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The Exploring Nature of Vocabulary Acquisition and Common Main Gaps in the Current Studies of Vocabulary Acquisition

Seyed Hossein Fazeli, M.A.

Abstract

Vocabulary can be as a key factor for success, central to a language, and paramount to a language learner. In such situation, the lexicon may be the most important component for learners (Grass & Selinker, 1994), and mastering of vocabulary is an essential component of second/foreign language teaching and learning that has been repeatedly acknowledge in theoretical and empirical second/foreign language acquisition research. The intent of the current study is to set out the nature of vocabulary acquisition alongside the expressing importance of vocabulary acquisition. The importance of the present study is to explore the current studies of vocabulary in order to find out common main gaps among such studies.

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Keywords: Vocabulary, Vocabulary teaching, Vocabulary acquisition, Vocabulary learning strategies

Introduction

It seems only logical that a text about teaching and learning of vocabulary would begin with definitions of what vocabulary is and what word is. The review of the literature reveals that we do not have a universal definition of the terms vocabulary, and word. As Julien (2006) discusses there is a certain paradox connected with the concept 'word'. Vocabulary and word can be defined in a number of ways based upon the particular aspect of which is approached. In such ways, "vocabulary" is defined as "the body words used in particular language or in a particular sphere of activity" (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2008, 1617), or it is as "all the words used by a particular person or all the words which exist in a particular language or subject" (Cambridge international dictionary of English, 1995, 1628). Moreover, "Word" is defined as "a single distinct meaningful element of speech or writing, used to form sentences with the others" (Concise Oxford English dictionary, 2008,1660-1661), or it is as "a single unit of language which has meaning and can be spoken or written" (Cambridge international dictionary of English, 1995,1678), or it can be defined as "a speech sound or combination of sounds having meaning and used as a basic unit of language and human communication" (The new lexicon Webster's encyclopedic dictionary of the English, 1995,1131). Moreover, it must be mentioned that *"Learning" and "Acquisition" used interchangeably as the same concept throughout this study, although the researcher is aware that different researchers may treat these terms differently.*

During the past three decades, the researchers have attempted to express the importance of vocabulary acquisition for second/foreign language acquisition. In such way, vocabulary attracts more and more the attention of scholars that it becomes the subject of numerous research works (Allen, 1983; Morgan & Rinvolutri, 1986; Aitchiston, 1987; Hatch & Brown, 1995; Carter & McCarthy, 1988; McCarthy, 1990; Nation, 1990, 2000, 2001; Coady, 1993; Read, 2000; Nagy and Scott, 2000; Schmitt, 2000, 2008; Thornbury, 2002).

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Nowadays because of many reasons, it is widely accepted that vocabulary acquisition should be part of the syllabus design. For example, Schmitt (2008) believes that vocabulary is an essential part for language mastery. Similarly, Knight (1994) proposes that acquisition of words can be considered the most important aspect of second language acquisition.

Review of Literature

A brief look at the history of L2 acquisition in the last three decades helps us to see the major issues in vocabulary acquisition. In the last three decades, vocabulary constituted an important part of L2 teaching and learning. The researchers have focused their attention on vocabulary in the procedure which second/foreign language learners optimize their vocabulary knowledge. In such way, after long time of neglect, as Stern (1983) mentions vocabulary acquisition had been curiously and unjustly neglected, vocabulary is now recognized as central to second/foreign language acquisition process (Laufer, 1997).

When we observe at the research on vocabulary acquisition over the past three decades, the sheer volume of the literature and welter of topics and findings is incredible. Countless books, papers, articles, schemes and items of equipments have grown out such argument. Especially in the last three decades, there are varieties of both theoretical and empirical researches which are appeared on various aspects of vocabulary acquisition (Harrison,1980; Keen,1985; Cruse,1986; Wallace,1987; Nation,1990; Clark,1993; Huck, Haynes & Coady,1993; Schmitt,2000).

As we enter the 21st century, acquisition of vocabulary has assumed a more important role (Lewis, 1993).This is evidence in the growth of interest in L2 vocabulary acquisition research and in the publication of many books exclusively devoted to the teaching of vocabulary, acquisition of vocabulary, and vocabulary learning strategies.

The recent studies are done on various aspects of vocabulary acquisition, for example vocabulary acquisition via task (Nunan, 1989), vocabulary acquisition via reading activities (Gu & Johnson, 1996), acquisition condition of vocabulary (Joe, 1995), research and techniques of

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vocabulary acquisition (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Oxford, 1990; Nation, 1990), and approaches and strategies of vocabulary learning (Krashen & Cho, 1994; Sanaoui, 1995).

