ATTENTION TO TEACHING L2 VOCABULARY AND RESEARCH ACROSS THE DECADES

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ABSTRACT

This is a descriptive paper, which shed light on the importance of learning L2 vocabulary, which was not paid a serious attention in second language learning classroom. The paper presented weight of vocabulary learning across the ancient, medieval, and modern periods in general and various methods/approaches of modern period in specific. This paper was concluded with an appeal to the teachers of English as second language to integrate certain features from various methods/approaches discussed in the paper and develop a suitable program to enhance L2 vocabulary of their beloved students.
Key Words: *English as second language, L2 vocabulary, and approach/methods*

1. INTRODUCTION

English as an international language promotes academic, social, cultural, economical, and political relations among the nations of the world. Learning or teaching English as a foreign language or second language is the common phenomenon in many parts of the world. Though English language is the composition of many language items, vocabulary is an undeniable item for quick learning of LSRW skills in English language. Vocabulary development is one of the most important aspects of students' life. It affects their thoughts, actions, aspiration, and success, particularly in academic field. In the fast growing world, every branch of study demands good amount of vocabulary for all round development. William S. Gray (1938, p.1) stated:

> *The vocabulary is an essential means of interchanging ideas and of acquiring new experiences…. Man's growth in ideas has always been accompanied by a corresponding expansion of his vocabulary (as cited in Iheanacho, 1997).*

The world inside and outside the school is full of words. Farmers and professionals have been well informed now a days. The whole sensorium (whole stimuli from all senses) of man is expressed in words. Dale (1969) points out that the words are the names given to experiences and further says, "Vocabulary as a key to concept development (p. 89) and meaningful word-learning…. is an excellent example of permanent learning in action" (p. 63). According to Meara (1984), there was severe criticism against neglecting vocabulary in English language teaching in the early 1980s. Though there was little attention on research, importance of vocabulary was not neglected in language pedagogy even in days of communicative language teaching. Wilkins (1972), advocate of Communicative approach stated that learning vocabulary is as important as learning grammar. He further stated that we could say very little with grammar but almost anything with words. Thornbury (2002) recorded the wish of many learners who emphasized the importance of vocabulary through their answers to the question "How would you like to improve your English?" given below:

1. Oral is my weakness and I con't speack (cannot speak) a fluent sentence in English. Sometimes I am lack of useful vocabularies to express my opinions.

2. My problem is that I forget the words soon after I have looked in the dictionary. For example, when I read a English book.

3. I would like to improve my vocabulary. I have the feeling that I always use same idiomatic expressions to express different sort of things.

4. I'd like enlarge my vocabulary. Too often my speaking is hard caused by missing words (p. 13).

This shows how some students face problem in acquiring vocabulary and some of them face the problem with their poor retention and recalling. In spite of the dire need for strong English vocabulary store, teaching vocabulary had not been so responsive. The historical development of learning and teaching L2 vocabulary could give vivid picture how it is neglected across the decades.

2. Vocabulary Teaching in Ancient Period

According to Schmitt (2000), teaching vocabulary in second language acquisition is not a modern phenomenon but it was rooted in the second century B.C. In the beginning student learnt to read after mastering alphabet, syllables, words and connected discourse. Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty, (1985) stated that the vocabulary help was given in either alphabetical

form or grouping them under various topics. As the art of rhetoric was highly prized, learning vocabulary was considered highly important in ancient period.

3. Vocabulary Teaching in Medieval Period

Schmitt in his book "*Vocabulary in Language Teaching*" in 2000 stated that William of Bath wrote a text, which focused on vocabulary acquisition through contextual presentation in 1611. The book contains 1200 words that exemplified common Latin vocabulary and used homonyms in the context of sentences. Based on the idea of "contextualized vocabulary", John Amos Comenius proposed an inductive approach to language learning with limited vocabulary grouped under the topics with labeled pictures. Both William and Comenius tried to raise the status of vocabulary. They considered translation a mean of using the target language. They opposed to the idea of rote memorization and robust grammar teaching. The medieval period witnessed the dominance of grammar over vocabulary but a few attempts were made to standardize the vocabulary.

Robert Cawdrey produced a dictionary "A Table Alphabetical" in 1604. Later in 1755, Samuel Johnson brought out "*A Dictionary of English language*" which remained standard for reference. He gave more a fixed spelling and lexical usage than any other single source in the history of English. Johnson cleverly used contemporary pronunciation to guide his spellings and definitions. In the context of ambiguity, he turned to give arbitrary decisions stimulated by logic, analogy, and personal taste. The dictionary remained unchallenged until the publishing of "*Noah Webster Dictionary*" in 1828 in American Version.

