Promoting Lexical Knowledge in the Saudi Tertiary EFL Classroom at Taif University

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Abstract: **Probably, EFL teachers' negligence of illustrating some crucial aspects of vocabulary knowledge is a reason behind students' inefficient use of vocabulary at Taif University. Examples of such neglected aspects of vocabulary knowledge are: word polysemy, homonymy, connotation, word basic parts of speech, synonymy and antonymy. This study attempts to examine these aspects and to see the degree to which they are demonstrated in the language classroom at Taif University. A questionnaire was filled by the members of English departments as well as teachers of the preparatory year in the three branches of Taif University, Rania, Khurma and Traba. Data analysis and statistical results have revealed, to a considerable degree, that teachers at Taif University seldom demonstrate the aspects of vocabulary knowledge in teaching vocabulary. Also, the analysis of data has showed how students can acquire more palpable skills in language use if these aspects were handled in teaching vocabulary. The recommendations emphasize the need for introducing these aspects in teaching vocabulary at Taif University.**

Keywords: **Polysemy, Homonomy, Connotation, Part of speech, Synonymy, Antonymy.**

1. INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to lay great stress on vocabulary as a core component for proficient language use . The researcher thinks of vocabulary as a basis for how well EFL students speak, listen, read and write. It cuts the boundaries between these skills. Rajan and Parveen (2012: 171) confirm the same idea by stating that word learning is a fundamental block in the acquisition of language. Hence, research on the area should facilitate the task of introducing effective vocabulary instruction and teaching strategies. Sedita (2005: 1) adopts a similar opinion by placing stress on the tremendous need for vocabulary instruction at all grade levels.

Vocabulary instruction should aim at helping EFL students to use vocabulary in communicative contexts. Due to the language skills integrity, if students are able to use vocabulary to express what they need communicatively, one can say, they will develop skills in communicative writing and speaking and consequently they will acquire communicative competence in language.

The researcher's experience in the field of foreign language teaching and learning enables him to say that there is generally no explicit instruction of vocabulary in the EFL classroom. In most occasions, students struggle alone to learn vocabulary without the necessary guidance which paves the way for them to build a concrete vocabulary stock. Yang and Dai (2011: 61) maintain that vocabulary is neither taught explicitly nor systematically in the EFL classroom and teachers provide students with word lists to merely memorize. At times, teachers exert on much effort by illustrating one corresponding meaning of new vocabulary in the mother-tongue of students. Such a defective way of handling vocabulary will reflect negatively on EFL students' skill to use vocabulary proficiently.

Luckily, there was a growing role of vocabulary in foreign language acquisition by the year 1980. Coady and Huckin (1997 : ix) ensure that since 1980 there were empirically based studies on the nature of vocabulary acquisition , lexical retrieval , bilingual lexicon and the use of vocabulary by foreign language learners .

In view of these considerations, the present study attempts to examine the aforementioned aspects of vocabulary knowledge.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Very often, EFL students at Taif University have weaknesses to use vocabulary effectively to produce language. However, those students are not to completely get the blame for such weaknesses. EFL teachers should not evade criticism, they can   partially be held responsible for their students weaknesses in using vocabulary. The researcher assumes the use of traditional and over-consumed teaching strategies by EFL teachers. These teaching strategies make students' presentation of vocabulary like scattered beads and finally lead to their inability to benefit from the language learning opportunities around them .Thus , EFL teachers at Taif University , as part of handling vocabulary   , should reconsider enhancing students' vocabulary use by demonstrating word polysemy , homonymy , connotation , word basic parts of speech , synonymy and antonymy.

2.1 Word Polysemy and Homonymy:

Generally as defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000: 97) , the word polysemy can refer to the fact about a lexical item as having more than one meaning . More precisely, the word polysemy indicates the capacity of a word to have multiple related meanings. The interpretation of a polyseme is distinct from a homonym because the meanings of a homonym are unrelated. For instance, in each pair of sentences below, the words 'bark' and 'Miss' represent examples of homonyms with distinct meanings:

A) 1-Dogs always bark at strangers. (The sound made by the dog)

   2- The tree's bark is very strong. (The outer covering of a tree)

B) 1- Miss Sara teaches physics. (Unmarried woman)

   2- I miss my brother who lives abroad. (Eager to)

Quite the contrary to the previous examples , in each pair of sentences below , 'lamb' ,'bottle' and 'beer' show polysemous words with related meanings . Examples are taken from Pustejovsky (1995):

