VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES AMONG ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is vital in improving students’ language skills which are reading, writing, speaking and listening. English competency level is governed by the breadth and depth of students’ vocabulary knowledge. Possessing a large stock of vocabulary especially academic and technical vocabulary is very essential for developing the language proficiency and equipping learners to survive in the academic world. However, learning vocabulary requires effective and strategic vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). This study reviewed literature on the VLS used among students in tertiary institutions. Students’ success rate in learning vocabulary is correlated to correct application of vocabulary learning strategies that are beneficial in assisting the students’ progress in their learning.

Keywords: Language skills, English proficiency, second language learning, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary learning strategies.


1.0 INTRODUCTION

English is recognised as one of the most favoured languages worldwide due to the fact that it is used in many transactions such as world-wide trade, admission to science and technology, and the mediocre of pedagogy within schools and institutions (Sun, Yin, & Brien, 2017). Harmon, Antuna, Juarez, and Wood (2018) claim that due to various content area texts, literacy of English as a second language has been emphasised and attention has also been given heavily onto the students, leading to countless emerging literacy strategies that positively have affected students’ process of learning. This is because the more students know the words and its structure, the better they could be (Susanto & Halim, 2017). In the process of mastering a second language, learners should have more understanding of each word and their structure so that learners would be using it correctly, in any situations.

Good English language users are required to have good vocabulary in their arsenal as vocabulary is the foundation of English and its role is vital. Without knowing the components of vocabulary, a language learner will find difficulty to communicate, read, write or
comprehend a foreign language (Schmitt, 2010). The stress on the vitality of the roles played by vocabulary is highlighted clearly through the statement.

Easterbrook (2013) claims that vocabulary is defined in two different ways, which are orthographically (as an independent language item which holds meaning) or phonologically (the combination of independent items that are known as the multiword which is related to morphological mechanisms such as affixes or etymological parts). Hence, it is understood that vocabulary is the language item which is related to phonological, morphological and syntactical structure. On the other hand, vocabulary knowledge is known as different features of a term or terminology that should be considered in term of having the item and system structures (Nation, 2015). In order to make sure that learning process of vocabulary can take place smoothly, although there seem to be a divide which appear to be of two different ways of learning; traditionally and up-to-date vocabulary learning strategies, students are more advised to leave the traditional methods behind and begin to apply the numerous vocabulary learning strategies that are discovered by the prominent researchers (Aziz & Hossain, 2010).

In today’s life, due to globalisation and modernisation, vocabulary is deemed to be an important part in communication which may hinder the expression of ideas and encrypting information if it is taken lightly that lead to problems in the long run (Taghinezhad, Azizi, Shahmohammadi, Kashanifar, & Azadikhah, 2016). This means that if learners of a second language participate but inactively during learning process, they are actually missing the point that to be excellent users of English, it is obligatory to have a broad width of vocabulary knowledge. This claim is further supported by Khalid and Almuslimi (2016) saying that significances of emerging words are deliberately emphasised, whether in written books or during classroom learning process. Thus, the role of vocabulary is undeniably essential and needs to be given more time for studying and excelling at it.

However, for learners of English as second language, the tension of learning a new knowledge cannot be denied. Learning a new language is difficult because it involves learners’ first language which is their mother tongue and it is proven through many researches carried out in the past (Marin, 2006). For example, when students are getting the grip of the rules and regulations of the newly learned English language; their vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar rules of their first language come in the way and interfere with their learning process (Mohd Noor, Nik Yusoff, Md. Yasim, & Kamarudin, 2016). The study shows that students, who are learning Arabic language, find it difficult to master the grammar rules because they are having the interference with their local dialects as well as first language. As they are learning, they mistakenly apply the vocabulary of their first language into the Arabic language, therefore leading them to grammatically wrong compositions and responds.

Other than that, Dollah and Mohd Shah (2016) cite that between urban and rural secondary schools students, there are huge gaps that show the levels of proficiency between them. Urban school students are found to be of higher level of proficiency if compared to their counterparts, which are the rural school students. Urban school students are better achievers because they are using the more appropriate approach in learning, and it makes distinct differences from the lower achievers in rural schools.

