

The Roles of Textbook, Teacher, and Informal Activities in Vocabulary Acquisition

SUNTIPAAP SUNGPRAKUL

Faculty of International Programs, Thongsook College, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract: Vocabulary knowledge is widely regarded as the building block of language learning. In order to reach the fluency level of language, ones need to acquire the large amount of words. This paper aims to examine the roles of textbook, teacher, and informal activities in vocabulary acquisition as they are the three most common methods of lexicon input. The Analyze is based on the researches and studies of the related topics. The result of the investigation suggests that formal classroom teaching is still the most effective source of input for the vocabulary learning. The quality of teacher and textbook or other forms of classroom material combined is the most important source of vocabulary. However, the informal activities outside the classroom can play important role in word knowledge development as well as the supplementary resources in the learners' acquisition of lexicons. Nevertheless, the rate of vocabulary acquisition may vary in each individuals depend on their or her own motivation.

Keywords: vocabulary acquisition, textbook learning, teaching vocabulary, informal language learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every language is created to serve the communities as their communication tool. In order to fluently understand and in turn, be able to archive the communicative level of language, Along with the knowledge of grammatical structure, the learner also needs to acquire a large number of lexicons. Actually the large number of vocabulary may be the most important thing the learner needs to gain before going up to the stage of archiving 4 language skills. Ricketts, Nation, and Bishop (2007) suggests that vocabulary is strongly related to some aspects of reading skill especially reading comprehension as vocabulary plays a role in word recognition of the learner. Moreover the role of vocabulary may even be more important when it comes to the acquisition of the foreign language and it is the first thing every learner exposes to. With this being said, brings the question of how many words the learner need to recognize in order to be able to reach the level of successful in foreign language. Laufer (1989) examined on how many percentage of vocabularies the learners should know to be able to understand textbook in the comprehensive level. The result came up with the number of 95 % or roughly around 5,000 words. This led to the question on how the learner will acquire enough vocabularies to be able to use language effectively. Traditionally, vocabularies are taught as a part of the formal classroom English language teaching. It is believed to be the major and perhaps, the most important method of vocabulary learning. Many researches and studies support its importance. However, the train of thought of the recent studies has lowered the importance of classroom teaching. Despite this, Milton (2011) still suggests that the efficiency of the formal classroom teaching as the way to provide the learners knowledge of vocabulary is still high. The learners can even acquire a large number of vocabularies provided in classroom alone if they are given the adequate time of study. However, classroom teaching may not be the only effective method of lexicon acquisition as there are other factors such as the teachers themselves or the informal activities involved English language outside of the classroom like casual reading that can also produce a good chance of learners to obtain the play important roles as well. This paper will discuss the role of these three factors on how much vocabulary can be learned by each of these methods of lexicon input.