A) 1- The lamb is running in the field. (Animal)

   2- Jhon ate lamb for breakfast. (Meat)

B) 1- Mary broke the bottle. (Container)

   2- The baby finished the bottle. (What is contained in the bottle)

C) 1- The restaurant served beer. (Stuff)

   2- We ordered three beer. (Portion)

In their try to teach vocabulary effectively, EFL teachers at Taif University should get rid of the previously mentioned common and over-consumed teaching methods by implementing the way of explaining vocabulary which is dealt with under 2.1. EFL teachers should explain both possible distinct and related meanings of homonyms and polysemes . Parent (2009: 6) points out that students often know one meaning of a polyseme or a homonym and are reluctant to abandon it . The researcher views EFL teachers as contributors to this reluctance. They often provide students with one generalized or core meaning of each lexeme they come across. Considering other meanings facilitates the task of students to contemplate about different uses of vocabulary and helps them to take a step up the ladder in proficient language use.

2.2 Word Connotations:

Normally, in explaining vocabulary EFL teachers focus on the denotative meanings of vocabulary, i.e the basic, literal or referential meaning of vocabulary. To make the activity more interactive, EFL teachers at Taif University can try illustrating the connotative meanings of words as well. In a study on enhancing Sudanese university EFL students' sentence writing (2011 : 43) , the researcher refers to a word's connotation as the idea which a word makes one think of in addition to its main or

referential meaning . For example , the words 'house' and 'home' have the same denotative meaning , but the word 'home' carries connotations of warmth , intimacy , privacy and family which the word 'house' lacks . Also, the words 'old' and 'antique' have the same denotative meaning, but the word antique connotes value. For instance, the word 'antique', in the expression ' an antique bracelet ', may imply the value of the bracelet as priceless.

Cristal (1995: 170) refers to the words which are highly charged with connotations as loaded. He maintains that these loaded words are used in languages like the languages of politics and religion. Probably, these words are needed in such contexts because they are expressive and usually cause the necessary effect.

As known, synonyms carry similar meanings. However, the connotative meanings of synonyms may have positive and negative implications. For example, the use of the words 'slender' and 'skinny ' to describe a thin person, 'slender' has a positive connotation, while 'skinny' has a negative one. These positive and negative connotations have their due importance because they communicate expressive ideas in the contexts that show how people feel towards each other. A typical example which illustrates this situation is provided by Tuzlak (2010). It shows how the contrasting feelings of people can determine the language they use. Myrna is proud of her nephew Georg. Willa, by contrast, disapproves of everything George does. To refer to the fact about George who likes saving money when shopping, Myrna says 'he is thrifty', while Willa says, 'he is stingy'. Myrna's kind feelings towards George urged her to select a word with a positive connotation which means smart and knows how to spend money wisely. Because Willa usually disapproves of what George does, she selects a word that portrays George as a greedy person who does not like to spend money.

Explaining the possible connotative meaning of new vocabulary is quite important. It draws the attention of EFL students at Taif University to the power of words in writing and reflects positively on their skills to take accurate decisions on word choice That is , the selection of words which cause the needed effect in their contexts .

2.3 Word Basic Parts of Speech:

To help EFL students at Taif University further their knowledge of vocabulary, it is necessary to illustrate the basic parts of speech in teaching new words. So, when those students come across these words in writing, they will identify them as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. By time, this activity will help them to have an idea about the correct position of the four basic parts of speech in grammatical sentences. Misplacement or misuse of the basic parts of speech in writing grammatical sentences is an error which is frequently made by students to the degree of becoming global. To phrase it differently, a big number of EFL students at Taif University do not place these words in sentences correctly. They do not, for example, place adjectives in their exact attributive and predicative positions.

Also, being able to identify the parts of speech new words belong to, EFL students at Taif University will become familiar with the suffixes which usually occur with each word category. Kim (2013: 43) conducted a study with two groups of students. One group benefited from the received instruction on affixation to memorize words, while the other group used different vocabulary learning strategies to memorize words .The basic assumption of the study was in favour of the importance of affixation knowledge in helping students to learn new words faster. Thus identifying a word's part of speech and having knowledge on affixation are interrelated processes in developing students' vocabulary learning.

