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# **ON Assessing vocabulary learning and teaching**

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## **Abstract**

Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental; students cannot understand a text without knowing what most of the words means. Lack of adequate vocabulary knowledge is already an obvious and serious obstacle for many students. Teachers and students are in need to new techniques in this issue. The reasons behind students' low performance in learning vocabulary are: the low status of vocabulary study, learning burden, life in our departments, lack of authentic dictionaries, constant lack of textbooks, no room for morphology, and mal-furnished room of vocabulary in Iraq. A questionnaire is done to assess vocabulary learning and teaching in our departments. The present paper is of three sections. Many concluding points are also mentioned.



## 1. Introduction

Although vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching, interest in its role in second language learning has grown rapidly in recent years and specialists now emphasize the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both the teacher and the learner. As a fact, it is through lexical resources that languages maintain their flexibility. Each language has about many thousands of words<sup>1</sup>, though not all are in active use, and some are known only relatively to few speakers. And in spite of the thousands of words in English, a number are in active use; these are called "core" vocabulary (see Richards & Rodgers (1986:32) and Jordon (1997:151)). What's more than that "core" is lexical luxury. In other words, it's the ability to use and tackle vocabulary of a language powerfully. And this requires basic knowledge in meanings of words, substitutions, polysemy, synonymy, antonymy and other relations between words. For a student to 'know' a word, it means the ability to (see Jordon (ibid.:150)and Ur(1991:60-63) :

- ☒ recognize it in its spoken or written form
- ☒ recall it at will
- ☒ relate it to an appropriate object or concept
- ☒ use it in the appropriate grammatical forms
- ☒ in speech, pronounce it in a recognizable way
- ☒ in writing, spell it correctly



- ☒ use it with the words it correctly goes with ,i.e., in the correct collocation
- ☒ use it at the appropriate level of formality
- ☒ be aware of its connotations and associations.

Research on vocabulary has focused on two important issues. The first is the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension: the proportion of difficult words in a text is the single most powerful predictor of text difficulty, and learner's general vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of how well that learner can understand a text. The second is learners' strategies, and these are (Nation, 1990:ch.10):

- ☒ Guessing words in context.
- ☒ Using mnemonic techniques to remember word meanings.
- ☒ Using word building.

Nation (1994:191-95) affirms that these strategies depend on a good use of reliable dictionary (see 3.2(4)). Mercer (2005:25) confirms that some students already use (these) strategies: "**however, they often do so unconsciously, and vocabulary learning strategies are more likely to be effective when their use is conscious and directed.**" Furthermore, he, supporting other linguists' modern tendency, classifies vocabulary strategies into two types: '**determination**' or '**discovery**' strategies and '**social**' strategies:



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**The determination strategies... includes using cognates knowledge, referring to reference words, and inferring meaning from context. The social strategies include asking someone for help with unknown words(ibid.).**

Nagy (1988:3-4) states that there are two reasons for failure of vocabulary teaching. The first is that most vocabulary teaching fails to produce in-depth word knowledge; reading comprehension requires a high level of vocabulary-higher than the level achieved by many types of vocabulary teaching. The implication is that teachers should augment traditional methods of teaching (or instruction) such as memorizing definitions with more intensive instruction aimed at producing richer, deeper word knowledge. The second reason is related to the comprehensibility of texts containing some unfamiliar words. Students do not need to know every word in a text to understand it (see also Gairns & Redman, 1986:73-81).

## **2. Approaches to Vocabulary Learning**

Linguistic and psycholinguistic studies concerning vocabulary learning and teaching<sup>2</sup> led to the emerging of a central debate whether effective vocabulary learning should focus on explicit or implicit learning.



