

LEARNING VOCABULARY AT TERTIARY LEVEL: STRATEGIES, TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS

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Abstract: This paper shows the strategies taken by the learners at the tertiary level to enrich vocabulary skills and the materials which are used by the learners in terms of acquiring vocabulary. Besides, this study aims to investigate the self-selected techniques of L2 learners in the context of Bangladesh. This research was qualitative in nature. Data were collected from the students and teachers of Private Universities. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview questionnaire for the students, a semi-structured interview schedule for the teachers and a focus group discussion guideline for the students. Major findings of the study showed that contextual reading, using dictionary, using online social platform, watching movie, taking note, listening lectures, memorizing, listening audio-visual materials and reading billboard were taken by the learners as the strategies to enrich vocabulary. Moreover, learners discovered self-selected techniques either in the sub-conscious or in the conscious state of mind.

Keywords: Learning Vocabulary, Strategies, Techniques; Materials, Tertiary Level

1. Introduction

Mastering in English is a great challenge to the EFL learners unless vocabulary is ensured for the appropriate circumstances as we know that no language can give the message to its receivers without words, despite being flourished with structure and grammar (Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997; Yaacob et al, 2018). Learning any language is explicitly influenced with vocabulary. Vocabulary plays the most outstanding role in respect of learning a language. L2 learners rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for them to develop English learning skills. Learners bring dictionary which convey that lack of vocabulary is a major problem on the way of productive communication (Huckin, 1995, Wilkins, 1972 & Maximo, 2000). According to McLaughlin, vocabulary development is the prime concern of L2 learners and this concept is supported by Nation (2001). It is found from the studies (Susanto, 2016; Marion, 2008; Nation, 2001 & 2005; Maximo 2000; Read, 2000 & 2004; Gu, 2003; Laufer and Nation, 1999) improving vocabulary is a part and parcel to have a good command in foreign language. In a broad sense, language learning is concerned with different strategies that can be defined from different outlooks and approaches and as vocabulary is the most important tool of a language, different strategies which attracted the attention of SLA learners, have been taken to increase vocabulary learning (Schmitt, 1997 & Nyikos & Fan, 2007).

The present study outlines the vocabulary learning strategies adopted by the learners of the tertiary level to enrich vocabulary skills and the materials they use to develop vocabulary in the self-selected ways. The self-techniques may be present in the learners' mind subconsciously or consciously, which directly contribute to the development of vocabulary among the learners of the tertiary level.

2. Literature Review

Adopting different strategies in learning vocabulary has been added a new dimension and learners are not confined to single or traditional strategy of learning vocabulary. The studies from (Zhang, 2001; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Hulstijn, 1993) confirmed that more proficient learners use different strategies of vocabulary learning rather than depending blindly on dictionary. A considerable amount of work has been accomplished home and abroad regarding teaching-learning vocabulary.

It is pointed out from the studies of Koolstra and Beentjes (1999) as cited in Rokni and Atae, (2014), Lertola (2012), Koskenin et al,(1985) as cited in Yuksel & Tanriverdi (2009), Vanderplank,(1988), that watching movie with sub-titles helps to enrich vocabulary of the learners as in their subconscious mind, they learn vocabulary from the movies or audiovisual materials. The studies also reveal that subtitled videos perform significantly better on a word recognition and help in increasing vocabulary. Huang and Yang (2012), Nation & Meara (2002), Shu et al. (1995) found that learning from contextual reading ensures the increase of vocabulary

among the learner. They also point out that contextual and incidental reading smooth the way to learn and capture vocabulary from different sources. Hong (2010) found that contextual vocabulary learning was considered an integral part of L2 vocabulary learning as it covers three vocabulary learning strategies-glossing, guessing from context and using dictionary. In the same echo, Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) outlined that guessing from context, using word parts and mnemonic techniques to remember words, and using vocabulary cards to remember foreign language and first language word pairs are the important strategies of learning vocabulary. Moreover, Murcia (2001) reported the same techniques in order to achieve vocabulary especially in English language. Again, Furqon (2013) stated that knowing 90 percent words of a text helps the learners to cover the rest 10 percent which they do not know but can easily guess. Murcia (2001) stated that a rich context is enough to give adequate clues to guess the words' meaning. Moreover, Hulstijn (1993), Laufer & Levitzky-Aviad (2003), Peters (2009) overviewed that learners are less interested to find a word from the dictionary if it is easily guessed.

