

The Importance of Vocabulary Development In Reading Comprehension in Efl Classes.

Abstract

It seems almost impossible to overstate the power of words. Perhaps the greatest tools we can give students, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary. This article reports on the importance of vocabulary to reading achievement. Providing vocabulary instruction is one of the most significant ways in which teachers can improve students' reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. A large vocabulary is more specifically reflective of high levels of reading achievement.

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Introduction

The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in E.F.L. (English as a Foreign language)

learning has been increasingly recognized. Over the last twenty years, much has been achieved in this field and in the context of the acquisition of foreign or second languages. Bogaards, P. and B. Laufer (2004, p.1) state that

over the last twenty years, much has been done in the field of vocabulary in the context of the acquisition of foreign or second languages. Recurrent research themes include: the construct of vocabulary knowledge, the relation between vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency, particularly in respect to reading, the role of word frequency in vocabulary learning, strategies used by learners to comprehend and learn new words, and testing vocabulary knowledge: size and depth, receptive and productive. The growth of interest in L.2 vocabulary since the days of "a neglected aspect of language learning" (Meara 1980) has also been reflected in authored and edited books specifically devoted to vocabulary.

ملخص

من المستحيل أن يبالغ المرء في قوة الألفاظ. من أعظم الأدوات التي يمكن أن نرود بها طلبتنا، ليس في دراستهم فقط وإنما، عموماً، في حياتهم أيضاً. هو معجم شخصي معتبر و ثري. يعتني هذا المقال بأهمية المعجم الشخصي في إنجازات الطلبة في ويعتبر توفير تدريس ميدان القراءة. موجه لإثراء المعجم الشخصي للطلبة إحدى أنجع الطرق التي يتسنى من خلالها للأساتذة تحسين قدرة الطلبة على فهم النص المكتوب. لا يستطيع القراء فهم ما يقرأون ما لم يفهموا معاني الألفاظ. على وجه الخصوص، فإن ثروة المعجم الشخصي تعكس مستوى عال من الإنجاز في ميدان القراءة.

One of the domains investigated is the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency, particularly in respect to reading comprehension. A considerable volume of research has linked vocabulary knowledge with reading comprehension and fluency.

Reading ability and vocabulary knowledge are two of the most important components of performance in a foreign language especially in academic settings. Each is dependent upon the other, as vocabulary knowledge is the single most important factor in reading comprehension, while reading is the single most important means through which intermediate and advanced learners acquire new words. However, building vocabulary through reading is a fruitful but complex activity that needs better understanding and more careful guidance for both teachers and learners.

1- Overview of the Place of Vocabulary in Foreign Language Teaching

The first part of the article is a historical overview to build a better understanding of the place of vocabulary in the different approaches and methods advocated in foreign language teaching and to indicate likely development in lexical pedagogy in the future.

Many approaches/methods have been advocated and used in the teaching of foreign languages. A great deal of research has been carried out in this area by linguists and educationalists in order to solve the different problems that face people learning a foreign language. In the course of time, this has given rise to different approaches and methods to language teaching such as the Grammar Translation Approach / Method, the Direct Approach / Method, the Reading Approach / Method, the Audio-lingual Approach / Method, the Situational Approach / Method, and the Communicative approach. Around the 1930's, the Reading Method

(in the U.S.A.) / Situational Language Teaching (in Great Britain) were aimed primarily at the development of reading skills. In Great Britain, Michael West (1930 , p. 514) stressed the need to facilitate the reading skill by improving vocabulary skills. He states that "*the primary thing in learning a language is the acquisition of a vocabulary, and practice in using it*".

The view that saw vocabulary as mainly a problem of grading and selection in the teaching of foreign languages largely dominated up to the 1960's. At that time, the emergence of different works dealing with word lists had a great success. For example, A General Service List, a book produced by West in 1953 which proposed a list of 2000 words that enables the reader to grasp 80 % of any written text.

