

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN INDONESIA: THE URGE TO IMPROVE CLASSROOM VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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Abstract: This article addresses some important issues regarding the teaching of foreign vocabulary. It draws on the literature reviews in this field and is also based on personal reflections and experiences of the writer. This article critically highlights the teaching of English vocabulary in Indonesian schools and universities. More particularly, it discusses issues dealing with curriculum, teaching techniques, instructional media, and vocabulary assessment. Finally, this article provides recommendations for the improvement of the teaching of English vocabulary in the Indonesian context.

Key words: English as a foreign language, English vocabulary, vocabulary instruction

Teachers' beliefs, according to Kagan (as cited in Kennedy, 1997), play an important role in influencing their teaching practice. These beliefs come from teachers' past experiences, knowledge, and environments in which they have been living. Kennedy (1997: 7) states, "One of the most difficult beliefs to be changed for teachers are those formed during childhood, which is while they themselves are students in school observing their teachers and envisioning the kind of teachers they themselves would be". Having learned and taught English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia, I know that I myself have formed my beliefs in teaching and learning a foreign language. In this article, I explore the importance of classroom vocabulary instruction from both the practical and theoretical viewpoints based on my own experiences as a second language (L2) learner and a teacher, combined together with results of the literature review.

MY EXPERIENCE AS A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER AND TEACHER

For six years in high school, English was for me no more than a set of grammar rules and a pile of vocabulary items to be memorized. Language learning was based on textbooks that divided English into four skills, i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing, and contained discrete grammar points and glossaries. The focus, however, was reading skill combined with many grammar rules and words to be memorized. I still remember that I used to read some passages, translate them into Indonesian, and then memorize the new words in both English and Indonesian. When I could translate a passage into Indonesian, it was easier for me to answer the reading comprehension questions that followed. However, since I had to find the meanings of the new words in a bilingual dictionary almost without guidance, I often missed the right definitions. So, at that time, vocabulary was my biggest obstacle in learning English. I could remember the new words for only a short period of time and when they were in translation mode. When a different mode was used, e.g., giving the English definition, I mostly forgot the words I have learned in the translation mode.

Surprisingly, when I taught English in private courses for high school students a few years ago and asked my students about their reasons of taking private lessons, the answers I got were quite similar to my own experience. One common reason was "I cannot do my reading assignments". The actual problems that I found were that they did not know the meaning of many words in their reading texts, they could not do the translation tasks given by their teachers, and therefore could not answer the reading comprehension, questions. My private students' problems and my own experience, made me think that there might be something wrong with the formal classroom vocabulary instruction. However, I am not saying that this is the case of all foreign language classroom settings in Indonesia. I am just saying that maybe it is time to look at classroom foreign language instruction and see whether we do have the problem of classroom foreign language instruction. Therefore, in this article I will discuss the importance of classroom vocabulary instruction and the possibility of improving it.

Another important reason why I raised the issue of classroom vocabulary instruction is that having learned English as a foreign language for six years in high school (some are even for nine years since they have the chance to start learning English in grade 4 of elementary school), students' vocabulary is far from satisfactory. It is a common problem that students are having difficulties in reading English textbooks when they continue their study to the university level because they do not have enough amount of English language vocabulary. Moreover, the research done by Nurweni in 1999 regarding the estimation of the English vocabulary knowledge of a large sample of first-year students of a University in Jakarta (after 900 hours of instruction) shows that on average these students only have some knowledge of approximately 1,220 English words, a figure that falls far below the 3,000-5,000 word range that is widely considered appropriate for students of that level (Nurweni, 1999).

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Vocabulary has been studied in research for more than half a century. It is pointed out by White (as cited in Juffs, 1996) as one of the properties that is specific to language that has to be learned. Vocabulary here includes the words (lexical items) and their meanings together with their syntactic categories and subcategories requirements. Some linguists refer to vocabulary using the term lexicon or mental dictionary. Vocabulary is not only a list of words. It is a system embedded in language. It is a part of any language that is, just like grammar, defined by experts in various ways. Fromkin et al. (1996) defines lexicon as a part of grammar. It is not solely the meaning of the words; it includes the pronunciation and the syntactic category or part of speech of the words.

