EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

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Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to present evidence that intensive reading along, is not the only way nor the most effective approach to learn and acquire vocabulary in a second language. Furthermore, the author presents substantial evidence based on research conducted in class by highly recognized authorities in the field of second language learning that different explicit strategies for teaching vocabulary can enhance the vocabulary range on English Language Learners. In addition, the author challenges and questions the idea presented by Steven Krashen that, ELL learners can learn most of the vocabulary through reading, a theory that he supports based on the input hypothesis. The author provides insights on some effective strategies and approaches for teaching vocabulary to second language learners. Based on research data, the author will also present some of the factors that affect vocabulary learning. In addition, the author argues the differences from learning vocabulary through intensive reading versus the explicit teaching of words in an academic environment. The author also provides substantial evidence of the most effective approach to learn vocabulary in an academic environment.*

Key words: *strategy, English Language Learners (ELLs), explicit instruction, lexicon, English as a Second Language (ESL), metalinguistic awareness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the questions that has been at the center of vocabulary learning is how many words ELLs need to know; however, since this is different in every case, the answer to this question varies depending on the learner. For example, in the case of students who were medical doctors in non-English speaking countries, and moved to the USA, England or Canada, and want to revalidate their degrees to be doctors in any of these countries, they need to learn an extensive number of terms related to medicine. However, this event will not be the same for those ELLs who take English courses with a different purpose. In addition, many ESL learners just need the language for social communication; as a result, the number of words they need to learn, are those that will allow them to function in society and allow them to communicate their thoughts to others. In this case, these students will not need the required academy vocabulary to function properly in a college career. A similar example can also be observed in the case of learners who want to further their studies in a university, and they need to learn academic words to take subject area courses such as psychology, history, literature, and physiology, etc. It is common sense

that the lexicon these learners need in order to function properly in an academic environment of higher education, has to be larger and more sophisticated than those who need the language for the sole purpose of social communication.

Moreover, the problematic in the acquisition of vocabulary in second language learning is not just how many words the learner needs to know, but how he or she will be able to use the words properly in any given context. According to linguist Paul Nation, for a learner to know a word properly, he/she must know the phonological and semantic use of the word (Nation, 2000). For example, when a learner uses the word record as a verb, he/she must know that the pronunciation of this word is /rikórd/, but when the word is used as a noun, the stress changes to the first syllable /rékord/. Moreover, the ESL learner must also know that when the word is used in the past tense, the morpheme ed should be added to the word because it is a regular verb. In addition, to have a better command of the word, the learner should also know its grammatical function; therefore, the learner needs to know that a word can sometimes function as a verb, a noun, adverb, and as an adjective. An example of this grammatical change can be observed in the word watch, which can act as a noun, but it can also act as a verb. Another example can be observed in the word look, which functions as a verb; for example, "look over there", but it can also function as an adjective, as in "a good- looking person"; however, it can also function as a noun, as in "she takes a look". Of course, these are just brief examples of how important it is for ESL students to know the different functions that a word has in the context in which it is used. In addition to the phonological and semantic knowledge of a word, there are other features that will make impossible to have a better mastery of the vocabulary, such as: the polysemy, which is the capacity in many words of having multiple meanings; as a result, the polysemy of words should also be addressed in the lessons, since many ESL learners are not aware of the multiplicity of meanings that many words present. In fact, most ELLs will not notice the capacity of words in having multiple meanings, until they see the words used in a different context. In addition to the polysemy structure of the word, learners must also learn the spelling, which will help them to avoid confusion with words that have similar spellings, such as: advice/advise, altar/alter, bear/beer, born/borned, brake/break. This is just a brief list of the words that can bring confusion in spelling; nevertheless, the confusion can even get more complicated when the words have the same pronunciation.

