

The Impact of Vocabulary Learning Strategies on Vocabulary Acquisition of Adult Learners

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Abstract— Vocabulary plays an important role in language acquisition. There is no language without words. This issue gives a new point of view on how to acquire vocabulary, especially for English Second Language (ESL) and English Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This work describes the impact of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) on vocabulary acquisition to adult learners. It then summarizes the contributions of VLS in English Language Teaching (ELT), which involve several factors including: language proficiency level, gender, age, and motivation. Generally VLS offers opportunities for ESL or EFL learners and teachers to teach and learn vocabulary based on the real world situation in the classroom.

Keywords—*vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary acquisition, adult learners*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is an important part in foreign language learning. Language always deals with words to listen, speak, read and write. Teaching and learning vocabulary are very challenging for teachers and students especially for foreign language learners for examples, Spanish, Turkish, Arabian and also Indonesian. They have to struggle in gaining vocabulary mastery which relates to four main skills. The success of learners in acquiring language is often affected by the size of vocabulary that they have learnt. Richard in his book illustrates that vocabulary as one of the most obvious components and there will be no language without words. As words are symbols of language. Its function is to express our thought and ideas. Researchers and teachers have been trying to solve the problem in acquiring vocabulary for years. They believe that vocabulary is as “the building block upon which knowledge of the second language can be built”. It is hoped that learners who cope with the words and the meanings might use the language correctly and appropriately [1].

A wide range of vocabulary is important for the language learners. According to Maharaj, there is a relationship between learners’ proficiency level and their abilities to employ and acquire new words [2]. Many researchers agreed that vocabulary acquisition

is important to support the achievement of second language learners dealing with speaking and writing. Learning vocabulary has a pivotal role in four main skills of a language. English is learnt by people around the world as a second language and a foreign language. The more unknown words of target language gained by the learners the more they will be successful in listening, speaking, reading and writing [3,4,5,6,7]. Based on above statements, there is an assumption that a wider vocabulary helps students to accelerate their four main language skills.

As mentioned earlier, the process of learning a second language and foreign language are very challenging, especially in learning vocabulary. Teachers and students have to consider the ways to learn vocabulary effectively and efficiently. Vocabulary acquisition needs strategies that involve students in learning actively. Questions have been raised about how to teach vocabulary effectively, especially for ESL and EFL learners. Vocabulary acquisition studies in recent years explain the difficulties experienced by some ESL and EFL learners in learning vocabulary. It highlights the strategy on vocabulary acquisition. It is well-known as VLS. Schmitt, a scholar who has concern about VLS disagree the opinion that language learning should be more teacher-centered than learner-centered. Presumably learners themselves can manage their own language learning [8]. He observed how VLS affected vocabulary learning. This strategy is considered easier for the learners to improve vocabulary compared with the strategies in integrated language skill learning such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar.

In the teaching learning process, teachers set up activities and strategies to deliver the lesson for the students. By combining appropriate strategy in a particular activity, the input and output of language learning can be acquired well. O’Malley & Chamot clarify that learning strategies are the tools that learners use for active, self-directed language learning, and research shows that the conscious, orchestrated and tailored use of such strategies is

strongly associated with language achievement and proficiency [9]. There are several studies conducted which have focused on learning strategies such as, utilizing CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) or MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) and using a word list or dictionary. Researchers and teachers know that learning strategies are not enough in supporting vocabulary acquisition because they have to consider the language proficiency level, gender, the age of the learners, and internal factors, such as motivation. Those considerations also give an impact on vocabulary acquisition in addition to learning strategies.

