

Vocabulary Learning Strategies for Independent EFL Readers : A Focus on Dictionary Use

กลวิธีการเรียนรู้คำศัพท์จากพจนานุกรมสำหรับผู้อ่านภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

This article introduces the idea that written texts can be a significant source of language input especially vocabulary for adult learners in EFL contexts where an opportunity for learners to interact with native speakers is rare. Learners can have an exposure to new words through reading in several ways: learn words incidentally by guessing meanings from context clues, engage in classroom activities that accompany reading texts, and use a dictionary while reading. Each option has its own strength and limitations.

In particular, the author suggests that there are sound psycholinguistic and pedagogic reasons for the use of dictionaries to improve vocabulary knowledge among EFL readers. Guessing words from meaning alone may not always lead to good retention since successful guessing depends on various factors. Moreover, it is hard for direct vocabulary instruction to deal with a large number of words that learners need to know. Training the learners to use a dictionary efficiently is a reasonable way to develop independent learners. To achieve this goal, learners need to be familiarised with various aspects of a dictionary. Also, strategic use of a dictionary can be introduced to EFL learners in a number of ways through classroom activities.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เสนอแนะว่าควรส่งเสริมให้ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศโดยเฉพาะผู้เรียนที่เป็นผู้ใหญ่แล้วเรียนรู้คำศัพท์จากการอ่าน เนื่องจากโดยทั่วไปผู้เรียนกลุ่มนี้มักไม่ได้มีปฏิสัมพันธ์กับเจ้าของภาษามากนัก ทั้งนี้ผู้เรียนสามารถจะเรียนรู้คำศัพท์ใหม่ๆ จากการอ่านได้หลายวิธี ได้แก่ อาศัยการเดาความหมายศัพท์จากบริบท ทำกิจกรรมในชั้นเรียน และใช้พจนานุกรมระหว่างการอ่าน อย่างไรก็ตามทางเลือกเหล่านี้มีทั้งข้อดีและข้อจำกัดในตนเอง

ผู้เขียนเสนอว่าการใช้พจนานุกรมเพื่อพัฒนาความรู้ด้านคำศัพท์เป็นสิ่งที่สมเหตุสมผลทั้งทางด้านจิตวิทยาและด้านการสอนภาษา การเดาความหมายคำศัพท์แต่เพียงอย่างเดียวอาจไม่ทำให้ผู้เรียนจำคำศัพท์ได้เสมอไป เพราะการที่จะเดาศัพท์ได้นั้นประกอบด้วยปัจจัยหลายอย่าง นอกจานนั้นยังเป็นเรื่องยากที่จะสอนคำศัพท์ในชั้นเรียน เพราะมีศัพท์มาก

มายที่นักเรียนจำเป็นต้องรู้ การฝึกให้ผู้เรียนสามารถใช้พจนานุกรมอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพเป็นหนทางในการส่งเสริมให้ผู้เรียนเป็นผู้ที่พึงตนเองได้ ดังนั้นผู้สอนจึงควรช่วยให้ผู้เรียนเกิดความคุ้นเคยกับองค์ประกอบของพจนานุกรม และควรใช้กิจกรรมในชั้นเรียนเพื่อพัฒนาลักษณะการใช้พจนานุกรมของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

The use of English in the world appears in three contexts: the regions where English is the primary language, e.g. USA, UK, etc.; the regions that have gone through extended periods of colonisation where English has an important status in language policies, e.g. Hong Kong, Singapore, India, etc.; and the regions where the use of English was initiated by non-native speakers from the need for modernisation and technology, e.g. China, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, etc. (Kachru, 1985). It follows that non-native learners of English in each group have different degrees of exposure to the language. In the case of Thailand, an opportunity for students to interact with native speakers is rare. This explains why Thai learners may not be as motivated to learn English and proficient in English as their counterparts in other contexts.

