

Vocabulary, an Indicator of Language Proficiency: A Perspective from the Review of Literature

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Vocabulary is a fundamental language element. A mastery of vocabulary can help develop proficiency in language skills. To verify this statement, this paper tries to highlight the correlation between vocabulary and the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and grammar by delving into the existing literature. What can be understood from the review of literature is that vocabulary plays a vital role in determining one's general language proficiency.

Keywords: language proficiency, language skills, language components, vocabulary knowledge

Vocabulary as construct of language proficiency

The importance of vocabulary in language use cannot be overemphasized. It is an aspect of language that plays a pivotal role in both language comprehension and production. In the last three decades much has been done in the areas of vocabulary relating to the nature of the bilingual lexicon, L2 vocabulary acquisition, lexical storage, lexical retrieval, and use of vocabulary. Now, it is a well acknowledged fact that vocabulary knowledge plays a decisive role in determining one's language proficiency. According to Schmitt (2010), there are high correlations between depth and range of

vocabulary and general language proficiency or language skills. Further, Meara (1996) says, all other things being equal, learners with large vocabularies are more proficient in a wide range of language skills than learners with smaller vocabularies.

Keeping in mind the correlation between vocabulary and other language proficiencies, the following subsections discuss vocabulary and its relationship with each of the four language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, and grammar.

Vocabulary and listening skills

For Nation (2001), vocabulary learning through listening is learning through meaning-focused input. For a reasonable comprehension through listening input, learners would need a coverage of 95% or 98% in the running words. In other words, for a better comprehension of oral text, learners should come across one unknown word in every 50 words or 2 or 3 unknown words per minute. According to Nation (2001) there are certain conditions that make learning of vocabulary through listening to stories more likely. And it is the responsibility of the teacher to create such conditions in the class. Some of these conditions are a) the content of the story should be interesting; b) story should be

comprehended; c) unknown words in the story should be understood and the meaning of those not yet strongly established should be retrieved; d) decontextualizing the target words; and e) thoughtful generative processing of target vocabulary.

There are numerous research studies which show that learners can learn new words as they are being read to. Brett, Rothlein and Hurley (1996) in their study found that the students who listened to two stories and were given a brief explanation of the target words learned significantly more new words and remembered them better six weeks later than students who heard stories with no explanation of the target words. In another study, Elley (1989) showed that the oral story reading constitutes a significant source of vocabulary acquisition, whether or not the reading is accompanied by teacher explanation of word meanings. In yet another study, Vidal (2011) compared the effects of reading and listening on incidental vocabulary acquisition. The results showed that although both academic reading and listening result in vocabulary gains, reading was a more efficient source of acquisition. This was especially true for low-proficiency students who appeared to have more difficulty coping with academic lectures which needed real-time processing and therefore could benefit more from written texts over which they had more control. The study also showed that this distinction in vocabulary learning through different modes of input was blurred with proficient students. That is to say, proficient learners could learn vocabulary in equal degree from

both types of input.

Vocabulary and speaking skills

Vocabulary and speaking skills are invariably linked. In a classroom situation, a teacher can use several techniques and activities to facilitate this connection. Some such activities are *semantic-mapping*, *information transfer activities*, and *split information tasks*. According to Nation (2001), semantic-mapping can help bridge the gap between the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge by making learners produce language while doing the task. Studies have shown that compared to writing which requires knowledge of a great stock of vocabulary, speaking requires a much smaller vocabulary. Nation (2001) reported that a good mastery of 2,000 most frequent word families which can provide over 95% coverage is helpful to understand 90% of the words used in spoken discourse. Crabbe and Nation (1991) came up with a list of 'survival' vocabulary which consisted approximately 120 words. The purpose of such a list was to help learners who intended to use another language for short periods of travel when they visited another state or country. The language functions that could be carried out using such words were greetings, requesting for food, expressing politeness, asking for help and directions, describing yourself and buying and bargaining for goods etc.

