

An Exploration of Strategies for Teaching and Learning English Language Vocabulary in Secondary Schools in Tanzania: A Classroom Observation

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Abstract

This paper explored English language vocabulary teaching and learning strategies used in secondary school classrooms in Tanzania. The study used observation method to witness the process of direct vocabulary instruction through an authentic text extracted from the Novel “The River Between” to collect data from 48 students, and one teacher of English language making a total of 49 informants from Kilimanjaro Region- Tanzania. Findings showed that the informants used a number of strategies in teaching and learning vocabulary, the strategies included the use of dictionary, asking classmates and teacher for meaning, vocabulary learning through questions and answers, among these strategies, the students seemed to be better in using matching items strategy. From the observation it was found that the students were inactive in participating in the lesson this was somewhat contributed by the way the teacher was engaging them in the lesson. One of the ways teachers can aid the learning process is by helping learners become aware of and practice in using a variety of vocabulary learning strategies, since students in EFL context mostly depend the classroom for learning of English language.

Keywords: Secondary Schools in Tanzania, English as a Foreign Language, English for Specific Purpose, strategies, classroom.

Introduction

Vocabulary learning deserves a special attention as vocabulary is central to language acquisition and competence. Vocabulary makes a person to function well in day to day communication that is why Nation (2006) calculated the amount of vocabulary necessary to function in English, using a 98% coverage figure. He posits that, it takes an approximate of

6,000–7,000 word families for spoken discourse and 8,000–9,000 families for written discourse. These figures suggest the need for learners to master more vocabulary than previously thought necessary. In order to help students attain vocabularies of this size, teachers need to provide explicit instruction on the more frequent words, and they also must help students to develop learning strategies that enable them to acquire less frequent vocabulary. By high frequency vocabulary, we mean the items that occur frequently in the running text, they approximately reach 2,000–3,000 words (Nation, 1990, 2001). While low frequency words are those items whose large proportion of the items in that area are hardly known. These are those words that are also known as rare, obsolete, or dialectal in the dictionary. The low frequency words that the learners know reflect the influence of a variety of personal and social variables such as how widely the learners have read and listened.

On the other hand, students need a well-structured vocabulary program with a balanced approach that includes explicit teaching together with activities providing appropriate contexts for learning. Nation (2001: 232) asserts that ‘many learners of second and foreign language do not experience the conditions that are needed for this kind of learning to occur’. Thus, he claims that activities focusing on the word itself (explicit learning activities) are essential for successful L2 vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary learning strategies are a subdivision of language learning strategies which have attracted much attention since the late seventies. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary learning strategies enable learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. He believes that a large amount of vocabulary can be acquired by using vocabulary learning strategies. One of the methods that can help the learner acquire enough vocabulary so that they can function well is through incidental and explicit instructions. In incidental and explicit vocabulary learning students engage in activities that focus attention on vocabulary such as reading. In the present study, the students were engaged into incidental reading of a text in which the teacher targeted some vocabulary items to be acquired.

Equally, Sokmen (1997) highlights several key principles of explicit learning that can help and guide teachers in deciding what to teach and how to teach. These principles are important since the students in EFL settings as the case in this study depend to learn language in the formal context and may be little outside the formal context. We cannot deny the fact that strategies require the learner to take self-initiative efforts for better learning as well as teachers as the actors or agents of such process.

However the teaching and learning of vocabulary in EFL environment as it is the case in Tanzania in most cases rest entirely on the syllabus in which students are taught only basic vocabulary of several hundred words, and read restricted sorts of texts such as language textbooks and graded readers. Having looked at such a scenario, it is unclear whether the

exposure the Tanzanian students have would be enough for them to acquire the language satisfactorily, this can therefore be said, Tanzania learners need a greater exposure for them to be able to acquire more vocabulary items that would help them in their language competence. As Wilkins, (1972) puts it,

“without grammar very little can be conveyed”.

“without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”

Expanding the statement by Wilkins, it can be said that vocabulary teaching and learning need a special attention so that the students can be able to excel in their academic life, and overall competence in English language as English is a global language. It is for this case that the present study sought to explore vocabulary teaching and learning strategies in Tanzanian classrooms.

Literature Review and Theoretical Approach

Some of studies on vocabulary learning were carried by Hill and Laufer (2003) who found that post-reading tasks explicitly focusing on target words led to better vocabulary learning than comprehension questions which required knowledge of the target words' meaning. Mondria (2003) found that the combination of word inferencing followed by verification with a word list led to just as much vocabulary learning (about 50 per cent) as giving students an L1 translation before memorization. This shows that incidental learning plus explicit follow-up can be just as effective as a purely explicit approach.

Schmitt (2008) indicates that explicit vocabulary instruction, in this case after incidental learning from reading, is not a waste of time and effort; it is rather a practical investment of time in the EFL reading class for building a large repertoire of L2 vocabulary. Jie Li and Schmitt (2009) conducted a longitudinal case study on the acquisition of lexical phrase in academic writing; the study involved one female subject, this informant confirmed that both explicit and incidental approaches to vocabulary learning were helpful to her. She further reported that academic reading as a fruitful source of lexical phrases, according to her, one-fifth of her phrases were acquired from this single source. On top of that, it was found that learning and using vocabulary is only partly about knowledge of lexical items but having the confidence to use those items is another requirement. This is to say that, once the students have acquired the new vocabulary, they should be confident enough to use them so that the words can be retained into their vocabulary repertoire.

In the same line, Sonbul and Schmitt (2010) assessed effectiveness of direct teaching of new vocabulary items in reading passages. The study compared vocabulary learning under a

reading only condition (incidental learning) to learning that is aided by direct communication of word meanings (explicit learning). The results also showed that direct instruction is especially effective in facilitating the deepest level of knowledge. Schmitt (2008) suggested that the best methodology in teaching and learning vocabulary may be to combine incidental and intentional approaches, such as by using explicit post-reading tasks to consolidate and enhance the vocabulary initially met while reading. This is the case with the current study; the students were taught vocabulary after reading a text, though the time for reading the text was somewhat very limited.

In Africa we have a few studies which were done on language learning strategies. We have a study by Msuya (2016). The study gave a descriptive analysis of language learning strategies used by Tanzanian secondary school students. Data were gathered from 70 EFL learners in two ordinary level secondary schools in Tanzania, through a questionnaire inventory adapted from Oxford (1990). Findings depicted that the majority of his respondents used social strategies and relatively few were using compensation and memory strategies. Other strategies were affective strategies and the memory strategies, which involved using new English words in a sentence. The difference between Msuya's study and present study lies in the fact that, when the former assessed strategies in language learning, this one specifically explores the strategies in learning vocabulary.

In Kenya, Wambui (2010) addressed the gaps affecting the teaching and learning of vocabulary to help learners write interesting compositions to improve language performance in general. The study found that the decision to teach vocabulary lies entirely on teachers. Her study also found that lack of consistence on how learners practiced the use of vocabulary in composition writing. Wambui believes that some children usually completed primary and secondary school without mastering writing skills due to poor selection of vocabulary which somewhat resulted from the poor teaching processes.

In Tanzania much research was done on the other areas of language proficiency such as teachers' level of competence with less attention on students learning strategies (Allen, 2008; RoyCampbell & Qorro, 1997). Therefore, studies on language learning strategies as a factor for language learner individuality have hardly been done in the Tanzanian context most especially on vocabulary learning strategies. In that light, this study was carried to investigate vocabulary teaching and learning strategies used by Tanzanian Secondary Schools considering the roles these two variables have to general language competence.

Theoretical Approach

This study is guided by the sociocultural learning theory and cognitive learning theory. The reason behind using the two theories is because they complement each other. On one hand, the sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978) views learners' strategies as a result of both cognitive skills and the mediation of particular learning communities. The development of learning strategies is closely connected with the socialization process understood as participation in specific social, historical and cultural contexts. Strategies are developed as a byproduct of the process of socialization (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Social life is seen as central to the problem of a learner's strategy development and use. The language classroom is a place where students learn to participate in the values, beliefs and behaviors of this community of practice. Mediating context (language environment and language discourses), mediating agents (teachers, friends, or partners), and mediating objects (assessment) can all influence learners' strategy choices (Gao, 2006). The relevance of this theory to the current study is linked to the argument placed forth on how learners need both the context, (the classroom) and the mediating agents that is, teachers, friends and people who can help as they utilize the vocabulary learning strategies in their attempt to learn the English as Foreign Language.

On the other hand, the Cognitive Theory considers learning strategies to have a major contribution in the learning of second language. The theory emphasizes, people acquire proficiency in an L2 in the same way that they acquire other complex cognitive skills. The interest in learning strategies came into the field of second language acquisition (SLA) from cognitive psychology. Furthermore, the theory sees learning as an active, constructivist process, in which students encode incoming information, relate it to their previous experience, and store a personally constructed input (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). Similarly, the theory shifts learning responsibility from the teacher to the learner, and students attribute their success or failure to their own efforts. In this view of learning, students are involved in directing their own learning. Learning strategies help learners to control and improve the learning process.

Area of Study and Participants

The study took place in Kilimanjaro Region in Moshi Municipality among Form Three student learners and their English language teacher. The subjects were 48 in total including male and female learners and one teacher. The student participants were equal in number that is, 24 female and 24 male students. The subjects were recruited from a public secondary school in the Municipality. The selection of these subjects was based on their time spent in learning English language, which was sought to be satisfactory for them to be able to give authentic data. Similarly, this level was chosen because students at this stage have already sat for national Form II examinations, and also because it is a level that students do not expect to sit for any national examination in which case the students were not disturbed nor was the researcher wanted to

interfere with their reading timetable. The female teacher recruited for this study was the one teaching English language in this class with 12 years of teaching experience.

Procedure

Data were collected through a reading comprehension text, observation and focus group discussion. The classroom observation was done with the principal researcher taking notes on how the lesson was carried in the classroom. The time spent for this particular lesson was 80 minutes. The usefulness of observation method is that it was possible for the researcher to account for actions which both the teachers and the pupils did without relying so much on what they would say. Observation method helped to explore the vocabulary teaching and learning strategies used by both the students and their teacher through a reading for comprehension text.

Authentic Text

In order to ensure a suitable level of difficulty, the reading passage was selected from the students' ESP reading course book. This passage is a smaller division of topics. Most topics in this syllabus have more than one sub-topic. These sub-topics are presented under the relevant topics. These vocabulary items related to given topic and sub-topic are usually given in the vocabulary column. Normally, the list is not exhaustive. Students were expected to learn many more words which would be found in passage as they read and listen. The teacher should ensure that students know how to pronounce the words correctly. The teacher was also assisting the students to learn the meaning of the new vocabulary encountered from the passage. During observation, the principal researcher witnessed the teacher correcting students' pronunciation whenever they could not pronounce the vocabulary items correctly.

The procedure started with the teacher arranging the students into six groups containing eight students each. Then the teacher asked one student from each group to volunteer reading aloud. A total of seven students equals to 16.6% read the text aloud. The text was from an extract from the "Novel the River Between". The story was about Nyambura, the main character from this extract. From the observation, it was witnessed that, the majority of the students were not making a through follow up while others were reading. Due to lack of good concentration the students who were reading a loud were repeating the same mistakes in their pronunciations. Connecting this observation to the present study, the cognitive theory has this to say, learners need to take learning responsibility to themselves as the shift of learning is placed on them. On the contrary, the sociocultural theory places the responsibility of language learning to both the student and the teacher.

