

# THE TEACHING OF VOCABULARY: A PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*The learning of vocabulary is an important part in foreign language learning. The meanings of new words are very frequently emphasized, whether in books or in verbal communication. Vocabulary is considered as central in language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner. Vocabulary is a basic of one learns a foreign language. Few research indicate that teaching vocabulary can be considered as problematic, as some teachers are not really sure about the best practice in the teaching and sometimes not really aware how to start forming an instructional emphasis on the vocabulary learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Through this article, the writer summarizes the related research that focus on the importance of vocabulary and explains many techniques used by some English teachers and lecturers when teaching English, as well as writer's personal view of the issues.*

**Keywords:** *perspective; teaching of vocabulary; vocabulary*

## INTRODUCTION

As foreign language for Indonesian, learning English is like constructing a traditional building. A good engineer, a well-drawn blueprint, tends to be made for constructors to follow. It can be compared to a good language learner who is inclined to make plans and sticks to them afterwards. Similarly, steel can be compared to grammar which seems to most English Foreign Language (EFL) learners a monotonous and boring eyesore, given the fact that most EFL learners feel, more or less, worried when faced with grammar. However, it is generally accepted that EFL learners cannot have a good command of English without an in-depth sense of the structure of English. Gravel and sand can be compared to words, phrases, collocations and idioms, which are indispensable in taking shape of both receptive and productive language learning skills. Cement and water can be compared to sentence patterns and construction, which have the magic power to create different kinds of verses to attract the audience. As far as mastering a foreign language is concerned, none of the language properties is to be ignored. Among the language properties mentioned above, "vocabulary acquisition is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign" (Decarrico, 2001, p. 285). If learners lack vocabulary knowledge, they soon discover that their ability to comprehend or express themselves clearly is limited (Decarrico, 2001; Nation, 2001).

Vocabulary that has been considered as the head of language is not always considered as valued when English is taught in school or other formal class. If one asks what have been done to develop students' knowledge in English, some educators may come out with the teaching approach which is then indicated by the academic achievement that measured through a very high frequency word measurement as per the need of social context. Grammar is normally used as the measurement of students' English achievement now days. It could be due to the simplicity of theory in delivering and in measuring students' achievement. How the students understand the concept of unfamiliar words, gain a greater number of words with their own effort, and use the words successfully in communication purposes is still far to achieve. How the vocabulary learning is not considered very importance in second and foreign language pedagogic is pervasive.

In Indonesian context, Rinaldi et al. (2013) stated that 26.67% of Bengkalis Polytechnic Riau Indonesia students vocabulary size were below 1000 words level, 40% at 1000 words level and only 33.3 % students were at 2000 word level and no students reached 4000 words level. The result is linear with (Liu 2016) research toward undergraduate students of Jiangzu-China. Liu (2016) indicated that no participants had reached the mastery level of the 3000, 5000 and academic word category, but 2000. Hence both Rinaldi et al. (2013) and Liu (2016) suggest the language learners to explore more approach on vocabulary skill such as vocabulary learning strategies and more independent in learning.

Improving vocabulary skill among English language learners (ELLs) is a challenge faced by many universities. Several problems and limitations have been associated with the factors contribute to the level. This area has been a loop for some time. Some researchers for example, do not have good information of students' success on vocabulary learning and other language skill where vocabulary is needed. Some even do not have information about the student's individual language strengths and weaknesses (Sothan, 2015).

Vocabulary acquisition plays an important role in mastering a language. A learner with insufficient vocabulary size will not perform well in every aspect of language itself. Yang (1997) pointed out that many college students still encountered difficulties in reading their English textbooks. The main reason for those college students who cannot read comprehensively is their limited vocabulary size. In order to facilitate the learning process for learners, a deep understanding of vocabulary teaching is rudimentary. In addition, some issues pertinent to the improvement in learners' vocabulary size are also mentioned. Issues such as what to teach, and how to teach, is also submitted and discussed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Vocabulary Learning**

Vocabulary skill is often considered as a critical aspect of foreign language learners as limited vocabulary in a second language, impedes successful communication. Considering the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. Nation (2001) then describes the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and language practice as complementary: The skill of vocabulary enables language use and conversely. Language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge.

