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*Investigating the Efficiency of the Used Vocabulary Teaching Strategies
on EFL Learners' Performance*

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Abstract:

As the English language became a global language for communication and trade, many studies were devoted to recognize how to teach/ learn this language properly and efficiently. One of the core elements to master this language is 'vocabulary'. This research aims at discovering the common difficulties that most of students encounter while learning new vocabulary. It also intends to investigate the students' attitudes towards many of the teaching strategies adopted by current teachers. The present study was undertaken in the department of English at the University of Oran 2.

To profoundly examine the efficiency of vocabulary teaching strategies on students' vocabulary development, this work was based on the analysis of a significant questionnaire administrated to second year EFL students. The findings revealed that the traditional vocabulary teaching strategies are barely successful, make students less keen to study, and seem a bit dated now.

Keywords: courses; EFL students; positive outcomes; teaching strategies; vocabulary.

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I. Introduction

Language acquisition and language learning are crucial topics in our modern world, especially after the globalization and the influence of the English language on the different aspects of life. This matter has become the trigger that pushes many of the researchers and scientists to look for new methods and techniques to teach vocabulary as it is considered as the primary element in learning any language whether a native or a second one. However, this task was not easily taken by both sides teachers and learners. Therefore, This research focuses on spotting the major difficulties that face learners while acquiring new lexis. Moreover, it seeks to identify precisely which vocabulary EFL learners find heavy to grasp or use. More importantly, this study sheds light on learners' reaction to the teachers' different used techniques while delivering new vocabulary. Based on these inquiries, the researchers hypothesize that the vocabulary teaching strategies used nowadays do not motivate students and do not enrich their vocabulary repertoire. Throughout this paper, the writers attempt to answer the following research questions:

- What are the various barriers that may affect vocabulary learning?
- What are the students' attitudes towards the distinct vocabulary teaching techniques?

1. Definitions of Vocabulary

Vocabulary is mainly defined as the group of related words used to transmit a certain idea or a message between the four basic skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing that need strongly this element to be achieved at a certain level of proficiency. Wilkins stated that the importance of vocabulary is vital as he considers that everything revolves around vocabulary and nothing is achieved or made without this latter (Wilkins, 1972, p. 111). Language practitioners are required to recognize a variety of words and how to substitute some of them by their meanings and opposites so as to facilitate the communication in the targeted language. The main purpose of any language is to communicate and express ideas, Chatrismab shares the same principle as he sees that vocabulary is a set of words, fragments and especially expressions that are used to deliver a an idea or a feeling (Chatrismab, 2015, p. 9).

2. What Makes a Word Difficult?

Second year learners may find obstacles when dealing with new or complex lexis. These obstacles can affect their comprehension and block their acquisition process. Nuttul (2005, p. 76-79) offered a list of difficulties that learners may encounter:

2.1. Words with several meanings

Words with several meanings are characterized by having different meanings according to the context they were used in, a single word may have up to more than 20 meanings, for example, the word "face" in English may have up to 24 definitions according to the various contexts it may be used in, Oxford Dictionary Online provides some of them:

- The front part of the head where the eyes, nose and mouth are.
- The side or surface of something.
- The acting, striking or working surface of an implement.

2.2. Idioms

Nuttul describes idioms as a barrier that may face learners of any language, according to him, an idiom is a set of words - a statement - that conveys a totally different message comparing it to when you separate its element, and then each word would have a meaning by itself. For instance, "to feel under the weather" means "to feel unwell". Another example provided by Yakub, Taiba Ibrahim, Tomekyin, and Nyame (2022, p. 432) in their table of idiomatic expressions and their interpretation:

You have longer hands (literal meaning), you are a thief (idiomatic meaning). Ta'amneh (2021, p. 83) claims that learners may suffer from idiom's difficulty because of the influence of the target language unfamiliar culture as well as the use of idioms in real-life situations or in oral conversations.

2.3. Transfer of meaning

Nunberg defines transfer of meanings as "linguistic mechanisms that make it possible to use the same expression to refer to disjoint sorts of things" (Nunberg, 1995, p. 1). This language point may hinder EFL learners' progress especially in their first years, as they are not used to read between the lines and infer the hidden messages orally or written. In this case, transfer of meaning occurs and students focus only on the literal meaning of words and understand nothing such as metaphors.

