
Effective Vocabulary Teaching Strategies for ESL Students: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract:

Lexis comprehension is an important and crucial element of any language scholarship. This piece of research focuses on efficient vocabulary teaching strategies in the English for Academic Purposes of ESL classroom. Illustration on results obtained from the study of three English for Academic Purposes ESL classrooms of RISE Krishna Sai Group of Institutions, Ongole, Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh and the personal experience as a teacher and learner, the author discusses various effective vocabulary teaching strategies in the English for Academic Purposes classroom which could greatly help English language learners in their voyage of language ability realization and further the language progression.

Key words: *Lexis, ESL, Academic Purposes etc.*

Introduction

Vocabulary teaching and learning is a constant challenge for teachers as well as students because historically there has been minimal focus on vocabulary instruction in the ESL classroom. Due to this, an increased emphasis on vocabulary development is crucial for the English language learner in the process of language learning. The native speakers continue to learn new words while English language learners face the double challenge of building that foundation and closing that language gap.

Another crucial point is the amount of time it takes for English language learners (ELLs) to learn English and be ready for school. Why ELLs would be struggling with the academic content. Firstly, the English language learners are doing two jobs at the same time; they are learning a new language (English) while learning new academic concepts. They are literally moving between two different worlds. Secondly, ELLs have to work harder and need more scaffolding than the average native English-speaking student who has an age- and level-appropriate command of the English language. Thirdly, academic vocabulary is often very technical used in the English language classroom.

Due to the enormous and alarming gap between the acquisition of basic conversation English and academic English, it is therefore important for teachers in the English for Academic Purposes ESL classroom to be knowledgeable about the most effective and current teaching strategies in vocabulary instruction and provide constant academic scaffolding to ELLs. English for Academic Purpose classroom needs a language proficiency that will enable students to comprehend academic content and participate in activities and assignments, and then it is even more important for the teacher to employ effective and dynamic teaching strategies that will empower the students to master the required tasks.

The language demands of academic learning are enormous. The more diverse, creative and effective teaching strategies the teacher in the English for Academic Purposes classroom employs, the richer the student's academic language becomes and the more likely will they experience success with the content and will be able to communicate with various registers. This paper discusses the various teaching strategies currently employed by teachers in the English for Academic Purposes classroom and their implications for effective vocabulary acquisition. It outlines how vocabulary is learned and explores best practices in vocabulary teaching practiced in the RISE Krishna Sai Group of Institutions, Ongole. It discusses the new insights

learned, challenges experienced within the English for Academic Purposes class room and possible solutions to these problems. It provides suggestions on how ESOL teachers can assist the ELLs in their academic language development more effectively.

What is Vocabulary?

According to Gardener (2009, as cited in Adger, 2002) vocabulary is not only confined to the meaning of words but also includes how vocabulary in a language is structured: how people use and store words and how they learn words and the relationship between words, phrases, categories of words and phrases (Graves, 2000, as cited in Taylor, 1990)

Cummins (1999, as cited in Herrel, 2004) states that there are different types of vocabulary:

-) Reading vocabulary
-) Listening vocabulary
-) Writing vocabulary
-) Speaking vocabulary

Nations and Waring (2000, as cited in Adger, 2002) on the other hand, classify vocabulary into three categories: high frequency words, general academic words and technical or specialized words. When students have a great vocabulary, the latter can improve all areas of communication, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing. Reading in the English for Academic Purposes ESL class room considers vocabulary knowledge an important source of variation in reading comprehension, because it affects higher level language processes such as grammatical processing, construction of schemata and text models (Adams and Collins, 1977 as cited in Zimmerman, 2007).

The fact being vocabulary acquisition, semantic development and growth of word knowledge are currently being studied in several interesting ways, hence the research that is presented here is to complement and augment these studies by introducing effective vocabulary teaching strategies in the English for academic purposes ESL classroom that will expedite the vocabulary development in ELLs. Vocabulary knowledge can be possible when teachers employ effective vocabulary teaching and learning strategies which are the objectives of this research.

What is Academic Vocabulary?

