

The Importance of Vocabulary Development: An ESL and Tool Based Approach

Dr. M.Somathasan

Abstract

English is the language that has spread throughout the world most extensively and is dominating a number of important fields including education, international commerce, and communication; now-a-days, English language has become a famous Lingua-Franca in the world. Thus, the knowledge of English is indispensable and it is to be developed. Its development depends on many language components. Vocabulary is one of them. Vocabulary means word knowledge or word power. For students of English as a Second Language (ESL), there are a set of reasons why they have to improve their vocabulary. First of all, they have to master the word knowledge as there is a common accepted statement in English pedagogy, i.e. if someone wants to learn a second language successfully, firstly, he or she has to develop the vocabulary of that language because language development depends on its vocabulary development. Further, the students use the English in their education, especially in higher education, to express their views; describe their feelings; understand the ideas of others, etc. Moreover, they will feel good about themselves when they have a good command of word power. To acquire all these said things, the students have to make their English vocabulary affluent and also get their teachers' support as a student's vocabulary improvement cannot be separated from the teachers' corporation and motivation. Hence, having considered the teachers' contribution towards the students' vocabulary development, this paper focuses on a simple but effective testing tool to improve the ESL students' vocabulary to great extent.

Key words: *Lingua-Franca, ESL students, English pedagogy, vocabulary, testing tool*

Introduction

We live in a world of words (Landon, 2013). Words are the important part of linguistic knowledge and constitute a component of our mental grammars. Nothing is more important to language than words which carry the meaning and are permanently stored in a speaker's mental dictionary, or *lexicon*; they are the

fundamental building blocks of communication (O'Grady and Archibald, 2016). The term 'word' is part of everyone's vocabulary which is about words and we use them to view the world. Vocabulary learning is a continuous and unending process that poses a great challenge to language learners who have to pay much attention to focus on the subject of vocabulary learning, especially the size and development of lexicons i.e. the breadth of word knowledge. It is said that the more words a student knows, the easier it is to communicate his ideas, i.e. having just the right words in a student's mind, or at the tip of his tongue, lets him express his thoughts precisely.

Many scholars mostly present similar definitions about vocabulary. The scholar, Hubbard (1983), says, 'vocabulary can be defined as a powerful carrier of meaning'. Diamond and Gutlohn (2006) state that vocabulary is the knowledge of words and their meanings. Lewis (1993) describes that lexis is the core or heart of language. As far as the English vocabulary is concerned, Stahl (1999) says that English Language has a very large vocabulary, estimated to between 450,000 and 750,000 words. Crystal (2002) says that the English vocabulary has a 'remarkable range, flexibility, and adaptability'. It is the basis for learning English language, that is, it is central to English language learning and teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students hardly understand others or express their own ideas. Wilkins (1972) wrote that '. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed'. Vocabulary supports all of the English skills. Many educational researches show that vocabulary strongly relates to language skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing, and general abilities of students. To prove this, Richards and Renandya (2002) state that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Further, Coxhead (2006) says that in learning English language, lexis or vocabulary is recognized as a vital factor for ESL or EFL literary development.

Further, a strong vocabulary causes a student's high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) level. In addition to this, there are many practical benefits the students can gain by a strong vocabulary which, for instance, improves the lives of the students both personally and professionally. Though others commonly judge the learners based on their outward appearance, the real fact is that they judge them by the way they speak. Thus, vocabulary is an element that people will use to judge the students' intelligence. When a student is found with a poor vocabulary, it can make others look down on him. Instead, when he speaks to someone, and he uses the proper words that are not spoken daily by the average person, he will convey the impression that he is a person who is educated and well read. Moreover, he will also show that he is great at carrying on a conversation. That is why, it is emphasized that developing a good vocabulary is crucial and it makes a student well-noted and is fruitful for his smart learning. It is surely agreed that actions speak louder than words, but sometimes words speak louder than anything else. The words a person uses, or his vocabulary, will often tell others who he is and where he comes from, i.e. totally his story. For example, isn't it shocking when a person who looks educated and dignified opens his mouth and his vocabulary horrifies everyone around him? Thus, it is strongly said that vocabulary learning is a vital part of education and in second language learning for a student. Further, the researcher, Stanovich (1986) has stated that vocabulary deficiencies are a primary reason of academic failure. Hence, building vocabulary is inevitable for a student of ESL to make him bright in his academic career, especially in language learning.