Nowadays, vocabulary learning strategies have been applied in language teaching and learning. It comes along with the innovation of technology in the 21st century. In addition, there had been an active push among researchers to explore and expand language learning strategy on vocabulary acquisition. There are many articles in this domain published, including works by Kham Sila Ahmad, Gulcin Cosgun, Dieter A. Waldvogel, Mofareh Alqathani, and Ameerchund Maharaj along with their colleagues. Yet, recent work in the areas of ESL and EFL language learning has increasingly continued to shape the understanding of the impact of VLS on vocabulary acquisition to adult learners. This work highlights the impact of VLS on vocabulary acquisition in the English teaching learning processes. It describes classroom practices and studies in relation on how and why VLS give contribution to learners' vocabulary acquisition.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW

A. Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learner listen, speak, read, and write [10]. Vocabulary is a list of words as vehicles for thoughts, self-expression, interpretation and communication [1]. Whenever people express ideas, interact and complete with one another, they should select or choose appropriate vocabulary [11]. Meanwhile, Hatch & Brown define vocabulary as a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words that individual speaker of language might use [11,12]. In addition, vocabulary can be seen as stock of words used by person, class of people, profession, etc. and a collection or list of words, usually in alphabetical order and defined [13].

Furthermore, Zimmerman cited in Coady and Huckin states that the center and the important thing in language learning is vocabulary [14]. Vocabulary is defined as the words teachers teach in the foreign language. It can consist of one, two or three words which has a single meaning, for examples, step-mother, brother-in-law, etc. In this case, when teachers give new words to language learners, it means that the teachers teach vocabulary to them [15]. According to the above explanations, it can be

concluded that vocabulary is a list of words arranged alphabetically and used to express thoughts and ideas in language. Language covers words to listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is the reason why it is essential to learn vocabulary as a word bank for the language learners.

Typically, ESL and EFL learners have limitation in vocabulary. Both young and adult learners need to be guided in acquiring vocabulary. They are different in many ways so the teachers have to consider about their background knowledge, language development, physical and mental development. For young learners, Teachers need to take into account of the first language background to consider that some certain words may be too difficult for the children. It also becomes apparent that learning a word is not a simple task that is performed once and then completed. Children will ask what a particular word means, or how a key unit builds up skills and knowledge [16]. On the other hand, adult learners have freedom to choose the way in learning language. The teachers can negotiate and discuss the term and rules to learn vocabulary with the learners.

There are differences of the characteristics between adult and young learners. It is viewed from learners' independence, experience, readiness, orientation up to motivation [8,17]. Fozdar & Hartley acknowledges that teaching learning process requires careful consideration about the learners' previous psychological and emotional concerns such as trauma, settlement and family priorities, or confidence and motivational issues [18]. Indeed, English as a second or foreign language needs to take into account the contribution of the mother tongue, culture, age, experience, and opportunities to use the target language.

Vocabulary acquisition cannot be separated from language learning. A learner with a large vocabulary is well equipped to develop skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking. In order to understand the language, vocabulary is crucial to be acquired by the learner [19]. The learning of vocabulary often appears to be a daunting task for learners, since all languages contain large numbers of words. Many English dictionaries, for example have a list over 100,000 words. However, learners often have restricted needs for vocabulary learning. Maharaj in his study, make it clear that adult learners can grasp the meaning of the target word and the relationship of the target word to other words through Multi-dimensional Vocabulary Acquisition (MDVA) [2]. By MDVA, the examination of the target word is thorough and students are able to catch all dimensions of the word.

Many linguists and language experts often divide language teaching into two major categories, the spoken and the written categories. They distinguish between receptive and productive vocabulary [20]. Receptive vocabulary refers to words that learners

know meanwhile productive vocabulary refers to words that learners know and use in the real situation. Those kinds of vocabulary can be gained using MDVA. Maharaj mentions that there are key concepts to achieve a multi-dimensional understanding. The terms look at aspects of the words, for examples antonyms, synonyms, rhyming counterparts, idiomatic usage, gender considerations, diminutive implications, proverbial usage, and likely confusion with other words [2].

The teachers and learners can adopt or adapt the above list. They might add or remove several elements or dimensions based on their consideration related to the learners' needs and characteristics. In brief, vocabulary acquisition of ESL and EFL are different between young and adult learners. Therefore, the teachers have to consider several factors that influence the learners' vocabulary acquisition in order that they can help ESL and EFL learners to enrich their vocabulary.

B. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Dealing with the restricted vocabulary of ESL and EFL, teachers try to find the way out to help learners in acquiring words of the target language. Education practitioners or teachers apply many kinds of VLS continually. They assume that all VLS is worth to try so they can analyze the appropriate strategy based on the situation in the teaching learning process. Schmitt argues that there is no "right" or "best" way to teach vocabulary. The best practice in any situation will depend on the type of student being taught, the words targeted, the school system and curriculum, and many other factors. A number of principles, however, should be considered when developing a vocabulary component to a language course [21].

Successful EFL learners realize that they have to learn a large number of forms and meaning of target language. They are expected to be able to recall their memory where they store the vocabulary so that they can use them in the real situation appropriately. Learning strategies are the tools that learners use for active, self-directed language learning, and research shows that the conscious, orchestrated and tailored use of such strategies is strongly associated with language achievement and proficiency [9,22]. Waldvogel reports that over the past thirty years, scholars have developed numerous classifications for VLS [22].

VLS taxonomy has been developed and divided into several classifications comprehensively [23]. Oxford organizes the taxonomy into meta-cognitive, cognitive, memory, and social classifications of second language learners. One of the examples is the comprehensive learning of vocabulary. In addition, the taxonomy is based on language learning theory as well as on theories of cognition and memory [24]. Cognitive learning strategies are the integration between the incoming information and the manipulation of the input directly to enhance learning.

There is an assumption that cognitive learning strategies enable the second language learners to control the language material directly. It can be carried out through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to strengthen schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally [9,25].

Schmitt in his book explains that students are able to use meta-cognitive learning strategies for their own learning. It is because of having an overview of the learning process in general [23]. Similarly, Oxford also states that second language learners have abilities to recognize their own learning styles and needs. The students presumably afford to plan, gather and organize materials. Moreover, they might have an arrangement and a schedule to do monitoring and evaluation of their own learning strategies [25].

Based on above explanation, there is an assumption that VLS influences the vocabulary acquisition of ESL and EFL adult learners. Teachers perhaps discuss with the learners in the teaching learning process to choose the strategy used in the classroom or students are given options of VLS and they have freedom to select their learning strategy based on their needs' and characteristics. It is hoped that VLS will help to enrich and support their vocabulary acquisition.

C. The Impact of VLS on Vocabulary Acquisition to Adult Learners

This particular problem has five articles related to vocabulary acquisition to ESL adult learners. Those articles share the impact of VLS in ELT. They show that learning strategies in teaching vocabulary influence learners' vocabulary acquisition. In fact, the impact is not only caused by learning strategies but also other factors. The implementation of VLS to ESL adult learners might add a new point of view in ELT dealing with vocabulary acquisition problems.

The first article by Kham Sila Ahmad, Jocelyn Armarego, and Fay Sudweek implement VLS on teaching vocabulary. In their study, they used MALL on vocabulary acquisition among migrant women English learners. There are six migrant women in a small suburban community centre in Western Australia who attend a minimum of five non-MALL session. After that, only three participants who continue to attend a minimum of five MALL sessions. Semi-structured interview and observation are used in this study. There are two session of interview for the participants, namely pre- and post-sessions. The researchers view that there has been a significant increase in learning experience and vocabulary acquisition of migrant women. All participants do agree that MALL is really helpful for them. The tablets used by the migrant women are so very practical dealing with its weight and size. In addition, the learners who want to apply MALL can bring and

use the application anywhere and everywhere. Participants of MALL also realize that they could access a lot of information related to the target language. They do not need to open text-books or use flashcard to learn new words and do translation. This study provides a valuable insight into vocabulary learning by using technology. MALL gives learners new experiences to enrich their vocabulary acquisition. This study is limited by the absence of the opportunity to have partners with the same first language background, proficiency level, and experience in using the application of the tablet [17].

