

FACTORS AFFECTING THE VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN ESP

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The demand for ESP is undeniable as English continues to dominate as lingua franca of business, media, medicine, technology, education. One of the objectives of the work within ESP is to develop students' text comprehension skills in an academic environment, where some explicit teaching of specific vocabulary items goes together with some kind of strategy planning for improving and managing their learning, plus extensive reading, in order to gain the required exposure to lexis and build up word knowledge. In an ESP context, words (mainly specialized vocabulary) are expected to be used both productively (i.e. interactional communication of students in different settings) and receptively (i.e. students' comprehension or translation).

However learning a large number of vocabulary items is one of the greatest challenges facing learners in acquiring English. In this respect, the present article aims at reviewing the factors affecting the vocabulary acquisition process, and focuses on their nature and quality features.

The factors that may stand in the way of efficient vocabulary acquisition are numerous. Among the most frequent are: the heterogeneous proficiency level among students in the group which is problematic for both students and teachers for effective teaching, insufficiency of academic hours, failure to engage the students in extensive reading outside the classroom, the size of the class and a range of factors which affect students' attendance, and the resulting demotivation. Other factors affecting learnability may involve the teacher's decision as to how many lexical items should be learnt, and the choice of vocabulary instruction.

Some issues are to be taken into consideration when discussing what word knowledge is. This is often referred to as the quality or 'depth' of vocabulary knowledge, and is as important as vocabulary size. Nation [6, 6-19] proposes a three-dimensional model to describe a person's vocabulary knowledge which thus depends on the number of words known, the amount of knowledge present for each word (depth of knowledge), and how quickly the word can be used (automaticity). A lexical item might be considered as 'learned' once its form and meaning are known. While it is true that the form – meaning link is the first and most essential lexical aspect which must be acquired, and may be adequate to allow recognition, much more must be known about lexical items, particularly if they are to be used productively. Nation [5, 31] specified eight types of word knowledge:

- spoken form;
- written form;
- grammatical patterns;
- collocations;
- frequency;
- appropriateness;
- meaning;
- associations.

According to Laufer [3, 20-34], the intralexical factors that affect the learnability of lexical items include pronounceability (phonological or suprasegmental features), orthography, length, morphology, including both inflectional and derivational complexity that increase the vocabulary learning load, similarity of lexical forms (e.g. synforms, homonyms), grammar (i.e. part of speech), and semantic features (e.g. abstractness, idiomaticity and polysemy). While some of the aspects, such as word meaning and word form, are easy to acquire; some are difficult to capture (e.g. appropriateness and collocations). At the beginning of the learning process, the meaning-form link is most appropriate, but as the word becomes more established, other aspects should be included to master the lexical item better. The initial degree is the elementary knowledge, such as visual recognition of a lexical item in a context that still does not enable the students to produce it. Higher degrees of knowledge suggest knowledge of multiple meanings of a polysemous lexical item or its collocations.

Another key issue is how much vocabulary is necessary for enabling the comprehension. Nation [5, 288p.] posits that there exists a minimum level of vocabulary learners must reach in order to attain some level of comprehension. He states that to reach 95 % of academic text, a vocabulary size of around 4000 word families would be needed, consisting of 2000 high-frequency general service words, about 570 general academic words and 1000 or more technical words, proper nouns and low-frequency words.

The influence of the L1 on L2 vocabulary acquisition is also worth mentioning, because a L2 learner has already developed conceptual and semantic systems linked to the L1. And at least in its initial stages, vocabulary acquisition involves a mapping of the new lexical form onto an already existing conceptual meaning or translational equivalent in L1. The role of L1 in this process varies depending on the degree of equivalency between languages, although in some cases it may facilitate the acquisition or use of new lexical items, in others it will create an obstacle. Making cross-linguistic comparisons can often predict difficulties caused by the interference of the L1. However, these comparisons may fail and bring to erroneous conclusions because of the following reasons [8, 156-180]:

- lexical units in two languages are not exact equivalents;
- equivalent lexical units in related languages have different grammatical contexts;
- equivalents belong to different word classes;
- equivalents are false friends;
- there are no equivalents at all.

Coping with these problems may be overwhelming, and the students tend to avoid such lexical items; a possible explanation that Gass [2, 92-106] gives is that there is no foundation on which L2 knowledge may be built. Moreover, students' exposure to the language input is often limited to the classroom context, and though reading or listening in the target language do not guarantee the development of rich vocabulary, it can significantly expand it.

