

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE AND ITS VOCABULARY ACQUISITION: THE PLACE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

The paper discusses English as a second language in Nigeria with a focus on its vocabulary and ways the learners of the language can acquire it. After explicating the meaning of vocabulary and the importance of its acquisition, the discussion went on to examine the different types of English vocabulary. This is followed by an analysis of the role Information and Communication Technology can play in English language vocabulary acquisition. After examining how mother tongue or first language interference, spelling problems, cultural attitudes, lack of exposure to the language environmental background and inadequate pedagogical facilities militate against learners' vocabulary acquisition, some recommendations for improvement are made, including the need to provide ICT facilities in schools and exposing learners to the language environments for pedagogical effectiveness.

Introduction

English Language, which serves as Nigeria's official language, also plays a very important role in other aspects of the peoples' lives. In addition to being the language of commerce, business and law, English is the country's language of education. For instance, as provided for in the National Policy on Education (2004), from primary one to three, English is studied as a compulsory subject. At this level, notably, textbooks and other reading materials are written in English. The only exceptions are those concerned with the learning of other languages. Furthermore, most materials and equipment bear English names, including the chalkboard or "blackboard", chalk, table, chair, duster, ruler, pen, pencil, and ink.

In fact, despite the provision that the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment should be used as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level, school authorities and teachers conduct a great deal of their activities in English. Such activities include assemblies, physical and health programmes, sports and games.

As from primary four, the policy provides that English becomes the language of instruction. This provision covers secondary and tertiary levels of the education system.

The foregoing underscores the importance of English language in Nigeria. This makes its learning and knowledge essential in the school curriculum. On the part of teachers, they should possess adequate knowledge of English that would enable them to impart knowledge to children effectively. On the part of children, in addition to the need to understand their teachers and English-based textbooks and other reading materials by having adequate knowledge of the relevant language, they should be able to use such a language to express themselves when expected to do so orally or in writing.

Adequate knowledge of a language, including English, entails possession of adequate words (vocabulary) and other lexical items of such a language which he can combine correctly to form meaningful sentences. This is a pre-requisite for effective communication. In fact, whether a person is involved in any of the language skills of listening, speaking, reading or writing, he needs adequate store of the vocabulary in order to maintain a certain degree of proficiency in the relevant language.

The teacher who is expected to guide students in their acquisition of the requisite vocabulary in English language should be aware of, have access to and be able to use modern facilities - particularly Information and Communication Technology (ICT) - that can be a wonderful asset in this aspect of his duties. Please note that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the context used here refers to the computer and the Internet.

In this paper therefore, our concern is how Nigerians learners of English as a second language can be guided to improve their vocabulary acquisition by making use of the opportunities provided by Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

English Language Vocabulary: Meaning and Importance

Vocabulary is the sum or stock of words employed by a language, that is, the lexicon (Woolf, 1975). Quirk(1972) refers to vocabulary in a language as the set of names for things. According to Hornby (1995), vocabulary is the total number of words in a language. Dictionaries usually have a list or collection of words and phrases usually arranged alphabetically with their meanings and uses. So a dictionary, to an extent, can be referred to as a book of vocabulary. However, unlike thesauruses, dictionaries often go beyond merely giving the meanings of words and phrases. Some even go into the etymological and grammatical analysis of words.

Regarding the importance of vocabulary, Ogbonna (1999) had noted that “in every language one needs words in order to build up sentences for effective and meaningful communication”. For this reason, vocabulary acquisition is an essential aspect of language teaching, learning and use. As a result, adequate mastery of the vocabulary of English is a pre-requisite for proficiency in the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Stressing the importance of words in a language, Quirk (1972) had earlier noted that we couldn't help feeling struck by the mystical significance that words have had in many civilizations. According to him, so important is the word in a language that people use it as a kind of “synecdoche” for language. “Vocabulary is only one component of language but, by reason of that mystical quality that names have, vocabulary seems to overshadow all else in our consideration of language” (p.121).

The Federal Ministry of Education of Nigeria (1985) in its “National Curriculum for Junior Secondary Schools” stated that “Words are the basic elements of language learning as they provide the basis for sentence formulation and other forms of language usage”. Accordingly, a student's proficiency in a language “depends largely upon his mastery of words and his ability to fit them together into intelligent patterns”. Furthermore, according to the document, to say that a student has achieved a satisfactory level of competence in a given language depends not only on his ability to use the various patterns of the language but also upon his mastery of its vocabulary.

Types of Vocabulary

Vocabulary can be classified under two types to which teachers should expose their English language pupils. These include (a) “Reproductive” and (b) “Recognition” or “Receptive” vocabularies.

- a. **Productive Vocabulary:** This refers to words which are acquired and used regularly, especially when the user is communicating with familiar people or engaged in routine activities in his daily life.
- b. **Recognition or Receptive Vocabulary** constitutes those words that the user acquires and stores to be recalled and used as situations or occasions demand. Sometimes such words are only needed by the user to interpret or understand what he is listening to or reading.

The necessity for distinguishing these types arises because of their implications for both the teacher and learner of English. For instance, it is obvious that people should put in more efforts in acquiring more productive than receptive vocabulary because of the constancy in the need for the former. Also, It can take a long time for many people to transfer their vocabulary from receptive to productive use. Bright and McGregor (1981) have observed that “as greater mastery of the language is achieved, words pass more rapidly and easily from receptive knowledge to productive use when the need arises”. According to them, therefore, when teaching English to native speakers no sharp distinction between receptive and productive use is normally made. However, the foreign learners wish to reach general fluency as rapidly as possible. So “if he can do so within a limited vocabulary, time will be saved”(p.19).

Information and Communication Technology and English Vocabulary

As stated earlier, the computer and the Internet can be a wonderful asset to the student and the teacher in vocabulary acquisition. However, they should be aware of the following about the computer:

Most computers available to Nigerians use American English in their default spelling of words, whereas Nigerians who had colonial relationship with Britain (and patterned their educational system accordingly) use British spelling. For instance, the word “labour”, which is the British spelling of the word, would be underlined with red by the computer as wrong. It would prefer “labor”.

When this happens, the student who wants to use the British or U.K. spelling should place the cursor on the relevant word, right click, and then click “ignore’ or “ignore all” in the dialogue box. The student should also note that the box could help him set the computer to use any other English version of the spelling he wants, including, British (U.K.).

Overcoming problems that Militate against Vocabulary Acquisition

The following problems that militate against the teaching and learning of English vocabulary should be taken note of so that efforts can be made to overcome them:

i. Mother tongue or first language interference

In Nigeria, English is learnt as a second language. There is a tendency for the learners of English to translate English words into their first language before they understand them. But sometimes this can create confusion especially for words that may have denotative, connotative or idiomatic meanings. For example, the word, “stone” which can mean so many things in English including all kinds of precious stones may not have the same type of extended meanings when the word is translated into most Nigerian languages.

One way of minimizing the problems of this nature is to avoid transliteration especially where this is no direct mother tongue equivalent. Instead, the use of a dictionary may be more useful than resorting to the computer.

One way Information and Communication Technology facilities can be useful is that some relevant synonyms are usually suggested. Please note that these may still not be direct equivalents of your mother tongue.

ii. Spelling

As noted by Ogbonna (1999), the rules guiding spelling in African languages are different from what are applicable in English language. In African (including Nigerian) languages, words are spelt exactly according to their sounds. There are no such things as “minimal pairs” arising from distinction between long and short vowels. So, the Nigerian listener may not be able to distinguish the

spellings of “fit” and “feet” from the way the two words are realized phonetically another Nigerian speaker. This creates a problem in the correct use of such words particularly in writing..

Teachers of English have a critical role to play here. They should use drills in minimal pairs to train their students in using the correct pronunciation to distinguish the meaning such words.

In using the Computer or any other aspect of Information and Communication Technology for vocabulary acquisition, the student should learn to distinguish between American and British or UK spellings. Words that end in “our”, e.g. “labour”, “harbour” and “neighbour” are spelt “labor”, “harbor” and “neighbor” respectively. Also, some words (mainly the continuous tense of some verbs) that should have double consonants are spelt with single consonants, e.g. “counseling” instead of “counselling”.

iii. Cultural Attitudes

Cultural orientation of Nigerians can be a hindrance to the way they understand and use different words. For instance, in many Nigerian cultures, the words “brother” and “sister” can be used to express such relationships as “cousin”, “nephew”, “uncle”, “aunt”, “kinsman”, “fellow-clansman” and other male relatives. Bright and McGregor (1981) have noted that in extreme cases Africans (including Nigerians) use the word “brother” or “sister” to include “a chap I was having a drink with last night”.. It is the duty of the teacher to point out these to their pupils.

Another problem created cultural attitudes is a situation whereby Nigerians derogate some users of English language who try to pronounce English words correctly or who try to use a variety of vocabulary in their use of English. Some people treat them with scorn, accusing them of “showing off” or “trying to us that he knows English”. This adversely affects vocabulary acquisition and use.

iv. Lack of Exposure to the Language Background

Language is not the type of subject taught in the classroom. Experience has shown that language is better learnt when the learner is exposed to the environment or situations where the language is practically. This explains why children pick any language faster whenever they are in the community where that language is spoke. They vocabulary of the language is acquired effortlessly by such children. This underscores the necessity of excursions or acculturation sojourns that take learners to the actual language environments.

Facilities. Curriculum and Pedagogical Problems

It is unfortunate that from our experience, many schools in many States of the Country lack the facilities that would encourage the acquisition of vocabulary by school children, from the primary to the secondary level. These include trained teachers, language laboratories and libraries. The use of Information and Communication Technology for the purpose of improving learners’ acquisition in such schools can at best be ruled out.

Bright and McGregor (1981) do not encourage using “direct method” in the teaching of vocabulary. According to them, it is not advisable to make children use the dictionary and begin to “learn” the list of words and their meanings. Words are better learnt in contexts.

Recommendations to Guide the Teaching of Vocabulary

The teacher should be guided in his teaching of vocabulary by taking note of the above problems and impediments, so as to minimize their negative influences on his task.

English as a Second Language and its Vocabulary Acquisition: The Place of Information and Communication Technology

Schools should be equipped with Information and Communication Technologies facilities so that teachers and students can seize the immense opportunities offered them for the learning and improving their vocabulary acquisition.

When teaching, children should be exposed to only a few new vocabulary items in a lesson.

Teaching in context is the best option compared with learning words and their meanings in isolation.

Use graded texts and other learning materials when teaching vocabulary.

Learning the meaning of words straight in English is more helpful than translating to their mother tongue before they can understand.

Children should be exposed to read intensively and extensively, especially novels and other kinds of literature.

Children should be guided on how to use the dictionary, encyclopedia and other relevant reference materials related to language and vocabulary development.

Conclusion

The acquisition of adequate vocabulary is indispensable for a learner who wants to be proficient in the use of the language in question. English is not an exception. So every effort should be made to help Nigerian learners of English to improve their vocabulary acquisition by taking note of the foregoing discussion in this presentation.

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