In addition to lexicon, learning vocabulary involves the notion of categorizing words in order that they can be stored in the brain (Meara, 1996). To be organized in the brain, words are categorized into groups. There are various theories on vocabulary organization. Hatch and Brown (1995) present four of them, i.e., prototype theory, semantic feature analysis, semantic field analysis and the relational models. These theories show the relation of one word to another. All of these theories have their own strengths and limitations in representing the organization of vocabulary in the brain. However, they could be useful in L2 teaching as the basis of vocabulary teaching instruction. This categorization is helpful for L2 learners in that they do not have to learn new words from scratch, which is impossible regarding the capacity of human brain. They can just fit in

the new words they learn into the appropriate categorization or organization they have built in their target language's mental lexicon.

Another important issue to be discussed here is vocabulary competence. Vocabulary competence is a part of L2 competence. We cannot say that a person is competent in his/her L2 without having sufficient vocabulary knowledge. However, it seems that language teachers do not give sufficient attention to vocabulary teaching because they think that vocabulary competence does not have to be taught extensively as it is picked up along the way of learning L2. This is correct to some extent, since much vocabulary is learned incidentally. But to achieve maximum results, teachers should not rely on just incidental vocabulary learning. One reason is that incidental learning takes time and in reality there is always time limit in learning L2. Another reason is revealed by Lawson and Hogben (1996:127) who state that "one element of success in learning foreign language vocabulary is the consistent and skillful use of individually congenial strategies rather than the employment of some particular fixed set of strategies". Individual differences are the key word here. Learners need to use suitable methods of learning according to their personal learning styles. Moreover, research on vocabulary teaching and learning shows that there is no one best method of vocabulary teaching and learning, and that the success of vocabulary learning activities still depends on many factors including the learners' levels of proficiency, interests, and goals (Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). To be able to expose our language learners to as many methods as we can is probably wise, since different learners require different ways of learning. One method that is good for one learner might not be good for another. Some learners can learn from the context, some others have to be taught explicitly.

In everyday L2 teaching, it is common to refer to vocabulary just in reference to the meaning of the words. Many L2 learners experience translation as the default method of vocabulary learning. This method, however, has its limitations. First, there is not always one to one correlation between two languages. Take for example the word 'rice'. In Indonesian there are various kinds of rice, each represented by its own lexical item. In English the word 'rice' refers to any kind of rice. There are also many culturally embedded words that it is almost impossible to find their meaning in another language. Second, in the long run, translation slows down the process of acquiring and accessing the target language. Given the L2 words, learners have to check their first language (L1) lexicon before they can access the conceptual level or, in other words, L2 has to be accessed through L1 (Kroll & de Groot, 1997).

OVERVIEW OF VOCABULARY TEACHING AND SLA RESEARCH

The way of approaching vocabulary learning has changed dramatically over time. In the audiolingual approach in the 50s, vocabulary was treated as a property of language to be memorized through intensive drills to create habit formation. In late 60s and 70s the presentation of vocabulary was topic-based. From more familiar topic, for example, classroom, school, home, to broader topic of community, workplace and many others. Since the 80s, when communicative language teaching was introduced, vocabulary teaching has moved toward a more communicative approach with the use of more authentic materials.

There is extensive research on SLA regarding the methods of effective vocabulary presentation and learning. One example is a study by Ellis and Beaton (1993) which demonstrated the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through the use of keywords in L1 as well as in L2. Another is Lawson and Hogben (1996) who present vocabulary learning according to the type of activities that are used. Their categorization presents four basic categories, i.e. repetition, word feature analysis, simple elaboration, and complex elaboration.

Research on vocabulary instruction discusses a range of choices that we have in teaching vocabulary (see Coady, 1997; Nation, 1993; Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). Researchers propose quite similar kinds of vocabulary teaching activities, however, grouped them using different categories. Oxford and Scarcella (1994), for instance, present three categories of activities for vocabulary teaching, i.e., decontextualized, partly-contextualized, and fully-contextualized. Coady (1997) lists the activities by using different classification, i.e., context alone approach, strategy instruction approach, development plus explicit instruction approach, as well as classroom activities which relate to the traditional way of presenting vocabulary in the classroom. Nation (1993) lists several techniques of teaching vocabulary, i.e. direct teaching, graded reading, word building, repeated reading, guessing from context, making use of definition in context, and reporting back to other. In sum, I can conclude that there are varieties of classroom vocabulary instruction we, as language teachers, could choose according to our language learners' needs. The question that is left in the end is how and when to use these varieties of instructions appropriately so that they can reach their optimum effectiveness.

