

Developing EFL Teachers' Classroom Practices in Teaching English Vocabulary

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Abstract

This paper explores the EFL teachers' classroom practices when they teach English vocabulary in order to develop their students' performances. The reason behind conducting this research was because teaching vocabulary helps students understand and communicate with others in English. When students have a great vocabulary, the latter can improve all areas of oral and written communication. The growth of vocabulary knowledge is one of the essential pre-requisites for language acquisition and this growth of vocabulary knowledge can only be possible when teachers employ effective vocabulary teaching and learning strategies which are the objectives of this. English vocabulary is the most comprehensive and most difficult aspect of foreign learners. Moreover, English teachers seemed to be encountering difficulties in vocabulary English teaching. These challenges are worthy of attention to develop a vocabulary teaching program. In order to achieve this goal, this study recommended that it is necessary for teachers to concentrate on teaching the most frequently used and the most important English vocabulary for real life communication.

1, Introduction

With the rapid growth of English as an international language, there has been a huge increase in the demand to use effective methods for teaching vocabulary around the world in general and Libya in particular. Historically, there has been minimal focus on vocabulary instruction in the EFL classroom (Ur, 1991). Due to this, an increased emphasis on vocabulary development is crucial for the English language learning field. The four main skills in learning language can also be improved with learning new vocabularies which is reading, listening, speaking and writing. Moreover, there are different varieties of English in English speaking countries in terms of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. These varieties cause difficulties in learning



and teaching English to learners from different cultures. However, there has been little research conducted in investigating EFL teachers' beliefs and practices of vocabulary teaching, particularly in the Libyan context.

2. Definition of Vocabulary

The term vocabulary is defined in many ways. Nation, (2001) considered it as the body of words used in a particular language, whether isolated, in a phrase, or a group of many words that carry specific meaning. Zhang (2011) for example, stated that vocabulary means the knowledge of a word. According to this knowledge, it does not only indicate a definition, but implies how a word appears in a context. Neuman and Dwyer (2009) considered it as the words that learners must know in order to be able to communicate efficiently. Moreover, Ur (1991) defined vocabulary as the words we teach in a foreign language. However, as time goes on, the definition of a word has turned out to be uneasy matter to decide upon. Vocabulary is a bridge to learn the other language skills and components. Vocabulary mastery can affect the mastery of a language (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009) It might be concluded that without words there would be no communication which brings the existence of a language under.

3. The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary

The study of using vocabulary is one of the reading and speaking elements. This important since vocabulary includes all the words learners need to know in order to express themselves effectively in various situations. For children, vocabulary is the means through which they bring together stories, ideas and content. Rupley et al., (1999:37) stress that word knowledge is closely associated with language success because it provides learners with the necessary source of maintaining comprehension. They added for elementary students, teaching English is presenting vocabulary in addition to pronunciation that they learn for the first time In this respect, Chall et al., (1990) claimed that if learners do not have sufficient amount of vocabulary, they cannot make real progress in the field of language learning. Maximo (2000) argued that knowing little grammar rules can make learning somehow difficult; however, the lack of vocabulary creates a serious learning obstacle. This means words establish the great part of language learning without the whole communication process collapses. Wilkins (1972) argued that a learner have a chance to compensate for his\her shortage



in grammar which is not possible with vocabulary even if the learner falls back use his\her mother language equivalent. A group of researchers such as Laufer and Shmueli (1997) and Nation and Webb (2011) agreed that learning a language vocabulary is crucial for attaining a new language because it has a leading role in supporting speaking and writing the language. Therefore, the study of teaching and learning vocabulary has been growing remarkably. Nation and Webb (2011) stressed the importance of words saying that they are essential for communication. Little children learn to speak in isolated words and then in chains of nouns and verbs. The child who says” Daddy bye-bye car” is easily understood by English speaking adults. We expect students of a second language, however, to control the grammatical features of that language as well as its vocabulary. Regardless of the specific target language and the conditions of instruction, vocabulary is an important factor in all language teaching. Students must continually be learning words as they learn structures and as they practice the sound system. Furthermore, what makes vocabulary a focus of any language teaching, is that without sufficient vocabulary learners cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Wilkins (1972:114) stated that “. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. Lewis (1993:122) believes that “lexis is the core or heart of language”.

