

The Principles and the Teaching of English Vocabulary: A Review

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Abstract

The importance of vocabulary, its types, selection criteria, size and depth, and teaching principles were found unclear. The present article seeks to respond to such challenge. To achieve the mentioned goals, we did a systematic review to previously related studies and theories. The results showed that the vocabulary was found to be more functional as a basis for communication, a reflection of social reality, emotion booster, and academic ability predictor. It also revealed that its contribution to the basic language skills varied. Finally, the principles of teaching vocabulary, size and depth, and teaching and learning vocabulary materials (TLVMs) appeared to be associated with student's vocabulary mastery.

Keywords: *vocabulary teaching; principles; vocabulary importance; breadth and depth*

INTRODUCTION

Many studies testified the contribution of vocabulary to language skills, namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and GPA (Grade Point Average). Roche and Harrington's (2013) finding showed that the vocabulary is associated with both academic writing and GPA. Similarly, a vocabulary knowledge has been viewed as a prior ability that has to be mastered to increase other language abilities. Roche and Harrington argued that the vocabulary knowledge was a precondition for most of other language abilities.

No exactly the same research results has been reported. Different studies on vocabulary tend to have the different findings and conclusions. For example, Staehr (2008) posited that the vocabulary had a more beneficial contribution to reading and writing abilities, and was moderately related to speaking and listening skills. Learners' receptive vocabulary size was found to be strongly associated with the reading and writing abilities, and moderately influential to the speaking and listening performances.

Surprisingly, despite students' positive attitude towards vocabulary importance (Vasu & Dhanavel, 2015), the contributions of vocabulary use were not seriously responded by undergraduate students, English teacher, lecturer, and practitioner. In the vocabulary teaching and principles, Gogoi (2015) claimed 75% of his participants,

the teachers at Golaghat District of Assam, India, reported that teaching materials for early childhood care and educational center were not designed by experts, and more than a half of them said that the materials were insufficient and teachers were not well trained to use them. Treating as a result, monolingual speaker's vocabulary sizes seemed to be much smaller than what was expected (Treffers-Daller & Milton, 2013). Less complex than number words (Musolino, 2004), new enrolled undergraduate students acquired about 10,000 English words families. Furthermore, as an English lecturer, the first writer of this article also found that the pre-service EFL students at English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Kristen Indonesia were confused to select appropriate teaching and learning principles and procedure that can be used in writing their undergraduate thesis.

The insufficient teaching materials and principles, and the confusing theories of vocabulary, which are more likely to decrease the vocabulary mastery and study, appear to be influenced by material complexity (Rosa & Eskenazi, 2011), media inappropriateness, teaching attractiveness, and evaluation objectivity (Prastiyawati, 2008). To respond to them, the present article aims at providing a description of the importance of vocabulary, types of vocabulary to teach, selection criteria of teaching and learning vocabulary materials, size and depth of vocabulary, and principles of vocabulary teaching. A review of previous studies and related theories was systematically conducted to accomplish the objectives. Using a concept-centric review and matrix (Murniarti, *et al.* 2018), it applied some steps, namely identification, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis. With three significances, the current systematic review is expected to gain access to the information of previous vocabulary teaching practices, researches, and development (Schlosser, 2006).

DISCUSSION

The Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary as the Basis for Communication

Nothing can be done without the vocabulary. It is the basis for communication. Such argument was strengthened by Jamalipour and Farahani (2012) saying that the vocabulary is commonly recognized as the main communication tool. What language users employ in expressing their feelings, ideas, and opinions, a manifestation of the human mind, is the vocabulary. Compared to another language aspect, more importantly, according to linguistic perspective, the vocabulary seems to be more useful and urgent than grammatical role. Sullivan and Alba (2010) argued, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed."

A related study by Staehr (2008) shows, regardless of the various degree of its contribution, that the number of the vocabulary positively predicts the language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It has a more beneficial contribution to the reading and writing abilities, but is moderately related to speaking and listening skills. Staehr (2008) reported that the learners' receptive vocabulary size was found to be strongly associated with the reading and writing abilities, and moderately influential to the speaking and listening performances.