In the early 1970's, there was a widespread reaction against the methods that stressed the teaching of grammatical forms and paid little attention to the way language is used in everyday situations. The decline in emphasis on vocabulary learning was accelerated by movements in linguistics that concentrated on phonology, morphology and syntax with a corresponding neglect of semantics. Therefore, around the 1970's, we started to take care of the word and insist that it has to be learned in "context". Semantics started to play a very important role in the teaching of vocabulary; we have even started to regard vocabulary as a skill that should not be subsumed by other aspects of language. An inspiration seemed to emerge with the advancement of

notional syllabuses: notions, topics and settings seemed to bring a new life for the word. Wilkins (1972) deplored the neglect of vocabulary in the period dominated by the Audio-lingual Approaches, and wrote that “*if without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed*”. A concern also developed to make foreign language teaching 'communicative' by focusing on learners' knowledge of the functions of language and their ability to use them in specific situations.

The communicative approach grew out of the work of anthropological and Firthian linguists such as Hymes (1972) and Halliday (1973) who view language first and foremost as a system of communication. This approach assumes that learning a foreign language requires the acquisition of the linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions. It was primarily designed to meet the needs of adult learners and people engaged in academic, cultural, technical, and economic activities.

Around the 1980's, researchers started to claim the importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning. Studies confirm that learners feel the lexical deficit as the major problem in their reading and that the need to understand can explain their fascination for lexis.

As a matter of fact, the acquisition of lexis has become a question of interest to applied-linguists only since the 1980's. Meara (1980) was among the first researcher who stressed the importance of vocabulary acquisition in language learning. He states that this was the neglected aspect of language learning.

The position in the early 1990's is that lexis has been unduly neglected in the past, and is due to a re-evaluation. The lexical approach to second / foreign language teaching has received interest as a complement to grammar-based approaches. The lexical approach concentrates on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and words combinations. Lewis (1993, p.95) sees that

The lexical approach is based on the idea that an important part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalyzed wholes, or “chunks” and that these chunks become the raw data by which learners perceive patterns of language traditionally thought of as grammar .

In addition, Gu, Y. and R. Johnson (1996 , p.645) posit that “*Developments in 'lexical semantics' and the 'mental lexicon' have prompted the development of the 'semantic field theory' which organize words in terms of interrelated lexical meanings*”.

According to them, the “semantic field theory” suggests that the lexical content of a language is best treated not as a mere aggregation of independent words or an unstructured list of words but as a collection of interrelating networks of relations between words. A very simple example of a semantic field is the set of kinship terms: *father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, uncle, aunt*, which clearly share some aspect of meaning.

This part provides an overview of the methodological foundations underlying the lexical approach and the pedagogical implications suggested by them. However, a distinction is to be made between vocabulary and lexis.

The lexical approach makes a distinction between vocabulary – traditionally understood as a stock of individual words with fixed meanings – and lexis, which includes not only the single words but also the word combinations that we store in our mental lexicons. Lexical approach advocates argue that language consists of meaningful chunks that, when combined, produce continuous coherent text, and only a minority of spoken sentences are entirely novel creations. To Hatch, E. And Brown, C. (1995 , p.1) *“there is no single term that we can define that includes semantics, lexicon, and vocabulary. Each has its own definition”*.

According to these linguists, the term *semantics* refers to the study of meaning and the systematic ways those meanings are expressed in language. The term *lexicon* refers to the overall system of word forms. When we include *morphology*, usually lexical morphology, we refer to the study of word formation in languages. Finally, the term *vocabulary* refers to a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words individual speakers of a language might use.

Within the lexical approach, special attention is directed to collocations and expressions that include conventional utterances and sentence frames and heads. Lewis (1997 a, p. 204) maintains that

Instead of words, we consciously try to think of collocations, and to present these in expressions. Rather than trying to break things into even smaller pieces, there is a conscious effort to see things in larger, more holistic ways.

In the lexical approach, lexis in its various types is thought to play a central role in language teaching and learning. Nattinger (1980, p. 341) suggests that

Teaching should be based on the idea that language production is the piecing together of ready made units appropriate for particular situations. Comprehension of such units is dependent on knowing the patterns to predict in different situations. Instruction, therefore, should centre on these patterns and the ways they can be pieced together, along with the ways they vary and the situations in which they occur.