4. Teaching of English Vocabulary

English vocabulary has been neglected in the process of language teaching (Carter, 1998). A review of the literature highlights two main reasons for the neglect of vocabulary in language teaching. Vocabulary in language teaching has shift attention from “poor relation” in the 1960s and 1970s into “guest of honor” (Maiguashca, 1993:2). Vocabulary teaching (VT) is now considered a controversial issue that poses some questions such as what vocabulary to teach and how to teach them (Choo *et al.*, 2012). As a timely reminder to the reader, this study aims to understand how vocabulary is taught at Libyan secondary school and to find out the vocabulary teaching techniques used in VT.

According to Carter (1998: 178), the first reason for its neglect was due to “a specialization in linguistic research on syntax and phonology which may have



fostered a climate in which vocabulary was felt to be a less important element in learning a second language”. Another reason for its neglect was because of instruction methods that gave a little significance to vocabulary. Allen (1983) points out that a little emphasis was put on vocabulary teaching (VT) in methodology courses about how a new word is taught. Schmitt (2000) also states that the recent methodologies such as grammar-translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method, and the communicative language teaching method have something in common is that they did not deal with vocabulary in any upright way.

The grammar-translation method was the dominant language teaching method from the 1850s until the beginning of the twentieth century. During this period, the vocabulary gained less emphasis than the grammar did under the prominence of this method (Choo *et al.*, 2012). Kelly (1969, cited in Choo *et al.*, 2012) said that vocabulary was taught only when it exemplified a grammatical rule. In the 1940s, the emergence of structuralism and behaviorism contributed to born a new method known as the audio-lingual method which lasted until the 1970s. This method is built on ideas from behaviorism, which said that language is learnt as a result of habit formation. It emphasizes on oral skills and memorization. Thus, the role of vocabulary was a mere accessory of other language skills (Choo *et al.*, 2012).

In the 1970s, a new instruction method has been emerged called the communicative language teaching approach (Choo *et al.*, 2012). This approach focuses attention on message and fluency rather than grammatical patterns. The language is taught through activities and tasks such as information gap tasks and problem-solving activities (Schmitt, 2000). CLT was given a little significance to the vocabulary. “It is assumed that L2 vocabulary, like L1 vocabulary, would take care of itself” (Schmitt, 2000: 14). However, Schmitt (2000) argues that exposure to vocabulary with functional communication will not lead to acquiring adequate vocabulary. It is necessary to join vocabulary with instruction methods.

Furthermore, vocabulary plays a very significant role in language teaching and learning. In learning any language, vocabulary instruction occupies a crucial position for success in L2 acquisition (Carter, 1998; Schmitt, 2000; Macaro, 2003). It improves students’ skills such as speaking fluency, reading, and listening



comprehension. Therefore, learning a language depends on what students are taught as well as how they are taught according to their level and motivation (Curtis &Longo, 2001 cited in Ferreira, 2007). This view requires shedding a light on methods selected for vocabulary teaching.

Schmitt (2000) suggested that there is no best method of vocabulary teaching. Schmitt's view agrees with constructivism which embraces that there is never one right mean to teach and the teaching should be concerned about how teachers use their imagination to make a sense of situations in which they find themselves (William and Burden., 2006). This is very true, that is why the way of teaching vocabulary may vary from one teacher to another. According to Schmitt (2000), VT depends on students' level, school system, targeted words, and other factors. He adds that effective vocabulary teaching takes place when there is a mix of explicit teaching and incidental learning activities. However, it is important to teach vocabulary explicitly until students have enough vocabulary to use new words they find in context. Regardless of this basic level, implicit learning should also take part in the vocabulary teaching program. It is necessary for two reasons. First, meeting vocabulary several times in different context increase students' knowledge about it. Second, students can only acquire different kinds of word knowledge such as collocation and frequency through several exposures (ibid).