Therefore, it is recommendable to teach explicit spelling lessons and word recognition strategies in the classroom, so English language learners can learn the different spelling of confusing words. Besides, expecting that these learners will acquire all the spelling rules only by having them read books based on Krashen's input hypothesis is not the most recommendable approach to follow because students can also profit from explicit learning, which allows them to be aware of the linguistic features about the target language (Krashen, 1998). However, it is also important to point out that some authorities in the field of vocabulary acquisition back up Krashen's hypothesis such as: Nagy, W., Perman, P., & Anderson, R, (1985) who state that the majority of the words learners acquire in school occurs informally and incidentally rather than formally and consciously. They also state that learners learn vocabulary in a more efficient way when teachers read to them and make emphasis on important and interesting words followed by discussion of what they read. Consequently, according to the evidences stated above, it is evident that ELLs will learn best if the teachers use both approaches to learn vocabulary, incidentally and explicitly. In fact, those teachers who use an eclectic method in language teaching, and do not spouse to one method only, will have more chances of facilitating different

opportunities to ELLs to learn the target language. Moreover, when teachers use both approaches to teach vocabulary, they are taking into account the different learning styles that students bring with them. In addition, Schmitds, (1990) points out that ELLs need to learn the target language in a conscious way in order to acquire it. At the same time, this will help them to develop metalinguistic awareness in the target language.

Furthermore, another issue to consider when dealing with words is that many of the words ESL learners learn, remain as their passive vocabulary; nevertheless, they are able to recognize and understand them when they see or hear these words, even if they do not encounter the words on a daily basis. On the other hand, many words become part of their daily lexicon, becoming their active vocabulary, which they will use to communicate their ideas to others. According to Nation, these are degrees in knowing a word (Nation, 2001). Moreover, another issue to consider is that depending on the frequency that the learner encounters the word, this will determine how the vocabulary will transfer from passive to active (Nation, 2001).

2. RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING VOCABULARY

The following are some recommended strategies for teaching new words to second and first language learners. The first strategy that I will recommend here is repetition. According to Paul Nation, there are two types of repetitions, space and mass repetition (Nation, 2000). Space repetition consists of repeating words for a period of time, and later repeat them after a certain time in the future. According to a study conducted by Bloom & Shuell, (1981), space repetition is more efficient than mass repetition. Mass repetition consists on repeating the same word for 15 to 20 minutes. Pimsleur suggested that the space between each repetition should become larger. Nation on the other hand, describes three types of repetitions, noticing, which occurs when one sees the same word having the same meaning again. The second is retrieval, which consist on reading the meaning several times, and generation, that occurs when one recalls the meaning in a different context. Evidence shows that the most effective techniques is generation, because it challenges the learners to use the words in different context instead of memorizing words like parrots. Of course, there are many other techniques that teachers can use to teach vocabulary, such as: mimes, showing pictures, using synonyms, teaching prefixes and affixes, graphic organizers, semantic maps, and word formations, etc (Bloom and Shuell, 1981).

2.1. Translation strategy

Another strategy that has been implemented in language teaching to teach new words is the translation method. However, this has been the most criticized approach, because it deprives learners from been fully immerged in the target language (Nation, 1999). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the use of the learner's first language cannot be used when feasible. Sometimes, it is very hard to explain a word if the teacher does not have the picture or the way to do so; as a result, translation becomes the best and faster approach to teach the meaning of a word. An example can be when teaching abstract words like, honesty, love, hate, dream, patriotism, etc. In regard to this approach, language instructors should not oppose to the translation of a few words, however, relying too much on the translation method to teach any language is not recommendable if the method used is the direct method, however, this method can be useful for schools that have dual language

