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Vocabulary Teaching Techniques: A Review of Common Practices

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Abstract

Abundantly clear though the need for effective eclectic techniques for enhancing learners' vocabulary learning strategies may seem, in practice, language instructors, by all accounts, tend to resort to only a few obsolete ones. This review paper aims to provide a brief account of practices in vocabulary teaching and learning by focusing on the research on teaching words in context and out of context as well as incidental and intentional vocabulary learning.

Keywords: vocabulary teaching, context, incidental, intentional

1. Introduction

In the last 25 years interest in vocabulary learning and acquisition has been resumed. There are many aspects of vocabulary learning and acquisition which have been investigated in different areas of research being done on the topic. In spite of this fact, many students still use traditional methods to learn English vocabulary, such as rote memorization, learning new words through teachers' explicit instruction, reciting from word lists, and so forth.

Moreover, most English teachers in schools, colleges, and institutes still employ traditional strategies to teach vocabulary, such as giving list of English words with their equivalents in native language, letting students recite new words, writing sentences with target vocabularies, explaining the meaning of vocabulary in native language, repeating vocabulary, and making students do plenty of vocabulary exercises. These methods of learning and teaching English vocabulary can be labeled intentional learning, or, explicit learning. These methods are directly focused on the word to be learned without relating it to a context (Schmitt, 2000).

2. The Definition of Vocabulary

At first, it seems necessary to provide a clear definition of the term vocabulary. Different definitions may be given for the term vocabulary regarding different viewpoints. However one can generally define vocabulary as the knowledge of words and word meanings. Or someone else may define vocabulary as a list of words arranged in alphabetical order with their definitions. A word, in most linguistic analyses, is described as a set of properties, or features, each word is the combination of its meaning, register, association, collocation, grammatical behavior, written form (spelling), spoken form (pronunciation) and frequency. To master a word is not only to learn its meaning but also to learn seven other aspects. All these properties are called word knowledge (Schmitt, 2000).

Although these definitions seem straightforward, vocabulary is more complex than these definitions suggest. Words can come in oral form such as those used in listening and speaking or the can come in print form such as those words that we recognize and use in reading and writing. Furthermore word knowledge also comes in two forms, receptive and productive. Receptive vocabulary includes words that we recognize when we hear or see them. Productive vocabulary includes words that we use when we speak or write. Receptive vocabulary is typically larger than productive vocabulary, and may include many words to which we assign some meaning, even if we do not know their full definitions and connotations – or ever use them ourselves as we speak and write (Kamil & Hiebert).

Schmitt (2000) says that word meaning consists of the link between the word and its referent, and the latter means the person, thing, action, and situation. The dictionary meaning of a word is the basic meaning. However, a word can have extra meanings in different texts. In addition, there are some associations between words. According to Aitchison (2003), there are four categories of associations. The first one is coordination: words cluster together on the same level of detail.

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For example: boxing, skateboarding, football are stored together, belonging to the group of *sport*, opposites also belong to this kind, for example: lazy and smart.

The second one is super-ordination: some words cover other words which are subordinate to the upper ones. For example: when people mention the word animal, others can easily associate to cat, goat, horse, dog, and so on. The third one, synonymy: words having the same or similar meanings are stored together. For example, happy and glad, surprise and shock tend to appear together. The last one, collocation: some words are usually stored together to collocate each other. For example, black and white, salt water, bright red are usually matched together based on people's habit of actual use.

Based on what was said about the nature of vocabulary, it can be concluded that all of those which are concerned somehow with language teaching or learning should develop methods a full command of vocabulary on the part of learners.

3. Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

One of the elements which learners need in order to be able to function in a second language is vocabulary. It has always been an essential element of language teaching, and after a long period of relative neglect, it is now widely recognized as such. This has partly been due to a period of sustained attention and research which picked up momentum in the early 1990s. From this time, a number of influential books focusing on vocabulary were published (Bogaards & Laufer, 2004; Coady & Huckin, 1997; Folse, 2004; Nation, 1990, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997).

Learning vocabulary is likely to be one of the biggest challenges that student will face in their studies. Among all language skills vocabulary learning is as significant in language learning as its challenging. As Wilkins puts it without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed (Wilkins, 1972). Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learners Lack of vocabulary knowledge will result in lack of meaningful communication (Boyd Zimmerman, 1997).