Thus, both explicit and implicit approaches with their strengths and weakness are significant in the VT program. A recent study undertaken by Al-Darayseh (2014) outlined that a mix between explicit and implicit vocabulary teaching can increase students' vocabulary size and therefore it improves their reading comprehension skills. However, there is a controversial question often raised in this field about which is more effective. Moreover, a recent study conducted by Yaghoubi and Seyyedi (2017) found out that although both approaches found to be effective in vocabulary teaching, there was a difference between them. The study consists of 100 EFL students were divided into groups. The vocabulary was taught explicitly in a first group; whereas, a second group was taught implicitly. The result shows that the first group received explicit teaching gained more vocabulary than the second group received implicit teaching. There are other recent pieces of research prove that



students gain more vocabulary from explicit teaching compared to implicit vocabulary teaching (Maeda, 2011; Marzban & Kamalian, 2013; Biria, 2016). However, research conducted by Shakouri *et al.* (2014) concluded that there is no significant difference between both approaches. Although there could be a difference in gained vocabulary between explicit and implicit VT approaches, there is still a need to mix them to gather in the VT program. A current study attempts to find out VT strategies (whether they are implicit or explicit strategies) used in Libyan secondary schools.

4.1. Explicit Approach

Explicit teaching is one method of teaching which focuses on teachers' role in the classroom (Lu, 2017). It is "involves the direct, systematic presentation of critical information by the teacher to the students" (Simmons (1995:388). According to Schmitt and McCarthy (1997: 239), the meaning of vocabulary is taught directly and it is illustrated by

- *Building a large vocabulary size*
- *Integrating new words with old*
- *Providing a number of encounters with a word*
- *Promoting a deep level of word knowledge*
- *facilitating imagining and concreteness*
- *Using a variety of techniques*
- *Encouraging independent learning strategies*

These features can assist EFL teachers in implementing and designing a curriculum. However, teachers should be aware of mixing new words with old ones. If two vocabularies are similar, they will be difficult for students to learn (Schmitt, 2000). The best way to avoid this confusion is to teach the most frequent word first and then after it's acquired presenting its partner (Nation 1990).

Furthermore, some authors provide a number of both traditional and non traditional strategies that teachers can use to teach a new vocabulary explicitly (Gairns and Redman, 1986; Duin and Graves, 1987; Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997;). For example, Gairns and Redman (1986) point out that explicit teaching could involve traditional techniques that include verbal techniques such as translation, definitions, synonyms as well as and visual techniques like drawing and gestures.



The traditional techniques suggested above are still considered effective techniques in teaching vocabulary; For example, verbal techniques like translation can be a quick way of teaching vocabulary and has an effective role in learning vocabulary (Gairns and Redman, 1986; Richards and Renandy, 2002; Thornbury, 2002). However, the teachers should not depend on translation when teaching vocabulary as students know the teachers' plan and they do not have to focus on the other strategies as translation is given afterword (Cameron, 2001; Gairns and Redman, 1986). Therefore, teachers should avoid translation as a regular way and use other techniques of teaching vocabulary. Thornbury (2002) argued that visual technique like gesture can be a quick way of teaching vocabulary without direct translation.

Besides, visual techniques are also effective because they link between the word and its picture in the mind which makes them more memorable compared to written words (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). Thornbury (2002) also argued that visual techniques are an economical way of presenting vocabulary because they can explain the word meaning easily. In contrast, Duin and Graves (1987: 313) suggested a combination of both traditional and non-traditional vocabulary teaching techniques. They state that “explicit vocabulary instruction can be given through providing word definitions, synonym pairs, word lists, word associations, the keyword method, semantic mapping, and semantic feature analysis”.

4.2. Implicit Approach

In contrast to the explicit approach of vocabulary teaching, the goal of the implicit approach is to enable students to obtain multiple exposures to language (Schmitt, 2000). This means that the new vocabulary will be acquired implicitly through multiple exposures to various contexts, extensive reading, and other material without involving deliberate memorization (Biria, 2016). Schmitt & McCarthy (1997: 36) defined the implicit approach as “learning without awareness”. It takes place when students focus attention elsewhere such as understanding text passages or using the language for communicative purposes. Additionally, Shakouri *et al.* (2014) maintain that implicit vocabulary teaching focuses on guessing a new word meaning from context through involving in written and oral language experiences. Macaro (2003) adds that vocabulary size enlarges through interaction between students and reading authentic texts.



