

Learning of English Vocabulary at the Primary Level: A Study of English Readers

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Abstract: *This paper aims at presenting the vocabulary of the school level textbooks where English is taught as a Second Language (SL) and these textbooks are prescribed for Class IV, V & VI and published by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. The different strategies of vocabulary learning such as learnability criteria, language and cultural distance, pronounceability, and use of basic vocabulary are discussed for making a counterpart argument.*

Keywords - *vocabulary, acquisition, corpus, accuracy, Second language learning*

I. Introduction

Primarily, learning of a language at the most basic level involves two aspects: grammar and vocabulary. In other words, it is mainly directed to the mastery of some grammatical features and vocabulary items. As Mohanty (2010:505) states that “grammar being a closed system can easily be subjected to abstractions and generalizations whereas the same is not true of vocabulary which is an open set. Unlike grammar, the limit of vocabulary is hard to specify because of its open-ended nature. Notably, due to this reason coupled with the emphasis on formal rules of grammar, the teaching of vocabulary was relegated to a secondary position after the rise of structural linguistics between 1940 and 1970s. Another reason is that there was too much emphasis on vocabulary during the preceding years which was dominated by Grammar-Translation Method. As structural linguistics was against such a teaching method, it was natural for vocabulary to be neglected during its hey days”.

In fact, ample attention has been given to English vocabulary teaching in the recent years because of the low performance of learners even after years of learning English as a second/foreign language. That is why vocabulary is now occupied a centre stage in all language teaching and learning programs and wherein grammar has been placed in a secondary position. It is understood that vocabulary knowledge is very essential for learners’ academic attainments. If a learner does not understand the meaning of the word in the text, certainly it creates a problem for him/her in understanding the content of the word. So “vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of ELS academic achievement” (White, Grave & Slater 1990). It not only helps in learning a foreign language but also improves the cognitive abilities of the learners. Undoubtedly, it is emphasized that vocabulary learning is an important tool for the cognitive development of learners.

According to Vermeer (1992:147), “the bulk of learning a new language consists of learning new words. Grammatical knowledge does not make for great proficiency in a language”. In the same context, Gass and Selinker (1994: 270) advocate that: “the lexicon may be the most important component for learners”. Cook (1993: 125) opines that“Communication strategies seem to be linked to lexis rather than to other levels of language” and ... “communication strategy” is reiterated to lexical “compensatory strategy”. Stephanie Wessels (2011:46) also identified five characteristics which involved the students’ vocabulary learning: “ (1) accessing background knowledge; (2) connecting unknown vocabulary to known knowledge; (3) ensuring opportunities for meaningful vocabulary use; (4) providing multiple exposures; and (5) focusing on higher level knowledge” (quoted in Wessels, Allen 1999; Carr & Wixson 1996; Nagy 1998; Watts 1995). The above stated theoretical arguments are taken into consideration in examining the factors related to learning English vocabulary at the primary level and tries to examine the nature of problems found in the textbooks.

II. Methodology

For this analysis I have selected the English textbooks, *The English Reader* published by the Government of Andhra Pradesh and prescribed for Class IV, V, and VI for a closer scrutiny. I hope a careful analysis of the textbooks will reveal that more emphasis should be given to those vocabulary items which are basic in nature and easily learnable. There is no mention of this criterion in the textbooks and it does not seem to be concerned with this criterion as Preface “To the teachers” states: The main objectives of teaching English at this level are to develop in pupils:

- a. The ability to listen to English by their teachers and classmates, and understand it;

- b. The ability to speak English with their teachers and classmates in asking and answering questions as well as discussing simple topics of interest to them;
- c. The ability to read prescribed textbooks, stories, and other reading materials and understand them;
- d. The ability to write simple English in answering questions and generally expressing themselves; and
- e. The ability to read, understand and enjoy simple poems in English (p.iii).

The English Readers of class: IV, V and VI (27 prose pieces and 21 poems in total) were fed into a computer and the data were generated using Compleat Lexical Tutor (version- 4). The total number of word tokens are 35877 whereas the word types are 6071. It should be mentioned here that the machine treats the same word written in small letters (e.g. book) as four different words. It also counts different inflected forms of grammatical categories like noun and verb as different words including punctuations.