Based on the input hypothesis, which states that learners acquire a second language when they have opportunities to understand natural language or comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), written texts at appropriate level of difficulty should serve as a rich source of comprehensible input for Thai learners. In fact, language educators agree on the positive effects of longer periods of reading on second language learning: building awareness of vocabulary and structures which become more salient in written than in oral forms (Grabe, 1991;

Wallace, 1989), enhancing background knowledge, improving comprehension skills, promoting confidence and motivation (Grabe, 1991) and offering learners the opportunity to 'stand back' and reflect on areas of difference between their own usage and the way meaning is conveyed in the texts (Wallace, 1989).

Of my particular interest is vocabulary acquisition through reading since vocabulary has been considered the number one priority by students learning foreign languages (Crow, 1986) as well as teachers (Knight, 1994). I would like to propose that vocabulary learning strategies should be promoted among adult learners so that they can be responsible for their own learning. Specifically, the strategic use of dictionaries should be a way to enhance learners' autonomy. This article covers three main areas: the role of reading in vocabulary learning, dictionary use, and implications for instruction.

The Role of Reading in Vocabulary Learning

On this issue, scholars hold two distinct positions. Some support incidental vocabulary learning while others emphasise the advantages of direct vocabulary instruction. The incidental vocabulary learning hypothesis (Nagy & Herman, 1985), based on first language vocabulary learning, proposes that words are learned gradually through repeated exposures. Taking a large number of words one has to learn into

consideration, they conclude that direct instruction cannot be responsible for all of them. Therefore, extensive reading should be promoted because it will lead to an increase in learners' vocabulary. In a similar vein, second language researchers like Pitts, White, and Krashen (1989) report that intermediate ESL students in the experimental group in their study who read light literature in English acquired a small but a significant amount of vocabulary while the control group did not. However, the research in this area seems to pose a methodological problem. That is, such findings are not surprising in light of the fact that the control groups were not given any exposure to the texts. A more legitimate research design should allow the control groups to memorise the target words in some way within an identical time frame (Coady, 1997).

Many second language researchers, on the other hand, point out the insufficiency of learning words by inferring meaning from context through reading alone. This process is lengthy and error-prone (Harley, Howard, and Roberge, 1996) due to various factors: too few encounters with target words (Hulstijn, 1992), beyond the learner's linguistic ability to use (Nation, 1990), and some context clues that are too obvious to draw learners' attention to target words (Mondria & Wit-de Boer, 1991). Moreover, Paribakht and Wesche (1997) report that even though extensive reading among adults studying English for academic purposes leads to significant acquisition of second language vocabulary, acquisition was greater qualitatively and quantitatively when the participants received direct vocabulary instruction. In addition, activities that draw learners' attention to meaning connections

between thematically related words (e.g., semantic mapping), activities that raise learners' awareness of internal structure of words (e.g., word families) and opportunities to use vocabulary for discussion or writing promote substantial vocabulary learning (Harley, Howard, & Roberge, 1996).

In my judgement, vocabulary instruction, which requires learners to intentionally learn words, plays an important role in vocabulary learning because, as Hulstijn (1997) suggests, it creates a link between the word's form and its meaning, which eventually leads to retention.

Reflecting upon Nagy and Herman's idea that the number of words that one has to learn are beyond the scope that direct instruction can handle, I find it pedagogically reasonable. I think this idea should shape the way we provide vocabulary instruction for adult learners, who are mature enough to take care of their own learning. Classroom activities should aim at promoting learner's autonomy. If learners are encouraged to look at classroom activities as ways to develop their own vocabulary learning strategies, the outcome should be favourable. Stated another way, they should not consider English lessons the only source to learn new words. One way to achieve this goal in EFL context is by motivating learners to read materials of their interest and encouraging independent vocabulary learning. This leads us to the next topic, dictionary use.

