Techniques to Teach Vocabulary to Regional Medium Students

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to study the impact of vocabulary teaching techniques on vocabulary learning by Regional Medium Students of Tamilnadu. For this study, nearly 60 students from professional colleges, particularly I year B.E./B.Tech. students, were identified based on their medium of instruction at the school level. This strength was divided into two different groups, namely,

1. Student studied in Tamil medium from Urban Background – Tamil Medium &Urban Background, TM & UB.

2. Student studied in Tamil medium from Rural Background. – Tamil Medium & Rural Background, TM & RB.

The First Group TM & UB, consists of 28 students, both boys & girls. Of this strength 12 are girls and 16 are boys. These students were taught to learn new English words by producing either spoken or written sentences using them (a contextualizing technique).

The Second group TM & RB had 32 students. Of this, 10 were girls, and the remaining 22 were boys. These students were taught to learn new English words by memorizing word lists

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associated with their Technical Subjects (a de-contextualizing technique) and allowing them to practice.

The data were collected using two types of tests: a memorization test and a sentence-making test, which were administered to both groups.

The results of the study revealed that the students in the TM & RB outperformed those in the TM & UB quite significantly on a vocabulary memorization test. The TM &UB had better performance on a sentence-making test than the TM & RB, though the difference was not statistically significant.

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that memorization of word-lists can work better than sentence-making practice, especially for Tamil Medium Students of Rural Background at low levels of proficiency.

Introduction

Vocabulary learning, by far, plays a very crucial role in learning another language. Seal, (1990, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 269) states that "To the non-language specialist, the common sense view of how languages are learned is that always we substitute the words in our first language for the corresponding words in the second language. Words are perceived as the building blocks upon which knowledge of the second language can be built."

The vocabulary of any language is huge and its acquisition takes time, even for a native speaker. Research has concentrated more on how words are learnt than on what should be taught, though everyone agrees that a threshold of around 2000-3000 words is a requirement for further progress. Extensive reading leads to good vocabulary gains. Also teachers can help the learners to become autonomous by teaching useful strategies and ensuring the availability of appropriate, motivating materials.

Importance of Vocabulary Teaching/Learning

Considering the crucial role attributed to vocabulary learning in second or foreign language learning, one can appreciate the importance of vocabulary teaching as well. A number of research studies have dealt with lexical problems, namely, problems which language learners face in vocabulary learning. The research findings have revealed that lexical problems frequently interfere with communication. As a matter of fact, communication breaks down when people do not use the right words (Allen, 1983).

Three Approaches to Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

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If we consider vocabulary teaching and learning, there are three approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning:

- learning vocabulary as a by-product of doing other things such as reading or listening),
- explicit or direct instruction (i.e., diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting such words to the learners and elaborating on their word knowledge) and
- independent strategy development (i.e., practicing guessing the meaning of the words from context and training learners to use dictionaries) (Hunt & Beglar 2000, cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002).

In connection with the first two approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning, a number of methods can be employed. One can make use of de-contextualizing techniques such as memorizing the word lists or using flashcards. And while adopting the indirect approach, one can utilize contextualizing techniques such as reading and listening practice and speaking and writing practice (Oxford & Crookall, 1990).

In regard to the first two approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning, there is a problem to select the best approach or to identify the authentic approach to augment the vocabulary teaching and learning process.

Argument in Favour of Systematic Teaching

There are a number of studies which have addressed the issue, but most of such studies have come up with mixed results. As a matter of fact, there is no general or common opinion on the superiority of one approach over the other. Nation (1994) argues for a systematic rather than an incidental approach to the teaching of vocabulary and argues that such a factor is an essential part of a language course. He points out the limitations of incidental learning and the fact that second language learners are often unable to benefit from incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading because of limitations in their vocabulary knowledge. Read (2004) also encounter that although learners certainly acquire word knowledge incidentally while engaged in various language learning activities, more direct and systematic study of vocabulary is required.

Statement of the Problem

The present study intended to touch upon a relevant aspect of the two major approaches of vocabulary learning/teaching. It investigated the effect(s) of two vocabulary teaching/learning techniques, that is,

- memorization of word lists (a de-contextualizing technique) and
- Sentence-making practice (a contextualizing technique) on learning English vocabulary as a foreign language.

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Based on the points mentioned in the above paragraph, one can state the following research question: Is sentence-making practice (as a contextualizing technique) superior to memorization of word lists (as a de-contextualizing technique)?

The vocabulary acquisition is in desperate need of investigation in both second and foreign language learning situations.

Deciding on the Relative Usefulness/Efficacy of Different Practices

The main purpose of this study is to examine the superiority of sentence-making practice. Also using a type of speaking and writing practice on vocabulary items (a contextualizing technique) over rote memorization of word lists (a de-contextualizing technique) or vice versa and their effect(s) on learning English vocabulary as a foreign language in a Professional education curriculum.

