

## Conceptualisation of Language and Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Key Aspect in Every Curriculum Area

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**ABSTRACT** Teaching vocabulary well is a key aspect of developing successful readers. In line with the constructivist theory literacy is a social practice, learners learn academic vocabulary through social interactions. Challenges of such conceptualization and implementation of vocabulary development strategies are numerous. This conceptual paper examines Language Learning (LLS) and Vocabulary Language Strategies (VLS) used to teach vocabulary in schools. The paper reviews literature on the philosophical concept of Language learning strategies and Vocabulary Language Strategies. The paper analyzes the significant usage of VLS as prominent strategies in teaching vocabulary as informed by conceptual and theoretical frameworks of cognitive and metacognitive theories which have been proved by reading researchers in L1, ESL and EFL teaching contexts. A number of data bases in fields such as sociology, early childhood, and psychology were used to examine literature on VLS.

### INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to review Language and Learning Strategies (LLS) and Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). This paper explores vocabulary instruction and its benefits. Various aspects of vocabulary instruction will be covered, including practices, research based language and vocabulary learning strategies. In addition, the paper will share ideas on effective instructional strategies that primary grades teachers can use to teach vocabulary in the language and the difference between direct and indirect instruction and will be disseminated to teachers.

These strategies can be used to help teachers create a more conducive environment in which teachers can feel more comfortable as they progress towards the goal of teaching vocabulary. It is hoped that teachers will use these strategies to help learners to become competent readers who can read the text with understanding. In this paper, important research based language and learning strategies vocabulary will be shared to enhance the efficiency of instructional strategies that primary grades teachers can use to teach vocabulary.

It is assumed that vocabulary learning strategy is one of the fundamental factors in attaining success in the academic field. In comprehension strategies play a critical role because readers use them to construct intelligible mental representation and explanation of the situation described in the text (Graesser 2007). In a class-

room setting, teachers must provide for a variety of learners with a variety of words to learn, and their implications. Learners need strong instructional opportunities to build their personal warehouse of words to develop deep levels of word knowledge and acquire a toolbox of learning strategies that aids their independent acquisition of VLS (Butler et al. 2010). However, there continues to be little research that conclusively identifies the best methods or combination of methods of vocabulary instruction (NRP 2000). In their research of first and second language reading/vocabulary, Hunt and Beglar (2005) recommend that teachers should use a combination of direct and indirect techniques in order to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Using direct techniques entails teaching specific words, such as teaching vocabulary prior to reading a selection. Employing indirect technique means helping learners develop an appreciation for words and having them read a lot (Baumann et al. 2003; Hunt and Beglar 2005).

Teachers should incorporate vocabulary as an essential component of communication and comprehension competence. They should attach importance to current research-based strategies to teach language. Research indicates that without adequate vocabulary skills, learners' ability to communicate are severely limited (Westwood 2001).

Research has shown that vocabulary is a principle contributor to comprehension, fluency and achievement (Ahour and Salamzadeh

2014; Griffiths 2013; Graesser 2007; Westwood 2001). Chall and Jacobs (2003) and Hirsch (2003) indicated that “word knowledge is crucial to reading comprehension and determines how well learners will be able to comprehend the texts they read”. This necessitates the need to have learners afforded strong instructional chances to build their personal warehouse of words to develop deep levels of word knowledge and acquire a toolbox of learning strategies that aid their independent achievement of VLS (Butler et al. 2010). This paper thus aims to illustrate that vocabulary is the predictor of success in reading and that if we could find ways of supporting learners in class, more learners will be able to read the text with understanding (Nation 2013; Liu 2010; Wagner 2005).

### **Problem Statement**

Research indicates that there are various causes of reading difficulties. One such reading problem is founded on learners’ inability to accumulate adequate vocabulary and relate vocabulary or words to contextual meaning or comprehension.

### **Purpose of Inquiry and Inquiry Questions**

This conceptual paper is envisioned to classify and augment understanding of the strategies that can enhance language and vocabulary in learners. Therefore, the probe questions for this paper are:

- How can various VLS be employed to enhance learners’ language learning?
- How can various VLS enhance learners’ vocabulary learning?

