



## ENHANCING WORD KNOWLEDGE TO PROMOTE INCREMENTAL GROWTH OF VOCABULARY

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper entitled, “Enhancing Word Knowledge to Promote Incremental Growth of vocabulary” is an attempt to study some of the aspects associated with the word knowledge. The research of Nation suggests that word knowledge increases world knowledge and world knowledge increases word knowledge and so on. To increase their repertoire of vocabulary, a mere memorizing of list of words does not always help learners reach the target. Hence, imparting vocabulary should enable the learners in establishing links between them by strong associations. This paper presents the possibility of adapting the theoretical underpinnings of aspects of word knowledge suggested in the research of second language vocabulary acquisition. Further, imparting vocabulary should seriously consider the associated aspects of words which contribute to incremental growth of vocabulary. If vocabulary instruction from the high school level is thorough and strategic, it can help in orienting the learners towards serious goals of vocabulary acquisition.*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The knowledge of word usage and its different forms is vital and undoubtedly the obligatory component of language learning. If the major skills of language have to operate effectively, either in an individual or in an integrated manner, the required word knowledge is mandatory. It is words which help us express our views, opinions, and ultimately contribute to communication. However, for intelligible communication, besides the repertoire of words, their associated features acquire significance in spoken discourses, as the intelligibility of speech is measured in terms of proper pronunciation. Hence, in imparting vocabulary to the second language learners, if the focus is on all the required associated aspects such as

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spelling, pronunciation, syllable division, word stress, word derivatives, and usage, this would contribute to effective incremental learning. The efforts, if initialized from the lower standards at school level, can be a constructive step towards achieving the goal of target language vocabulary acquisition by the high school level.

Considering the position of English language at the global level and its local status in a multilingual country like India, enabling the second language learners to acquire language skills is a challenging task, nonetheless an impossible one. Language primarily consists of words and the ability to use words with ease is often regarded as a significant skill as it forms the basis for communication. It has been aptly defined by Lee Kok Cheong that “Linguistic competence is at the very heart of communicative competence.”<sup>1</sup> Linguistic competence is the ability to use language effectively in any context or situation to express oneself, which in turn, facilitates communication. However, communication, which is the hub of all activities, can be possible and intelligible only if the required repertoire of words is possessed by the speaker. It is indeed the prerequisite for communication as one cannot communicate without words. Hence, the knowledge of vocabulary is very essential for learners to perform well in both their personal and professional lives. In order to facilitate vocabulary acquisition among learners, the underlying notion of the applied linguistic perspective of vocabulary cannot be overlooked that a word can be thoroughly understood only when the several aspects of word knowledge are learnt. Furthermore, the research in the second language acquisition also throws light on the fact the aspects of word knowledge contribute to permanent and incremental growth of vocabulary among learners.

## 2.0 WHAT CONSTITUTES THE WORD KNOWLEDGE?:

Lewis (1993)<sup>2</sup> opines that second language acquisition is related to the acquisition of vocabulary as the vocabulary competence directly influences the learners’ ability of language skills. In order to know what should be learnt about a word, it is important to consider the associated features that are concerned with the word knowledge such as spelling, syllable division, pronunciation, word accent, word derivations, synonyms & antonyms, collocations, and usage. Providing vocabulary instruction for both receptive and productive use by incorporating all the afore mentioned aspects of word knowledge is a challenging task in the second language situations owing to the limited exposure and duration of the second language instruction.

Vocabulary instruction should consider the fact that vocabulary acquisition is influenced by both semantic and morpho-phonological forms. Hence, it should cater to the needs of learners in this direction by providing insights on some of the features of word knowledge such as pronunciation, spelling and syllable division, word accent, word relations, word derivations, and usage of the words in the target language.



### 3.0 PRONUNCIATION:

The research of the Feigenbaum(1958)<sup>3</sup> suggests that the 44 sounds being realized as 251 orthographical representations accounts for the difficulty in pronunciation encountered by learners. Nation's statement is very apt here which suggests that

“Pronounceability depends on the similarity between individual sounds and supra-segmentals like stress and tone in the first and second language, the way in which these sounds combine with each other and the relationship between the spelling and sound system.” The aspect of pronunciation has been identified as one of the difficulties and an important factor affecting learning the pronunciation of words.

A common classroom observation provides some insights strengthening the same when learners make mistakes in terms of the pronunciation of

- a. “/g/” which can be realized as both soft /g/ [as in gem] and hard /g/ [as in gun].
- b. Utterance of the silent letter as in “honest”, “hour”, “plumber”, “debt”, “dumb”, etc.
- c. Realization of final “/t/” in word final positions in words like “water, air”, etc.
- d. Stressing the double consonants in words such as “running, skipping, swimming”, etc.
- e. Insertion of initial vowel sound before “/s/” as in “istation”, “ischool”, etc.
- f. Insertion of median vowel between consonant clusters as in “station”- [setation], “school”, [sechool], etc.

