Words: Are we really teaching them?
The case of two EFL teachers in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper discusses a short account of vocabulary instruction. It identifies some obstacles to the teaching and learning of English words and points out possible ways of addressing the obstacles. Moreover, actual classroom practices of two EFL teachers in Ethiopia were observed and examined with the state of the art in vocabulary instruction worldwide. Finally, some implications were drawn out for EFL practitioners.

Keywords: Vocabulary, vocabulary instruction, implicit instruction, explicit instruction, independent word-learning strategies.

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions and ideas, without which people cannot convey the intended meaning. Traditionally, the teaching of vocabulary above elementary levels was mostly incidental to the main purpose of language teaching, namely, the acquisition of grammatical knowledge (Furneaux, 1999, p. 368). According to Seal (1991, p. 296), there was even a period when too much vocabulary learning was regarded as a positively dangerous thing. This means even though learners have a rich repertoire of English words, they might not be able to produce coherent sentences to convey ideas.

In the area of second language research, the same neglect could be readily observed. Until approximately the late 1980s developments in research seemed to have neglected the area of vocabulary acquisition in the second language context. According to Meara (1984), the limited research in the area of vocabulary was caused by two major reasons. First, attention has been greatly focused on the grammatical element of language because this element was believed to be the most important basis to build linguistic theories. Second, appropriate models that can explain the acquisition of second language vocabulary were not available in the literature and this hindered better understanding of the role of vocabulary in second language teaching and learning.

However, the prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been recently recognised by theorists and researchers in the field. Accordingly, numerous types of approaches, techniques, exercises and practice have been introduced into the field to teach vocabulary (Brown & Hatch, 1995). Nowadays, it is widely accepted that vocabulary teaching should be part of the syllabus and taught in a well-planned and regular basis. Lewis (1993) argues that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching because 'language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar'.

According to Seal (1991, pp. 297–298), the importance of vocabulary in recent years has been elevated by three recent developments in the theory and practice of language teaching: the de-emphasis on grammar, the newly-placed emphasis on communication and the perceived needs of students of English for academic purposes. With the emergence of communicative language teaching, formal studies of language become de-emphasised and the view of language teaching as facilitating learners to communicate becomes fostered.

1.1. Obstacles to vocabulary instruction

To help students develop word knowledge in breadth and depth, as the National Reading Panel (2000) stated, teachers must first recognise some fundamental obstacles and then develop teaching practices to address those obstacles. The obstacles include:

1.1.1. The size of the task

The number of words that students need to learn is exceedingly large. Describing the immense difficulty faced by English language students in learning academic English, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) stated,

> The academic vocabulary challenge alone is overwhelming. Consider that high school students are expected to have a vocabulary of approximately 50,000 words to be able to master the increasingly complex coursework of high school (Graves, 2006; Nagy & Anderson, 1984) and the average student learns 3,000 new words each year. In 4 years, then, the average beginning ELL might learn 12,000 to 15,000 words without targeted interventions, falling far short of the 50,000-word goal (pp. 26–27).

1.1.2. The differences between spoken and written English

The vocabulary of written English, particularly the 'literate' English that students encounter in textbooks and other school materials, differs greatly from that of spoken, especially conversational English. Students—both English language learners and those for whom English is the first language may have limited exposure to literate English outside of the school (National Reading Panel, 2000).

1.1.3. The complexity of word knowledge

Knowing a word involves much more than knowing its dictionary definition and simply memorising a dictionary definition does not guarantee the ability to use a word in a different context. An important complicating factor in describing vocabulary learning is the fact that students' word learning is not simply an on/off switch but rather a matter of degree and even type of knowledge. As Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) stated,

> *It is not the case that one either knows or does not know a word. In fact, word knowledge is a rather complex concept. . . . The extent of knowledge one may have about individual words can range from a little to a lot, and . . . there are qualitatively different kinds of knowledge about words (p. 9).*

Adding to the complexity is the fact that different kinds of words place different demands on learners. To know a word, students need to encounter it in a different context and see how its meaning relates to the words around it and how it relates to the other words that might have been used in its place.

