

## TEACHING AND LEARNING LEXICAL ITEMS

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### ABSTRACT

*Almost all EFL teachers ascertain that vocabulary is a very indispensable facet of any foreign language learning. Vocabulary acquisition is one of the crucial features in estimating one's language proficiency (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Sirbu, 2017; Stahl, 2005 ). In fact, many researchers believe that it is more important than grammar since people can communicate if they do have the needed words for that particular conversation without knowing its correct grammar. In other words, any message can be sent easily if the speaker retains the necessary repertoire of lexical items required. For instance, Thornbury (2007) adds that language learners do not need to spend most of their time studying grammar because he argues that their English will not improve very much if they focus only on grammar learning. He adds that the students will see more improvement if they learn more words and expressions. He concludes that language learners can say very little with syntax knowledge, but they can say almost anything with semantic updates. A plethora of research concludes that when students do not identify at least 90% of the words in a text, they do not sufficiently comprehend what they read (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018a; Güiven & Bekdas, 2018; Sedita, 2005,). In fact, many school language learners have shown a noticeable shortage of vocabulary which is obligatory for a fluent communication. Therefore, this paper is trying to provide the EFL teachers with practical recommendations on teaching vocabulary that would improve their students' vocabulary levels. Besides, it would help learners uncover what is necessary to be excellent in vocabulary acquisition.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Acquisition, Explicit, Implicit, Lexis, Vocabulary*

### INTRODUCTION

#### What is Lexis?

Various definitions have been labeled to vocabulary, but the most agreed one is that vocabulary is words learning. Harmer (2007) states that vocabulary is not only to know the words but also to know the relationships of these learned words to other words in the sentence. Scrivener (2011) further argues that "lexis" rather than the more familiar word "vocabulary" should be used. That is because of the availability of corpora. The use of the word lexis implies a major shift in understanding, attitude, and approach. Therefore, Michael Lewis wrote a book (called *The Lexical Approach* in 1993) that reflects this new paradigm in thinking of vocabulary teaching. It stresses that learning words in isolation are the wrong way of augmenting foreign language lexical items acquisition. They should be incorporated into learning grammar and other language skills meaningfully (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018a, 2018b; Hedge, 2014 ). In a new book called TKT ( Teaching Knowledge Test ) by

Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams the second unit entitled “lexis” shows the language educators and linguistics that researchers have intended to replace the old term vocabulary with the latest one lexis. Harmer (2007) argues that words in a sentence such as “it is warm here.” may be understood wrongly. Thus, he stresses the essence of functions should be a part of lexical items. Thus, lexis is a more comprehensive term that goes beyond individual words or sets of words to their collocations, denotations, figurative meanings...etc.

### **What is Needed to Master a New English Word?**

One aspect of effective vocabulary learning requires figuring out what needs to be studied about a word (Canale,2014). This is called the learning burden of a word and differs from one word to another according to the ways in which the word pertains to some factors such as first language knowledge, already existing knowledge of the second language and/ or other known languages. The way to work out the learning burden scientifically is to reflect on each aspect of what is vital in knowing a word. Generally, knowing a word requires being able to identify its form and its meaning at the basic level. Harmer (2007) enlarges this condition to include two more aspects of knowing a word: usage and grammar. By usage, he means understanding the word’s collocations, metaphors, and idioms, as well as style and register (the appropriate level of formality), being aware of any connotations and associations the word may have. On the other hand, by grammar, he states that language learners should be able to use the word in the suitable, correct, grammatical structures. It can be concluded that a language learner masters a word if he/she is able to define, spell, pronounce it correctly, be aware of its connotation, affixes, and he or she can use it in a context as well as discern its grammar. All these requirements make learning vocabulary look a complicated process as learners should be able to recall the word and recognize it in its spoken and written forms.

### **Teaching Vocabulary Explicitly or Implicitly**

Many researchers believe that EFL teachers should not teach lexical items deliberately, but they should expose their students to them through reading, listening, speaking and writing activities. In other words, vocabulary teaching should be accidental and unplanned (Al-Darayseh, 2014; Laufer & Hulstijn,2001). However, a myriad of research has investigated the essence of teaching vocabulary explicitly and they found out its effectiveness (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018a; Nation, 2011; Schmitt,2013, Young-Davy,2014). In fact, some research findings revealed that incidental vocabulary learning is a slow-moving and error-prone process with little vocabulary gains (Read,2004; Khezrlou, Ellis, & Sadeghi,2017). Also, Graves (2006) claims that explicit instruction of carefully selected words is needed for students to comprehend content-specific texts. Also, Kusumawati & Widiati (2017) discovered that direct instruction is highly effective for vocabulary learning.

Hanson & Padua (2011) mention three steps for teaching lexis explicitly. These steps are first identifying the potential list of words selected to be taught, second determining which of these words to teach and third planning how to teach the target words. Furthermore, they recommend EFL teachers to use four strategies to introduce individual words explicitly. The first strategy is to supply a learner-friendly definition. The second tactic is to use the word in context and give contextual information. This means that EFL teachers must not teach individual words in isolation. The third strategy is to offer multiple

exposures. In addition, the fourth strategy of teaching lexical items is to provide chances for active involvement.