Dictionary Use

The focus of this paper is the use of dictionaries¹, which was reported by learners as the most popular and the most useful strategy to access meaning (Schmitt, 1997). Even though guessing and learning words through reading fit the communicative approach better than other strategies, I choose

not to discuss it primarily because much of the second language research has already concerned itself with this issue. In addition, this strategy may not be as promising as it seems because successful guessing depends on various factors: that 98 % of the lexical items in a text are already known (Nation & Coady, 1988); that learners have reached a certain proficiency level to make use of the context (Ryan, 1997); that learners have sufficient background knowledge of the topic (Schmitt, 1997); and that the context itself must be rich enough with clues to enable guessing (Huckin, Hynes, & Coady, 1993).

Since the advent of communicative language teaching, the benefits of dictionaries have been overlooked. Oftentimes, EFL readers are discouraged from using dictionaries due to the concern that looking up words frequently interferes with short-term memory, which consequently disrupts the comprehension process. However, research supporting this claim is notably lacking. The relationship between the looking up process and reading comprehension is not well understood.

Aspects of Dictionary Information

One aspect of dictionary information is whether the dictionary is bilingual or monolingual. Bilingual dictionaries have been considered inferior to good monolingual counterparts because they often offer a too simplistic one-to-one relationship between words in the target language and words in learners' first language and because they do not encourage engagement with the target language (McCarthy, 1990). Nevertheless, the majority of learners below advanced

levels find bilingual dictionaries more helpful and motivating to use (Horsfall, 1997). In my opinion, it will be naïve to abandon bilingual dictionaries altogether. An advantage of a bilingual dictionary is that it is made for users of a particular first language, allowing them to incorporate information helpful in coping with known errors, false friends, and contrastive problems for the pair of languages (Scholfield, 1997). One way around this controversy, as suggested by Schmitt (1997), is by including more and better information in bilingual dictionaries. According to Schmitt (1997), *Word Routes* series of bilingual dictionaries (1994) is a move in this direction. As for the problem regarding learners' tendency to translate word for word when using a bilingual dictionary, in light of the fact that there is threshold second language competence that prevents learners of lower proficiency from making efficient use of monolingual dictionaries (Scholfield, 1997), it is advisable that EFL learners be trained to use bilingual dictionaries strategically. Language teachers need to make them aware of what bilingual dictionaries can do and, what they cannot do (McCarthy, 1990).

I now turn to a discussion of other aspects of dictionary information, which involves amount of information, types of information, symbols and other graphic conventions, and explanation of meaning.

A survey of three major learner's dictionaries² by McCarthy (1990) reveals that each of them contains between fifty and seventy thousand words and phrases. All of them offer International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). In particular, the *COBUILD* dictionary provides more information than the others by using bold face and superscripts to indicate syllables that should receive main stresses and a range of possible pronunciations for weak syllables. McCarthy raises an

interesting point by stating that how much users will benefit from a dictionary depends on their linguistic knowledge (e.g., phonetic symbols, etc.) and their willingness to learn complex notations provided in the first few pages.

With respect to explanation of meaning, the most critical problem of EFL readers is how to locate the right sense since most words in English have multiple senses. In my opinion, whether they will be able to access the meaning easily and accurately or not depends partly on how dictionary information is organised and the language used in definitions. A more recent survey of four EFL dictionaries³ by Scholfield (1997) shows that each of the dictionaries deals with these issues rather differently. To enable the user to access the right sense without having to read all the other definitions of the same word form when he/she has managed to guess some of the meaning in advance, the *Cambridge* dictionary and the *Longman* dictionary use guide words in capitals, in addition to definitions. Furthermore, in order to save time of those who are unable to jump to the right sense because they have no idea about the word they are looking up, all except the *Oxford* dictionary starts from the most frequently occurring sense. As regards the entry division, the *COBUILD* dictionary keeps all senses and parts of speech in one entry whereas the *Longman* dictionary has one entry for each part of speech, regardless of meanings. The *Oxford* dictionary separates entries for parts of speech and words historically unrelated. The *Cambridge* dictionary has one entry for every group of senses recognisably different in meaning. Therefore, it is likely that the *Longman* dictionary will benefit those who can guess the part of speech of an unknown

word the most because it reduces amount of material that they have to pay attention to (Scholfield, 1997). Finally, to facilitate learner's understanding of definitions, the *Longman* dictionary limits the defining vocabulary while the *COBUILD* dictionary uses non-conventional dictionary definition style (e.g., by beginning sentences with *If...*).