To sum up, the vocabulary size and depth in communication appear to be associated with a good interaction meeting the principles of communication, namely maxim of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner (Grice, 1975). The maxim of quantity is normally achieved when the message being delivered is definitely informative, giving intended words. The maxim of quality is obtained when the

speakers' word is truthful. It is expected to inform the real thing. In contrast, the maxim of relevance is more likely to be gained through the appropriateness of given vocabulary. Finally, the maxim of manner is theoretically met as long as the words are clearly, briefly, and orderly used.

Vocabulary as the Reflection of Social Reality

It is certain that there are four basic reasons for treating language, in general, as a tool for social interaction. Richards (2001, p. 161) theorized those four reasons, namely (1) language is a system for the expression of meaning; (2) the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication; (3) the structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses; and (4) the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

Having believed that the language is symbols representing human thoughts and feelings, the meaning—the reality of the human thought, seems to be only grasped through the language. Such argument is in line with Can's (2008) opinion about reality and the symbols. It was stated that the reality can only be received through the symbols.

The symbols refer to the words of language, and its choice is an accumulation of human social background and feelings when they are communicating. This indicates that the word choice in our communication is definitely determined by our experience. Children with limited experience will have limited number of vocabularies expressing his or her thought. As a consequence, a politician's diction will be always associated with political issues and social problems.

Interestingly, the vocabulary also constructs the human reality. It forms the reality of the world, or even can change the world of human thought, for which language listeners' attitude and action are developed. With a more philosophical tone, Searle (1995) emphasized it by saying human institutional reality was developed by the linguistic representation.

Vocabulary as an Emotion Booster

Common sense views that emotion is physical type that has little association with words used to name it. It is thought the words are instruments to label the emotion with the linguistic symbols. Yet psychological constructionists believe that the language is a fundamental element in the emotion that is constitutive of both emotion experiences and perception (Lindquist, MacCormack, & Shablack, 2015).

This suggests that the words choice in the interaction helps people produce and perceive the emotion which are contextually linked to the situation where, when, and how they are communicated and received. Supported by Lindquist, MacCormack, and Shablack (2015), the language plays a role in the emotion since it supports an understanding used to create a meaning of sensations from a body as well as the world in a given context. Similar evidence has been reported by Lindquist, Sapute, and Gendron (2015). They claimed that the emotion is built when sensations are categorized using emotion category knowledge and supported by the language.

Vocabulary as an Academic Ability Predictor

Believing science and technology are widely spread using academic discourses and academic discourses are composed by the string of structured words, it can be concluded that vocabulary is tightly related to the spread of scientific findings. This is

due to the fact that research articles are formed by the words, a substantial function of the word in academic discourse. To know its features and categories, linguists believe that, linguistically, the used words in academic discourses are always academic and specific.

Moreover, the size and understanding of vocabulary knowledge are more likely to predict the academic ability. Though different effects and research designs vary, they are still in the same direction supporting the vocabulary usefulness. Taken for example, Roche and Harrington's (2013) finding showed that vocabulary was associated with both academic writing and GPA (or Grade Point Average). Similarly, vocabulary knowledge has been viewed as the prior ability that had to be mastered to increase the other language abilities.

Types of Vocabulary

An account for the vocabulary types is important. It is in order to have a better understanding of how to teach them effectively according to context, learners' learning style and preferences, and needs. Two well-known categories are receptive and productive vocabulary, and active and passive vocabulary. Table 1 figures out the vocabulary types. Listening and reading vocabulary are words usually understood during a process of language perception. Speaking vocabulary, like writing vocabulary, refers to productive-active-passive words used.

Table 1:
Types of Vocabulary

	Receptive	Productive	Active	Passive
Listening Vocabulary	√			
Speaking Vocabulary		√	√	√
Reading Vocabulary	√			
Writing Vocabulary		√	√	√

Receptive Vocabulary vs. Productive Vocabulary

The receptive vocabulary is defined as the vocabulary type a reader encounters during reading and listening. They are the words which the readers and listeners use to comprehend given messages. Such vocabularies are strongly related to receptive the language skills. Supported by Stuart (2008) and Susanto (2017), they are the words recognized by the students during reading process. In a broader sense, Laufer and Goldstein (2004) posited that receptive vocabulary was associated with the listening and reading.