### **Strategies to Teach Vocabulary**

According to Schmitt (1997), a vocabulary learning strategy is any strategy that leads to the learning of vocabulary. Clearly, this covers vocabulary teaching strategies as well because they also result in, or are meant to lead to vocabulary learning. In other words, vocabulary teaching strategies as actions taken by EFL teachers to introduce target vocabulary whereas learning strategies are self-initiated by the learners themselves. Therefore, good teachers help their learners uncover learning strategies and guide them to utilize the most effective learning strategies that suit them.

Teaching vocabulary is a complex process that entails EFL teachers to be aware of certain aspects and factors before they introduce any lexical item to their learners. Also, they should be aware of diversifying techniques to teach vocabulary effectively (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018a). Therefore, all EFL teachers should be able to vary their methods and procedures when they teach vocabulary to meet certain criteria such as the students' ages, levels, needs, aptitudes, motivation, learning styles, and learning strategies. Much research has shown the effectiveness of using various ways to teach vocabulary such as games, drawings, stimulus, drama, role plays, caricatures, video technology, personalization, semantic mapping and competitions (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018b). For instance, Sirbu (2017) analyzed the scores of the pre and post-test results, he found out that the students mastered the vocabulary regarding the five topics of the study (family members, jobs & occupations, animals, weather, sports & activities) well when they were taught by games. Thus, the results showed that having used games in vocabulary instruction, the experimental group outsmarted the control group noticeably. Also, according to the students' opinions, games are considered to be a real aid in mastering vocabulary; the study revealed that games enhance the students' capacity of learning vocabulary; they motivate students to interact and augment their motivation to learning as well. Similarly, Güven, & Bekdas, (2018) found out that using caricatures on vocabulary learning and teaching in a foreign language was effective and recommended by the 25 participants in the experimental group. Moreover, Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad (2018a) have revealed effective solutions to increase the students' vocabulary repertoire. For example, they found out that EFL teachers should use the new words in context, analyze the word part, raise word consciousness, sketch the words and use semantic mapping. Also, they suggested that curriculum designers should specify target vocabulary for each unit, so the learners, as well as the teacher, would know exactly what to focus on. Furthermore, Al-Qutaiti and Ahmad added that language learners should read extensively and use personalization when they meet new words. According to Al-Qutaiti and Ahmad, language learners should also regulate their own vocabulary banks and work on their pace to master more words. Furthermore, they should be keen on discovering new words by using various ways including dictionaries, real-life situations, and readings.

### **Teaching Grammar Versus Teaching Vocabulary**

Research shows that a greater priority was allocated to teaching grammatical structures over the communicative function itself for a long time (Al-Qutaiti & Ahmad, 2018b). Therefore, teaching grammar took most timing focus of any lesson and this emphasis caused by the belief that grammar must be known by language learners first. As a result, grammar-

translation method domination was markedly viewed and widely experienced in all language teaching classes. On the contrary, the number of words introduced in such courses was kept noticeably low. Those taught words were often selected because they were effortlessly demonstrated or could be easily translated. The access of the communicative approach revived the notion of vocabulary significance in interaction and discourse of any foreign language, as well as debated the effectiveness of the teaching process locus ( Thornbury,2007). Teaching and learning vocabulary has become one of the aspects that should be concentrated on by EFL teachers and learners to master English. Thornbury (2007) states that around 2,000 - 3,000-word families are recommended to be sufficient for a language learner if he/ she masters them well.

### **Grammar-Translation Method Versus Communicative Approach**

In modern methodology two main tendencies set apart: methods in which the teacher has the most significant role and chooses the items students will learn opposing the one where the focus shifts away from the teacher to the students. This makes students be more responsible for their own learning and more autonomous. In addition, it allows meeting individual needs of each student (Gairns & Redman, 1986).

Harmer (2007) asserts that translation seems to be a beneficial tool if it is used sparingly, but it should be utilized with caution. If EFL teachers depend heavily on the use of translation, students lose much essence of being in a language learning classroom. Thus, they will listen to a little English and lack sufficient language exposure. Moreover, Harmer further adds more challenges of depending on translation only as it needs an efficient speaker of both languages to translate well; and not all words can have equivalent in the target language.

Communicative approach refers to classroom activities which students use language as a means of communication, and the main purpose is to accomplish some type of task. Therefore, students are demanded to use any and/or all the language that they know, and they incrementally develop their learning strategies in order to attain their real communication in the target language.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has discussed some issues pertained to research in the area of second language vocabulary teaching and learning. It also unearths a new trend to consider learning and teaching words as lexis that is more comprehensive than simple term vocabulary. In addition, it reveals that EFL teachers can use both explicit and implicit exposure to new lexical items. In this article, many strategies of teaching and learning vocabulary have been highlighted. Moreover, some practical ideas to teach grammar and vocabulary effectively were discussed. Finally, a clear comparison between the grammar-translation method and the communicative approach was shed light on.

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