The Role of Extensive Reading for Vocabulary Acquisition in ESP

Haddam- Bouabdallah Faiza

University: Abou-Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen

Abstract

Development in the field of EFL teaching during the last two decades have given birth to ESP as a new branch in the field of English teaching. Many countries, Algeria among them, have given much importance to the learning of English in order to contribute to national and international scientific development and to achieve progress in different scientific fields. Strongly related to that, at the university level, graduate students are required to read and understand written documents in relation to their different fields of study since they are expected to use recent articles and to attend international conferences. So, ESP learners can acquire vocabulary through Reading. But studies have shown that only little amount is learned by ESP students. The reason is that extensive reading is neglected. This paper is to describe the relationship between extensive reading and vocabulary in order to show the impact of text frequency on acquisition of word meaning and spelling.

Keywords: extensive reading, vocabulary acquisition, incidental learning, explicit instruction, ESP context.

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Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is and has always been one of the core activities in foreign language learning- whether it is for general purposes or for professional ones- very simply because no communication is possible without words. However, there is no clear evidence to show that there is a direct causal link between vocabulary and success in reading, but the relationship between the two has been strongly suggested in research or theorising by reading experts. **Daneman (1988)** for instance, suggests that since words are the building blocks of connected text, constructing text meaning depends, in part, on the success of searching for individual word meanings. Other researchers such as **Beck et al. (1982)** have also attested to the importance of vocabulary in reading. A number of studies have shown that second language learners acquire vocabulary through reading, but only relatively small amounts, that is why, it is necessary to explore whether an extensive reading programme can enhance lexical knowledge, words' spelling, meaning and grammatical characteristics. Overall, the study undergone by **Pigada & Schmitt (2006)** indicates that more vocabulary acquisition is possible from extensive reading than previous studies have suggested.

The benefit of extensive reading in vocabulary acquisition

At the heart of Anderson's approach is his belief that **"reading is an essential skill for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) students; ... and the most important skill to master. With strengthened reading skills, ESL/EFL readers will make greater progress and attain greater development in all academic areas"** (Anderson,1999:2).

According to its definition, extensive reading exposes learners to "large quantities of material within their linguistic competence" **(Grabe and stoller, 2002:259)**, which is, at the same time, pleasurable. There are several reasons why it is so attractive to develop language knowledge (and more specifically vocabulary) through extensive reading. To mention a few, it is considered a "pedagogically efficient" **(Huckin and Coady, 1999: 182)** approach, as two activities-vocabulary acquisition and reading – occur at the same time. This approach facilitates learner autonomy, can be very pleasant and motivating, provides learners with the opportunity to meet words in their context of use **(Thornby, 2002)**, increases sight vocabulary **(Coady, 1997; Nagy et al.,1985; Nation and Coady, 1988)**, and could theoretically result in substantial vocabulary learning, which seems difficult to achieve with explicit teaching during the relatively short period of time that L2 learners spend in the language classroom . In fact, **Nation** argues that: **"the use of reading and other input sources may be the only practical options for out of class language development for some learners,"** **(Nation, 2002:155)** especially in EFL contexts.

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Considering the above, it seems that extensive reading should be an indispensable dimension of vocabulary teaching. In extensive reading, learners select and read large amounts of material that interest them and that are within their level of comprehension. Successful programmes integrate extensive reading with speaking, listening and writing tasks and encourage large quantities of reading over long period of time **(Elley, 1991; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983)**.

Research credit extensive reading with improvements in motivation, reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary growth and reading fluency **(Day and Bamford,1998)**. Because of these benefits, it should be implemented early in EFL curriculum for the purposes of increasing vocabulary size and developing fluency with known vocabulary **(Nation and Wang, 1999)**. However, two approaches can be taken into consideration in extensive reading, *incidental learning and explicit instruction.* The incidental learning of vocabulary requires that teachers provide opportunities for extensive reading and listening. Whereas, explicit instruction involves diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting words for the first time, elaborating word knowledge, and developing fluency with known words. In general, emphasizing explicit instruction is probably best for beginning and intermediate students who have limited vocabularies. On the other hand, extensive reading and listening might receive more attention for more proficient intermediate and advanced students. Also, because of its immediate benefits, dictionary training should begin early in the curriculum.