Dictionary Strategies

As mentioned earlier, dictionary use does not have a good reputation in EFL reading instruction since excessive use of dictionary as opposed to guessing or skipping unimportant words may disrupt the fluency of the reading process. Padron and Waxman's (1988) study shows negative correlation of reported amount of dictionary use with gains in reading proficiency of Hispanic learners over a three-month period. Besides, a research comparing performances in reading comprehension tests between Israeli learners who had access to dictionaries and those who did not reveals that there was no difference between the two groups (Bensoussan & Laufer, 1984). Nevertheless, it is hard to reject the value of dictionary use on the basis of these findings since the studies did not investigate how competent the learners were in using dictionaries.

One way to learn how the use of a dictionary can benefit EFL readers is by asking successful readers why and how they look up words in dictionaries. Gu and Johnson (1996) indicate that skilful use of dictionaries of Chinese university EFL learners positively correlated with the vocabulary size test and English test scores. According to the learners in this study, they choose to look up words because the word appears several times in the passage; they want to confirm their guess; and not knowing the word may prevent them from understanding a whole sentence or even a

whole paragraph. Their findings reveal that when the learners look up a word: they look for phrases or set expressions that go with the word; they focus on subtle differences in meaning; they read sample sentences illustrating various senses of the word; if they get interested in another new word in the definitions of the word they look up, they look up this word as well; if the new word is inflected, they remove the inflections to recover the form (e.g., for 'created,' look for 'create'); if the new word has a prefix or suffix, they try the entry for the stem; if the unknown word appears to be an irregularly inflected form or a spelling variant, they scan nearby entries; if there are multiple senses of homographic entries, they use various information (e.g., part of speech, pronunciation, style, collocation, meaning, etc.) to reduce them by elimination; and they try to integrate dictionary definitions into the context where the unknown word was met and arrive at a contextual meaning by adjusting for complementation and collocation, part of speech, and breadth of meaning.

The strategic use of English dictionaries by EFL readers suggests that having access to a dictionary may result in favourable outcomes because learners do not necessarily use them excessively. Hulstijn's (1993) study confirms this idea. Dutch high school students in his study had a tendency to look up words relevant to their goal of reading – either to summarise the text or to answer comprehension questions – more frequently than words that were irrelevant, even though they were not working under time pressure, and even though looking up a word's meaning could be made easily and quickly by the aid of the computer. And words whose meanings could be inferred easily were looked up less

frequently than words whose meaning could not easily be inferred. Interestingly, high inferring ability does not necessarily result in less dictionary use than low inferring ability. Hulstijn (1993) explains that EFL readers with good inferring ability must have ended the process of inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word by consulting a dictionary in order to verify their guess.

In order to give a broader perspective of dictionary strategies, I now turn to a discussion of unsuccessful use of dictionaries. Nesi and Meara (1994) assigned EFL adult learners in their study the task of understanding the meanings of a set of words and asked them to use the words immediately by writing up sentences. They found that sometimes learners went through the following steps when looking up a word: paying attention to a word or phrase that they are familiar with in the definition, assigning that meaning to the target word, and ignoring the rest. For example, reading the definition for the word, 'retard' (if something **retards** a process or development, it causes it to happen more slowly), a learner assumed that 'retard' means 'develop(ment)' and wrote a sentence: **If children eat much food they retard very fast.* However, the findings from this study need to be interpreted with caution because there were no contexts for the target words and the learners were required to use them at once. Nevertheless, the study sheds some light on the way learners interpret dictionary entries. And if this is the case, language teachers as well as researchers will have to think of the way to deal with the kind of strategy explained in this study. I propose that the learners' inability to identify the key word in a definition may result from their lack of grammatical knowledge (e.g. parts of speech, sentence patterns, etc.)