In contrast, the productive vocabulary refers to the set of words used to produce the messages. Two basic skills naturally make use of the productive vocabularies are speaking and writing. In short, they are termed as they are to correspond to the productive skills of language.

Another equally important account for the vocabulary types is their contribution to the growth of the receptive skills and productive skills. Many studies testified such effect on those language skills domains, like oral ability, reading competence and cloze test ability. Jamalipour and Farahani (2012) reported that the vocabulary knowledge positively predicted the reading comprehension. This spells out that it functions as a predictor of reading comprehension competence, the evidence for the receptive skill. More specifically, the vocabulary knowledge that seems to influence the research result comprises knowledge of word form, meaning, and use. A similar finding also showed

that the receptive vocabulary is closely related to cloze test result of Spanish primary students who learned English. Catalan and Gallego (2008) reported that the higher the score on the cloze test was, the higher the score on the VLT (Vocabulary Levels Test) would be. Concerning vocabulary and oral skill relationship, Uchihara and Saito (2016) discovered that the productive vocabulary scores significantly correlated with L2 fluency, but not with comprehensibility and accentedness. This means the L2 speakers with the sophisticated productive vocabulary are more likely to speak spontaneously with fewer pauses and repetitions, and at a faster tempo.

Active Vocabulary vs. Passive Vocabulary

With reference to a word frequency use, it is more likely to group the vocabulary into active and passive vocabularies. The active vocabulary is the words by which listeners and writer usually use as they are completely understood. They are the words that are recalled and used at will when a situation of speech and writing requires them. Practically, the active words are those we can automatically use when writing and speaking without stopping and forcing ourselves to remember. Yet Laufer (1998) in his research divided them into two subgroups, namely controlled active and free active.

In contrast, the passive vocabulary is meant as the words that are not completely understood, so that they are infrequently used when writing and speaking. Related to this, therefore, it can be concluded that the passive vocabulary is a precondition of the active vocabulary. It is, of course, an optional step as people have different abilities and words have different degrees of comprehensibility, which has to be acquired anterior to the active vocabulary mastery.

Table 2:
Comparisons of Passive-Controlled Active Ratios of Word Families
(Adopted from Laufer, 1998)

	Passive	Controlled active	Ratio
10 th graders	1,900	1,700	89%
11 th graders	3,500	2,550	73%

As for the growth of the passive and active vocabularies, Laufer (1998) explained that both passive and controlled vocabularies increased and mutually correlated. Yet passive vocabularies increased more than the controlled active ones. The free active vocabulary was found unrelated to the two types. Laufer and Parabakht (2008) accentuated that the passive vocabulary were acquired more than the active ones. They argued that free the active vocabulary developed more slowly and less predictably than did passive vocabulary.

The Teaching of Vocabulary

Approaches to Vocabulary Teaching

Available literatures classify vocabulary teaching approaches into implicit and explicit vocabulary teaching. Implicit vocabulary teaching refers to a procedure of teaching in which language learners unconsciously, indirectly, and contextually learn the vocabularies. The learners of vocabulary who are applying such approach always learn naturally. This is based what Ellis (1994) and Choo, Ai Lin, and Pandian (2012) argued that the implicit learning is viewed as the process of learning through a natural and simple procedure without any conscious operation.

As for its disadvantage, the implicit vocabulary teaching is time-consuming.

Preparation of English teachers is required to attractively operate the teaching and learning. An unprepared teaching and less attractive interaction will lead to confusion in the classroom. However, the implicit learning contains many benefits. Reviewed by Chu-Min and Hsiu-Tin (2003), the implicit learning showed a positive association with a number of domains, such as artificial grammar learning, sequence learning, control of computer-simulated dynamic systems, and probability learning.

Explicit vocabulary teaching is a conscious process of mastering the vocabulary. There has to be a direct and systematic procedure and awareness toward the objectives of vocabulary learning. It also requires the learners to understand the process it has, predict answers of the problem, evaluate and reflect a result. This is more likely to be accomplished by cognitive strategies, note-taking, dictionary, and some other associational learning methods, such as semantic approach and mnemonic method (Dakun, 2000).