Also, there is no doubt that the most effective way of teaching vocabulary implicitly is engaging students in the countries or situations where the L2 is the main language (Schmitt, 2000). Schmitt also states that although there is a variation in vocabulary improvement among students who engaged in immersed programs; however, most of them benefit from immersion into the L2. Unfortunately, this desirable approach is not widely available to students around the world. Therefore, teachers must find ways of increasing their students' exposure to the L2 without their getting onto an airplane (Schmitt, 2000: 150). He states that an effective way to do this is by encouraging students to read more because reading is considered as a key to vocabulary improvement.

5. What Makes Vocabulary Teaching More Effective

In order to be able to teach as effectively as possible, it is important to know, how words are remembered and stored in students' minds and how long term memory is organized (Thornbury, 2004). Numerous researchers argue that vocabulary is stored in the mind in a highly organized and complex system, the so-called 'mental lexicon'. In the mental lexicon, words are stored, categorized and interconnected in many ways, according to their features such as meaning, form, collocation, syntactic properties, cultural background etc. Therefore, a word being retrieved is looked up through several pathways at once, which is extremely economical in terms of time needed (McCarthy 1992; Gairns and Redman 1995).

Thornbury (2004: 24-26) suggests principles supporting the process of permanent or long – term remembering. In this summary he listed several techniques to follow to make vocabulary teaching as effective as possible:

- Firstly repetition, yet what he means is “repetition of encounters with a word” (Thornbury 2004: 24) e.g. in reading. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of retrieval and use of the new words. While practicing, learners should make decisions about words, e.g. match rhyming words or use new items to complete sentences.
- Secondly is motivation, which is closely linked with attention. “A very high degree of attention (called arousal) seems to correlate with improved



recall.”(Thornbury, 2004: 25) Connected to this, emotional value of words should be considered as well.

- Finally, Thornbury (2004: 25) advises to visualize a picture for a new word or to link an abstract word with some mental image. Images drawn by students themselves have the best outcomes. Besides imaging, there are other mnemonics, such as making clues from associations with similarly sounding word and its meaning in the mother tongue.

To sum it up, the teacher should help students build up and use a mental lexicon in such a way that they will be capable of storing, keeping and retrieving words when needed. He or she can call on various methods to aid him or her in accomplishing this task, mainly arousing motivation and attention, engaging in meaningful activities and providing many channels for learning and practicing. Pictures represent a convenient tool to be employed in nearly all of these methods.

6. Learning Vocabulary Implicitly Through Reading

Both beginning students and advanced students benefit from reading in expanding vocabulary knowledge (Schmitt, 2000). Although many words can be learnt implicitly through speaking; however, speaking is usually connected solely with more high frequent words than written texts. The written texts, in turn, provide a variety of vocabulary which gives opportunities to students to obtain several different words (ibid). Sedita (2005) found that students learn new vocabulary through meeting them in text, either through their own reading or by asking them to read certain texts in the classroom. In addition, providing opportunities to encounter new vocabulary can improve their vocabulary knowledge and therefore they can understand more complex texts. This view leads to an important question: how many words the students need to understand the text. According to Penny (2012), the students need to know between 90% and 98% of words in the written text to understand the text. She adds that if there is more than one vocabulary every two lines in the text that students do not understand, the students may not understand the text and they may not guess the meaning of a new vocabulary correctly. Therefore, teachers should teach vocabulary explicitly to increase students' knowledge. Schmitt (2000) argued that vocabulary should be taught explicitly until students have enough vocabulary to guess the



meanings from context. Penny (2012) stated that understanding 98% of the text means knowing a maximum number of word families (a group of words which have the same root).

