

Vocabulary perceptions and principles in foreign language learning and teaching

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Abstract: *The article examines the principles and understandings that pursue the vocabulary acquiring in the process of learning and teaching foreign language. The difficulties that students meet while acquiring vocabulary as well as different strategies, used during the learning process, are considered. There are accents upon different acquiring words approaches, importance of translation and use of dictionary that pursue the authentic learning process. There are accents upon final assessment of acquired knowledge by means of appropriate type of test.*

Key words: *vocabulary, vocabulary principles in foreign language learning, foreign language, knowledge, test*

1. INTRODUCTION

The frequently asked question *what vocabulary is* in foreign language learning has found various answers among the last century explorers. According to Carter and Nunan [2001], a word can be defined as 'the minimum meaningful unit'. However, Schmitt [2008] suggests that a vocabulary should be considered as more than a set of single-word units. Schmitt has maintained the idea that lexical patterning 'affects the use of most words in discourse' [2008]. This involves that language ability includes both the ability to produce fluent language syntactically and the ability to generate lexical chunks such as multiword units [p. 111].

Lewis [1997:255-260] indicates that in the lexical approach, learners focus less on each word and pay less attention to grammar [260]. Language proficiency can be ameliorated through learning lexical items and learners can profit in class by doing various language activities [268]. Nation [2001:56] also asserts that collocation has a lexical pattern. He claims that knowledge of collocation helps contextual vocabulary knowledge. In order to gain fluency in language production, the learning of collocation sequences is crucial, and learners need to practice them time and again [324].

Vocabulary can also be categorized into high frequency words, academic words, technical words and low frequency words in terms of their frequency of occurrence in spoken and written contexts [Nation, 2001:11-21]. In order to read texts efficiently, Nation [2001:20] reckons that FL learners need to know at least 15,000-20,000 words. According to the FL learner's proficiency, teachers need to assess what type or what level of the FL words is appropriate for learners.

2. KNOWING A WORD

Wood [2001] suggests that knowing a word means using it in a sentence and being able to give the word a definition, a synonym etc. In other words, knowing a word requires more than understanding its meaning. People should be able to use it to produce meaning and use it in a text. Both Laufer [2005] and Schmitt [2008] adopt the definition of 'word knowledge' from Nation [2001]. Knowing a word is to understand its meaning, written and spoken forms including inflectional and derivative forms, collocations and lexical relations with other words. In this sense, vocabulary learning is to learn how to read words, how to write them, and how to use them syntactically and semantically in context.

2.1. Productive and receptive knowledge

Word knowledge is classified into productive and receptive knowledge. The former is determined by 'the recall of a FL item in response to a native language cue' while comprehension is regarded as 'the recall of a native language item from the FL item' [Griffin and Harley, 1996:446]. *Receptive vocabulary knowledge* is to recognize a word in terms of its form, function, meaning and position [Nation, 2001]. When a word is written or

spoken, learners need to know its meaning, spelling, collocation, grammatical pattern, and appropriate usage in colloquial and formal situations [Nation, 2001]. This type of knowledge is to understand a word in texts [Schmitt, 2008]. It is mainly related to *listening* and *reading*, and is therefore called '*passive knowledge*' [Schmitt, 2008]. It is also 'knowledge of the meaning of a FL word', which has been learned and can be translated as 'a word from FL to native language' [Mondria and Wiersma, 2004:86].

On its turn, *productive vocabulary knowledge* includes receptive vocabulary knowledge, but extended to the wider knowledge of *writing*, *pronouncing*, and *using words appropriately* [Nation, 2001]. It includes the ability to make use of a vocabulary in conversation or writing, so that this type of vocabulary knowledge is alternatively called '*active knowledge*' [Schmitt, 2008]. According to Laufer and Hulstijn [2001] 'mere memorization of a word form in a given context without understanding the word's meaning cannot be called productive knowledge'. Productive vocabulary knowledge is the ability to 'express a concept by means of a FL word' which has been learned and can be translated as 'a word from native language to FL' [Mondria and Wiersma, 2004:87].

Schmitt [2008] agrees with the general notion that learners attain proficiency in receptive knowledge first and productive word knowledge is developed later. However, learning is not always done in the same order, because there may be some limited productive word knowledge before a word is completely mastered [Waring, 1998 in Schmitt, 2008], and some words can be spoken orally but not comprehended receptively. For that reason, 'the distinction between receptive and productive mastery of a word is not always clear-cut' in vocabulary testing [p. 170]. Mondria and Wiersma conducted a study [2004:93] the results of which show that productive retention is more difficult than receptive one. Although their immediate tests showed that receptive and productive learning are not significantly different, delayed tests showed that productive knowledge is considerably more difficult to retain than receptive knowledge [2004:91].