The explicit vocabulary teaching, according to the natural entity of language, including form, meaning, and use contains three additional techniques, that appears to be functional in learning. They are form-based explicit teaching, meaning-based explicit teaching, and rule-based explicit teaching. The form-based explicit teaching refers to the process by which forms of the vocabulary, like its free morphemes, bound morphemes, and spelling are directly taught to the students. The meaning-based explicit teaching is understood as a procedure where the meaning of an intended vocabulary is taught. Finally, the rule-based explicit teaching is related to a teaching of vocabulary based on the rules of the vocabulary being learned.

Yet knowing a better technique in teaching vocabulary is another interesting topic for many scholars. Wang's (2014) work showed that the meaning-based implicit teaching is more beneficial for meaning-based language features, and the rule-based explicit teaching is more beneficial for form-based language features. Such finding means that the vocabulary teaching through the implicit teaching allows the language learners to better understand the meaning of vocabulary. It also indicates that the teaching of the use and rules of vocabulary explicitly is more likely to improve the learners' ability to master ways to spell and to understand parts of the vocabulary, like root, base, suffix, infix, prefix, and many more.

The Selection of Teaching and Learning Vocabulary Materials (TLVMs)

Vocabulary teaching material, traditionally, is restricted to printed teaching sources, like books, magazines, newspapers, articles, etc. But in a broader sense, the vocabulary material is any sort of tools that are used to accomplish teaching objectives. The Ministry of Education of Ghana (2016) views that the vocabulary materials are all things used in teaching, like chalk, blackboard, papers, pens, books, bottle tops, everyday objects, technology of any kind, environment, and even human body.

However, the part of this article only addresses the selection of vocabulary teaching material that has to be prepared by English teacher. It is because considering the criteria of teaching materials is a must for language teachers. Once it is met, the teaching and learning activities will be attractive and make the planned learning objectives achievable. Moreover, it assists English teacher with a presentation and transmission of knowledge, helps learners master content, and profiles various academic abilities and values (Bušljeta, 2013). More importantly, she or he described six functions of teaching and learning materials, namely (1) motivating students, (2) developing creativity, (3) evoking prior knowledge, (4) encouraging process of

understanding, decoding, organizing and synthesizing educational content, and (5) influencing the growth of different skills.

Conversely, it is found that there are still problems on the availability of teaching materials. Surprisingly, Gogoi (2015) claimed 75% of his participants, teachers at Golaghat District of Assam, India, reported that the teaching materials for early childhood care and educational center were not designed by experts, and more than half of them said that the materials were insufficient and teachers were not well trained to use them.

To respond to the aforementioned problem, a more beneficial course book, one of teaching and learning material sources, is obliged to be integrated with other alternative materials. This is in accordance with Johansson's (2006) finding. She reported that all interviewed teachers agreed that the course books were not the only source of teaching materials as it seemed to be boring and did not stimulate the learners to better learn.

Referring to the previous importance and problems, criteria, like in teaching materials in general, selecting vocabulary has to be taken into account. Proposed by Honeyfield (1997), the criteria of vocabulary selection in language teaching comprises availability, familiarity, coverage, and frequency. Additionally, from grounded theory and conceptually-driven data analysis Shi (2009) highlighted five criteria of effective resource selection. She reported that the selected material has to (be) (1) curriculum-appropriate, (2) make students interested, (3) balance students' interests and other factors when facing conflicts, (4) student-appropriate, and (5) flexible.

Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Teaching

Vocabulary breadth is defined as the number of words a person understands. The breadth is characterized as a surface-level knowledge of the words. Emphasized by Miao and Kirby (2015), the breadth of vocabulary is the number of known words.

Nation and Newton (1997) argued that there are four levels of vocabulary: highly-frequent, academic, technical, and low-frequency words. The high-frequency words are 2,000 and more likely to be covered 87% in texts. The academic vocabulary contains 800 words and is used 8% in the texts. Ultimately, technical (3% covered) and low-frequency words (2% covered) are sequentially 2,000 and 123,200 words. This suggests that the total number of intended learning words, excluding the low-frequency, is 4,800 (98% covered in the texts).