Literature Review

In the process of learning English as a second language, building vocabulary or lexicon is important and it is a major factor in learners' growth. Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Cameron, 2001). Harmon, Wood, and Keser, (2009) and Linse (2005) state that learners' vocabulary building or development is an important aspect of

their language development. By building an effective vocabulary, a student of ESL achieves the great knowledge in vocabulary skills, for which the scholars, Nist and Mohr (2002), provide some of the compelling kinds of evidence, below:

- As far as the reading skill is concerned, vocabulary is a basic part of reading comprehension. Simply put, if a student doesn't know enough words, he will have trouble understanding what he reads. An occasional word may not stop him, but if there are too many words he doesn't know, the comprehension will suffer.
- Vocabulary is a major part of almost every standardize test like *diagnostic test, placement test, college entrance exam, reading achievement test*, etc. The test developers know that vocabulary is a key measure of both one's learning and one's ability to learn. It is for this reason that they include a separate vocabulary in tests. The more words a student knows, then, the better he is likely to do on such important tests.
- Students have agreed that they are more successful in their learning process with strong vocabularies. And one widely known study found that a good vocabulary, more than any other factor, was common to people enjoying successful careers in life. Words are in fact the tools not just of better reading, but of better writing, speaking, listening, and thinking, as well. The more words a student at his command, the more effective his communication can be, and the more influence he can have on the people around him.
- In today's world, a good vocabulary counts more than ever. Words are the tools of our trade; words we use in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Further, experts say that workers of tomorrow will be called on to change

jobs and learn new skills at an ever-increasing pace. The keys to survival and success will be the abilities to communicate skillfully and learn quickly. A solid vocabulary is essential for both of these skills.

The grammarian, Schmitt (2000), says that mastering vocabulary is important in learning language especially English, because the potential knowledge that can be known about a word is rich and complex. Vocabulary attainment can be constructed as an ability to combine skill or knowledge of words that is used to express meaning, in case of the physical object or idea, in form of symbol of group of letter in a single or more one word (Coulson et al., 1987). The scholars, Coady and Huckin (1998), describe that vocabulary is the central to language and of critical importance to language learning for the young learners. Gass (1999), similarly, states that learning a second language means learning its vocabulary, suggesting that knowing a lexical item means knowing a number of things. She further mentions that Paribakht and Wesche (1999) note that acquisition of vocabulary is an incremental and perhaps recursive process that involves the integration of various kinds of knowledge along with gaining different levels of ability to make use of that knowledge in communication.

The former prime minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, acknowledged in Indian parliament that English is ‘the major window for us to the outside world. We dare not close that window, and if we do, it will spell peril for the future!’ (Broughton et al., 1980). In this case, Stahl and Nagy (2005) also support the same as the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world.

Clearly, all the evidences are overwhelming that building vocabulary is essential. Hedge (2000) then raises the question, ‘What strategies do learners use to develop

vocabulary?', in his studies on vocabulary learning and teaching. Vocabulary can be developed through many strategies.

Strategies for Vocabulary Development

The idea of how vocabulary is learned is mainly related to strategies used by learners as well as approaches to teaching vocabulary. One of the principal controversial issues in vocabulary teaching and learning is how to identify the significant strategies and approaches to teaching and learning vocabularies, which result in longer and easier retrieval of the vocabularies. Oxford (1990) says that the willing steps taken by the students to enhance their own learning are called *strategies*. Strategies are considered to be tools for gaining autonomous involvement in learning and they are the essential factors for the development of communicative competence. She further points out that learning strategies are important for learning a language. Moreover stating, by using language learning strategies a student achieves an improved proficiency and greater self-confidence. According to Farhady (2006), applying certain types of strategies forms an approach to vocabulary learning that influences the level of foreign language proficiency. In other words, the use of appropriate strategy results in improved achievement in specific skills or sub-skills. Moreover, language proficiency also affects the use of particular vocabulary strategy use. Sanaoui (1995) says that vocabulary teaching strategy is an action taken by the teacher to teach or practise the target vocabulary. At this point, it is a predominant duty of teachers to help students enlarge their word power. There are several effective classroom strategies that teachers can employ with the students of ESL of any age. Some of the vocabulary strategies or boosters are here explained:

