

ENGLISH VOCABULARY UPTAKE BY SAUDI ARABIC-SPEAKING STUDENTS AT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Abdulmonem Wazen Altyari
Saudi Ministry of Education

ABSTRACT: *English language is incorporated as a core module into the Saudi national curriculum. Students study and learn English 7 years and, during this period of time, they are assigned 13 English textbooks. However, they leave school knowing about 1000 words. This paper sheds light on factors that contribute to little vocabulary uptake by Saudi students when they leave high school. These factors are is that the vocabulary teaching methodology which is " non-incremental " and students are not repeatedly exposed to learnt vocabulary. Consequently, students do not fully master the English vocabulary which simply results in students not being able to retain the vocabulary in their minds. Recommendations that are promoted in this study include consulting the corpora to ensure that textbooks are provided with 5000 most frequent words, incorporating suitable graded readers into the curriculum, employing an effective methodology for vocabulary teaching and, most importantly, sufficient exposure to the target vocabulary items.*

KEYWORDS: Vocabulary uptake, exposure, explicit approach, incidental approach

INTRODUCTION

The Saudi government as part of its drive to ensure its citizens are competent in the English language have made teaching and acquiring the English language a fundamental factor by incorporating it into the national curriculum. The curriculum is structured over 7 years and consists of 13 textbooks and 7 additional workbooks, tailored to meet the educational needs of the English learner. In order for students to complete the full course they must ensure that they pass the assessments at the end of the level. Alsaif and Schmitt (2012) stated that these text books provide about "2800 English words from the most frequent 5000 words plus 1000 less frequent English words". However, after seven years of studying English, Saudi students leave school showing critical deficiency in vocabulary uptake. According to Alsaif (2011, cited in Alsaif 2012), Saudi learners leave school knowing about 1000 words. Indeed, from my experience as an EFL teacher in this context, it is considerably less than this number. The problem is highlighted more in rural areas of the country than the main cities. Alsaif did not specify what level and what aspect of knowledge those learners know. At the level of the productive knowledge, it seems that their knowledge does not exceed 300 hundred words. This deficiency of knowing English words affects the other skills required to build on learning English. It also has been a controversial issue among the Saudi education specialists. On the other hand, some argue that more emphasis should be placed on focusing on creating methodologies and pedagogies conducive to teaching English, as well as the way vocabulary is taught.

This paper seeks an investigation into the reasons behind the little vocabulary uptake by Saudi student s when they leave high school. I will begin by presenting the recent theories that tackle teaching vocabulary and then focus on what the Saudi context lacks when teaching vocabulary. I will also promote some recommendations that may contribute to solving this problem.

The thesis this paper is that teaching vocabulary in the Saudi schools is " non-incremental " and students are not repeatedly exposed to learnt vocabulary. Consequently, students do not fully master the English vocabulary which simply results in students not being able to retain the vocabulary in their minds.

The teaching of English is non-incremental from two perspectives. Firstly, neither the teachers nor the course designers provide the opportunity for the students to learn all the different types of word knowledge. Secondly, it is incomplete in its process; teachers only establish the form-meaning links by giving direct translations and stop at this stage. They rarely attempt consolidating learnt words in student's minds. Actually, more explicit teaching, integrated with extensive incidental instruction, and encouraging students to use words already learnt would be needed to solve this problem.

Teaching Vocabulary

The learners' needs and expectations may determine the number and the selection of words to be taught and the approaches we may use. Thus, we may need to discuss critical issues related to teaching vocabulary such as the number of words an EFL learner should obtain, what they should know about a word and what approaches teachers need to teach vocabulary?

How many words?

Nation (2001) categorized words as either high-frequency words, low-frequency words or specialized words. Carter (1998, p 209) claims that 'the most frequent 2– 3,000 words in a language provides a firm basis of about 80 per cent of the words likely to be encountered'. Nation and Newton (1997) also argued that the most frequent 2000 base words cover at least 85% of any texts. In addition, Nation (1990) shows that the 2000 high frequent words plus the 800 academic words cover 95% of any reading text. He also stresses that below the 2000-level of high-frequency words there could be no use of English. Nevertheless, Nation and Meara (2002) rightly claim that for intermediate level performance in all aspects of English, a learner should learn at least 4000 word families. In fact, corpora play an important role in stating which 4000 or 2000 core words should be introduced first to learners.

What should a learner know about a word?

There are two levels of word knowledge, the receptive and the productive level, (Nation 1990; Schmitt 2000). Each level may entail some certain aspects of knowledge. Nation (1990, P: 31) suggests a list of knowledge aspects that are necessary for knowing a word either for receptive competence or productive capacity. These aspects are the word's meaning, '*the spoken form*', '*the written form*', '*the grammatical patterns*', '*collocations*', '*frequency*', '*appropriateness*' and '*associations*'.