In a study with novice to intermediate Japanese learners of English, Koizumi and In'nami (2013) wanted to explore the degree to which second language speaking

proficiency could be predicted by the size, depth and speed of L2 vocabulary. The findings of the study showed that a substantial portion of variance in speaking proficiency could be explained by vocabulary knowledge, size, depth and speed. The findings also suggested that vocabulary knowledge is central to speaking proficiency. In yet another study, Daller and Xue (2007) investigated how *picture descriptions* and *C-test* as two lexical measures tapped the relationship between oral proficiency and vocabulary knowledge with two groups of learners. One group consisted of 26 Chinese students who had been studying in UK (UK group) and the other group was 24 university students in China who had EFL teaching as part of their degree course at a Chinese university (Chinese group). The findings demonstrated that in both the lexical measures it was the UK group who fared better than the Chinese group, suggesting that the UK group had more vocabulary knowledge and thus performed well on the tasks which involved oral description.

Vocabulary and reading skills

Among all the language skills, the relationship between reading and vocabulary is the most researched one till date. There are innumerable research studies which have investigated how reading helps in vocabulary learning and the vice versa. In what follows, some such studies are discussed in brief to emphasize how strong the relationship between reading and vocabulary is.

Research studies centering on L1 reading suggest that knowledge of vocabulary and the ability to comprehend a text are very closely related to each other (Stahl, 1990). The connection is not unidirectional. That is to say, reading can contribute to vocabulary growth and vocabulary knowledge can also help in reading (Chall, 1987). Several researchers (Hazenber&Hulstijn, 1996; Hu & Nation, 2001) have proven that one's ability to read and comprehend is to a large extent influenced by one's vocabulary size. Laufer (1992) stressed the need for receptive knowledge of the most frequent 3,000 word families to understand unsimplified text. Further, Hirsh and Nation (1992) suggested that knowledge of at least 5,000 word families is necessary for reading to be pleasurable.

Paribakht and Wesche (1993) experimented the effects of reading only, and reading plus vocabulary exercises wherein learners had the opportunity to meet the same vocabulary repeatedly while reading. The results showed that learners learnt vocabulary under both the approaches. However, it was the reading plus exercise group which learned more vocabulary than the group which asked to read only. In another study in the context of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Qian (2002) investigated the roles of breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension in academic settings. It was found from the study that depth of vocabulary knowledge is as important as breadth of vocabulary knowledge in predicting performance in

academic reading, thus revalidating the natural connection between reading and vocabulary growth. Horst, Cobb & Meara (1998) in a study with thirty four Oman students who were a part of an intensive English program at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman found that the students recognized the meanings of new words and built associations between them as a result of comprehension-focused extensive reading. The text-length which was carefully controlled resulted in more incidental vocabulary learning and a higher pick-up rate than the previous studies that were carried out by them. The study also demonstrated that the students who had larger L2 vocabulary sizes gained more vocabulary through incidental learning. Waring and Takaki (2003) in their study with female Japanese subjects revealed that words can be learned incidentally through reading. However, it is the more frequent words which are learned easily and remained for a long time in mental lexicon. Their study also suggested that a massive amount of graded reading is required to learn new vocabulary.

Vocabulary and writing skills

Writing is the most complex of the four language skills. Being a productive skill, writing involves a number of cognitive processes. In many ways, the ability to write effectively depends upon a learner possessing a good stock of vocabulary. In reading, which is a receptive skill, a learner can understand the meanings of unfamiliar words from the larger sentential context. In the case of writing however, which is a

productive skill, a learner has to have a reasonable amount of mastery over the language in general, and vocabulary in particular, in order to express themselves effectively. In writing, the learner must be able to recall appropriate words for the context quickly and effortlessly. Research studies show, learners will only be able to recall those words spontaneously which they have understood well enough or they have depth of knowledge on. To substantiate, Mayher and Brause (1986) state that “writing is dependent upon the ability to draw upon words to describe an event”. The above discussion suggests that vocabulary has a deep relationship with successful writing.