But Laufer (1990) asserted that though a word in a sentence looks familiar to the learners, it is difficult to guess the meaning of an unknown word and in most cases, it is rarely accurate. Kaivanpanah and Alavi's (2008) stated that the inferences about the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary are not always reliable and so, teachers should encourage the learners to find the particular meaning of the desired words. Besides, learners become confident if they find the meaning of the words in a dictionary, they inferred from the contextual information. Access to a dictionary makes the learners more autonomous to see appropriate interpretations of unfamiliar words in sentences without teachers' explanations in the classroom (Gu 2003; Miyanaga, 2006). This finding was also supported by Walz (1990), Hayati and Fattahzadh (2006). In this connection, based on memorization fact, Cortazzi & Jin (1994) stated that Chinese tertiary-level students became habituated to memorizing words from vocabulary books and dictionaries as well as vocabulary note book as their main means of vocabulary learning.

In another perspective, the findings of Nader (1996) and Warschaur (1995) revealed that social media plays an important role in learning vocabulary for the learners within individual and group activities and so, teachers should make the social platform usable with a view to creating awareness in terms of learning vocabulary. They further added that technology can be an important tool to the teaching-learning strategies of vocabulary. This present study only deals with the strategies which are followed by the tertiary learners, is a unique research in this context which was dealt with the common practices of the learners in order to show the real scenario in improving vocabulary skills in the context of Bangladesh.

3. Rationale of the Study

Learning vocabulary has been a great challenge for the L2 learners for many factors because in different times teaching-learning approach has been directed and redirected by the linguists and language specialists (Meara, 1995; Nation, 2001; & Schmitt, 2010). Schmitt (1997) argued that the mechanics of vocabulary acquisition are one of the most challenging tasks in L2 learners.

At the beginning of the 20th century, vocabulary learning was considered as the influential issue of L2 learning. In this connection Wilkins (1972) stated that vocabulary is the main component of language as without grammar a little can be conveyed but without word nothing can be conveyed. But at the middle of the 20th century the interest of vocabulary declined due to the Chomsky's theory which redirected the approach of learning vocabulary. Rather more emphasis was given to the structure and grammar, than the words or vocabulary needed for communication. However, in present time, the focus goes to the vocabulary learning in order to have the perfection in the second or foreign language. The previous studies cover a great number of work in terms of learning and acquiring vocabulary. But researchers hardly find any work related to learning vocabulary with self-selected approaches in Bangladesh. In many cases students are very reluctant to increase their vocabulary as teachers and classroom do not play an influential role in order to have good command in acquiring vocabulary what they adopt or follow depending on their own will, except memorizing and getting pressured by the teachers. Finally, the present study explores the strategies, the tertiary learners follow to enrich their vocabulary and the research will help language teachers, students, material developers and policy makers to go into the depth of findings and to have the necessary actions to the development of English vocabulary learning strategies.

4. Objective of the Research

The main objective of the study is to explore the strategies followed by the L2 learners at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. Besides, the materials they follow or adopt to enrich their vocabulary are to be shown in this study so that all the concerned can have decision in regard of learning and teaching vocabulary following the real context of the self-selected strategies of the learners.

5. Research Questions

1. What strategies are followed by the tertiary learners of Bangladesh to enrich vocabulary?
2. Which materials are followed by them in learning vocabulary?

6. Methodology

This research was qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2008). Data were collected from the students of three private universities, who are studying in different departments in the first and second semester and they all have a credit course in English language. Thirty students were selected for this purpose randomly and 6 English teachers were interviewed, who are teaching English at tertiary level. Among the respondents, fifteen percent were females. Finally, three focus group discussions were conducted with the selected respondents. Three males and three females took part in each focus group discussion. The open ended data were collected through interview of the respondents as well as the teachers. Thematic approach was applied to analyze the collected data as well as to enter into the depth of the research (Boyatzis, 1998).