programs where learners are learning two languages at the same time. Moreover, if a teacher is teaching English in a country where all learners speak the same language, translation can be more acceptable, but if the student population is multilingual, translations should be avoided to prevent that the students who do not understand the language being used to translate feel as outsiders. Another strategy that can be used to teach vocabulary can be the use of antonyms and synonyms. This technique has been implemented in language classrooms to teach new words to learners and it is a very useful strategy to enrich learners' vocabulary. First of all, it is relevant to mention that the English language has the largest number of words among all the languages in the world, and this is the result of a large number of borrowings from other languages (S.I Hayakawa, 1994). However, even when using synonyms strategy to teach new words, teachers have to be aware because this approach can sometimes tend to confuse ELLs. For example, if one says, he found happiness in Montreal, it cannot be substituted for "he uncovered happiness in Montreal". On the other hand, if one uses the same word in a different context, it will be possible to use the synonyms substitution. Example, in the sentences, he found the thief, instead of he uncovered the thief. In both cases, the meaning that the phrase conveys is the same.

2.2. Strategy for teaching synonyms

When teaching synonyms teachers must consider the different varieties of English used in different countries. Therefore, language teachers must have into consideration that words used in British English, are not used in American English, even when they have the same meaning, therefore, it is recommendable to be cautious about this difference, so ELL learners avoid getting confused with words that are used in other varieties of English. The following list of words, shows some of the difference between American and British English words with same meaning.

American English	British English
Truck	Lorry
Hood	Bonnet
Trailer	Caravan
Trash	Rubbish

Of course, the above list is not even the abc of the number of words one can list here to differentiate both varieties of English. Another factor that teachers should consider when teaching vocabulary is the number of words learners need to know in order to understand the spoken language. According to a study conducted by (Kucera and Francis, 1982), ELL learners will only need to know half the number of words they need to comprehend in written language. However, this cannot be taken for granted since spoken English is not always the same. One cannot assume that a person who understands the news, will be able to understand a lecture by Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinker or any professor who uses a large number of abstract and sophisticated words in his or her speech to deliver a lecture. Furthermore, an ELL learner who is not familiar with the content of the lecture, and the lexicon being used to deliver it, will find it very hard to understand the message the speaker tries to convey. Moreover, another factor that must be considered for the language learner to understand the lecture, will be his or her background knowledge on the subject that the speaker is dealing with. If the ELL learner is an adult who holds a degree in medicine from his or her native country and the lecture

being delivered is on medicine, the chances for this learner to understand are greater than for anyone who does not have any background in medicine.

2.3. Context clue strategy

An advantage that English language learners have when listening or reading is that they do not need to understand every single word they read or listen to, since they can grasp the main ideas of the text by using context clues. According to David Mendelsohn, professor of linguistics at York University in Toronto, it is recommendable to teach students to infer and predict when they face these types of situations. As a result, it is also relevant to teach English Language Learners how to guess the meaning of the words they do not know by using context clues (Mendelsohn, 1994).

3. LEARNING VOCABULARY THROUGH READING

Another approach that is used to teach and learn vocabulary is through exposure to reading. The vocabulary learning hypothesis presented by Wagy and Herman, states that the majority of words ESL learners learn depends on the exposure they have with these words (Nagy and Herman, 1985). Coady, James & H. Thomas, (1997) also support this theory, by stating that learners who achieve high proficiency level in reading, will acquire most of the words by reading instead of explicit instruction. On the other hand, Schmitt shows evidence that using the reading approach only, will take too much time for the learners to acquire the needed vocabulary. He based his argument on study conducted by Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. (2001), that estimates that a learner will have to read 8 million words or read over 400 novels in a year to increase the number of words to 2000 (Schmitt, 2000). However, based on this criterion, ESL/EFL teachers cannot expect that just by having the students read will do their work; as a result, it is recommendable to teach explicit vocabulary strategies and techniques, so ELLs can advance and enrich their vocabulary repertoire. Teaching explicit words will also help learners to develop their language proficiency, and acquire the academic vocabulary that will allow them to comprehend academic textbooks in middle, high school and college. On the other hand, to expect that ELLs will read so many novels is irrational, since teachers know that ELLs will not be able to read this number of novels in a school calendar year. In fact, teachers will be lucky if they have the learners read more than six novels in a school calendar year. Consequently, Schmitt, recommends not to rely on incidental learning as the main source for teaching words. In addition, he also suggests that this reading can be used to reinforce words that learners have partially learned (Schmitt, 2010).