2.4 Synonymy and Antonymy:

Among many things which are needed for knowing a word, Mukoroli (2011: 13) has referred to its rich semantic associates like synonyms and antonyms. Also, Sweeny and Mason (2011: 4) have pointed out that as students move through their educational careers, vocabulary instruction should focus on some aspects of words and language use which include synonyms and antonyms. These points of view certify the importance of treating the synonyms and antonyms of new vocabulary as an effective word learning strategy that definitely helps EFL students at Taif University to increase word knowledge. Having an idea about a number of words which carry the same meaning or supply definition by contrast , i.e antonyms , opens vistas of freedom to select from a variety of words that fit in their contexts .

Web (2007:121) argues that pairs of synonyms take longer to learn than unrelated words or antonyms. To him, it is difficult to learn the semantically related words. The researcher believes this opinion can be true only if the synonyms are perfect equivalents in meaning and consequently replaceable in contexts. However, synonyms are not always perfect equivalents in meaning. It is necessary to consider the slight differences in meaning that exist between synonyms. Such differences should be clarified by EFL teachers at Taif University to promote their students' skill to write precise expressions .Fernald (2009: 3) supports this opinion by referring to the slight differences in meaning between synonyms as helpful for a master of style in choosing and in every instance the one term that is the most perfect mirror of his thought. For example , Fernald listed a number of synonyms for the word 'abet' like 'advance' ,'aid' , 'support' , 'assist' , 'encourage' and 'uphold' . The word 'abet' itself is always used in a bad sense since it means to help or encourage somebody to do something wrong. However, in view of the slight differences that exist between its synonyms, each of which can be used in a particular context that shows its special province. For instance, one can:

a) advocate the claims of justice,

b) aid the needy ,

c) encourage students to study hard,

d) support the weak, and,

e) uphold the law.

Some antonyms of the word 'abet' are: 'hinder', 'deter', 'confound', 'disapprove', and 'impede'. Like synonyms, these word are semantically related but are used differently. As stated, commenting on the antonyms of new vocabulary enables EFL students at Taif University to select the words that convey the precise meanings they intend.

3.   METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants:

Fifty EFL teachers who belong to the three branches of Taif University participated in this study. Their degrees range from doctorate to master and bachelor degrees. Most of those teachers have considerable expertise in teaching English as a foreign language. They taught English language in different Saudi academic institutions. Their responses to the questionnaire resulted in valuable opinions which contributed a lot to the results of the study.

3.2 Data Collection Tool:

The data collection tool was a teacher-oriented questionnaire. It consisted of fifteen items. EFL teachers were asked to show their opinions of each item by ticking one of four options which include strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Broadly, the items required EFL teachers views as regards demonstrating the aspects of vocabulary knowledge, the subject of the present study, in the EFL classroom at Taif University.

4.   DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As illustrated in the table below, to reach the results and to see whether or not the vocabulary aspects are demonstrated in the EFL classroom at Taif University, the researcher has measured teachers' responses to the four options of each item in percentage terms. Out of the total number, the percentage indicate the number of teachers who showed their opinions about the items

No	Item	Strongly agree percentage	Agree percentage	Disagree percentage	Strongly disagree percentage
1	EFL students at Taif University need lexical knowledge in order to develop their language skills.	82 %	18 %	0 %	0 %
2	EFL students at Taif University really encounter problems in using vocabulary proficiently.	60 %	34 %	4 %	2 %
3	Most EFL teachers at Taif University follow traditional and over consumed vocabulary teaching methods.	26 %	52 %	20 %	2 %
4	The traditional and over consumed vocabulary teaching method, referred to in item 3, hinder students at Taif University from using vocabulary effectively.	26 %	52 %	22 %	0 %
5	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle the meanings of new vocabulary in Arabic.	16 %	60 %	14 %	10 %
6	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle one relevant meaning of new words .	20 %	62 %	14 %	4 %
7	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle the multiple related meanings of a	20 %	22 %	54 %	4 %

	polyseme				
8	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle the unrelated meanings of a new word (if any) .	10 %	10 %	56 %	24 %
9	In heading new vocabulary, EFL teachers at Taif University limit themselves to the denotative meanings only.	22 %	54 %	18 %	6 %
10	In handling new vocabulary, EFL teachers at Taif University don't only limit themselves to the denotative meanings but also illustrate the connotative meanings.	10 %	10 %	52 %	18 %
11	EFL teachers at Taif University consider illustrating the four basic parts of speech when they treat new vocabulary.	12 %	38 %	38 %	12 %
12	EFL teachers at Taif University are keen on showing the derivatives of the new vocabulary they explain.	8 %	20 %	52 %	20 %
13	EFL teachers at Taif University select the synonyms that carry equivalent meanings of the new vocabulary they explain.	28 %	54 %	16 %	2 %
14	EFL teachers at Taif University pay attention to showing the slight differences in meaning that may exist between synonyms.	10 %	20 %	56 %	14 %
15	As part of handling new words, EFL teachers at Taif University give an idea about their antonyms.	6 %	25 %	51 %	18 %