Moreover, Schmitt (2000) suggested that the number of word families that students need to know ranged from 5,000 to 8,000. Helping students to achieve such a huge number of vocabularies is a big challenge that teachers face in VT. However, the teacher can use techniques such as *input enhancement* to help students understand the text (Maeda, 2011). This technique involves intonation and stress in teachers' speaking or color enhancement in printed texts. It is an effective technique to lead learners' attention to vocabulary without direct teaching (ibid). Additionally, this technique does not teach target topic directly but lead learner's attention to it subconsciously without deliberate operations. Helping students to guess the meaning of unknown vocabulary in context is another effective strategy to simplify text and to raise the percentage of knowing of text words. Schmitt (2000: 152) states that "The percentage of text known also affects the ability to guess an unknown word's meaning from context".

Besides, *guessing the unknown word meanings from context*, which is also called inferring the meaning from context is a significant means of vocabulary learning (Pflaum, 1973; Schmitt, 2000). Richards and Renandy (2002:253) explained that learning vocabulary through guessing its meaning from context is "a gradual process". In other words, providing solely single exposure to unknown vocabulary, there is a possibility of learning its meaning from context 10%. He adds that students need several exposures to vocabulary in context in order to understand its meaning. However, guessing the meaning from context is more difficult than it seems at first sight; moreover, we cannot assume that students will benefit from it (Nezhadet al., 2015; Schmitt, 2000). There are several factors for successful guessing; "Learners should be skilled in guessing, the context must be rich enough to offer adequate clues to guess a word's meaning" (Schmitt, 2000: 153).

Guessing skills are techniques that the students use for the implicit learning. The text should contain full of clues about the meaning of unknown words such as captions, other words, examples, keywords and titles to enable students to obtain information



about unknown words (Nezhad et al, 2015). A study conducted by Quoc (2017) concluded that the students have positive attitudes towards context clues; moreover, it is useful strategy to improve learners' ability to guess word meaning from context. Another study has also proved that context clues help in guessing word meaning easily from the context and improving vocabulary knowledge (Cetinavci, 2013). Most importantly, students need to be skilled in guessing. Clarke and Nation (1980) suggested the following steps of guessing unknown words: First, you need to know what part of speech that unknown word belongs to. Second, look at its position and its related words; for example, if it is a verb, you need to know it's a noun and an adverb that modified it. Third, consider the relationship between a sentence or a clause that contain the unknown word and other sentences or clauses that linked with them by conjunctions such as but and because or adverb like however. This type of relation contains cause and effect, time and contrast. Moreover, punctuation and reference words such as this and that also provide useful information.

Clarke and Nation (1980: 154) claim that "readers are better able to use local clues in proximity to an unknown word than more global clues that are located further away". They added that learners may mistake an unknown word for one they already know with a similar orthographic or phonological form (ibid). Zhou (2010) indicated that many teachers believe that morphological Clues of words such as roots, prefixes, suffixes, and infixes, can provide students another important technique to guess the meanings of words. Giving students affixes and teach them how to use them in a combination with context, will help students to understand the meaning of several related unknown words (ibid). However, this technique is unreliable; because the incorrect reading of affixes is likely leading to incorrect guessing (Schmitt, 2000). This means that background knowledge about the topic and the culture being discussed aids inferencing and guessing a word from context does not mean that it will be remembered (ibid). As a timely reminder to the reader, this research seeks to find out strategies that secondary school teachers use in teaching vocabulary.

7. The Teacher's Role in Teaching Vocabulary

Since the teacher is main element in the teaching and learning process, he/she has to be competent enough to carry out his mission in the most appropriate way. This



means the teacher has to be qualified in various aspects. He/she should be able to not only to give instructions, but creative as well. He/she is supposed to gain considerable knowledge of the language he teaches. Moreover, the teacher is required to create enthusiasm within learners (Wilkins, 1972: 118). By connecting teaching vocabulary with art, Harmer (2007) implies that the teacher has to work out the most impressive way to convey the words content to the learners. This opens the door for the teacher to try the best to smoothly supply the learners with efficient language input. With regard to vocabulary, a language teacher should be able to produce and understand the vocabulary items in order to facilitate the task for their learners.