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Extensive reading in the ESP context

In teaching ESP certain fundamental questions should be addressed:

    1. How extensive should the ESP vocabulary be?

    2. What is the objective of ESP reading?

    3. What grammatical constructions should be emphasized?

    4. What is the role of speaking activities in reading ESP text?

At first, it is necessary to take into account the specific features of ESP context and the taxonomy of vocabulary relative to ESP/EST. In an ESP classroom, there are relatively homogenous group of learners as far as their age, language proficiency and their field of study are concerned, with a commonly defined purpose to learn English (i.e. acquire mainly their frequently-used subject-specific vocabulary items) through reading academic subject- specific texts in ESP courses. In addition, appealing to the innate characteristics of the new words whether specialized or non-specialized can facilitate the students' vocabulary learning while studying their ESP texts. Specialized or technical words were made up of words that occurred frequently in a specialized text or subject area but did not occur or were of very low frequency in other fields **(Nation, 2001)**. They can thus be identified by referring to specialists who have a good knowledge of the subject area **(Nation and Chung, 2004)** . Whereas, non-

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specialized vocabulary are terms that may have one or several meanings in an every day setting but have a specific and sometimes different meaning or connotation in a scientific context **(Childs and O'Farell, 2003).**

A research was conducted in Biology Department in 2008 on the needs of the learners and was aimed at determining the language skills necessary for their studies and future careers. Most study courses require students to read scientific texts in English that is why in this research among the fourth-year students in the Department of Biology, on the language skills reveals that translation, reading and listening skills are among their top priorities. Strongly related to that, it is necessary to integrate extensive reading in ESP courses that can help the ESP learners to read fluently and to acquire enough vocabulary and to be able to distinguish between words which exist and are used in general, even familiar English, which are found in any kind of texts but whose frequency of use is greater or even characteristic of EST and from ultra specialized vocabulary belonging to each scientific or technical field.

For example, extensive reading of scientific articles and texts related to their field of research can help the readers (biology students) to understand the ambiguity and meaning of words since the exact meaning is not always immediately perceived even to the L2 learners who 'know' the word. Such as the words 'plate' and 'medium' which have very different semantic fields and belong to several categories, since the two terms belong to general English when you think about

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kitchenware. But it is specialized vocabulary when used within laboratories; Plate: "boite de pétrie" and medium: "milieu de culture". They can also acquire different frequent verbs used in the EST context like, the verbs: to analyse, to synthesize, to increase and to involve ......etc and the last class of vocabulary is that of articles, auxiliary verbs, preposition, particles, linking words, etc. These words half way between lexis and grammar are the backbone of the language and without which no complex meaningful sentence can ever be built. They, naturally, do not belong to the language of ESP, as such, but are essential nonetheless.

The reader must learn to extract lexical meaning,structural or grammatical meaning, and socio-cultural meaning. Making an oral presentation on a related topic is an important component of the ESPcourse if the speaker wants to deliver a speech, an oral presentation, he is expected to connect these sentences and the paragraphs to make the text cohesive

Conclusion

One of the main concerns for those of us working in an ESP context is how to help our students deal with authentic academic texts which by its nature requires a fairly advanced level of language proficiency. By "advanced level of proficiency", it is meant, in fact, a good vocabulary size. There are several approaches one can adopt in order to develop students' vocabulary. It seems clear that students in ESP contexts need some explicit teaching of specific vocabulary items together with some kind of strategy training for improving and managing their learning plus extensive reading of their original references in order to gain the required exposure to vocabulary items and build up word knowledge. It needs the collaboration of both language teachers and content teachers as content teachers can make students read their references, present the derived information in the classroom and assign some grade to it in their final exam. Language teachers, however, need to increase their awareness of their students' strategy usage and needs in order to be able to facilitate their language learning process. Students should be taught how to develop both breadth and depth of their vocabulary knowledge so that they, as autonomous learners, would be able to use their vocabulary knowledge both receptively and productively as the need arises. In other words, teachers and learners should aim for integration of knowledge-oriented and skill-oriented strategies.

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