He proposes activities used to develop learners' knowledge of lexical chains. They include the following:

- 1- Intensive and extensive reading in the target language.
- 2- First and second/foreign language comparisons and translation – carried out chunk-for-chunk, rather than word-for-word- aimed at raising language awareness.
- 3- Repetition and recycling of activities, such as summarizing a text orally one day and again a few days later to keep words and expressions that have been learned active.
- 4- Guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from context.
- 5- Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations.

6- Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.

Zimmerman (in Coady and al. 1997, p. 17) contends that the works of Nattinger and the work of Lewis represent a significant theoretical and pedagogical shift from the past. First, their claims have revived an interest in the central role of vocabulary for accurate language description. Second, they challenge a traditional view of word boundaries, emphasizing the language learner's need to perceive and use patterns of lexis and collocation. Most significant is the underlying claim that language production is not just a syntactic rule-governed process but is instead the retrieval of larger phrasal units from memory.

2- The Reading Skill in a Foreign Language

As it has been pointed out, in many parts of the world, a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important for academic studies, professional success, and personal development. This is particularly true of English as today so much professional, technical, and scientific literature is published in English. Reading ability is the most important skill needed by learners of English as a foreign language. Yet, despite this specific need for the foreign language, most students fail to learn to read adequately. Very frequently, students reading in a foreign language seem to read with less understanding than one might expect from them, and read considerably slower than they reportedly read in their first language.

Reading is a complex process which has been extensively studied across a wide range of disciplines such as Sociology and Psychology. Beck, I. and Mc Keown, M.(1991 , p. 790) observed that *"The shift to an information-processing orientation in psychology provided rich theory from which to draw in conceiving the relationship between words and ideas"*.

This is reflected in the vast literature on reading and on the teaching of reading of both mother tongue and foreign language. So far, the learner has been the focus of attention of the research reviewed: what the learner did to acquire words and the effectiveness of the method. It is possible to shift the focus of the question, however, and to concentrate instead on the thing that is being learned. This shift produces a completely different set of questions – questions that have typically been asked by psychologists rather than by language teachers and applied linguists. These questions concern the structure of the lexicon, and they have typically been investigated by comparing the way bilinguals and monolinguals behave on simple psychological tasks involving word skills. However, to give a general definition of reading is not an easy task. A number of writers gave different definitions expressing what they think of the process of reading. C. Nuttal (1982, p.4) considers that in reading *" the main purpose is the extraction of meaning from writing. Our business is with the way the reader gets a message from a text."*

In her opinion, what is important is the reader's ability to decode the message transmitted by the writer. This is related to the understanding a reader arrives at, and more importantly, to the understanding of how he gets and grasps messages, i. e., the understanding of the reading process.

In psycholinguistic terms, reading is concerned with the interrelation between thought and language. It is a process whereby a reader tries to understand what has been written and grasp the message. In other words, readers will have to make sense of the text in order to extract the information they need from it. K.S. Goodman (1975, p.12) states that *“There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought.”*

We then notice that reading is a process by which the writer encodes a linguistic surface representation which later on the reader decodes in order to construct his meaning. According to Goodman, reader’s proficiency depends on the semantic background the reader brings to any given reading task. H.G. Widdowson (1979, p.7) views the reading process

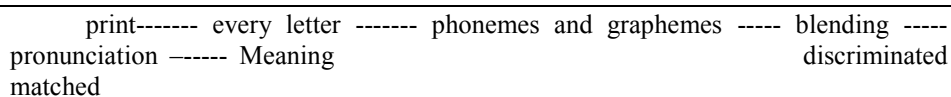
As not simply a matter of extracting information from the text. Rather, it is one in which the reading activates a range of knowledge in the reader's mind that...may be refined and extended by the new information supplied by the text.

According to this extract, reading is a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text, and the reading process is an interaction between both of them.

