

# PROMOTING STUDENTS' VOCABULARY REPERTOIRE

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning vocabulary is essential in language learning. The size of a one's vocabulary correlates strongly with one's other linguistic competences in the target language. Therefore, vocabulary has long been the interest of a lot of scholars, and much work has been done on vocabulary and vocabulary testing. In this paper, I attempt to explore the ways to promote students' vocabulary growth. I will examine what kinds of vocabulary instruction can improve students' acquisition of word meanings and analyze different kinds of vocabulary tests that teachers can use to support students' vocabulary growth.

## II. RATIONALE

As we know, vocabulary size plays an important role in all four skills of language competence, i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing. According to Read (2000), it is necessary in the sense that words are the basic building blocks of language, the unit of meaning from which larger structures such as sentences, paragraphs and whole texts are formed. Thus, vocabulary can be seen as a priority area in language teaching. For learners, acquisition of vocabulary is a demanding process. Even at an advanced level, learners are aware of limitations in their knowledge of L2 words. They experience lexical gaps. Language teachers and researchers have recognized the importance of vocabulary learning and have been exploring ways of promoting it more effectively.

In addition, from my personal case, many students of mine have complained that on one hand they cannot remember new words and even when they know the word, they do not know how to use it on the other hand. I think it is a universal problem for most language learners, especially for students at low levels. The first problem, from my point of view, is primarily due to the lack of teachers' checking the previous lessons at university, so students tend to neglect to study or review their previous lessons. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers need to monitor the learners' progress in vocabulary learning, and vocabulary testing is a useful tool. For the latter issue, I suppose improvements in teachers' instructions can help enhance students' vocabulary knowledge.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Vocabulary Instruction

According to Nagy (2005), effective vocabulary instruction must be multifaceted, encompassing: teaching individual word; extensive exposure to rich language, both oral and written; and building generative word knowledge.

#### *Teaching individual words*

Teaching individual words is what commonly comes to mind when we talk about vocabulary instruction. A number of studies have shown that for vocabulary instruction to increase the comprehension, it must be fairly intensive (e.g., Mc Keown et al., 1985; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986 as quoted in Nagy, 2005). Intensive or rich vocabulary instruction requires giving students both definitional and contextual information (i.e., information about what a word means and about how it is used), and providing them with opportunities to process this information deeply by applying it in ways that require creativity and connections with their existing knowledge.

Vocabulary instruction is thus rather labor intensive. Only a portion of the words that students need to learn can be covered with such instruction. Some words must necessarily be dealt with more superficially. This brings us to the other two components of effective vocabulary instruction, extensive exposure to rich language and building generative world knowledge.

### *Exposure to rich language*

Extensive exposure to both oral and written language is likewise essential to effective instruction. Wide reading is the primary engine that drives vocabulary growth for older, more able learners. However for young and for less able learners, experiences with rich oral language are critical for vocabulary growth (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Biemiller, 1999 as quoted in Nagy, 2005). Therefore, if they are to have any chance of acquiring sufficient vocabulary knowledge to get meaning from text, their teachers must make effective use of classroom activities such as reading aloud, storytelling, pretend play, and even routine classroom conversations, to promote oral vocabulary growth.

The need for exposure to rich language is especially acute for older, less able learners who tend to have limited vocabularies. Although increasing such students' ability and motivation is essential, teachers must also find ways to use oral language as a means of increasing their vocabularies.

Many researchers believe that a substantial proportion of vocabulary growth occurs as learners gradually learn the meanings of new words through repeated encounters with the words in text or in conversation. A review of the research on learning words from context indicates that the chances of learning the meaning of a particular word after encountering it once in context are relatively low, somewhere around 15% (Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999 as quoted in Nagy, 2005). Exposure to rich language is essential for promoting vocabulary growth, but the benefits of such exposure accumulate slowly.

### *Generative word knowledge*

Generative word knowledge is vocabulary knowledge that can transfer to the learning of new words. There is a tendency to think of vocabulary knowledge as consisting of isolated, memorized information about the meanings of specific words, but such conception is clearly inadequate. A variety of types of knowledge about words contribute to word learning. Most obviously, there are word-learning strategies, such as the use of context and word parts that can be taught to students to make them better word learners (e.g., Edwards, Font, Baumann, & Boland, 2004 as quoted in Nagy, 2005).