Academic vocabulary is the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills which includes learning new information, describing abstract ideas and developing student's conceptual understanding. (Chamot and O'Malley, 2007 as cited in Herrel, 2004)

The main barrier to student comprehension of texts and lectures is low academic vocabulary knowledge, due to the sub-technicality of the academic language. Academic vocabulary is based on more Latin and Greek roots. Moreover academic lectures and texts use longer and more complex sentences. Academic vocabulary contributes to the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in ELLs which enables them to apply the language, using abstractions in a sophisticated manner.

Learning Vocabulary: What does it mean to know a word?

Dale (1989, as cited in Taylor, 1990) provides a description of the extent of word knowledge in terms of 5 stages:

-) The student has no knowledge about the word.
-) The student has a general sense of the word.
-) The student has a narrow, context-bound knowledge about the word.
-) The student has a basic knowledge of the word and is able to use it in many appropriate situations.
-) The student has a rich, de-contextualized knowledge of the word and can use it in various appropriate situations.

Knowing a word implies knowing many things about the word: Its literal meaning, its various connotations, its spelling, derivations, collocations, frequency, pronunciation, the sort of syntactic constructions into which it enters, the morphological options it offers and a rich variety of semantic associates. Factors involved in knowing a word: recall difficulty and inter-language factors such as storage of these lexical items in appropriate context and the ability to recall vocabulary for active usage in speaking and writing.

For every vocabulary dimension there is a knowledge dimension and a skill dimension. Evidence suggests that the knowledge aspect requires conscious and explicit learning mechanisms whereas the skill aspect involves mostly implicit learning and memory. Vocabulary learning strategies include strategies for using as well as for knowing a word. Bybee (1985, as cited in Taylor, 1990) states that words are stored in a network of items linked by shared phonological, morpho-syntactic and semantic properties and that the relative strength of any given item and its relationship to other items in the network are directly determined by the speaker's experience both using and perceiving the word. Bonvillian also emphasizes that learners need a deeper and more complete knowledge of syntactic information in particular the sub- categorization of words—that is, the syntactic frames that words fit into. Besides, one must have knowledge of the used syntactic frame. In order to gain syntactic information, subjects are asked to write a sentence using the specific vocabulary item, e.g. the words fetch and carry. Production information may provide us with at best partial information about linguistic knowledge, but doesn't inform learner's knowledge of what is not possible.

Concentration on grammatical information in vocabulary is important as it helps in inferencing. The results of the study provide that syntactic and lexical knowledge are related. So, the effort of this research is to understand the specific relationship in life with the vocabulary acquisition process over a specific period. The observation is that low level learners lacked the ability to differentiate sentence such as,

“The teacher demonstrated the students the new machine and The teacher showed the students the new machine”.

However, high proficiency learners differentiated the two sentences and the learning happened in the following manner:

1. Learners learn a particular syntactic pattern to account for all cases of what appears to them to be a particular structural type.
2. When a second pattern becomes available, they either alternate these patterns or replace the first with the second until the correct pattern is established. In fact learners get syntactic information through the lexicon. The point is that lexical acquisition needs to be considered broadly and needs to include the semantics of lexical items as well as syntactic information. In addition one needs to learn to build appropriate networks being dynamic processes that continue as vocabulary learning continues and one's lexicon matures.

The Partial – Precise Knowledge Dimension

Quantitative studies such as vocabulary size or breadth and different types of achievement tests define vocabulary knowledge as precise understanding. For measuring vocabulary size in the L2 word recognition tasks and check lists were used. Lexicon decision tasks do not differentiate between what the learner precisely or vaguely knows. The method where learners be requested to pronounce words, explained the meaning and provided various word association. This showed that there are definite levels of knowledge along the partial to precise knowledge dimension.

The Depth of Knowledge Dimension

The depth of the learner's vocabulary knowledge is the learner's ability to apply syntactic and morphological meaning to words they know. Suggestions are to use a vocabulary knowledge scale to measure levels of lexical knowledge like meaning, use and accuracy. In fact, a learner's lexical competence can only be measured by a combination of test formats that measure the various word knowledge dimensions.

The Receptive Productive Dimension

There is a difference between word mastering and its use. As most of the vocabulary test concentrate on receptive and productive vocabulary there is a need for the definitions of concepts 'reception' and

‘production’. Melka (1997) presents that it is difficult to find tasks that test production and reception but a variety of tests usage could measure inter language development.