7. Analysis of the Study

7.1 Contextual Reading

The data shows that contextual reading helps to learn vocabulary and it is developed through real encounters with the words in context. Contextual vocabulary traces the mind of the readers more than the list of vocabulary, learners are accustomed to memorize. It is found from the interviews that majority of the student state that they learn vocabulary through reading different types of books, magazines and newspapers especially by reading comprehension or passages which are included in their curriculum. From the FGD, maximum students notify that contextual reading enhances their vocabulary stock. They also state that it is one of the easiest ways to learn vocabulary because it happens in the subconscious mind of the learners.

One of the students says,

“I have grown the habit of English newspaper reading which helps me to cope with the vocabulary; moreover, I can guess the theme from the reading context and it is always better understanding”.

From the interview of the teachers it is found that one teacher agrees with the fact that reading helps grasping vocabulary, no doubt. The other teacher states *“vocabulary learning gets its maximum output when contextual interaction, collaboration and peer feedback are to be considered and performed”*. So, Contextual reading finds out the way to learn new vocabulary.

7.2 Using Dictionary

From the data, it is found that learners are fond of using dictionary and there is hardly any students who do not have any dictionary. Some of the students said that they use dictionary when they need to know the Bangla meaning of any word and so they have grown the habit of using dictionary. One of the students asserts in this connection that dictionary gets the first priority to the learners because they hardly see any alternative way to learning vocabulary, here they also opine that dictionary provides not only vocabulary but also the meaning of the desired words. Another student say,

“Dictionary is written alphabetically, so it is very easy to find out the word from the dictionary book within a moment, besides, we are able to learn synonyms and antonyms of the word easily.”

From FGD, it is opined by the learners that dictionary is a very useful material for learning vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation and in general synonyms and antonyms. Some students say that they use dictionary on their mobile for easy access. From the teachers' interview, it is found that majority of the teachers suggest the students to use portable dictionary with them at any place so that students can be able to learn words. One of the teachers states that learning vocabulary is a very crucial issue for the learners and most of the students find no interest to enrich their vocabulary stock, so dictionary helps them to pick up the desired words with the quickest possible time and in the context of Bangladesh, maintaining dictionary has been an integral part of learning English.

7.3 Using Online Social Platform

The study reveals that learners learn and pick up vocabulary from online social platform. Students assert that online social platform is a place where learners get acquainted with different types of vocabularies which help to improve their vocabulary stock. One of the students says that their use of everyday words with the friends and family members make them think and the transcribed words on the online sites have longer lasting effects to their minds.

One of the students says,

“They get introduced with different types of words and these words are exchanged from person to person through online media and therefore, they have ample scope to have a look into many new words”

each day. In the same connection, sometimes using their hypothesis or assumption they try to use some sorts of words having no prior conception of the meaning of words”.

One of the teachers in this regard states,

“Social platform makes the learners acquainted with every day necessary words and these words can have a permanent impact through utilizing and exchanging in the daily affairs. However, code switching frequently occurs due to the intentional use of the social platform.”

7.4 Watching Movie

Students find more opportunities to enhance their vocabularies using audio-visual aids especially through watching movies. The study reveals that watching movie helps students to improve their limited vocabulary, grammar and listening skills. One of the students mentions that watching subtitled movies facilitate them in vocabulary building especially when it comes to English language learning. From FGD, maximum respondents say,

“We can easily concentrate on words or phrases while movie runs because in English movie we see the subtitles just below the pictures and so, it is interesting and effective to increase vocabularies through watching movie.”

One English teacher says,

“Subtitled videos, movies and films are a rich source in communicative language in use and through them there is a lot of opportunities of the learners to increase the vocabulary stock because subtitled movies give language learners more motivations and comforts, as well as the production of new terms, words, phrases and idioms.”

Two students add that vocabulary learning becomes a fun when teachers teach them showing movies and films and they never feel boring in this process but they feel awkward when they go through memorizing a list of vocabularies without the realism.

