

Teaching and Testing Vocabulary

Nang Hla Win Khaing*

Abstract

Teaching vocabulary is important as it is of great help for ESL Learners to understand and use the language. In the process of teaching English, new vocabulary is taught to ESL learners by using various strategies to develop four language basic skills. Knowing vocabulary assists them to understand English correctly and fluently, to read English with comprehension and reasonable speed, to write neatly and correctly at sound speed and to communicate well in their society. This research presents some useful strategies for teaching vocabulary and valuable items for testing vocabulary. The methods in the paper are mostly based on the work of Elizabeth (2011). One of the useful strategies, Sentence construction, is applied for this research. It is expected that the strategies and items in this paper can help teachers teach vocabulary in more effective ways and change their learners' passive vocabulary into active vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Language is mostly formed by words and sentences. Words are, thus, to be mastered to get good vocabulary. Written or oral communication is well done with the knowledge and understanding of the use of vocabulary. Vocabulary is an essential part of learning with all reading materials. It is the foundation of four basic skills of the language. Learning vocabulary has been familiar to most ESL learners since they first learnt the language. They have learnt vocabulary in many different ways. However, they cannot memorize them for a long term, or even they can memorize certain vocabulary, it is just passive vocabulary. They do not use the words they have learnt although they understand them. Thus, useful ways for teaching and items for testing vocabulary need to be used. This paper provides five strategies for teaching vocabulary and seven different items to be used in testing vocabulary. They are hoped to be of great help for English language teachers in their teaching.

2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to present some useful ways for teaching vocabulary and valuable items for testing vocabulary. The specific objectives are to examine whether the strategies work well or not and to help teachers in their teaching and in changing their learners' passive vocabulary into active vocabulary.

3. Literature Review

3.1. What is vocabulary?

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2009), vocabulary is all the words in a particular language. A person's vocabulary is all the words that he or she knows or uses. Andrew (2002) states that the term 'word' is part of everyone's vocabulary. Thus, vocabulary is a set of words of a particular language which people know and use.

3.2. Types of vocabulary

Oral vocabulary

Those words that we recognize and use in listening and speaking are oral vocabulary.

* Daw, Lecturer, Department of English, Yadanabon University

Print vocabulary

This type of vocabulary includes those words that we recognize and use in reading and writing.

Receptive vocabulary

This includes words that we recognize when we hear or see them.

Productive vocabulary

This includes words that we use when we speak or write.

Passive vocabulary

This includes words that we know but do not use in our speaking and writing.

Active vocabulary

This includes words that we know and frequently use them in speaking and writing.

3.3. Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning is a major goal in most teaching programmes (Scott,2006). By knowing and memorizing a lot of vocabulary, it can be easier for learnersto read and comprehend what they have read. They can easily and fluently communicate with others. They will be able to express more ideas, so they can share their ideas more effectively. Moreover, they can avoid the breaking down of the communicative interaction or express their idea. It is now generally agreed that learners need a receptive vocabulary of around 3000 high-frequency words in order to achieve independent user status. Thus, new words have to be introduced in effective ways to capture the learners' attention and place the words in their memories.

In teaching vocabulary, it is important to remember that learners need to have both active and passive vocabulary knowledge.Learners' vocabulary should consist of the words to be used by the learners themselves in original sentences, and those they will merely have to recognize when they hear them or see them written down by others. This is called receptive knowledge of English. Teaching passive vocabulary is important for comprehension_ the issue of understanding another speaker. The listener needs to have passive vocabulary, that is, enough knowledge of words used by others to comprehend their meaning. Teaching active vocabulary is equally important for the learners in terms of their own creativity.This is called productive knowledge of English.

3.4. Testing Vocabulary

After teaching, it is appropriate to measure the English vocabulary of learners by constructing test items. Testing is a procedure for critical evaluation. It is a means of determining the presence quality, or truth of something. In terms of human beings, testing tells what level of knowledge or skill has been acquired. It cannot be denied that tests and examinations are the main motivation for students to study. Through tests, a teacher can find out whether the learners have understood what they have taught or not.