Methodology

60 students from the same professional college, particularly the students who are all doing I year B.E./B.Tech Programs participated in this study. Students were randomly chosen from different branches of engineering and technology sections. These students came from various districts of Tamilnadu. The classes met for two hours a day, two days a week. The reason for the selection of these students for this study was that they were considered as slow learners. Vocabulary items as paired associates from their textbooks were presented to them. These included word lists in English also from their Engineering subjects.

Materials

In order to conduct this study a vocabulary test was constructed based on the vocabulary items presented to students in their book.

Example – Word Level

1. Technical vocabulary
2. Affixing
3. Word formation
4. Synonyms & Antonyms

Sentence Writing

1. Definition – Defining the words (Example: A robot, A Computer etc.,)
2. Description – Describing any physical object.

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3. Fill in the blanks with suitable Prepositions and   suitable tense forms, adjectives & Adverbs.
4. Cause and Effect
5. Purpose and Means

The test was administered to the participants both as a pretest, to see if they were homogeneous enough to start the study, and as a post test, to measure the difference between the achievements of the two groups with respect to the type of vocabulary teaching/learning technique employed in each group.

Data collection and analysis

In order to begin the study and to make sure that the two groups were comparable enough to start the study, this research work was administered the pre-test to both TM & UB and TM & RB groups.

As it was explained in the procedures, as far as the memorization test was concerned, the subjects were expected to produce, in writing, the meaning of the words which they had memorized. The words appeared in a list and the subjects were asked to provide their memorized meanings. The questionnaire was in the form of Match the following, Fill in the blanks, Cloze Test format, etc.

Example 1

"Meaning of accumulation" or " Meaning of Contamination
Accumulation – forming together, combining, gathering or amassing
Contamination - toxic waste, pollution etc.

Example 2 – Match the following

S.No	Column – A	Column – B
1.	Cramped	Not moving
2.	Stagnant	Polluted
3.	Robot	Confined
4.	Contaminated	Of people
5.	Folk	Mechanical man

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Example 3 Fill in the blanks with suitable prepositions

The story -------- the English language is typically one ----------the massive stealing ----other languages. That is why English today has an estimated vocabulary -------over one million words.

Example 4 -Fill in the blanks with suitable articles

1. I love ------- flowers in your garden.
2. I always listen to -------- radio in the morning.
3. Listen! Dennis is playing --------trumpet.
4. She has never been to ---------- alps before.

Example 5 – Define the following

1. A Calculator
2. A Flow Chart

Example 6 : Write the description on

1. Refrigerator
2. Washing Machine

Example 7 combine the following using suitable cause and effect Expressions

1. Holiday declared for schools and colleges – heavy rain
2. Deforestation – ozone layer depletion

Example 8 Combine the following hits using suitable purpose and means Expression

1. An aerial – receive the broad cast signals
2. A Carbon paper – make more number of copies

Confirming whether the two groups performed statistically different on the two tests, the raw scores obtained from the administration of the test were subjected to two separate independent t-tests at minimum level of significance.

Results and Discussion

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With respect to the results obtained from the analysis of data pertaining to the pre- and post-test, one can conclude that although the difference between the means of the TM & UB group and the TM &RB group was not statistically significant, the treatment given to the TM & RB group had affected this group to some extent.

The interesting findings of this study can mainly be attributed to the results of the administration of the second test which was composed of two tests: memorization test and sentence-making test. As stated above, the TM &UB had outperformed the control group quite significantly on the memorization test. There is, in fact, a mean difference of eight points between the means of the two groups. It reveals that the treatment given had affected the TM & UB group so that the participants in this group could easily recall the meanings of the words.

The results obtained from the administration of the sentence-making test are also quite noticeable. The TM &UB group had a better performance on this test as compared to the TM &RB group, though the difference was marginal. The significance of this finding doubles when one pays attention to the fact that the students in the TM &RB group had a lot of sentence-making practice both in written and spoken form in class while the students in the TM &UB group did not have any such practice. This finding might imply that good recall of the meaning of vocabulary items might have helped students in the TM &UB group to make appropriate sentences and that the students in the TM & RB group did not perform as well as they were expected to on this test simply because they could not recall the meanings of the words which is a basic requirement for making sentences using such words.

Another reason which can be claimed regarding the low performance of subjects in the TM & RB group, and which is, in fact, the more probable reason is that these students usually copy sentences from dictionaries when they are assigned to make sentences based on vocabulary items. Such being the case, they do not actually make sentences to have real practice in sentence-making. In cases when they make sentences of their own in the spoken form, due to the over-crowdedness of the second language classes and the shortage of time, the teachers cannot attend to every student individually and the mistakes made by students usually go unnoticed. Even when the students receive feedback from the teachers and their mistakes are corrected, they do not pay enough attention to the correct form of sentences.

Conclusion

Since a good knowledge of vocabulary has a great effect on the learners' improvement effective communication, especially at beginning levels, due attention should be paid to choosing and implementing appropriate vocabulary teaching/learning techniques in language classes. Based on the results obtained from this study, we can conclude that memorization of word lists as a de-contextualizing or direct technique of vocabulary teaching/learning is better than sentence-

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making practice as a contextualizing or indirect technique, particularly for the slow learners at the B.E. / B.Tech. level.

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