Vocabulary Learning and Acquisition in English as a Foreign Language: A Case Study

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Abstract :

The present paper is an exploratory research aimed at gaining insights into the vocabulary acquisition strategies used by Algerian students. The research adopted a mixed-method approach to collect data from the respondents. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 34 second year students at the department of English language, University of Ghardaia. The results of the study showed that the students used constant techniques to acquire vocabulary, and most of them use dictionaries when searching for new vocabulary. It is recommended that the students use varied strategies and benefit from the information technology items.

Keywords: Vocabulary acquisition, Strategies, English as a foreign language, Teaching, Learning.

1. Introduction

Learning a language necessitates good command of its vocabulary. Vocabulary is a necessary basis to gain self-confidence, take part in communication, and maintain a smooth flow of the communicative process. Without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed (Thornbury, 2002, p. 13 quoting David Wilkins). Along with other linguistic aspects, a good command of vocabulary is critical to perform well in the learning of foreign languages. Schmitt (2010, p. 4) argues that "learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language."

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In the same vein, Ur (2022) considers vocabulary the most important element in learning languages. People can communicate with limited grammar and weak pronunciation, but they cannot do so without enough vocabulary. She claims that a learner needs at least five thousand words to be able to satisfy the needs of their communicative situations. Ur (2022) claims that vocabulary is not necessarily single words; it can be composed of more than one word conveying a single meaning. She estimates at least one-tenth of the vocabulary we learn to be as so. She gives an example of *by and large* to mean *generally*. (p. 6)

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vocabulary

In the context of foreign language learning, the term vocabulary is confusing and difficult to define (Katamba, 1994; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2000; Stahl, 2005; Jackson & Zé Amvela, 2007; Pavicic Takac, 2008). Ullmann (1962: 118ff) (qtd. in Jackson & Zé Amvela, 2007: 62) attributes ambiguity to the word due to its generic character, its multiplicity of aspects, the lack of clear-cut boundaries in the non-linguistic world, and the lack of familiarity with the referent of the words. It is generic and vague, when it refers to general classes of things, even for concrete things. It, then, has abstract reference that leads to misunderstanding and arbitrary distinction.

Schmitt (2000) considers the term word too general to encapsulate vocabulary. Read (2000:1) considers words "the basic building blocks of language." Jackson & Zé Amvela (2007) argue that words are uninterruptible units, and the vocabulary of any language is open-ended as it always receives new words; thus, nobody can be familiar with all the words of a language.

Richards (2003) defines vocabulary as terms and their definitions. According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, vocabulary has many shades of meaning. It can be compared to lexicon, and it may refer to the collection of words known by an individual or by a large group of people. It may also signify the body

of specialized terms in a field of study or activity such as "the vocabulary of science."

1.2. Criteria of Wordhood

Orthographically, Plag (2003: 4) considers the orthographic word as "an uninterrupted string of letters which is preceded by a blank space and followed either by a blank space or a punctuation mark." Jackson and Zé Amvela (2007: 57) call it representation. But this definition is formalistic, inconsistent and incomplete (Pavicic Takac, 2008: 5). It does not seem appropriate in some instances, the case of polysemy, homonymy, and compound words, for example.

Semantically, a word expresses a unified semantic concept (Plag, 2003: 8). This definition can be ambiguous and not reliable, for some unified semantic concepts have phrasal forms; they consist of several words. The author offers this example: the smell of fresh rain in a forest in the fall.

Syntactically, words are called parts of speech, and their position in a sentence is determined by the syntactic rules. For instance, articles make parts of noun phrases; they occur before nouns and their modifiers, as in *the big house*. (Plag, 2003: 9)

Lexically, attempting to solve the problem, lexeme, of lexical unit, has been introduced. It involves orthographic, phonological, grammatical, and semantic characteristics of the word. Lexeme "covers inflections, polysemy, as well as multi-word items with different degrees of fixedness, such as compounds, phrasal verbs, and idioms" (Pavicic Takac, 2008: 6).