Focus on mapping meaning onto form and network building

According to Hatch and Brown (1995) the process of mapping meaning onto form should not be considered more important than the learner’s ongoing struggle to construct and reorganize his/her inter-language because it is a complex process that involves network building. It is difficult for learners to attain word meaning through the process of labeling, packaging and network building. Labeling is a brief description for identifying the description attached to an object. Packaging is the process of learning in which objects are grouped under one main topic. Network building is the process of learning the relationship between words. It is linking words together according to meaning. It is difficult to determine, test and evaluate the progress of the learner’s inter-language semantic development.

Development from partial to precise comprehension

Research states that English language learners should be allowed to have a vague understanding of word meaning before developing accuracy. Learner’s knowledge of a specific vocabulary item moves from partial to precise knowledge as they expand their communication world (Brown, 1994). Miller and Fellbaum (1991) point out that knowledge of how verbs, adjectives and nouns function in relation to another is important in acquiring word meaning.

Development from Receptive to Productive Control

Vocabulary items in the learners’ receptive vocabulary might not become readily available for productive purposes, since vocabulary reception does not guarantee production. It is difficult to draw a line between reception and production, since it is not clear at what point receptive word knowledge becomes productive. Maera (1997) suggests that vocabulary learning is to be viewed as the learning of items and changing of systems when teachers employ the following vocabulary learning strategy.

Guessing meaning from context

Herrel (2008, as cited in Henrikson, 1999) suggests the following method in assisting students guessing meaning from context:

-) **Definition**
-) **Restatement**
-) **Punctuation marks**
-) **Examples Contrast**
-) **Similarity**
-) **Surrounding words**
-) **Background knowledge**

Teaching lexical chunks

Learning of lexical chunks serves two objectives: it enables the student to have chunks of language available for immediate use and it also provides the student with information that has to be analyzed at a later stage. The main advantage of this is that they build on the fluency of the English language learner. They can also be associated with certain communication rituals such as ‘To whom am I speaking?’ Lexical chunks are related to typical functional language use. They provide clear, relevant and concise language use and are stored as individual whole units.

Teaching collocations

Vocabulary knowledge doesn’t only involve just knowing the meaning of a word in isolation, but includes knowing the word that usually co-occurs with it. These words that co-occur with high frequency are called collocations, e.g. heavy rain, strong coffee but not powerful coffee, a brief discussion but a short man. Collocations help students to define the semantic area of a word such as: Synonyms- words with identical meaning; however, that absolute substitutability is not possible, since factors such as register and style determine the usage of synonymous words.

Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition (IVA)

Teaching word family

Recycling content

Keeping a vocabulary journal

Eliciting

Contextualization

Labeling

Personalization

Learning vocabulary by identifying productive pre-fixes and post-fixes

Association

Semantic mapping

Character trait vocabulary chart

Learning vocabulary via analogy

Using Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) to teach vocabulary

Learning vocabulary through story innovation

Categorizing words

Vocabulary finder

Use of bilingual dictionaries

It is important for teachers in the English for Academic Purposes ESL classroom to focus on the Difficulty and quality of the semantization process in order to enhance the structure of the learners' lexicon. Effective vocabulary teaching strategies enhance word retention, broaden the depth and breadth of word knowledge and therefore expedite the vocabulary development of the learner.

HOW AT RISE KRISHNA SAI GROUPS VOCABULARY LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES ESL CLASSROOM IS FACILITATED

The aim was to investigate and observe effective and current methods and strategies in the English for Academic Purpose, ESL classroom. The following methods and strategies were successfully employed by on our campus

I used the following Language Program, focusing on **form, meaning** and **use** of words. **Teaching vocabulary in I B.Tech, CSE, ESL classroom.**

Form- pronunciation, spelling, inflections, and derivations of the word

Meaning- basic and literal meaning, figurative meanings, semantic relation and the connotation of the word

Use- sub-categorization, collocation, socio-linguistic and stylistic meaning of the word

I mainly used the Presentation, Practice and solidation and lexical and semantic development teaching strategy as outlined below:

Presentation

I provided a description, explanation or example of a new term. Students are asked to restate the description, explanation or example of the new term. Students then construct a picture, symbol or graphic design of the term. The students are engaged in activities that will help in mastering the new concepts. Students are asked to discuss the new terms often in class.