2.2. Difficulty in learning a word

There are certain factors that have an effect on and cause difficulties in foreign language vocabulary learning. Various advantages can be effectively drawn from 'orthographical similarities between members of a word family' [Schmitt, 2008]. For example, the word 'learn' can be taught by grouping it with the word family, e.g. learned, learnedly, learner, learning, learnt. 'Grouping of related words is one of the main principles in vocabulary learning and teaching'. It seems very effective to learn a lot of similar words or expressions at the same time.

On the other hand, words with the same orthographic characters in both the native and foreign languages can be learnt better [Schmitt, 2008]. In addition to Schmitt, Koda [2005] asserts that 'the use of native language processing mechanisms that are typologically similar will result in better and more efficient performance' in FL processing. Furthermore, analysing the facts, Swan [1997:163] reckons that 'related languages often share a great deal of cognate vocabulary' and the non-cognate words 'tend to have close translation equivalents, which can give learners an enormous advantage'. De Groot and Brink [2010] also show that cognate words are learnt considerably better than non-cognate words. Besides, non-cognate words are more forgettable than cognate ones [2010]. This is because cognate word learning is less demanding than non-cognate word learning. Learners can combine previous word memory in cognate learning, while they have to make new memory space for non-cognate learning [De Groot and Brink, 2010].

Referring to her study, Akamatsu [2003] also shows that having the same alphabetic background (e.g. the Persian group) is more efficient for word processing and reading than having different alphabetical background (e.g. the Chinese and the Japanese group). To summarise, when native language and FL are strongly related, learners may have 'fewer errors resulting from the intrinsic difficulty of what has to be learnt, since the mother tongue will provide support in main areas' [Swan, 1997:164].

Nonetheless, there are some disadvantages from orthographical similarity. Haynes [1993 in Schmitt, 2008] contends that *familiarity* of word shape 'often overrides contextual information'. In addition, if the native and foreign languages are related, they produce more interference between them [Swan, 1997:164]. When grouping new words, teachers have to attend to certain confusions which may arise from word form similarity [153]. In addition, learners have to know not to depend on word morphology too much, but to check the meaning carefully when they guess word meaning from context [153].

FL learners also have difficulty in learning when they have to deal with multiword units while processing the language. According to Schmitt [2008] *phrasal verbs* can particularly lead to vocabulary learning difficulties for learners. The reason is because when taught to learners, phrasal verbs mostly do not form consistent groups, and 'presenting several unrelated phrasal verbs together may even cause confusion' [110]. It may be helpful for learners' vocabulary acquisition if phrasal verbs with consistent meaning are used with the same adverbial particle which influences the root verb e.g. to break off, to take off and to turn off.

Word class is another moot point that causes difficulties in word learning. Schmitt defines the 'word class' as 'the category of grammatical behaviour' and it is called alternatively 'part of speech' [2008]. The scholar [2008] introduces some research works which show that particular parts of speech are easier to learn than others i.e. nouns are easier to learn than adjectives or adverbs. Laufer [2005] asserts that there is no definite empirical evidence for learning difficulty of certain word classes..... This reveals the fact that FL learners do not always comprehend deeply the grammatical classification of a word, although they have already acquired the word meaning [Schmitt, 2008]. In Schmitt's opinion the difficulty in learning distinct word classes is slightly evident; though using word classes is an effective learning method for FL students.

To complicate the problem, it is worth mentioning the presence of concrete and abstract words. Concrete words are regarded as high 'image-ability' words, while low 'image-ability' words are regarded as abstract words by De Groot and Brink [2010]. According to Carter and Nunan [2001], the process of learning vocabulary is pursued by certain points which indicate that 'concrete words' are learned earlier and retained for a longer period of time than abstract words. Though sometimes, concrete words are not always more easily learned than abstract words if they include some aspects 'of difficulty: intra- or inter-lexical'; 'confusing *Tuesday* with *Thursday*... due to similarity in form'; and 'difficulty with simple words as *cousin*, *uncle* and *aunt*' because of lack of sufficient information like many other abstract words ...

3. VOCABULARY LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

3.1. *Incremental characteristics of vocabulary learning*

Vocabulary learning is 'a cumulative activity' [Meara, 2009]. 'Unknown words are words that have no connection of any kind with the learner's lexicon' while 'known words are words that are connected'. Although the acquisition of individual word is not a great activity, it will develop into rich lexical connections in time [Meara, 2009].