Another significant obstacle is the failure to engage in extensive reading. Although students quickly learn many of the high-frequency words that occur in teaching materials, they experience a breakdown in their ability to guess from context when faced with much lower frequency words found in unsimplified texts, because the low-frequency words make up a large proportion of such texts. So the reason is neither the lack of adequate reading strategies nor of grammatical knowledge, but the lack of sufficient vocabulary. Coady [1, 225-237] also refers to the fact that limited lexical knowledge discourages reading, and at the same time a lack of reading restricts vocabulary growth. Therefore, the need to provide students with a way to acquire as much lexis as possible in a short period of time is a key element to the development of their reading skills.

In the discussion of the factors influencing vocabulary learning of great significance is the role of teacher and vocabulary teaching strategies. Depending on the proficiency level and the given teaching situation, one of the several approaches may be the most effective in developing students' vocabulary. Coady [1, 225-237] for example, identifies four main positions on what he calls the vocabulary instruction continuum. The first of these- context alone, refers to incidental learning through context by extensive reading (listening) with no need for the direct teaching of vocabulary.

Strategy instruction is the second approach, the proponents of which agree that much of the vocabulary learning is through context but also believe that learners are unable on their own to acquire the large amount of vocabulary they need just by reading, listening, speaking or writing, no matter how meaningful they may be. As a result students should be taught explicit strategies, like mnemonic techniques, learning through association, keyword, analysis of word parts, for dealing with new vocabulary. This approach typically refers to advanced learners.

The third approach is rather similar to the second but emphasizes explicit teaching of specific vocabulary items at an early stage in the learning process as well as at later stages of development. Coady [1, 225-237] refers to this approach as 'development plus explicit instruction'. The last approach is what he calls 'classroom activities', which emphasize practical classroom activities of ten of grammar-translation kind with some communicative tasks. These could be used in any classroom and within any methodology.

In vocabulary teaching teachers can apply a host of strategies and activities. Which teaching strategy a teacher will employ depends on the time available, the content, as well as on its value for the learner. Seal [7, 296-312] distinguishes between unplanned and planned vocabulary teaching strategies. Unplanned teaching strategies relate to teachers' spontaneous reactions with the aim to help learners when the need arises, in which case teachers improvise. Planned vocabulary teaching refers to

deliberate, explicit, clearly defined and directed vocabulary teaching. It encompasses the use of teaching strategies, i.e. ways in which teachers introduce and present the meaning and form of new lexical items, encourage learners to review and practice, i. e. recycle what is known, and monitor and evaluate the level of acquisition of various components of lexical knowledge.

The scope of the vocabulary learning task, and the fact that many learners fail to achieve even moderate vocabulary learning goals, indicates that it can no longer be assumed that an adequate lexis will be simply picked up from exposure to language tasks focusing either on other linguistic aspects (e.g. grammatical constructions) or on communication alone (e.g. communicative language teaching). A principled approach needs to be taken in promoting vocabulary learning, which includes both explicit teaching and exposure to large amounts of language input, especially through extensive reading [4, 223-250].

To conclude, it needs to be admitted that achieving the goals of vocabulary instruction is not an easy matter. Starting from the assumption that language learning strategies are not the only determinant in vocabulary learning and acquisition, a number of other aspects were considered, such as the role of L1, the learning context, inherent linguistic features of lexical items. Even a well-planned vocabulary lesson based on contemporary principles cannot guarantee that students will acquire the vocabulary that is taught. Learning a vocabulary through formal instruction is a complex process influenced by a number of factors:

- the teacher's approach to vocabulary teaching (i. e. vocabulary teaching strategies);
- the effort invested by learners in vocabulary learning (i. e. vocabulary learning strategies) as well as their readiness to take responsibility for their own learning, and finally,
- the interaction of all the factors discussed above.

References

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Անփոփում

Ցանկացած մասնագիտական ոլորտում արդյունավետ աշխատանքի պահանջներից է համապատասխան բառապաշարի առկայությունը: Հոդվածի քննարկման առարկան է այն գործոնները, որոնք ազդում են բառապաշարի յուրացման և բառագիտական հմտությունների զարգացման վրա: