

Effective Use of CALL Lab in Building Vocabulary for Engineering Graduates

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Abstract

A strong vocabulary is an invaluable possession for engineering students as it widens their avenues of thought, sharpens mental abilities to excel not only in academic affairs, but also maximize scope for employability and help in professional growth. This necessitates an endeavour to integrate vocabulary improvement as an ongoing process in one's academic and professional journey. British linguist David A. Wilkins (9-10) has rightly observed that "without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." A nimble working vocabulary gives learners the ability to be explicit instead of being vague when sharing their views, following classroom teaching or comprehending the books they read. To meet this objective, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) Lab plays a very crucial role, since it exposes learners to self-instructional, learner-friendly modes of language learning, providing them with the freedom and privacy to listen, read and learn at their own pace. The vocabulary acquired in this process strengthens the learners to confidently face computer-based competitive exams such as TOEFL, GRE, IELTS.

Key words: CALL, Computer Assisted Language Learning, TOEFL, GRE, IELTS, vocabulary learning, vocabulary use, Indian engineering students

Introduction

A limited vocabulary hampers a learner's ability to express himself/herself effectively. Such a learner finds it difficult to comprehend a text and write coherent, cohesive and syntactically correct compositions. Besides this, the learner also has a tendency to avoid situations where there is a need to interact with others since he/she is unable to converse with

peers or understand the teacher's lectures and so on. Due to paucity of vocabulary, a learner might have problems such as verbosity, malapropisms, mixing general and specific vocabulary, incorrect use of formal and informal language, confusion with homophones etc. Often, these problems which occur due to lack of attention and practice in vocabulary building, inhibition in using new words, can be rectified by setting goals and nurturing an awareness, appreciation and love for words. Although vocabulary building is a lifelong learning activity, its success depends on it being goal-oriented and time-bound.

Need to be Aware of the Demands of the Industry

As Stephen Covey points out, one must begin with the end in mind (98). Engineering graduates need to be aware of the requirements and demands of the industry and prepare themselves from the outset to face the professional challenges that lie ahead of them. In the present day scenario, recruiters prefer engineering graduates who are equipped not only with their subject knowledge and technical skills, but also have a sound command over the English language. Such candidates leave a positive impression and are considered assets in any organization.

Focus on Building a Sound Vocabulary

To achieve this goal, learners must strive towards improving their language skills by focusing on building a sound vocabulary, since it forms the basis in language learning and affects one's language proficiency. As Lewis points out, "Lexis is the core or heart of language". (89) A rich gamut of vocabulary enables learners to effectively enhance their language skills, gain new insights and articulate their thoughts and feelings. Building vocabulary involves more than just memorizing lists of words. These words need to be used appropriately in proper context. This in turn builds confidence and has a positive impact on one's capability to strengthen language proficiency. However, as linguist researcher Paul Nation (1994) notes: "Vocabulary is not an end in itself. A rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perform."

Ways to Expand Learners' Vocabulary

Hence, learners need to make a constant effort to acquire and retain new words which would enable their vocabulary to grow exponentially. There are many ways in which learners can expand their vocabulary, such as developing the habit of referring to a dictionary, reading extensively (e.g. books, newspapers, magazines, journals, books that focus only on vocabulary building such as “Improve Your Vocabulary in 30 days” by Norman Lewis), mastering root words and affixes, learning at least one new word a day and using those words in a befitting, appropriate manner. However, this paper is focused mainly on the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) Lab to expand and enrich learners’ vocabulary.

Teachers can assist learners to expand their vocabulary rapidly and in an enjoyable manner by using the different vocabulary building software in the CALL LAB, for example, CD-ROMs of the various dictionaries. Present day learners feel comfortable in using technology and this can be used to their advantage to make vocabulary building effective and interesting. It may be noted that in some engineering colleges the CALL LABS are equipped with internet facilities. This empowers the teacher to make the most of the innumerable resources available and make wise choices with respect to materials that will expedite the process of vocabulary building. The following are some of the sites that will be of great benefit to the learners:

- Online English newspapers
- Vocabulary learning sites e.g. www.vocabulary.com
- BBC Learning English: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish>
- Services that send emails with a new word a day e.g. wsmith@wordsmith.org
- Online Dictionaries and Thesauri e.g. <http://www.merriam-webster.com>

The Role of CALL Lab

The CALL Lab encourages learners’ self-learning. It gives the advantage of attempting a larger number of exercises compared to what a teacher could do with board work. In the lab situation the learners are much involved and take an active role, as they can make use of the vocabulary learning tools available, at their own pace. As pointed out by Ali Farhan AbuSeileek and Atef Odeh Abu Sa'aleek in the journal **Language in India** (2012), "CALL programs can be wonderful stimuli for second language learning....computer technology can help second language

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learners, strengthen their linguistic skills, affect their learning attitude, and build their self instruction strategies and self-confidence."

Undergraduate Engineering Class and Use of English CD-ROMs

Synonyms, antonyms, idioms, homonyms etc. are part of the English Theory syllabus for Engineering (BE), 1st Year students. It is not easy for a teacher to do justice in covering these topics in merely two or three hours in the theory class. Interestingly 'Dictionary and Thesaurus' are part of the English Lab syllabus. Hence the CALL Lab with its CD-ROMs of dictionaries and thesauri can be used to supplement and consolidate the vocabulary learning that the learners have already been exposed to, in the theory class.

The following are the ways in which the CD-ROMs of various dictionaries and thesauri (e.g. Cambridge Learner's Dictionary and The Oxford Learner's Thesaurus) can be used to assist learners in vocabulary building in the CALL Lab.

To begin with, learners can be provided with a list of words, the meanings of which they can be asked to find in the CD-ROMs of dictionaries available in the CALL Lab. Gradually, the list can be enriched by including words that they find more challenging. Interestingly, there are many words which can be explained better through a picture than merely explaining it. For instance, the words to express quantities can be taught through pictures, for example, a blob of cream, crumbs of bread etc. as shown in the CD-ROM of Cambridge Learner's Dictionary.

Words learnt in context will be long retained if they can be presented in documentaries, video clippings, films etc. For example, students can learn the expressions used in debates when they watch the inspiring 2007 American biopic *The Great Debaters* which can serve as a model to develop debating skills of a high order.

Besides working with lists of words, phrases and expressions chosen by the teacher, the learners can use the software available in the CALL Lab, which have different sets of exercises that focus on vocabulary building.

For example, the CD-ROM of Cambridge Learner's Dictionary (2nd ed.) which makes words easy to understand, shows the usage of collocations and the apt use of words in context. It provides exercises on different topics such as phrasal verbs, adjectives, prefixes, suffixes etc. Below are listed a few examples of these exercises:

(i) Phrasal Verbs

Learners can be encouraged to pay attention to phrasal verbs since such phrases are used in everyday conversation. Familiarization with phrasal verbs can result in rapid development in vocabulary and give a person mastery over the language.

The exercise on Phrasal Verbs requires learners to choose the correct option from the given words in the brackets. Once they click on the right option it is shown in green while the wrong answer is shown in red and then the correct answer is provided in green.

E.g. i) Ask (for/out/up) help if the work is too hard. **Ans.** For

ii) Please take (down/off/out) your coat. **Ans.** Off

(ii) Adjectives

Adjectives make one's writing more descriptive and interesting. In the exercise on the usage on Adjectives, the learners need to complete sentences with comparative or superlative form of the adjectives given in brackets.

E.g. i) Thetown is fifty miles away (Close) **Ans.** Closest

ii) It has been theJune for over a century (Wet) **Ans.** Wettest

Learning affixes (prefixes and suffixes) is very crucial to vocabulary learning. Knowledge of the meanings of prefix and suffix enables learners to form or derive new words and thus expand their vocabulary.

(iii) Prefixes

In the exercise on prefixes the learners are required to choose the correct option from the words given in brackets.

E.g. i) The questions were hard and I was (di/in/un) sure of nearly all the answers. **Ans.** unsure

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ii) (in/non/un) helpful: not wanting to help, in a way that seems unfriendly. **Ans.** unhelpful

(iv) Suffixes

In this exercise the learners have to complete each sentence by adding the correct suffix to the word in brackets.

i) I explained the _____ of the internet. (useful) **Ans.** Usefulness

ii) Her _____ did not stop her climbing mountains. (blind) **Ans.** Blindness

The CD-ROM of the Oxford Learner's Thesaurus shows the subtle differences between synonymous words, antonyms, collocations, usages and enables learners to speak and write effectively by finding the most appropriate words to express what they wish to convey. For example,

i) excellent (adj.).

Synonyms: superb, classic, first rate

Antonym: mediocre

ii) articulate (adj.)

Synonyms: fluent, eloquent

Antonym: inarticulate, silent

For synonyms, the thesaurus presents exercises called 'Choose the Best Word' with different levels. For example, for the word anger the instruction states:

There is a better word that you can use than anger.

i) She screamed and slammed her phone down in a rage/outrage/indignation (ans. a rage)

ii) The publication of the book provoked a storm of public rage/outrage/indignation (ans. Outrage)

For antonyms, the thesaurus offers exercises like this: 'Find the opposite of the word in bold in the first sentence to fill the gap in the second sentence'. The learner has to type the correct antonym in the gap.

i) Are you **allowed** to smoke in here?

Smoking is strictly (Ans. Forbidden)

ii) I am afraid I am not **authorized** to give out that information.

Newspapers were ----- from publishing any material relating to the investigation. Ans: prohibited

Live Action English

Live Action English Interactive is an interesting multimedia program that uses real movies to teach English. The program, other than giving a scope to practice listening, reading, and writing, can be used to familiarize students with basic vocabulary in the context of familiar activities related to exchanging greeting, domestic chores, shopping, giving directions and so on.

Thus the various software in the CALL Lab do facilitate intensive vocabulary practice. A learner who is hesitant in the class room scenario feels free to open up in the Lab, since it provides both privacy and a congenial environment. Raman and Sharma rightly say, "Technology has provided many aids to make learning new words fast, interesting and lively." (603)

In conclusion, it can be observed a masterful command of words and the ability to select the right ones to express a specific idea, for a particular audience is essential in crafting powerful and engaging speech and writing. The repetition of the same words bores people, while a vocabulary that is correct, crisp and convincing, enables learners to present a positive personality. "In the age of technological advancement what establishes our credentials is our ability to use words - the powerful words...and also their appropriate usage that is required of us to be good communicators". (Sanjay Kumar and Pushpa Lata, 207)

This paper has looked at how learners can enhance their vocabulary not only by the conventional methods, such as making a habit of reading extensively maintaining a vocabulary

journal and so on, but also by making the most of the vocabulary building software particularly in the CALL Lab.

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