The importance of vocabulary is demonstrated daily in and out of campuses. In classroom, the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary. Researchers such as Laufer and Nation (1997); Nation (2001; 2005); Maximo (2000); Read (2000; 2004); Gu (2003); Marion (2008); Susanto (2016); and Nation (2001) and others have realized that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful foreign language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. Learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (eg. listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2001). Alqahtani (2015), furthermore, argued that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful foreign language use because without an extensive vocabulary, a language learner will be unable to use the structures and functions we may have learned for comprehensible communication. Some research has shown that second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for readers to overcome (e g., Nation, 2001; Alqahtani, 2015),

In production, when language learners have a meaning or concept that they wish to express, they need to have a store of words from which they can select to express this meaning or concept. As stated by Nation (2001), when language learners travel, they do not carry grammar books, but dictionaries. Many researchers argue that vocabulary is one of the most important-if not the most important- components in learning a foreign language, and foreign

language curricula must reflect this. Alqahtani (2015) stated that there was not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one was not get the vocabulary that needed to convey what one wish to say. While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. Maximo (2000) stated many reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary. First, a large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language. Second language acquirers know this; they carry dictionaries with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that the lack of vocabulary is a major problem''. On the other hand, vocabulary has been acknowledged as language learners' greatest single source of problems (Meara, 1980). This remark may possibly reflect that the open-endedness of a vocabulary system is perceived to be a cause of difficulty by learners.

Another possible reason is that, unlike syntax nor phonology, vocabulary does not have rules the language learners may follow to acquire and develop their knowledge. In other words, it is not clear in vocabulary learning what rules apply or which vocabulary items should be learned first. Oxford (1990) also claimed that vocabulary was by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language, whether a foreign or one's mother tongue, because of tens of thousands of different meanings'' Despite these difficulties that language learners face in L2 vocabulary, they still have to deal with it in their examinations as ''vocabulary has traditionally been one of the language components measured in language tests'' (Schmitt, 1999, p.189). Furthermore, many learners see second language acquisition (SLA) as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary and therefore they spend a great deal of time on memorizing lists of words and rely on their bilingual dictionary as a basic communicative resource.

From the above explanation, it can be concluded, language teachers and applied linguists now generally recognize the importance of vocabulary learning and are exploring ways of promoting it more effectively. Some of these research takes the form of investigation of strategies learners use specifically for vocabulary (VLS as focus of attention).

### **Vocabulary Learning in Indonesia**

Vocabulary has been viewed differently depending on which method is fashionable. Flash back of the students' experience of English learning at high school, vocabulary was covered in the learning activities. The 2004 and 2006 curricula, the so-called Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) and the school-level curriculum or KTSP (*kurikulum tingkat satuan pendidikan*), emphasized the development of communicative competence covering linguistic competence, discourse competence, socio-cultural competence, and strategic competence. Linguistic competence, in particular, includes such components as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Under the four stages of teaching and learning process suggested by the curriculum, vocabulary teaching is supposed to be dealt with at the very first stage. The earlier curriculum even emphasized 1000-2500 word level on the practical use and textbook.

When the students go in campus life, English subject is expected on the real practical. Based on the current laws of National education system in Indonesia (the 1989 Education law No.2 and the 1999 Government Regulation on Higher Education No.60), education at the tertiary level is mainly designed for profession building. The students in higher education prepared to take specific and major subjects to support their future profession. However, they are still required to take the mandatory subjects called general education courses and English is one of them. In some campuses, the subject graded 1 and 2, or overall four credits or two separated subjects. English that to be functioned not only as effective and efficient means of interaction but also as the medium of instruction. Moreover, English is included to develop and disseminate the technology and arts that would uplift the quality of life enhanced by the national cultures. The English as a subject is General English that basically aiming at students' competences on integrated language skills, such as speaking, writing, reading and listening,

has turned on emphasizing on grammatical structure. The focus of how Vocabulary taught and learnt is not specific but it is part of the campus and lecturers authorities on learning activities. English will be more widely required in various sectors such as education itself, business, tourism, trade etc. beyond the campus life.