Teachers test the learners' vocabulary as they need to know how much the learners'vocabulary knowledge has been developed. Well-developed vocabulary skills and wide background knowledge help individuals comprehend more difficult and complex situations. One of the effects of testing is that it helps to recycle vocabulary as well as to consolidate it.The teacher should not ask the learners to simply memorize long vocabulary lists. When testing vocabulary, the teacher should also avoid testing words in isolation. In most cases, the teacher should test vocabulary that he expects his students to know or to use.

3.5. Effective ways for teaching vocabulary

3.5.1. Using visual aids

Teachers use symbols, flash-cards or word-cards and pictures to help learners bring vocabulary to life. The teacher writes the English language word on one side of the card and draws a picture or writes a sentence containing the word, its definition, its synonyms and pronunciation on the other. Word-cards are excellent memory aids, and especially suitable for learners who have very poor knowledge of vocabulary.

3.5.2. Verbal repetition

The teacher pronounces the words as a model and the learners are asked to repeat them by taking turns. The teacher should avoid giving long vocabulary lists in using this method. Some remark that this type of teaching is just boring and unattractive. However, this is an effective way in teaching vocabulary as the learners need to hear new words frequently to keep them in their memory and it is of great help in practicing learners' pronunciation.

3.5.3. Sentence construction

The teacher explains the meaning of new words by using relevant phrases and sentences to learners. Then, the learners are asked to construct their own sentences using the words they have just learnt. The teacher gives feedback to their work. This method is helpful in memorizing new words and it can improve the learners' language skill. Learners are favored to turn their receptive vocabulary into productive ones.

3.5.4. Using textual context

Learning in rich textual contexts is essential for vocabulary learning. The teacher provides learners with suitable texts such as magazine articles, etc. They are asked to read them individually or in groups. Based on the text given, the teacher discusses and explains about unfamiliar words. Occasionally, learners are asked to guess the meaning of certain words. The discussion and explanation deal with word meanings, words derivations, the part of speech of a word and word collocations.

3.5.5. Activities

Activities can motivate learners to absorb new words or to remember words they have just learnt. They can bind their prior knowledge of words together with new words. Activities such as The Gallery Walk, Word Wall and Wordsplash are suitable and widely used in teaching vocabulary.

3.6. Items for testing vocabulary

In this paper, tests for vocabulary are divided into two categories: "Context-independent" tests and "Context-dependent" tests. The following different types of test items are adapted and modified the items used by Elizabeth (2011).

"Context-independent" tests

"Context-independent" tests are those which present learners words in isolation and require them to select meanings for the words without reference to any linguistic context.

3.6.1. Definition: In this type the test word is followed by several possible definitions or synonyms. Learners are asked to choose the correct one.

Example:

- (1) gadget
A. food you can eat
B. a kind of jacket
C. a small, useful tool
D. an expensive vehicle
- (2) vacancy
A. a holiday, or time spent not working
B. a job that is available for someone
C. a mass of very small drops of a liquid
D. the amount of sound

A variation of this type places the definition first and the problem word in the multiple choice. The learners are asked to select the word that corresponds to a target language.

Example:

- (1) An arrangement of flowers
A. vase
B. bouquet
C. garden
D. orchid
- (2) A large formal meeting, especially of Church officials or members of a university
A. convocation
B. cinema
C. tuition
D. lecture

3.6.2. Prefixes: Learners are asked to select the suitable prefix to make the word still meaningful.

Example:

- (1) ___justice
(A) un (B) dis (C) re (D) in
- (2) ___understand
(A) pre (B) dis (C) mis (D) over

3.6.3. Word Association: The learners are asked to associate pairs of words. Example:

Match the words that go together.

- (1) terrace whale peak house mountain
- (2) antique note music museum universe

“Context-dependent” tests

In “Context-dependent” tests, learners are expected to make use of contextual clues to get the answer.

3.6.4. Antonyms: Some words are learnt better when they are paired with their antonyms. This item provides learners to choose words closest to meaning the opposite of the word given in *italic*.