After having long been ignored, vocabulary acquisition is once again of central interest in language learning (Manguerra, 1993); however still as Meara (1980) points out that we know a little about vocabulary acquisition.

Importance of Vocabulary Learning

The statement that “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972, 111) tells us that mastering of vocabulary is an essential component of second/foreign language learning. Moreover, Read (2000, 1) states that “words are the basic building block of language, the units of meaning from which larger structures such as sentences, paragraphs and whole text are formed”, Nation (1993) discusses that vocabulary knowledge enables language use (as cited in Nation & Waring, 1997), or Anderson and Freebody (1981) emphasize that vocabulary has long recognized as important to reading success (as cited in Dickinson, Flushman & Freiberg, 2009).

Similarly, Carroll (1993), Elley (1991) and Krashen (1993) believe that the development of vocabulary knowledge and the amount of target language reading undertaken by the learners are strongly related, or difficulty levels of vocabulary substantially affect the degree of readability of reading text (Coady, 1993; Alderson, 2000; Nation, 2001). In addition, successful acquisition of the ability to read with comprehension is essential for success and full participation in the mainstream the technological society (Dickinson, Flushman & Freiberg, 2009). In such case, Coady (1993) believes that vocabulary building as integral part of reading.

Main Gaps in the Current Studies of Vocabulary Acquisition

Although there is a welter of studies about vocabulary acquisition, but there are so many areas that have not been considered and discussed at all or seriously. Such areas are observed as gaps of current studies of vocabulary acquisition in this study. The gaps are:

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1. Synonym is a type of relationship among words that are similar in the meaning. Such type is one of the common vocabulary acquisition techniques which is based on the semantic sets. Such technique is applied in order to help learners to learn the unfamiliar vocabularies in terms of the familiar: the meaning of an unknown vocabulary can be expressed in terms of vocabulary whose meaning is known. Here, this problem arises that the meaning of two vocabularies are not same to each other completely; therefore the learners who learn similar meaning of one vocabulary instead of exact meaning of that vocabulary, how they can understand and apply in active skills correctly. Such problem must be considered, studied and discussed from various views. Same problem should be studied on antonym as another common vocabulary acquisition technique which is based on the semantic sets.

2. One of the problems in the studies of vocabulary acquisition is the developing of the model that really clarifies how vocabulary is transferred from short-term memory to long-term memory. The developing of such general and applied model can solve many of the most current problems in the vocabulary acquisition procedure. Such model is needed to be developed.

3. There are very few empirical studies have researched on teacher beliefs about nature of vocabulary, vocabulary acquisition procedure, and the other related subject to vocabulary. Such less studies can be considered as a gap in the studies of vocabulary acquisition.

4. The correlation among constitutes lexical competence, and the factors that facilitate and hinder successful vocabulary acquisition procedure needs to be studied from various views to have particular dominant overall theory in such case.

5. Since text can affect the procedure acquisition of vocabulary, and text types are varied based on the subject type, word difficulty level, complexity of text and the other factors; there are needs to particular studies to be done as clarification of valuation of text in order to have particular model for degree of value for every text.

6. The advantage and disadvantage of the two common acquisition procedures of vocabulary which are incidental and direct learning should be more clarified and classified. Such

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clarification and classification of the advantage and disadvantage are varied depend various factors such as why and how regarding particular individual personality of the learners some advantages and disadvantages follow every type of leaning of procedure of vocabulary. Such classification and clarification are needed to be researched as a gap among the current studies of vocabulary learning.

7. Since the text is the environment for acquisition of vocabulary, the effect of such environment whether it is ‘authentic material’ or not, can affect the vocabulary acquisition procedure. How much such environment can affect vocabulary acquisition when the early stages of acquisition includes such environment, when the condition of L2 acquisition is as a foreign language, and so many factors are needed to be considered, studied, and discussed as long-term of education which leads to more realistic results that are varied from the results of short-term of studies.

8. Since mostly the current empirical studies of vocabulary acquisition were done among advanced and intermediate language proficiency learners and the outcomes of these studies were applied (generalized) for low language proficiency learners as poor language learners, the problem arises that normally the poor language learners do not know when, where and how apply particular strategy regarding vocabulary acquisition procedure as they are applied among advanced and intermediate language proficiency learners as good language learners. Therefore they deal with the difficulty when the application (generalize) the scientific outcomes which are obtained from good language learners. The gap is that it should specific studies among poor language learners and their outcomes should be specified for such learners.

9. The focus of studies of vocabulary acquisition is done on good language learners because normally the poor language learners are not advanced in applying of strategies. The gap in such studies is that there is not focus on how to motivate the poor language learners to begin and continue applying of strategies of vocabulary learning and, how to help the poor language learners to select particular strategies to be succeeded in vocabulary learning through such strategies.