Reading is now looked at as a cognitive activity which implies a certain amount of thinking on the part of the reader. There should be a kind of involvement and interaction of the reader with the piece of written discourse in order to get the meaning out. Therefore, when students have learned to decode words in text in a reasonably efficient way, comprehension would normally follow. In most modern methods, students learning to read have, for some years, been exposed to the spoken language; one would expect the skills they have learnt to transfer to understanding language in written form. However, this does not always seem to be the case. A second problem is that learners may be so engrossed in the word-decoding aspect of reading that they do not have the cognitive capacity to simultaneously carry out comprehension processes. In addition, the rapid loss of information from short-term memory makes it difficult for slow readers to “hold” information from an earlier sentence so that they can integrate it with what comes later. If word recognition is slow and labored, much of the prior context may have been forgotten by the time the current word has been recognized. Decoding skills will obviously improve with practice. When students' word recognition skills become relatively fast and automatic, they are able to give their full attention to comprehending the content of the text.

The Bottom-up view of reading suggests that successful listening is a matter of decoding the individual sounds we hear to derive the meaning and hence utterances; and the Top-down view suggests the use of discursal and real-world knowledge to construct and interpret aural messages. These two competing models of language processing have also had a central place in the debate on the nature of reading comprehension.

On the other hand, the Bottom-up approach according to Cambourne (1979) was the basis of the vast majority of reading schemes. The central notion behind such an approach is that reading is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents. Cambourne, who rather uses the term “outside-in” than bottom-up, provides the following illustration of how the process is supposed to work:



According to this model, the reader processes each letter which he encounters. These letters or graphemes are matched with the phonemes of the language, which it is assumed the reader already knows. These phonemes, the minimal units of meaning in the sound system of the language, are blended together to form words. The derivation of meaning is thus the end process in which the language is translated from one form of symbolic representation to another. So, when we read, letters do represent sounds, and despite the fact that in English twenty-six written symbols have to represent over forty aural symbols, there is a degree of consistency. In fact, it seems more logical to teach readers to utilise the systematic correspondences between written and spoken symbols than to teach them to recognise every letter and word encountered by memorising its unique configuration and shape. This represents the trends of the phonic approach.

However, a number of criticisms have been made of the Phonic approach. Much of this criticism is based on research into human memory. In the first place, with only twenty six letters to represent over forty sounds in English, spelling-to-sound correspondences are both complex and unpredictable. Research into human memory also provides counterfactual evidence. It has been shown that the serial processing of every letter in a text would slow reading up to the point where it would be very difficult for meaning to be retained.

Understanding a text results in a mental representation of the state of affairs the text describes – a mental model of the text. Even after the individual words have been identified and grouped into phrases, clauses, and sentences, a number of other skills will also be necessary to construct such models. The meaning of individual sentences and paragraphs must be integrated, and the main ideas of the text identified. In many cases, inferential skills will be needed to go beyond what is explicitly stated, since authors necessarily leave some of the links between parts of the text implicit. In the case of expository texts, such other skills include identifying the topic, differentiating between important and trivial information, following the argument, and extracting the gist meaning of the passage.

Vocabulary research has led to observations about the relations between vocabulary knowledge and academic achievement. The conclusions drawn are as follows:

- 1- Vocabulary and reading are closely related.

2- The shift to information – processing orientation in psychology provided rich theory from which to draw in conceiving the relationship between words and ideas.

3- Building knowledge is a shift in education from emphasizing basic skills to problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills.

Therefore, we can state that vocabulary research demonstrates that building knowledge requires more than accumulating facts about specific elements such as words definitions. This shift has resulted in additional research directed toward understanding language and vocabulary acquisition within the context of prior knowledge.

In view of all what has been stated above, we can say that vocabulary plays an important role in reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean.

3- Need for Vocabulary instruction.

