

The Crucial Role of Vocabulary Knowledge in English Language Learning

ความสำคัญของความรู้เกี่ยวกับคำศัพท์ในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

This article was prompted to recognize the importance of vocabulary knowledge in English language learning particularly in four macro skills namely: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This topic had been studied and proven by different researchers that truly, adequate vocabulary knowledge is tantamount to success in the holistic academic performance of an individual. Also, it is emphasized in this article that vocabulary teaching in class is vitally important in learning English language especially among second or foreign language learners including Thai students.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้กระตุ้นให้ตระหนักถึงความสำคัญของคำศัพท์ในภาษาอังกฤษในทั้ง 4 ทักษะ อันประกอบไปด้วยทักษะการฟัง ทักษะการพูด ทักษะการอ่านและทักษะเขียน โดยจากการศึกษาและค้นคว้าข้อมูลจากนักวิจัยหลายท่าน พบว่า การรู้คำศัพท์ในภาษาอังกฤษนั้นจะช่วยให้ผู้เรียนแต่ละคนประสบความสำเร็จในการเรียนทางด้านวิชาการ นอกจากนี้ บทความยังเน้นย้ำเรื่องการสอนคำศัพท์ภาษาอังกฤษในชั้นเรียน เนื่องจากคำศัพท์เป็นปัจจัยสำคัญของการเรียนรู้ภาษา โดยเฉพาะเด็กไทยและเด็กอื่นๆที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาที่สองหรือภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Overview

In Thailand, inadequacy of English vocabulary is a problem that hinders Thai students to perform better in listening, speaking, writing and reading English language (Liangpanit, n.d.). Many Thai researchers (Nomsiri, 2005; Duadsuntia, 2008; Mongkol, 2008) tagged vocabulary learning as a major problem in English language learning (as cited by Liangpanit, n.d.). Yet, it remains that vocabulary acquisition in the classroom is of little importance. It is generally given a little emphasis even in the university curriculum in Asian countries (Fan, 2003). As an Asian nation, Thailand has the same condition (Komol&Sripetpun, 2011). This situation is due to the fact that, most Asian nation concentrate on teaching the four skills namely: speaking, listening, writing and reading. With this, vocabulary teaching in the classroom is just incidental.

In a book authored by Michael Graves (2006), he cited Walter Petty, Curtis Herold, and Erline Stoll, English Educators:

“The importance of vocabulary is daily demonstrated in schools and out. In the classroom, the achieving students possess the most adequate vocabularies. Because of the verbal nature of most classroom activities, knowledge of words and ability to use the language are essential to success in these activities. After schooling has ended, adequacy of

vocabulary is almost equally essential for achievements in vocation and in society.”

Graves (2006) continued by citing the following results of research in vocabulary:

a. Vocabulary knowledge is the one of the best indicators of verbal ability (Sternberg, 1987; Terman, 1916).

b. Vocabulary knowledge contributes to young children's phonological awareness, which in turn contributes to their word recognition (Goswami, 2001; Nagy, 2005).

c. Vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten and first grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Scarborough, 1998).

d. Vocabulary difficulty strongly influences the readability of text (Chall & Dale, 1995; Klare, 1984).

e. Teaching vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) and English learners (Carlo, et al., 2004).

f. Growing up in poverty can seriously restrict the vocabulary children learn before beginning school, and can make attaining an adequate vocabulary a challenging task (Coyne, Simmons & Kame'enui, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995).

g. Disadvantaged students are likely to have substantially smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged

classmates (Templi, 1957; White, Graves, & Slater, 1990).

h. Learning English vocabulary is one of the most crucial tasks for English learners (Folse, 2004; Nation, 2001).

i. Lack of vocabulary can be a crucial factor underlying the school failure of disadvantaged students (Becker, 1977; Biemiller, 1999).

In addition to this, Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) reported that students, who have wide vocabulary knowledge, get higher grades than students who have a lack of vocabulary. Likewise, Wilkins (1972) stated that, "...without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (pp. 111-112).

