


Raising Prospective Teachers' Awareness of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies in English Language Classroom

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Abstract: *The present study provides a coherent overview of vocabulary teaching and learning by raising prospective teachers' awareness of various strategies for presenting vocabulary and evaluating vocabulary acquisition, in classroom teaching of the prescribed textual content. The study, follows Schmitt's (1997) definition of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) and the key vocabulary learning strategies as adapted from his work, to understand and classify the learning strategies suggested by the prospective teachers. The conceptual content analysis helped to determine the existence and frequency of the VLS key strategies in the activities designed for teaching vocabulary by the prospective teachers. The study thereby responds to emerging vocabulary research trends that indicate that lexical acquisition needs to be treated differently based on the student's level and interests. The first-hand contributions of the prospective teachers highlight practical and pedagogical applications to teaching and learning vocabulary.*

Keywords: ELT, Teaching Strategies, Teaching Vocabulary, VLS, Vocabulary Acquisition

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1. Introduction

The acquisition of vocabulary is the most critical component of successful language learning. Vocabulary plays a vital role in determining one's general language proficiency. Furthermore, 'learners' achievement in the language skills listening, speaking, reading and writing relies on their vocabulary knowledge' (Richards and Renandya, 2002). Understanding the importance of vocabulary acquisition, various techniques and strategies have been developed over the years to teach vocabulary. But still, on actual ground teaching vocabulary seems a formidable challenge to teachers while integrating it seamlessly within their regular classrooms. With this, the present study provides a coherent overview of vocabulary teaching and learning by raising prospective teachers' awareness of various strategies for presenting vocabulary and evaluating vocabulary acquisition, in classroom teaching of the prescribed textual content. The study responds to emerging vocabulary research trends that indicate that lexical acquisition needs to be treated differently based on the student's level and interests. The first-hand contributions of the prospective teachers highlight practical and pedagogical applications to teaching and learning vocabulary.

Meaning and Need for Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to a set of words known and used by individuals. The knowledge of words is one of the key building blocks in learning a language. An enriched vocabulary repertoire is a positive indicator of gained language proficiency. 'Vocabulary acquisition is an important component of communicative competence and is a core element in language mastery' (Baharudin and Ismail, 2014). Vocabulary acquisition is closely linked with better reading comprehension and critical listening abilities. Fluency in speaking is also partly attributed to a rich vocabulary repertoire.

'Despite its important role in language learning, learners often identify vocabulary as the most challenging area' (Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020). A comprehensive understanding of a vocabulary item implies not just knowing its meaning and form but comprehending its appropriate usage. Enhanced literacy goes beyond the meaning and definition of words. 'Knowing a word involves understanding numerous aspects of vocabulary knowledge which is a multidimensional and complex construct' (Henriksen 1999; Nation 2001). It implies understanding the spelling and pronunciation, connotation, collocation, and grammar of the vocabulary item. This comprehensive

view of the word would help in mastering vocabulary and thereby enhance the language proficiency of a learner. ‘The average native speaker uses around five thousand words in everyday speech’ (*Presenting Vocabulary*, n.d.). With thousands of words to be mastered in the English language, teaching and learning vocabulary may seem to be a daunting task.

What to Focus on While Teaching Vocabulary

British Council's article titled *Presenting Vocabulary* examines what needs to be taught when teaching vocabulary. ‘It states that a student may need to know about the meaning and form (verb/noun etc), how the word is pronounced and how it is spelled, the connotations (neutral/positive/negative image) that the word may have, lexical sets, synonym & antonyms of the word, collocations that occur, what the affixes may indicate about the meaning and whether the word follows any unpredictable grammatical patterns’ (*Presenting Vocabulary*, n.d.). The meaning of the word may comprise the definition and dictionary meaning. It may also include how the word is related to others to get a better understanding of the various facets of the meaning. Knowing the accepted pronunciation and the spelling of the vocabulary item may prove problematic to the learners because of the very nature of the English language. A teacher needs to clarify how the word is pronounced and written, especially in relation to the differences with the learner's first language. The situations where certain vocabulary items are used in terms of formal and informal settings need to be explained with examples. Depending on the level of the learners the knowledge of the vocabulary item could be given in more breadth. The breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge have to be focused on while presenting a vocabulary item. The teacher needs to decide which aspects of a vocabulary item need to be highlighted at a given time while teaching the content at hand.



The Theory of Learning Vocabulary

Vocabulary language acquisition is the process to perceive and comprehend vocabulary learned as well as to produce and use these words in sentences to communicate through speaking and writing (Lightfoot, 2010). Knowing a vocabulary item entails much more than going beyond its meaning. Mastering a new word certainly involves such abilities as form recognition (pronunciation, spelling, derivations) and knowing its dictionary meaning. Knowledge of its specific grammatical properties, however, as well as the ability to use the word appropriately in certain contexts, and its functions (frequency and appropriateness), are all a necessary part of the vocabulary mastery process (Nation, 2001).