## **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Social Constructivism as a Theoretical Framework for VLS and LLS**

According to Rose (2012), Scott et al. (2008), state that “literacy is a social practice, so learners learn academic vocabulary through social interactions as members of the learning community”. Therefore, effective teachers of language and literacy provide practices that stimulate rich uses of language within a social context that promotes vocabulary leaning. In this regard, vocabulary is referred to as the glue that holds

stories, ideas and content together making comprehension accessible to learners (Li 2010; Rupley et al. 1998).

For the purpose of this paper the researcher identified the social constructivist theory as the most relevant learning theory. According to social learning theory, learning is a reasonably enduring change in visible behaviour that occurs as a result of experience (Oxford 2011; Slavin 2000; Eggen and Kauchak 2001). The emphasis is thus on the acquisition of new behaviours via the imitation of actions modelled by the other which is a teacher in the context of this paper. The same applies to vocabulary knowledge: it comes about when the individual controls another to behave in a certain way. Usually in the classroom, it is the teacher who is the significant other to the learner, resulting in the learner acquiring some vocabulary competency. The social learning theory emphasizes that learning occurs as a result of reinforcement of particular behaviours by the learners social and environmental influences. Within the context of this paper, vocabulary is viewed as a conditioned behaviour which cannot occur in a vacuum. The implication of this theory is that if teachers can provide rich and varied language experiences, teach individual words, teach word-learning strategies and foster word consciousness to the learners on a regular basis, they act as positive role models (Alqohtani 2015; Graves 2006).

The teacher must instil learners to attain self-regulatory competence in order to become independent readers and learn to read and use the appropriate strategies needed for the text. These processes are planned and adapted to support the pursuit of personal goals in changing learning environments. Zimmerman (1998) proposed the idea of learners themselves being the source of plans, intentions, strategies and the emotions that are necessary to create meaning from the written text. According to Zimmerman (1998), teaching multiple strategies is important, since the self-regulatory strategy will not work for all learners and using a few strategies will not work on all tasks. In this regard, Zimmerman suggests “multiple self-regulatory strategies rather than single strategies and states that learners can be taught to become more self-regulated. This view is linked to the constructivist theory”. By learning to self-regulate a skill from peers, parents or teachers, each new generation of learners can build on the achievement of prior generations

and avoid the mistakes of the past (Zimmerman 1998). This is relevant to vocabulary learning strategies.

### **Language and Vocabulary Learning Strategies (LLS and VLS): Evidence from Literature**

A review of vocabulary learning strategies to be taught in developing language and comprehension in learners is important. The purpose of reviewing research-based literature is to provide teachers with the theoretical knowledge base of what research says about teaching vocabulary. Teachers teach from experience, it is appropriate and orderly that in their classrooms, they should integrate theory and practice to enhance learners' language and vocabulary. In addition, studies demonstrate that successful learners are those who apply a variety of strategies since this contributes to learners' success in language skills and vocabulary. Both L1 and L2 researchers agree that good language learners are those who have better ways of handling their problems in the learning process when the need arises (Annisa 2013; Nation 2001).

Oxford (1990: 8) states that "learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations". In this view the learner is not passive but is actively involved in the learning process. In addition, Oxford explains that the importance of learning strategies is that they improve proficiency and greater self-confidence in learners. The learner is confident because when the need arises he/she knows which strategy to use which makes learning more enjoyable.

There is an interrelationship between strategies of language learning and vocabulary learning strategies. According to Nation (2001); Schmitt (1997) language learning strategies (LLS) form a sub-class of learning strategies in general whereas vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) constitute a sub-class of language learning strategies. In the same vein, researchers such as O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) confirmed that VLS forms a sub-class of framework for language learning strategies and for this reason are applicable to a wide variety of language learning (LL) tasks. In essence, the vast majority strategies of language learning list-

ed in taxonomy by Oxford (1990) are either vocabulary learning strategies or can be used for vocabulary learning tasks. In this paper the researcher reviewed language and vocabulary learning. This is because in learning any language, vocabulary becomes crucial and therefore it should be taught and learnt.

Oxford (1990: 9) states that:

*"Features of LLS contribute to the goal of communicative competence which allow learners to become more self-directed, expand the role of teachers, problem-oriented, specific actions to be taken by the learner, involve many aspects of the learner, not just cognitive, support learning both directly and indirectly, are not always observable, are often conscious, can be taught, are flexible and are influenced by a variety of factors"*.