In addition, picking wrong language learning strategies is also the biggest contributor to lack of progress during the learning of a particular language (Gillies, 2016). This statement is proven true because the study shows that students who learn individually and
independently, perform significantly poorly if a comparison is made with students who learn in pairs, group or can be said as cooperatively. Learning cooperatively allows students to have a more active role during the learning process and it can reduces the language tension as well as anxiety (Khalid & Almuslimi, 2016). Therefore, if learners of English as second language apply the right language learning strategies, they have a better chance of getting better result, in significantly less time.

In conclusion, there are many problems that linger around vocabulary and its role. Learners of a second language are interfered by their first language, approaches used to learn a language and the strategies applied during the learning process. All these issues need to be overcome if the learners are aiming to get better over time. This paper aims to review the numerous strategies that have been applied by students in mastering vocabulary.

2.0 THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING VOCABULARY

Cheon and Ma (2016) cite that the width of vocabulary knowledge is not the only prerequisite to prove one’s ability and proficiency of a second language. For the past few years, many studies have been carried out regarding vocabulary learning and people know that learning vocabulary is important for those who want to use the second language precisely (Cohen & Wang, 2018). It is showed that focus is given onto the learning strategies and it is because the right strategies need to be implemented so that vocabulary learning can take place with ease. However, although many studies have been conducted in the past, they are assumed to be misleading due to countless of questions are still cannot be answered. Furthermore, these studies are carried out to distinguish the discourse types, syntactical structures and lexical knowledge that are necessary to be applied pedagogically in order to give better insight between language and its contents (Vaish, 2018). Through these studies, learners are able to differentiate and have clearer vision on the language that they are learning. There are a lot of reasons why learners should be giving their best in trying to master the vocabulary of English. Learners should be willing to give their best for they are trying to master a language.

Vocabulary knowledge allows learners to fully utilise the language that they are learning but it is wrong if students’ proficiency are determined solely based on their vocabulary knowledge and their mastery (Nation, 2001). However, the importance of vocabulary learning shall not be neglected. Alqahtani (2015) cites that communicative competency is made up from good vocabulary knowledge. It is the communications that are successful because learners are responding well during the interaction with the second language. They are able to digest the messages that are delivered to them and provide answers to it. Therefore, vocabulary is proven to be part of successful communication (Teng, 2014).

Besides, learners’ ability to read comprehension will improve impressively if they have adequate vocabulary knowledge (Davoudi & Chavosh, 2016). Once the students have improved over the learning process, they have become the literate users of English and are able to digest their readings with ease. The readings can be of any materials such as academic writings, journals, entertainments and many others. The learners are no longer anticipated to be reading the materials that are in their first language. This claim can be further supported by a study made by Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) stating that good learners are able to read materials that are translated into the second language better than the weak learners.
because they have broader vocabulary knowledge and their word counts are higher. Thus, to understand a reading material, it is necessary to learn and imply all the grammatical rules.

Additionally, learning the vocabulary is the fundamental foundation and an integral part of a second language (Sun et al., 2017). A learning process determines the successfulness of one’s effort in mastering a language. Learners cannot easily understand any part of a second language if no efforts are being put as it is underlining the acquisition of it. Zhang and Lu (2015), support the claim by citing that contextual clues practice establishes learners’ proficiency of English. It takes place when interactions happen between two different parties as they are listening and replying to dialogues that are being uttered. Conclusively, having a more active role and engages more whenever they could allow learners to have better understanding of English and its components.

In contrast, there are cases whereby first language interferes with the learning of second language. However, recent studies show that having to learn the second language leads to enhancement of the first language mastery (Lam & Chen, 2018). This means that some rules of the second language can be applied into the first language, making the learners to be using a more accurate and precise first language. First language is usually acquired naturally from the parents, whereas second language requires learners to learn it formally (Gu & Johnson, 1996). A naturally acquired first language is not learn as precisely as the second language, making it to be used erroneously. By learning and applying the grammar rules of a second language, it allows learners to be using the first language more accurately.

In conclusion, learning the vocabulary of English is important for learners as it enhances them in many different ways. In fact, the learning process should be taken more seriously so that learners can master it in a shorter period of time.