The vocabulary field has been especially productive in the last two decades. We have seen a number of classic volumes on theories (Carter, 1987; Carter & McCarthy, 1988; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990), research (Arnaud & Bejoint, 1992; Gass, 1987; Meara, 1989; Nation & Carter, 1989), and practical tips (Gairns & Redman, 1986; McCarthy & O'Dell, 1994). Recent volumes, especially the CUP volumes, that shed significant light upon different aspects of vocabulary acquisition include Huckin, Haynes, and Coady (1993), Harley (1995), Hatch and Brown (1995), Coady and Huckin (1997), Schmitt and McCarthy (1997), Atkins (1998), Wesche and Paribakht (1999), Read (2000), Schmitt (2000), and Nation (2001).

National middle school association (NMSA, 2008) in its research summary on Vocabulary Teaching and Learning across Disciplines asserts that vocabulary is at the heart of general language development and conceptual learning and is, therefore, a critical aspect of curricular programs in all disciplines. In its research summary, it highlights relevant studies that support several key understandings of vocabulary learning and teaching. In its summary it emphasizes that word knowledge is important for learning, and it is complex. It also stresses that Metacognition is an important aspect of vocabulary learning, and Effective vocabulary instruction moves beyond the definitional level of word meanings, it also focuses that vocabulary learning occurs implicitly in classrooms across disciplines, and it also occurs through direct instruction. Finally it lists them as the six key understandings for all teachers across age levels and content areas.

According to Nation (2001), vocabulary acquisition includes three processes, namely noticing, retrieval, and creative (generative) use. An explanation of each follows:

The process of Noticing involves learner's detection of a given word and marking it as an unknown. A crucial point, however, is that the learner at the same time realizes she/he has come across the word before, but it was used differently, and most importantly the learner becomes familiarized with a new context, as well as he/she wishes to learn a particular word. Moreover, the learner will tend to decontextualize the word the moment she/he notices it, which in turn will provide foundation for better understanding of the word. The process of decontextualization takes place either consciously or subconsciously in a variety of ways. For instance, it occurs while listening or reading exercises, when the teacher highlights a particular word, while negotiating meaning in speaking exercises, or when the teacher provides learners with an explanation of the word, be it translation, giving a synonym, or target language definition.

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While the noticing directs the learner toward learning the word, the retrieval, the second process of vocabulary acquisition distinguished by Nation, reinforces the meaning of the word in the learner's mind. The more frequent the retrieval of a particular item in a learning process, the greater the chances that the item will strike deeper in the learner's memory. Thus, repetition and retrieval of the word extend its meaning, or definition, and repetitive exposure to and use of it will lead the learner to understanding of each meaning of the word he/she encounters.

Nevertheless, the span of time between encounters cannot be too long. If the learner is not able to recall encountering the word in the past, she/he finds herself/himself at the initial stage of the learning process. Nation (2001) states that it is very useful to try to estimate how much listening and reading a learner would need to be doing per week in order for incidental receptive vocabulary learning to proceed in an effective way .On average learners would need to listen to stories at least three times a week for about fifteen minutes each time. They would need to read about one graded reader every two weeks.

The last process of vocabulary acquisition in Nation's classification is that of the creative or generative use. It takes place when "previously met words are subsequently met or used in ways that differ from the previous meeting with the word" (Nation, 2001). Those new encounters push learners toward reconceptualization of their knowledge of these words.

4. Learning Vocabulary in Context and out of Context

Teaching and learning vocabularies in and out of context are two different methods in teaching words in second or foreign language learning. Language professionals do not agree on the superiority of one of them and the conflict still exists among them. There are many language professionals who strongly agree that contextualized vocabulary learning is more effective than learning words in lists. For example, Oxford and Scarcella (1994) observe that while decontexutalized learning (word lists) may help students memorize vocabulary for tests, students are likely to rapidly forget words memorized from lists.