Carter and McCarthy (1988:18) assume that words are composed of meaningful 'bits' of language (the word *mean/ing/ful* is itself composed of at least three such bits), and that words are freestanding: in the freestanding word *laughing,* we can see another potential word, *laugh,* but not a word *ing.*

1.3. Approaching Vocabulary

Jackson and Zé Amvela (2007: 2) consider 'vocabulary', 'lexis', and 'lexicon' synonymous. However, they see that vocabulary is more colloquial, lexicon is more learned and technical, and lexis is situated between the two. They define lexicology the study of lexis, the stock of words in a given language, i.e. its vocabulary or lexicon, and the 'word' is central in the study of lexicology. Jackson and Zé Amvela (2007: 9) add that lexicology relies on information derived from morphology, the study of the forms of words and their components. Lexicology must not be confused with lexicography, the writing or compilation of dictionaries, which is a special technique rather than a level of language study. Morphology is the study of morphemes and their arrangements in forming words. Morphemes are the smallest meaningful units which may constitute words or parts of words.

1.4. Vocabulary Acquisition

Learners are obliged to expand their vocabulary in order to learn a foreign language. The process of vocabulary learning depends to a great extent on the exposure to a varied range of words. Pavicic Takac (2008: 6) states that vocabulary acquisition is not merely a mental collection of individual lexical items. Carter and McCarthy (1988:12) argue that learning vocabulary effectively is closely bound up with a teacher's understanding, and a learner's perception of, the difficulties of words. Read (2004) argues that not only the semantic characteristic of the word that counts in vocabulary knowledge, but also its orthographic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, collocational and pragmatic aspects.

Carter and McCarthy (1988:1) argue that vocabulary study has been neglected by linguists, applied linguists and language teachers. According to Pavicic Takac (2008: 4), there is still no generally accepted theory of vocabulary acquisition. Learning new words is a continuous process even in people's mother tongue, according to Thornbury (2002). For Kamil and Hiebert (2005), the process of

expanding and elaborating vocabulary extends across a person's lifetime.

1.5. Vocabulary Learning Strategies

There are two main strategies of vocabulary learning: intentional and incidental. Thornbury (2002) considers the relationship between these strategies complementary. While some words will be learned actively, others will be picked up incidentally (p. 32). Schmitt (2000: 4) refers to the mechanics of vocabulary learning as a mystery. He distinguishes between understanding words as receptive/passive knowledge through listening and reading, and producing them when speaking or writing as active knowledge.

Vocabulary can be learnt intentionally or incidentally through input and output exposures. It can be learnt deliberately through guided and planned courses to teach or learn selected vocabulary. This approach is commonly used at a beginner level where the role of the teacher is obvious (Meara, 1994; Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001). On the other hand, while involved in language learning activities in different contexts, learners find themselves unconsciously developing vocabulary knowledge.

Pavicic Takac (2008) considers intentional vocabulary teaching deliberate, explicit, planned, directed, and clearly defined. Teachers introduce and present the meaning and form of new lexical items, encourage learners to review and practice, i.e. recycle what is known, and monitor and evaluate the level of acquisition of various components of lexical knowledge. The teacher presents both the meaning and form of the lexical item, which may occur in either order. (p, 20).

1.6. Vocabulary through Teaching Approaches

Carter and MaCarthy (1988) argue that the structural approach neglected vocabulary, and it had been seen an outcast of the language teaching for the transformationalists. According to Schmitt (2000), in the Grammar-Translation language teaching methodology bilingual dictionary was inevitable and vocabulary was learnt through bilingual word lists. Vocabulary was typically taught in isolation and is often

associated with written texts. Learners might learn vocabulary words as discrete items, often accompanied by their translations in the native language. Studying vocabulary was based on listing and memorizing words and their corresponding translations.

In the Direct Method vocabulary was taught through direct association with objects and actions. Pictures and physical objects were used to demonstrate concrete vocabulary through the use of simple and familiar things such as objects in the classroom or clothing to relate vocabulary with reality.

The Situational Approach introduced vocabulary on real-life based scenarios, allowing learners to understand and use language in particular situations. Words and phrases should be relevant to each situation within role-play, discussions, and activities that require learners to use the vocabulary in context focussing on contextual understanding. Vocabulary was grouped as required in different situations (e.g., at the post office).

The Communicative Language Teaching approach was a response to the shortage marked in the previous methods. It stressed the use of appropriate language for particular contexts. Vocabulary was subordinate to matters of functional language (e.g., requesting and apologizing) with the presumption that vocabulary would take care of itself. That in fact has not ensured the acquisition of adequate vocabulary (Schmitt, 2000). According to Carter and MaCarthy (1988), the communicative approach states that nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary. Much concern was given to meaning in the notional/functional syllabus, and words became to be learned in context not as lists of items; moreover, lexical learning had begun to be considered a skill in ELT not an appendage serving other skills.