2. THE ROLE OF TEXTBOOK

Like mentioned above, traditionally, the vocabulary teaching is featured as a part of the formal foreign language classroom teaching and is the main source of most classroom teaching. The textbook using in the class is the main source of lexicon input that the learner can access to. It is also likely to be the easiest way for the learner of the foreign language to expose new words. Alisaif and Milton's (2012) suggests that textbook becomes more important source of input when it comes to the environment of study that the other sources of input are very limited to the learner. It is also suggests that the good quality language textbooks should present the most frequent 5,000 words and also provide some infrequent words especially at higher level of study. Nation (2001) also points out that the good textbook should explain the vocabulary in the variety of categories such as word families, tokens, types or lemmas which would help the learner to understand the vocabularies in deeper dimension. As the significant value of textbook being said, it leads to the question that as important as the text book can be the source of vocabulary input, how much lexicon the learner can learn from it? It is the universal perception that each person can acquire the knowledge at the different rate depending on various factors. The acquisition of vocabulary is not exceptional; each learner may gain the quantity of words at the different rate depending on their own factors. Some learner may gain a large amount of lexicon knowledge while others may acquire a small number of words despite being in the same classroom at the same amount of time. This fact makes it very significant for the textbook, as a source of input to provide enough amount of vocabulary for every kind of learner. Konstantakis and Alexiou's (2012) discuss this topic and come up with the suggestion that the course-book needs to be loaded with vocabulary covered in their purpose of study (of that book) as most textbook only feature 2,000 most frequent words with a limited number of non-frequent words. The study indicates that the course-book is the main method of lexicon teaching - learning in the classroom, in this case, for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in Greece. To make the students reach the productive level of vocabulary acquisition, the textbook needs to introduce at least 10 words per study period in order to make an adequate knowledge of vocabulary for the learners to climb up to the higher level of study. Schofield (1991) also suggests that the textbook should be designed systematically in manageable quantities to make the most effective rate of vocabulary delivered to the learners in classroom which turns out to be the minimum of 9 words per classroom period. On the point of coverage, according to The Second Edition of the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary, there are 171,476 English words currently using in every aspect of English language. From this amount, it may seem to be a very large number, however, only some thousands of vocabulary are declared the most frequent words. Milton's (2011) points out that the most frequent words cover around 50% of words using in daily life. This information gives the significant value to the most frequent words as the useful lexical items the learners need to know, at least at their beginning level. However, if the learners' goal of foreign language study is that of communicative skill, only the knowledge of most frequent words may not enough to make them reach the goal. The knowledge of less-frequent words also relevant to the learners to acquire they cannot avoid encounter with the less frequent words in the more advance level. This lead to the problem of textbook as Tschichold (2012) point out that the words in most textbooks may be limited to the only most frequent words with a very small number of less frequent ones. It also suggests that reading textbooks, need to introduce new words when it go up the level and also should re-use the words many times in the same textbook as the evidence of the study presents that the learners actually learn words when they encounter with them many times. Although each learner may differ their goals of studying foreign language, there are a number of words they need to acquire in order to be a reach the effective level of studying Nation (2001) recommends that the learners need at least 2,000 words regardless of how high or low their goals are. From these studies, it is without a doubt that textbook can be the effective vocabulary input for the EFL learner if it is design with the great deal of care.

3. THE ROLES OF TEACHER

The textbook may play an important role in classroom teaching; nevertheless, it can be less useful or even useless without the direction of the teacher. Some studies even praise the ability of the teacher as the better input than others. Donzelli (2007) points out that the amount of vocabulary provided in classroom teaching by the teachers are way more than what the students acquire from the course-book at the rate of 1,322 words to 740 respectively. This shows that the teacher is capable of introducing more words to the students than what it would be featured in the textbook. However, it is not always the case that the teacher is more effective than the textbook as it shows in Tang and Nesi's (2003) study of the lexical environment in the English classrooms of secondary school in China, in this case, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou. The situation in Guangzhou is that the teachers are strictly follow the organised syllabus and conduct their teaching mainly follow the usage of textbook while in Hong Kong, the teachers are given more freedom in making teaching

syllabus and allowed to plan their teaching lesson individually. The result turns out to be that the number of words that the students learn in Hong Kong is higher than in Guangzhou. This may be due to the lack of lexical supporting environment in mainland China where the students are likely to be exposed to the foreign language only in classroom and as the teachers strictly follow the textbook, and also do not encourage them as much as the teachers in Hong Kong, this may be the factor of low number of lexicon acquisition. Another study by Meara et al (1997) based on intensive cases of an EFL classroom featured the teachers with very "strong commitment approach to language teaching." (pp 28) the case studies are in the condition that the classes are very intensive with a number of contact hours of oral input by the teachers a day, which means the students are able to encounter with both frequent and infrequent words than those who do not attend. The students are the native French speaking students of 11 and 12 years old. The result of the analysis turns out to be quite disappointed, as the numbers of the unusual (infrequent) words are as low as 3% while the frequent words are at the rate of 85%. This may happen due to many factors, but it is also undeniable that the highly motivated classroom with the strong commitment of the teacher is not always the case of a successful lexical learning environment.