4. Learning and Teaching L2 vocabulary through the methods/approaches in Modern Period

The **Grammar-translation method** is the extension of an approach of learning classical languages to learn modern languages. It emerged in 1840 and swayed through 1940 and continued further to tease a few teachers all around the world. The main objective of this approach is to enable learner to read the literature. It was thought that memorizing the vocabulary list, rules of grammar and practice of translation would contribute to intellectual growth through mental exercises. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), this method stressed on explicit grammar learning though the rules were obscure. The students were asked to find synonyms, antonyms to recognize cognates and define words while reading an English passage. So the students were expected to learn spellings and sounds, which correspond between target language and mother tongue.

According to the **Direct method**, meaning is directly related to target language without the stage of translation. Hubbard, Jone, and Thornton (1983) studied that the main idea behind this method was that the students learn language by hearing them spoken and engaging themselves in conversation. It was contemplated that vocabulary could be acquired naturally through the interaction during the lessons. Pictures and physical demonstrations were used to explain concrete vocabulary. Basic vocabulary teaching was begun with classroom objects and clothing. The teaching vocabulary was connected to the real context as much as possible. This method was criticized for its lack of methodological basis.

Reading method started its function as an alternative to direct method with limited classes and qualifications of teachers. Richards and Rodgers (2001) observed that the reading became a goal of the most of the foreign language programs in the United States, after Coalman's report in 1929. It continued its popularity until the end of Second World War. According to this method, reading could be achieved with gradual mastery of vocabulary and simple structures through easy reading texts. Vocabulary was chosen based on their frequency and usefulness. It was controlled in beginning levels. Much priority was given to acquisition of vocabulary than that of grammar rules and translation practices. All types of efforts were made to improve vocabulary through intensive and extensive reading. The disability of speaking language persisted with the deficit vocabulary due to lack of exposure to oral- aural skills.

Audio-lingual method was developed by American structural linguists during the Second World War. It focused mainly on listening and speaking, to train the soldiers quickly in a foreign language. According to this method, vocabulary must be relatively easy and selected based on the simplicity and familiarity. New vocabulary was added when it was necessary to make the drills viable. It was felt that good exposure to language would finally lead to extension of vocabulary. Still it was criticized that it had no clear method of teaching vocabulary.

Structural Approach viewed teaching and learning L2 vocabulary from different perspective. According to this, learner extracts the meaning from morphological analysis, which divides the words into prefixes, suffixes and roots then turns to understand the sentences. It focuses on word formation by providing different forms of words such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs for effective learning. It is confirmed that word formation yields productive learning because learner could recall self-generated words easier than the words from reading and listening to texts. This approach guides both the learners to understand the meaning semantically from morphological analysis and teachers to use multi-exposure techniques while devising variety of vocabulary learning activities. This approach

seeks learners' active participation rather than remaining passive recipients of learning vocabulary.

Celce and Murcia (2001) recognized the **Oral and Situational Approach** in Britain was as a response to reading method in America. It enjoyed its popularity until 1960. Though it shared many similarities with reading approach, many things were added by linguist, J. R. Firth who believed that language form would be governed by its situation. In this approach, vocabulary and grammar items were presented and practised in the situations, for example; dialogue between the people at the post office, bank, or railway station. Vocabulary was chosen according to the demands of the situation. The process of selection of words ensures the coverage of general service list. As this approach shared similarities with audio-lingual approach, its theory of language teaching and learning was called into question by mid 1960s. According to Coady (1993), **Communicative Language Teaching** (CLT) was the production of anthropological linguists Hymes, Firthian, and linguist Halliday.   In this approach also, vocabulary was given secondary status. This approach did not specify how to handle vocabulary other than the vocabulary used for functional use. Later it was realized that mere exposure to functional language would not provide adequate vocabulary. So the inclusion of both principled selection of vocabulary based on frequency and teaching methodology was practiced. As it was assumed that the vocabulary would take care of itself, the direct vocabulary instruction was not considered necessary (Schmitt, 2000).

According to Coady (1993), **Natural approach** has emerged from the development of communicative approach. As comprehensible and meaningful input was preferred to correct grammatical construction, this approach considered vocabulary relevant to language acquisition. According to this approach, vocabulary is one of the important aspects for successful communication but it is to be achieved in the same way of L1 vocabulary acquisition. It is realized that just exposure to functional communication will not ensure vocabulary acquisition. This approach suggests that principled selection of vocabulary based on the frequency lists and teaching methodology, which is built on meaningful engagement with number of recycles, shall be practised.

According to Thornbury (2002), the **Lexical Approach** to teach language prepared the ground for vocabulary teaching not only in the form of individual and high frequency words but also in the form of word chunks. The founding principles of lexical approach were around the meanings, organized syllabus, frequent meanings encoded by frequent words, words occur in combination, and combinations aid fluency. As it is the syllabus around the meanings, it is also called semantic syllabus.