### **Categories of Language Learning Strategies (LLS)**

A number of researchers have proposed several classifications of language learning strategies. For example, Rubin (1981), Oxford (1990) and Oxford and Crookall (1990: 404) classified language learning strategies into two broad categories namely direct and indirect strategies which they sub-divided into six categories. According to Oxford and Crookall (1990: 404), the following is the definition of each strategy category:

#### **Direct Language Learning Strategies**

These strategies are important because they are directly involved and deal with the target language. They include the following sub-strategies:

*Memory Language Learning:* These are methods specifically tailored to help learners to store new information and retrieve it later. For example grouping, imagery, rhyming or moving.

*Cognitive Language Learning:* These are skills that involve manipulation or transformation of the language material in direct ways. For example reasoning, analysis, notes taking, summarizing and practicing in naturalistic settings.

*Compensation Language Learning:* These are behaviours used to compensate for missing knowledge of some kind. For example, guessing meanings from context and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning.

### Indirect Strategies

These are important strategies that support and manage language learning.

They include the following sub-strategies:

*Metacognitive Strategies:* These are behaviours used for centering, arranging, planning and evaluating one's learning.

*Social Strategies:* These are actions involving other people in the language learning process. For example questioning and cooperating with peers.

*Affective Strategies:* These are techniques which help learners to gain better control over their emotions, motivations and attitudes related to language learning. For example reducing anxiety, self-encouragement and self-reward (Alsaaw 2013).

### Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

There are various strategies to teach vocabulary. It is important for teachers to know a variety of strategies because they can assist their learners' individual vocabulary learning needs. Vocabulary learning strategies comprise knowledge about the mechanisms used to learn vocabulary as well as specific actions or mental operations taken by learners to:

- find out the meaning of unknown words;
- retain them in long-term memory; and
- use them in oral or written mode (Catala'n 2003: 56).

There are many strategies that can affect the process by which vocabulary information is obtained, stored and retrieved for use (Simon and Tavernier 2011; Schmitt 1997: 203). The National Reading Panel (2000) found that vocabulary learning strategies are a necessary and important factor in primary grades and can have long-term effects. The findings suggest that primary teachers may be able to help narrow, or halt the widening gap of word knowledge through explicit teaching of vocabulary by using VLS effectively. Therefore, teachers should have a knowledge base of the research-based strategies and how to employ them.

As in language learning strategies several researchers classified vocabulary learning strategies in many ways. Gu and Johnson (1996) classified vocabulary learning strategies into 7 categories namely metacognitive regulation, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note-taking

strategies, rehearsal strategies, encoding strategies and activation strategies. However, in order to address this gap, Schmitt (1997) proposed a taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) which are divided into two broad categories namely, discovery and consolidation strategies. These two broad categories are subdivided into five sub-categories namely determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Social strategies are included in both categories. According to Schmitt, social strategies can be used for both discovery and determination purposes as is discussed below.

#### *Determination/Discovery Vocabulary Learning (DET)*

Discovery strategies help the student to discover the initial word that is introduced (Schmitt 1997). Discovery strategies include several determination strategies and social strategies. A learner may discover a new word's meaning through guessing from context, guessing or by asking someone else. According to Schmitt (1997: 205-206), all strategies employed in discovery activities could be used as consolidation strategies. Strategies for the discovery of a new word include strategies of determination which are used by an individual when faced with the discovery of a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise. Determination strategies facilitate gaining knowledge of a new word by means of guessing from any available information and from mother tongue, texts and consulting reference materials such as a dictionary, word list and flashcards.

#### *Dictionary Use as a Vocabulary Learning Strategy*

The use of a dictionary can be used in both receptive and productive skills in language learning. Teachers help learners to develop a so-called dictionary by writing new words in the book. Scholfield (1982: 185) maintains that looking for a word in a dictionary is far from performing a purely mechanical operation. Skills may be practiced separately through well-designed activities and only in this way can effective dictionary use be maximised.

Word part analysis can be helpful for learners to learn both high frequency and low frequency words (Nation 2001). To achieve this

goal, learners must know the meanings of the common word parts and to be able to re-express the dictionary definition of a word to include the meaning of its prefix and if possible, its stem and suffix (Nation 2001: 278).

### Consolidation Strategies

The second category of vocabulary strategies is the consolidation strategy and this includes.

