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CONTEXTUAL VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN AN ESL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition, one of the most important components of language learning, has often been termed as unimportant while learning and teaching English as a second language. In most of the Indian schools, stress is given more on learning grammar than on learning new words. There are a variety of techniques and methods of vocabulary acquisition and expansion which are important and should be taken care for the systematic vocabulary learning. Since vocabulary acquisition is a continuous process, it can be initially taught directly and then the students can be exposed to various texts for contextual vocabulary acquisition so that they acquire vocabulary through various concepts.

When it comes to vocabulary acquisition, we often have the following questions in mind:

Is vocabulary expansion important in learning English language? Do students acquire unknown words incidentally while reading or listening? If so, what helps them in this process of acquiring vocabulary?

This paper is an effort to put forth the importance of contextual vocabulary acquisition. It is also an attempt to understand the factors that help students in contextual vocabulary acquisition and expansion.

Keywords: vocabulary, acquisition, expansion, language, dictionary, reading, listening, writing, speaking

Abbreviations

Contextual vocabulary acquisition- CVA; English as a Second Language – ESL; English as a Foreign Language –EFL; First Language - L1; Second Language – L2

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is the first and foremost important step in language acquisition. English language is considered to have the largest vocabulary in the world (Crystal, 2002). Educated native speakers of English are expected to know approximately 20,000 word families or 70,000 words (Nation, 2001); however, educated non-native speakers of English know less than one quarter of the native speakers' vocabulary (Laufer & Yano,

2001). Language learning is a continuous process and a child starts listening to and recognizing sounds from the beginning. The first language learnt by the child is his/her mother tongue or first language (L1). If the learning starts at the beginning of one's school life it could be a second language (L2) or a language learnt for academic purpose. In the beginning, L2 students are taught the new language through direct methods. They are taught various words through pictures, realia, teaching word meanings, opposites, and learning to read dictionary to find meaning. Then gradually they are moved on to the process of learning through various contexts. This process helps the students to learn and expand their vocabulary. This paper is an attempt to study and explore the various contextual vocabulary acquisition methods that can be incorporated in the teaching of vocabulary to the English as second language (ESL) students.

Stages of Vocabulary Acquisition

Language learning is a slow and steady process which starts when a child is born and he/she learns mother tongue. Babbling is a process by which infants acquire words. Babbling shifts towards meaningful speech as infants grow and produce their first words around the age of one year. A child learns to communicate by learning the words. Most of the words acquired in the childhood are learnt through context. The same rule can be applied to the learners who learn vocabulary in the later years.

For ESL students, the beginning of learning a new language takes place when they first enter the school. Throughout their school years, students continue to build their vocabulary through direct learning and incidental encounter with words. Initially it is important to build up students' vocabulary through direct methods of teaching. Once the students have built up some basic vocabulary, they may be introduced with incidental or contextual vocabulary clues. Once the students have gained a level of vocabulary knowledge, new words are learned through the reference of familiar or "old" words. This method helps the students in acquiring and building their vocabulary in the long run. Vocabulary development during the school years builds upon students' previous vocabulary knowledge, and they use the knowledge to broaden their vocabulary.

What is Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition?

In his paper titled, 'What is Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition', William J Rapaport supports Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition (CVA). He says, "Acquisition of vocabulary is arguably the most critical component of successful language learning. It is the active, deliberate acquisition of a meaning for a word in a text by reasoning from textual clues and prior knowledge, including language knowledge and hypotheses developed from prior encounters with the word, but without external sources of help such as dictionaries or people." Anyone can face this situation while reading or listening and coming upon an unknown word with no outside source of help, but who needs to comprehend a meaning for the word in order to figure out the text being read. Some of this "incidental" acquisition is the result of conscious, active processes of hypothesizing a meaning for unknown words from context. L1 researches specify that learners acquire most of their vocabulary by the process of incidental learning. In this type of learning, the learners acquire different aspects of lexical knowledge through repetitive exposures as well as the surrounding contextual information of the unknown words.

