Enhancing Students' Autonomous Vocabulary Learning for Academic Writing

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Abstract:

This study was intended to explore the role of the tutors' in enhancing in autonomous manner classroom vocabulary learning. Learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is becoming a necessity for English language learners in higher education institutions that adopt either traditional or open education nowadays. It plays a prominent role in developing the learners' language acquisition and achievement. The new trends in education that emphasize the learner's needs and motivations deserve more attention from teachers of English language because they constitute the foundations of the learner's language learning acquisition. Generally learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is desired in our universities. Students enter the university with different experiential backgrounds and learning achievements, but unfortunately they have few autonomous dispositions which higher education requires in learning.

Key words: Autonomous Vocabulary Learning, Academic Writing, English language learners, higher education institutions

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is keystone for every nation as long as development is measurable along the lines of by the level of the education of

the citizens. Being well aware of this vital element, Sudan as a developing nation, has contrived and invested much in education to make sure that every citizen has at least education up to secondary school level for effective interaction and dynamic life. This dream is yet to be realized due to poverty and ignorance.

Secondary education in Sudan is a program of three academic years. The aim at this stage of education is among other things to equip students with skills that can make them self-reliant as they move up the scales of education. Many students need to be guided in order to learn. They have no independent good approach to learning. Hence, the education authority has trained classroom tutors to identify the different learning styles students may have, in order to be nourished and developed. Learning Style refers to the preference or disposition of an individual to perceive and process information in a particular way or combination of ways. The idea that people learn differently is well-known and almost certainly dates back to the time ancient Greeks. Educators have for many years, noticed that some students prefer certain methods of learning to others. These dispositions, referred to as learning style, form a student's unique learning preference.

According to Cesarian and Eileen (1993) learning style is one factor that should be considered when planning teaching strategies but not to ignore the complexity of the learning process. In effect other factors like the environment, intellectual ability, emotions etc should also be taken into account. The application of holistic strategy will lead to better academic performance. Dunn and Grigg (2000) assessed learning style to be the way students begin to concentrate on processes, internalize and remember new and difficult academic information and is composed of both biological and developmental characteristics that make the identical instructional environments, methods and resources effective for some learners and ineffective for others. They believe that

learning is the way an individual master new and difficult skills.

The aim of this article is to examine autonomous vocabulary leaning. Concentration is on autonomy as a learning style.

Because of its important role in academic affairs in general and reading development specifically, vocabulary learning and instruction has been a well-researched area in the field of education for many years. Moreover it is such an area that linguists, teachers and educators have continued to draw new insights. *Vocabulary* refers to words we use to communicate in oral and print language. *Receptive vocabulary* refers to the words we understand through reading and listening. *Productive vocabulary* refers to the words we use to communicate through writing and speaking (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004). To put ones message across as effectively as it ought to be   through the medium of oral production, using oral and print language, interlocutors   must be , without hesitation, capable of   using words that they recognize and understand.

Viable reading comprehension requires two types of vocabulary, *word recognition vocabulary* and *word meaning* (Chall, 1983; as cited in Blachowicz, Fisher, & Watts-Taffe, 2005). *Word recognition* is the readers' ability to pronounce or figure out the word by using word attack strategies. *Word meaning* refers to words students know or can define. Though Learners are readily acquainted with the importance of both word recognition and word meaning, the emphasis in the present study will be on *word meaning*.

2. WHY TEACH VOCABULARY?

In reading, vocabulary knowledge is indispensable to comprehending text (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). When students do not understand at least 90% of the words in a text, they do not

adequately understand what they read (Hirsch, 2003; Sedita, 2005). Research suggests that students acquire 2,000 to 3,500 new words a year and know the meaning of approximately 50,000 words by the time they graduate from high school (Graves, 2006; Lehr, Osborn, and Hiebert, 2004; PREL, 2008).

As students progress from the lower elementary grades into the middle grades, the majority of their reading moves from narrative to expository text. *Narrative text* is fictional material that mainly uses one text structure (or format). Text structure is the way an author organizes the text (PREL, 2007, 2008). The narrative text structure usually includes plot, setting, problem, and resolution. This commonly used structure makes it easier for students to predict what the story will be about or what the author plans to write. *Expository text*, or nonfiction, usually has more complex content and higher-level vocabulary and is written using different types of text structures, such as description, compare and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution.

As a result, students find it difficult to anticipate what the author plans to write next or which direction the content will flow.

The vocabulary used in expository text builds the foundation for current and future learning. Teachers need to explicitly teach these words to help students comprehend the text. For example, the word *digest* used in the above text is repeated three times. If student understand *digest* in this context, they have a better chance of knowing this word when they learn about the digestive system in human bodies.

3. ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF VOCABULARY TEACHING

Students can have access to vocabulary learning through indirect and direct exposure to words in diverse language contexts. Upon communicating with others, For example,

students can learn vocabulary indirectly, through read aloud, and through autonomous reading (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Students can learn vocabulary directly when teachers target individual words and promote word-learning strategies (Armbruster, et al., 2001).

According to Michael Graves (2006), there are as many as four essential components of vocabulary instruction listed below.

1. Providing rich and varied language experiences
2. Teaching individual words explicitly
3. Teaching word-learning strategies
4. Fostering word consciousness

Now, more issues in connection with active vocabulary learning will be considered in the following parts, starting with effective academic vocabulary instruction. This part will focus more particularly on the roe to be played by students in learning.

4. WHAT IS EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION?

Blachowicz and Fisher's (2000) asserted that students should be responsible for taking an active role in learning new vocabulary words. Active engagement means "learning the meaning of specific words (where it is important to make connections between and among words and concepts), and learning strategies to become independent word learners" (p. 505). Therefore, the question to be posed here for the purpose of this project was to answer the question: How can we enhance young adolescents' active engagement with academic vocabulary.

Right from the outset a common understanding of academic vocabulary words should be built, considering both general academic words and content-specific words. For general academic word knowledge, Coxhead's work was exhaustively

used   (2000). She created a list of 560 academic vocabulary word families consisting of thousands of terms students would most likely see across content areas. However, this list was never intended as a prescriptive list of words to teach, and we did not use it that way. Rather, we used the list as a guide for the type of word we wanted to attend to as we encountered them in the texts we were reading. For example, *proceed,* a word from the list, can mean to move forward, and *proceeds* can indicate the money received from an economic venture.

Different forms of this word can be found in many other content areas, often with varying meanings. In science, students must follow lab *procedures*, and in math, solving equations requires a specific *process*. In social studies, students can read about a funeral *procession*. The discussion of words at this basic but interconnected level is important to the deeper learning of words and supports the principle of active engagement. As we encountered general academic words in our instructional texts with our students, we would stop to run short pair-shares or whole-class discussions on how these words are used in various contexts.

5. WORD WALLS

The prime function of word walls is that they provide visual support for all learners in their acquisition of academic vocabulary. Corson (1997) tells us that "words are only fully learned when they are available for active use" (p.699). We learned that it is important when creating a word wall that the words are terms students have created and manipulated, not simply words up for display (Fisher & Frey, 2008). The organization of word walls varies; some walls arrange terms in alphabetical order, some use common themes or units of study (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Yates, Cuthrell, & Rose, 2011).

6. MORPHOLOGY IN ACTIVE LEARNING

Morphology, the study of word structure, including roots, bases, and affixes, is an extremely powerful tool for building academic language proficiency. The majority of the words on Coxhead's (2000) list are complex in nature, as are many social studies content area words. Consider, for example, the terms *civil disobedience, jurisdiction, communism,* and *revolution.*

7. WORD SORTS

Word sorts can engage middle-level students in finding similarities and differences in word structures and word meanings (Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2010). One example of a word sort involved students receiving (or making a set of slippers of paper, each with a term related to the Civil War. Students then sorted their terms into "people," "places," "events" or other self-selected categories. This particular sort included the category "military words." We were then able to assess a student's understanding of an individual word, such as *Copperheads* (see Fig. 3), by asking him to justify his category choices, thus uncovering misconceptions to be explored.

Word sorts can also be used to further awareness of morphology (Templeton, et al., 2010).

For example, in the same unit, *emancipation* was analyzed for its root "man," and students made connections to words like *manacle* and *mandate*. Students then practiced with word sorts comprised of Civil War terms that shared common roots or affixes.

8. VOCABULARY JOURNALS

Vocabulary journals in content areas allow adolescent students to work with vocabulary terms using an "introduce, define, discuss, and apply" sequence (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p. 67). The

variations in the set-up of the journal reflect the needs of individual content areas. Interactive notebooks in a social studies classroom may include a vocabulary section for each unit. Students record word sorts, vocabulary, student friendly definitions, and visual representations for each term. In our classes, students reviewed, referenced, and revised their vocabulary records as they continued to construct more knowledge (see Fig. 4). Word learning is incremental in nature, and depth of word knowledge is built as students encounter words across various texts and contexts. Therein lays the power of vocabulary journals; students can revisit words, adding information about those words as they learn new nuances of and contexts for those words. Every page or section of a vocabulary journal then authentically grows as students' word knowledge grows.

CONCLUSION

Active academic vocabulary practice helps middle- level students actively engage with and use the challenging academic language of the content areas. The strategies discussed here have included   a few of the ones used successfully in word study. Other successful strategies may include student discussions, role plays, jeopardy-esque games, flash cards, comic strips, acrostic poems, and a plethora of other writing assignments.

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