

Vocabulary Learning Through Vocabulary Scrapbook

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ABSTRACT

For the last 25 years, the field of English language teaching has witnessed significant responses to the incorporation of vocabulary learning in the language classroom. Vocabulary learning has been viewed as central to language learning and being of critical importance to the typical language learner. According to Coady (1997), there is a general agreement among vocabulary learning advocators that the heart of communicative competence is lexical knowledge. Such shift in emphasis in the field of ELT, followed by continuous research on vocabulary learning, have shed light on, and have provided valuable information about what to do and what to focus on. All these imply that the teachers in the language classrooms can utilise many interesting and creative techniques in vocabulary teaching and learning. A project called *Vocabulary Scrapbook* was introduced to the first semester students at Universiti Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia France Institute with the aim to enrich students' vocabulary inventories via specific vocabulary learning strategies. This paper describes how the principles underlying vocabulary learning are put into practice in the project, the problems faced by the teachers and students in carrying out the project, and the effectiveness of the project in improving students' inventories of words and phrases. A survey carried out after the project was completed revealed the students' positive reception of the project – viewing it as a useful tool in learning and enriching their vocabulary.

INTRODUCTION

Experimental evidence has shown that a lot of language teachers think “vocabulary learning can be left to take care of itself” (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981 in Nation, 1990:1). This reflects that the teaching and learning of vocabulary have seriously been “undervalued in the field of second language acquisition” (Zimmerman, 1991:5). Indeed, little emphasis has been given to the teaching of vocabulary at Malaysia France Institute (MFI) in the previous years. Vocabulary teaching was only introduced after the first English syllabus was revamped. Even then, students were not directly taught ways to improve their vocabulary. Instead, dictionary skills were taught to them as tools to find the meaning of unknown words. These skills were tested but were not utilised as tools in learning new words. Vocabulary learning also comprised of learning word parts (suffixes and prefixes) and guessing of meaning of unknown words through contextual clues. The derivations were taught to the students with the noble idea that with proper utilisation of prefixes and suffixes, they would be able to build new words. This, however, was proven to be a fruitless attempt to improve their vocabulary inventory. Students often had problems matching the right prefixes to appropriate root words. Some had problems differentiating the parts of speech and ended up producing “new” words by changing the suffixes. Furthermore, students were unable to guess the correct meaning of the words

from context due to their very limited vocabulary. Guessing meaning from context, despite being considered “as the most important strategy” (Nation, 1990: 6) seemed to bring about more confusion than benefits to the students. Hu and Nation (2000) stated that meaning of an unknown word could only be guessed from the context if a student knows about 98% or more of the other words in the text. Vocabulary learning became a frustrating process since it did not focus on exposing the students to workable ways that may result in an increase of vocabulary inventory.

With the recent development in the field of vocabulary teaching and learning and due to the failure of the approach to the teaching of English vocabulary at MFI, the English teachers at MFI have embarked on a vocabulary-learning project. The main focus of this project, entitled the Vocabulary Scrapbook Project, is on enabling students to store newly learnt words and use these words productively. The project is aimed at making students be aware of skills that they can utilize in learning new words that would empower them to be more autonomous.

This paper focuses on the theory behind the project, pedagogical considerations that had to be made, problems that were faced by students and teachers, and the effectiveness of this project in enriching students’ vocabulary inventory.

Theory into Practice

There are many vocabulary-learning strategies that students can utilize in improving the vocabulary knowledge and inventory. Determination strategies are one type of strategies that facilitate gaining knowledge of new words by guessing from structural knowledge, L1 cognate, context, reference materials and asking from someone. Social strategies are ways to discover meaning of words by employing the social strategy of asking someone who knows. Memory strategies involve linking the word to be learnt with some previously learnt knowledge using imagery or grouping. Cognitive strategies include repetition and using technical means like using flash cards and word lists, taking notes, making tape recording and keeping vocabulary notebooks. Metacognitive strategies are used to control and evaluate students’ own learning by viewing the learning process as a whole. One pedagogical implication derived from a study done by Kudo (1999) was that students should be exposed to many different vocabulary-learning strategies. Students can then choose strategies that are suitable to their learning style. Due to time constraints however, students at MFI were not exposed to different strategies before they could settle on one or a few strategies that match their learning style. The method selected, however, must be one that will enable the learners to become independent word learners. According to Waring (2002), in order for vocabulary learning to be successful, students have to be made independent word learners and they learn best by making sense of their own vocabulary and internalizing it. Research has shown that time and learner independence have been the two measures that are most closely related to success in vocabulary learning and higher overall English proficiency (Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown, 1999). In language classrooms, language teachers need to make learners conscious of the need to develop an independent and structured approach to language learning (Nielsen,