An effective approach to vocabulary instruction should address all three of these components – teaching individual word, exposure to rich language, and generative word knowledge (Graves, 2000 as quoted in Nagy, 2005). In fact there are a number of instructional interventions that attempt to do so. For example, Beck and McKeown's Text Talk is a very promising example of a comprehensive approach to vocabulary growth for younger students (Beck & McKeown, 2001; McKeown & Beck, 2003 as quoted in Nagy, 2005). Likewise the Vocabulary Enrichment Program described by Foorman, Seals, Anthony, and Pollard-Duradola (2003 as quoted in Nagy, 2005) is a comprehensive approach.

### **Vocabulary Testing**

Although there has been some interest shown in vocabulary testing throughout the twentieth century (Sims, 1929; Cronbach, 1943; Dale, 1965; Perkins and Linnville, 1987 as quoted in Schmitt, 1994), the recent surge of attention in vocabulary studies (Meara, 1987; Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Coady, 1993 as quoted in Schmitt, 1994) has given impetus to several fresh testing approaches. Although vocabulary achievement tests (tests which measure whether students have learned the words which they were taught in a class or course) remain largely unchanged, improved testing methods have been developed to measure vocabulary size. Perhaps more importantly, work is beginning on an emerging area of vocabulary testing - measuring how well individual words are learned (depth of knowledge), as opposed to the traditional way of testing.

In addition, according to Nation & Chung (2009), a well-planned vocabulary component of a language course has the following features: it focuses on the appropriate level of vocabulary, it provides a balanced range of opportunities for learning, and it monitors and assesses the learners' vocabulary knowledge in useful ways. Put another way, a well-planned program answers these questions: What vocabulary? How should vocabulary be taught and learned? How should vocabulary knowledge and growth be assessed?

### ***What vocabulary?***

An important step in planning the vocabulary component of a language course is deciding what vocabulary goals to set. A useful way of doing this is to find out how much vocabulary is needed to do certain tasks without assistance. A way to increase the efficiency of the vocabulary focus is to make use of specially designed vocabulary lists. A common way to do this is to distinguish four vocabulary levels: high-frequency, academic, technical, and low-frequency words.

Focusing on individual words has been criticized in course design because words often do not make much sense unless they are in phrases or larger units. Also, learning words in multi-word units means that they are learned with the collocations and grammar with which they need to be used.

There are four major productive effects of learning multi-word units.

1. Learners will be able to produce grammatically correct utterances.
2. Learners will be able to produce utterances that are nativelike.
3. Learners will be able to produce utterances fluently.
4. Learners will be able to communicate very early in their language learning.

### ***How should vocabulary be taught and learned?***

One way to make sure that opportunities for vocabulary learning are properly balanced in a course is to see that there is a roughly even allocation of learning activities to each of the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development (Nation, 2007 as quoted in Nation & Chung, 2009). Each strand should receive about the same amount of time in a well-balanced course.

### ***How should vocabulary knowledge be monitored and assessed?***

Vocabulary testing can be used to see what level of vocabulary learners should be focusing on (a diagnostic goal), to see how much vocabulary learners know and how well they know it (a proficiency goal), and to see what vocabulary they have recently learned and how well they have learned it (an achievement goal).

Vocabulary proficiency testing has typically involved the measurement of vocabulary size, but there are now innovative approaches to measuring how well vocabulary is known and how diverse a vocabulary learners actually use. The distinction between how many words are known and how well they are known has been described as the distinction between breadth of vocabulary knowledge and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Read (2004 as quoted in Nation & Chung, 2009) has usefully distinguished between several meanings of depth – precision of meaning, comprehensive word knowledge, and network knowledge. Read's (1993, 2000, pp. 180 - 6 as quoted in Nation & Chung, 2009) Vocabulary Associates Test is a well-researched example of a network knowledge measure. It involves items like the following, where learners need to choose elements of meaning and collocates of the test item. Each item involves choosing four words out of the eight provided.