Research studies (Laufer, 1994; Leki & Carson, 1994) have shown that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and quality of writing. According to Nation (2001) one’s vocabulary choice in writing is a strong indicator of whether the writer has adopted the conventions of the relevant discourse community or not.

Schmitt (2000) is of the view that a lot of vocabulary research has focused on exploring the relationship between reading and vocabulary. But, vocabulary is also equally necessary for the other three skills. Teachers when teach writing have a tendency to focus more on the grammatical well-formedness of a composition. However, they should focus more on the use of lexis in a composition as research has shown that lexical errors can impede comprehension more than grammatical errors (Schmitt, 2000).

Vocabulary and grammar

Unlike listening, speaking, reading and writing (which are language skills), grammar, like vocabulary, is a language component. If grammar is considered to be merely a system of rules, then it becomes very difficult to demarcate between grammar and vocabulary because when it comes to word use, certain vocabulary rules or grammar come into play. For example, while learning a word, a learner must know what word-class a particular word belongs to i.e., noun, verb etc. Also, while learning verb forms like *enjoy*, *love*, *hope*, the learner needs to know if these words are followed by an infinitive or a gerund. Similarly, while learning phrasal verbs, the learner needs to be aware of the fact that some phrasal verbs are separable (Example: He **called up** Ramesh the other day. or He **called** Ramesh **up** the other day.) and others are non-separable (Example: The mother **looked after** her child., not *The mother **looked** her child **after**.).

Unlike the learning of grammar, which is essentially a rule-based system, vocabulary learning is largely a question of accumulating individual items. That is to say, there is no generative rules for learning vocabulary like grammar. If grammar learning is a matter of learning generative rules, vocabulary learning is a question of memory.

The vocabulary of any language can be divided into various word classes such as nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and

determiners. Again, broadly all these word classes can be divided into two classes: grammatical class and content class. Word classes like pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and determiners fall into grammatical class of words and word classes like nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs fall into content class of words. To substantiate, words like *and / or* (conjunction), *them / you* (pronoun) and *under / to* (preposition) mainly contribute to the grammatical structure of a sentence and therefore are called *grammatical words* or *structural words* or *function words*. These words are closed words which imply that the number of grammatical words in language is static. On the other hand *content words* carry high information load and are open ended, which means there is no limit to the number of content words that can be added to a language. Traditionally, grammatical words belonged to the domain of grammar teaching, while the teaching of vocabulary was more concerned with content words. However, this rigid division has become blurred recently.

Apart from the four language skills and grammar, vocabulary knowledge also plays a role in determining some other language skills. Nasserji (2006) highlighted that EFL students having deeper knowledge of vocabulary were able to make use of lexical inferencing strategies more effectively. Watts (2008) examined the effects of word salience (the learner's evaluation of a target item's importance in the context of a reading passage) and syntactic complexity (presence of target items in independent or dependent

clauses) on the acquisition of word meaning and word grammatical class of Spanish-like nonsense words and found that word salience affected acquisition of both grammatical class and word meaning, while clause type affected correct acquisition of grammatical class. Pulido (2007), investigated the relationship between adult L2 text processing and vocabulary acquisition and reveals that as lower-level text processing operations become more efficient, lexical processing can become more effective and retention of vocabulary is enhanced; in particular, background knowledge of a text topic did not appear to moderate the relationship between comprehension and retention of target item meanings.

Conclusion

The discussions from the previous sections clearly suggest that vocabulary knowledge is very much essential to be proficient in the language skills. It has also been observed from the discussions that vocabulary knowledge and language skills are complementary to each other. That is to say, not only vocabulary knowledge helps in developing the four language skills, but also while the language skills are at work, vocabulary can be learnt.

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