1.6.1. Computers and Technology

With the advent of using computers and technology in language acquisition, vocabulary learning has become systemized. Computers and technology offer a range of tools and resources that can enhance language learning in various ways. There are numerous online platforms, websites, and applications designed specifically for language learning. They offer interactive lessons and vocabulary

exercises among many diverse tools. Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, Babbel, and Memrise are some of them. They make language learning engaging and enjoyable and can adapt to learners' level of proficiency. Computers allow learners to access to a wide range of authentic language content, such as movies, TV shows, and online videos.

Online platforms connect learners with native speakers of the language they're learning through video calls or text chats. These tools provide personalized feedback, offering explanations for grammar and vocabulary mistakes. Online dictionaries and translators help learners look up unfamiliar words or phrases and understand their meanings. Advanced linguistic software can analyze large text corpora providing insights into language usage, vocabulary frequency, and grammar patterns. Digital libraries, podcasts, and audiobooks provide learners with diverse reading and listening materials, helping them expand their vocabulary and improve comprehension. Emerging technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality are being explored for language learning.

1.7 Techniques of Vocabulary Learning

Schmitt, Schmitt, and Mann (2011) suggest four vocabulary learning techniques to maximize the learners' vocabulary acquisition: 1) using a dictionary to discover words' meaning, 2) guessing the meaning of new words from context; they can get some clues from the surrounding words, 3) extensive reading to understand the use of words, their spellings, meanings, and collocations, and 4) using internet tools as easy to access tools to see the frequency of words, among many other benefits.

Agustín Llach and Canga Alonso (2020: 28) argue that learners can and would benefit from a structured or directional approach to spelling and pronunciation. It is reasonable to claim that explicit instruction would raise orthographic and phonetic awareness.

In many cases learners can expand their lexical repertoire and enrich their vocabulary knowledge creating mnemonic interconnection of words associating them by means of word patterning, harmonization, derivation, and cognates, i.e., words which are very similar and have equivalent meanings in the mother tongue and foreign language, paying attention to false friends.

1.7.1 Contextual Learning

Contextual vocabulary learning is a dynamic and functional approach to acquiring new words and expanding one's vocabulary by emphasizing the importance of understanding words within their natural contexts. It involves exposing learners to words in sentences, paragraphs, or even longer texts, allowing them to grasp the nuances of word usage, meaning, and collocations. Learning words in context enables learners understand how words are used and how their meanings change in different situations.

1.7.2 Definition

Definition is one of the most frequent ways of vocabulary presenting, Pavicic Takac (2008) mentions nine forms in defining the meaning as follows:

1. synonym, antonym, analytic definition (X is a Y which),
2. taxonomic definition (Autumn is a season),
3. giving examples (Furniture: something like a chair, sofa, etc.) or the reverse,
4. giving the superordinate term (A rose is a flower),
5. describing the function (Pen: use it to write),
6. grammatical definition (worse: comparison of bad),
7. definition by connection (danger: lives have not been protected),
8. definition by classification (Family: a group of people), and
9. full definition, the one resembling word definitions in monolingual dictionaries. (Pavicic Takac, 2008: 20)

1.7.3 Familiarization

The frequent encounter with words makes them common to the learner and easy to recall. The learner also becomes attuned to patterns of word formation such as, prefixes, suffixes, and root words. This can facilitate the learning of new words based on familiar morphemes. Familiarity with lexical items creates spontaneous recognition of linguistic aspects: orthographical, phonological, grammatical, and semantic.

1.7.4 Memorization

Memory is important in building a strong vocabulary base, and it helps retain and recall vocabulary. Vocabulary is stored, and then recognized and retrieved in a systematic way. The mental accumulation of words builds up a storage enabling language users recollect, compare, choose, combine, construct, and create language items according to the needs and contexts. The lexical input can be realized by means of the exposure of language items through listening or reading. Memorization is not the only technique for acquiring vocabulary, but it can be more valuable if it is used in conjunction with other methods.