### **The Description of Vocabulary**

Vocabulary has been discussed and divided into various types. Some are divided into two types: active and passive vocabulary. Gruneberg and Sykes (1991) distinguished the two types of vocabulary. The first type of vocabulary referred to the one that the students had been taught and that they were expected to be able to use. Meanwhile, the second one referred to the words which the students would recognize when they met them, but they would probably not be able to pronounce. Hatch and Brown (1995), indicated two kinds of vocabulary, namely as receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary.

Receptive vocabulary means words that learners recognize and understand when they are used in context, but which they cannot produce. The type of vocabulary that learners recognize when they see or meet in reading text but do not use it in speaking and writing (Stuart, 2008). Meanwhile productive vocabulary is the words that the learners understand and are able to pronounce correctly and use constructively in speaking and writing. It consists of what is needed for receptive vocabulary plus the ability to speak or write at the appropriate time. Productive vocabulary can be addressed as an active process, because the learners can produce the words to express their thoughts to others (Stuart, 2008).

Vocabulary is crucial to be mastered by the learner in order to understand the language,. Vocabulary mastery is needed to express our ideas and to be able to understand other people's sayings. Hornby (1995) as cited in Alqahtani (2015) defined the mastery of vocabulary as complete knowledge or complete skill. From that definition, mastery means complete knowledge or great skill that makes someone a master in a certain subject. Vocabulary mastery refers to the great skill in processing words of a language (Susanto & Fazlinda, 2016). It is an individual achievement and possession (Alqahtani, 2015). Due to that reason, the biggest responsibility in increasing the knowledge is in the individual himself. The success in widening the vocabulary mastery requires their own motivation and interest on the words of a language. As in conclusion, vocabulary mastery is an individual's great skill in using words of a language, which is acquired based on their own interest needs and motivation. Vocabulary mastery plays an important role in the four language skills and it has to be considered that vocabulary mastery is one of the needed components of language (Susanto & Fazlinda, 2016).

### **Teaching Vocabulary**

Teaching vocabulary is a crucial aspect in learning a language as languages are based on words (Alqahtani, 2015). It is almost impossible to learn a language without words; even communication between human beings is based on words. Recent research indicates that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about the best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). Either teachers or students agree that acquisition of the vocabulary is a central factor in teaching a language (Walters, 2004). Teaching vocabulary is considered as one of the most discussed parts of teaching English as a foreign language. When the teaching and learning process takes place, problems would appear to the teachers. They have problems of how to teach students in order to gain satisfying results. The teachers should be concerned that teaching vocabulary is something new and different from student's native language. They also have to take into account that teaching English for young learners is different from adults. The teacher should prepare and find out the appropriate techniques, which will be implemented to the students. A

good teacher should prepare himself or herself with various and up-to-date techniques. Teachers should be creative and be able to master the material in order to be understood by students, and make them interested. The teachers have to know the characteristics of his/her learners. They more over need to prepare good techniques and suitable material in order to gain the target of language teaching.

Commonly, there are several techniques concerning the teaching of vocabulary. However, there are a few things that have to be remembered by most English teachers if they want to present a new vocabulary or lexical items to their students. It means that the English teachers want students to remember new vocabulary then it needs to be learnt, practiced, and revised to prevent students from forgetting. Techniques employed by teachers depend on some factors, such as the content, time availability, and its value for the learners (Takač & Singleton 2008). This makes teachers have some reasons in employing certain techniques in presenting vocabulary. In presenting one planned vocabulary item, the teacher usually combined more than one technique, instead of employing one single technique. Teachers, furthermore, are suggested to employ planned vocabulary presentation as various as possible (Pinter, 2006). The followings are some techniques of teaching vocabulary as proposed by some experts.

#### 1. Teaching vocabulary using Objects

This technique can help learners in remembering vocabulary better, because memory for objects and pictures is very reliable and visual techniques can act as cues for remembering words. Using this technique includes the use of visual aids, and demonstration. (Takač & Singleton, 2008). In addition, Gairns & Redman (1986) state that real objects technique is appropriately employed for beginners or young learners and when presenting concrete vocabulary. Objects can be used to show meanings when the vocabulary consist of concrete nouns. Introducing a new word by showing the real object often helps learners to memorize the word through visualization. Objects in the classroom or things brought to the classroom can be used.

#### 2. Teaching vocabulary by drilling, spelling, and active involvement

Drilling is employed to make learners get accustomed to the word form especially to how it sounds. To make learners more familiar with the word, drilling should be clear and natural (Thorbury, 2002). Drilling is very necessary since learners need to say the word to themselves as they learn it to recall the words from memory (Ellis & Beaton, 1993, in Read, 2000; 2004).

The primary means of spelling is actually memorizing words (Reed, 2012). Word spelling needs to be considered since spelling forms of English words is not always inferred by the pronunciation.

Employing this technique, the teacher encourages the students to find out word's meaning by elicitation (Takač & Singleton 2008). Elicitation maximizes learners' speaking opportunities, and acts as a way of checking learners' understanding (Thorbury, 2002). This technique also includes personalization, which is using the word by learners in a context or sentence that is related to their life. Related to the above techniques, Pinter (2006) argues that teachers are suggested to conduct planned presentations of vocabulary as various as possible, so it is better that teachers present word meaning and form by combining more than one technique. In addition, Takač and Singleton (2008) points out that in choosing which techniques to be used in the classroom, teachers consider time availability, the content or teaching material.

### 3. Teaching vocabulary using drawing and picture

Objects can either be drawn on the blackboard or drawn on flash cards. The latter can be used again and again in different contexts if they are made with cards and covered in plastic. They can help young learners easily understand and realize the main points that they have learned in the classroom.

Teaching vocabulary using pictures connect students' prior knowledge to a new story, and in the process, help them learn new words. There are plenty of vocabularies that can be introduced by using illustrations or pictures. They are excellent means of making the meaning of unknown words clear. They should be used as often as possible. The list of pictures includes: posters, flashcards, wall charts, magazine pictures, board drawings, stick figures and photographs. Pictures for vocabulary teaching come from many sources. Apart from those drawn by the teacher or students, they are sets of colorful pictures intended for schools. Pictures cut out of newspapers and magazines are very useful as well. Nowadays many readers, vocabulary books and course books contain a vast number of attractive pictures that present the meaning of basic words. The teacher can use learning materials provided by the school. They can also make their own visual aids or used pictures from magazines. Visual support helps learners understand the meaning and helps to make the word more memorable.