Research links vocabulary knowledge with reading comprehension. Vocabulary is, in fact, an integral part of reading and comprehending. Rupley, Logan and Nichols (1999, p.5) state that *“Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas and content together and that it facilitates making comprehension accessible”*

Laflamme (1997 , p.1) feels more seeing that *“Researchers have acclaimed vocabulary knowledge as the single most important factor in reading comprehension”*

According to these authors, and in addition to comprehension, vocabulary knowledge increases reading skills. Marlow Ediger (1999, p.1) discovered that *“One reason that learners do not read well is that they do not possess a functional vocabulary for reading”*.

In view of what has been stated above, we can state that reading fluency and text comprehension necessitate vocabulary instruction and vocabulary recognition.

The scientific research on vocabulary instruction reveals that most vocabulary is learned incidentally (indirectly) and some vocabulary must be taught explicitly (directly). This research is based on how children learn vocabulary in their native language. It proposes that the vast majority of vocabulary words are learned gradually through repeated exposures in various discourse contexts. Consequently, Nagy and Herman

(1987) argue that *“Teachers should promote extensive reading because it can lead to greater vocabulary growth than any program of explicit instruction alone ever could”*.

Krashen (1989, p.454), a proponent of extensive reading and who analyzed the results of 144 studies to provide evidence for the superiority of the input

hypothesis, contends that *“Language learners acquire vocabulary and spelling most efficiently by receiving comprehensible input while reading”*.

Other evidence can be seen in a study carried out by Grabe and Stoller (in Coady J. and T. Huckin, 1997, p.228) which describes an attempt to learn Portuguese by extensive reading. Their theory was that *“Many exposures of different intensities would gradually lead to a large recognition vocabulary”*.

They concluded that reading and vocabulary abilities did developed as a result of extensive reading practice.

4-Text Linguistics.

A text is a stretch of language, the structure of which is constituted in accordance with purely linguistic criteria such that the “textuality” of a text results from the correctness or cohesion of individual textual units. Cohesion concerns the ways in which the components of a text, i.e., the words and the sentences are mutually connected within a sequence by grammatical dependencies, and connectives. Text linguistics studies focus on the regularities of inter-sentential linkage, and further on semantic relations which enable one part of text to function as context for another.

Reading involves two necessary elements: the reader and the text.

4.1- The Reader

Traditionally, reading researchers focusing on the reader have attempted to analyze the reading into a series of sub-skills. Teachers are familiar enough with approaches that distinguish between the ability to understand or recall details from the passage, or facts from a text, and the ability to understand the main idea of a passage, i.e. to get the gist of a text. Research has attempted to discover whether reading is composed of different sub-skills that might relate to one another within a taxonomy of skills. The usual approach is to give learners a task as a series of passages to understand, and ask them a variety of questions afterwards. These questions are then subjected to factor analysis, to see whether identifiable factors emerge. Many different taxonomies have been drawn up over the years varying in content from three to four, up to the outstanding 36 drawn up by the New York City Board of Education, quoted in Lunzer and Gardner (1979). Typical of such taxonomies is that of Barrett (1968) who reportedly distinguishes five skills: literal comprehension, reorganization of the ideas in the text, inferential ability, evaluation, and appreciation. Davies and Widdowson (1974) come up with a similar list of types of reading comprehension questions relevant to the testing of reading ability: direct reference questions, inference, supposition and evaluation questions. However, the problem that may arise is that the levels of understanding do not relate to the “process” of understanding but to the “product”, what the reader has got out of a text. A description of what a student has understood of a text is not the same as description of how he arrives at such an understanding. The product of reading may vary in terms of levels of meaning and comprehension, but it does not follow that the levels of comprehension reflect different skills. It is at least possible that readers use similar processes for getting at different products. The product of reading will vary according to the reader. Different readers

will arrive at different products because they start off from different positions. Steffensen (1981) refers to the effect of what might generally be termed background knowledge on the product of reading. She clearly demonstrates the effect of cultural knowledge on the product of comprehension. This relevant knowledge is important to processing, but it also needs to be activated before it can contribute to understanding. Then, it is possible to view reading both as product and as process. Research has tended to focus upon the product rather than the process. However, knowing the product does not tell us what actually happens when a reader interacts with a text. It is this latter knowledge which is essential in the teaching of reading. The basic rationale behind attempts to describe process is that an understanding should lead to the possibility of distinguishing the processing of successful and unsuccessful readers. This, in turn, should lead to the possibility of teaching the strategies, or process components, of successful readers to unsuccessful ones, or at least make the latter aware of the existence of other strategies, which they might then wish to try for themselves.