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10. In the studies of vocabulary acquisition, psychologically there is a gap that there is not specific focus why the learners apply particular vocabulary strategies more or less.

11. There are studies on the application of particular vocabulary learning strategies by the learners as general information but from technical point of view, there are not specific studies. For example there is not a technical study that if the learners shift from one or some particular vocabulary learning strategies to another, how the vocabulary acquisition procedure would process and how much the learners would be succeed.

12. There are not complete similarities or differences among a group of language learners; and similarities and differences are varied from one learner to another. In such situation, it should be suggested that vocabulary learning strategies as individual strategies and they should be considered from individual learning point of view; but the vocabulary learning strategies are discussed in the current studies as group strategies and from group learning point of view either directly or indirectly are considered and discussed.

13. The vocabulary knowledge is discussed from two points of view, firstly knowing of vocabulary knowledge and secondly using of vocabulary knowledge. Knowing of vocabulary knowledge includes passive knowledge which is varied from using vocabulary knowledge that is considered as active knowledge. In the studies of vocabulary learning, it is gap that there is not specific studies on which vocabulary learning strategies help the learners to have better using of vocabulary knowledge and which vocabulary learning strategies help the learners to know vocabulary knowledge only.

14. The importance and type of vocabulary learning strategies which are applied among the language learners are discussed in so many studies, but there are not specific researches on how to apply such particular vocabulary learning strategies consecutively for long-type of learning and what kind of procedure is needed to be applied.

15. In the studies of vocabulary, the particular new learning strategies for the language learners are suggested that they should apply to be more succeed, but the gap is that the

researchers do not show how to connect such particular new vocabulary learning strategies to the former vocabulary learning strategies that the learner already had adjusted to them.

16. The flexibilities of every one of vocabulary learning strategies can be as a helpful and useful facility for better application of vocabulary learning strategies by the learners, and easier extension of vocabulary learning strategies among more language learners. In this way, without application of flexibilities for every one of vocabulary learning strategies, some restrictions would occur. However, the studies of vocabulary learning strategies are researched to specific formats and procedures; and the flexibilities of vocabulary learning strategies are not studied and discussed as it should be focused in the studies of vocabulary learning strategies.

17. In the studies of vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies, there is not a distinctive line between the nature of target language whether it is second or foreign language.

18. The application of every one of vocabulary learning strategies are studied in language learning classes without any consideration from the effect of other course papers that the learners studied before or study simultaneously as they study language learning course. In such situation, it is necessary to be specific studies on probable effects of other course papers on vocabulary learning strategies as variables whether directly, indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, otherwise it is difficult to claim about the applications and outcomes of vocabulary learning strategies.

19. The majority of the studies of vocabulary includes the application of vocabulary learning strategies by the learners, but there is not specific studies on teachability characteristics and evaluation of teachability of such strategies; in other words, it is necessary to research on the possibility of evaluation of teaching particular vocabulary learning strategies, and how the teacher can teach it to the language learners in order to be applied in vocabulary learning procedure.

20. There is lack of balance and high correlation among teachers' approaches, methods and techniques in type of vocabulary learning strategies. Such type of lack is varied from some minimum level to some maximum level of range and from one language teaching class to another. The gap in the studies of vocabulary learning strategies in such case is that the type of

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balance is fixed without any flexibility and without consideration to any correlation among the levels of variation among different groups of language teachers and learners. In such situations, it is difficult to have scientific claim about the application of vocabulary learning strategies.

21. There is no a general agreement of approaches, procedures and evaluation among theoretical researchers, theoretical researchers and teachers, and teachers regarding vocabulary learning strategies. In this way, some problems in type of whole procedure of vocabulary learning strategies would occur. Such problems are as gaps in teachers' aspect of studies of vocabulary learning strategies that need to be studied and discussed more seriously.

22. Target language to be taught may come as a second or third language, or it is taught through mother tongue or other than mother tongue. In such situations, what type of procedure and outcomes regarding the application of every one of vocabulary learning strategies would occur. Such conditions should be more studied in order to be clarified.

23. Communicative competence is as a considerable phenomenon in language learning which is correlated with vocabulary learning strategies that need to be studied and discussed based on application, procedure and evaluation of vocabulary learning strategies.

24. The majority of application of vocabulary learning strategies in academic courses and for examination purposes. In such situations, examination purpose is a variable which may affect the outcomes of vocabulary learning strategies. Here, this question arises if the purpose of application of vocabulary learning strategies is for the long-life learning purpose only, what outcomes would occur, and when we compare application of vocabulary learning strategies for examination purpose with long-life learning purpose only, what outcomes would be obtained.