2.4. Synonyms and antonyms

According to Ozturk, learners may get confused when it comes to remember new synonyms or antonyms or when they are supposed to replace one with another. This process seems easy but not all the time works efficiently because not all antonyms are tall and short, as this latter became as cliché (Ozturk, 2006, p. 25).

2.5. Irony

Irony is one of the pragmatic expressions that users of language choose when they want to express their sarcasm about a given point. They usually select a word or a statement to comment in a sarcastic way and the receiver needs to decipher the code and read between or behind the lines to get the message. Nuttall thinks "irony is probably the most difficult of all the uses of language for the student to interpret" (2005, p. 9).

2.6. Sub-technical words

In specific domains like law, trade, medicine, etc. words may have certain characteristics and meanings. The kind of lexis dealt with in the tourism field is way too far from the lexis used in medicine or judicial fields. For example, a foreign language learner may find this statement difficult if he is not familiar with law vocabulary "Bill committed a crime when he robbed a bank. Someone witnessed the crime and told the police" (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2001, p. 124).

The previous kinds of vocabulary are not the only difficulties that a learner may be surprised of; there are other factors that can make the comprehension process heavier for them. According to Thornbury "pronunciation, spelling length, complexity and grammar play a role while understanding new or difficult items" (Thornbury, 2002, p. 27-28).

3. Current Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

As learners find it difficult to understand, memorize or use new vocabulary, teachers as well struggle when selecting which vocabulary needs to be taught and in which way. There are some traditional methods that most of the teachers find easy to handle and while teaching English in general or vocabulary in specific. These methods are mainly based on books, papers or handouts, and writing vocabulary on the board. However, in return, other methods that had been proved to work effectively as the traditional ones or even more are now invading the world of education. The most common used methods are the following:

3.1. Games

Teaching and learning under pressure had never worked out, learners who feel themselves obliged or forced to acquire or use new lexis will not achieve the promising objective. Therefore, using games may create an atmosphere of relaxation and enthusiasm and make the learners study and

practice subconsciously. Bakhsh (2016) indicates that “games create amusing and informative atmosphere for the young learners in a language class”. Moreover, Learners’ four language skills can be ameliorated while playing educational games because they will read or listen and interact verbally or written to solve the game and find the answers of their tasks (Lee, 1995, as cited in Bakhsh, 2016). Additionally, games can attract and motivate students to a certain high level and optimize their chances to contribute in the game making process (Marzano et al., 2001, p. 57-58). It is not restricted to teachers only, games like: tongue twisters, guessing, and crosswords puzzle can be shared by both in terms of generating or applying (Klingner et al., 2015, p. 66).

3.2. Vocabulary self-collection strategy

The use of such a strategy developed recently. Haggard (1982) Describes how a Self Vocabulary Collection Strategy ‘VSS’ works inside a class through the following steps:

1. Ask students to identify two words they believe everyone should learn that are related to specific topics the group is studying.
2. Have students write their words on the board.
3. Ask students to present their words to the group by defining them, explaining why the group should learn them, and telling where the words were found.
4. Moderate a discussion through which the class reduces the list to a predetermined number of most important words by eliminating words already known by many. The final list becomes the focus of vocabulary activities for the next few days.

3.3. Rankling vocabulary items

One of the funniest tasks that a learner may be part of is rankling vocabulary items or in other words, classifying them. This task focuses on testing students’ capacities concerning the specific categories that may be in each list of the provided vocabulary. Students here are required to categorize the words that they had been given into a specific criterion. The teacher’s role is provide a list of 6 to 8 words about topics that motivate the learners and raise their interest, then ask the students to classify them according to what he wants, for example, all list of cities and ask students to classify them according to population, etc. (Folse, 2008, p. 17).

3.4. Vocabulary cards

Learners like to be taught within various situations, vocabulary cards strategy gives them an opportunity to learn in a competitive atmosphere as a kind of change. This task makes learners more free to talk about an issue of their interest with their instructor. The procedures that a teacher takes while adopting such a method are: first, distributing students into pairs or groups, then giving a card to each group. The card will have a question or an activity including true or false activity and finally students will debate and deduce the correct answer while exchanging their ideas about that topic or question (Folse, 2008, p. 17).