## 2.1 Explicit Vocabulary Learning

In this type of learning, students engaged in activities that focus attention on vocabulary. DeCarrico (2000:286-89) adopts Skmen principles of explicit learning that can help and guide teachers in deciding basic questions of what to teach and how to teach:

**These principles include the goal of building a large recognition vocabulary ,integrating new words with old, providing a number of encounters with a word, promoting a deep level of processing, facilitating imaging, using a variety of techniques, and encouraging independent learning strategies.**

Researchers, especially those adopting communicative approaches, advocate that learners should initially be taught a large productive vocabulary of at least two thousand high frequency words. They were against earlier "vocabulary control" approaches (see Richards ,et al.,1992:400) in which students were taught only a basic vocabulary of several hundred words, and read restricted sorts of texts such as language textbooks and graded readers ,as done really in Iraq. DeCarrico (2000:287), claims that

**knowing these words give access to about 80 percent of the words in any written text and thus stimulate motivation since the words acquired can be seen by learners to have a demonstrably quick return.**



Another important issue is that teachers can increase vocabulary considerably by teaching word families instead of individual word forms. For teaching purpose it is more proper to see sets like (teach, teaches, taught, teaching, teacher, teachers) and ( act, acts, acted, actor, actress, action, actions, active, activity, activities) and the like, as members of closely related "family", not as 6 or 10 single words, and to help students recognize them as such<sup>3</sup>.

Meaning associations attached to words are also important; words, as stated in all semantic books appear to be organized into semantically related relations like synonymy, collocations, colour terms and kinship terms (Lyons, 1977:247,295-305).Also words, as stated in psychological studies, words appear to be ordered into sets in the mind. For example, words like **father**, **boy** and **table** will be related in the students' minds with **mother**, **girl** and **chair**, respectively (see Brown, 2000:10).

## 2.2 Implicit Vocabulary Learning

This type of vocabulary learning occurs incidentally when the mind of students are focused elsewhere, such as on understanding a text (like a poem in poetry) or using language for communicative purposes (as in classroom debates).Here, the learners' attention is focused on some features, usually the message that is conveyed by a speaker or a writer. If the amount of unknown vocabulary is low in such messages,



considerable vocabulary learning can occur even though the learners' attention is not directed towards vocabulary learning. Krashan (1981: 21-22) call this **the input theory** of language learning.

This implicit learning is more preferable than explicit learning since simply the majority of words we use and tackle have not been taught explicitly. Some researcher ,like Decarrico, adopt a position between the two: learners should be given explicit instruction and heavy practice in the first two or three thousand productive (or high-frequency)<sup>4</sup> words (also including word families) ,while beyond this level ,most less-productive or less frequency words will be learned incidentally while reading, writing ,or listening (see Richards, et al.(1992:147)and Nagy (1988 :31-33).Finally, as mentioned by Mercer(2005:25),it seems undeniable that extensive reading or substantial contact with English will improve vocabulary ,but both of these approaches require unrealistic amounts of time for most language learners.

### **3. A Case Study: A Questionnaire**

#### **3.1 The Situation**

Students in the English Department, College of Education, Wassit University have many problems and weakness in their lexical luxury and/or even in their vocabulary stock. This is very clear in the following learning aspects:



- writing
- speaking inside /outside the classroom
- pronunciation
- reading

The situation is somehow dangerous that some of them, i.e., students, are unable to answer personal questions, social interaction, and daily-statement conversations. Students usually want to increase their store of vocabulary, regarding it as a yardstick of their language improvement. This leads the researcher to investigate the problem by identifying the reasons and then to present a questionnaire to a number of teachers in our departments to assess vocabulary learning and teaching.

### 3.2. Reasons of the Problem

Different reasons can be mentioned here, with some related explanations related to the case study:

1-Linguistically speaking, **the low status of vocabulary study** and teaching was in large part due to language teaching approaches based on American linguistics theories that had been dominant throughout the 40s-60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most influential in the early years was Charles Fries's Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language (1945), based on American structural linguistics, which emphasized grammatical and





phonological structure. To Fries, and by adopting behaviorist psychology, learning was a matter of habit formation (see Imssalem, 2001:ch.2). The assumption was that once students learned the structural frames, lexical items to fill the grammatical slots in the frames could be learned. Chomsky rejected that notion of habit formation and supplanted it with a rationalist framework, the central assumption being that language is represented as a speaker's mental grammar, a set of abstract rules for generating grammatical sentences. Language learning approaches based on Chomsky's theory viewed learning as rule acquisition. Vocabulary was afforded somewhat more importance, but the focus on rules of grammar still served to reinforce the idea that lexis was somewhat secondary. The 70s and 80s witnessed a shift towards promoting fluency over accuracy and consequently shifted the focus from sentence-level to discourse-level functions. This is known as **communicative language teaching**. Vocabulary studies are developing exponentially and vocabulary teaching became considerable. Teachers should have good knowledge of these facts, especially those recent second language learning (and teaching) theories (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