3.0 VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Vocabulary learning strategies have become a major concern for many researchers and language practitioners in recent days (Cohen & Wang, 2018). This statement shows that for learners to improve gradually, they are required to apply the right learning strategies which are beneficial in making their learning process goes with ease. This claim is further elaborated through a study made by Kafipour and Naveh (2011), showing that through the application of learning strategies, any area of learning or any topics can be handled easily and learners are on the right track in becoming good English as second language learners. To date, it is found that various strategies have been established and it is proven to be beneficial for the learners in the long run. For example, the pioneers to language learning strategies are O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) which claiming that learning strategies are divided into four different categories which are metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective (Zhang & Lu, 2015).

Basically, there are so many strategies to be listed. Sanaoui (1995) claims that in adults’ vocabulary learning process, two approaches have been revealed which are structured and unstructured. A study that is made by Xie (2009), shows that structured learning is deemed to be more productive and unstructured learning becomes surplus throughout the learning process. This is because structured learning offers a more systematic way in organising and handling things. In another study, it is understood that there are six different kinds of strategies which are guessing, referring to dictionary, rehearsal, encoding and
activation – together with two associating factors which are beliefs of vocabulary learning and metacognitive regulation (Gu & Johnson, 1996).

Additionally, Saigh and Schmitt (2012) cite that vocabulary learning strategies are divided into five different categories and each category covers different aspect. The five strategies are social, memory, cognitive, meta-cognitive and determination (Schmitt, 2010). According to Schmitt, social strategy takes place when learners ask questions to the people who know regarding that particular aspect of study. Moreover, memory is when learners relate the question to the existing knowledge that they have in their mind. Cognitive strategy improves learners’ proficiency of English by exhibiting the common purpose of ‘manipulation or alteration of the target language by the learner’ (Jafari & Kafipour, 2013). Meta-cognitive strategy is applied when it involves a practical reviewing of the learning process and decisions are made regarding scheduling, observing or assessing the best ways to learn (Zhang & Lu, 2015). Lastly, determination strategy is when learners have to relate any question by guessing from their structural knowledge, guessing the meaning and even referring to any materials (Yalçın Tılfarlıoğlu & Bozgeyik, 2012).

There are many ways that learners of English as second language can apply in studying and mastering their lessons. It depends whether the learners make the right choice and apply them correctly to establish a well-planned and effective learning process.

Over the years, many studies have been carried out in revealing the most helpful and beneficial vocabulary learning strategies for the students (P. Nation, 2015). These studies that are carried out experimentally have proven that the right learning strategies can enhance students’ English language proficiency, making them to be able to converse in English proficiently (Vaish, 2018). This study aims to review the literature on vocabulary learning strategies that are employed by English as second language learners.

Chang, Liu, and Paas (2018) carried out a study by utilising computer-mediated dictionaries and they proposed a new ‘checking-meaning’ function in order to further enhance the memory span of a learner. The result proved that with the aid from digital dictionaries, it helped in improving small vocabulary size learners’ vocabulary acquisition.

Another study was carried out by Wette and Furneaux (2018) to explore academic discourse socialisation of international graduate students. At the end of the study, it appeared that although the students were learning at the universities and the language of communication is English, they had improved significantly as they developed independent learning strategies.

Moreover, a study on the engagement by having conversations with an audience through blogging was done by McGrail, McGrail, and Rieger (2016). The finding for this study was that language learning occurred when the young writers and readers of the blogs imitated the examples given by the experts in writings. It is part of a language learning strategies that is believed to be very beneficial in promoting language learning in the long run.

Lastly, Driver, Elliott, and Wilson (2015) published a study on how a study learning model, underlined by different theory, is vital in promoting language learning among students. The result demonstrated that students were able to come out with their own ideas...
and definitions with the aid from key words and vocabulary learning strategies. It was most effective for memorising new knowledge and retains it.

Decisively, there are numerous studies made to prove that vocabulary learning strategies are vital in promoting language learning. With the right learning methods, students can learn faster and this kind of approach should be employed by every student.

4.0 CONCLUSION

English is an important language that everyone should consider in learning it. Good English language users come with good vocabulary knowledge. One’s vocabulary knowledge acts as the marker of their level of proficiency. Learners of English as second language should apply and implement the right language learning strategies so that they can study with ease and excel significantly. There are many strategies that a learner can apply in their process of improving the mastery of English. Once English language is mastered, learners will improve in any aspect of social life.

REFERENCES


