

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR BETTER COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH

กลวิธีการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์เพื่อประสิทธิภาพการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษ

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article was to suggest solutions to communication problems due to a limited vocabulary of Thai students studying basic English subjects at Sripatum University. It proposed effective strategies to increase students' vocabulary knowledge and gain communicative competence in English. This article was based on the results of the vocabulary problems summarized from a questionnaire given to students, classroom observations of students who could not express themselves well in 4 language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the literature related to vocabulary learning strategies. The results were described in students' communication problems because of restricted vocabulary.

This article proposed vocabulary learning strategies were suggested teaching to improve and develop vocabulary learning of students and concluded with the application of vocabulary learning strategies to teaching vocabulary.

KEYWORDS: Vocabulary, Language skills, Vocabulary learning strategies

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อเสนอแนะวิธีแก้ปัญหาการสื่อสารด้านภาษาของนักศึกษาที่เรียนวิชาพื้นฐานภาษาอังกฤษในมหาวิทยาลัยศรีปทุม รวมถึงการนำเสนอกลวิธีในการเพิ่มพูนความรู้คำศัพท์และความสามารถในการสื่อสารที่มีประสิทธิภาพซึ่งบทความนี้จัดทำขึ้นโดยอาศัยข้อสรุปจากแบบสอบถาม และการสังเกตนักศึกษาที่ประสบปัญหาในทักษะการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ 4 ด้านคือ การฟัง การพูด การอ่าน และการเขียน รวมทั้งวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวกับกลวิธีการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ ข้อสรุปได้แสดงถึงปัญหาในการเรียนภาษาของนักศึกษา เพราะความรู้จำกัดด้านคำศัพท์

อนึ่ง กลวิธีการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์และการประยุกต์การสอนคำศัพท์นี้ เป็นการนำเสนอวิธีการเรียนการสอน เพื่อปรับปรุงและพัฒนาการเรียนรู้อำนาจสำหรับนักศึกษาได้ต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: คำศัพท์ ทักษะการเรียนภาษา กลวิธีการเรียนคำศัพท์

Introduction

It is accepted that there is no language without words and words are the fundamental of a language. In fact language appears first as words. If speakers do not have enough words to use, they will not be able to express themselves in English. Vocabulary learning is an important part of learning a foreign language, in addition to grammar. "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed. Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins 1972:111). "Vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to the typical language learner" (Zimmerman 1997:5). Limit of vocabulary knowledge will result in limit of meaningful communication.

In Thailand, English is a foreign language. It is used for business and other communication purposes. However, Thai students study English from primary level to university a few hours a week. Communicative approach is being used nowadays but there are still many who teach English in a traditional way (Phentip, 2008). Teachers focus on teaching grammar and translating every English word into Thai language. Therefore, the result is not positive in terms of communicating in all 4 major areas

in English language: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Although there are a few exceptional students who can speak English satisfactorily, but communication is still limited because they do not have enough words that can be used to express their opinions, explain things, reason out, or participate in a discussion of current events or other topics.

Learning basic words is a stepping stone to increasing students' vocabulary to elementary, intermediate and advance level of words although it takes time to do this (McCarten, 2007). It is crucial to have a positive attitude to learn more vocabularies and how to use them both literally and contextually (Carter and McCarthy, 1988). A non-native English speaker needs to know an enormous amount of English words that communicate with other people around the world for business and other personal issues.

Students' Communication Problems

The following observations and the results of the vocabulary problems summarized from a questionnaire described students' attitudes, motivation, difficulties and performance in the classroom in relation to the use of

vocabulary.

1. Listening

Listening is a big problem of Thai students in communicating in English. Most of the students cannot understand the words and the pronunciation. English speakers have different accents, British and American English have different words for the same object. For example, football is used in British English and soccer in American English. Some native speakers talk slowly while others speak really fast. The normal speed of English speakers makes it difficult for Thai students to understand them. Moreover, limited vocabulary and its pronunciation is a big obstacle to students' listening skills development.