Table 3:
Number of Vocabulary to Learn (Nation & Newton, 1997)

Level	Number of Words	Text Coverage (%)
High-frequency words	2,000	87
Academic vocabulary	800	8
Technical vocabulary	2,000	3
Total to be learned	4,800	98
Low-frequency word	123,200	2
Total	128,000	100

On the contrary, the vocabulary depth is concerned with learners' level knowledge of a word. According to Shen (2008), the depth of vocabulary knowledge is termed as the learners' understanding of various aspects of a given word, or how well the word is comprehended. More technically, Qian (2002) stated the learner with vocabulary depth

should comprehend more than just a superficial understanding. Pronunciation, spelling, meaning, register, frequency, and morphological, syntactic, and collocational elements have to be included.

Comparing relationship the vocabulary breadth and depth, and their contribution to reading performance seems to be an interesting issue. To discuss them, we need to consider Qian's (2006), Şen's and Kulelim's (2015), and Schmitt's (2014) works. Qian (2006) reported that the vocabulary size or the breadth, the depth and reading comprehension are highly, and strongly, correlated. Supported by Şen and Kulelim (2015), it was argued that the vocabulary size and the vocabulary depth were both significantly correlated to the reading performance. However, the vocabulary depth predicted the reading performance better.

To better understand the relationship of depth vocabulary and breadth vocabulary according to word frequency level, it is to give credit to Schmitt (2014). He discovered that it seemed to have a low correlation between the vocabulary depth and breadth for students who had higher frequency words and the low vocabulary breadth. On the contrary, it was found a difference between the size and depth of vocabulary for learners with the lower frequency words and larger vocabulary sizes.

Principles of Teaching Vocabulary

As for principles of teaching vocabulary, an account for what vocabulary forms need to teach and the principles of how they are taught is crucial. Firstly, apart from the vocabulary teaching which in line with its objectives and students' need, it is certain to consider the vocabulary aspects to teach. To accomplish it, Nation (2001) proposed these aspects, namely spoken form, written form, parts of word, concept a word has and items it may associate, association of the word, grammar of the word, collocation of the word, register and frequency of the word.

Table 4:
Nine Vocabulary Aspects to Teach

Aspect	Part	Definition
Meaning	Form and meaning	Is the word a loan word in the L1?
	Concept and referents	Is there an L1 word with roughly the same meaning?
Form	Associations	Does the word fit into the same sets as an L1 word of similar meaning?
	Spoken form	Can the learners repeat the word accurately if they hear it?
	Written form	Can the learners write the word correctly if they hear it?
Use	Word parts	Can the learners identify known affixes in the word?
	Grammatical functions	Does the word fit into predictable grammar patterns?
	Collocations	Does the word have the same collocations as an L1 word of similar meaning?
	Constraints on use	Does the word have the same restrictions on its use as an L1 word of similar meaning?

Secondly, the principles of teaching vocabulary. There are many theories about teaching vocabulary guidelines and principles. Amongst of them, two writers are thought to be plausible. To Nation (2005), six principles in the teaching vocabulary are (1) keeping teaching simple and clear without any complicated explanations, (2) relating present teaching to past knowledge by showing a pattern or analogies, (3) using both oral and written presentation, (4) giving most attention to words that are already partly known, (5) telling learners if it is a high-frequency word that is worth noting for future attention, and (6) not bringing in other unknown or poorly known related words like near synonyms, opposites, or members of the same lexical set. Lastly, according to Graves (2006), providing rich and varied language experiences, teaching individual words, teaching word-learning strategies, and building consciousness in readers and

writers are frameworks for successful vocabulary programs.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

It is plausible that vocabulary plays an important role in language use. It is the heart of language skills. More importantly, it appears to function as a basis for communication, reflection of social reality, emotion booster, and academic ability predictor. Besides, receptive and productive vocabularies, and active and passive vocabulary according to previous studies have various contributions to language skill performances. Furthermore, principles of teaching vocabulary, breadth and depth, and teaching and learning vocabulary materials (TLVMs) appear to be associated with student's vocabulary mastery. Finally, it suggests that the vocabulary teaching has to be simple, related to student's known and unknown knowledge, and highly-frequency based.

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