*Firstly, Social Vocabulary Strategies (SOC) in which* teachers must provide learners with an opportunity to interact with others. This involves disobeying a new word's meaning by asking someone else who knows, such as classmates or by discussing during small group work.

*Secondly, Memorisation as Learning Strategy (MEM) which* involves making connections between the to-be-learned word and some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery or grouping. This play an important role in helping learners to commit new words into memory and in the whole process of vocabulary learning and can have long-term retention (Schmitt 1997: 213). In this view, learners can learn to memorise words using certain techniques. These include, studying a word using grouping, story line through Peg Method or Loci Method, grouping words together by colour, size, function, likes/dislikes, or any other feature that makes sense. Learners can also paraphrase a word's meaning, use multi-word chunks (phases or idioms, or put the words in a meaningful context or explicitly study a word's spelling or pronunciation, study the grammatical or morphological aspect of a word, use cognates or physical actions to aid recall, of a word and the Keyword method (Nation 1990).

*Thirdly, Cognitive Strategies which exhibit the common function of manipulation or transformation of the target language learner.* Researchers such as Lin (2001, Fowle (2002) and Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) indicate the advantage of the cognitive strategies as the enhancing of vocabulary acquisition. The mechanical means involve taking notes in class or making use of study aids such as word list, flash cards, vocabulary sections in text books, labelling physical objects, tapes of word lists and vocabulary notebooks.

### Metacognitive Strategies (MET)

Metacognitive strategies are broad and concerned with more efficient learning (Schmitt 1997: 216). These play an important role in language learning. Within the metacognitive strategies teachers should train learners to control and evaluate their own learning through various ways (Schmitt 1997). For example, using spaced word practice, continuing to study word overtime and self-testing.

Research by NRP (2000) and Daniels and Zamelman (2004) indicate that vocabulary instruction is a necessary and important factor in primary reading instruction and can have long-term effects. These observations clearly confirm that vocabulary learning is a more complex process and that it involves seeing, hearing and using words in a meaningful way (Daniels and Zamelman 2004: 13).

### Research-based Vocabulary Teaching Practices

Researchers Graves (2006) and Christ and Wang (2010), identified four research-based vocabulary teaching practices that teachers can use in supporting young children in the teaching of vocabulary instruction which will be discussed below:

#### *Rich Varied Language Experiences*

Listening and speaking in the primary grades are ways teachers can promote vocabulary growth. Teachers must allow learners to learn words through listening, speaking, reading and writing is key to an effective vocabulary program. Most of the new words primary grades children learn come from listening and discussion. Teachers of primary grades need to directly build their learners oral vocabularies through interactive oral reading (Graves 2006). Effective interactive reading includes:

- Using interesting and enjoyable books for children.
- Having adults read with expression to engage children.
- Reading books several times.
- Focusing children's attention to a small number of words.
- Interaction of the reader and children as they discuss and ask questions about the text (Graves 2006).

### *Teaching Individual Words*

There is an overwhelming quantity of words learners need to learn. Teachers cannot teach all of them directly in a school year, but that does not mean they should not teach some of them. Not every word a teacher wants to introduce to learners from a text requires rich instruction and knowledge. Context can give enough information about some words to acquire and maintain meaning. Rich instruction is needed only for words that are necessary for comprehension of the text or that turn up in a wide variety of contexts, or that require more than a brief explanation to be understood (McKeown and Beck 2004). Experts on vocabulary learning strategies (Graves 2006; Nagy 1988) agree on the following effective ways to teach a new word:

- Use a definition of the word and have students work with the word in context.
- Have learners actively relate similarities and differences of a new word to words and concepts they know and practice using the word in various situations.
- Provide multiple exposures to a new word through games, definitions and using it orally and/or in writing.
- Review and remind learners about the word as it occurs in other contexts over time.
- Spend time learning the word.

Effective word learning instruction provides examples of a word used in various contexts and includes discussion of what the word means in each context. Learners need contextual and definitional information to gain understanding of how the meaning of a word changes in different contexts (Stahl 2003; Stahl and Fairbanks 1986).