These features of pronunciation need implicit instruction that would promote unconscious learning as Gathercole's and Baddeley's (1989) findings supports that learners' vocabulary learning is influenced by their ability to “hold a word in their phonological short-term memory.”<sup>4</sup> Frequent exposure to exact/native like pronunciation can be encouraged through listening activities, or use of multi media such as news reading telecast, or software assisted practice sessions to provide both ear training and oral practice.

### 4.0 SPELLING AND SYLLABLE DIVISION:

The research of Bradley and Huxford (1994)<sup>5</sup> suggests that the skill of reading is contributory to phonological representations and is related to spelling. Written form of the words gives rise to word spelling which is strongly influenced by the learners' phonological structure of language. Bradley and Huxford suggest that the learning of rhymes in the initial stages of learning contributes to the creation of a system that facilitates both learning and storage of spelling. The feature of spelling can be focused by the use of utterances in syllables. If words are pronounced according to the syllables, it would yield to the learning of proper



pronunciation and spelling based on the phonological realizations. Explaining the concept of syllable division by pronouncing the words equated in terms of syllables or by audio versions of the words can facilitate the acquisition of both spelling and syllable. Though not a common practice, if such practice is observed from a very early stage, it contributes to easy learning of difficult words at a later stage.

At this juncture, use of mother tongue in a very limited manner can prove to be of immense help during the initial stage of concept development. For instance, the following steps can be useful in teaching some of the features of vocabulary.

- Pick few words as- surrender, difficult, communication, pronunciation, etc. for syllable division, spell and write them on the board.
- Ask the learners to give the mother tongue script (Telugu) for the words as- surrender, difficult, communication, pronunciation, etc.
- Explain the concept of syllabification in the simplest manner.
- Finally ask the learners to apply the same to the words written in mother tongue .

This practice, in principle, can prove useful with learners of middle school level, who would have certain well formed language habits for their age. Besides, explaining some difficult aspects can also be handled with certain ease owing to the learners' receiving level. However, this cannot be left in isolation as the fact that a particular syllable in a given word receives emphasis can be made observable thus contributing to word accent.

### 5.0 WORD ACCENT:

The knowledge of syllable can be effectively used to highlight the point that words with more than one syllable are often stressed on a particular syllable. Learners should be made aware of the differences between content and function words in order to apply the rules of word accent. Importantly, while giving practice of word accent, attention of the learners should be drawn to the change of accent in case of word derivations. For instance, word formation which involves the word class change can be considered as in the example mentioned below: Words derived from verbs with the suffix '-ation' indicate process, and are stressed on the preceding syllable where the suffix is added.

Form – For`mation; Nominate – nomi`nation; Communicate – communi`cation

The words thus learned with focus on word accent can be immediately put to use either by a follow up oral activity or by dictation which requires the learners to recognize the stressed syllable. However, the principles of grading, frequency, and usefulness help in acquiring the rules of word accent. Further, the teaching should focus both on the practice of individual

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words, and also words in connected speech which would enable the learners identify the subtleties in pronunciation.

## 6.0 WORD MEANINGS AND RELATIONS:

Learners acquire meanings of words either by definitions or by identifying the existing relationship between a word and its referents as Hirtle (1994) opines that “the words are usually labels for concepts.”<sup>6</sup> Concepts such as Polysemy, synonyms and antonyms can contribute to incremental growth of word meanings as opined by Nagy&Scott (2000), Schwaneflugel et al., (1997), and Stahl (2003).

### 6.1 Polysemy:

A single word giving rise to different meanings exhibits polysemy. For example, the word “bank” which shares the same spelling and pronunciation gives three different meanings as explained below:

- a financial institute,
- river bank, or
- the trust one places on the other

The feature of homophones and homographs is also a challenge to young learners.

Homophones, which have similar sounds, differ in spelling and meaning. Eg: see-sea; I-eye  
Homographs have same spelling but differ in meaning, the meaning which is decided by the context. Examples of this kind are : “Bank, grave, etc.”

Enabling the learners to form association by describing the other terms related to the word usage can be very useful as the distinction of registral variation can also be subtly conveyed. The research of Cohen and Apehek (1981), and Hulstijn (1997) throws light that retention of words was better as opposed to rote memorization of words by forming word association. For instance, if ‘bank’ should mean ‘financial institute’ by associating it with cheque, passbook, draft, pay order, manager, etc., would help the learners form the association of the main word with the related words and helps in retaining it as a separate entity.