III. The Learnability Criteria

Many scholars have argued that a language is acquired through incidental exposure, and vocabulary acquisition is no exception to it (Coady1997, Elley 1989, Hulstijn1992, Simcock1990). Though it is true of LI vocabulary acquisition where the learner is exposed to a very large amount of data, the L2 learner is certainly not very fortunate to share the same as with L1 learner. So Meara (1997:113) argues: “the basic assumption-sometimes described as a hypothesis is that learners can acquire words from incidental exposure to written or spoken text, and the research is designed to find experimental evidence in support of this common-sense hypothesis”. At the same juncture, Nation and Newton (1997:241) state: “in any language course it is worth looking at the opportunities for direct and indirect vocabulary learning to see that there is a systematic programme of vocabulary development”.

In the same context, Cook (1993), Gregg (1995:90) argued that contrastive analysis and error analysis are “unrelated to linguistic theory in particular” and “dead meat in general”, there is plenty of evidence that the first language influences learning of a second / foreign language in a considerable manner (Odlin 1989, Perdue 1993 Ringborn 1987). The following pronouncement of Perdue (1993, Vol.2:245) should drive home the point: “I have claimed that each native language has trained its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. This kind of training is carried out in childhood and is exceptionally resistant to restructuring in ALA (adult language acquisition)”. Mostly, for this reason, the Keyword Method as well as certain other mnemonic devices which have been proposed by scholars (Kasper 1993, Hulstijn 1997).

Therefore, learners cannot be left to themselves in order to learn mainly from their exposure to the second/foreign language; rather certain principles have to be followed so that they can learn it quickly and systematically. These principles, in fact, demand a discussion on different principles of learnability.

IV. Language and Cultural Distance

Language and culture are closely associated. According to Dell Hymes (1964: 05), “the relation between language and culture tends to be seen as one of congruence between parallel systems or products of collective psychology. Language itself is seen as primarily a shared, socially inherited system, the use of which in communication tends to be seen primarily in terms of the cognitive function of distinguishing or expressing meanings”. So the cultural distance may hamper language learning.

There are a number of studies which show that language and socio-cultural distance can enable or hinder learning of second/foreign language vocabulary. Odlin (1989:77-80) has reported that Swedish and Spanish speakers learn English vocabulary more easily and successfully than their Finnish and Arabic counterparts. In other words, learning of English vocabulary by Swedish and Spanish speakers is facilitated as they share a lot of common vocabulary whereas it is less successful in the case of Finnish and Arabic speakers who perceive their languages and cultures as distant from the English language and culture. Kasper (1992) has also shown that Danish speakers transfer their first language usages frequently while using German whereas it does not happen when they speak in English.

Above discussions lead us to think that a similar situation might be happening to second language learners in India. In fact, it does happen. For example, many Indian languages do not make distinctions among a tree, a plant, and a shrub, and they use only one word for all the three English words. That is why banana tree and mango tree are often heard in Indian English. Again, I have identified some examples where learners are confused while using the following words:

- (a) *arm, hand, palm*
- (b) *desk, table, teapoy*
- (c) *honour, respect*
- (d) *to catch, to hold*
- (e) *tomorrow, yesterday*

All these distinctions are expected to be made clearly in the initial stage except honour and respect because of their abstract nature. This study reveals that most of the learners were unable to distinguish the semantic relations. It clearly indicates a lacuna which has to be overcome by the textbooks designers to achieve the goals proposed by them.

1.1. Pronounceability

According to Gibson and Levin (1975), the pronounceable words were perceived quite accurately compared with the unpronounceable ones. Celce-Murcia (1978) has also reported that her daughter Caroline, who was simultaneously acquiring English and French, used English equivalent boy to French *garçon* on one hand and French *couteau* to English knife on the other, most probably due to the presence of /r/ and /f/ in the latter words. Ryan (1997:186) has given the following examples to substantiate the argument:

- a) We get water from deep wells. (*wells*)
- b) You get upstairs in a lift. (*lift*)
- c) I met my friend in the middle of the square. (*middle*)
- d) Goods are carried on a freight train. (*freight*)
- e) He went to prison for the crime. (*prison*)

According to Ryan (1997:188), the cause for this confusion is the difference in root-structures between Indo-European languages and Arabic in which the roots normally have three consonants in combination with different suffixes consisting of vowels and create words that belong to one semantic domain. For example, from the root /k-t-b/ words like *kita:b* 'book', *kataba* 'he wrote', *maktaba* 'library', etc., can be formed. It means that vowels perform different functions in Arabic and English. The hypothesis is that Arabic speakers ignore the vowels while storing these words in their mental lexicon and they also demonstrate "... an almost indiscriminate choice as to which vowel to use when needed" (Ryan 1987:189). This may be problematic for Arabic speakers" which Haynes (1984) calls as 'vowel blindness'.