Juel and Deffes (2004) conducted a six-week study with kindergarten learners comparing three forms of vocabulary instruction – context-based, anchored word and analytic vocabulary instruction. The teachers using the context-based method related word meanings to the background knowledge of the learners. The analytic word method had learners analyze word meanings along with connecting the word to background knowledge. The anchored word method had learners analyzing words, connecting words to background knowledge and focusing on the letters and sounds of the words. All of the instruction was delivered through storybook reading where five words were targeted from each book. The study found that the analytic and anchored

methods were the most effective in teaching word meanings to learners. Learners who were behind their peers in letter-naming fluency seemed to make greater gains in vocabulary growth if they had received the anchored method of instruction (Reed 2012; Juel and Deffes 2004).

In addition, Christ and Wang (2010: 86) suggested that teachers must teach learners how to use word learning strategies. While reading aloud teachers should follow the three steps. Teacher must model how to use clues and meaning several times. In this process, learners must be actively involved.

Primary school teachers can informally begin to teach these strategies through modeling, scaffolding and discussing with their learners. More formal teaching of word learning strategies should occur in Grade 4 and above (Graves 2006). The goal of a primary teacher is to help learners be aware of words they do not know and decide if the word is important to the meaning of the text. This metacognitive approach to word learning encourages learners to think about the unknown word, determine if they have heard it before, try to find the word's meaning from the rest of the sentence or paragraph, and look at the parts of the word in order to determine the meaning. This process is most often taught informally through shared storybook reading (Reed 2012; Webb and Chang 2012; Lubliner and Smetana 2005).

### **Fostering Word Consciousness**

'Word consciousness refers to the knowledge and dispositions necessary for learners to learn, appreciate, and effectively use words' (Scott and Nagy 2004). When a learner is word conscious, they have an interest in and an awareness of words around them – words they read, hear, speak and write (Graves 2006). Word consciousness is not another component of vocabulary instruction, but rather the goal teachers strive for their learners to attain as they teach individual words, word-learning strategies and provide rich language experiences (Alqohtani 2015; Taylor and Francis 2014; Christ and Wang 2010).

To foster word consciousness, a teacher must model and encourage an enthusiasm for new words. The use of games, riddles, homophones, and puzzles is highly motivating in pri-

mary school classrooms. Reading instruction in primary grade is not just teaching students that printed words convey meaning, but that words can feel and sound good and can incite laughter and be fun to play with (Blachowicz and Fisher 2006; Graves and Watts-Taffe 2002).

The advantages of using eliciting-type of questions to the learners are that they learn more word meanings than simply being exposed to words in a context (Senachal 1997). During this exercise teachers explain the word meanings quickly to the learners when learners encounter unfamiliar words (Yang and Kim 2011; Justice 2002; Christ and Wang 2010). The reason for this is that the explanation of the word explained by the teacher is embedded in the natural context in which the word occurs; use extended instruction when they want to help learners develop a nuanced understanding of a word teacher's use (Elgort 2011; Silverman 2007).

In a study of vocabulary learning, Zare-ee and Salami (2014), Schmitt et al. (2011) and Beck et al. (1982) found that students in one particular middle school class learned more incidental vocabulary (words that had not been taught) than the other classes. Researchers, attempting to find the cause, found a poster of interesting words in the classroom. The teacher stated it was the class "word wall." Whenever a student encountered a new word from TV, conversation or reading, they could write the word on the poster and share where they heard or saw it. The students received points in a class contest when they used the new word. This simple activity fostered word consciousness by motivating students to look and listen for new words and use them in their speech and writing. Teachers therefore play a vital role in helping their students become word conscious.

When teachers use rich vocabulary in the classrooms, teach words fully so that their students can develop new word schemas and create an environment where students can explore and use words, they are giving their students tools necessary for success in school and beyond (Subasi 2014; Subon 2013; Tam 2013; Scott and Nagy 2004).

### CONCLUSION

Literature has confirmed that primary grade teachers have the ability to influence the future reading and school success of students through

teaching direct, effective vocabulary instruction. From the literature review it became clear that vocabulary can be taught directly and indirectly. Variety of language and vocabulary strategies in comprehending the texts are supposed to be used. The teacher, who looks for opportunities to use interesting words and is an active, enthusiastic word learner, can instill a lifelong love of words in his or her students by implementing the strategies appropriately. This can be achieved if readers can use various strategies to read the words and understand the written words.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the foregoing discussion the following recommendations are made:

- Constant monitoring of vocabulary performance of students is imperative and clear early warning signs for underperformance should be in place to identify underperforming students.
- Support programmes should be in place and constantly evaluated by experts.

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