1. Pre-teach Vocabulary

Pre-teaching vocabulary is always suggested and helpful before doing an activity like *reading a story in the class*. It will give the students the chance to identify the

words and then be able to place them in context and remember them. Pre-teaching vocabulary can be used in the ESL methods such as *role playing or pantomiming, using gestures, showing real objects, pointing to pictures, doing quick drawings on the board, using the native language equivalent and then asking the students to say the word in English*, etc. To ensure mastery of more complex words and concepts, the teacher can do the following six ESL steps:

1. Pre-selecting a word from an upcoming text or conversation.
2. Explaining the meaning with student-friendly definitions.
3. Providing examples of how it is used.
4. Asking the students to repeat the word three times or more.
5. Engaging the students in activities to develop mastery.
6. Asking the students to say the word again.

By sticking to the above said six steps, the teacher can set a related scene and bring the students into the learning environment.

2. Semantic Mapping

Semantic mapping involves a web-like graphic display. Semantic knowledge, or word and world knowledge is a key area of vocabulary growth. Semantic mapping is also known as *learning map* in which students are presented with a concept that is central to understanding a selection or subject. They then try to find out the associate words based on their own understanding and experiences with the related concept. They are able to understand the links and differences between semantic concepts such as *synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and categories*. For instance, in the unit of transport, the teacher targets the words *transportation, land, water, air, train, ship, helicopter*, etc. from the students and look at the *Figure 01*, below:

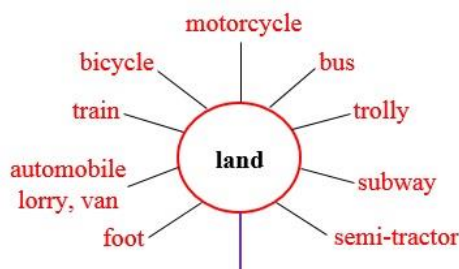


Figure 01

Semantic mapping is very useful for a student of ESL to develop his understanding of almost any concept. As a result, he enriches his mental lexicon or word bank, because a student must learn 2,700 to 3,000 new words per year (Beck and McKeown, 1991; Nagy and Herman, 1987) or about seven new words per day to achieve nearly the 40,000 vocabulary words in the second language learning.

3. Focusing on Cognates

Cognates are words in different languages that are derived from the same original word or root. It is believed that about 40% of all English words have similar cognates in Spanish. This is an evident bridge to the English language if a student is made aware of how to use this valuable resource. By teaching the cognates in different languages, the students can be asked to tell the English equivalent of the cognates, for example, words like *family* and *familia*, and *conversation* and *conversacion*. There are some false cognates as well, but they are the exceptions to the rule. For instance, *mano* in Spanish means *hand*, not *man*. Thus, the teacher has to encourage the students to guess at words and try to decipher the text based on this existing knowledge. The more familiarity a teacher has with Spanish and other

languages like French and Greek, the easier it is to point out these connections for the betterment of the students' vocabulary development.

4. Using a Dictionary

Teachers should promote the habit of using dictionaries among students and they should be taught how to use dictionaries to look up the meanings of unknown words. Even a small pocket dictionary can provide the students a wealth of information. Dictionary skills such as *using guide words*, *understanding parts of speech*, and *deciphering phonetic spelling*, should be explicitly taught and practised. Dictionaries are also useful in introducing multiple meanings or senses of words.