Figure (1): Example of Multiple-Choice Activity

Answer is B

Multiple Choice Exercise
The area between two mountains is called a _____.
A. voucher B. valley C. wound D. wave

The source: (Folse, 2008, p. 17)

3.5. Word mapping

This strategy helps students to participate more freely; it facilitates the grasping of new words through the drawing technique. Students in this case will gather as much words as they know and want and be more creative to list them in a cluster by their own. Graves insists on the role of the learners as he stated that “they are required to represent what they know about a certain topic in a visual display” (Graves, 2008, p. 56-58).

3.6. Reading and retelling

An advanced learner has a special way and mood for acquiring new information. That is why this technique allows them to practice their oral skills and proficiency at the same time, it gives them a great deal of unfamiliar lexis to be learnt and memorized (Mowbray, 2010, p. 10). Retelling; therefore, makes second year learners restate a topic or a set of words they came across and think over and over about how they are going to present their deep thoughts about that topic.

3.7. Internet and web-based exercises

Internet today plays a great role in people's life; everyone connects to it at any time or place. This helped many of the students and workers to do their jobs quickly and effortlessly. Learners at any level can get access to infinite wide range of information books and videos that they might need or use. Searching for a word's origin or meaning is no longer a problem for today's students. Zhang, Song and Burston (2011); Khazaei and Dastjerdi (2011) as cited in Hajebi, Taheri, Fahandezh, and Salari (2018, p. 374) confirmed the positive impact of web-based vocabulary learning since they tested the difference between the traditional vocabulary teaching tools and web-based activities. A study was conducted on two groups of second year learners. The findings showed that learners who got better results studied online and got their activities were web- based vocabulary activities while the other students did not perform well because they have been taught with papers, i.e. traditionally. Working with such technique attaches learners and renders them collaborate and communicate easily while doing their activity. It seems that this technique excludes the teacher; however, the teacher's part is to control and lead student's choices to choose the suitable source they would work with, for instance, online dictionary.

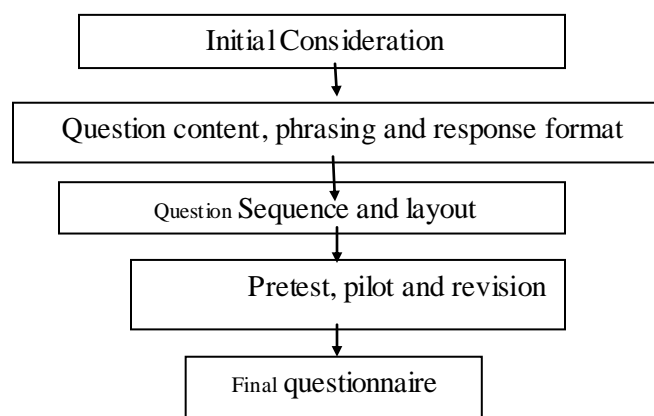
II. Methods and Materials

This research aims at highlighting the importance of variety and modernity of vocabulary teaching strategies. Therefore, a quantitative method was adopted to collect data from the students under investigation in order to test their reactions and attitudes towards vocabulary teaching techniques. The advantage from using such a tool according to Abuhamda, Ismail, and Bsharat is to have statistical reliable facts to interpret the goal of the study accurately. Working with questionnaires enables researchers to work in a very short time with fewer spent efforts (Abuhamda et al., 2021, p. 79).

1. Data Collection

The selected tool for this study was a questionnaire in order to get quantitative data that are easy to quantify and to analyze. A questionnaire is defined by Brown (2001, p. 6), as cited in Dornyei and Taguchi (2010, p. 3), as follows: “Questionnaires are any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from existing answers. Piloting the preliminary questionnaire is crucial to design a final well-refined draft of questionnaire. That is why the researchers piloted the first version of questionnaire on 10 students from the same target population. The objective behind such a procedure is to test the validity and clarity of the proposed questions. After the piloting, many questions were reformulated and removed to get a final questionnaire which suits students’ educational level, time and needs. The questionnaire was distributed online through the social network ‘facebook’. The reason behind this step is that all the Algerian universities were off duty from March 2020 because of the pandemic of corona virus. Roopa Suggested the following stages to plan questionnaire:

Figure (2): Stages of Planning a Questionnaire



The source : (Roopa, 2012, p. 273)

2. Participants

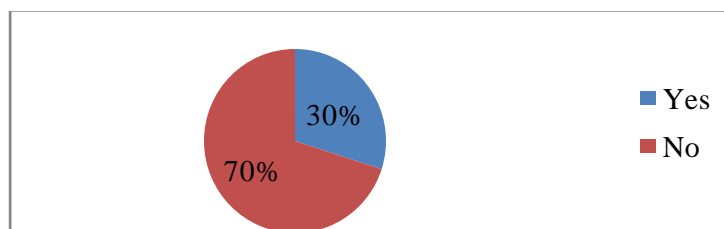
The sample of this study consists of 46 Second Year EFL students in the department of English at the University of Oran 2. The distribution was online through a group created by the students themselves, we requested 80 students to participate in our study; however, only 50 of them replied and filled in the given questionnaire.