I personally like the way Coady (1997) presents a variety of instruction, since he gives sufficient explanation on using various kinds of instructions and that he also covers the points asserted in the other two articles (i.e., Nation,

1993; Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). He illustrates the vocabulary instructions as presented in a kind of continuum that at the two ends we can find the traditional classroom activities and the context-only approach. He shows how these two are not enough when they stand by their own. "Vocabulary teaching needs to be made more explicit at the early stages of learning. As learners develop enough vocabulary recognition, the emphasis then moves more strongly to guessing from context and that the previous teaching procedure will no longer be appropriate" (Nation & Newton, 1997:118). Therefore, teachers need to balance the use of textbooks with other vocabulary learning activities to be able to suit learners' individual differences, goals and levels of proficiency.

SOME OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Savignon (1991) involves learners as active participants in communication. Language skills are not divided into active and passive skills but rather as productive and receptive skills that involve a collaborative nature of meaning making, and this collaborative nature is best illustrated by interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning. CLT has become a term for methods and curricula that embraces both the goals and the process of classroom learning. The goal is to reach communicative competence of the target language, and the process is by building learners' grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence through communicative activities (Canale & Swain as cited in Savignon, 1983).

Today, CLT is the dominant approach in the current second language pedagogy. However, many teachers in this field still find difficulties in creating communicative activities in their language classrooms while at the same time trying to focus on vocabulary teaching. Some researchers have actually tried to address this issue. Savignon (1991), in her presentation of the communicative language curriculum components, gives some clues on how to focus on certain aspects of language learning using communicative activities; for example: by inviting guests into the classroom, by using role plays and pantomime, by involving language learners in language arts games, and many others. Nation and Newton (1997), being more specific in addressing the vocabulary learning issues, present their ideas of how to incorporate vocabulary teaching into communicative activities. They come up with some features of communicative activities that encourage vocabulary learning: allow the learner to negotiate comprehensible input, provide a meaningful context within which to encounter new vo-

cabulary, allow the learner to be exposed to repeated uses of a new item in a meaningful context, encourage or require the learner to use new items productively, and provide a supportive environment for learning (Nation & Newton, 1997:244-245). By using these research results, language teachers can learn to integrate vocabulary teaching and CLT mode.

We can also learn from the case of grammar teaching in CLT mode and apply it into vocabulary teaching. There are many interpretations of grammar in CLT mode. Today, the question that we have to answer is not *whether* grammar should be taught in CLT, but *how* it should be taught in CLT mode (VanPatten & Cadierno as cited in Blyth, 1997). The parallel of this statement for vocabulary teaching is that there are, of course, many interpretations of vocabulary teaching in CLT mode. The issue is not *whether* vocabulary should be taught or not, but *how* to teach vocabulary in this mode. Why do I see the importance of comparing grammar to vocabulary? Grammar and vocabulary teaching overlap in such a way that we cannot really separate them. When teaching vocabulary, there are some part of grammar that is taught, for example the syntactic category of the words. Vice versa, when teaching grammar, there are some part of vocabulary teaching involved, for example collocation.

Thinking about the four components of communicative competence more thoroughly, the actual problem lies on *how vocabulary should be taught in integration with the four components of communicative competence*. Learning language at the discourse level means learning how to re-cognize different patterns of discourse, to connect sentences to an overall theme or topic, to infer meaning of large units of spoken or written text, and to form coherence and cohesion in spoken and written discourse. How should this knowledge be taught to L2 learners? How should the ability to use language appropriately in a given context (intercultural awareness), and to act and say things politely be taught to language learners? How should the ability to compensate for imperfectness of linguistic, sociolinguistic, grammar and discourse competence; to sustain or enhance communication; and to limit factors such as fatigue, distraction, and inattention be taught to language learners? How should grammar in relation to the other three components of communicative competence and in relation to vocabulary teaching be taught to language learners? All of these questions are important in language teaching and learning and have to be addressed seriously by language teachers, including me.