5. Using Word Parts or Components

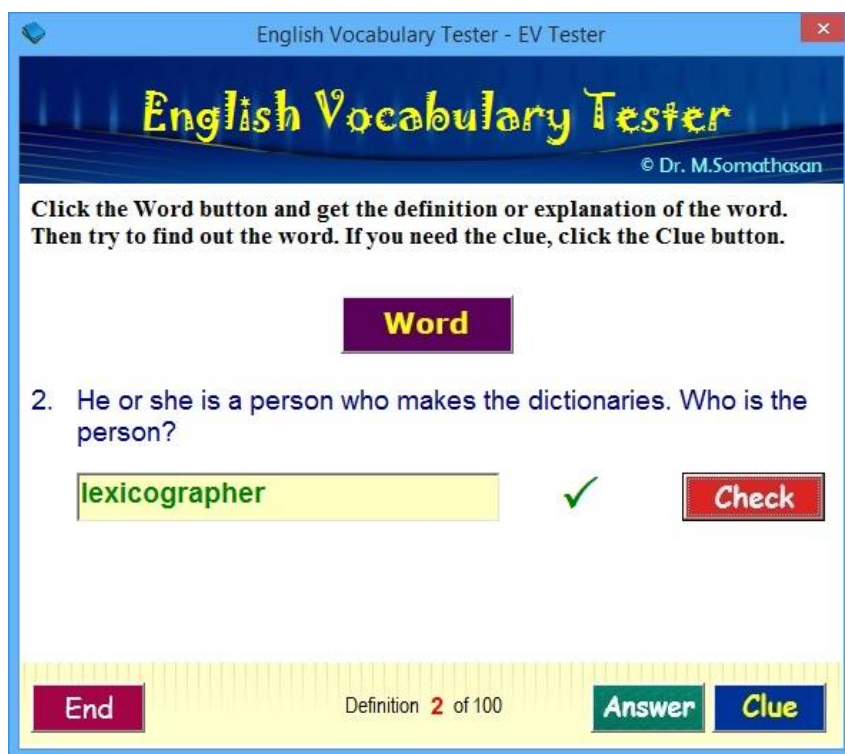
An understanding of word parts or components or linguistically *morphs* (i.e. prefixes, suffixes, and roots) helps the students unlock the meanings of new words. Teachers have to give the students an opportunity to create the prefixes-suffixes reference chart in the text they deal with. It is stated that more than 60% of new words can be parsed into morphs which the students use to figure out their meanings.

6. Using Computer Programmes

Now a days, computers perform a pivotal role in the educational field. With the help of the computer technology, a student can become a digital naive. While taking the English language learning, computer technology-incorporated ways are very special for the students of ESL. When geared to them, computer programmes are the learning and even teaching tools which are proven supplements to helping the students build language skills and especially word power. They are the interest-provoking ones in language learning. A computational tool is a non-threatening way to help learners study or work on their own. As far as vocabulary development and

computers are concerned, there are ample software (*Anki, EasyWords, Vocabulary Spelling City, Word Hippo, Free Rice, etc.*) and online sources (*TrackStar, ThingLink, etc.*) available for students to increase the lexicon. A student-friendly computer programme related to vocabulary development can help him study the new words digitally and efficiently. Based on this concept and for this paper, a computational testing tool called *English Vocabulary Tester (EV-Tester)* is designed to teach the ESL students the English vocabulary successfully.

Sample Visual of the Developed Testing Tool (EV-Tester)



Methodology of the Developed Tool

While considering the vocabulary for ESL students, it is a must for their language learning process and it should be imparted contextually and meaningfully. As far as the mechanism of this developed testing tool is concerned, hundred definitions or explanations of words have been taken as data and they are displayed and

sometimes with example while clicking the ‘Word’ button. Then the students have to identify what it is. If they like, they can get the help from the clues (by clicking ‘Clue’ button) about the word to guess it. For instance, the explanation is: *He or she is a person who writes dictionaries. Who is the person?* The clue may be: *The word begins with the letter ‘l’ or with the sound /l/.* The answer is *lexicographer*. If a student fails to find out the correct answer though attempting many times, then the ‘Answer’ button will help him find out it. For the next definition or question, the button ‘Word’ has to be clicked again. By utilizing this tool, the students are motivated to use the existing knowledge to guess the word; or they are stimulated to look at the contexts in the definition or question and try to find out the new word. This tool was tested in a group of B.A English students at EUSL and the results were very successful; especially it was noted that the students had shown a keen interest in working with this tool on their own and their curiosity was observed in improving the word knowledge. Further, in the discussion, all the participants stated that they were very interested in doing this technology-incorporated vocabulary developing activity and all of them happily voiced that they were able to get the immediate feedback of their every attempt in this e-tool. Thus, it is obvious that the tool is simple and student-friendly, but strongly effective in promoting the mental lexicon of the ESL students.