Findings and Discussion

The present study assessed vocabulary teaching and learning in secondary schools in Tanzania. Data were collected in the classroom setting where the informants, the students and teachers were the agents of the process. The vocabulary was introduced through the text in which the students were guided to read aloud and later on the teacher taught the vocabulary explicitly using various strategies presented below. The findings showed that, only seven (16.6%) students out of 48 students were given the opportunity to read the text aloud. This means a total of 48 students in the class only 7 equal to 16.6% percentage were involved in reading aloud while 41 (85%) others were listening. The results of the present study are presented into general themes these are explicit vocabulary learning from the context, vocabulary learning through questions and answers, vocabulary learning through matching items list and vocabulary learning through definition. The findings are as follows:

Vocabulary Learning Through Matching Items From List A and B

From observation, this was the first strategy that the teacher used to teach the vocabulary immediately after the students had read the text. When the students had already finished reading the text, the teacher guided the students to match the meaning of vocabulary from the matching list. The learners need mediating agents such as teachers, and mediating objects, in this case, the text and the matching list act as an assessment tool for their language learning. The list in which the students were supposed to match the items from column A to the meaning in column B was however not exhaustive. The list of vocabulary given is listed as follows:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| i. Menacingly | (a) Emphasized |
| ii. Trembling | (b) Talk or act in a manner so as to scare someone |
| iii. Insisted | (c) Desire to harm |
| iv. Burst out | (d) Shaking |
| v. Malice | (e) Speak suddenly and with a lot of emotion. |

The findings showed that only 8(17%) of the students were able to match all five vocabulary items correctly with their true meaning. While 40(83%) students were able to match from at least (2) two up to (4) four items correctly to their true meaning. These findings suggest that, students might have needed multiple encounters with the vocabulary for them to be able to know the meaning of the new vocabulary. These findings are not far from what (Rott, 1999; Pigada and Schmitt, 2006; Waring and Takaki, 2003) asserted, reading enhances vocabulary learning when learners have multiple exposures to reading tasks. They further described that when learners are exposed to minimal exposure the pick-up rate is relatively low, and therefore it can be difficult to gain a productive level of mastery from limited exposure. This is in line with

(Horst, Cobb, and Meara;1998) who also reported that, words appearing eight or more times in the text had a reasonable chance of being acquired.

Vocabulary Learning Through Sentence

In an attempt to ensure that the vocabulary was learnt and understood, the teacher asked the students to point out other words from the passage which they did not know their meaning. The students pointed the new vocabulary and the teacher gave the meaning through synonyms or creating context. Then the students were guided to construct oral sentences after they had understood the meaning of the vocabulary meanwhile receiving corrections and clarifications from her. However, findings for this strategy revealed how the students were reduplicating the sentences similar to those of their fellow classmates. The reasons for repetition could be due to methodological constrains. Schmitt (2008) argues that, the reasons for small gains of vocabulary from reading could be attributed to a number of drawbacks such as very small amount of reading, inadequate control of text difficulty and very small number of target words. In this study, the time allocated for reading the text was 30 minutes only which can literarily be said to be very limited time. On top of that students reported not to be familiar with many words from the text. This suggests that students have very few target vocabulary and that was why they were trying to repeat the sentences that somewhat looked similar to those of their classmates.

From the observation, it was evidenced that, the teacher was focusing in teaching the meaning of word and pronunciation, while other components of vocabulary knowledge such as the word class, spellings, orthography and the like were left behind. This can as well be a limitation to vocabulary learning as the students fail to know the entire knowledge of the new vocabulary. As Oxford (1990) puts it, learning a word involves much more than remembering the phonological and orthographic forms, and their corresponding meaning. A large part of EFL vocabulary learning involves learning to use the words syntactically and pragmatically. Having seen what Oxford advocates, vocabulary learning should hence aim toward vocabulary in action. Teachers should therefore adopt materials, teaching methods, exercises and evaluation techniques that encourage developing learning strategies suitable for these skills. The samples of the sentences made by the students were:

Rescue: 1. I rescued the child from fire, 2. I will rescue my friend 3. I rescued him

Cheat: don't cheat your father, 2. do not cheat your friend.3. Do not cheat me

Devil: I do not like the devil, 2. I do not like my enemy

Harm: I will not harm you, he will not harm you

The students were given an opportunity to construct spoken sentences and no chance was there to write the sentences into their exercise books. We assumed that students needed written exercises as well so as they would acquire the other aspects of a word such as spellings.