2- **Learning burden:** English and Arabic. There is a common (false) tendency in our departments to forget everything about Arabic when we study English. As mentioned by Nation (1990:33), "**there is a lot of evidence to show that second language vocabulary**



**learning is influenced by first language vocabulary".** If many of the features of a word are predictable because the learners already know some English, or because of their Arabic, words (like cognates taxi, hotel, internet, mobile, satellite, video) will be easy to learn (see Gairns & Redman, 1986:67). The following table shows the four types of features that affect the learning burden (Nation (ibid.); modifications are mine):

Types		Explanations
Form	Spoken	Does the word contain only familiar sounds or clusters of sounds? Is the stress predictable?
	Written	Is the script like Arabic? Is the written form predictable from the spoken form? Does the regular written form follow the regular spelling patterns?
Position	Grammar	Does the word occur in the same patterns as the corresponding Arabic?
	Collocation	Does the word commonly occur with predictable words or types of words?
Function	Frequency	Does the Arabic word have the same frequency?
	Appropriateness	Do the pragmatic criteria of the word match the corresponding Arabic word, or the other English words learned so far?
Meaning	Concept	Does the English concept correspond to an Arabic concept? Are the various meanings of the word obviously related to a central concept?
	Association	Does the Arabic word give rise to associated words similar to the English word?



3- **Life in the Department.** Some students find no appropriate learning atmosphere in the Department, especially because of the large number of students in each class, carelessness and laziness, and lack of (audiovisual) facilities, like TV programs and cassettes. Teaching techniques and activities are very important. Frankly speaking, learning English will be developed in Iraq if teachers avoid their spoonful teaching, and instead apply the recent teaching techniques. On the other hand, psychological aspects are somehow out of our respect and attention. Therefore, participation inside the classroom is poor and negative.

4- **Lack of dictionaries.** Ability to use a dictionary is an important skill, and looking through dictionaries can be fascinating. Knowing this, **"a teacher can minimize copying definitions and similar activities that might lead to a lifelong dislike for learning words, and instead maximize activities treating dictionary use as a skill to be mastered"**(Nagy, 1988:39). Majority of students have no bulky dictionaries, especially English-English ones. Last year, as a teacher of Translation, only four female-students had Hornby's Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. Fortunately, seven students in the fourth stage this year have it, but unfortunately there are some who do not know or use this dictionary at all. High percentage of students has no dictionary, spending their life in the Department on borrowing dictionaries from



their colleagues or from the library. This, of course, brings light to the following three conclusions:

- ☒ Students lack the basic abilities of finding new words (in dictionaries), and, then, their phonological, grammatical and semantic information. For instance, when I gave them permission to consult a dictionary in their Translation examinations, many unacceptable and unbelievable methods of finding new words had been applied: one of these is writing the English alphabet on the exam paper.
- ☒ Negative participation in the class, especially in Reading Comprehension.
- ☒ Therefore, no actual understanding of the great importance and usage of dictionaries.

5- **The lack of books.** Many second language learners depend on their individual motivation, the priority given to the language course amongst their other commitments, and any contact with the language they might have outside the classroom, e.g., through books, films, words, or perhaps native speakers of English. Workbooks or practice books accompanying major course books can compensate for restricted classroom time, and provide a source for lexical consolidation as well as an opportunity for learners to acquire vocabulary relevant to their own personal needs.