Approaches to teaching vocabulary:

There could be many techniques and methodologies to teach vocabulary. However, they all may fall into two categories, direct and indirect. We have to come across some critical facts about the nature of teaching vocabulary before we draw on its approaches. The first fact is that there is no best way to teach vocabulary Schmitt (2008), but rather all approaches complement one another. We may also need to improve some techniques to achieve some certain goals of the course. The second fact about the nature of learning vocabulary is that it is an incremental process. This fact may affect the way teaching vocabulary should be implemented. Another additional fact is that the age and level of L2 proficiency may determine what vocabulary is to be taught, and thus what approach is to be used. For example, concrete words may be best introduced first to young beginners and then we could move to more abstract words as they improve. So from this we can understand that, Schmitt (2000), Nation (1990) and Nation and Newton (1997) identify two approaches to teaching vocabulary, the explicit or direct approach and the incidental approach.

The explicit approach:

Explicit learning is a cognitive process .It therefore presupposes involving learners into conscious cognitive activities which usually lead to explicit knowledge, Allen and Harely (1992). In some cases explicit instruction is necessary to help students, who may do not trust their intuition, to avoid confusion and misinterpretation of the word form. It seems at least necessary for the instruction of the 2000 most frequent words or the core vocabulary that appear in word lists.

Allen and Harely (1992) divide techniques used in the explicit teaching into two categories. The first category, '*metacognitive counseling techniques*', includes instructions on how to memorize and learn new words. The second category, '*guided cognitive learning techniques*', includes techniques like 'observation', 'explanation', 'mnemonic devices' and explicit practices. Nation (1978, cited in Nation 2001) also suggests that teachers should allow some time for students to mentally process the new word, repeat it in its context many times and involve the students in the process by encouraging them to provide a translation or explanation for the meaning.

However, the explicit teaching could only serve to deliver the base forms and the most frequent words. It could be difficult to teach the vast number of low frequent words which they usually do not appear in first 2000 words, Zimmerman (1997). It is also difficult to explicitly teach all aspects of word knowledge and help students consolidate this knowledge, Schmitt (2008). Thus, another approach should be integrated to complement the explicit approach and that could be the incidental approach.

The Incidental approach:

Incidental learning entails extensive meaning-focused exposure, Schmitt (2008). In this approach the learners' attention is drawn toward the message not to the vocabulary item. Learning vocabulary incidentally can be implemented through communicative activities. Nation (2000) argues that vocabulary can be learned either through 'meaning-focused input' or through 'meaning-focused output'. He stresses the significant relationship the usage of the word in speaking activities and its learning.

As well as this, Krashen (1989, cited in Zimmerman 1997) emphasizes the role of interesting and comprehensible input in teaching vocabulary. He claims that for intermediate and advanced students, reading is the best way to acquire new words.

Practically, sufficient incidental instruction entails exposing learners repeatedly to both reading materials, which Schmitt (2000) considers the best way for the receptive knowledge of words, and listening materials. Patribackt and Wesch (1997) add 'clear cues to unknown words' meanings' as an important constituent for this process.

In addition, according to Day and Bamford (1998), extensive reading is the best method for sight vocabulary development. Incidental instructions through extensive reading may also facilitate vocabulary uptake. Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) found that Saudi learners get benefit from extensive reading and graded readers to increase their high frequency words in 10 weeks. Nation (2001) suggests extensive reading for one grader reader every one or two weeks. He also suggests that the length of the grader reader should suite the learners' vocabulary level.

However, one limitation of grader readers would be that learners, especially beginners, would need to know at least 95% of the words to enable them to guess the meaning of new words, Nation (2001), or at least 3000 word families to comprehend them, Laufer (1992). In this case, explicit instruction should precede starting a grader reader. Teachers can explicitly teach the key words which learners may misinterpret. They, however, should take the following issues into consideration. The first one is that students may ignore the unknown word if they understand the text without guessing it, Paribackht and Wesch (1997). The second issue is that the best way to retrieve a word is by processing it mentally to infer its meaning, Hulstijn (1992). Thus students should be given the chance to guess meaning from the context and should learn other learning strategies like what suffixes mean and how to consult a good dictionary for the accurate meaning.

Teachers might also need to recognize that incidental learning does not lead to full mastery of vocabulary especially the productive level, Schmitt (2008). Many researches refer to that incidental vocabulary learning may increase knowledge about a word but not gain it. For this reason, EFL and ESL teachers

should understand that there is an urgent need for both explicit and implicit instruction. They should use and improve all possible techniques and methodologies that may facilitate better learning.

However, it could be important to introduce a word explicitly or incidentally, but the process does not stop here. We need to recognize the importance of the role of the memory and remembering almost everything about a word. Students may forget everything they have learned about an item. So that teachers need some techniques that may guarantee learning and remembering the vocabulary item as well.

