

ACQUIRING NEW VOCABULARY FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SOME USEFUL STRATEGIES

*Dr. Ema F. Utiam
Department of English,
College of Education, Afaha Nsit,
Akwa Ibom State.*

Abstract

Many students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria lack adequate vocabulary for effective communication. Various studies have shown that rich vocabulary is a necessary tool for reading comprehension and effective writing. These two skills are indispensable to academic study. This paper sets to provide useful strategies that can help students to acquire new vocabularies. The paper highlights those things a learner should be knowledgeable about as far as a vocabulary item is concerned. It stresses that the acquisition of adequate vocabulary is a panacea to effective learning and communication.

Vocabulary acquisition is a necessary skill for a language learner. Without adequate words in a particular language, it is difficult to learn, speak, read, write and comprehend that language.

Herman (2003) in Abu-Rmaileh (2008: 109) stated that “without words, language for us would be reduced to a mere discourse of iconic gestures and symbols. This dependency on the lexicon requires that even a novice communicator in a language masses a repertoire of thousands of words”. This implies that whoever wants to use a language, the knowledge of words in a language helps one to understand spoken and written text. It is therefore necessary that students acquire enough vocabulary to enable them communicate better.

They should be guided to acquire vocabularies relevant to their discipline and also related to such global issues as terrorism, ethnic conflict, poverty and environmental pollution.

Vocabulary acquisition is an aspect of literacy which empowers an individual. Literacy in this context “increases awareness and influence, the behaviour of individuals, families and communities. It improves communication skills, gives access to knowledge and builds the self-confidence and self-esteem needed to make decisions’ (Koichiro Matsuura, 2008).

The acquisition of new and relevant vocabularies is a tool for students for active citizenship, and a means to pursue other civil, political, economic or social rights. The skill can also help to meet the global education goals as suitable vocabularies are needed to talk to, persuade and sensitize citizens of different ages including the most marginalized groups – girls and women, indigenous population and remote rural groups, street children, migrants and nomadic populating, people with disabilities, and linguistic and cultural minorities (Richmond & Robinson, 2003).

Various studies such as Corson (1997) and Papadakis (2008) have revealed that adequate vocabulary is a panacea for reading comprehension and that it is critical to students' writing progress because "lexical quality and writing quality are interconnected" (Lawfer, 1994; 21 cited in Papadakis & Bahloul, 2008). Thus, for students to be successful learners, they must enrich their stock of vocabulary.

What Learners Should Know About a Vocabulary Item

It is accepted that knowing all the vocabulary in a language is not possible. Nation, (2004; 66) stated that "even native speakers do not know all the vocabulary of the language". According to Nation (1990 and 2004), native speakers of English who are College educated know around 20,000 words. All English words are meaningful and the learners of English are expected to know a number of things about the words they try to learn.

Frost (2007) has identified different things that learners ought to know about a vocabulary item as they attempt to learn it. Some of these are enumerated as follows:

1. **What it means:** It is important that learners know the meaning of the word. Knowing what a word means will enable the learners to know when, why and how to use the word. This will also help them to know when the word should not be used. For example the word 'slug' could be used as a derogatory, as an act of drinking and as an animal as seen in the following examples:

- i. Peter was a complete slug at high school – derogatory
- ii. He slugged down a jug of beer at a wink – act of drinking
- iii. A slug crept out from the river into the beach shore – animal.

2. **The Form:** Knowledge of the part of speech of a word will enable the learners recognize and identify the position of the word in a sentence as well as its function in relation to other parts of the sentence. This will make it easy for the word to be used correctly. For example, the word 'import' can act as a noun and as a verb. In sentence (a) below, the word acts as a noun, while in sentence (b) it acts as a verb. (a) Nigeria imports rice from Thailand every day, sentence (b) The country has to import its raw materials.

3. **How it is pronounced:** Correct pronunciation of a word is one way of using that word correctly. Listeners would not be confused if words are pronounced correctly. For instance, the word 'fan' is different from the word 'van' for those who

have problems with the articulation of /f/ and /v/, therefore, correct pronunciation's necessary for appropriate use of a word. The same applies to the differences in 'Zinc' and 'sing', 'goat' and 'coat', 'load' and 'road'.

4. **How it is Spelt;** Knowledge of how a word is spelt is important since learners will use this in writing. Some words are difficult to spell because of the difference between the way they are pronounced and the way they are spelt. A good example is seen in the word 'Physics' which is not spelt as 'fiziks'. Other examples are 'psychology' and 'photography' which are not spelt as 'cychology' and 'fotography' respectively. Hence, students ought to know how to spell words so as to avoid making mistakes in writing.

5. **If the word follows any unpredictable grammatical pattern:** Some words are exceptions to grammatical rules. That is, they do not follow the rubs of grammar. For example, the plural form of 'man' is 'men' and not 'mans', the past form of 'take' is 'took' and not 'taked', and the past form of 'leave' is 'left' not 'leaved'. It is important that students to acquaint themselves with this fact, so that learning the word would be easy.