Hence, teachers should not expect that ELLs will learn all the words they need to function in an academic environment just by reading texts. As a result, it is recommendable to teach explicit strategies, so ELLs can learn words explicitly, and enhance their lexicon. In fact, these learners will benefit more when the teacher presents words explicitly, and at the same time, they can learn the grammatical function of the words. A clear example can be used when teaching adjectives and adverbs. The teacher can introduce a list of adjectives that end in the morpheme ed. This strategy will help learners to develop metalinguistic awareness, and avoid confusion when they see regular verbs used in the past tense with the morpheme ed. Example of these adjectives can be amused, concerned, fascinated, surprised, thrilled, etc. In addition, it is even better if the teacher provides the students with the opportunity to write

sentences with these adjectives, since this will help them to learn how to use these words in context. Another strategy that can be used to learn and develop vocabulary awareness is by introducing morphemes. A clear example can be used with the suffix (ing), this suffix can be used to form adjectives, such as: amusing, concerning, fascinating, surprising, thrilling, etc. By teaching morphemes, ELLs will learn explicitly that morphemes can be used to form adjectives. Furthermore, this strategy can also be used when teaching adverbs. In English many adverbs are formed by adding the morpheme (ly); therefore, it can be beneficial for Ells whose first language is Spanish or French to know that ly is the equivalent of mente in Spanish and ment in French. They will learn the strategy faster if the teacher explains explicitly the equivalent in both languages. When applying this strategy, it is helpful to use translation, since it is feasible, and it will allow the learners to make an association with their native language, and they will be able to develop metalinguistic awareness in forming new adverbs ending in (ly), such as: slowly, quickly, carefully, easily, elegantly, gladly, etc.

It is a fact that a large number of linguists and researchers on reading and vocabulary learning do not agree on the different approaches and methods of teaching and learning new words. Krashen for example, opposes to direct vocabulary teaching, stating that vocabulary should be acquired and not taught by the use of rules (Krashen, 2013). To support his theory, he states that there are too many words to be learned in the language. Obviously, this is common sense, since the English language has millions of words, and no one can expect to learn them all at once, not even in an entire life. However, what Krashen fails to point out is that using "the reading only approach", does not guarantee that ESL learners will be able to learn all the words they need in a faster way.

4. VOCABULARY ACQUISITITION THROUGH STORY TELLING

Another idea, or strategy that Krashen proposes in an article published in the Iranian Journal of Language Teaching, is using story-telling and reading aloud to children, so they can acquire new words in the language. To affirm this theory, he appeals to a study conducted by (Krashen and Mason, 2004), where they concluded that the use of story telling is more effective to learn words faster than explicit vocabulary teaching and doing vocabulary activities. To support his research, Krashen cites the reading program Reach out and Read, designed to teach reading to children. Furthermore, to support this idea, he gives statistics of the result obtained in the program, stating that even though the children who participated in the study were from socio economical low class, the result was fairly good (krashen, 2013).

To support his proposal of story - telling and reads aloud approach, Krashen gives some reasons, stating that "reading aloud does not take so much time to prepare lessons, like teaching explicit vocabulary". He further argues that when reading aloud to children, one can also have the cooperation of family members, since most adults can read to the children, and it is a more pleasant activity than explicit vocabulary teaching. However, the problem with his preposition is that Krashen is citing a reading program that has been designed to teach children from age 3 to 6, but this does not mean that second language teachers can conduct the same approach when teaching academic vocabulary to senior high school or college ESL learners who can benefit from explicit vocabulary teaching. In addition, Krashen states that, "explicit vocabulary teaching focuses only on a restricted list of words", (p.37), and he also argues that stories also provide a grammar information.