Carter and McCarthy (1988, p 12) claimed that 'The more words are analyzed or are enriched by imagistic and other associations, the more likely it is that they will be retained'. Nation (2001) also suggested three processes to remember a word. The first process is '*noticing*' which involves drawing students' attention and interest to the vocabulary item when teaching it explicitly, or when decontextualizing it when it is a part of a message. '*Noticing*' also includes negotiation of the meaning and presenting the definition of it. The second process, Nations goes on, is the receptive and productive retrieval. The final process is '*generation*' in which students meet and use a word in different contexts. Nation also suggests many repetitions and reviews of a word over calculated intervals.

Hulstijn (1997) suggests talking to students about their concerns and methods by which they can retain new words. He also suggested some techniques like the keyword and word association. Also, Schmitt (2000, p 112) argues that 'lexical chunks are retained in longer-term memory because of their utility'. Therefore, it would be encouraged to help learners establish lexical chunks that are effective for spoken communication.

Teaching vocabulary in Saudi Arabia

Saudi schoolboys leave school with insufficient vocabulary uptake. To understand this problem properly, we may need to answer these questions: Are learners introduced to learning English with the support of sufficient and relevant vocabulary? Are methodologies used in teaching vocabulary useless? And how much responsibility do students take to achieve a substantial vocabulary size whilst learning the English language?

The text books currently implemented for teaching English as the target language are designed to provide about 2800 words from the most frequent 5000 words, which Alsaif (2012) rightly argues that they are insufficient for satisfying performance in English. However, from my experience, Saudi students leave school with less than 10% of this number. Thus, the key issue behind the problem may not be solely in how many words these texts provide.

As well as this, the text books adopt a communicative approach in teaching English. In this case, L1 should be avoided and the L2 should be the mode of instruction, Zimmerman (1997). Unfortunately, the dominant language in Saudi's classrooms is L1. Consequently, there is no sufficient exposure to L2.

In addition, the techniques used in teaching vocabulary in this context do not help consolidate the learned vocabulary in the students' memory. There could be many reasons behind being unable to retrieve vocabulary items. West (1930 cited in Zimmerman, 1997), for example, introduced three reasons for low vocabulary uptake after three years of study. These reasons are no sufficient time is spent on learning vocabulary and using them productively, the words that learners learn are useless and learners were not 'fully mastering' the words they were learning. In short, I can describe some practices that may be not supported by existing research into vocabulary learning and teaching:

1- When teaching vocabulary teachers do not distinguish high frequent words in English to focus on, and supplement this with spending more time in explaining them, but rather they select a group of any 8 to 10 words.

- 2- Students are not involved in the process of teaching vocabulary, in which no negotiation or noticing is done.
- 3- Once teachers cover the words of a certain level, they never re-introduce them or expose learners to them in any way in order to reinforce their learning.
- 4- There is a common belief, even among students, that once the meaning of a word is established, the word is learnt. Khan (2011) introduces five aspects of vocabulary that represent a problem for Saudi learners. These aspects are 'synonyms and antonyms, word derivation, size of lexicon, collocation and spelling.
- 5- Teachers do not provide students with some basic techniques of memorizing new words such as the key word and mnemonic associations.
- 6- For levels beyond beginners, teachers mistakenly consider students as intermediate or even advanced students, and aim to explicitly increase their vocabulary while in fact they need to establish vocabulary first. Therefore, the explicit teaching would be useless since they are not at the right level of language development, Pienemann (1985, cited in Nation, 2001).

Furthermore, there is another additional reason which worsens this dilemma. Students leave school for a 3-month holiday. During this holiday, they never expose themselves to English and resume school with almost only 2% of the previous level learned from the lists of words. So, the big challenge could be how to come up with new techniques to keep students exposed to L2 during this holiday.

IMPLICATIONS

After consulting corpora resources, text books should be supplemented by other resources to present at least 4-5000 words. Teachers also should be aware of the processes involved in learning vocabulary as well as teaching it in a manner that is productive for the students. The psycholinguistic aspects of learning L2 words are need to be given a lot more attention. Here are some recommendations that may help lessen the trouble of mastering English vocabulary in the Saudi context.