2. Speaking

Most students are shy to speak because they are afraid of making mistakes and they do not want to be embarrassed in front of the class. They speak because the teachers require them to do it. They are not very motivated to learn English because they do not see the need of it especially if they are not English majors. They look at their books and listen to their teacher for pronunciation and try to practice a given conversation. Simple words and phrases were learned easily by heart but the following week of learning English, most students forgot what they have learned. Their retention is short because they are not exposed to English outside the classroom. Therefore, learning and increasing vocabulary is a problem of Thai students. They do not have the confidence in speaking English and communicating to other people who are non-Thai speakers.

3. Reading

Reading is a problem in communication as Thai students translate every English word into Thai when they read. Vocabulary is translated literally therefore when they read, they cannot understand texts and passages well because they do not take the meaning

contextually. In reading, the message conveyed should be taken as a whole. Words, phrases and sentences should not be taken independently. Thus, it is difficult for Thai students to comprehend and answer questions about reading topics because they are taught to read individual words and phrases.. Half of the students in an English class use a dictionary but all or most cannot answer questions after reading passages, because they lack the proper reading skills.

4. Writing

Writing involves many factors; vocabulary, grammar, word order, spelling, punctuation marks and organization of ideas. Repetition of words is not encouraged and vocabulary building is needed for communication. Most students have difficulties in developing their writing skills because they do not have words to express their ideas in writing, and also they usually fail in their writing due to the lack of accuracy in the use of vocabulary and organizing of ideas.

Suggested Vocabulary Learning Strategies

1. Category of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The literature related to vocabulary learning strategies attempted to identify useful strategies. After the identification of strategies the next step was developing a framework for the categorization of these strategies.

Gu & Johnson (1996) specified a foreign language vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies.

1. Metacognitive strategies contain selective attention and self-initiation strategies. Foreign language learners who employ selective attention strategies know which words are important for them to learn and are essential for adequate comprehension of a passage. Learners employing self-initiation strategies use a variety of means to make the meaning of vocabulary items clear.

2. Cognitive strategies bring on guessing strategies, skillful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies. Learners using guessing strategies build up their background knowledge and use linguistic clues like grammatical structures of a sentence to guess the meaning of a word.

3. Memory strategies are categorized into rehearsal and encoding. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding strategies include such strategies as association, imagery, visual, auditory, semantic, and contextual encoding as well as word-structure (i.e., analyzing a word in terms of prefixes, stems, and suffixes).

4. Activation strategies comprise those strategies which the learners actually use new words in different contexts. For instance, learners may set sentences using the words they have just learned.

All these suggested strategies can be summarized in table 1 as follows

2. Guessing Strategy

EFL learners can possibly derive the meaning of unknown words using the context in which they

appear, that is, a sentence in which the word to be learned appears (Clarke & Nation, 1980; Huckin & Bloch, 1993). It is found that learners should be helped to develop their ability to make use of the contextual clues to infer the meaning (Gairns & Redman, 1991; Scherfer, 1993). Nagy & Anderson (1984) and Mckeown & Curtis (1987) have shown that students can learn new words by guessing the meaning of new words through texts.

To guess the meaning, learners can look closely at the unknown words, next look at its direct context and then take a much wider view of how the clause containing the word relates to other clauses, sentences or paragraphs. Liu & Nation (1985) point out that a large proportion of unknown words (at least 80 percent) can be successfully dealt with in this way. Therefore, this strategy plays an important role in dealing with unknown words when reading.

Guessing strategy can be useful to help Thai learners deal with unknown words when reading. Thai learners should be taught to find out the meaning of the unknown words from the context. This strategy can help Thai learners develop their reading skills.

Table 1 Gu & Johnson' s foreign language vocabulary learning strategies.

Strategies			
Metacognitive	Cognitive	Memory	Activation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Selective Attention : Identifying essential words for comprehension * Self-initiation : Using a variety of means to make the meaning of words clear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Guessing: Activating background knowledge, using linguistic items * Use of dictionaries * Note-taking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Rehearsal: Word lists, repetition, etc. * Encoding: Association (imagery, visual, auditory, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Using new words in different contexts

3. Dictionary Use

Like it or not, a dictionary is amongst the first things a foreign language student purchases (Baxter, 1980; Luppescu & Day, 1993), and learners carry their dictionaries around, not grammar books (Krashen, 1989). When learners encounter an unknown word that they cannot infer unknown word from context, they can either ignore the unknown word or consult a dictionary. It is often stated that learners tend to depend on dictionary use excessively.