2001). In other words, students need to learn ways to learn vocabulary. One way to do so is by requiring students to keep vocabulary notebooks in which they put in words and knowledge about words that they learnt (Schmitt and Schmitt, 1995). In fact, a lot of writers have recommended the usage of vocabulary notebook in learning vocabulary (Schmitt: 1997). By keeping vocabulary notebooks, students will be provided with the opportunity to develop self-management skills, which will involve “planning their own learning”...setting goals for their own vocabulary learning/ acquisition...and make choices and decisions... depending on their own perceived needs.” (Fowle, 2002).

In the case of MFI students, they were required to keep a vocabulary scrapbook that contains information about at least 20 words that they were interested to learn. Students were exposed to and were utilizing various vocabulary learning strategies in the process of preparing the vocabulary scrapbook. Some of the strategies that students were exposed to are, analyzing part of speech (determination strategy), studying the spelling of words (memory strategy), associating a word with its coordinates (memory strategy,) using monolingual dictionary (determination strategy), asking someone for the meaning and knowledge of the word (social strategy), using new words in sentences (memory strategy), using new words within a storyline (memory strategy), studying the sound of a word (memory strategy), writing the word repetitively (cognitive strategy), and keeping words learnt in a notebook/scrapbook (cognitive strategy). Keeping a vocabulary notebook enabled the students to take charge of their vocabulary learning. This, coupled with effective dictionary skills, could assist in making them independent word learners. Furthermore, such project may enable vocabulary learning to be done collaboratively and creatively.

Pedagogical Considerations

The first thing that was considered at the initial stage of the project was what vocabulary the students should learn. A lot of research has revealed the effectiveness of using a word list of high frequency words in promoting the learning of words. This traditional way of teaching vocabulary has been proven successful particularly when a large number of words need to be learned in a short time (Sokmen, 1997). Learners have been found to be able to acquire from 30-100 L2 words in an hour and remembered words learnt for weeks afterwards (Nation, 1982). The question is, however, as plainly put forward by Wallace (1982:16), “Is frequency the best criterion for choosing vocabulary to be taught?” It has been found that learning words from a frequency list may not be suitable for beginners’ vocabulary and furthermore, the order of the words in a frequency list is usually “not in the best order in which to teach the words” (Nation:1990: 21). Not only that, words which are learnt in isolation may not help learners to understand their meaning since students will not be exposed to examples of where and when the word may occur (Ying, 2001). Words learnt in a meaningful context are best assimilated and remembered (Mc Carthy, 1990). Taking these into consideration, for the purpose of the project, students were not taught words from word lists. The biggest worry was, students may copy from each other and this could be difficult to monitor. Instead, they were given the chance to learn words that they want to learn from their own selected materials mainly because only

they could recognize the importance of learning the words that they have selected. This is supported by Carter (1998) when he stated that learning words from a new language is connected with motivational factors. The rationale here is that by giving them the liberty to learn words that they want to learn, students will be motivated to improve their vocabulary inventory and such motivation “affects intention to learn and consequently, attention to commit something to memory” (Baddeley, 1990). Students learn words that exist in meaningful context (from newspapers, advertisements and magazines). This is a better way for these students to learn new English words since their needs are real. Furthermore, they are exposed to the when, where and how the words are used which may lead to better understanding of the meaning and usage of the words. In such a scenario, Carter (1998: 86) posits that vocabulary teaching will “put the students in the position where they are capable of deriving and producing meanings from lexical items both for themselves and out of the classroom.”

Identifying what vocabulary to be learnt is one aspect to be tackled in vocabulary teaching. The next question to be answered is how these words should be learnt. Before this question can be answered though, what needs to be understood is what a word is and what is involved in learning a word. Nation (1990:32) states that knowing a word entails being able to 1) pronounce the word and recognize it (spelling), 2) distinguish words with similar form, 3) identify the grammatical pattern the word will occur in, 4) identify the grammatical pattern that the word will exist in, 5) being able to identify the right meaning of the word according to the context it is in and 6) make various associations with other related words. Cook (2001:62) states that knowing a word will involve four aspects which is the form, grammatical properties, lexical properties and meaning. Ellis (1997: 123) adds in by stating that to learn a word, we must learn its pronunciation, orthography, syntactic properties, lexical structures and its semantic structures. In learning these aspects of a word, Hatch and Brown (1995: 374) have identified five main steps to learning new words. They are encountering new words, getting the word form, getting the word meaning, consolidating word form and meaning in memory and lastly using the word.

