Learning Vocabulary

Suggestions for giving proper attention to the teaching and learning of English vocabulary in Vietnamese contexts.

A close look at the currently prescribed curriculum for teaching English in Vietnam shows that there is little emphasis on vocabulary. Class time is allocated primarily to the four basic skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Vocabulary is considered to be integrated and included in other subjects. As a result, it is sometimes neglected or taught randomly.

However, all English learners need vocabulary to communicate in all forms of the language. Zimmerman, an American second language vocabulary acquisition researcher, in her doctoral dissertation points out that meaning is the heart of language, and that nothing is more fundamental to meaning than vocabulary.

Given this fact, should learning vocabulary be allowed to “take care of itself”? Nation asserts: “There are very strong reasons for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both the teachers and the learners” (p. 1). I agree that the teaching and learning of vocabulary deserves greater attention from classroom instructors, students, and curriculum designers and writers. This article, as a call to pay due attention to the teaching and learning of vocabulary at every level in English education in Vietnam, sets out to give a rationale for the importance of teaching vocabulary, and to discuss ways of enlarging and developing students’ vocabulary.

Vocabulary and Learning English

Vocabulary is an essential element of language. Whether in speaking or writing, learners need vocabulary to communicate and understand others. When learning English, students to some extent go through a process which resembles the way children learn their mother tongues. They start with small chunks of language and move on to larger units, such as phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. The basic components, or building blocks, of all these language elements are words—vocabulary. In many cases, learners produce ungrammatical sentences, but they can still get their message across if they use key words appropriately. In other cases, learners may feel uncomfortable because they fail to employ certain words, or do not know the words needed to be able to express themselves. Unlike native speakers, second language learners are unable to absorb new vocabulary from a natural, English-speaking environment. They acquire language mostly by learning at school, and their success very much depends on their own efforts and learning techniques. Since vocabulary is a foundation of language, and because the means for acquiring it are limited, vocabulary development deserves greater attention in the process of language learning.

Vocabulary is not only indispensable for personal communication, but also for academic study. In fact, many standardized tests in Vietnam require a knowledge of vocabulary. The Vietnamese national exam for high school graduation, as well as most university entrance examinations for English majors, contain a portion which tests vocabulary. International tests such as the Cambridge Proficiency Examination, the TOEFL, and others also include a section on vocabulary. Even if a test does not contain a vocabulary section—as is the case with the IELTS—test-takers definitely need a large vocabulary to comprehend other parts of the exam, and to be able to interpret what they are required to do. Students in non-English majors often find it hard to learn English or to pass English tests because of their limited vocabulary. All this shows that to succeed in studying English, learners must give high priority to developing their vocabulary.

Vocabulary and the Classroom

Vietnamese learners of English might consider learning vocabulary boring if required to memorize lists of words that they do not need in daily use. In fact, most words learned contribute to learners’ passive, or receptive, vocabulary, which is used for word recognition in reading and listening (Nation). So it is true that learning vocabulary may have more value for future use than for immediate practice. This does not mean,
however, that learning vocabulary should be down-played in the classroom, or that it must be boring. On the contrary, teachers need to seek creative ways to motivate learners in this area. One way to do so is to help them use new words—to make input become intake. After introducing new words by asking students to guess meanings in context, or after giving definitions with examples, diagrams, or pictures, a teacher might ask students to paraphrase the content of a text, to discuss the issues in a text, or to write a short paragraph using the words introduced in the lesson. When learners can use new words in their own speech or writing, the new words have become intake. Through this process, learners become aware of meanings and usages, and retain them more effectively.

Schmitt and Schmitt point out in their research that learners acquire vocabulary incrementally, or gradually. In this sense, providing students with a list of new words and asking them to simply repeat them or memorize them may not help at all with actual language acquisition. It takes learners a great deal of time to learn all the new words in a lesson. To help them develop better vocabulary-learning techniques, instead of asking them just to memorize new words, a teacher should provide them with words in context. This approach raises learners’ awareness about how to take advantage of context clues to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words. In addition, a classroom teacher can provide practice with games, such as vocabulary bingo. Another example is a game in which learners find synonyms or antonyms of words and match them up in a way similar to dominoes. Using a variety of teaching methods helps teachers and learners make the most of time spent on studying vocabulary.

Enlarging Vocabulary

Reading Clubs

Very often we hear of English speaking clubs. This activity helps learners with social interaction and the development of interpersonal communication skills. Organized in the same way, a reading club would offer English learners the chance to exchange knowledge obtained from reading books. In addition, through this kind of reading, learners consciously and subconsciously acquire new vocabulary used in the books. Club members might discuss the content or any other features of the books. By retelling stories, paraphrasing ideas, or critiquing a poem, for example, learners will remember the words they have read. According to many second language acquisition researchers, such a non-threatening and relaxing learning environment enhances the language acquisition process. More specifically, the acquisition of vocabulary is accelerated. Zimmerman agrees that interactive vocabulary learning can lead to gains in vocabulary knowledge. A reading club benefits students because it provides a context where language input, output, and interaction facilitate learning vocabulary. In addition, a reading club can increase motivation, if the books chosen reflect common interests or popular topics. Even if club members decide to read only certain authors or styles, this type of narrow reading, according to Krashen, still seems to provide learners with rich input.

Students of majors other than English should do more academic reading to build a vocabulary, since there is a strong correlation between how much people read and how many words they know (Parry, p. 649). Students in the same academic major should probably choose certain materials relevant to their field of study to read and discuss. Teachers could encourage this by holding reading contests.

Word Knowledge Development

Knowledge of vocabulary does not mean only understanding the meanings and usages of words, but also knowing their derivatives. For example, derivatives of “demonstrate” include: “demonstration,” “demonstrative,” and “demonstrator.” Learners might think that if they know a word then they can use all its derivatives, but unfortunately they are often wrong. To learn derivatives and their appropriate uses takes time and effort. As mentioned above, word knowledge development is an incremental process. Generally, learners first acquire nouns and verbs, then adjectives and adverbs. Word knowledge also includes an understanding of word collocation, that is, of which words can regularly be used together. For instance, one says “tell a story” not “say a story,” “yellow chicken” but not “blond chicken,” or “strong tea” instead of “heavy tea.” English textbooks often seem to ignore the development of this sort of word knowledge.

Examining textbooks currently on the market in Vietnam, one can easily recognize that vocabulary is a very small part of what is studied, and that the wider development of word knowledge is often ignored. Therefore, it definitely falls to classroom teachers to make additions to texts and changes in teaching.
methods in order to help enlarge learners’ word knowledge. According to Schmitt, a word knowledge framework can be used if EFL learners aspire to native-like proficiency in word use. If that is the case, the kinds of word knowledge that must be acquired include:

• a word’s spoken form.
• a word’s written form.
• a word’s part-of-speech derivative forms and grammatical patterns.
• a word’s collocations.
• how frequently a word is used.
• stylistic constraints which determine if a word is appropriate in a particular context.
• a word’s conceptual meaning(s).
• a word’s semantic network of associations.

Conclusion

In summary, no one can deny that if active language learners have a large vocabulary, they will improve their language proficiency. If given due attention, whether individually or collectively, the teaching and learning of vocabulary will help learners develop all their language skills and holistically improve their knowledge of English.

References


What we become depends on what we read after all of the professors have finished with us. The greatest university of all is a collection of books.

— Thomas Carlyle