Lexical approach identified the importance of multi-word units or chunks (leave- me- alone, this- is- mine). The fluency depends on the ability to use these chunks in conversational exchanges. The chunking process serves two purposes in the early language usage: It provides readymade expressions to use the language from the beginning and preserves those chunks for linguistic analysis later. Along with the expressions for immediate use, this process stimulates the learners to create new chunks by re-chunking (That- is- yours from this- is- mine). The phrase-book view of language prompted Lewis to define lexical approach as grammaticalized lexicon but not lexicalized grammar. In other words, instead of slotting words into grammatical structures, it is storing memorized words, phrases, and collocations with their associated grammar. We draw chunks from this phrase book to maintain fluency and fine-tuning of them later.

5. Alternative approaches/methods

The major paradigm shift was witnessed between 1970 and 1980 in the field of language teaching. As the quest for alternative to Grammar-Translation method went on different directions, new methods/approaches to teach language and develop communicative ability prior to grammar. Asher's **Total Physical Response** (1977) is the result of his investigations based on developmental psychology. This method gave priority to learning grammar and vocabulary over other aspects of language. It emphasized on initial attention to meaning and then to the form of language. This method established listening comprehension very important because it further develops speaking, reading and writing skills spontaneously under right conditions. Gattegno's **Silent way** (1963) shared the principle "teaching is subordinate to learning" with the cognitive approach. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), differentiation is made between several types of vocabulary items: common expressions in daily life were set for first class, words used to communicate special ideas like politics were set for second class, and last class contains many functional words of language. Roger's humanistic psychology gave birth to **Community Language Learning,** which was propounded by Curran (1976). This method considered individual as a 'whole person' and used to teach oral proficiency but did not follow conventional language syllabus that determines grammar and vocabulary items. The vocabulary items will be nominated by learners according their wish. Based on the language generated by learners, particular grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary will be selected. Lozanov's **Suggestopedia** (1978a) laid emphasis on memorization vocabulary pair in which target words were to be translated into native language. In the view Larsen and Freeman (2000), this method preferred lexis and lexical translation to contextualization, which resulted in successful acquiring of large amount of vocabulary.

6. Explicit and Incidental Learning

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Nation and Waring (1997) studied that the required vocabulary size to read an authentic text may be between three and five thousand word families. It is agreed on the point that second language learner need both explicit and incidental learning. Certain important words pose wonderful target for explicit attention, for example technical words and most frequent words. Nation (1994) thought that vocabulary teaching must be considered in terms of cost benefit, according to which the words of great value (high frequency) shall be learnt explicitly and less-frequent words shall be left for incidental learning. Explicit learning focuses attention directly on information, which is to be learnt. Schmitt & Schmitt (1995) suggested that learning activities should be designed to require multiple manipulation of a word, for example, using vocabulary notebooks to which learners go back and writing additional information about the word. Understanding the process of memory enables teachers to create effective programs that give maximum benefit from the revision.

Ellis (1997) studied that children learn most part of orthography and phonology of second language from incidental learning in spite of explicit focus on spelling and pronunciation rules. The early conscious learning becomes automatic with the speed and over all proficiency of orthographic input and output by repetitive practice in target language. This was replicated by the study of Thomas and Dieter (1987) which showed that the act of writing would reinforce memory of its orthographic form. In respect of vocabulary learning, the more the learner is engaged with the word, the stronger the retention will be.

7. Whole Language approach

According to this approach, the main aim of teaching English was to help the learners to evolve themselves as "independent users" of English. The focus was on knowledge and language construction rather than on reproduction. The students are expected to listen to narratives, descriptions, dialogues, and songs, read them graphically and construct the both oral and written discourses.

It is believed that the colourful pictures draw the students' attention and carry a meaningful input in mother tongue because of their immersion is in social environment rather than in second language. In spite of the arrangement of units thematically to construct a story, the designers' expectation from the students that they should speak, read, and write something in English only by virtue of graphic reading and graphic writing.

In order to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English, the textbook contains the basic vocabulary that every beginner should learn. The words used in the textbook are the words that the pupils encounter in their daily life. The designers of the textbook assumed

that the graphic reading and graphic writing would help the learner to pick up the vocabulary non-consciously without any stress for spelling and pronunciation.

8. CONCLUSION

The paper described the vital role of vocabulary learning to master every field of study. The line of observation journeyed through different periods. The special focus was made on vocabulary teaching in various methods/ approaches of modern period. It was universally accepted that no method/approach is free from criticism yet the teachers of English can consider and include the brighter side of method or approach of their choice to enhance L2 vocabulary.

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