As the example in Guangzhou, the teachers can be both very effective or less effective input to the students depend on how they conduct the class. In order to be as effective, the teachers themselves need to have enough knowledge of vocabulary and be able to adapt it to the available teaching materials. However, in the case of Meara et al (1997), it is clearly that other factors can interfere the ability of the teacher as the significant input of vocabulary too. Nevertheless, in all 3 sources of lexicon input, the teachers are the only one that is not only capable of providing vocabulary for the learners by themselves but also capable of managing the utilization of other 2 sources to create the larger scale of vocabulary input for the learners. The teachers who are already closely associated with the utilization of textbook should make the most proficiency use of textbook by exploring the ability of each student in class and then produce the balancing compound of teaching method which should be something that both fast and slow learners can catch up.

4. THE ROLES OF INFORMAL ACTIVITIES

Apart from the formal classroom education with the teacher, informal activities outside of the classroom is also the interesting alternative option for the learner to practice or even be exposed to the less formal input of language in their own way. The advantage of using informal activities as the vocabulary input is that the learner will likely to face less stress in the situation since it is not required the formal testing of the improvement. In other words, the learners can enjoy doing the activities without any concern of the outcome. Although the outside classroom activities are not a formal form of language acquisition like the classroom teaching-learning, both kind of input are also related in some aspect. Like mentioned in role of the teachers' part, the outside activities are mostly served as the backup of the formal input. The Teacher can play important role in encouraged the learners to practice language on their own free time which in turn, can help them improve their language ability in the classroom. The outside classroom activities can be varied based on each learner interest. It can be in many forms depending on the purpose of the learners. This kind of input is measured by many studies to calculate the number of how appropriate the learners can rely on it as the vocabulary input. Although the informal input are likely to be less academic-like input like the classroom teaching, it is also required some number of vocabulary knowledge of the learners in order to uptake the vocabulary from it. Webb and Rodgers (2009) examine the use of television as the input of vocabulary. Their examination comes up with the number of about 3,000 words needed for learners to completely enjoy television shows. More than half of them (55%) are less-frequency words that occurred only once while 19% of them have been used twice and 12% of them are used more than five. This result is surprisingly against the general believe that the entertainment purposed activities are required small number of vocabulary as 3,000 less-frequent words are far more than the number of words acquired in the formal classroom teaching of some studies. On the other hand, television may be seen as more practical source of input than it is viewed. Horst and Meara (1999) also investigate the uptake of vocabulary through reading. The study is conducted by a participant who is assigned to read the comic book called, "Lucky Luke". After reading it eight times, he is tested and provide impressive result of 223 out of the 300 target words. This can imply as the repeat reading habit can help the learners memorize the vocabularies effectively. The popular recreation activities like listening to the music and watching movies are also examine as whether they can be an effective input of the lexicons. Milton (2008) examines the participant who was given the order to listen to 23 songs from Greek motives for a period of 8 weeks. The total combined vocabularies from all songs are 2,225 words. The result of the investigation comes up with the participant acquires a number of vocabularies as he could produce words that he has heard more than four times. This result clearly supported the point that the ability of the learners can grow overtime as they are exposed to the input regularly. The rates of the learners' uptake from these informal activities from these studies

are relatively high when compare to those number of the input from the formal classroom. It is quite obvious that the outside activities can be an effective input of lexicons for the EFL learners. However, to expose to the informal activities alone may not make an effective outcome in every kind of activities since some activities like watching TV shows still requires a large number of vocabulary knowledge which the learners need to gain prior the exposing.

5. CONCLUSION

As we have discussed all 3 sources of input for vocabulary acquisition. It is clearly seen from the studies and researches that formal classroom teaching is still the most important and the most effective source of input for the vocabulary learning, especially in the environment that outside activities involving the use of English is limited. The teacher seems to be the highest rate in providing the number of vocabularies to the learner. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that the teacher will be most effective input of language as sometimes the other factors, e.g. environment of study or the ability of students may interfere. The acquisition of vocabulary may vary in each individual learner depending on their own motivation. However, the out-of-classroom activities also play some significant role in supporting the learners' acquisition of lexicons. The informal activities provide more chance for the learners to expose to the foreign language which in turn can help them improve their language skill by practicing in the free time. To sum up, the most practical way of uptaking the lexicons for the EFL learners should be the combination of all input together. The suggestion for further study is to focus on effectiveness of the material inputs. How to determine the appropriateness of the materials and how should the educator use them to enhance the ability of the EFL learners. Another interesting topic is study about the comparison situation that English is limited to being spoken in classroom context and the student are not capable of using English anywhere else to investigate the usefulness of the materials.