Vocabulary Learning Through Guess the Meaning from the Context

When a learner has encountered the vocabulary in which the meaning is not yet understood, context can give a learner a chance to find out the meaning of the new vocabulary. The teacher guided and exposed the learners to use context and try to figure out the meaning of the new vocabulary from the context by re-reading the passage. After a second reading, there was a slight improvement compared to the first encounter. These findings suggest that when the learners are exposed to multiple exposures the outcomes of vocabulary can be witnessed unlike one time exposure of a new word.

According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2011), you develop your knowledge of context learning by seeing and hearing words in many contexts and noticing which words form partnerships with one another. They emphasized, collocations can contain different parts of speech and perform different grammatical functions within a sentence. Contextualization according to Gardner (2013) is perhaps the most important element of Direct Vocabulary Instructions (DVI) that ensured that learners of English language were actually conceptualizing the words they were trying to learn. Different contexts provide different kinds of information about a word. For example, it is possible to learn one meaning from a particular context. Similarly, it requires a different context in order to learn a separate meaning. It is therefore imperative for EFL and SLA teachers to provide the students with the possibility of how certain words would go together. On the other hand this does not mean that the students should not be responsible of their own learning as cognitive theory suggests.

Vocabulary Learning Through Questions and Answers

It was observed, one of the methods that the teacher used to explicitly teach students new vocabulary was through questions and answers. The passage had the follow up questions which the teacher guided the students to answer them after they had read the passage. Examples of the follow up questions were:

Do you think Nyambura is afraid of her father?

Do you think Nyambura's father was right to warn her off Waiyaki?

Why does Nyambura's father forbid her to meet waiyaki?

From the observation, it was revealed that, only 5 students (10%) out of 48 students were able to answer those follow up questions. Some students enquired their teacher for the meaning

of the words **forbid**, **warn**, and **afraid** before they responded to the follow up questions. It was later on realized, through Focus Group Discussion with the students that, the majority of the students had encountered the words “**forbid**, **warn**, and **afraid**” for the first time. This finding could have an explanation from Schmitt (2008) who argues that, it requires knowledge of around 3,000 families as the threshold that should allow learners to begin to read authentic texts. On the other hand, apart from the knowledge of these word families, Nation (1990) asserts that words must be encountered numerous times to be learned. Schmitt and Schmitt (2010) concluded that it takes from five to sixteen or more repetitions for a word to be learned. The text in which students were exposed to had no enough number of occurrences that was why it was somewhat difficult for students to be able to acquire the meaning of the new vocabulary items encountered. That why only 10% of the students seemed to actively participate in answering the questions that came from the text.

Vocabulary Teaching and Learning Through Definition

Findings through observation showed that the teacher explicitly taught vocabulary through definition. This is the use of other words to tell the meaning of words, this was the most preferred method by the teacher, dictionary was used as a source of word definition. Through classroom observation it was revealed that, the teacher sought all the meaning of the new vocabulary from the dictionary. In so doing, she as well combined with other strategies such as context and the use of the matching items strategies. It was witnessed through classroom observation that students do not bring dictionary with them to the classroom, they solely depended those available in school which were also not available, as the teacher reported. Schmitt (2008) says, by defining the underlying meaning concept, we maximize the effects of teaching by enabling students to understand the word in a much wider variety of contexts.