In sum, research that concerns dictionary strategies suggests that learners do

not necessarily overuse their dictionaries while reading. In order to decide if they should look up a word or not, readers take into account the importance of the word to their comprehension of the text, their goals of reading, and the inferability of the word. However, it is evident that when looking up a word sometimes they cannot grasp the key concept of a definition. But what leads to this problem is unclear and needs further investigations. In any event, it will be misleading to convince students that the meaning of all unfamiliar words can be inferred on the basis of context clues. A sound reading pedagogy not only shows students how to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words, but also ensures that they can verify their inferences by consulting an authority, such as a dictionary.

Dictionary Use and Vocabulary Learning

There seems to be room for dictionary use for teaching methodologies based on the notions of conscious and unconscious language learning. From the viewpoint of Krashen's input hypothesis, dictionary use can play a supporting role by making input comprehensible; therefore, it indirectly aids acquisition. In addition, dictionary use is especially relevant to the more recent view of second language acquisition that emphasises the role of noticing or conscious awareness because using a dictionary is a conscious act of focusing on a linguistic form (Scholfield, 1997).

Based on the 'depth of processing' hypothesis, which maintains that the more meaningful information is processed in various ways, the better it is retained (Craik & Lockhart, 1972), dictionary use, itself, may contribute to long-term word learning since the looking up process

mentioned earlier (especially when writing) requires a certain degree of effort. Nevertheless, research findings that support this claim are still lacking. It may be beneficial for EFL readers to consider Scholfield's (1997) advice that the combination of inferencing, which has been claimed to require depth of processing, and dictionary use, which ensures that the information retained is correct, should be employed. I take Scholfield's idea one step further by saying that sometimes information from inferencing alone may not be well retained without the use of a dictionary because, psychologically speaking, some learners may be reluctant to remember information of which they have no confidence. In fact, research shows that the low verbal ability learners who use a dictionary learn more than those who do not and they benefited from the dictionary more than high verbal ability learners (Knight, 1994). It will, therefore, be unwise to leave learners of low verbal ability to their own devices since they are more dependent than high verbal ability students on vocabulary knowledge.

Implications for Instruction

Recently, some scholars have started to support the pedagogical value of dictionary use in second language reading. After finding that despite different routes EFL readers take to reach their reading goal; that is, some go through a text once, others twice; and some look up more words than others, they all can succeed in comprehending a text, Hulstijn (1993) suggests that teachers should show EFL readers practical ways to comprehend a text and give them freedom in choosing if they want to infer meaning of an unknown word before deciding whether to look up its meaning, or to look up the word right away, or even to ignore the word altogether. Furthermore, Horsfall (1997) points out that a

dictionary can help focus learners' attention and increase concentration by releasing the learners from the need to keep asking the teacher what something means, a procedure that is unavoidably distracting for others. And the teacher in turn is then freed to spend time more productively than simply being 'a walking dictionary.'

There are several options that teachers can choose to familiarise learners with dictionary use. First, like McCarthy (1990), Horsfall (1997) is concerned with the fact that the introduction to a dictionary is rarely consulted, and many useful features tend to remain undiscovered by most learners. Perhaps, it will be useful for language teachers to go through a list of notations in a dictionary with their students and to familiarise them with basic linguistic knowledge such as how to read phonetic symbols. Second, during a reading task in class, whenever an unknown word comes up, teachers should discuss the options to use a dictionary and/or guess (Scholfield, 1997). Third, to promote vocabulary learning, dictionary use can be accompanied by note taking and/or memorisation strategies. When noting down words, learners should take into consideration how best to categorise