- 1- The sufficient explicit vocabulary instruction should be used mainly to teach high-frequency words, and then incidental instruction should be integrated to cover all other aspects of word knowledge.
- 2- As an initial step to more authentic English, grader readers should be included in the course and count heavily towards the calculation of the students' grade. They should be fully exploited. They should read them at home, hear and talk about them in the class, dramatize them and write about them. Actually, by having students hear, talk, and write about one part of them every day, we may include the three maxims Nagy (1988, cited in Smith 2008) suggests for better learning of vocabulary; '*integration, meaningful use, and repetition*'.
- 3- For levels beyond the beginning level, a grader reader could be provided with glosses and word lists. Glossing is of great importance for those who do not trust their intuition in guessing or inferring meaning of difficult words since glosses help students avoid wrong guessing of new words, Hulstijn (1992).
- 4- More attention should be drawn into vocabulary retention strategies, in which repeated and extensive exposure over calculated intervals is the main one. Students also should be taught other strategies like the key word and mnemonic techniques and provided with effective communicative lexical chunks. It would be also of great use if teachers could anticipate and establish some new concepts in English before they acquire them in Arabic, or at least establish them as 'loan words'. For example, Saudi children are not familiar with the 'train track'. Such word could be introduced in their L1 context and then could be

decontextualized to be introduced. Above all, teachers should bear in mind that the aim is to help learners retrieve learned words when they need or meet them not only to memorize them.

5- Conventional technology can facilitate remote contact, meaning that during holidays, teachers can benefit from technological mediums, like mobiles and E-mails to message students a reminder of the high frequency words they have studied.

Finally, the most obvious way that shows that learners have fully mastered target L2 words is to utilize these words in their speaking and writing, ensuring that students demonstrate a thorough understanding and can fully comprehend English when reading or listening to L2. If this does not happen, then we may need to reconsider the whole process.

In conclusion, learning vocabulary is an incremental process and thus teaching it should be incremental as well. The explicit approach is suitable for establishing the form-meaning link and could be the best for high frequency words. It is, however, unsuitable for other aspects of word knowledge. Therefore, the incidental approach should be integrated in the process of teaching.

For the Saudi Arabian context, neither the text books nor the "non-incremental" approaches used appear to help students fully master and retain sufficient vocabulary uptake when they leave school. The course and material designers and teachers should recognize the incremental process of learning a word. One exposure to an item is not sufficient. There is an urgent need to review techniques and introduce new ways that may guarantee keeping learners in touch with the L2. Extensive reading, mobile and other technologies are only some examples that can supplement learning and facilitate the process of acquiring and retaining the English vocabulary.

REFERENCES

- Al-Homoud, F, and Scmitt, N. (2009) 'Extensive reading in a challenging environment: A comparison of extensive and intensive reading approaches in Saudi Arabia.', *Language Teaching Research*, 13,4 383–401.
- Allen, P. & Harley, B (ed.) (1992) *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University press.
- Alsaif, A. and Milton, J. (2012) 'Vocabulary input from school textbooks as a potential contributor to the small vocabulary uptake gained by English as a foreign language learners in Saudi Arabia. ', *the Language learning Journal*, 40:1 21-33.
- Carter, R. (1998) *Vocabulary - Applied Linguistics Perspective*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (ed.) (1988) *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
- Day, R.R., and Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hulstijn, J.H. (1997) 'Mnemonic methods in foreign language vocabulary learning: theoretical consideration and pedagogical implications.'. in Coady, J. & Huckin, T. (ed.) *Second language vocabulary acquisition*, Cambridge: University Press, 203-224.
- Hulstijn, J.H. (1992) 'Retention of inferred and given word meanings: Experiments in incidental vocabulary learning. '. in Anau, P, J., and Bejoint, H. (ed.) *Vocabulary and applied linguistics*, London: Macmillan., 113-125.
- Khan, I., A. (2011) 'Role of applied linguistics in the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia.', *International Journal of English linguistics*, 1(1),.
- Laufer, B. (1992) 'How much lexis is necessary for reading comprehension?.'. in Anau, P, J., and Bejoint, H. (ed.) *Vocabulary and applied linguistics*, London: Macmillan, 126-132.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2001) *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I.S.P. (1990) *Teaching and learning vocabulary*. New York: Heinle and Hienle.

- Nation, P. and Meara, P. (2002) *Vocabulary*. In N. Schmitt (ed.) *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. London: Arnold.
- Nation, P., & Newton, J. (1997) 'Teaching vocabulary.'. in Coady, J. & Huckin, T. (ed.) *Second language vocabulary acquisition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 238-254.
- Paribackt, T. S., & Wesch, M. (1997) 'Vocabulary enhancement activities and reading for meaning in second language vocabulary acquisition. '. in Coady, J. & Huckin, T. (ed.) *Second language vocabulary acquisition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 174-200.
- Schmitt, N. (2008) 'Review article: instructed second language vocabulary learning.', *Language Teaching Research*, 12(3), 329-363.
- Schmitt, N. (2000) *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, T.B. (2008) 'Teaching vocabulary expeditiously: three keys to improving vocabulary instruction. .', *The English Journal*, 97(4), 20-25.
- Zimmerman, C.B. (1997) 'Historical trends in second language vocabulary acquisition. '. in Coady, J. & Huckin, T. (ed.) *second language vocabulary acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 5-18.