McCarthy (1990) argues that a word learned in a meaningful context is best assimilated and remembered. In the field of second or foreign language teaching and learning there are still more studies which have investigated the role of context in learning words, and have examined the effectiveness of contextual learning and focusing on ways readers guess the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Nist and Olejnik (1995) studied their subjects' abilities to learn and remember new vocabulary depending on the strength of context and adequacy of definition. They found out that there was no interaction between levels of context and levels of definitions. Adequate definitions positively influenced performance on vocabulary measures regardless of the strength of the context provided. Moreover, context helped learners' performance when they saw a word in context and then looked at its definition on a multiple-choice test.

Prince (1996) looked at weak and advanced learners when examining two conditions, L1 translation (learning words in pairs) and context use, in terms of the performance of learners in accessing and using the learned materials. Translation condition subjects examined 44 English words accompanied by their French equivalents, while context condition subjects looked at sentences in English with one unknown word per sentence. Thus, context condition provided no translation or definition. Learners were tested in two ways: by translating isolated words in the L2-L1 direction and by filling the blank in sentences. Results revealed that translation learning was superior in terms of quantity (number of correct answers) for both weak and advanced learners. Weak learners outperformed advanced ones where learning by translation was tested by translation, while the advanced learners who learned through context did slightly better on the sentence completion test than on the translation test.

One of the issues which is of utmost importance in teaching words in context is guessing. There are also various studies which have investigated second language learners' guessing from context. Bensoussan and Laufer (1984), for example, studied second language learners' levels of proficiency and word guessability from the context. Sixty first-year students were given a list of 70 words to translate into their first language. A week later, they were given the same list with a text containing all 70 words followed by comprehension questions. Bensoussan and Laufer conclude that level of proficiency has no effect on the ability to guess meanings of unfamiliar words. They also concluded that word guessability is less a function of using context than of applying "preconceived notions" about the meanings of words.

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Still in another study with second language learners, Li (1988) examined the effects of cue adequacy on inferring and remembering the meanings of new words in discrete, semantically disconnected sentences. He compared the effects of cue adequacy in both reading and listening contexts. He found that subjects receiving cue-adequate sentences reported greater ease in inferring and remembering the meanings of unfamiliar words in context, in contrast to those receiving cue-inadequate sentences. Also, subjects reading the sentences, in contrast to those listening to them, scored higher in both inferring and remembering contextual meanings of unfamiliar words. In the same vein, Na and Nation (1985) saw that words in a high density text (1 unknown word in 10) were more difficult to guess than words in a low density text (1 word in 25).

There are also some studies which show the ineffectiveness of teaching words in context in comparison with other methods. Akbari (2008) investigated the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary items through pictures and contextualization to elementary Iranian EFL students. In the study in one class vocabulary items were presented through pictures, and in the other class they were used in contexts and model sentences. In the third class, control group, the new words were presented through definitions and synonyms. Analysis of the results in the posttest revealed significant differences between picture group and context group, on the one hand, and between these groups and the control group, on the other hand. The results showed that though both picture and context enhanced vocabulary development of the learners, picture seemed to be better than context. That is, picture group outperformed the other two groups significantly.

Of the decontextualized vocabulary memorization strategies, mnemonic and non-mnemonic elaboration techniques involving deep semantic processing of target words have been shown to be more effective than memorization strategies involving only shallow processing, such as oral rote-repetition (Atkinson & Raugh, 1975; Cohen & Aphek, 1981; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985; Pressley & Levin, 1978; Pressley, Levin, & McCormick, 1980).

The Keyword Method remains largely unpopular with both teachers and learners because of the effort involved in memorizing words in this manner. In addition, critics question the usefulness of a technique that has been consistently shown to enhance retention of concrete words that can be perceived visually - e.g. table, but which has been shown not to be as effective with abstract words such as peace (Hulstjin, 1997). Non-mnemonic elaboration techniques, such as semantic mapping and ordering, encourage learners to process target words in terms of their semantic properties. 'Semantic mapping' involves brainstorming associations that a word has and diagrammatically displaying the results. 'Ordering' is a technique that asks learners to organize scrambled lists of words, forcing them to distinguish differences in meaning during the arrangement process (Sökmen, 1997).