Even though reading stories aloud to children sounds as a good strategy, since they need to listen to a role models or patters, so they can listen to the proper intonation and reading patterns, explicit vocabulary teaching must not be excluded from any reading course. In fact, in his article, Krashen focuses the attention in teaching children, and not adult learners, and it is also common sense that one size does not fit all. Moreover, research shows that ELLs have benefited from explicit vocabulary teaching, and they have enriched their vocabulary repertoire through explicit teaching (Archer and Hughes, 2010).

In addition, if children can acquire grammar from story-telling and read-aloud, evidence also shows that children and adults have acquired grammar from explicit grammar instruction. Indeed, all textbooks used in colleges and universities to teach grammar, include a great range of vocabulary learning, and evidence shows that ELLs have acquired and learned not only words, but also how to use the words in context. Example of these textbook is the series *Understanding English Grammar* by Betty S. Azar, which has been designed to teach explicit grammar. When ESL teachers use these textbooks to teach explicitly, ELLs learn not only the English grammar, but they also learn new words, and at the same time, they also learn how to place the words in the proper order; this also helps them to develop a better syntax and metalinguistic awareness in the target language (Azar and Hagen, 2009).

It is also relevant to address that contrary to Krashen, there are other authorities in the field of teaching literacy who advocate explicit vocabulary instruction. Two of these authorities, and authors of the book *Explicit Instruction: Effective and Efficient Teaching* are Anita Archer and Charles A. Hughes, who argue and give substantial evidence on how learners in general can profit from explicit vocabulary instruction. The authors give a clear example of explicit instruction by using decontextualized and contextualized instruction, a strategy that can be used to teach explicit vocabulary (Archer & Hughes, 2010). In their book, the authors present examples of explicit instruction to teach specific and discrete skills. However, Archer and Hughes state that, "concerns related to this element include the notions that teaching discrete skills trivializes education, that a reductionist approach i.e., explicit teaching of skills, ignores the whole child, and that processes such as reading are greater than the sum of their isolated parts (e.g., subskills of reading such as phonemic awareness or decoding" (p.20). Nevertheless, they disprove this concern by stating that evidence has proved the contrary. Based on statistics from the National Reading Panel (2000) the teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics to children have had a positive effect on students' reading skills. In addition, these statistics show that teaching phonic lessons helps children to read words in print, allowing them to develop accuracy and reading fluency, and at the same time, it helps them to develop reading comprehension skills (p. 20). Furthermore, the authors clearly argue that teaching the skill is not enough, since the learners must be allowed to have sufficient opportunities to use these skills in context, so they can practice the skills being taught. (Archer & Hughes, 2010). Contrary to Krashen who is known more as a theorist on language acquisition, Dr. Anita Archer can be observed in several videos that are available in Youtube.com, teaching explicit vocabulary lessons in real classrooms. Two example of these videos are Vocabulary Instruction and Vocabulary Instruction in Sixth grade English. In these videos, one can observe Professor Archer using effective strategies to teach explicit vocabulary to children.

5. CONCLUSION

Finally, it is clear that to continue teaching vocabulary explicitly from elementary school to college, does benefit both first and second language learners, and to limit learners from such benefit, will be to deprive them from the opportunity that teachers can provide, so these learners can enhance their lexicon. The evidences stated above, also prove that explicit teaching is effective in vocabulary learning, and teachers should not spouse to one approach or method only. In fact, teaching and learning must be perceived as mixed martial arts, which means that one should not be limited to one art only, but it is the mixed of all arts that produce better and more effective results. Therefore, when teaching vocabulary one cannot rely only on having students read texts but also teach the words explicitly. Language teachers must be eclectic, and not limit themselves to one approach or method, but use all possible approaches, strategies and methods that are useful and can produce results to improve the students' academic achievements.

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