Talking about CLT means that we have to also talk about the curriculum into which this method of language teaching can be integrated. Savignon's

(1991) list of the five components of communicative language curriculum gives me the basic idea of how to create CLT curriculum. She talks about 'Language for a Purpose' or language as experience. Using this kind of activities, learners are exposed to the target language so that they can experience the target language in a meaningful way, since the focus of the activities is on meaning rather than form. 'Beyond the Classroom', which is the next component in the list, intends to give the learners opportunities to explore the target language community and bring it into the classroom. This is a bit difficult to do in the setting of English as a foreign language such as in Indonesia. It is difficult, but not impossible, since by the help of technology we can possibly bring the target language community into the classroom. Another is 'My Language is Me'. This time, the personal aspects of language use are emphasized, since learners' affective as well as cognitive aspects of language acquisition are given the chance to be involved in the process of language learning. The next one is 'Theatre Arts'. Here, learners are given the chance to act using pantomime, unscripted and scripted role plays, simulation, etc. and to experience using the target language in certain contexts. 'Language Arts' as the last on the list, gives language analysis its role in language learning process. Vocabulary teaching can be integrated into these learning experiences. This means that not only will L2 learners learn vocabulary, but they will also learn it in various interesting and communicative ways.

The type of activities in CLT classroom is also important. Paulston (1970) classifies classroom exercises into manipulative (e.g., reciting dialog lines, pattern drills, and cued question-answer), meaningful (e.g., directed dialog and predictable question-answer but still focus on the meaning rather than drills), and communicative activities (e.g., simulation, interview, and free completion exercises). It is of course inappropriate to use solely manipulative activities and claim that we use CLT as our method of teaching, since CLT requires the use of communicative activities. However, it does not mean that we have to solely use communicative activities. Manipulative activities are sometimes needed. For early beginners of L2, for instance, it will not be possible to ask learners to communicate and negotiate meaning without providing them the basic vocabulary and grammar of the target language. Afterwards, the activities have to move to more meaningful and communicative ones, in which to understand meaning rather than form, and negotiation of meaning is more significant to language learners.

VOCABULARY TEACHING AND THE DICTIONARY

There is a large amount of research on the use of the dictionary for language learning, especially reading skill, and the results vary. However, there are two important points highlighted in most research. The first is the role of the dictionary and the second is the use of context in L2 learning. Luppescu and Day (1993) found out that learners comprehend better when using dictionary while reading but, as a consequence, need longer time to read. McCreary and Dolezal (1999) found that the use of dictionary expands the reading time compared to context use only, but learners' comprehension results are not significantly different because both the dictionary and context resources are not used effectively by students.

The issue of dictionary use interests me greatly since there is a tendency for language learners in Indonesia to assume that possessing a dictionary is compulsory for language learning. In reality, however, students often do not have sufficient skill to use the dictionary, especially those at high school level. This is understandable since using a dictionary in language learning is actually quite a complex task. Luppescu and Day (1993:274) reveals five stages of dictionary look-up process: looking for a suitable headword; comprehending the entry; locating the appropriate part of the definition; connecting the right sense to the context; and putting the word within the context of the unknown or difficult word in the text. These stages are quite complicated to perform and language learners need to be taught how to do it. For example, L2 learners need to be taught how to use the multiple entries in the dictionary and to find the right part of speech for certain words.

Instruction in dictionary use can be used as a form of vocabulary instruction. However, teachers have to be careful since the impact of this type of vocabulary instruction might only be positive as a short term. For a longer term, learners still need to be exposed to the new vocabulary more than once in order to retain the new words and make them part of their target language vocabulary. Therefore, making L2 learners aware that it is better for them to use a dictionary as a secondary source instead of a primary source is recommended.

The next is the issue of the type of dictionary. There are two types of dictionary commonly used in Indonesia, i.e., bilingual dictionary and monolingual dictionary. The second type, however, is not common for high school students. It is mainly used by students learning English intensively at the university level. But even for them the preference is still for the bilingual dictionary. This phe-

nomena is interesting in that although teachers and students feel that CLT is good for language learning, still they choose to use a device not really compatible to CLT.

VOCABULARY TEACHING, MULTIMEDIA TECHNOLOGY, AND CALL

The use of radio, television, video, language laboratory, self-access material and especially computer has become a new trend in language teaching all over the world. Many people seem to assume that using multimedia in language learning will make learners learn language better. This could be right, since the world is changing in its way of communicating. Multimedia is more accessible than it used to be. Therefore, schools have been more readily adopting multimedia technology to keep up with a changing world. Consequently, this will make a difference to language teaching and classroom instruction (see Felix & Askew, 1996; Hoven, 1999). On one hand, language teachers can present various authentic materials in various forms which can strongly support Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). On the other hand, it needs to be realized that Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) brings a different dimension in language learning in that learners might get less interaction with peers and teachers and more exposure to the machine.