1.2. Components of effective vocabulary instruction: Addressing the obstacles

Instruction in vocabulary involves far more than looking up words in a dictionary and using the words in a sentence. According to Graves (2000), components of an effective vocabulary programme include:

1. Encouraging students' wide or extensive independent reading to expand their word knowledge,
2. Incorporating explicit instruction for specific words to enhance comprehension of texts containing those words,
3. High-quality oral language and
4. Instruction in independent word-learning strategies.

1.3. State of the art in vocabulary instruction

According to Hunt and Beglar (2002), vocabulary is acquired incidentally through indirect exposure to words and intentionally through explicit instruction in specific words and word-learning strategies.

1.3.1. Implicit (Incidental) vocabulary instruction

Incidental learning is learning vocabulary as a by-product of doing other language activities, for example, reading and writing. As reviewed by Hunt and Beglar (2002), several studies have confirmed that extensive reading and listening contribute to incidental vocabulary learning.

1.3.2. Explicit instruction of specific words

Explicit instruction of specific words and their meanings can contribute greatly to the student's vocabulary development, in particular, and their knowledge of the language, in general. Allen (2006) stated five possible reasons for incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction in her teaching:

> *I found at least five reasons I needed to incorporate this type of direct vocabulary instruction: to increase reading comprehension; to develop knowledge of new concepts; to improve range an specificity in writing; to help students communicate more effectively and to develop deeper understanding of words and concepts of which they were partially aware (p. 11).*

To deepen students' knowledge of word meanings, specific word instruction should be robust (Beck et al., 2002). Explicit vocabulary instruction is critical for English language learners because students encounter different key technical terms that are difficult to understand.

1.3.3. Independent word-learning strategies

Independent word-learning strategies are strategies that teachers can teach their students so as to help them figure out the meanings of unknown words on their own. Because students learn most new words incidentally, through wide reading, helping students to acquire a set of word-learning strategies is important to their vocabulary development. Key word-learning strategies include the efficient use of the dictionary; the use of word parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots and compounds) to unlock a word's meaning and the use of context clues.

2. Research methodology

As it deals with the case of two English language teachers' vocabulary teaching practice to improve their student's word knowledge, the type of research design is termed as a Case Study design. Two grade 9 English language teachers of Wondo Genet Secondary School were selected as the study samples by using convenient sampling technique. To gather the necessary data for the study, I observed two vocabulary lessons of the sample teachers. Moreover, pre- and post-observation interviews were conducted with the teachers. I analysed the collected data qualitatively after transcribing the interview data and the classroom observation note.

3. Data analysis and interpretation

In this section, I tried to qualitatively analyse and interpret the data collected through the pre-observation interview, the classroom observation and post-observation interview.

4. Pre-observation interview

Before observing the actual teaching–learning process, I met the two sample teachers and asked their informed consent to be observed. They replied:

Teacher A: … you can, but no audiovisual recordings!

Teacher B: Emmm… you can, but, isn't it better if you observe my grammar class…

The Researcher: I want to see your vocabulary teaching practice

It can be deduced from the pre-observation interview that the teachers do not want to be observed while teaching vocabulary. Especially, Teacher B gives more emphasis for the teaching of grammar than vocabulary. On the contrary to this fact, Harmer (1991) asserts that teachers should have the same kind of expertise in the teaching of vocabulary as they do in the teaching of the structure.

5. The classroom observation

In the classroom observation, I tried to see what the two teachers actually did in their English language classes. The lesson they taught was the vocabulary section of chapter eight of the students' textbook which is entitled 'Increase your word power: Money and finance'.

5.1. Teacher A

The first teacher, who is named *Teacher A* for the purpose of this paper, started teaching his lesson by greeting the students. Then, he asked them to take out their textbooks and deal with the first exercise. Hereunder, are some extracts from the classroom interaction between the teacher and the students.

Teacher A: students please be seated in a group of three and then open your textbooks on page 96. Now try to answer the questions under 8.4—one.