Till the end of the first semester last year (2004/2005) some of the students had no textbooks (their only source), and unfortunately there are no such textbooks suppliers in their city of Kut, as in Baghdad. Additionally, the quality of the available ones is very bad, and they have been in use for a long time. Therefore, students of Reading Comprehension, and other courses, find no difficulty in answering the questions since they had been answered at least 3 or 4 years before. I see this clearly while I am teaching this course for second year students. In other words, and frankly speaking, majority of these books are in use since our teachers were students, i.e., 20 to 30 years before. Teachers try to avoid this problem by either selecting relevant new material or developing them in one way or another.

**6- There is no room for morphology** – that science of the underlying structures of words. Yes, it is given in a chapter or two in the second year in a book of 70s, i.e. Stageberg's(1974). The same are repeated in the course of Linguistics (Yule's 1985). But, actually we are badly in need to a separate course in it. Students should have been given enough time and chance to consolidate and activate the topics they study. Another very important consideration is that we can maximize vocabulary considerably by teaching word families instead of individual forms, by including a base plus its inflections and/or derivations (see 2.1 above). Actual realizations and



application of morphology in other courses is necessary. For instance, they must be asked to identify the simple, compound, and complex words in a scene in a play or a novel, and the different derivations by a dramatist (or a playwright) or a novelist. In this course of morphology, memorization is not important as actual application.

**7- The room of vocabulary is not furnished well.** Frankly speaking, there is no explicit course or material devoted to increase students' stock of vocabulary. As the most important and dangerous reason, separate course in vocabulary is badly needed in the English departments. Such course must have the following characteristics (Nation, 1994: v-vii):

- ☒ Because different vocabulary gives greatly different returns for learning, it is important to make sure that the students /learners have good control of their core before moving to the less frequent vocabulary. A good vocabulary course should focus on the appropriate level of vocabulary for the learners, and should do this in the appropriate way.
- ☒ Vocabulary learning can be increased by careful design of both vocabulary and other skill activities.
- ☒ Vocabulary presentation should be organized and sequenced. This is to avoid any difficulty in learning vocabulary. Grouping words into opposites,



synonyms, and items in lexical sets together cause interference and that results in confusion for the learners.

### **3.3 The procedure of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire is determined to examine the status of vocabulary learning and teaching in brief. It focuses on the following:

#### **Vocabulary Learning**

- 1- Linguistic fields vocabulary is of actual use in.
- 2- Effective learning strategies students use.
- 3- Lexical phrases and vocabulary learning.
- 4- Students' difficulties in using vocabulary.
- 5- Using dictionaries and word families.
- 6- Vocabulary size.
- 7- Expressing mental activities in learning vocabulary.

#### **Vocabulary Teaching**

- 1- The course in the department vocabulary is important.
- 2- Methods of teaching focus on vocabulary.
- 3- Teachers' advantages of teaching vocabulary.
- 4- Steps teachers adopt to develop students' vocabulary.
- 5- Teachers' satisfaction with recent textbooks.
- 6- Teaching vocabulary and class size.



(16) English –department teachers are the subjects of the questionnaire. They are of three departments.<sup>5</sup> Time was from (2) days to (3) weeks. The questionnaire is of 16 questions: some are of arranging-types and others need the subjects' written answers (see Appendix).

### 3.4 Results and Discussion

The procedure here is to show the results of each question.

**Question 1:** In which course in your Dept vocabulary teaching and learning is very important and considerable?

The results show a subjective tendency among teachers since they specify the courses they are teaching now in their departments. The following table shows this:

Courses	No	%
Grammar	3	19
Writing	4	25
R. Comprehension	6	37
Poetry	1	6.5
All courses	2	12.5

It is worth noting to mention that there is an agreement among vocabulary specialists to regard Reading Comprehension as the most important course as far as vocabulary learning is concerned.





**Question 2:** Arrange the following according to the actual use of new vocabulary inside the classroom: writing, reading, class participation, pronunciation. The results show an agreement that these can be arranged as follows:

1	Reading	2	Writing	3	Class participation	4	Pronunciation
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This means that teachers are fully aware that the above order is the actual order of new vocabulary encountering.