However, emphasizing the vowel blindness, it can be stated that Indian languages have more or less a stable relationship between letters and sounds. Whereas spelling and pronunciation of English words do not match with each other due to their orthographic idiosyncrasies. That is why Indian language readers find it very difficult to learn English words. In an experiment that was conducted a few months ago I found that not only the young or adolescents learners even research scholars pronounced *who* as /ho/ like 'go', *good* as /gu:d/ like 'food', and spelt *quote* as 'coat'. The English Readers under discussion contains many such words which confuse the learners. The following examples are illustrative:

*arrows, book, child, country, daughter, deal, hear, our
arose, blood, could, country, laughter, dear, heard, hour*

Apart from these, there are many words where derived forms have been used in this text without giving their bases. For example, *annoyed, arose, blurred, boasted, calmed, dashed, dug, spoilt, bruises, butterflies, charmingly, dustbins, floating, thawing, personal, teeth*, etc. Even the very first lesson, i.e. *The False School Master* contains the following words: *anxiety, anxiously, brought, continued, could, dying, furniture, guessed head, shearing, house, knit, know, minutes, neighbours, received, their, there, trouble, wallet*, etc. These words certainly create difficulties for the learners who neither understand the meanings nor their forms as often these words are idiosyncratic.

1.2. Use of Basic Vocabulary

Fries (1945) had pointed out that: "A person has learnt a foreign language when he has thus, first, within a limited vocabulary mastered the sound system and has, second, made the structural devices matters of automatic habit". In this particular context, one may not agree with this statement may not be true, but his idea of a limited vocabulary' is quite important even today. It is known as 'core' or 'basic' vocabulary in the literature on language teaching/learning. It has found that Scholars have used criteria like frequency, range, availability, coverage, etc to find out the basic vocabulary of the human language. It has been mentioned that "lexical frequency information is deemed a useful guideline for selecting and sequencing vocabulary. While the incidental or deliberate acquisition of low-frequency words is still desired, learners are urged to learn high-frequency words in the first place" (Nation and Meara 2002).

In this paper, I have selected the 207 basic vocabulary items listed in from Sridhar (1990:323-327) to find out how these words are used in the textbooks under consideration. A careful scrutiny reveals that out of the 207 words, 37 words have not found a place though a few of them have been used in their inflected or derived forms, which means almost 20% of the basic vocabulary has been ignored. Surprisingly, this 20%

includes very frequently used words, like 'belly', 'bone', 'dig', 'dust', 'flower', 'laugh', 'leaf', 'person', 'salt', 'snake', 'tooth', and 'yellow'.

Again, the frequencies of the occurring words are neither regular nor proportionate. The following data cited from Class IV textbook will make this point clear:

big (10), *small* (8)
hand (12), *leg* (2)
live (19), *die* (3)
long (23), *short* (2)
good (18), *bad* (5)
play (2), *sleep* (19)
head (9), *tail* (2)

The above data shows that the distribution and age-appropriateness of the lexical items presented in the English Reader are quite useful and revealing but it has to be a separate and extensive study.

V. Conclusion

This paper intended to discuss why learning of English in this country is so disappointing in spite of a strong motivation on the part of learners to learn it, and the emphasis was on learning of vocabulary. For this purpose, *English Reader* published by the Government of Andhra Pradesh and prescribed for Class IV, V, and VI were selected for a close study. Three major criteria of learnability, language and cultural distance, pronounceability, use of basic vocabulary were adopted to test the lexical items employed in these textbooks. It was also found that none of these have been adhered to seriously especially when learners are exposed to the language for the first time at the primary level and then at secondary level.

Colophon

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