(students started working the exercise in groups while the teacher was writing the questions on the blackboard)

After some minutes, the teacher asked the students to reflect on the questions.

Teacher A: now, who can tell me the answer to the first question?

(some four students raised their hands and one was given the chance)

Student: the bank is the office of saving our money.

Teacher A: yeah, you're right… very good!… Now let's go to the second question… who can answer the second question?

The question and answering continued until the last question. Finally, the teacher wrote the answers to the questions from the teachers' guidebook on the blackboard.

After completing the first activity, the teacher proceeded to the next task which asks the students to study a list of words with their definitions. Here, the teacher ordered the students to copy the list of words with their definitions on their exercise books and study them. And then, the teacher told the students that they will have a quiz on their next meeting.

On the contrary, the literature does not support this kind of vocabulary instruction. As Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) state, in the past, vocabulary instruction most often consisted of learning lists of words and definitions with a test on Friday. However, now it is well known that such instruction is of limited value in improving students' word knowledge.

5.2. Teacher B

The second teacher, who is named *Teacher B* for the purpose of this paper, as Teacher A does, started teaching his lesson by greeting the students. Then, he asked them to take out their textbooks and copy the first exercise on their exercise books. Hereunder, are some extracts from the classroom interaction between the teacher and the students.

Teacher B: Good afternoon students… open your textbooks on page 96.

(the students did what their teacher order them)

Teacher B: have you opened?

Students: yes, teacher!

Teacher B: ok, good. Now, write down the questions 1–5 on your exercise books and I will give you the answers.

After the students have copied the questions, though the textbook asks the students to answer the questions in groups, without giving them any chance to work on the exercise, the teacher dictated them the answers orally from the teachers' guide.

Next, going on to the second task, the teacher told the students to study the listed words and their definitions and proceeded to the next grammar lesson. As his classroom practice indicated, Teacher B

emphasised the teaching of grammar than vocabulary but the reverse should be done. Strengthening this view, Wilkins (1972) states the importance of vocabulary by saying 'Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.'

6. Post-observation interview teachers A and B

After the classroom observation, the two teachers were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their way of vocabulary teaching. Both of the teachers responded that they teach vocabulary effectively. Though they say that they teach vocabulary effectively, they don't even know the existence of different techniques except the traditional ones (synonyms and antonyms). The researcher also observed the same problem during the classroom observation. Hereunder, are some extracts from the post-observation interviews of the two teachers.

6.1. Teacher A

The researcher: how do you evaluate your vocabulary instruction?

Teacher A: I think my vocabulary lesson was good, I am doing well.

The researcher: do you think that we should teach vocabulary? and why?

Teacher A: yes, because if students know a large number of words they can easily express their ideas in English.

6.2. Teacher B

The researcher: how do you evaluate your vocabulary instruction?

Teacher B: I think it's good.

The researcher: do you think that we should teach vocabulary? and why?

Teacher B: no, because students can develop their vocabulary by themselves.

On the contrary to what Teacher B believes, Nation (2002) states that vocabulary growth is such an important part of language acquisition that it deserves to be planned for, deliberately controlled and monitored. Vocabulary learning is thus not to be left to look after itself.

Because Teacher B said students can develop their word knowledge by themselves, I asked him 'how'? and he replied:

Teacher B: by using their dictionaries, by the way, if you see the textbook itself, most of the vocabulary activities are games. This shows that it's not important to teach vocabulary.

However, Stahl (1999) points out the fact that a number of oral and written word games can serve to promote word consciousness, including puns, limericks, Hink-Pinks, crossword puzzles, jokes, riddles and anagrams.

7. Conclusions

In sum, EFL practitioners need to contextualise their vocabulary instructions instead of forcing the learners to memorise a list of words and their definitions as a means of teaching and assessing vocabulary knowledge of the students. Moreover, it is reasonably helpful to make the students active participants in the teaching–learning process. Above all, teachers should change their belief that vocabulary is incidental to language teaching, and they should give the proper emphasis for the teaching and learning of words in their English language classrooms.

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Biography

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