The Sentence Writing Method (also known as the Sentence Generate Method) is recommended by reading researchers as a way to increase vocabulary learning, and involves having learners construct a sentence containing the target word to be memorized (Dale, O'Rourke, & Bamman, 1971; Gipe, 1979 as cited in Pressley et al. 1982). Using this method, learners are asked to not just restate the definition of the target word in the generated sentence but to construct a sentence from which the meaning of the word can be inferred.

In a more recent study Hatime Çiftçi, and Sema Üster (2009) conducted a study on the subject of "A comparative analysis of teaching vocabulary in context and by definition." In their study they instructed words in two different techniques; one of which is teaching vocabulary in discourse and context whereas the other is teaching words by providing only the word definitions. After conducting the study they found that there was not a statistically significant difference in post-test scores of the two groups. As a result, they concluded that presenting the target vocabulary items in context and by definitions does not make a remarkable difference in terms of overall performance.

5. Intentional and Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Intentional vocabulary acquisition is memorizing straightforwardly term after term with their respective translations from a list. Intentional learning is quick and therefore usually preferred by learners, but it is also superficial. Learners encounter vocabulary in an isolated, often infinitive form and remain incapable of using it correctly in context. Moreover intentionally learned vocabulary sinks faster into oblivion. Didactically recommendable vocabulary acquisition exposes learners comprehensively to every term, embedding it deeply and solidly in the mental lexicon (Aitchison, 2003).

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Incidental vocabulary acquisition, namely through contextual deduction in target language reading, meets these recommendations. Learners encounter terms together with syntactic information, which helps using the accurate words in an idiomatic way. Vocabulary in context often appears repeatedly under different aspects and hence engrains in the learners minds. Unfortunately it takes long until enough vocabulary for fluent conversations is incidentally gathered (Tom Cobb, 1999).

Hossein Shokouhi (2009) in his article on the subject of "learners' incidental vocabulary acquisition: a case on narrative and expository texts" emphasizes that the literature on incidental vocabulary acquisition has witnessed a great diversity of, and sometimes controversial, views held by various researchers. These controversies principally arise from the complex nature of incidental learning and its application in L2 learning enterprise generally and incidental vocabulary acquisition in particular.

Incidental and intentional learning have been naively taken to be used interchangeably and have become indistinguishable from implicit and explicit learning, respectively (Hunt & Beglar, 2005). It seems beneficial firstly distinguish incidental from intentional learning and then we deal with incidental vs. implicit and intentional vs. explicit distinctions which are more complicated and subject to many misunderstandings.

Shokouhi (2009) explains that the distinction between incidental and intentional learning, according to Ellis (1999), is based on the distinction between focal and peripheral attention. To him, "intentional learning requires focal attention to be placed deliberately on the linguistic code (i.e., on form or form-meaning connections)," while "incidental learning requires attention to be placed on meaning (i.e., message content) but allows peripheral attention to be directed at form" (pp. 45-46). Therefore, any learning, whether intentional or incidental, can only take place with some degree of attention (Schmidt, 1994). By the same token, Hulstijn (2003) claims that intentional or incidental learning requires some attention and noticing. However, attention is deliberately directed at committing new information to memory in the case of the former whereas the involvement of attention is not deliberately geared to an articulated learning goal in the case of the latter.

Gass (1999) introduces factors that are involved in learning vocabulary in a schematic representation that also captures the difference between incidental and intentional learning. The continuum that she portrays, as shown in Figure 2 below, suggests that words are more likely to be learned incidentally if (a) there are recognized cognates between the native and the target languages, (b) there is significant L2 exposure, or (c) other L2 related words are known.

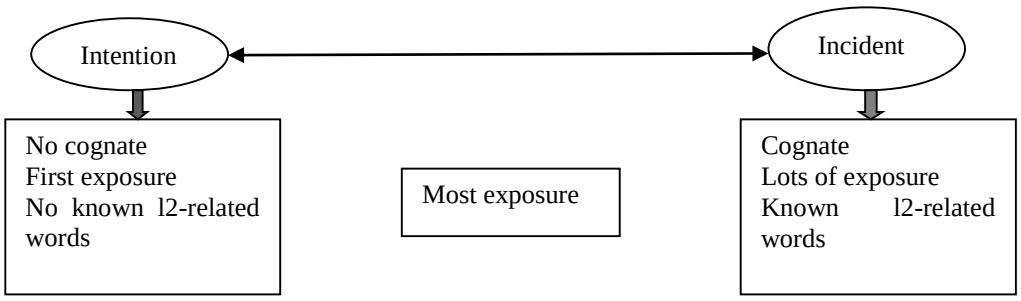


Figure1. Incidental and intentional learning (Gass 1999, p. 322)