Practice and Consolidation

I used games when teaching vocabulary and employ semantic field and semantic mapping strategies. Used the key word method to reinforce important concepts and provided sufficient practice.

Lexical and Semantic Development

Employed extensive reading activities in and out of the classroom and facilitated communicative activities such as role-play and debates to enhance fluency and confidence in speech.

Vocabulary teaching strategies used in I B.Tech, ECE ESL classroom:

Used the criteria mentioned below to select vocabulary items:

Range

Coverage

Frequency

Learnability

Language needs

Academic vocabulary journal

A vocabulary journal is recommended in which students write word pairs and semantic maps that helps students to understand the relationship between words. The main idea here is *input flooding*. The more the learners are exposed to a specific word, the higher the retention and usage of the word.

Academic vocabulary word lists

A master academic word list is used to teach specific lexical items. I perceive word lists to be ineffective in teaching academic vocabulary, due to the following reasons:

Wordlists do not contain all the words that students need to know because students must still learn many words from oral language and from extensive reading in order to be academically successful. Moreover, the definitions on many wordlists are not learner-friendly. Through my personal teaching experience, I discovered that teaching vocabulary in context is more meaningful than just teaching with wordlists because students have a better understanding of a word when they see and hear how the word is used in daily life or how its meaning is related to their own reality.

Scaffolding

Used the following methods for scaffolding academic vocabulary learning:

Graphic organizers are used to explain concepts and related words. New vocabulary is posted on a word wall and reviewed daily. Drawings and pictures are labeled to help students make the connection between oral and written English.

Focus on cognates

The identification and use of cognates can be a building block in vocabulary learning. Students look at the words and discuss how they are alike and different by focusing on word roots, endings and affixes. It is crucial for students to be aware of false cognates - words that have similar spelling and pronunciation but don't share the same meaning. To overcome this I pre-selected words from an upcoming text or conversation and explained meaning with student-friendly definitions.

-) Teaching word maps
-) Teaching productive prefixes and suffixes
-) Semantic feature analysis
-) Word sorts activities
-) Oral presentations and academic discussions
-) Model correct usage of language

These are the additional approaches taken for imprinting the vocabulary learned.

Vocabulary teaching strategies implemented in I B.Tech, Mechanical ESL Classroom:

Word awareness

The target vocabulary is placed on posters pasted to the wall and constantly referred to the vocabulary for reinforcement. Students were instructed to create a weekly vocabulary poster as the lesson progresses.

Use of audio visual equipment and computers

Use of corpus linguistics

The main aim and focus of Corpus Linguistics is to discover patterns of authentic language use through analysis of actual usage. A corpus and concordance can be used in the English classroom to:

-) Compare language use
-) Compile exercises and student activities.
-) Analyze usage

The following problems might occur when using corpus and concordances:

-) Usefulness
-) Corpus bias
-) Comprehensibility
-) Learning differences

It is clear that there are many vocabulary teaching strategies. During this research I discovered new insights, challenges and possible solutions to the problems experienced by the ESL teacher in the English for academic purposes classroom. Firstly, most ELLs have a deficit in second language vocabulary and teachers have a limited time for direct instruction. Secondly, some ESL teachers have a difficulty in choosing whether to concentrate on developing vocabulary or promoting extensive reading. Thirdly, I discovered that there was a lack of formative assessment in one of the ESL classes that I attended during my research. It is important that lexicon is a part of the evaluation component of the English for academic purposes classroom. Finally, I have come to realize the importance for English language learners to have an extensive knowledge of the breadth and depth of words.

Conclusion

Through personal experience I discovered that many of my students became confident because they believed that they were making progress in their vocabulary learning journey. As much as I am aware of the fact that academic English vocabulary is generally difficult to understand for the average ELL it takes time to get assimilated with the vocabulary. These teaching strategies have their advantages and disadvantages and it is my responsibility as an English teacher to implement vocabulary teaching strategies that will expedite the learning process of my learners. I am aware that the level of proficiency of the class determines how the teacher will implement specific teaching strategies. I have learned that in order for ELLs to communicate more effectively within their immediate communities they must have a certain level of vocabulary. I will have to reconsider the way I had taught English in the past, evaluate my past teaching strategies and implement more effective new strategies that I observed in various English for Academic Purposes classrooms.

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