Example:

- (1) We should start our meeting with *boring* topics.
A. expensive
B. noisy
C. interesting
D. unfamiliar
- (2) The report paints a *bright* picture of the economy.
A. shiny
B. gloomy
C. stormy
D. windy

3.6.5. Suffixes: For this item, the word in its incomplete form is given in the sentence and the learners are asked to identify the most suitable suffix that can be added to it.

Example :

- (1) Being a government employ__ is hard.
A. er B. ment C. ee D. eer
- (2) There stands a quiet village with a picture__ harbor.
A. some B. ist C. ful D. sque

3.6.6. Completion: The problem word is placed in the context setting. The given context provides grammatical clues which automatically rule out at least one of the options. The learners are asked to choose the most suitable word from the words given. This item allows the testing of many words which cannot be briefly defined.

Example :

- (1) Eating too much but doing no work is the _____ of laziness.
A. diagnosis B. medicine C. symptom D. therapy
- (2) Two _____ were sent ahead to take a look at the bridge.
A. hairdressers B. greengrocers C. teachers D. scouts

3.6.7. Meaning from Context

(i) A very large number of words in a dictionary have multiple meanings. The meaning of the word depends on the thought that it is being used to express and the context of its expression. Learners are asked to select a word which has the same meaning in the context.

Example:

- (1) The *face* of the city is changing because of new modern buildings.
A. side B. appearance C. status D. part
- (2) The *image* of this company depends on the attitude of the workers.
A. impression B. picture C. copy D. photograph

(ii) Learners are provided with reading passages, articles, extracts or other suitable textual contexts. Reading the passage, learners are asked to do the tests followed. Various kinds of test items such as matching, replacing, completing the sentences or choosing the most appropriate word are set in this type.

Example:

We can read of things that happened 5,000 years ago in the Near East, where people first learn to write. But there are some parts of the world where even now people cannot write. The only way that they can preserve their history is to recount it as sagas_ legends handed down from one generation of story tellers to another. These legends are useful because they can tell us something about migrations of people who lived long ago, but none could write down what they did. Anthropologists wondered where the remote ancestors of the Polynesian peoples now living in the Pacific Islands came from. The sagas of these people explain that some of them came from Indonesia about 2,000 years ago.

Give another word or phrase to replace these words as they are used in the passage:

1. preserve (line 3)
2. recount (line 3)
3. migrations (line 5)
4. anthropologists (line 6)
5. remote (line 7).

4. Research Methodology

This research presents some useful ways for teaching vocabulary and valuable items for testing vocabulary. One of the useful strategies, Sentence construction, is applied for this research. Pre-test and post-test are used as research instruments and the data are collected from twenty students, Fourth Year Library and Information Studies Specialization, Yadanabon University during the Second Semester of 2016-2017 Academic Year. Three pre-tests and three post-tests are set to collect data and thirty words from Straightforward, Level 4B are selected for the tests. Data analysis is conducted after the completion of data collection procedures. Data collecting process involves three steps. In the first step, in pre-test, the teacher asks the students to construct sentences using the given words which are chosen from their coursebook. Most of the words are not familiar with them. The students have to do the work without referring any books or dictionary but their prior knowledge. They are given twenty minutes to construct ten sentences. In the second step, the teacher checks their sentences, gives feedback for their mistakes to the whole class and adds some more examples using the words. In the third step, in post-test, the students are asked to construct ten sentences using the same words in pre-test. They are not allowed to use the sentences they have written in pre-test or the example ones that the teacher gave them. Giving feedback on the students' work in post-test is followed after checking. All three pre-tests and post-tests are done by these steps.

The following tables show the different scores of three pre-tests and three post-tests.