**Question 3:** Mention the effective strategies students use in identifying vocabulary items.

Teacher's answers show that these strategies their students use are:

- i-making use of the context/identifying contextual meaning
- ii- connecting words to their roots
- iii- explainingg the meanings
- iv- checking meanings up in a dictionary
- v- word families

This indicates that some (since some teachers didn't answer this question) are well-aware of students' strategies mentioned by Nation(1990:ch.10).

**Question 4:** Arrange the followings according to their frequency in tour courses: i-synonymy, ii-antonymy, iii-collocation, iv- idioms,v-compounds.



The results show that these lexical phrases are presented in the following order:

1	synonymy	2	Antonymy	3	Compounds	4	idioms	5	collocation
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The low percentage of the last two, i.e. idioms and collocations make them the most difficult items to learn (see Ur(1991:65)).

**Question 5:** Which is suitable: implicit vocabulary learning or explicit vocabulary learning?

The results can be seen in the following table

Implicit		Explicit		Both	
No	%	No	%	No	%
5	31	7	44	4	25

This shows that only 4 teachers are able to identify that both courses are necessary in learning vocabulary. This result should be considered well.

**Question 6:** What are your advantages of teaching vocabulary?

Teachers' answers are disappointed:

i-( 7) said "no advantage"

ii- (2) said "increase my knowledge"

iii- (1) learning through teaching

iv-(6) give no answer



This shows that majority of subjects find no benefit of teaching vocabulary, and this is the opposite of what is recommended in all vocabulary books: a point to be considered well.

**Question 7:** Which method of teaching deals with vocabulary learning and teaching?

Majority of teachers mention the **communicative method**. Only one teacher mentioned both the **communicative** and **grammar-translation methods**. In fact both are needed if the two implicit and explicit vocabulary learning is required. (5) give no answer.

**Question 8:** What are your students' difficulties as far as vocabulary learning is concerned?

Answers here consolidate the researcher's belief that Arabic interference is important (see 3.2.2 above). Teachers state that their students' difficulties can be summed up as follows:

- i- mother language interference
- ii- confusing due to similarities of sounds and letters
- iii- mal-identification of the form class of the lexical items  
/a noun is seen as a verb
- iv- limitation of memories, both in meaning and incorrect spelling
- v- spelling
- vi- they don't practice what they learn and consequently they tend to forget what they learn easily.
- vii- no dictionary



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**Question 9:** What are the three steps you may adopt to develop your students' stock of vocabulary?

The researcher wanted teachers to reflect the strategies they adopt in this point. Teachers' answers are:

- i- contextual meaning
- ii- constant use of dictionary
- iii- memorization
- iv- synonymy
- v- using words in different contexts
- vi- involving them in conversation

The results show that teachers are somehow aware of what they can do about this issue.

**Question 10:** Are your students able to use dictionary powerfully?

The results are somehow disappointed:

- i- not all of them
- ii- I don't think so
- iii- no
- iv- no, and therefore, dictionary use should be taught.

The researcher's suggestion is to adopt the fourth answer even indirectly in all courses. The point is very considerable.

**Question 11:** If you are teaching Reading Comprehension:



- a- What is your textbook?
- b- Can you suggest a suitable substitute?

Teachers mention their textbooks. Concerning suggestions, unfortunately, no one of them give a suitable substitute. The point is very considerable because it shows that we are away from recent relevant textbooks in language skills.

**Question 12:** if you are teaching Conversation:

- a- What is your textbook?
- b- Can you suggest a suitable substitute?

Unfortunately, the answer here is typically similar to that in Question 11.

**Question 13:** Are there differences in vocabulary size among your students?

All teachers say (yes). This is an indication that there are individual differences among our students.

**Question 14:** Can vocabulary learning and teaching be affected by class size?

The results show that all the three departments have the same problem, i.e., the large number of students. Last year we had, in Wassit University, (125) as first year students! Majority of teachers affirm this conclusion, that is, vocabulary learning and teaching can be affected by class size. One instance only states (no).