According to Pavicic Takac (2008), the most frequent tasks to help language learners memorize words, stimulate word identification, enable them to build up an adequate lexical knowledge and consolidate it in long-term memory are:

- mechanical repetition,
- copying words onto cards,
- manipulation, such as matching words and their definitions, grouping, and finding the odd one out
- integrating new words with the already known ones,
- semantic elaboration, like mapping, ordering, and classifying,
- creating mental images,
- personalization, relating words to real events or personal experiences,
- identification, such as finding words in a text,
- recalling words from memory, by acting the word out, replacing it with its synonym or antonym, giving a definition, or cross-word puzzles,
- expansion of lexical knowledge, such as word formation analysis, analysis of grammar categories and forms, and highlighting collocations, and
- productive use of words by using them in meaningful contexts, such as completing sentences or texts with words. (pp. 21-23)

1.7.5 Receptive Skills

Kamil and Hiebert (2005:3) argue that words come in at least two forms: oral and print. Knowledge of words also comes in at least two forms, receptive—that which we can understand or recognize—and productive—the vocabulary we use when we write or speak. According to them, recognition or receptive vocabulary is larger than production vocabulary (p. 3). Some studies strongly correlate vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Anderson & Freebody, 1981). Horst, Cobb, and Meara (1998) argue that reading is a good way to learn new words; Kamil and Hiebert (2005) consider vocabulary an integral part of comprehension as it occupies a central place in the scheme of learning to read (p. 4).

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted an exploratory research method to investigate the ways second year students learn new vocabulary. This study aims at examining the strategies used by first year students at the department of English language, University of Ghardaia, Algeria, to learn new words and enhance their vocabulary knowledge.

The problematic of the current study is that vocabulary deficiency hinders EFL students to perform well in language learning. Students are struggling to find out better strategies to develop their vocabulary acquisition.

The research seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What makes the students inept in acquiring vocabulary?
2. What are the strategies used in vocabulary acquisition?

It is assumed that the students find difficulties to learn new vocabulary, and this is due to the inappropriate strategies they use in learning vocabulary.

2. 1. Participants

A group of 34 second year English students (Group 2) at the department of English, University of Ghardaia during 2022/2023 academic year participated in this study.

2.2. Data Collection

The empirical study was conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire administered to the respondents to gain data about their attitudes, strategies, and preferences to acquire vocabulary. The questionnaire contains ten closed-ended questions and one open-ended question, and it is divided into three sections. The first section is about the students' attitudes towards vocabulary learning; the second is about the strategies the students use to learn vocabulary. And the third section is about the students' preferences in learning vocabulary. It should be noted that in many instances percentages have been used in rounded-off figures for better convenience.

2.2.1. Questionnaire' Sections

Section One: Students' Attitudes to Vocabulary Learning
Question 1: How important is vocabulary in learning English?

Table 1. The Importance of Vocabulary in English Language Learning

very important	important	not important
100%	0%	0%

There is a common agreement among the students about the importance of vocabulary in language learning. All of them (100%) think that vocabulary is very important in learning English.

Question 2. *How difficult is vocabulary learning?*

Table 2. Vocabulary Learning Difficulty

very easy	easy	difficult	very difficult
7%	28%	58%	7%

Almost two thirds of the students (58% + 7%) think that learning vocabulary is difficult. The students' impression can be reflected in their productive skills where many of them face problems in using vocabulary in both oral and written expression.

Question 3. *Are you satisfied with the way you learn vocabulary?*

Table 3. Students' Satisfaction of the Vocabulary Learning Ways

very satisfied	satisfied	not satisfied
9%	41%	50%

Half of the students (50%) consider the way adopted in learning vocabulary not satisfying. The probable reason behind this fact is the unvarying and constant way chosen in learning/teaching vocabulary. This should urge the teachers to find out more efficient ways of the vocabulary learning/teaching process.

Section Two: Techniques of Vocabulary Learning

Question 4: *Which of the following activities/techniques you think is more effective in vocabulary learning?*

Table 4. The Effectiveness of Vocabulary Learning Techniques

vocabulary list	gap filling	word matching	synonym finding
37%	34%	11%	18%

The items given in the table are some of the common techniques and activities to teach/learn vocabulary. 37% of the students say that presenting vocabulary lists is effective. 34% go for filling the gaps. 18% say that they find synonym finding more effective. And only 11 opt for matching words.

Question 5: *What is the best way to learn vocabulary? If you choose 'other', mention it, please.*

Table 5. Students' Preferred Way in Vocabulary Learning

using dictionaries	guessing the meaning	other
78%	22%	0%

The majority of the students (78%) consider using dictionaries the best way in vocabulary learning. The others (22%) opt for 'guessing the meaning' from the context.

Question 6: *Do you learn vocabulary outside the classroom? If so, mention the way(s), please.*

Table 6. Students' Vocabulary Learning outside the Classroom

yes	no
100%	0%

The results show that all the students tend to learn vocabulary outside the classroom through different ways. A good number of them (57%) say that they watch movies and listen to songs. Some of them (28%) say that they use English chat-rooms. And only 15% of them say that they read English books.