In teaching the complex aspects of the words selected, prior to the project, students were first informed about what knowing a word means. This is important as it makes the students realize that knowing a word does not only mean knowing its meaning (this is a general misconception among students). Dictionary skills were then taught and used as a tool that would equip students with skills in finding the right meaning of words, utilizing the pronunciation table to identify the pronunciation of words, identifying the grammatical aspects of the words (plural form of nouns learnt, the comparative and superlative form of adjectives learnt, the past tense/ the past participle form of the verbs learnt and whether the verbs are intransitive or transitive verbs), identifying the registers of the words and making sense of the relationship of the words with other words that they often exist with (collocation). Students will also be taught ways to identify high frequency words through the utilization of a dictionary. Usage of dictionary, particularly copying of words may provide an opportunity to set up memory links (Thomas and Dieter, 1987). It is also useful as an “independent acquisition strategy” (Sokmen: 1997). In other words, good dictionary skills may help empower the students to be independent

word learners; it helps students to be independent of the teacher and the classroom (Wallace: 1982). Throughout the project, students also utilized monolingual dictionaries.

Due to students' low level of English proficiency, they were not taught the vocabulary implicitly since students with low level of proficiency in the target language have been found to be frustrated with such approach to learning vocabulary (Sokmen:1997). For the project, students were taught the vocabulary explicitly where they learnt the selected words directly. To teach vocabulary explicitly, teachers are encouraged to integrate old vocabulary with new ones and to provide a number of encounters with a word which according to many studies a range of 5- 16 encounters with a word may lead to the acquisition of it (Nation, 1990). As stated by Wallace (1987), there should be a number of repetitions until there is evidence that the students have learnt the target word. Students were repeatedly exposed to the words when they were required to find information about the word. During consultations, students were asked about the words that they want and have learnt and this increased the number of exposure to the words. Students were be required to produce a piece of writing in which they may incorporate words that they know and words that they had learnt. This will increase the likeliness of the students incorporating news words with language that is already known, which according to Badelley, (1990, in Schmitt and Schmitt, 1995) is a basic requirement of learning. Students' encounters with words were increased through the consultations held and the writing that they had to produce. These activities may promote a deep level of semantic processing of the words where students were asked to "manipulate words, relate them to other words and to their own experience" (Sokmen:1997:242). This may increase the chances of students retaining the words that they have learnt.

Trials and Tribulation

Since its inception, the Vocabulary Scrapbook Project has undergone many overhauls in order to ensure its effectiveness in teaching students ways to store and learn new words. Despite these setbacks, teachers were continuously challenged in ensuring the success of the project. A lot of the students lacked the initiative to improve their vocabulary even when they realized that their inability to use English could be highly related to the fact that they did not have enough vocabulary to communicate in the language. Most of MFI students were not ready to be autonomous. Students had to be prompted all the time. Some students even asked the teacher to choose the words that they should learn. Because of this, inculcating a vocabulary learning experience into the students' life became an arduous task. Students had to be continuously reminded of the possible benefit that they may get if they take vocabulary learning seriously.

One aspect of pedagogical consideration that needs re-evaluation is students' choice of words. This had to be heavily monitored since some students would choose low-frequency words and jargons. They were advised on their choices of words because if the words were too technical and had low frequency, the chances of them using the words after the project would be very low. This may affect students' motivation in learning new words. Nevertheless, this step was necessary since a lot of students may face difficulty in

using the words productively if the words chosen were too bombastic or too technical. At the end of the day, the teacher had to make some kind of decision on students' choices of words.