Asking Classmates and Teacher for Meaning

This strategy was significantly used by the majority of the students. Through observation, it was observed how the learners were most of the time depending to learn or to know the meaning of the new words from their teacher and from the fellow classmates. The principal researcher had the chance to observe how students asked each other for meaning before asking their teacher. Through focus group discussion, students reported asking for meaning from another person (44)91%, they reported to use this strategy even when they were out of the classrooms. This was the commonly used strategy and the students reported to find it as one of the most helpful strategies. Some of the responses from the students were as follow:

- i. *When I do not know the meaning of a new word, I prefer to use ask the meaning of a new word from my friend or my teacher.*

- ii. *I used to ask meaning of the new vocabulary from my teacher because I don't have dictionary at home.*
- iii. *It is easy to ask my fellow classmate than to ask my teacher.*

The results revealed how students relied on their teacher to learn the meaning of new words. These findings are dissimilar to that of Kulikova (2015) whose descriptive analysis of vocabulary learning strategies demonstrated that the Russian learners preferred to use dictionary, guessing and note taking strategies. His findings are in line with Schmitt (1997) who found that 600 Japanese EFL learners of different age were the best users of dictionary together with other strategies such as verbal and written repetition, studying the spelling, guessing from context, and saying the word aloud.

Importance of using dictionary, of course with other strategies is also supported by Laufer and Hadar (1997). It is contended that the use of reference sources for vocabulary acquisition shows that dictionary use during reading is beneficial for word learning and retention, especially when dictionaries are used in combination with other vocabulary learning strategies such as inferring from context, deep processing of the information, and reinforcing the form. In the present study the informants preferred asking meaning from their teacher or fellow classmates as well as using constructing sentences by using the new vocabulary encountered from the text. However, our findings showed that context using was somewhat not effective demonstrated by the learners. This was probably contributed limited frequency of occurrence of new words in the text.

Conclusion, Recommendations and Implications

Findings show that both the students and teachers used a number of strategies in teaching and learning vocabulary. The strategies included the use of dictionary, asking classmates and teacher for meaning, vocabulary learning through question and answer among these strategies the students were better in matching items from list A and B over the other strategies. Similar findings are reported by Cohen and Apek (1981) whose study showed that word lists were better for beginning students and contextualized words for more advanced students. In the side of the teacher, it was observed that the teacher relied heavily on using dictionary than the other type of strategies. Despite the fact that syllabus guides the teachers what to teach. It is the task of the teacher to be more flexible in using the strategies that would stimulate more participation from students and keep them more active in the lesson.

Similarly, the findings of the present study have partially worked with Social Cultural Learning Theory. The theory advocates for enough mediation between the three agents, teacher, students and assessment. With the way the lesson was conducted, it is obvious that vocabulary

learning was not fully considered an independent topic rather a sub-topic of which not so much emphasis was given as far as vocabulary lesson was concerned. That said, teachers need to improve their teaching methods and provide proper strategy training and assessment tools, Oxford (1990) says, strategy are easy to train and an essential part of language education.

The teacher focused more in teaching the part of meaning acquisition with little attention on other aspects of word knowledge something which can be said to have somewhat contributed to inactive participation in the lesson as observed in the classroom. The time exerted on learning vocabulary can be said to be very minimal as they were given the maximum of 80 minutes in reading the text and proceeded with teaching and learning of vocabulary. This could be the hindrance in smooth acquisition of vocabulary and English language in general. It can therefore be suggested that syllabus designers, and particularly textbook writers are best positioned to organize this thoughtful development of vocabulary and systematically build recycling and enhancement into a course longer-term.

As we have seen that learning a word involves much more than remembering the phonological and orthographic forms, and their corresponding meanings. We have also seen how the teaching and learning of vocabulary in EFL context concentrated much in knowing the meaning.

Teachers of EFL should therefore adopt materials, teaching methods, exercises and evaluation techniques that encourage developing learning strategies suitable for these skills and not just the meaning as the knowing the word is more than just knowing the meaning.

It is prompting to say, vocabulary instruction is not the only activity that exposes students to high-value vocabulary in classrooms. Students need to take more chances and self-initiatives as the time and content provided to them would never be enough for them to master the vocabulary and language as whole as cognitive theory advocates. Generally, these findings suggest that vocabulary learning through explicit instruction helped in the learning of vocabulary however, teachers need to make their lesson presentations more engaging so as to make the learning process more exciting.

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