Schmitt [2008] also insists that vocabulary is not acquired instantaneously, but is gradually acquired throughout numerous exposures for a long period. The incremental feature of vocabulary learning shows the phenomenon of gradual acquisition from spoken and written practice. Learners generally know a word meaning first, they may pronounce or spell it and further may know its derivative forms [2008]. As word meaning is generally flexible, to master it the learner should meet the words in a variety of contexts. [2008].

3.2. *Incidental learning and explicit learning approaches* suggested by Schmitt

Schmitt defines 'explicit vocabulary learning' as the way of learning which 'focuses attention directly on the information to be learned' whereas 'incidental learning' is a way of learning vocabulary while 'using language for communicative purposes' [2008]. There are

disadvantages in both approaches. Explicit learning takes much time to learn a sufficient vocabulary size and is very arduous; while incidental learning is slower, but it requires the reading of texts numerous times.

Meara [2009] considers that incidental vocabulary learning is much more unplanned and is a simpler word learning process than intentional word learning. Therefore, vocabulary learning with texts is much more likely to improve vocabulary knowledge. FL beginners should learn vocabulary with an explicit approach until they acquire a primary vocabulary size - at least several thousand words, sufficient for incidental reading [Schmitt, 2008]. High-frequency words can be acquired through explicit learning, while low-frequency words can be learned from incidental reading [Meara, 2009]. For that reason, both approaches are necessary for FL learners and function as complementary methods [Schmitt, 2008].

3.3. Translation and guessing

Nation and Moir [2008] claim that translation is a very effective method for vocabulary teaching or testing. It is very operative in terms of expressing, revealing and testing word meaning. It can be used equally to 'definitions, pictures, real objects, synonyms etc.' Translation supplies FL learners with an easy method of explaining the meaning of words in the target language [2008].

Grace [2000] conducted a study that showed that a translation group featured considerably higher retention than a group without translation. Hulstijn [2005] also found that FL vocabulary knowledge with native language translation gave better recall results.

Vocabulary learning needs to be practised in context [Carter and Nunan, 2001]. However, Nation, [2008] comes to the conclusion that FL learners guess unknown words incorrectly, regardless of the level of FL word knowledge they have attained. Thus training in guessing is needed with appropriate levels of reading texts.

3.4. Using a dictionary

Finding the definition, explanation or connotation of unknown words in a dictionary is the most common way of understanding their meaning. According to Nation [2008] dictionary use possesses three purposes: comprehension, production and learning; in other words, looking up word meanings, finding spellings, and studying known/unknown words. Developing dictionary skills, suggested by Pachler, Barnes and Field [2008:58-59] include a 'familiarisation with dictionaries, using the dictionary to check for accuracy, finding the meaning of words in the target language etc.'. Developing dictionary skills consists of 'identifying the alphabetical order in a list of words, matching exercises, word correction tasks and categorisation of words' semantically or grammatically [Pachler, Barnes and Field, 2008:59]. The effective dictionary use involves the understanding of spelling and meaning of target language as well as words usage in proper and acceptable contexts. Besides the above mentioned, Nyikos and Fan [2007] add that consulting a dictionary is considerably helpful and propitious to FL word learning.

In terms of using a monolingual or a bilingual dictionary, Nation [2008] presents many research studies which support using a bilingual dictionary rather than a monolingual one. Especially, a bilingual ML-FL dictionary is effective both for comprehension of usage and for exposure to the FL.

3.5. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)

FL learners have applied or made use of various VLS such as guessing, highlighting, making word lists, memorising, translation etc. O'Malley and Chamot [1990:198-199] classify FL learning strategies into '*meta-cognitive strategies*' ('selective attention', 'self-monitoring'), '*cognitive strategies*' ('auditory' word learning, guessing word meaning, 'grouping' words, 'note-taking', using 'dictionaries' and textbooks, 'using visual image'), and '*social and affective strategies*' (ask teachers or friends, 'self-talk' on task, work with friends). More precisely, Schmitt [2008] has demonstrated that using various VLS depends on the level of learners and the target language frequency. Beginners need to learn words

with not so deep level of difficulty, while much higher level learners need deeper and more complicated activities in their studies. Furthermore, Nation [2008] asserts that high-frequency words should be learned directly, while more attention should be paid to low-frequency words in the handling of strategies.

As reported by Nation [2008], effective strategies must include the following stages: choosing a suitable strategy for the learners, learning through several steps, having knowledge from strategy training, and increasing effective vocabulary learning and vocabulary use. FL learners have to be trained in VLS and have to understand efficient vocabulary learning skills. Although the VLS used by advanced or proficient learners might not be advisable to lower level learners [Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown, 1999], VLS and high achievement are strongly related. The researchers also find that more successful learners exert efforts more often in taking notes and reviewing; also higher level learners tend to use the dictionary more elaborately and have willingness to work outside their FL classes [Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown, 1999]. According to Schmitt [2008] most successful FL learners make use of several VLS actively and simultaneously. To make it more precise, Schiefele [1999] states that 'efficient and successful learners use various strategies for their learning'.