### 4. Teaching vocabulary using mime, expressions and gestures

The term "mime or gesture is useful if it emphasizes the importance of gestures and facial expression on communication (Alqahtani, 2015). At the essence it can not only be used to indicate the meaning of a word found in reading passage, but also in speaking activity as it stresses mostly on communication. Many words can be introduced through mime, expressions, and gestures. For example, adjectives: "sad", "happy"; mime and taking a hat off your head to teach hat and so on. Several studies have emphasized the role of gestures in second language (L2) acquisition (Alqahtani, 2015). Teachers tend to gesture a lot (Sime, 2001; Hauge, 1999), especially when addressing young learners and/or beginners. It is commonly acknowledged that "teaching gestures" capture attention and make the lesson more dynamic. Using analyses of video recordings of English lessons to French students, Tellier (2007) determined three main roles for teaching gestures: management of the class (to start/end an activity, to question students, request silence, etc.), evaluation (to show a mistake, to correct, to congratulate, etc.) and explanation to give indications on syntax, underline specific prosody, explain new vocabulary, etc.). Teaching gestures appear in various shapes: hand gestures, facial expressions, pantomime, body movements, etc. They can either mime or symbolize something and they help learners to infer the meaning of a spoken word or expression, providing that they are unambiguous and easy to understand. This teaching strategy is thus relevant for comprehension (Tellier, 2007). However, its utility may depend on the kind of gesture used by the teacher. It has been highlighted that foreign emblems, for instance, may lead to misunderstandings when it is not known by the learners (Hauge, 1999; Sime, 2001). In addition to supporting comprehension, teaching gestures may also be relevant for learners' memorization process. Indeed, many second language teachers who use gestures as a teaching strategy declare that they help learners in the process of memorizing the second language lexicon. Many of them have noticed that learners can retrieve a word easily when the teacher produces the gesture associated with the lexical item during the lesson. Others have seen learners (especially young ones) spontaneously reproducing the gesture when saying the word. The effect of gestures on memorization is thus something witnessed by many but hardly explored on a systematic and empirical basis (Tellier, 2007).

### 5. Teaching vocabulary using enumeration and contrast

An enumeration is a collection of items that is a complete, ordered listing of all of the items in that collection. It can be used to present meaning. In other words, this technique helps when any word is difficult to explain visually. We can say "clothes" and explain this by enumerating or listing various items. Teacher may list a number of clothes e.g. address, a skirt, trousers etc ,and then the meaning of the word "clothes" will become clear. The same is true of 'vegetable' or "furniture", for example (Gruneberg & Sykes, 1991).

Some words are easily explained to learners by contrasting it with its opposite, for instance, the word "good" contrasted with the word "bad". But some words are not. It is almost impossible to contrast the words whose opposite is the gradable one. When the word "white" is contrasted with the word "red", there is an "in between" word "pink". Furthermore, verb "contrast" means to show a difference, like photos that reveal how much weight someone lost by contrasting the "before" and "after" shots. Many more studies have also shown that vocabulary is best acquired if it is similar to what is already learnt (e.g., Alqahtani, 2015). It is not surprising that learning synonyms is a way to expand our vocabulary. Learning about synonyms is important also because this is how dictionaries are organized. Putting bilingual dictionaries aside, mono-lingual dictionary essentially use words to explain words, and in this process, synonyms are often used (Elisabeth, 1999).

#### 6. Teaching vocabulary through guessing from Context

Guessing from context as a way of dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary in unedited selections has been suggested widely by L1 and L2 reading specialists (Dubin, 1993). Alqahtani (2015) claims that there are two types of contexts. The first type is the context within the text, which includes morphological, semantic and syntactic information in a specific text, while the second one is the general context, or non-textual context, which is the background knowledge the reader has about the subjects being read. Alqahtani (2015) considered the specific context as 'the other words and sentences that surround that word..... it follows that other words in the context of the unfamiliar word often 'throw light on' its meaning. These other words can be found in the sentence containing the unknown word or other sentences beyond the sentence of the unknown item. Learning from context not only includes learning from extensive reading, but also learning from taking part in a conversation, and learning from listening to stories, films, television or the radio (Nation, 2001). In order to activate guessing in a written or spoken text, there should be four elements available: the reader, the text, unknown words, and clues in the text including some knowledge about guessing. The absence of one of these elements may affect the learner's ability to guess. Furthermore, this technique encourages learners to take risks and guess the meanings of words they do not know as much as possible. This will help them build up their self-confidence so that they can work out the meanings of words when they are on their own. There are many clues learners can use to establish meanings for themselves, such as illustrations, similarity of spelling or sound in the mother tongue, and general knowledge (Walters, 2004).