Another pedagogical decision that needed careful consideration was the assessment of the words learnt which could be quite difficult. The first thing that the teacher needed to view was whether the student had correctly chosen the right meaning for the word that they want to learn. Most of the time, students were unable to choose the correct definition particularly because there were too many to choose from (the word 'run' alone, for instance, has 52 different definitions) and also because the definitions contain a lot of unknown words. For some students, this was a very frustrating experience. Requiring them to write using words that they have learnt may allow them to use the word productively. However, there are many aspects that needed to be viewed before it can be said that a student has mastered the word. He must be able to use the word in a semantically, structurally, grammatically and pragmatically correct environment. This was indeed very difficult to assess. In addition to this, a student may be able to use the word learnt correctly in writing but this does not mean that they may be able to use the words in a different context such as in a conversation (pronunciation of the words was not tested).

Another setback is that teachers did not have the knowledge of which words the students know or don't know. Students had been 'caught' including words that they have known in the scrapbook. One possible way to assess students' knowledge of the newly learnt words is through sessions of interview where they were asked questions about the words they had learnt (how to pronounce the words/ label of the word/ meaning etc). This did not materialize due to time constraint.

Despite these setbacks, however, a questionnaire-based survey carried out after the project ended provide some interesting insights that may motivate the teachers who embarked on this project to further improve the vocabulary scrapbook project.

The Effects of Vocabulary Scrapbook Project on Improving Students' Inventory of English words

Three months after project the project was completed, 30 randomly selected students were given a simple questionnaire to survey their opinion on their vocabulary learning experience through the project.

The table below shows the students' responses to the questionnaire.

Questions	Responses
1. After the project, would you continue keeping a vocabulary scrapbook?	Yes 25 students No 5 students
2. After the project, what would you do if you find an English word that you think is important and is very useful for you as a student?	Do nothing 2 students

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if you find an English word that think is important and is very useful for you as a student?	<p>Try to memorise the word 6 students</p> <p>Try to find the meaning 12 students</p> <p>Try to use the word 8 students</p> <p>Write down the word in a notebook 2 students</p>
3. How many of the twenty new words that you have learnt for the vocabulary scrapbook project that you can remember?	<p>Less than 5 words 8 students</p> <p>About 10 words 16 students</p> <p>About 15 words- 6 students</p>
4. What do you do with the words that you have learnt?	<p>I don't use the words that I have learnt- 3 students.</p> <p>I use the words in conversation – 15 students</p> <p>I use the words in writing- 12 students</p>
5. Have you learnt anything useful from the project?	<p>Examples of responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learnt to read phonetics symbols - learnt to use the dictionary with the right method - learnt how to use words appropriately - learnt an interesting way to remember new words - learnt about team work - learnt how to use good dictionary - learnt meaning of some words that I don't know before this. - Learnt new words
6. What are the aspects of the scrapbook project that should be maintained/ discarded?	<p>Maintained</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the writing part (essay/ dialogue) - the teaching of phonetics - the search for new words in the newspaper, internet etc. - ways to find new words to learn - creativity aspect <p>Discarded</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - phonetics - fancy decoration

Prior to the project, informal group discussions were held to identify whether students were utilising any vocabulary learning strategies. These discussions revealed that students did not give a lot of thought about strategies to learn vocabulary despite complaining that they did not have enough vocabulary to communicate.

Responses from the questionnaire revealed that students' perception towards learning English through the utilisation of an English scrapbook was quite positive. The responses, furthermore, showed that the vocabulary scrapbook project had positive effects on improving students' inventory of words and phrases. Extension activities such as using

the newly learnt words in writing short essays/ dialogues had increased the probability of students retaining some of the words. The writing task had indeed helped to improve the chances of future recalls. As mentioned by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995), “mental activities which require more elaborate thought, manipulation and processing of a new word will increase the learning of that word.” It was indeed a happy revelation to find out through the questionnaire survey that some students were able to use some of the words that they have learnt productively.

Through the questionnaire survey, it was also revealed that after the project, students were utilising some vocabulary learning strategies that may, if continuously utilised, increase their vocabulary inventory. Even though the reported strategies used were quite limited, the potentials of the project in teaching students the ways to learn vocabulary are confirmed.

CONCLUSION

The project has indeed enriched the teachers’ experience particularly in the teaching and learning of English vocabulary. It has particularly informed them that the road towards making learner more autonomous is indeed an arduous path. More time and energy need to be spent to ensure that students utilize the appropriate strategies and more research should be carried out to reveal the benefits and possible pedagogical implications that such project may have on the students. Ways to measure the outcomes in terms of vocabulary acquisition need to be devised in order to view whether such projects can productively enrich students’ vocabulary.

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