6. **The situations when the word is or is not used:** The status of the people one talks to, the different situations, and the social occasions that words are used may require different forms of a word. A formal, non-formal or neutral situation may require the use of a different form of a word. Certain forms like 'what's up', 'how far', are not used in a discussion with one's boss or with someone who occupies a high social position in a society. Slangs are not allowed in writing formal letters. Appropriate forms should be used in the different situations.

7. **How the word is related to others:** Certain words are easily recognized in relation to other words in the same category. For instance, students could learn more words through synonyms and antonyms. Relating a word to its opposite could help in the recall and in the retention of that word. For example, the word 'fortune' could help students learn the word 'misfortune' at a later stage. Correlating both words could help the learners recognize the different uses and meanings of both words.

8. **Idiomatic Collocations or the way that words occur together:** Some words go together. If one should separate them or use different words with the original word, the meaning is distorted. For instance, you describe something in 'great detail' and not 'big detail'. Appropriate use of collocations allow for the appropriateness of the language use (Folse, 2007).

9. **What the affixes (the prefixes and suffixes) may indicate about the meaning:** When the learners have the knowledge of the formation of words with their prefixes and suffixes, it helps them to infer the meaning of a word in context. It guides the learners in determining how a word is changed with the addition of a suffix or prefix.

For example, the word ‘substandard’ ‘sub’ meaning ‘less’ or ‘under’. Knowledge of such meanings help learners to learn more words, and it makes the learning of the language easy. Other examples are seen in the words ‘unimportant’, ‘unnecessary’, ‘unfortunate’, where ‘un’ means ‘not’.

Acquiring New Vocabulary – Useful Strategies

It has been established that there is a relationship between success in academic reading and vocabulary knowledge Nation (1990, p. 16), (Corson, 1997); Laufer (1997), Nation, 2001, pp. 144 – 149) and as reported by Boyle and Kirk (2008) argue that non native speakers in English-medium universities need at least 3,000 word families in order to understand 95% of the running words in a text.

According to Nation (2001), two of the most effective means of improving academic vocabulary are the study of Greek and Latin roots and affixes, and the use of mnemonic devices such as the ‘keyword’ method.

Graeco – Latin Roots and Affixes

The first 1,000 word families of English are predominantly words of Germanic origin (Boyle & Kirk, 2008). The Graeco-Latin origin words constitute about two-thirds of the lexicon (Stockwell & Minkova, 2001, p. 53 cited in Boyle & Kirk, 2008), and they are those words, that are needed for academic study (Corson, 1997; Coxhead, 2000). Boyle and Kirk, (2008) conducted a study of vocabulary size at the United Arab Emirate (UAE) university with a sample of 461 female students enrolled on HSR 250, Reading and comprehension, the required ‘great ideas’ course for all students entering the college of Humanities and social sciences. One finding from the research was that the Arabic – speaking students in the United Arab Emirate (UAE) university sample knew proportionately more of the Germanic words in the vocabulary levels test than of the Graeco – Latin words. One explanation for this put forward by the researchers may be because of the widespread use in the UAE of spoken English and its Germanic vocabulary, and the students vocabulary may therefore reflect a greater understanding of what (Cummins, 1981) calls greater Basic Interpersonal communication skills (BICS), the skills we need for spoken social interaction, rather than the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) which a person needs for university study. On his website, Cummins warned that the failure to take account of the BICS/CALP distinction can lead us to overestimate of the knowledge of the student whose speech is fairly fluent (www.iteachilearn.com/cummins). The student who can speak easily with classmates and teachers would necessarily have a good command of the Germanic vocabulary, but that successful learner may know little of the Graeco – Latin vocabulary.

Cummins warned that a learner’s oral fluency may mislead a teacher into thinking that the learner is ready for academic study when only the Basic interpersonal communication skills have, in fact, been acquired (Boyle & Kirk, 2008).

Mnemonics

Although this method of vocabulary learning can only be successfully applied with words referring to objects that can be perceived visually, it is still seen as a useful method. (Pierson, 1989), believed that etymology can show the concrete basis of many of these words and that these concrete ideas can serve a mnemonic purpose. For instance, if one knows that the Latin root ‘port’ means ‘carry’ it should be easier to comprehend related words such as ‘import’, ‘export’, ‘report’, and ‘support’.

Captioned Movies

Papadakis & Bahloul (2008) conducted a study on the effects of captioned movies on vocabulary learning with intermediate and high –intermediate students. The study was conducted in the intensive English programme (IEP) at the American University of Sharja. This programme is required for all students in the first four levels of the IEP, and is divided into three labs: computer, reading and video. Sections of students rotate among the three labs every five to six weeks. The total time in any particular lab is five hours a week. The goals of this programme are to guide students toward becoming independent learners and to assist them in becoming self motivated to learn. For the purpose of the study, research was carried out in the video lab. Four sections of intermediate to high intermediate students participated in this study over a period of one semester. A total of 80 students took part in the study. Each section involved in the study viewed two full-length American movies. The movies were chosen based on the level of the students and on the objectives of the particular level – the intermediate level.