7.5 Taking Note

Taking note is a great way to solve the vocabulary problem of the learners. Majority students say that they have fostered the habit of taking and maintaining note books whenever they are in the class or out of the class if the words seem unknown to them, they instantly write in the notebooks or mobile phone so that these can't be deleted from their mind. One of the students opines, “When I read or hear any new word, I just keep the word in my note and later on with the help of dictionary I try to find out the meaning so that it remains permanent in my mind. From FGD it is also notified that learners cannot retain new vocabularies even if they hardly can use the words from their stock due to the fact that there is no utilization of the vocabularies they learnt earlier and so, they adopt note taking strategy. One of the teachers states,

“After getting information about a new word, learners may take notes of this word in the notebooks, vocabulary cards, or simply notes along the margins or between the lines and the strategy ensures a positive result in terms of enriching vocabulary as well as the application of proper diction to the appropriate circumstances.”

7.6 Listening Lectures

The study reveals that learners pick up vocabularies from their teachers' lectures and vocabulary learning becomes fruitful if students are aware of the teachers' lectures. In every lecture teachers have some common vocabularies and these exist the learners' mind in a comparatively permanent way and in their speaking and writing in the classroom, learners feel satisfied and courageous to use the vocabularies used by the teachers. Some students opine that they are mostly influenced by the teachers' lectures and they learn many vocabularies from the teachers' lectures every day because they are habituated to understanding the vocabularies, the teachers use in the classroom and thus they are being enriched with new vocabularies each time. One of the students opines,

“I am not interested to learn vocabulary from dictionary or any other sources because, vocabulary learning is tiring some but I get encouraged to learn vocabulary from teachers' lectures as the strategy is easy to follow so that I keep continuing in touch of listening the teachers”.

One of the teachers states,

“Most of the students of my class do not always understand lecture but with the growing confidence they can try to guess the meaning of the lecture and thus contributes to increasing vocabulary stock indirectly from lectures.”

7.7 Memorizing

It is found from the data that vocabulary is not explicitly taught in many second language classes. Learners are to memorize the vocabulary on their own without proper guidance because teachers are not interested to teach the vocabulary in the class. If teachers start teaching vocabulary in the context of Bangladesh, in most cases,

learners are demotivated to the class and for this, teachers technically avoid teaching vocabulary to the learners but they have indirect influences to teach their students providing homework including the sheet of a list of vocabularies to memorize at home. In the same case students are interested and dependent to memorize a certain number of words as per assigned by the teachers.

One of the students says,

“I always try to memorize vocabulary for my own sake and sometimes being pressurized by teachers though it is boring some to memorize a lot of words and at the same time it is difficult to remember the amount of vocabulary, I learnt but finding no other way, I just continue memorizing.”

From FGD some learners opine that to face the challenges of English vocabulary learning, memorizing is a must, besides still, in our country in learning English, most of the learners depend on memorization strategy either in grammar learning or in composition writing. Still most of the learners follow the traditional approach in learning English and in this case vocabulary memorizing is a common practice. *“Large percentages of students were doubtful of many vocabulary learning strategies when they were in secondary school, and in university many remain hesitant about using different vocabulary learning methods other than memorization”*, stated by a teacher.

7.8 Listening Audio-Visual Materials

Listening audio helps the learners to be capable of learning vocabulary as the finding shows, most of the learners privilege that they have developed vocabulary learning through listening audio. Listening skill covers every section of language learning; especially huge improvement is possible in case of vocabulary learning because listening affects the listeners directly with the words systematically organized to form language. In this connection, one of the teachers says,

“Listening enriches vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, after all contributes much to learning any language: Besides that, listening works at remembering new words, of course, speaking skill is constrained unless there is lack of good listening skill.”

From FGD, students state that they listen to audio for increasing vocabulary and frequent listening not only gives them confidence but also provides them opportunities to handle with different words and phrases. One of the teachers asserts *“Listening audio is a good practice to grow more vocabularies of the learners and this has comparatively permanent impact in learning vocabulary”*.

7.9 Reading Billboard

From the data, it is found that majority of the learners get benefited in learning new vocabulary from bill board reading. Observing bill board or having a look over bill board can increase the vocabulary stock of a learner because in the subconscious mind, they look at the bill board and grab the words written on the board. One students asserts

“Bill board helps to learn vocabulary implicitly because on the bill board there is a combination of picture and words and seeing the picture, we can easily guess the meaning of the written words of the billboard.”