Table (1) : Scores of pre-test I and post-test I

Pre-test I			Post-test I		
Scores	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage (%)	Scores	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage (%)
0	5	25 %	0	0	0 %
1	2	10 %	1	0	0 %
2	3	15 %	2	0	0 %
3	3	15 %	3	0	0 %
4	4	20 %	4	1	5 %
5	2	10 %	5	4	20 %
6	1	5 %	6	4	20 %
7	0	0 %	7	4	20 %
8	0	0 %	8	3	15 %
9	0	0 %	9	3	15 %
10	0	0 %	10	1	5 %
	20	100%		20	100%

Table (2) : Scores of pre-test II and post-test II

Pre-test II			Post-test II		
Scores	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage (%)	Scores	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage (%)
0	1	5 %	0	0	0 %
1	4	20 %	1	1	5 %
2	5	25 %	2	1	5 %
3	4	20 %	3	0	0 %
4	2	10 %	4	2	10 %
5	3	15 %	5	5	25 %
6	1	5 %	6	4	20 %
7	0	0 %	7	4	20 %
8	0	0 %	8	0	0 %
9	0	0 %	9	2	10 %
10	0	0 %	10	1	5 %
	20	100%		20	100%

Table (3) : Scores of pre-test III and post-test III

Pre-test III			Post-test III		
Scores	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage (%)	Scores	Frequency (n=20)	Percentage (%)
0	0	0 %	0	0	0 %
1	3	15 %	1	0	0 %
2	3	15 %	2	0	0 %
3	3	15 %	3	0	0 %
4	4	20 %	4	0	0 %
5	2	10 %	5	1	5 %
6	1	5 %	6	1	5 %
7	2	10 %	7	3	15 %
8	2	10 %	8	8	40 %
9	0	0 %	9	5	25 %
10	0	0 %	10	2	10 %
	20	100%		20	100%

5. Findings and Discussion

In total result from three pre-tests and post-test, it is found that there is a development between every pre-test and post-test. According to table (1), 25 % of students get zero mark in pre-test. However, in post-test, there is no one who gets marks lower than four. Table (2) shows that although all the students get not more than six marks in pre-test, 35 % of them get more than six marks in post-test. Table (3) presents a significant development of students as 90 % of them score more than six marks. Based on the data of the three tables, there is a development in every post-test in compare with their respective pre-test.

In teaching English language, teaching vocabulary concerns with any level, from elementary to advance. ESL learners need to be introduced new vocabulary so that they have knowledge of words to comprehend what others mean. They need to be practiced to use the vocabulary they learnt, that is, to change their passive vocabulary into active one. Five different teaching strategies and seven testing items are mentioned in this research. Teaching strategies such as using 'Visual aids' and 'Verbal repetition' help learners in absorbing new words as they give learners sufficient exposure to new words. A limited vocabulary represents

a limited understanding of concepts. Well-developed vocabulary skills and wide background knowledge help learners comprehend more difficult and complex material. Teaching methods such as ‘Sentence construction’ and ‘Using textual context’ in this paper encourage learners how to apply the words they learnt in different contexts. Activities are suitable to be used together with various strategies in teaching vocabulary.

Appropriate tests should be set after teaching to find out if the learners know the words they have learnt or not. The “Context-independent” test items shown in this paper check the learners’ memory of words they have been taught. The “Context-dependent” test items promote their thinking skill based on the context given. Thus, the mentioned strategies and test items are useful and can be modified in teaching vocabulary.

6. Conclusion

The present research has displayed some useful strategies for teaching vocabulary and valuable items for testing vocabulary. As vocabulary is defined as all the words of a language, teaching vocabulary is vital in teaching a language. In using a language, the power of choosing different ways of saying the same thing is great. It is significant that teachers and students of English language should enrich vocabulary and it will lead them to possess a good command of the language. The useful strategies for teaching vocabulary and suitable items for testing vocabulary in this paper can partially assist English language teachers in their work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Daw Myint Myint, professor, Head of English Department, Yadanabon University, for her permission to do this research, her valuable advice to carry on the work and her encouragement to finish this paper.

References

- Carstairs-McCathy, A. (2002). *An Introduction to English Morphology: Words and Their Structure*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Elizabeth, M.E.S. (2011). *Acquisition of English Vocabulary*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House.
- Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching Vocabulary*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thornbury, S. (2006). *An A-Z of ELT*. Macmillan Education, London: Macmillan Publishing Company.