**Question 15:** Do your students express mental activities in learning new vocabulary items?

Majority of teachers state that their students express mental activities. Some go further to decrease this fact by saying:

- i- yes, little
- ii- very few
- iii- not so powerfully

Psychologically, one of the active mental activities in learning a language is learning and expanding vocabulary (see Mercer (2005:27)).

**Question 16:** Do your students use "word family" instead of individual words in vocabulary learning?

Majority of teachers affirm that this is not clear in their English. Some try to go further to state that they are unable to identify whether the words are of the same root or not.



## Conclusions

The main findings are the following:

1- There is still much debate about whether an implicit or explicit approach is better for teaching vocabulary.

2- it is better to teach vocabulary:

i- if the words you teach have clear ,easily comprehensible meanings.

ii-if items can be linked with each other, or with ones already known

,through meaning or sound association.

iii- if vocabulary items are taught in separated, spaced sessions than

to teach them all at once.

3- The main findings of the questionnaire are the followings:

i- departments are similar in Iraq since class size is their problem.

ii- teachers are really aware of students' strategies of learning vocabulary.

iii- lack of recent techniques ad approaches concerning teaching vocabulary.

iv-dictionary usage is a fundamental step towards acquiring active vocabulary.

v- reasons stated by the researcher concerning their low status in learning vocabulary are common in the three departments; individual differences are out of our concern.

vi- students should be trained explicitly on developing their mental activities.



vii- students face problems in learning lexical phrases like collocations and idioms since their occurrence in their textbooks is limited.

viii- students are in need of new books and facilities.

## Notes

1- West published in 1953 **A General Service List of English Words**, which became a standard reference in developing teaching material (see Nation, 1991).

2- See Brown (2000:6-7) for what is learning and what is teaching and how do they interact? "Every learner is unique. Every teacher is unique. And every learner-teacher relationship is unique".

3- Katamba (1993:205-10) and Ur (1991:64) emphasize the role of both inflection and derivation not only on the productivity of lexical items, but also on the syntactic structures. Bennett (1974:303) states that "**vocabulary extensive exercises would exploit the derivational system of language which native speakers know and use**".

4- Crystal (2003: 402) uses "**active**" and "**passive**" vocabulary for high-frequency and low-frequency words,





respectively. Similarly, Gairns & Redman use "**receptive**" and "**productive**" (1986:5).

5- (5) teachers from Baghdad University, College of Arts, Department of English;(5) teachers from Al-Mustansiryah University, College of Arts , Department of Translation; and (6) teachers from University of Wassit, College of Education, Department of English.

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## Appendix

### Dear Teacher

**This is a questionnaire to assess vocabulary teaching and learning in our departments. Your contribution will be greatly important and considerable.**

- 1. In which course in your Dept vocabulary teaching and learning is very important and considerable?**
- 2-Arrange the following according to the actual use of new vocabulary inside the classroom:  
writing, reading , class participation , pronunciation,**
- 3. Mention the effective strategies students use in identifying vocabulary items**
- 4. Arrange the followings according to their frequency in your courses:  
i-synonyms ii.antonyms ii.collocations iv idioms v.compounds**
- 5. Which is suitable: implicit vocabulary learning or explicit vocabulary learning?**



- 6. What are your advantages of teaching and learning vocabulary?**
- 7. Which method of teaching vocabulary deals with vocabulary teaching and learning?**
- 8. What are your students' difficulties as far as vocabulary learning is concerned?**
- 9. What are the three important steps you may adopt to develop your students' stock of vocabulary?**
  
- 10. Are your students able to use dictionaries powerfully?**
  
- 11. If you are teaching Reading Comprehension:**
  - a- What is your textbook?**
  - b- Can you suggest a suitable substitute?**
  
- 12. If you are teaching Conversation:**
  - a- What is your textbook?**
  - b- Can you suggest a suitable substitute?**
  
- 13. Are there differences in vocabulary size among your students?**
  
- 14. Can vocabulary learning and teaching be affected by class size?.**
  
- 15. Do your students express mental activities in learning new vocabulary items?**
  
- 16. Do your students use "word family" instead of individual words in vocabulary learning?**