Section Three: Students' Preferences in Vocabulary Learning

Question 7: *What do you do when meeting a new word?*

Table 7. Students' Techniques Adopted in Meeting New Words

Use a Dictionary	Guess the Meaning from the Context	Ask Others
68%	12%	20%

The majority of the students 68% tend to use dictionaries when they face new words. 20% of them ask others about the word, and 12% say that they guess the meaning from the context.

Question 8: *What do you look for much when meeting a new word?*

Table 8. Aspects to Look for when Meeting New Words

pronunciation	meaning	spelling
34%	50%	16%

Half of the students (50%) say that they look for the meaning of the words. About one third (34%) of them tend to check how to pronounce words. And 16% of them say that they check the spelling. Logically, the results vary as learners generally look for more than one item at the same time.

Question 9: *Do you agree that vocabulary learning should be prioritized in the classroom?*

Table 9. Vocabulary Learning Priority

strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
63%	37%	0%	0%

The results displayed on the table show that all the students (63% + 37%) tend to prioritize vocabulary learning in the classroom. This, again, shows the students' awareness about the importance of vocabulary learning.

Question 10: *Which among the following language skills do you think is more useful in learning vocabulary*?

Table 10. The Usefulness of Language Skills in Vocabulary Learning

listening	speaking	reading	writing
34%	11%	40%	15%

Forty percent (40%) of them go for reading, while 34% opt for listening. Only 15% think that writing is useful in vocabulary learning, and 11% go for speaking.

This indicates that students are aware of the importance of receptive skills in the process of vocabulary acquisition.

Question 11: *is an open-ended question asking the students to provide suggestions that seem to them useful in vocabulary learning*?

These are some of the students' views and suggestions:

1. One of the students says that electronic dictionaries are very useful in vocabulary learning,
2. Another answer may raise the difficulty learners often face when producing the language. *"In reading and listening, vocabulary is easy and ready to guess or check, but sometimes I struggle to find convenient words to use when speaking or writing."*
3. *"I find it very useful to learn vocabulary from movies, songs, and some YouTube channels as I can learn adequate pronunciation from native speakers. It boosts my listening, and I always learn new words."*

4. *"I like chatting with people whose mother tongue is English. I feel that this helps me too much."*

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pertinent data was collected from the questionnaire. The results show that the students are well aware of the importance and priority of vocabulary acquisition in language learning. It can be also deduced that students have different points of view regarding vocabulary learning. Besides, the results affirmed the research hypothesis which claimed that the students use different vocabulary learning strategies. It is recommended that the strategies and techniques adopted in vocabulary learning be diverse and varied.

Data analysis revealed that the receptive skills, listening and reading, are good sources of acquiring vocabulary for the students, and vocabulary variety helps students perform well in their speaking and writing. It is advised then to have more in-class speaking and reading sessions.

It can be deduced from the results of the study that the students tend to lean towards using dictionaries when they look for new words. Using dictionaries seems to be a very common way used and preferred by the students to learn vocabulary. The advent of technology offered easy-to-access online and offline linguistic resources. They are very efficient, and they help language users have abundant sources of information. As some students emphasize, electronic dictionaries, platforms, and websites provide learners with almost everything related to the word in search: its meaning, pronunciation, etymology, spelling, synonyms, antonyms, and collocation. Language learners should take advantage of the existence of this technological equipment and seize the opportunity of having smart-phones and their applications.

CONCLUSION

This paper represents a research work attempting to explore the Algerian students' attitudes and gauge their views about the strategies they used to learn vocabulary. The study was limited to second year English students at the department of English language, University of Ghardaia. To this end, the study adopted a mixed research method wherein a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to the students. It is valuable to mention that the students considered vocabulary very important in foreign language learning. It can also be deduced that the input skills, listening and reading, were not given much importance in the teaching/learning syllabus. And this is an opportunity to call for reconsidering the significance of these receptive skills in order for the students to be exposed to sufficient amounts of vocabulary during their classes. It was also obvious that the strategies used to acquire vocabulary were limited and constant. Diversity repels monotony, and variety invokes motivation within the students. Again, one positive conclusion was the fact that the students used electronic resources to learn vocabulary. They used electronic dictionaries, websites, and platforms to help themselves expand their vocabulary knowledge.

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