Learners across levels often find mastering vocabulary a challenging feat. Several explicit and implicit techniques and strategies, popularly known as vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), have been identified and developed to help learners acquire vocabulary. Catlan defines vocabulary learning strategies as, ‘knowledge about the mechanisms (processes, strategies) used in order to learn vocabulary as well as steps or actions taken by students (a) to find out the meaning of unknown words, (b) to retain them in long-term memory, (c) to recall them at will, and (d) to use them in oral or written mode’ (Catlan, 2003). Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) play a crucial role in language learning due to their contribution to helping learners develop independent language competence and self-development (Schmitt, 1997). Based on Schmitt’s work, there are four key strategies for vocabulary learning, which are divided into five sections; social, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and then activation as depicted in **Table 1**. The four strategies namely social, metacognitive, cognitive, and memory-based strategies lead to the activation and usage of these words in various contexts.

Social Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Memory Strategies	Activation
These involve learners participating in social activities. Key strategies include group work, asking teachers for clarification, and	These involve planning, thinking about learning, monitoring, and evaluating oneself. Key strategies include reading widely and listening to lectures to achieve maximum exposure	These involve thinking skills from context, using dictionaries, and repetition. Strategies include note-taking, word lists, flashcards, and glossaries in	These involve the processes of using the mind to enhance remembering. Key strategies include imagery, word association, grouping,	Usage of words in various contexts.

communicating outside the classroom.	to the language.	textbooks.	word class, and collocation.	
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Table 1: Vocabulary Learning Strategies, as adapted from Schmitt, N (1997)

In the present study, we shall follow Schmitt’s definition of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) and the key vocabulary learning strategies as adapted from his work, to understand and classify the learning strategies suggested by the prospective teachers.

Teaching Vocabulary

Each of the four skill areas of language learning, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing relate differently to vocabulary acquisition and usage. The skill area in focus will inform the pedagogy in classroom teaching. Generally based on the level of the learners and the skill area, the teacher highlights the aspects of the vocabulary item to be presented to the learners. The teacher could choose to teach the vocabulary items explicitly or implicitly. Ellis (1994) states that implicit vocabulary teaching-learning methods involve indirect or incidental learning, whereas explicit methods involve direct or intentional teaching.

British Council suggests, ‘lots of ways of getting across the meaning of a lexical item while presenting vocabulary to the learners in a classroom as mime, illustration, definition, context, translation, supplying the antonyms/ synonyms, gradable items’ (*Presenting Vocabulary*, n.d.). Depending on the vocabulary item to be presented in the class a combination of these techniques could be used to make vocabulary acquisition easy and memorable. Alternative ways to teach vocabulary could be using imagery, word extensions, and vocabulary games could be of great interest to the learners. Using the words in sentences, matching the meaning to the words and practicing pronouncing the word with their peers are popular activities to produce and practice the usage of vocabulary. ‘Preparing worksheets and asking your students to match words to definitions, asking students to classify a group of words into different categories, and finding new vocabulary from reading homework and teaching the other students in the class’ (*Presenting Vocabulary*, n.d.) could be few other alternative ways to teach vocabulary in the classrooms.

Developing awareness among teachers about the various vocabulary teaching techniques based on the understanding of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) is vital for effective vocabulary acquisition. The researcher believes that if this awareness is developed and accordingly training is given to the prospective teachers then it would certainly aid them in their future teaching careers and in the long run make the process of vocabulary acquisition easier for the learners.

2. Purpose of the Study

The present study provides a coherent overview of vocabulary teaching and learning by raising prospective teachers' awareness of various strategies for presenting vocabulary and evaluating vocabulary acquisition, in classroom teaching of the prescribed textual content. The study responds to emerging vocabulary research trends that indicate that lexical acquisition needs to be treated differently based on the student's level and interests. The objective of the study is to raise prospective teachers' awareness of various Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) in designing activities for teaching vocabulary in a language classroom.

3. Methodology Availed

Vocabulary instruction forms an important part of lesson planning. The prospective teachers studying the Methodology of Teaching English, in a two-year Teacher Education program (B. Ed) go through rigorous training in lesson planning with due orientation given in teaching learning vocabulary. The participants of the present study were 23 prospective teachers studying in the first year of this B. Ed program. Out of 23 participants, 22 were female and 1 was male. Post the orientation, the prospective teachers were asked to design creative activities to present vocabulary in their English language classroom. While designing the activity they had to consider the age group and level of the students, the language skill area focused on, and the context of the

textual content or lesson at hand. The activities designed and submitted by these prospective teachers were analyzed by the researcher alias the teacher educator with reference to the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) as adapted from Schmitt (1997).