4.2- Text

The principal sources of texts for foreign language learners are: texts in the language course book which are generally intended to improve the learner's language by exemplifying particular structures or vocabulary items; texts in reading comprehension books, often aimed at improving both language and reading skills.

As far as language difficulties are concerned, research into text difficulty has looked at the contribution of both structure and vocabulary. To pose the question of whether vocabulary is a greater problem than structure is misguided. The answer will depend upon the relationship between texts and readers, and which varies from case to case. Broadly speaking, there are two ways of tackling readers' language difficulties. One is to teach more language, the other is to teach strategies to cope with language difficulties.

4.3- Interaction of Reader and Text

The term reading style is now reasonably well established as a descriptive label for the reader's behavioral response to text. The reading style is motivated by the reader's purpose, and mediated by the accessibility of the text to the reader. The style most commonly identified in current works in foreign language reading is skimming (rapid reading to establish the general content of a text), and scanning

(rapid reading to locate a specific point), intensive reading (slow reading directed at complete understanding), and extensive reading (relatively rapid reading, typically carried out for pleasure).

4.3.1- Skimming Versus Scanning

Skimming is used when we are looking for the main idea of a passage for which it is unnecessary to examine a text thoroughly. When we skim, we glance at the text to discover its gist. The reader, in fact, is not reading in the normal sense of the word, but is setting his eye over the print at a rate which makes him take in only, perhaps, the beginning and end of paragraphs where information is generally summarized. This

allows the reader to keep himself informed about matters that are of great importance. Skimming occurs also when the reader looks quickly at the content page of a book, or at the chapter headings and subheadings. This is sometimes called previewing. Another example is when the reader glances through a newspaper to see what the main items of the day are. This will often mean reading the headlines.

Scanning, however, occurs when a reader goes through a text very quickly in order to locate a specific information of a particular interest to him / her, i.e., the reader is on the look-out for a particular item(s) he believes is (are) in the text. It is a fairly fast reading with instant reaction to all irrelevant data, perhaps most of the text. When scanning, the reader searches for a specific piece of information such as a date or a name. Scanning is similar to skimming in the sense that the reader is going through a selection; however, the difference lies in the fact that in scanning, the information needed is very specific, while in skimming the information needed is general.

4.3.2- Intensive Reading versus Extensive Reading

Intensive reading, also called study reading, involves close study of the text and careful analysis of each sentence including the study of vocabulary, syntax (punctuation clues and cohesive elements) and discourse (topic sentence and supporting details, and coherence). Intensive reading includes critical reading which is concerned with learning to read a text with the purpose of making critical judgements about it, as when one reads in his native language. In critical reading, students are supposed to offer their own interpretation of texts. This is a more sophisticated form of reading and it is also known as reading between the lines. Here, the reader tries to look for meaning behind the author's own words.

In extensive reading, the learner reads for his own pleasure, to broaden his general knowledge and reinforce previously learned items. Extensive reading involves the ability to read quickly, concentrating on the understanding of the main idea(s), but not necessarily every word. Another purpose of such reading is to develop the habit of reading and foster fluency in reading. Nuttall (1982) supports the idea that extensive reading contributes to improve our knowledge of a foreign language. Extensive reading is recommended if we want to improve our knowledge of a foreign language.

5- Conclusion

This paper aimed at highlighting the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension. It no longer needs to be proved that vocabulary is central in foreign language learning. A rich vocabulary unlocks a wealth of knowledge and opens up worlds to its owner especially in academic settings. Both comprehension and fluency are affected by vocabulary knowledge. Thus, as previously stated, there is a need for more instruction of that aspect of the language which has long been neglected by integrating it in the classroom instructional plan, and embedding it into regular class activities.

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