Next, Gulcin Cosgun also uses Wordlist as one of VLS in the language classroom students' acquisition. The author conducted the study in a private English-medium university in Turkey. Gulcin Cosgun selects two classes for this study. First, the experimental group from one class uses the word list in the classroom. And the second is the control group from the next class which does not use the word list in the classroom. Each class comprised of seventeen Turkish students. They are young people aged 17 to 22. The students experience a lot of advantages of using the word list in teaching vocabulary. They seem to learn more interesting things compared with traditional techniques when they have to write the words and the definition and also create sentences from those words on a board. Nevertheless, using a word list in the classroom is not the only fun way to solve the vocabulary problem among the language learners [26]. Gulcin Cosgun found a significant and strong correlation between using a word list on a word wall in the classroom and improvement in vocabulary acquisition. The result of this study shows a positive impact of using word lists on students' vocabulary acquisition.

The third article written by Waldvogel (2013), focuses on the relationship between VSL and the size of vocabulary possessed by adult Spanish foreign language learners [22]. His study took place at a U.S. military undergraduate academic institution during the fall semester in 2010. He is uncertain about the ability of the foreign language learners to have a greater control over their own vocabulary development. Novice Spanish foreign language learners may have a limitation in the meta-cognitive knowledge, skills and experience in vocabulary learning. One interesting finding is the result from the advanced proficiency group. Using VLS, the participants reach wide vocabulary better than the participants of beginning and intermediate-level. The survey shows that the experiences of the advanced group in learning English influence their habits and strategies. It indicates that external and internal factors may have contributions to learners' vocabulary acquisition.

The fourth article is written by Mofareh Alqahtani. He focuses his research on the importance of vocabulary and share many techniques used by

English teachers in the classroom activities. He agrees that vocabulary learning is an essential part of foreign language learning as the meanings of new words are very often emphasized, whether in books or in classrooms. It is also central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner. He views the vocabulary knowledge as a critical tool for second language learners because limited vocabulary in second language learning impedes successful communication [27]. Mofareh's research aims to highlight the importance of vocabulary learning as an important part of foreign language learning. It has been neglected for long time ago and then it became a trending topic for researchers. He reviews the current trends in the area of teaching vocabulary through various techniques used by ESL/EFL teachers. He suggests that English teachers should take into account the kinds of vocabulary, the students' level, characteristics, and the value of the techniques for learners. In brief, the teachers need to be aware of these differences when applying the techniques.

The last article by Ameerchund (Ashraf) Maharaj is action research. He proposes MDVA (Multi-Dimensional Vocabulary Acquisition) approach [2]. There is a major contribution of MDVA to the improvement of the students' writing quality. Students produce better paragraph from the simple one to the complex. They gradually become aware after exposure to new words and expressions related to the target language. This is also the proof of the changing in vocabulary teaching. There are many strategies and sources to teach vocabulary. Maharaj says that MDVA can be a viable alternative to teach new words and concepts to ESL learners. English teachers are not suggested to use MDVA in every ESL class. The decision of the key terms and concepts should be made first by the teacher in order that the students can keep the words in their long-term memory.

III. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From above explanation, the impact of VLS on vocabulary acquisition on adult learners somewhat involves (1) enrichment of positive and meaningful learning experience, (2) the awareness of being independent learners, (3) learners' motivation to acquire new words, (4) the improvement of language proficiency level of the learners. Some considerations in this case are (1) the availability of facility and technology to support the vocabulary learning, (2) the willingness of the learners to enrich their vocabulary, and (3) the continuity of learners' vocabulary acquisition to improve four language skills.

In conclusion, I can take the point of view from Schmitt [21] about teaching vocabulary. As mentioned above, it can be assumed that there is no "right" or "the best" way to teach vocabulary. The best practice in any situation will likely depend on the type of student being taught, the words targeted, the school system and curriculum, and many other factors. Based

on my understanding in applying VLS, English teachers should consider the factors which influence the way students want to learn vocabulary such as age, gender, language proficiency level and environment. Teachers, teaching strategies, and technology are apparently playing a part to support learners' vocabulary acquisition but the successful acquisition of wide vocabulary presumably depends on the learners.

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