III. Results and Discussion

This section offers the obtained findings and their interpretation. It comprises distinct questions about learners’ attitudes towards their vocabulary repertoire, the basic obstacles encountered when learning a new word, the most complicated terms met in their courses, the traditional way of teaching vocabulary, and their proposed vocabulary teaching techniques.

1. Do you think that the provided vocabulary during lessons enriches your stock?

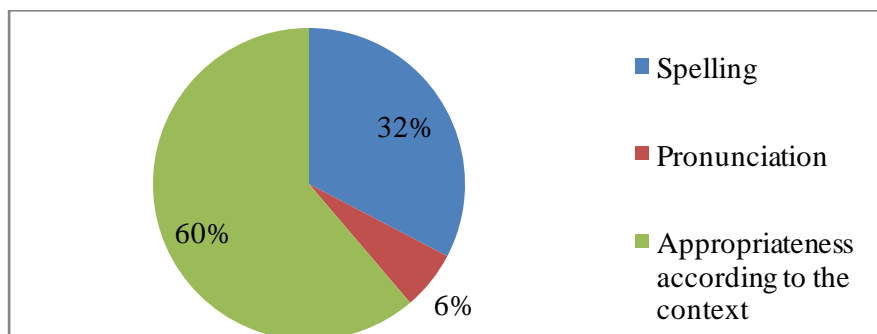
Figure (3): Students' Beliefs about the Enrichment of their Vocabulary Stock



The results reveal that the majority of students (70%) believe that they do not have enough vocabulary and they are unsatisfied about what they receive inside the classroom. Students spend approximately the whole day at university moving from one class to another, if they do not have the required amount of vocabulary items while studying, this will affect their level and render them unconfident about using the target language.

2. Among the following challenges, which one do you think it affects your vocabulary learning?

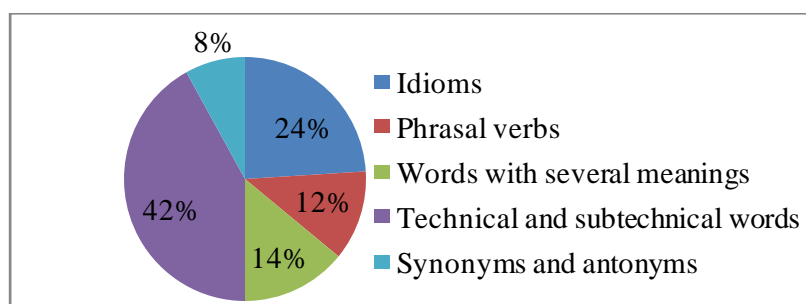
Figure (4): Students' Major Challenges while Learning New Vocabulary



Coming across a word may confuse second year learners since they are unfamiliar with many aspects related to the given words. Learners may find it very difficult to use the acquired words appropriately within a given context, they are not sure all the time about the several meanings that can a single word have and one word may change the whole meaning of a sentence or a passage. The majority of the questioned sample (60%) agree on that since they admitted that this is the dominant problem that faces them while dealing with new lexis whereas other factors like pronunciation do not have a great effect on their vocabulary acquisition, Only 4 of the informants feel that it confuses them; however, spelling indeed is considered as another obstacle especially when a word has a silent letter or a complicated formation. 32% of the participants believe that spelling is a problem that needs to be fixed.