EFL teachers responses in percentage terms

Generally, as appears in the table above, 82 per cent of the participants strongly agreed to students need of lexical knowledge in order to develop language skills. Also, 60 per cent of the participants agreed that students really encounter problems in using vocabulary proficiently. 52, 60 and 62 per cent of the participants agreed to the existence of traditional and over-consumed vocabulary teaching methods (items 3,5 and 6) . These percentage certify the importance of vocabulary acquisition and the researchers claims about students' weaknesses in using vocabular, partially, due to the use of ineffective teaching methods. 54 and 56 per cent of the participants supported the researcher's opinion by disagreeing to teachers' treatment of , as suggested in items 7 and 8 , the multiple related meanings of a polyseme and the unrelated meanings of a homonym . In a similar way, 52 per cent of the participants confirmed the negligence of an aspect of vocabulary knowledge by disagreeing to the demonstration of , as suggested by item 10 , the connotative meanings in the EFL classroom at Taif University. The researcher assumes the negligence of illustrating a word's basic parts of speech in the EFL classroom at Taif University. However, as appears in item 10, the number of participants who agreed and disagreed to demonstrating this vocabulary aspect in teaching new words was equal, 38

Per cent each .Though, the number of participants who disagreed was less than what is expected by the researcher, it still denotes a degree of negligence to this vocabulary aspect in the EFL classroom at Taif University. As concerns the remaining items from 12 to 15, 52 per cent of the participants disagreed that EFL teachers at Taif University are keen on showing the derivatives of the new vocabulary they explain and 56 per cent of the participants, also, disagreed to teachers' interest to show the slight differences in meaning that may exist between synonyms. Similarly, 51 per cent of the participants disagreed that EFL teachers at Taif University give an idea about the antonyms of the new vocabulary they explain.

Taking into account all these percentage, more than half of the participants responses were compatible with the assumptions which are raised by this study. Thus, the results are quite apparent and they generally emphasize the negligence of the vocabulary aspects which are examined by this study in the EFL classroom at Taif University. Als , the results emphasize the existence of some traditional and Over-consumed vocabulary teaching methods in the said classroom In view of the results, the recommendations, certify the demonstration of the vocabulary aspects in the EFL classroom at Taif University to help students gain more proficiency in language use.

5. CONCLUSION

In the teaching process, regardless of the courses being taught, EFL students come across new vocabulary. This new vocabulary should be given a space and should be taught systematically and creatively within the time allotted for the lecture. It is, as previously stated, a basic for how EFL students speak, listen, read and write. So EFL teachers should consider the implementation of effective ways in teaching vocabulary such as the ones which are handled by the present study.

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APPENDIX - A

No	Item	Strongly agree percentage	Agree percentage	Disagree percentage	Strongly disagree percentage
1	EFL students at Taif University need lexical knowledge in order to develop their language skills.				
2	EFL students at Taif University really encounter problems in using vocabulary proficiently.				
3	Most EFL teachers at Taif University follow traditional and over consumed vocabulary teaching methods.				
4	The traditional and over consumed vocabulary teaching method, referred to in item 3, hinder students at Taif University from using vocabulary effectively.				
5	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle the meanings of new vocabulary in Arabic.				
6	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle one relevant meaning of new words .				
7	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle the multiple related meanings of a polyseme				
8	Most EFL teachers at Taif University handle the unrelated meanings of a new word (if any) .				
9	In heading new vocabulary, EFL teachers at Taif University limit themselves to the denotative meanings only.				
10	In handling new vocabulary, EFL teachers at Taif University don't only limit themselves to the denotative meanings but also illustrate the connotative meanings.				
11	EFL teachers at Taif University consider illustrating the four basic parts of speech when they treat new vocabulary.				
12	EFL teachers at Taif University are keen on showing the derivatives of the new vocabulary they explain.				
13	EFL teachers at Taif University select the synonyms that carry equivalent meanings of the new vocabulary they explain.				
14	EFL teachers at Taif University pay attention to showing the slight differences in meaning that may exist between synonyms.				
15	As part of handling new words, EFL teachers at Taif University give an idea about their antonyms.				