REFERENCES

- [1] Laufer, B. (1989). *What percentage of text lexis is essential for comprehension?*, *Special Language: From Humans Thinking To Thinking Machines*, eds. Ch. Lauren and M. Nordman. Multilingual Matters., 316-323
- [2] Milton, J. (2009). *Measuring Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- [3] Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Alsaif, A. and Milton, J. (2012). *Vocabulary input from school textbooks as a potential contributor to the small vocabulary uptake gained by English as a foreign language learners in Saudi Arabia*. *Language Learning Journal*, 40(1), 21-34.
- [5] Konstantakis, N. and Alexiou, T. (2012). *Vocabulary in Greek young learners English as a foreign language course books*. *Language Learning Journal*, 40(1), 35-46.
- [6] Milton, J. (2011). *The role of classroom and informal vocabulary input in growing a foreign language lexicon*. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 26., 59-80.
- [7] Scholfield, P. (1991). *Vocabulary rate in course books – living with an unstable lexical economy*. *Proceedings of the 5th Symposium on the Description and/or Comparison of English and Greek*. Thessaloniki; Aristotle University, 12-32.
- [8] Tschichold, C. (2012). *French vocabulary in Encore Tricolore: do learners have a chance?*. *Language Learning Journal*, 40(1), 7-19.
- [9] Häcker, M. (2008). *Eleven pets and twenty ways to express one's opinion: the vocabulary learners of German acquire at English secondary schools*. In *Language Learning Journal*, 36(2), 215-226.
- [10] Ricketts, J., Nation, K., and Bishop, D. (2007). *Vocabulary is important for some, but not all reading skills*. *Scientific Studies of Reading*. 1-42
- [11] Donzelli, G. (2007). *Foreign language learners: words they hear and words they learn, a case study*. *Estudios de Lingüística Inglesa Aplicada (ELIA)* 7(2007), 103-126.
- [12] Meara, P., Lightbown, P. and Halter, R.H. (1997) *Classrooms as lexical environments*. *Language Teaching Research*. 1(1), 28-47.

- [13] Tang, E. and Nesi, H. (2003). *Teaching vocabulary in two Chinese classrooms: schoolchildren's exposure to English words in Hong Kong and Guangzhou*. Language Teaching Research 7(1) 65-97.
- [14] Shintani, N. (2012). *Input-based tasks and the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar: A process-product study*. Language Teaching Research April 1, 2012 16: 253-279.
- [15] Fitzpatrick, T, Al-Qarni, I and Meara, P (2008). *Intensive Vocabulary Learning: a case study*. Language Learning Journal, 36(2), 239-248.
- [16] Garnier, M. (2013). *Intentional vocabulary learning from watching DVDs with subtitles: A case study of an 'average' learner of French*. International journal of Research studies in Language learning 3(1), 21-32.
- [17] Milton, J (2008). *Vocabulary Uptake from Informal Learning Tasks*. Language Learning Journal, 36(2), 227-238.
- [18] Milton, J., Jonsen, S., Hirst, S. and Lindenburn, S. (2012). *Foreign language vocabulary development through activities in an on-line 3D environment*. Language Learning Journal, 40(1), 99-112.
- [19] Horst, M. and Meara, P.M. (1999). *Test of a model for predicting second language lexical growth through reading*. The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 56, 2 (December/décembre), 308-328
- [20] Webb, S. and Rodgers, M. (2013). *Vocabulary demands of television programs*. In Language Learning 59(2), 335-366.