It is also notified from FGD, a group of learners think that billboard contributes to remembering new vocabularies as billboard words are a kind of vocabularies which have ever lasting effect on the readers mind. However, incorrect spelling on the writing of billboard makes them confused.

8. Findings and Discussion

8.1 Listening Lectures, Contextual Reading and Bill board

Major Findings of the study show that teachers' lectures, contextual reading and bill board help to increase vocabulary of the learners. This study also reveals that contextual reading plays a very significant role in keeping vocabulary into students' mind as teachers' lectures, reading books and bill board bear the significance providing the contextual support to the learners in case of learning vocabulary. In this connection, research shows that words in context is highly effective to be placed in mind than they stand alone lists. Learning from conversation and from reading with context contribute a lot to developing vocabulary skills and the previous studies (Walters, 2004; Nation, 2001; Dubin 1993) support the present findings in the same manner at the same time, they all get emphasis on the development of vocabulary using context. But this study also finds bill board reading culture of the learners which is concerned to contextual reading. However, incorrect spelling on the writing of billboard makes students confused and sometimes incorrect spelling remains rooted in students' mind and they keep using in their practical life.

8.2 Watching movies, Listening Audio and Messaging on Social Platform

This study reveals that watching movie, listening audio, messaging on social platform play a great role in learning vocabulary as learners feel comfortable and subconsciously they can pick up the words for the real circumstances. Audio and video materials decrease students' fear of learning English and increase students' listening skill (Sultana & Ashrafuzzaman, 2016; Ehsan, Ashrafuzzaman & Das, 2013; Ashrafuzzaman, Babu & Begum, 2010). Watching movie not only gives the learners visual understanding of the words but also connects students to be with the listening of the frequency of the words so that movie watching and listening contribute to each other. Research shows that more proficient learners use a variety of vocabulary strategies, rather than depending exclusively on dictionaries (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Hulstijin, 1993; Zhang, 2001). Danan (2004) state that audiovisual materials are useful tools for learning vocabulary. The studies from Koskenin et al, (1985) as cited in Yuksel & Tanriverdi (2009), Akbulut (2007), Vanderplank (1988), state the importance of watching movie with subtitles and they all show in their studies that watching movie with sub-title makes the learners comparatively more focused in acquiring vocabulary. Social platform also contributes to learning vocabulary (Warschaur, 1995). On the other hand, code switching is frequently found due to the intentional use of the social platform.

8.3 Note-taking, Memorization, Using Dictionary

It is also found from that students foster note-taking and memorization to enrich their vocabulary. Dictionary memorization has become a common practice because most of the students depend on this strategy in learning vocabulary. Memorizing dictionary, and a list of selective words from the teachers or coaching center are also believed to be the proper way in learning vocabulary by the learners. In this regard, Nation (2006) and Harvey & Yuill (1997) show that there are many advantages actually learners can get from dictionary learning. However, Hulstijin (1993) states that advanced learners are sometimes reluctant to consult a dictionary if the meaning of the unknown word is easily guessed. In the same echo, Jan-Arjen Mondria (2003) states against traditional memorization that does not work due to lack of repetition and so forgetting is promoted. Now a days whenever students get any new word, instantly they search and learn vocabulary from mobile or computer applications dictionary.

9. Conclusion

Tertiary learners follow not only the traditional approach but also a number of techniques followed by the learners to be skilled in vocabulary. Besides, the strategies are meant to maintain a number of task related and self-selected activities of the learners so that they can be benefited with a variety of strategies to vocabulary learning, which will, no doubt, contribute significantly to students' vocabulary development. In addition to that, the materials which are to be used in order to enrich the vocabulary knowledge, get enormous positive impacts as the selected strategies with the vocabulary learning materials work together. Vocabulary learning is not confined to memorizing dictionary, rather a number of flexible approaches including contextual reading, using dictionary, using online platform, taking note, listening lecture, watching movie, audio and reading billboard are being practiced by the learners of the tertiary level in Bangladesh. Finally, vocabulary is the minimal part of a language but focuses on the whole system and function of a language and contributes to developing four skills of English language.

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