It has to be investigated what VLSs are actually employed by learners. According to Schmitt [1997:207], VLS are categorised into two types: the one is *discovery strategies* for a new word meaning, and the other is *consolidation strategies* for learning words [1997:207]. Schmitt also argues that age and language level influence the use of different strategies. Table 1 shows detailed VLS suggested by Schmitt.

Word Discovery Strategies	Determination strategies	analysing words; guessing meaning from context; using a dictionary or references;
	Social strategies	ask classmates; asking teacher;
Word Consolidating Strategies	Social strategies	interact with native speakers; study and practise meaning in a group;
	Memory strategies	connect word with its synonyms and antonyms; learn the words of an idiom together; say new words aloud; study the sound of a word; study the spelling of a word; use a physical action when learning a word; use semantic maps;
	Cognitive strategies	keeping a vocabulary notebook; verbal repetition and written repetition; word lists, put FL labels on physical objects;
	Metacognitive strategies	continue to study word over time; skip or pass new words; testing oneself with word tests; using media (songs, movies, newscast).

Table 1: Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies [1997]

Gu and Johnson's studies [1996:662] show that good learners employ several VLS actively. The results also suggest that vocabulary learning can be significantly influenced by active using of many strategies. Nation [2008] also claims that successful strategy users need to choose the best strategy for their learning style, and need to change to another strategy at the proper time.

Moreover, Gu and Johnson [1996:646] argue that direct vocabulary learning with active vocabulary use would lead to better retention than implicit word learning. They showed that 'using meta-cognitive strategies (selective attention, self-initiation) and oral repetition are positive factors in learning new vocabulary'.

On the other hand, Fan's study shows that FL learners use 'analysis', 'dictionary use' and 'guessing' rather than 'grouping', the 'keyword method' and mechanical 'repetition'. Nation explains the keyword method as a way of connecting a FL new word with a similar sound in native language and then producing a mental image combining the unknown FL word meaning and the concept of the key word [Nation, 2008]. To summarise, Nyikos and Fan [2007] concludes that 'reviewing and using words newly learned, in particular, and consulting the dictionary is important... at all frequency levels'.

Fan's [2007] study differs over the more frequently used vocabulary strategies from Gu and Johnson's [1996] participants, who used selective attention and the oral repetition method more. This result is also different from that of Schmitt's study [1997]. The subjects in Schmitt's study showed that learners use a bilingual dictionary, saying words aloud, written repetition and linking words with synonyms/antonyms rather than drawing a word image.

4. VOCABULARY TEACHING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

4.1. Principles of vocabulary teaching

Nation and Moir [2008] identify three principles of vocabulary teaching: '*content and sequencing*', '*format and presentation*' and '*monitoring and assessment*' of vocabulary. In terms of 'content and sequencing', learners' attention to the vocabulary, learning strategies and word frequency are important factors in FL vocabulary learning. As for the 'presentation and format', high-frequency FL words should occur in the 'language-focused learning, meaning-focused input and output and frequency development'. In addition, learners should have the chance to attain depth of vocabulary knowledge from the 'spaced, repeated, and generative retrieval of words'. Thus, learners will be able to produce FL words from using them frequently. Harris and Show [2004:90] also assert that 'effective vocabulary teaching' requires creating opportunities for 'frequent practice'. Frequent exposure of vocabulary to learners with some intervals is regarded as an effective technique for vocabulary learning and teaching.

In the monitoring and assessment stage, teachers make students take a test for recognizing the vocabulary which students should learn [Nation and Moir, 2001]. Teachers report their evaluation outcomes to students. Assessment can be used to help learners reflect on their vocabulary learning, and this can help to decide what vocabulary will be focused on [Nation and Moir, 2008]. De Groot [2010] summarizes from other researchers that a word in its context should be completely expressed with 'the semantic, syntactic, and collocational features of a word'. However, Nation [2008] argues that 'vocabulary course designers' need to adopt teaching strategies from proper research and reconsider wrong assumptions (e.g. '*all vocabulary learning should occur in context, vocabulary should be presented in lexical sets, monolingual dictionaries are preferable to bilingual dictionaries*').

4.2. Vocabulary testing

For novice learners, 'vocabulary may be the only aspect of language they know well enough to be tested on' [Schmitt, 2008]. Vocabulary testing includes 'filling (in) blanks, matching, multiple-choice, picture labeling' [Read, 1997:308].