Contextual Vocabulary is the study of words through the contexts they appear in. When a person encounters a new vocabulary word, he/she uses **the context clues to determine the word meaning**. For teaching contextual vocabulary, words are used in certain ways and with intended meanings. Through their implied contexts, learners can learn their meaning: a method of reverse application. An unknown word for a reader is by definition a word (or phrase) that the reader has either never seen before, or is such that he or she has only the vaguest idea about its meaning. Contextual vocabulary acquisition not only helps students in learning new words but also teaches them application of the newly acquired vocabulary because the students remember the context along with the meaning of the word.

Importance of Vocabulary Acquisition

The fact cannot be denied that vocabulary is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas clearly. Although vocabulary acquisition is the most important aspect of language learning, it is often neglected in the current

education system. Learning grammar and its techniques is termed as more important than learning of the language. Wilkins (1972) wrote that “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. Here it can be said that people can manage to communicate even if they do not know grammar concepts, but if they are unaware of proper vocabulary, they cannot express and convey their message at all. For the ESL students, knowledge of various aspects of vocabulary acquisition is very important. Teachers teach vocabulary directly or through various contexts to build students’ knowledge of words and phrases, helping them learn these different components which assist them in enhancing their English vocabulary knowledge and use. This method helps students in building their vocabulary and without any pressure as they tend to remember the words unknowingly and through various contexts.

Strategies for Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition and Expansion

A solid vocabulary is essential in every stage of language learning. So, it is crucial to learn vocabulary acquisition strategies to maximize the vocabulary power. Here are some practical strategies that can be used for contextual vocabulary acquisition..

Frequency of Words Used: The words and expressions which are important yet rarely taught should be included in reading, writing, speaking and listening activities. For this, students’ prior knowledge of the words can be used to build up new vocabulary. For example, if students know some basic vocabulary, they can be taught a variety of synonyms and antonyms through various contexts.

Mind-mapping: Mind mapping should be taught to the students so that they learn to direct their mind in different directions and yield better results while speaking and writing. Also conducting activities wherein they prepare word clouds help them to expand their vocabulary by recalling and repeating the words learnt in different contexts.

Exposure to all the four skills: One of the four skills required to acquire a language, reading is considered to be a basic element of vocabulary development in school children. Before children are able to read on their own, they can learn by listening to others reading to them. The repetition of the words and various situations provided in reading texts enhance the vocabulary learning experiences of the students as they learn new vocabulary through context.

Providing Situation: In the ESL setting, various situations should be provided in which students use certain vocabulary repeatedly. Activities such as sentence writing, paragraph writing, storytelling, group discussion can be conducted by encouraging the students to listen use and different words in different contexts. Providing situations for group discussions wherein students get to know about the views of other students and infer the content through contest.

Using Words in Own Sentences: Scholars in the field of language studies say that students learn the language well when they use them. Students can be provided with some example sentences with variety of words and for the application of new words, let them use the words in their own sentences. This activity can be done orally as well as in the worksheet for writing practice.

Knowledge about Differences in Speaking and Writing: To learn a new word, one must learn meaning, pronunciation, and spelling. While teaching contextual vocabulary, spoken and written vocabulary is to be taken care of because the pronunciation of spoken words and spellings differ in English language. Learning the exact pronunciation of the new word is very important for L2 vocabulary acquisition. Students should be taught to accept the difference in spelling and pronunciation through repetition. Knowledge of phonology also helps the learners recognize different sounds of the words and learn to read and pronounce the words correctly.

Use of Technology: With the changing time, technology has become feasible for everyone and it can be used for vocabulary acquisition. Online games, quizzes and books are great sources of vocabulary acquisition. There are varieties of resources that teachers may explore to model and teach English words and phrases to the students. One such website is <http://www.skyfall.com> where students can find reading books and <http://freerice.com/>.

Conclusion

A firm base of vocabulary knowledge is essential at every stage of the learner's second language acquisition and nowadays language researchers and teachers concur over the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition. The role that vocabulary plays in language learning should be given adequate attention by language teachers and researchers in the ESL setting as well. A systematic approach to language learning which includes reading, writing, speaking and listening activities should be applied in the ESL setting for the learners to keep acquiring vocabulary throughout their lives and a variety of activities can be applied to make the vocabulary acquisition process effective and long lasting. There are various methods through which students' vocabulary can be expanded. One such way is teaching through context which is an effective and proven method of vocabulary building.

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