The use of multimedia for vocabulary learning has shown to be effective in some studies. It is known from SLA research that words associated with actual objects or imagery techniques are learned more easily than those without (see Chun & Plass, 1995, 1996:183). These features are relatively easy to present in multimedia programs, i.e., pictures, videos, which can bring different types of information in addition to traditional definitions of words.

There are various choices of multimedia programs to be used in language learning. Some are interactive (in which the computer and the users can interact to each other's stimulus), some others are not (the users just use the computer without being given any feedback by it). Some use holistic approach of presentation and some others use discrete element approach. Some are structured and some others allow learners to explore authentic materials by themselves. One example of CALL material for vocabulary and grammar learning is the concordance. A concordance is a computer program that is able to search rapidly through large quantities of text for a target item (morpheme, word, or phrase) and show all the examples it finds with the contexts in which they appear. It

provides learners with authentic materials in an unstructured way. It benefits both the teachers and learners. Students might ask some questions that the teachers do not really know the answers, but they can both explore in the concordance to find the answers. For example the issue of collocation (the regular co-occurrence of two or more words within a given extend of text) which is mostly difficult to be explain by language teachers (Levy, 1990). The concordance is not an interactive program by itself, however, combined with appropriate teaching instruction it can be used to support interactive learning activities. Another famous CALL materials that are more communicative are the websites, e-mail, and chatrooms. Through these media, L2 learners can interact and negotiate meanings with other learners and individuals all over the world.

VOCABULARY TESTING

Testing has always been the most complicated and challenging part of overall language teaching for me, since it is the most complex language teaching task for teachers. Creating good language testing does not only mean that the test should be able to measure the students' proficiency or progress and the success of language teaching and learning process, but also that the test can have a good effect on the continuing study of language learners.

Having chosen CLT as the framework of vocabulary teaching, we have to consider the need to create communicative language testing. However, today multiple choice is still the most common vocabulary test used. According to Meara and Buxton (1996) the use of multiple choice for testing vocabulary should be carefully considered since there are at least two drawbacks from the use of multiple choice vocabulary test. The first is that multiple choice tests rely to a certain degree on guessing. The second is that multiple choice vocabulary test might work effectively only at lower level of proficiency. As the learner's vocabulary grows larger they become increasingly unreliable since the stress in no longer to the breadth but to the depth of the target language vocabulary (Meara, 1996). Therefore, although the use of multiple choice test is comfortable for both teachers and learners, the results might not be as good as expected.

Another issue related to testing is backwash, i.e., the effect of testing on teaching and learning. Backwash can be harmful or beneficial (Hughes, 1989). Whenever possible we would want test tasks to be as direct as possible and incorporating as many features of real-life language as we can. The first step to achieving this is to ensure that the conditions under which activities are per-

formed in the test reflect those in real-life situation. Therefore, contextualisation of items is important in enhancing authenticity (Weir, 1993). Testing has to be in line with language learning goals. Moreover, the use of a range of tests will be better than just only one test, since different test captures different information (Carter, 1987). Using various tests, teachers could be more objective in evaluating learners' results.

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary learning is universal but at the same time unique to the individual. Universal in the sense that learning vocabulary is important for every language learner, however, the way of learning vocabulary is different from one learner to another as well as from one level to another.

With a large amount of research available in the area of vocabulary learning and teaching, it is a disadvantage that not many language teachers try to adopt it. This might be because of the gap between research and practice, or it might be because teachers' beliefs cannot change easily, since they are comfortable with traditional methods. However, to improve vocabulary teaching in Indonesia, I feel the need to adopt more methods from SLA research into classroom instruction. To enrich classroom vocabulary instruction with various methods based on SLA is beneficial for both researchers and practitioners. A strong link between research and practice can in the end make these two fields respond better to each other's problems, and that both research and practice could support each other in order to improve the quality of language learning in general.

Adopting research results from SLA into the classroom is interesting and challenging, since it requires skill as well as creativity. This particular experience can help language teachers enrich their methods of teaching and help learners learn language better. There is no right or wrong answers here. In addition, this is not a problem since teaching is a kind of art, in which trial and error should take place.

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