4.2.1. The role of memory

Memory is very important in FL learning as we need to retain words in our mental lexicon, and should be able to use them when needed [Schmitt, 2008]. Most words are easily forgettable soon after the learning session, and they need to be learned with

continuing rehearsals [2008]. It is best to practice the rehearsal session with a recycling program soon after a language learning session.

Memory is divided into two types: 'short term memory' [STM] (also known as working memory) and 'long term memory' [LTM] [Schmitt, 2008]. LTM holds knowledge 'for use in anything but the immediate future', STM retains information while it is being learned. Specifically, STM tests have to consist of words what FL learners have learned usually within one or two weeks [Nation, 2001:374]. The ultimate aim of vocabulary learning is to have more lexical knowledge from the STM to permanent LTM [Schmitt, 2008].

Both STM and LTM can be assessed by several types of vocabulary tests. Such tests are divided into 'diagnostic tests', 'short-term achievement tests' (within the last week or two weeks), 'long-term achievement tests' and 'proficiency tests' according to testing purposes [Nation, 2001:373, 374]. On his part, Schmitt [2008] categorizes tests into achievement, diagnostic, placement and proficiency test. The purpose of achievement tests is to monitor whether 'students have learned the words that were taught, or that they were expected to learn' [2008]. These tests are practices for both learners and teachers' performance in class, and the results make them aware of their learning and teaching.

4.2.2. Selection of test items and types of tests

Choosing items for testing in vocabulary learning depends on the purpose of the testing. The word selection for class achievement tests should be from the vocabulary treated in the lessons [Schmitt, 2008]. Schmitt considers that 'the teacher is in the best position to know his/her students and which words they should have mastered' [2008]. The sampling of test items is related to vocabulary testing *validity* [Schmitt, 2008]. Validity is defined as 'the extent to which an assessment opportunity measures what has been taught and what pupils should have learned' [Pachler, Barnes and Field, 2001:204]. In this sense, vocabulary assessment is the activity of monitoring which vocabulary has been learned and what teachers have taught through the class. Moreover, when teachers design vocabulary tests, they have 'to minimize the difficulty of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening involved in the test items' in order not to 'restrict students' ability to demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge' [Schmitt, 2008].

There are also both receptive testing and production testing in terms of the production of FL. Receptive testing demands an understanding of newly learned FL words while productive testing demands the production of FL words [De Groot and Brink, 2010]. Thus, memory may perform well in receptive testing with newly generated FL words but show considerably lower recall in productive testing [2010]. However, Mondria and Wiersma's [2004:91] study shows that after productive learning, productive testing results in an immediate test are better rather than those for receptive testing.

Translation is a very effective way of 'testing vocabulary, both receptively and productively, in recall and recognition items' [Nation, 2008]. With regard to the direction of vocabulary testing, Griffin and Harley [1996] illustrate that learning in the L1-FL direction defines the FL words as target words, while native language (L1) can be target words in the FL-L1 learning direction. This L2-L1 way of testing is regarded as 'forward association', while the reverse way of learning is regarded as 'backward association' [Griffin and Harley, 1996]. Their study shows that forward association results are better in recall tests. In addition, L2-L1 word association is recalled better recall than the reverse; moreover, the L1-L2 learning direction is more effective in L2 production tests when the forward association is used [1996].

In terms of test construction, there are distinctions between discrete and embedded, comprehensive and selective, and context-independent and context-dependent [Schmitt, 2008]. A test is categorized as discrete or embedded, according to whether a vocabulary assessment is a separate test or included as part of a larger test. Vocabulary testing also divides into selective and comprehensive tests depending on the selection of vocabulary from the input. The context independent/dependent distinction is different from that

between referring to other contexts or not. Vocabulary testing can be constructed according to the purpose of the test such as whether it is an everyday word achievement test or an end-term test.

5. CONCLUSION

Although words are learned in different ways taking up different periods of time, their ultimate acquiring and mastering are a priority to everybody who desires to be fluent in English.

The ability of teachers to become aware of, introduce and present explicitly the boundary in differences between incidental and explicit learning is of great importance for they should help students in their everyday practice.

Difficulties in learning new words and assimilating the already learned ones may be avoided through clear knowledge of language learning principles and their applying in practice. Vocabulary learning strategies are very important in acquiring foreign language vocabulary as they provide learners with useful practical techniques for an easier and less pressing language comprehension and attainment.

Testing is an essential part or a logical end of every learning process. There are numerous kinds of tests that should be examined in detail which may help their appropriate use in examining students' knowledge.

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