The argument of whether dictionaries should be used in the foreign language classroom, and what dictionaries should be used has always been a lively one amongst language teachers. Some EFL instructors urge students to use their dictionary as much as possible while others encourage them not to use a dictionary at all.

Many studies have emphasized the post-test vocabulary and comprehension scores of learners with and without the use of dictionaries (Bogaards, 1998; Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993; Summers, 1988). Luppescu and Day (1993) found that students using a dictionary during reading gained higher scores on a post-test than those who did not.

On the opposite side, some studies found that using a dictionary while reading can lead to incompetent learning (Bensoussan et al., 1984; Knight, 1994). Using a dictionary does not always improve comprehension (Bensoussan et al., 1984). One concern is that the time it takes to look up words interrupts readers' short-term memory and prevents them from concentrating on the text as a whole (Bensoussan et al., 1984; Knight, 1994). In addition, learners with access to dictionaries sometimes place the wrong dictionary entry, leading to miscomprehension (Bogaards, 1998; Luppescu & Day, 1993).

Does it matter what sort of dictionary learners use? Most experts and teachers encouraged a monolingual dictionary (MD), rather than a bilingual dictionary (BD). (Hartmann, 1991). It seems little doubt that the use of an MD is something learners should be encouraged to use. The learners' difficulties with the vocabularies in an MD often resulted in the lack of understanding of the meaning of a particular word and also from the incomplete understanding of the particular word. This problem is because an MD defines words in a foreign language. Students at lower levels of language proficiency certainly have difficulty in understanding the definitions in a foreign language, and this in turn affects their comprehension. Consequently, a learner needs many skills to use an MD successfully. (Scholfield, 1982).

The difficulties in using an MD is surely the major reason that makes EFL readers prefer to use a BD if they have to look up a definition of a word. Hunt & Begla (2005) believe that besides short and easy-to-understand definitions of a BD, there are strengths which: can improve the reading comprehension of lower proficiency EFL learners; support vocabulary learning at all levels of proficiency; encourage translation and bring up one-to-one accurate match at word level between two languages. Luppescu & Day (1993) found that students who use a BD learn more vocabulary than students who read without a dictionary.

It could be concluded that some learners might gain knowledge from instruction on selective dictionary use. Learners may need help in recognizing a passage's main ideas and evaluating the frequency and usefulness of unknown words. Teachers can help their students by demonstrating learning vocabulary activities in the classroom.

Conclusion and Teaching Application

A wide range of English vocabulary is important for Thai students to have if they are aiming to communicate well in English. It is not enough to learn basic English words. Increasing vocabulary can be done by oneself with a great motivation and students can increase their vocabulary with great motivation and by using the vocabulary learning strategies mentioned above in section 3.1-3.3. The real-communication problems of Sripatum students in the classroom resulted from a limited vocabulary.

It was found out that teachers' role in students' vocabulary learning is very important. They should be knowledgeable of vocabulary learning strategies, able to observe what the students do not understand and to provide them with vocabulary instructions to enable them to learn independently (Brown, 1980). With learning vocabulary strategies, teachers will have the necessary tools to enhance vocabulary development. Strategies are particular important for language learning because they are the tools for active self-involvement, which is fundamental for developing communication skills. If teachers can use effective vocabulary learning strategies, students will benefit more from their classrooms and will not only remember words, but will be on the road to becoming independent vocabulary learners (Cohen, 1990). Further study is to determine the requirements for memory and attitude in relation to vocabulary development. When students have learned the importance of vocabulary knowledge to achieve communication, they have to increase their vocabulary knowledge and competence in English.

In order to communicate effectively in English, Thai students should pay attention in learning English inside their classrooms. Learning English words start from the basic lessons such as greetings, leave takings, and

conversations of everyday life. As a motto in language learning, "Learn a little and use it a lot", students do not have to learn many words that they cannot all remember. If they can remember a simple conversation with a topic of introducing themselves to others, they can practice it a lot so they do not forget the words used and can substitute other words in order to expand the conversation. This will be more effective in communicating than studying many conversations and then they do not remember anything.

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