The above-mentioned results of research and point of views can truly confirm the vital role of vocabulary knowledge to every student in the classroom. It can be drawn that, vocabulary knowledge can affect the students not only their learning in English language but also in all subjects in school. Aside from this, they can bring knowledge in their vocation in the society as a whole. Therefore, it is likely believable to theorize that teaching vocabulary knowledge in the classroom must be implemented.

The Importance of Vocabulary Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Sedita (2005) stressed the five core components of reading that are important in teaching students how to

reads successfully. Phonemic awareness, phonics and word study, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension are the core components (National Reading Panel, 2000). Vocabulary knowledge is important because it encompasses all the words we must know to access our background knowledge, express our ideas and communicate effectively, and learn about new concepts (Sedita, 2005). Rupley, Logan and Nichols (1999) emphasized that vocabulary is like a paste because it sticks stories, ideas and content and it makes the understanding reachable for the learners. In the same way, this was supported by Seville-Troike (1984) by affirming that vocabulary knowledge is the single predictor of their academic achievement across subject matter domains as cited by Sedita (2005). It can be drawn from these ideas that students with high vocabulary knowledge can perform well in the class because they can also comprehend well. This follows not only in their language learning but also in their holistic academic studies.

There are several studies about the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension conducted among second language learners and native speakers for elementary, high school, college and even adult learners since then.

For example, Qian (1998) studied 74 adult Chinese and Korean speakers' comprehension of general academic texts in English and produced empirical evidence that scores on vocabulary size,

depth of vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension were positively and closely related. A portfolio of vocabulary knowledge tests, a reading comprehension test, and a background questionnaire were Qian's (1998) instruments in his study. As a result, Qian (1998) pointed the importance and necessity of improving the depth of learners' vocabulary knowledge in their English as a Second Language learning.

In Thai setting, a related experimental study conducted by Sinpho (1999) found that reading program with vocabulary development emphasis plays a significant role in the reading achievement of technical students at the diploma-level. This classroom-based research was experimented among first-year level for 32 periods with fifty minutes per period. Sinpho (1999) used pre and post-test to determine the performance of the students and a questionnaire to elicit attitudes towards the strategies used in the whole program. Both experimental and controlled group were divided according to the result of their pre-test for further treatment and both groups also received the same process. The teaching program was different in terms of activities and tasks but they used the same reading texts from the course book. As a result, the experimental group's ability in three levels was significantly higher than those in the controlled group. Thus, it can be drawn that the activities and

tasks focusing on active vocabulary can develop the reading comprehension ability of the students in diploma-level technical students.

Recently, Martinovic (2013) piloted an action research focusing on the role of vocabulary instruction in developing strong reading comprehension skills. This study was conducted in a seventh-grade students in a Language Arts class. The participants received explicit vocabulary instruction which focused on the new vocabulary within the text. This was done before the students' exposure to the texts and they led to a variety of research-based activities and use of graphic organizers to develop understanding of the new vocabulary words. After five weeks of intervention, Martinovic (2013) found that by teaching vocabulary that students will meet in the text prior to reading the text, the teacher enables the students to better understand which is being read. Thus, Martinovic (2013) concluded that the link between vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension is absolutely clear, which can be seen from the result of students' pre and post-test performance.

These researches were both conducted among native English speakers and second language learners. Such studies attested truly, that improved vocabulary knowledge increases reading comprehension.

The Importance of Vocabulary Knowledge in Speaking English Language

Vocabulary has been viewed as an essential component of communicative language ability (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 68; Carroll, 1968, pp. 54–55 as cited by Koizumi, 2005). It includes speaking ability and vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in speaking English language. According to Su (2007), vocabulary can promote students speaking ability and aid students to obtain what they need. She (Su, 2007) added that, it is not necessary to speak a perfect sentence or use perfect grammar but the most important skill is to have enough vocabulary to convey meanings and achieve needs.