Reider (2003), relying on Schmidt's (1990) and Ellis's (1994b) definitions of the concept of 'consciousness,' attributes all these confusions regarding the difference between implicit and incidental learning to the inconsistent use and unclear status of this term noted by various researchers in the literature. Based on the interpretation of the term consciousness, Reider is said to argue the types of incidental learning that can take place. That is, if we equate consciousness with intentionality, then the absence or presence of consciousness will lead to incidental and intentional learning. In a similar vein, if we consider consciousness as awareness, then we will have explicit learning in the presence of consciousness and implicit learning in its absence

According to these definitions, the term implicit will be equated with 'non-consciousness' in the sense of 'unawareness', while incidental will be equated with 'un-intentional' (without any restrictions as to the role of

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awareness). Reider (2003) finally concludes that "incidental learning as being composed of implicit learning processes (which happen without the learner's awareness) and/or of explicit learning processes (which take place without learning intention but nevertheless involve online awareness and hypothesis formation)." (See the diagram below for more clarification).

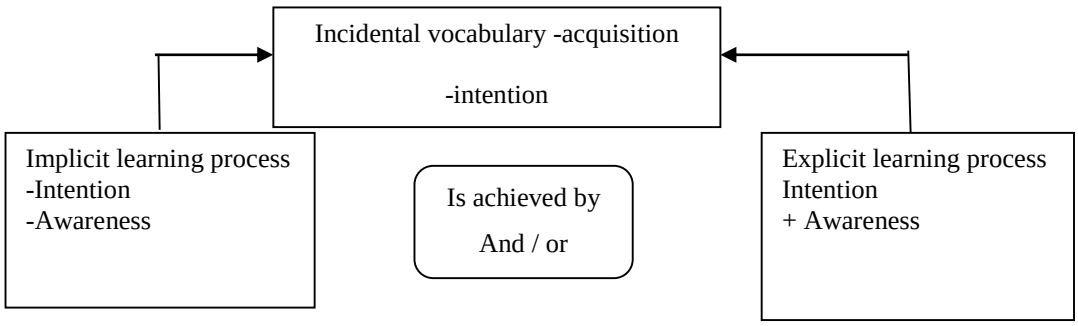


Figure2. Incidental vocabulary acquisition as a process involving implicit and/or explicit learning (Reider 2003, p. 28).

On the subject of incidental learning, larger and more carefully controlled studies have been conducted on native English speakers. For instance, Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) investigated the role of incidental learning from context in acquiring new vocabulary when reading passages of 1000 words or more. Grade 8 students were asked to read one of two different passages and were subsequently tested for the meanings of 30 target words in each passage. Full "adult meaning" from encountering the word in a single authentic context was found in 8% of cases in open-ended tests, and in 12% in multiple choice tests. A sensitive approach to the measurement of word meanings enabled the researchers to conclude that partial understanding was obtained in many more cases. While the probability of learning a word meaning from a single encounter was statistically small, the authors argued that it implied a great deal of learning over extended periods of silent reading. The passages in question took only 10 minutes to read. The gains shown were quite sufficient to account for at least a third of the 3000 words which are added to the average student's lexicon in one year.

Nagy et al. (1987) confirmed this finding in a similar study with different passages, and calculated that the better readers had a .26 to .42 probability of learning a word meaning from a single encounter in a meaningful context. Not all contexts are equal, of course, and the researchers showed that the likelihood of learning the unfamiliar words was greater when the context was informative, and the word repeated. Elaborating on these studies, Beck and McKeown (1991) have shown that the probability of vocabulary acquisition from silent reading is increased as the reader encounters the target word more often, and as the word meanings are elaborated in the surrounding context. It seems there is a substantial body of evidence both for first and second language learning; which support the fact that much of our vocabulary development is incidental.

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