Conclusion

Vocabulary development refers to getting the knowledge of new or unfamiliar words and their meaning and usage in the context for advancing language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vocabulary knowledge is considered as a basic one for second language learners and English language learning is impossible without improving vocabulary knowledge. It creates an essential literate environment for them. When a student enriches his word knowledge, he becomes an independent word learner and user. Vocabulary development brings *word consciousness, an awareness of, interest in, and curiosity* about words. Teachers

apply many strategies in the classroom to improve the students' vocabulary. Some of them are pre-teaching, cognates focusing, dictionary usage, word parts analysis, semantic mapping, using existing computer programmes, and self-developed computational testing tools like *EV-Tester*. By using *EV-Tester*, it was noted that students of B.A (English) were able to master many ESL and other terms concretely and therefore, their language power raised to praises.

References

1. Beck, I. and McKeown, M. (1991). *Conditions of Vocabulary Acquisition*. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, and P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 2, pp. 789–814). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
2. Broughton, G., Brumfit, C., Flavell, R., Hill, P., and Pincas, A. (1980). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. 2nd edn. London and New York: Routledge.
3. Cameron, L. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001.
4. Coady, J. and Huckin, T. (1997). *Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition: A Rationale for Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Coulson, R.L., Feltovich, P.J., and Spiro, R.J. (1989). *Foundations of a Misunderstanding of the Ultrastructural Basis of Myocardial Failure: A Reciprocation Network of Oversimplifications*. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (special issue on “The Structure of Clinical Knowledge”), 14, 109-146.
6. Coxhead, A. (2006). *Essentials of Teaching Academic Vocabulary*. Boston, U.S.: Houghton Mifflin Company.
7. Crystal, D. 2002. *The English Language*. 2nd Edn. London: Penguin Books.
8. Diamond, L. and Gutlohn, L. (2006). *Teaching Vocabulary*. Retrieved 20 September 2009 from <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/9943>.
9. Farhadi, H. (2006). *Twenty-Five Years of Living with Applied Linguistics: Collection of Articles*. Iran, Tehran. Rahnama press.
10. Gass, S. (1999). *Discussion: Incidental Vocabulary Learning*. *Studies of Second Language Acquisition* 21, 319-333.
11. Harmon, J. M., Wood, K. D., and Keser, K. (2009). *Promoting Vocabulary Learning with Interactive Word Wall*. *Middle School Journal*, 40(3), 58-63.

12. Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in Language Classrooms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
13. Hubbard, P. (1983). *A Training Course for TEFL*. Oxford: OUP
14. Landon, B. (2013). *Building Great Sentences: How to Write the Kinds of Sentences You Love to Read*. Plume; Great Courses edition.
15. Lewis, M. (1993). *The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and the Way Forward*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications.
16. Linse, C. T. and Nunan, D. (Ed). (2005). *Practical English Language Teaching: Young Learners*. New York: McGraw-Hill ESL/ ELT.
17. Nagy, W. E. and Herman, P. A. (1987). *Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge: Implications for Acquisition and Instruction*. In M. G. McKeown and M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The Nature of Vocabulary Acquisition* (pp. 19–35). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
18. Nist, S.L. and Mohr, C. (2002). *Improving Vocabulary Skills*. 3rd edn. USA: Townsend Press.
19. O’Grady, W. and Archibald, J. (2016). *Contemporary Linguistic Analysis: An Introduction*. 8th edn. Toronto: Pearson.
20. Oxford, R. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*. Newbury House Publications.
21. Paribakht, T. and Wesche, M. (1999). *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. Linguistics Education.
22. Richards, J. C., and Renandya, W. A. (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
23. Sanaoui, R. (1995). *Adult Learners’ Approaches to Learning Vocabulary in Second Languages*. *Modern Language Journal*, 79(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/329390>
24. Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
25. Stahl, S. (1999). *Vocabulary Development*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.
26. Stahl, S. and Nagy, W. (2005). *Teaching Word Meaning*. Erlbaum, Mahwah.
27. Stanovich, K. E. (1986). *Matthew Effects in Reading: Some Consequences of Individual Differences in the Acquisition of Literacy*. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21, 360-407. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.21.4.1>
28. Wilkins, D. A. (1972). *Linguistics in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: MFT Press.