Example:

(A) logical (B) healthy (C) bold (D) solid (E) snow (F) temperature (G) sleep (H) dance

For vocabulary achievement testing, Laufer and her colleagues (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Laufer et al., 2004 as quoted in Nation & Chung, 2009) examined four kinds of tests that can be used in both monolingual and bilingual versions.

1. Active recall (supplying a form for a given meaning; the first letter of the tested word is given to prevent learners from supplying non-target words)

Turn into water

m \_\_\_\_\_

2. Passive recall (supplying the meaning for a given form; the first letter of the translation is given)

When something melts it turns into \_\_\_\_\_.

Translate the following words into Indonesian.

melt

3. Active recognition (choosing the target word form from four options)

Turn into water

- a. elect                      b. blame                      c. melt                      d. threaten

Select the correct translation for the following words.

mencairkan

- a. elect                      b. blame                      c. melt                      d. threaten

4 Passive recognition (choosing the meaning of the target word from four options)

Melt

- a. choose                      b. accuse                      c. make threats                      d. turn into water

Melt

- a. menolong                      b. mencairkan                      c. memeriksa                      d. memandang

In the two studies, Laufer et al. found:

1. There was a hierarchy of difficulty in the order given above from the most difficult, active recall, to the least difficult, passive recognition.
2. The four formats were significantly different from each other. Active recall was very difficult compared with the other formats; the difference between active and passive recognition was much smaller.
3. Knowledge did not seem to grow at an even pace in the four strength measures. The more difficult recall formats seemed to take much longer to show growth.
4. Vocabulary knowledge is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Knowledge of words develops cumulatively and there is value in having tests that show this change in strength of knowledge.

An important message from this research for achievement testing is that there is a variety of test formats that could be used and which differ from each other in difficulty. It is thus very important to consider the level of knowledge that learners are likely to have when choosing a format to measure this knowledge. Choosing a very difficult format, such as active recall, could underestimate learning.

Choosing a format that is too easy may not give credit for additional knowledge that learners have. When considering the type of item to choose, the following factors are important.

1. How large is the learners' vocabulary? If their vocabulary size is small, bilingual items would be better than monolingual items.
2. What kind of learning did the learners do? If the learning was through reading or listening, then passive measures are more suitable. If substantial attention was given to the learning and active retrieval was used, then active item format needs to be.
3. How difficult does the teacher want the test to be?

Besides, there is a range of well known item types that are convenient to use for vocabulary testing.

**Multiple-choice** (*Choose the correct answer*)

The principal was irate when she heard what the students had done.

- a. Surprised                      c. interested  
b. Proud                      d. angry

**Completion** (*Write in the missing word*)

At last the climbers reached the s\_\_\_\_\_ of the mountain.

**Translation** (*Give the LI equivalent of the underlined word*)

They worked at the mill.

**Matching** (*Match each word with its meaning*)

- |                |                                 |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. accurate    | a. not changing                 |
| 2. transparent | b. not friendly                 |
| 3. constant    | c. related to seeing things     |
| 4. visual      | d. greater in size              |
| 5. hostile     | e. careful and exact            |
|                | f. allowing light to go through |
|                | g. in the city                  |

These test items are easy to write and to score, and they make efficient use of testing time. However, scholars in the field of language testing have a rather different perspective on vocabulary –test items of the conventional kind. Such items fit neatly into what language testers call the **discrete-point approach** to testing. This involves designing tests to assess whether learners have knowledge of particular structural elements of the language: word meanings, word forms, sentence patterns, sound contrasts and so on. In the last thirty years of the twentieth century, language testers progressively move away from this approach, to the extent that such tests are now quite out of step with current thinking about how to design language tests, especially for proficiency assessment.

The communicative approach to language testing has been adopted. Instead, the tests are based on tasks simulating communication activities that the learners are likely to be engaged in outside of the classroom.

The two views of testing relate to different purposes of assessment. Conventional vocabulary tests are most likely to be used for assessing progress in vocabulary learning and diagnosing areas of weakness. From the two perspectives on vocabulary assessment, we can expand our conventional ideas about what a vocabulary test is in order to include a wider range of lexical assessment procedures.