4. Analysis

The activities designed by the prospective teachers for teaching vocabulary formed the primary data for the study. Content analysis of the designed activities was done to ascertain the presence of certain key strategies as adapted from Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies (1997). For the conceptual content analysis, the researcher evaluated the language used within the designed activities to analyze the purpose of the activity, the process involved, and its relationship to vocabulary acquisition. This helped to systematically and objectively identify special characteristics and code the texts in line with Schmitt's (1997) four key strategies for vocabulary learning, which are divided into five sections; social, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and then activation. The conceptual content analysis helped to determine the existence and frequency of the VLS key strategies in the text.

5. Results and Discussion

In the process of data analysis, the researcher used conceptual concept analysis of the text. The activities designed by the participant prospective teachers were examined for the presence of concepts related to the key learning strategies of vocabulary learning, which are divided into five sections; social, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and then activation. The main components of each of the five key language learning strategies, as mentioned in Table 1. were used to systematically classify the vocabulary teaching activities designed by the prospective teachers (N=23). The results of the analyzed data are given in **Table 2**.

Social Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Memory Strategies	Activation
Who is in the Hot Seat	Textual words- create perceived meaning	Give one word for a sentence	Guess the word from the pictures shown	Word Charts prepared by students
Pictionary- visual rendering	I spy- words from Articles	Flash cards with meaning	Topical Search- Guess the words	Break and make a word
What's the Good Word?	Newspaper/ Advertisement- Keywords	Maintain a Picture Dictionary	Newspaper sifting- alphabetical grouping	Frame sentences with the new word
Word Antakshari		Notebook- note taking of textual words, spellings etc	Flashcards- guess words and supply synonyms/ antonyms of it.	Notebook- Perceived meaning and Dictionary definition
Dumbsherads Who am I?		Word Banks	Lexical sets	Crossword Puzzles
Hangman				
Fish out the word				

Table 2: Classification of activities designed by participants for teaching vocabulary

The conceptual content analysis shows that most of the prospective teachers designed activities that cater to the components of social strategies, followed by Memory-based strategies of vocabulary learning strategies. The purpose and process involved in many activities show the presence of Cognitive strategies at work., while the least showed evidence of metacognitive strategies being put to use. There were quite a few activities designed to culminate into Activation where learners are expected to use vocabulary items in context. Majority of the activities that utilize social strategies are interactive vocabulary games, such as Pictionary, Dumbsherads, Hot Seat, Hangman, Fish out the Word etc. that include group work and communicating with peers across the whole classroom. Activities applying memory strategies such as Guess the Word based on the Pictures, Topical word searches and Flashcards with visuals enhance retention through imagery or word associations. While Newspaper

sifting employs the process of grouping. Cognitive strategies like maintaining a Picture Dictionary or a notebook with meanings, spellings etc. involve meaning-making from context and dictionaries and repetition. Very few activities such as I Spy and creating the perceived meaning of textual keywords employ metacognitive strategies where learners employ thinking about learning and evaluating themselves. Using Crossword Puzzles, forming sentences, and maintaining Word Charts aims to provide practice in the usage of words in context. The majority of the activities were interactive and based on a collaborative methodology of teaching.

6. Conclusion

The conceptual content analysis of the activities designed by the prospective teachers for teaching vocabulary helps to determine the existence and frequency of the key social, metacognitive, cognitive, memory, and activation strategies in the text. It bears evidence of the utilization of Vocabulary Learning Strategies as adapted from Schmitt (1997) while designing interactive and creative activities for presenting and evaluating vocabulary in language classroom teaching. We can thereby conclude that an awareness has been created among the prospective teachers regarding effective vocabulary teaching considering the various vocabulary learning strategies. The study suggests organizing training sessions for prospective teachers in incorporating metacognitive strategies in addition to other key learning strategies, as they will enable learners to develop independent language competence and self-reliant learning techniques. Teachers equipped with the knowledge of vocabulary learning strategies and a raised awareness of applying them in actual classroom teaching will make vocabulary language acquisition a fair task for learners across all levels.

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Conflict of Interest: author declares “No conflict of interest”.

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Akshata Samant (akshata.samant@gmail.com), Assistant Professor, GVM's Dr Dada Vaidya College of Education, Goa, is a qualified teacher educator, having over ten years of experience in the field of education, school, and at the B. Ed level. With interest spanning across teacher education, English language teaching, inclusive education, communication skills, and educational technology, her primary skills include developing innovative subject-based content solutions, and delivering pedagogy-based training sessions. Designing activity-based learning programs specially curated for teachers and educators is her forte.