3. What are the most difficult terms to learn, understand or memorize according to you?

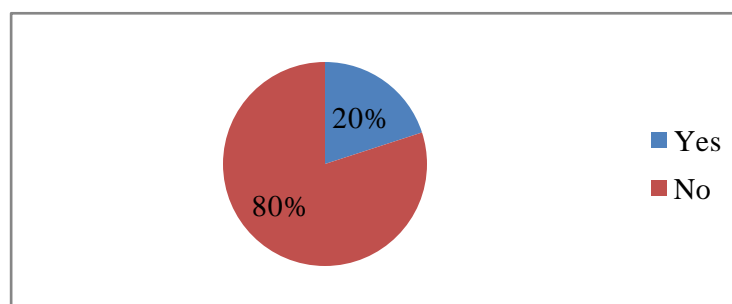
Figure (5): Students' Most Common Difficult Terms to Learn



The analysis of that question shows that a foreign language can be a serious dilemma when it comes to special vocabulary categories. Acquiring new words is a challenge in itself, and this challenge would be more complicated if learners are deeply involved in matters like technical terms, idioms or words with several meanings. Learners find it stressful and exhausting when dealing with special vocabulary like technical vocabulary, approximately, half of the sample under investigation (42%) confirmed that this kind of lexis is the most difficult term to learn and use. Whereas, the remained categories such as phrasal verbs, synonyms and antonyms are considered less difficult since they scored the lowest percentages 12% and 8% on roll.

4. Teachers may use books, handouts, newspaper articles to deliver new vocabulary, do you like being taught with such materials?

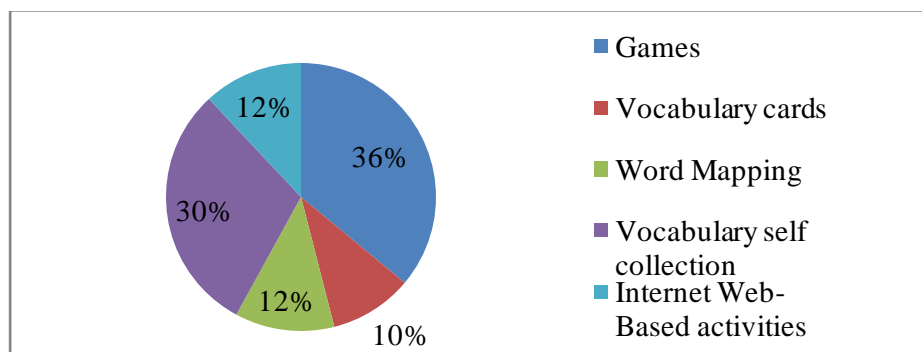
Figure (6): Students' Approval on Teachers' Traditional Vocabulary Teaching Method



A great number of the questioned informants 40 (80%) confirmed that teachers' traditional methods of using a board or a book do not rise their interest anymore, and only 10 of the sample are satisfied with these kinds of methods and do not search for a change. Technology and innovation are invading one's lives; today's learners like to be taught efficiently through strategies that they feel part of their lives and make their learning more motivating.

5. If you had the opportunity to choose among the following techniques of teaching vocabulary, which one would you prefer?

Figure (7): Students' Choice of Current Vocabulary Teaching Strategies



As noticed before, the learners of nowadays need to feel free when they learn, in other words, they want to learn indirectly as they are doing something fun like playing or chatting on the net. This is translated by their responses as many of them like games and internet web-based activities instead of traditional methods and copy paste materials. Other students like to handle both a little of the traditional method using cards or the board but with a more interesting way as being active members who decide how many vocabulary they can state down while word mapping or VSC techniques. When they were asked to suggest other preferred teaching/learning techniques, many of them agreed on the usefulness of videos, movies and pictures in rising their attention and interest as well.

IV. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to cast light on a fundamental subject in language teaching and learning. Vocabulary seems to be vital to practice any language whether a native language or a foreign language. Dealing with vocabulary is worldwide issue, treated over many years in order to come up with the suitable and efficient techniques to present lessons related to the subject matter. It is confirmed that vocabulary teaching plays a great role in language teaching and many scholars devoted their time and efforts to investigate the slightest valuable detail related to it. The provided research question and hypothesis postulated the main points in the vocabulary education process. The collected data investigated the different kinds of obstacles that EFL learners may bump into during the vocabulary acquisition process and whether the techniques adopted by teachers are motivating and successful. The findings exposed that the majority of the informants agreed on the inefficiency and impracticality of the traditional teaching methods as they do not bring any motivation or vocabulary development at all. This confirmed the beforehand hypothesis; therefore, EFL teachers need to vary their teaching styles and be more updated in order to engage students and raise their motivation towards vocabulary learning.

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