and they occasionally lost them. Sanaoui concluded that students who had a structured learning approach were more successful in retaining the vocabulary items taught in their classrooms than the learners who had an unstructured approach. The research suggests that helping learners gain control over processes for managing their own lexis is an important task in vocabulary learning and teaching in L₂ classrooms.

Thus, while reading literature, one encounters hard evidence that strategy use will result in effective vocabulary acquisition and recall. This, in turn, justifies why teachers should consider strategy training. Moreover, the significance of strategy training is pointed out even by strategy experts who believe that co-linguistic context is a major source of vocabulary learning. These scholars have expressed their concern over how well students can handle context on their own. Therefore, they have emphasized the teaching of specific learning strategies to students so that they can effectively learn from context (Coady, 1997).

Strategy Training: Some considerations

Before any strategy training can be done, several issues need to be addressed: First, teachers need to know what strategies and in particular what combination of strategies should be taught. Second, the learning strategies known and preferred by learners should be identified and considered. Third, some learners may need to be convinced that strategy training is to their own advantage (Ellis, 1994). Fourth, after deciding what strategies to give attention to, teachers should

decide how much time to spend on training learners in strategy use, and they should work out a syllabus for each strategy that covers the required knowledge and provides enough independent practice (Nation, 2001). Fifth, when considering which vocabulary learning strategies to recommend to students, teachers should notice not to take strategies as good.

Teachers should know that effectiveness depends on the context in which strategies are used (Schmitt, 1997). The effectiveness with which learning strategies can be both taught and used depends on such variables as iproficiency level, task difficulty, language modality, background knowledge, the context of learning, target language and learner characteristics” (Chamot & Rubin, 1994). Finally, teachers should bear in mind that learners need to understand the goal of each strategy and the conditions under which it works. Learners also need the practice to feel confident and proficient in using strategies. Therefore, teachers should provide time for strategy training (Nation, 2001). After these issues are settled, teachers can implement an appropriate framework for training students in using strategies. Discussed below are some examples of such frameworks which seem to fit ESL contexts.

A Framework for Vocabulary Learning Strategy Training

Recommending a fixed framework for strategy training does not seem to be practical as it was already pointed out that a number of variables like learners’ proficiency level, language modality, task and texts may have an impact on the effectiveness of strategies that can be taught. Thus, what follows is a number of options which ESL teachers can have access to but they need to be sequenced in an appropriate way to fit them into the classroom.

Teachers should decide which strategies to give priority to and how much time they need to spend on strategy training. In order to have an idea of the strategies learners need and the ones they currently use, students should be asked to draw up a list of strategies they employ to learn words in groups. They can report their lists to the class. The students and the teacher can then, collaboratively construct a list of strategies they employ. After this brainstorming session, the teacher can decide what strategies learners lack and need most. The teacher should model the strategy for the learners. Then, the steps in the strategy should be practised separately. Learners can be requested to apply the strategy in pairs while helping each other. They may report back on the application of the steps. The teacher monitors and provides feedback on learners’ control of the strategies. She also tests learners on strategy use and gives them feedback. Learners report on the difficulty and success in using the strategy outside the classroom and they ask for teachers’ help and advice on their use of strategy (Nation, 2001).

Learners should be given opportunities to examine the effectiveness of their vocabulary coping strategies. For instance, in activities like guessing from the linguistic context, teachers can see what learners do (Porte, 1988), and learners can assess how effectively they can apply the inference strategies they were taught. Moreover, teachers should be aware of the interaction between learners’ awareness of their own learning style and their ability to take charge of their own learning. Teachers have two options at their disposal to foster this interaction: they can provide learners with opportunities to do different vocabulary exercises. This will, in turn, expose them to different strategies, and learners will discover which one is right for them. Teachers can provide learners with

questionnaires to help them gain insight into what strategies are suitable for them. The questionnaire might include such questions as "Do I learn vocabulary easily while doing speaking activities with my friends? Am I comfortable with analysing parts of words (morphological analyses)? Does it work better for me to collect words on index cards or make lists of words?" (Sokmen, 1997, p. 256).

Teachers should also recognize that some typical vocabulary learning strategies such as using notebooks, dictionary and expansion exercises like semantic mapping are beneficial and can be introduced as early as they can. Learners can write the words they encounter on their vocabulary notebooks and add L_2 - L_1 translations or other knowledge they gradually acquire about words such as collocations, semantic associations, roots and derivations. Learners can be reminded to go through their notebooks often in order to add more information and rehearse what they already recorded. (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). The vocabulary notebooks could then serve as a valuable resource, for example.

Semantic mapping is also a useful strategy that can be introduced to learners at any level of proficiency. Semantic mapping involves drawing a diagram of the relationships between words according to their use in a particular text. It has the effect of bringing relationships in a text to consciousness for the purpose of deepening the understanding of a text and creating associative networks for words. It is best introduced as a collaborative effort between the teacher and the class (Stahl & Vancil, 1986, cited in Nation and Newton, 1997). Such a diagram visually shows how ideas fit together. This strategy incorporates a variety of memory strategies like grouping, using imagery, associating and elaborating and it is important for improving memory and comprehension of new

vocabulary items (Oxford, 1990, p. 62). In guided semantic mapping, learners work with the teacher to develop a semantic map around a topic; the teacher deliberately introduces several target vocabulary items and puts them on the map as well as elaborating on them with the learners who can then use the semantic map to do a piece of writing. If the writing is done in groups, one learner from each group may be assigned as a monitor to ensure that the target words are used (Nation, 2001). In general, teachers need to decide what framework and strategies they should choose to focus on based on their students' needs, learning styles, proficiency level as well as the requirements of the task. Thus, frameworks are not fixed and they can vary from context to context.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications for ESL Teachers

In the present paper, it was argued that vocabulary is an important aspect of language and vocabulary learning is central to L_2 learning. Language learners need a wide repertoire of target language words to be able to handle production and comprehension activities in the L_2 . One way to help learners to enhance their knowledge of L_2 vocabulary is through training learners with a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. Different taxonomies have thus been proposed, and some were discussed in this paper. The significance attributed to vocabulary learning strategies and to training students in those strategies may have the following implications for ESL teachers.

Teachers should think of ways to provide less successful learners with vocabulary learning strategies. This should be done by making them aware of the need to become independent learners by recognizing the strategies they

possess and those they lack. Learner's attention should also be directed toward the strategies successful learners benefit from. ESL teachers should make learners practice a range of vocabulary learning strategies ranging from decontextualized and mechanical strategies to contextualized ones. This enables learners to deal with any unknown vocabulary they may encounter in and out of the classroom. Teachers need to bear in mind that individual learners may vary on the basis of which strategies they consider more useful and they apply frequently. Thus, teachers may first need to have an appraisal of learner's beliefs regarding vocabulary learning strategies and then try to help them gradually realize the value of other types of strategies as well.

In conclusion, it can be concluded that learning new lexis is a challenge to L₂ learners but they can overcome such difficulties by learning a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. Learners should then be trained in strategies they. In order to achieve these, teachers should consider L₂ learners' willingness and readiness to receive training and think of the most appropriate ways of introducing strategies.

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