words (e.g., alphabetically, by function, by topic, by date, by synonyms), and if they should write the target language and then their first language, or vice versa (Horsfall, 1997). It is also useful for learners to keep a diary of any problems they encounter when looking up items, and discuss them in class later (Scholfield, 1997). He suggests further that some vocabulary memory strategies (e.g., depending on mental images, the sound of the word, and example sentences) can be applied to pictures in learners' dictionaries, real sound exemplars (as in *Longman Interactive Dictionary*, 1993). Corpus-based dictionaries are especially appropriate since they contain authentic example sentences. Forth, teachers can create or use activities from workbooks that accompany dictionaries. For example, *COBUILD's Learning Real English* workbook (Fox and Kirby, 1987) contains exercises that help learners understand the explanations, grammatical information, and pronunciation in the *COBUILD* dictionary. The *Longman Dictionary Skills Handbook* (McAlpin, 1988) guides learners to look up words successfully. Lastly, learners should know how to choose a dictionary for their own use. In order to decide which dictionary is suitable for them, learners can use the chart designed by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) to make a survey of dictionaries.

Notes

1. The list of vocabulary learning strategies for independent EFL readers adapted from Gu and Johnson (1996) and Schmitt (1997) appears in the appendix.
2. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1989), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1987), and Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (1987).
3. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1995), Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995), Collins COBUILD English Dictionary (1995), and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995).

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Appendix

Vocabulary learning strategies for independent EFL readers adapted from Gu and Johnson (1996) and Schmitt (1997)

(Note that items from Schmitt (1997) are indicated by *)

1 Guessing strategies

1.1 Use of linguistic cues/immediate context

- Analysing part of speech
- Analysing word structure
- Analysing any available pictures*
- Use of examples
- Checking guessed meaning against the immediate context

1.2 Use of background knowledge/wider context

- Use of logical development (e.g., cause and effect)
- Use of topic knowledge
- Checking guessed meaning against other words or expressions in the passage
- Looking for definitions or paraphrases in the passage to confirm meaning of a new word

2. Dictionary strategies

2.1 Dictionary strategies for comprehension

- Looking up an unknown word that appears frequently or that prevents one from understanding a whole sentence/paragraph.
- Looking up an unknown word to confirm guessed meaning

2.2 Extended dictionary strategies

- Focusing on examples of use
- Looking for phrases or expressions that go with the word
- Consulting a dictionary for subtle differences in meanings/usage of a known word
- Looking up another new word in the definitions of the word one looks up

2.3 Looking-up strategies

- Removing the inflections to recover the original form (e.g., for 'created,' look for 'create')
- Looking for the stem for a word with a prefix or suffix
- Scanning nearby entries when the unknown word appears to be an irregular inflected form or a spelling variant
- Using various information (e.g., part of speech, pronunciation, style, collocation, meaning, etc.) to reduce multiple senses or homographic entries
- Integrating dictionary definition into the context of the unknown word to arrive at a contextual meaning by adjusting for complementation and collocation, part of speech, and breadth of meaning.

3. Note-taking strategies

3.1 Meaning-oriented note-taking strategies

- Making a note of the meaning of a commonly used word
- Making a note of the word that matches one's personal interest
- Putting synonyms or antonyms together
- Writing down the English synonyms, explanations, or L1 equivalent

3.2 Usage-oriented note-taking strategies

- Copying a useful expression or phrase

- Writing down the collocations, grammatical information, and examples of usage

4. Memory strategies

4.1 Rehearsal

- Use of word lists
- Use of flash cards*
- Oral repetition
- Visual repetition

4.2 Encoding

- Association/elaboration
- Imagery
- Visual encoding
- Auditory encoding
- Word structure
- Semantic encoding
- Contextual encoding
- Connecting word to a personal experience

5. Activation strategies

6. Metacognitive strategies

6.1 Selective attention

- Knowing when a new word or phrase is essential for comprehension
- Skipping unimportant words*
- Knowing which words are important to learn
- Having a sense of which word can/cannot be guessed
- Knowing when to look up words
- Making a note of important words

6.2 Self-initiation

- Reading materials in English as much as possible
- Continuing to study word over time*
- Testing oneself with word tests*
- Using various means to figure out meaning of unknown words