According to Nation & Chung (2009), dimensions of vocabulary assessment are as follows:

<b>Discrete</b> A measure of vocabulary knowledge or use as an independent construct	←→	<b>Embedded</b> A measure of vocabulary which forms part of the assessment of some other, larger construct
<b>Selective</b> A measure in which specific vocabulary items are the focus of the assessment	←→	<b>Comprehensive</b> A measure which takes account of the whole vocabulary content of the input material (reading/listening tasks) or the test-taker's response (writing/speaking tasks)
<b>Context-independent</b> A vocabulary measure in which the test-taker can produce the expected response without referring to any context	←→	<b>Context-dependent</b> A vocabulary measure which assesses the test-taker's ability to take account of contextual information in order to produce the expected response

*Dimensions of Vocabulary Assessment*

#### **IV. SUGGESTIONS**

Increasing vocabulary knowledge is necessary. Both the content and method of vocabulary instruction are important. If the goal is to improve students' performance in four skills so that they can use in their real life, it is a demanding process to be achieved. We need to take into account the complexities of the piece of vocabulary in different contexts so that the instruction is effective. An effective approach to vocabulary instruction should address all three of these components – teaching individual word, exposure to rich language, and generative word knowledge (Graves, 2000 as quoted in Nagy, 2005). Such instruction has to start early and must be kept up over the years. It must increase students' generative world knowledge, as well as their knowledge of individual words. It must include increased exposure to rich oral language as well as wide reading, and it must be of part, and integrated into, a comprehensive literacy curriculum. Vocabulary instruction should include and go from the more concrete (e.g. use and description, demonstration) to the more abstract (e.g. synonym and explanation).

From the analyses of vocabulary tests and vocabulary instruction in this paper, the implications for instruction should be straightforward. Other individuals seem to benefit from instruction in how to use context in order to do this, but when students' comprehension skills are not very well developed, more direct instruction in meaning of words may be the most effective approach.

Effective vocabulary instruction includes components that might look like frills to some: spending valuable instructional time on building word consciousness, helping students to identify morphological and semantic relationships among words, increasing their sensitivity to words with multiple meanings and to contextual variation in meanings. Teachers also need to teach multi-word units with the collocations and grammar with which they need to be used. These things are not frills; they are essential components of effective instruction. We still need to figure out exactly how to combine the components in ways that create the most engaging and cognitively challenging instruction for all our students. Additionally, teachers can make a specially designed vocabulary list to facilitate the learning process for students.

On the other hand, attention to vocabulary growth has to start early and throughout the course. Tests are used by language teachers to assess students' progress in vocabulary learning and to diagnose areas of weakness in their knowledge of target-language words. Vocabulary tests are a way to obtain information about what words need to be focused on or need more attention as they reveal students' knowledge. Teachers can make use of frequent mini-tests in every lesson, which is very useful in the way that they provide students with chances to review the vocabulary they have learned. Furthermore, teachers can write better vocabulary tests if they have clearer understanding of precisely what aspects of word knowledge they wish to test. They should test both the breadth and the depth of vocabulary knowledge. There is a variety of test formats that teachers can take advantage, depending on their goal in each period because as Curtis (2014) said: “the value of vocabulary tests depends on the goals of the user”. Teachers can diversify the ways of vocabulary testing from the conventional ones such as multiple-choice, completion, translation, matching, cloze test to the more recent communicative approach, or from the discrete to the discrete-embedded. Teachers can make vocabulary games for students which provide fun and useful activity for students or can also require students to make presentations in the target language.

With regard to the words on the tests, the proportion of high-frequency words should be larger than the proportion of low-frequency words. Teachers must also find ways to use language as a means of increasing their vocabularies.

Last but not least, effective vocabulary consolidation also needs to be frequent. In addition, increasing students' motivation is essential.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

Promoting the large-scale, long-term vocabulary growth is necessary for academic success. In that process, assessing vocabulary knowledge is essential and must go hand in hand with effective vocabulary instruction. The design and use of vocabulary tests will aid on one hand, and the kind of instructional

approach and materials that will lead to the greatest growth, on the other. Effective vocabulary instruction is a long term proposition. Attention to vocabulary growth has to go with attention to vocabulary consolidation. The value of vocabulary tests depends on the teachers. A dedicated teacher should develop an integrated, diversified approach to vocabulary instruction and testing that benefits their students most.

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