25. Motivation as a strong instrument for the learners to apply vocabulary learning strategies. However, there are not specific applied studies on the correlation between motivation and type of vocabulary learning strategies; how motivation can be useful and helpful empirically in application of vocabulary learning strategies; and how the teacher can develop motivation of the learners to apply vocabulary learning strategies more.

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26. Motivation can be as a beginning point for the application of vocabulary learning strategies and there is need that using of vocabulary learning strategies to be continued as a procedure. In this way, it is necessary to study how to motivate the learners to develop the continuity of such procedure.

27. Academic language is more abstract than social sciences and that in science; common words can take on specialized meaning (Janet, 1999). In the studies of vocabulary, it should be differences in application of vocabulary learning strategies which are used in academic language or not. Such differences need to be studied in order to develop clarification on the application of vocabulary learning strategies in academic language and another type of language.

28. The majority of studies of vocabulary for other than mother tongue are done on English language learning. Such studies should be done to other than English language, to generalize vocabulary learning strategies as general vocabulary learning strategies.

29. The different scientific backgrounds, fields and majors of the learners may affect application, procedure and outcomes of every one of vocabulary learning strategies. It should be scientific applied studies on the probable effects, and the correlation of such backgrounds and fields of the learners, and vocabulary learning strategies.

30. The proficiency level of same mother tongue of particular group may affect the application, procedure and outcomes of vocabulary learning strategies. The specific studies are necessary to be done in order to clarify the probable effects.

31. The type of test and examination of vocabulary knowledge should be correlated with the type of vocabulary learning strategies. Such type matter has ignorant to be studied and discussed as should be discussed in many studies.

32. In some general course classes such as General English Course as compulsory courses in school and university degree durations, the elementary, intermediate and advanced proficiency level English language learners participate at same class. In such classes, how teachers can present vocabulary learning strategies, how learners are asked to apply particular vocabulary learning strategies, and how the outcomes of application of particular vocabulary Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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learning strategies would be tested, scored and interpreted, are as problems which are as gaps in the studies of vocabulary learning of English as example that need to be studied and discussed as serious problem in many studies of vocabulary learning strategies in language learning classes.

33. The application of every one of vocabulary learning strategies by the learners whether it is imposed to be used or not, needs to be studied and discussed clearly and to be focused among the language learners as participants through the style of relationships of the teacher and every one of the learners, because of individual characteristics of the learners in type of vocabulary learning strategies are varied.

34. Since mainly the current experimental studies of vocabulary are based on the short-time of teaching and learning research which includes one session or more sessions and they have not organized based on long-life schedules, the generalization of particular outcomes of limited period of teaching and learning is difficult (sometimes) or even sometimes it is impossible. So there are needs to be longer-experimental type of studies to decide about the nature and scope of vocabulary; related approaches, methods, and techniques regarding of both teaching and learning of vocabulary from more scientific clear and obvious view that really it can solve some problem in vocabulary issues.

35. One of the serious gaps in the studies of vocabulary learning strategies is regarding balanced structured teaching approaches that focus on format training; and open-ended and un-structural activities that focus on cultural central content of the target language. From such two different approaches, teaching, learning, application, evaluation and outcomes of every one of vocabulary learning strategies would be varied. However, in the studies of vocabulary learning strategies, these two approaches based on, through, and from point of view of vocabulary learning strategies are not studied, discussed and focused as it should be.

36. Frequency of vocabulary can affect vocabulary learning, and vocabularies will be more focused when they have high frequency. In the studies of vocabulary learning strategies, there is not specific emphasis on the nature, application and outcomes of vocabulary learning strategies through frequency aspect that vocabularies have.

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37. There are two types of learning, inductive and deductive learning. The effect of every one of these two types of learning and vocabulary learning strategies on each others; and the correlation between these two types of learning and vocabulary learning strategies are as gaps in the current studies of application, procedure and outcomes of vocabulary learning strategies.

Conclusion

The nature of vocabulary, vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary learning strategies, and the approaches, methods and techniques of teaching vocabulary have been the subject of much debate. The sheer volume of the literature and welter of topics and findings of vocabulary and related subjects is incredible.

Our understanding of the relations between nature of vocabulary, vocabulary teaching and learning, vocabulary learning strategies, and the realistic situation of current studies of vocabulary in application are expended in several ways as gaps in the present study.

There is need that the importance of vocabulary learning strategies be considered, studied and discussed as it is repeatedly acknowledged theoretically and empirically in many studies.

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