Explanation of this kind would be beneficial from upper primary and middle school levels as learners would have some idea about the words based on their observation, and general awareness. Besides such explanations, providing an opportunity to the learners to brainstorm for different shades of meanings leads to the formation of network associations of a new word with already known ones and facilitates in the acquisition of the different shades of the word.



## 6.2 Synonyms:

Synonyms contribute to generative word knowledge which is important in vocabulary enhancement. They help in teaching meaning by drawing on words of equivalent meaning already known by the students. The pairs of words such as “start, begin”, “complete, finish, end”, “worried, concerned”, etc, though share the same relation, cannot be used as a substitute for the other in all contexts. For instance, the words “regular/constant” cannot be used synonymously. One cannot say “The temperature is maintained regular” for “the temperature is maintained constant.” In addition, words which share sound relation to some extent need explicit teaching. The example under consideration leads to immediate conclusion that the meaning might be the same:

- i. Continuous (adj.) = happening or existing for a period of time without interruption
- ii. Continuum = a series of similar items in which is almost the same as the ones next to it but the last is very different from the first

This subtlety in difference should be drawn from illustrations to enable the students understand the different shades of meaning. Care should also be taken to exemplify the registral variation which does not account for 100% synonymy.

## 6.3: Antonyms:

It is a useful technique of vocabulary enhancement and concept formation. It does not merely depict the opposite meaning of a given word, but also shows the latent relationship between concepts. For instance, the word “hot” can be easily understood with the help of the opposite word “cold.” However, care should be taken while teaching antonyms to avoid over-generalizations by the learners. If the opposite of “rough” is taught as “smooth”, there is a possibility of generating the example as in “The Sea was smooth or Maya is such a smooth girl” which needs to be checked before it gets internalized. The use of words according to the context should be emphasized. This can be avoided if the learners are given information about the registral variations.

Though antonyms and synonyms contribute to enhancing vocabulary, the knowledge of word derivations also plays an important role in second language vocabulary acquisition.

## 7.0 WORD DERIVATIONS AND USAGE:



Most of the words are derived from the root words by affixation which contributes to a significant amount of vocabulary growth. The analyses of White, Sowell and Yanigihara (1989) throws light on this aspect that “eleven prefixes account for 81% of all prefixed words and six suffixes account for 80% of all suffixed words”<sup>7</sup>. In the second language vocabulary acquisition, if learners are trained to decode the meaning of the prefixes or suffixes used in deriving words, it would help them understand the meanings of many abstract words. This in turn would enable them to become independent in working out the meaning of the new words. For example, analyzing a word like “undetectable” into its prefix, suffix, root word, and arriving at the meaning of the prefix and suffix would certainly help the learners to apply the same principle when new words are encountered. Apart from the meanings of the prefixes and suffixes, the instruction should also focus on the following aspects:

- If the affixation results in grammatical purpose, for example, root word “talk” changes into “talks, talked, talking”, it is called inflection, and the word accent does not change.
- If the affixation results in the word class change, that is, if one category as a verb changes to noun, adjective, adverb, the pronunciation feature requires emphasis

Ex: Simulate (V) on suffixation gives to different forms such as  
Simulation (N) with word accent on /l/; and  
Simulated(Adj.) with word accent on/s/

Besides the process of word derivation, the productive feature of words has to be encouraged as it strengthens and consolidates the learning process. Learners should be provided with number of opportunities to make use of the derived words either in own sentences both in spoken and written activities which helps them own the word. While strategic inputs on affixes, giving practice to the words encountered in the texts by drawing closer attention to word accent help the students become independent learners, frequent opportunities to use the acquired vocabulary in target language facilitates permanent learning.

## 8.0 CONCLUSION:

Vocabulary or word knowledge is essential for fluency in language which enables the learners to perform effectively as Clark (1993) opines that “Words are the central building blocks of communication.”<sup>8</sup> Though vocabulary learning takes place through out the life of an individual, not all the learners acquire the different aspects at the same time as growth of vocabulary takes place in a gradual way, though it is complicated. Hence, focusing on the learners’ requirement, enhancing vocabulary should be carried on in an incremental manner



by introducing the learners to the various aspects of word knowledge. This strategic instruction should also cater to the level and ability of learners and should aim at learner autonomy over a period of time. Further, imparting vocabulary in the form of word families can enhance vocabulary growth of learners effectively. In this context, research in second language vocabulary acquisition states that a knowledge of 3,000 to 5,000 word families is essential to read and comprehend authentic texts. The number varies even to a range of 15,000 to 20,000 word families for learners aspiring higher academic goals. Recalling Lee Kok Cheong's statement that linguistic competence is the base for communicative competence, providing opportunities for learners to acquire word knowledge incrementally would strengthen their linguistic competence, which in turn would contribute to their communicative competence.

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