8. The Role of Motivation in Teaching Vocabulary

In order to be able to pick up new vocabulary, learners need to be considerably motivated. Learner's motivation is very important in teaching vocabulary; therefore, it is widely acknowledged. Motivations impel learners to attend to learning tasks. Allwright and Bailey (1994) stated that the motivated learners do better in learning words than those less motivated. Being motivated makes learners ready to receive and learn new word easily. Researchers, such as Arnold and Brown (1999), in the field roughly divide motivation in two types: integrative and instrumental. By integrative motivation, they mean the desire to learn a language and by instrumental they indicate desire to learn a language for some purposes like getting a better education, a better job or a promotion. McCarthy (1992) emphasizes the importance of the interaction between a teacher and learners; he believes this can only be realize through raising learners' motivation. Similarly, Dörnyei and Csizér (2005) argued that “without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough to ensure student achievement” (p. 203). Therefore, it could be argued that if this significance of motivation is to be fully taken into account, then motivation is highly necessary for learners of second or foreign languages if their learning is to be effective. Moreover, societies, parents, teachers and all those responsible for learners should try their best to create a good atmosphere, and one that motivates learners to learn. However, the argument that could be raised about motivating learners is whether such process is an effortless task, or could it be a complicated one? If



teachers do not have the ability or awareness of the strategies that should be followed, then it could be argued that motivating children will be difficult if not possible, which in turn will have negative consequences for their learning process. In this respect, Harris et al., (2011:27) introduced some ideas for teachers of how students can be motivated. Here are some of them:

- *Explain*: when students are asked to do any activity, teachers are recommended to explain fully what is expected from the learners so that they know how to do it effectively. Otherwise, they may not be able to do it. This understanding helps them to be more motivated.
- *Rewards*: rewards can work as extrinsic motivation for those learners who do not have intrinsic motivation. These rewards always suit learners' level. Small children for example may be offered balloons or crayons, whereas older ones may be given books or lunch. Moreover, verbal praise can also be used.
- *Care*: this simply means that in order to increase their students' motivation, the teachers have to show interest and care to their students. For example, they can help them to solve their own problems, ask them about their future plans and so on.
- *Have the students participate*: students are more motivated when they are actively involved in their own learning. Therefore, teachers should try to involve them as much as possible, for example asking them to find something that may be used in a lesson. This involvement makes the students feel that they are significant which in turn increases their motivation and they learn better.
- *Satisfy student' needs*: students in their learning process are highly committed to what they think meets their needs and interests. Therefore, teachers need to take this into account in order to increase motivation in the students.
- *Use positive emotions to enhance learning and motivations*: there is a powerful correlation between learners' strong and lasting memories, and emotional state. That is the stronger the emotions that accompany learning, the better learners remember. So teachers in class may come up with whatever



arouses the student's positive emotions, to combine them with what they learn for short and long term memories.

Thus, in Libya primary schools, in order to facilitate the teaching and learning English vocabulary, teachers in the thick of teaching have to remain aware of the significant aspects of motivation, and the strategies to be followed in order to cultivate good results in terms of producing good speakers of English.

9. Conclusion

This study described the literature reviewed related to teaching of English vocabulary in order to develop. Definition of vocabulary and the importance of teaching it were discussed. Moreover, aspects of the teaching and learning of English vocabulary such as implicit and explicit vocabulary learning, vocabulary teaching were reviewed. Throughout understanding of all of the explored issues, it is presented different aspects of a word and various vocabulary teaching strategies to use them in the classroom. Based on the studied reviewed in this study, some recommendations are offered: EFL Teachers should use out of visual and audio aids to improve pronunciation in English vocabulary classes. Moreover, it is hoped that this research can encourage teachers to consider a better way in teaching vocabulary to improve the students "ability in vocabulary mastery. The teacher also can apply interesting methods to develop the students' ability, use the interesting materials likes' storytelling, games, etc that will not make the students bored. Furthermore, curriculum developers, educators, and EFL researchers should work together to develop curricular materials and resources that consider teaching vocabulary needs as the materials are being developed and throughout the design process. Finally, EFL researchers, curriculum developers, assessment professionals, teacher educators, professional learning providers, and teachers should work collaboratively to strengthen teachers' abilities of teaching and to improve the strategies used by Libyan teachers at their classrooms.



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