Sixty students watched the movies with English captions, and twenty students viewed them without caption, (control group). At the beginning of each movie all students were given worksheets that mainly contained a list of salient vocabulary items taken from the movies. The movies were occasionally paused to assist students with comprehension and vocabulary. At the end of each segment watched, all the students were engaged in the same fill-in the blank and word – definition – matching activities on the worksheets. Finally, tests were designed to assess a range of word knowledge and were administered at the end of each movie to all four sections.

To further support their research, the researchers surveyed all sections of students on their opinion about the vocabulary learnt during the video lab and the use of captions. Findings from the study revealed that captions helped students make significant gains in vocabulary knowledge without formal instruction.

The following are some other vocabulary learning strategies which learners could adopt:

1. **Word Lists:** Many students have the habit of memorizing words, some of which meaning they do not know. They just use them to create an impression. The

aim of word lists is “to make the learning of English more manageable by providing a tried and principled basis for vocabulary selection (Nation, 1990, 27).

2. **The use of synonyms and antonyms:** Students could acquire new vocabulary with the use of synonyms and antonyms. Knowledge of these would help the learners to know the meaning of words. The teacher could also help the learners to do this by encouraging them through class exercise. For example, the teacher could also ask the students to match the following words with their synonyms:

i.	Word	Synonyms
	Hear	eat
	Scream	write
	Devour	yell
	Inscribe	listen.

ii The teacher may ask students to match each word with its antonym:

Word	Antonyms
Snooze	start
Forget	dirty
Clean	remember
Stop	wake up

(cf. Abu – Rmaileh, 2008: 44).

3. **Scrabble:** This is an interesting game that helps students to learn how to spell correctly. Through this, new words are discovered. Words learnt through this game are not easily forgotten. As the students internalize the words’ correct spelling, it enables them to write better.

4. **Extensive Reading:** Extensive reading helps students to increase their stock of vocabulary. As the students read extensively, they discover words from various spheres of life. Students who cultivate the habit of extensive reading will be well equipped as far as vocabulary is concerned. It is therefore necessary that students endeavour to read all types of materials – study materials, magazines, periodicals, novels (fiction and non-fiction), newspapers, and journals, among others to enable them acquire new word and expand their vocabulary.

5. **Oral or Silent Reading:** It is important that teachers adopt these two methods in the English class. The oral reading enables the students to sound out the words, thereby giving the teacher the opportunity to correct pronunciation mistakes, if any. The silent reading helps the students to concentrate on the words, learn their spellings and also how they are used in sentences.

Conclusion

Learning new vocabulary items is essential to learning a second language. This is so because it will help in the enrichment of one’s word bank in that language. With this, users and learners of the language can practice the use of those words in

isolation and in context both orally and in writing. It is important that students, in particular, should improve their stock of vocabulary in English through the various strategies mention above. This would improve their efficiency in the use of the English language.

References

- Abu – Rmaileh, S. (2008). Utilizing Effective vocabulary Acquisition Techniques. In: A. Jendli, C. Coombe, and S. Troudi (Eds) 2005, PP. 303 – 313. *Best Practice in English language teaching*, Dubai; TESOL Arabia Publications.
- Boyle, R. & Kirk, T. (2008). How many words showed an undergraduate know? In: A. Jendli, C. Combe, and S. Troudi (Eds). 2005, pp. 273 – 280. *Best Practice in English Language Teaching*, Dubai; TESOL Arabia Publications.
- Corson, D. (1997). The learning and use of academic words. *Language learning* 47(4) 671 – 680.
- Coxhead, A. (2000). A New Academic Word List. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(2), 213 – 228.
- Cummins, J. (1981). Age on Arrival and Immigrant second language learning in Canada: A Reassessment. *Applied Linguistics*, 2(2), 132 – 141.
- Folse, K.S. (2007). Implications of second language vocabulary research for teachers. In: P. Davidson, C. Coombe, D. Lloyd and D. Palfreyman (Eds.). *Teaching and learning vocabulary in another language*, Dubai: TESOL Arabia Publications, pp. 9-20.
- Frost, R. (2007). Presenting Vocabulary. The British Council. Available at: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/vocabulary/present-vocab.shtml>. Accessed on November 6, 2012.
- Nation, I.S.P. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Newbury Publishers.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2004). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. New York; Cambridge University press.

Papadakis, a.m. & Bahloul, R.M. (2007). Students' use of newly learnt vocabulary in academic writing. In: P. Davidson, C. Coombe, D. Lloyd and D. Palfreyman. *Teaching and learning vocabulary in another language* Dubai: TESOL Arabia.

Pierson, H. (1989). Using etymology in the classroom. *ELT Journal*, 41(3), 57 – 60.