### **Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

Strategies are communicative procedures that learners use in order to learn and use language. Strategies also involve mental in the learning process (Nunan, 1999). Learning strategies are the thoughts and actions that individuals are using to accomplish a learning goal (Chamot, 2004). Subekti and Lawson (2007) declared the effectiveness of the application of certain vocabulary learning strategies provide empirical evidence of the contribution of mastering new words to language learner. Oxford (2003) in more specific stated that learning strategies are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Through an appropriate language learning strategies would drive output in a greater self-confidence. The purposes of language learning strategies that taken by

learners are to make a learning process easier, faster, more fluent, more enjoyable, more self-directed, self-explanatory instruction, and more transferable to new experience situations (Oxford, 2003). Through the learning strategies, seems the language learner can set the learning goal to achieve.

As has been defined, language learning strategies could be any kinds of actions, tactics, plans, thoughts which language learners have maximized to help them to facilitate the comprehension, storage, retrieval, and also the use of information to their vocabulary learning process. The features of language learning strategies are also worth discussing as they may share some common characteristics with vocabulary learning strategies. As the core discussion of this research is vocabulary learning strategies would still deal with the language learning strategies as the bigger picture of features of language learning process.

Oxford (2003) proposed the important features of language learning strategies. Language learning strategies contribute to main goal communicative competence, allow learners to be independent, expand the teachers role, problem oriented, more specific action, more than cognitive, not always observable, and to be flexible. The description of language learning strategies features drives to the mind- set that the avid language learners get to have as prerequisite to master large vocabulary.

There are a variety of language learning strategies that may have the potential to facilitate language learning (Oxford, 2003; Kalajahi, 2012). Vocabulary has been found as an essential component of second language learning classroom (Susanto & Fazlinda, 2016), and also as a major resource for language use, and one could not learn a language without learning vocabulary (Cameron, 2001). Hence, vocabulary learning is of great importance as vocabulary is an important unit to build up skills and knowledge. Anyhow, learning vocabulary items is not such a simply matter of committing them to memory, but how to use them in appropriate situations as well as how to expand the knowledge of one's vocabulary is also crucial. This is where vocabulary learning strategies play role.

As language learners may experience getting new words in a variety of ways in the classroom through the teacher's language, through the language of other learners, or through learning materials, so vocabulary has long been found as language learners' big problem that could block their language learning road. Hedge (2000) highlights the ultimate role of the teacher, besides explaining new words to learners, is to build independence to learners. There are some ways, such as by training them good strategies for vocabulary learning, and build their independency to master new words, and other creativity they may have to master the words.

## **CONCLUSION**

This piece of work aims to highlight the importance of vocabulary learning as an essential part in foreign language learning. Although it has been neglected for many decades, during the 80s it became a 'hot' topic for researchers. Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second/foreign language and a lack of vocabulary knowledge is an obstacle to learning. An attempt is made to review the trends in the area of teaching vocabulary through various techniques EFL teachers use when teaching .Before presenting the meaning or form of vocabulary items, teachers need to notice the type of the vocabulary, the students' level and characteristics, and also the value of the techniques for the learners. In other words, students' age, level of education as well as English proficiency may affect their learning, so teachers need to be aware of these differences when applying their teaching technique. They can further provide their students with vocabulary learning strategies with opportunities to encounter words repeatedly and in more than one context. Speaking of vocabulary teaching in an EFL setting, learners should be equipped with the idea of what vocabulary is and how to achieve comprehensive acquisition. As vocabulary acquisition is

neither simply the single word learning nor a process of just memorizing the spelling and pronunciation of the word and finding the Indonesian word equivalent to it. Rather, vocabulary knowledge should cover dimensions of many aspects such as pronunciation, additional tools, collocation, aspects of meaning, and word formation. From the methods which can be applied to increase learners' vocabulary power, an enthusiastic learner with proper direction by teachers is bound to succeed in language learning process. It is only when teachers dedicate their whole life to English can they achieve success in language learning, and students should be part of it.

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