There were few researches about the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and speaking skill. In Japan, Koizuma (2005) conducted a study among 172 Japanese beginner level learners aging 14 to 16. They studied English as a foreign language for approximately two or three years at school. Participants were given speaking test and a productive vocabulary knowledge test. It was found out that there is a substantial effect of productive vocabulary knowledge on speaking ability and the impact is significantly stronger. Most students who have high scores in speaking test also gained almost the same in vocabulary knowledge test. Another related study was

made by Nouralianet. al. (2013) in Iran. The research was conducted among a hundred students via quasi-experimental design. As a result, the researcher has found that teaching vocabulary knowledge can improve speaking ability of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The study also revealed that the students were extremely satisfied because it gives them a better opportunity to improve their English speaking skill. Finally, Oya et al., (2009) as cited by Koizumi (2005) carried out a research examining the influence of language contact and vocabulary knowledge on the speaking performance of Japanese students of English. They found that vocabulary knowledge correlated with fluency, accuracy, complexity and global impression aspects of speaking performance.

From these results on vocabulary knowledge and speaking skill, it can be drawn that teaching vocabulary in the class can truly help students in enhancing speaking skill. Thus, the important role of vocabulary knowledge is evident in speaking tests and activities of students in school.

The Importance of Vocabulary Knowledge in Listening Comprehension

Listening is a basic language skill and one of the most significant skills compared to speaking, reading and

writing skill (Chuenjit, 2011). As learners communicate every day, listening also plays a major role and it should be acknowledged in language learning.

Vocabulary knowledge is the main hindrance to competence in listening comprehension for second language learners (Kelly, 1991). Meccarty (2000) clarified this issue, finding that the lack of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, as well as word recognition skills may result in ineffective listening comprehension in second language listeners. Bonk (2000) studied the interaction between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension among 59 Japanese university students of low-intermediate to advanced English ability. The result revealed that, the scores correlated significantly in low, middle and high language listening proficiency. Added to this, Staehr (2009) investigated the role of vocabulary knowledge in listening comprehension with 115 advanced EFL learners in Denmark. The result of this study is higher than the previous one and thus, it provides empirical evidence that vocabulary knowledge is a significant factor for successful listening comprehension. Likewise, Goh (1999) examined the factors that influenced 40 Chinese EFL learners' listening comprehension and found out the extent of learners' awareness of these factors. The examined tertiary students were from

mainland China who studied in Singapore. The results showed that the major factor was vocabulary followed by prior knowledge of the students. The speech rate, the type of input and speaker's accent were also found as one of the factors. Locally, in Thailand there were no studies regarding the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension but, there was a problem analysis conducted by Phutirat&Suwannapatama (2007) as cited by Chuenjit (2011) and the result stated was the need for improving listening comprehension.

The Importance of Vocabulary Knowledge in Writing English

Writing is considered as the most difficult skill for language learners because they need to have a certain amount of second language background knowledge about the rhetorical organizations, appropriate language use or specific lexicon with which they want to communicate with their readers (Tangpermpoon, 2008). Aside from this, Mayher&Brause (1986) indicated that writing is dependent upon the ability to draw upon words to describe an event. Likewise, Corona, Spangen berger, and Venet (1998) said that, written communication is more effective when a depth of vocabulary and command of language is evident.

Several studies show the importance of vocabulary knowledge in writing skill. Moseley (2003) studied 8th grade students by teaching target vocabulary words to be used in writing activity. After twelve weeks of intervention, the data confirmed that students showed significant gains in pretest to posttest performance in writing quality. The students have gained more knowledge as they were instructed the target words and use them in their essays. In another study, Papadopoulou (2007) investigated the effects of vocabulary instruction in theme-related words on students' knowledge, knowledge about the themes, use of these words in their writing, and quality of their writing. The treatment was a two consecutive week instruction of words in different activities. As a result, analysis revealed several statistically significant findings. Vocabulary instruction enhanced students' knowledge of adventure and mystery words taught,

the use of mystery words taught in students' writing, and the writing quality of students' mystery stories.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be drawn that enhancing vocabulary knowledge is closely related to the four macro-skills in English language namely: listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. As such, enhancing vocabulary knowledge needs to be learnt effectively and efficiently as it has a vital role in learning not only in English language but in the holistic academic performance of an individual. Therefore, it suggests that with the abovementioned notions of the crucial role of vocabulary knowledge in English language learning, it is vital to devote time to teach students vocabulary knowledge and include it in the whole curriculum.

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