English Acquisition and Learning through Vocabulary Development across the Curriculum

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Abstract

Language is the basis of human interaction and global conglomeration. The world has shrunk and become accessible to every individual occupying it mainly because of the connectivity ensured through effective communication. The education system promotes learning in English language around the globe to foster this communication and economic integration. The learning of language therefore is crucial to survival in this world of increasing competition in all spheres of life. Language learning follows a pattern of acquisition which is generally phased as listening – speaking – reading – writing. Language understandably is gained through the process of active listening of words, repetition of sounds and words to imply a set of meanings, reading the script to understand the words, and writing words in a selective pattern to convey meaning effectively. The one thing that unifies all these processes as a whole is usage of words. The significance of words then cannot be undermined in any stage of language learning. This article seeks to discuss the significance of using vocabulary learning in inter subject learning and transcend the border of language as a subject. The article also lists a few exercises and examples of activities that help in promoting such a wholesome language learning experience.

Keywords: acquisition, language learning, interdisciplinary learning, vocabulary, prefix, suffix, root, interactive sessions, hangman, rhebus, word ladder

Introduction

The key to survival in this world is Language. It is undeniably the most important factor in communication and the very first aspect that we, as human beings, start learning. Even before gaining knowledge of and the effective control of fine motor skills a child begins to learn the art of communicating through sounds and words. It is a basic skill that helps in acquiring other notable skills, and an impairment in the area of listening or speaking have been attributed as the main contributing factor for the delay in normal developmental milestones. That being said, the significance of language can thus be emphasised as the major milestone in child development and later throughout life. Language in any form- spoken or written - is a bridge to effective communication. In a world where business and money has become a core factor, communication in the developing world plays a crucial, and vital role in enhancing the economy.

Neuman and Dwyer define the term Vocabulary in *The Reading Teacher* under the article *"Missing in Action: Vocabulary Instruction in Pre-K"* as "the words we must know to communicate effectively: words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary). John Dewey opined that vocabulary is crucial to learning since a word is an instrument for the thought process. The number of words listed in the English Dictionaries namely *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged,* including its 1993 Addenda Section, comprises of almost 4,70,000 entries. *The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition* has recorded similar number of words enlisted. The *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd edition, published in the year 1989 contains 1,71,476 words in current use, along with 47,156 words which are obsolete and 9,500 derivative words. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 6th edition* published In the year 2007 has a total of 6,00,000 words, phrases and definitions. While it might not be possible to learn all the words in the language dictionary, the knowledge of a person can be expanded to include 3,000 to 5,000 words a year on an average through continuous involuntary and voluntary learning processes.

The process of vocabulary development is a continuous and ongoing process which stretches into a lifelong phenomenon. Vocabulary learning begins from birth and develops along with the physical growth of a person right until a person breathes his last. It is fostered by institutional education and experiences in life. Vocabulary acquisition exists as long as words are presented in meaningful contexts. The process is active while learning in educational institutions as part of an organised learning curriculum as well as in real life experience education.

Smith in his book *"The book of learning and forgetting"* says that individuals would learn "without conspicuous effort or organised instruction and without any forgetting" when they learn a set average number of words every day. According to Brabham & Villaume(2002) Children learn approximately a vocabulary of 2,000 to 4,000 words per year. In the words of Graves children encounter in excess of 1,00,000 words in school. Students' vocabularies increase by 3,000 to 5,000 words per year by reading activities in the school. Their reading vocabulary increases to 25,000 words by the eighth grade and over 50,000 words by the end of their high school.

The assimilation of the words thus encountered through reading activities can be made possible "when they experience words in comprehensible and meaningful contexts," to put it in the words of Allen J. Anderson & Nagy recorded their findings on the interlink between vocabulary and reading comprehension in their article *Word Meanings.* According to them, the increase in word knowledge can be attributed mainly to the practice of extensive reading. Reading and vocabulary acquisition have been interlinked for years and have been continually reiterated numerous times in the classrooms by various teachers. The emphasis on reading as a major contributor to acquisition of words and the building block of vocabulary cannot be under rated even in this era of online learning. In fact, the process of reading has only been further extolled through readily available reading material of various genres at our fingertips.

The point of contention through this article is simply that language crosses the boundaries of all subjects. English transcends and nestles itself between the spaces of every subject. As done with all knowledge in this world, the base of all knowledge lies in the hands of the teaching methodologies and the teacher.
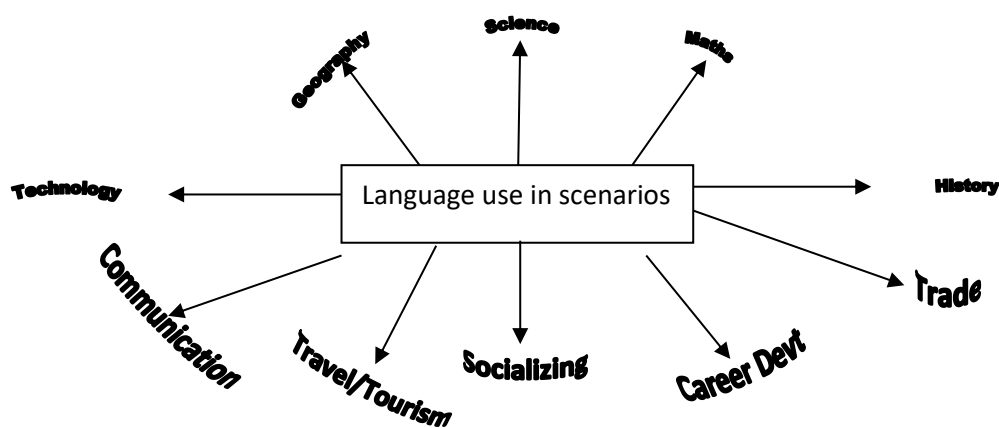
As English becomes an interdisciplinary entity, it can be said in all probabilities that language in all aspects: speaking, writing, listening and reading becomes better naturally if a student has a better vocabulary. If this is taught properly, students will be able to analyse and develop an interest in learning as a whole and aspire to self-educate. This in turn, inspires a student to engage in active learning. Active and motivated learning of vocabulary in turn helps the student to understand the usage of words and use them in all subjects across all fields of study, not necessarily restricted only to English as a stand-alone subject.

The base or the root of this type of vocabulary teaching can be traced back to the formation of words from other official languages of prominence in the prime age of discoveries and inventions. Such word coinage finds itself modified and nurtured at the hands of Greek, Latin and many other prominent languages which have incorporated themselves into the English language slowly through time. English is almost entirely a development of words from other languages- to be precise more than 90% of the language comprises words of foreign origin. A point to be noted is that most of the 90% of the words is Latin, French and Germanic languages. A study of these roots, prefixes and suffixes which are the fragments from these core languages make understanding vocabulary much easier. They can probably be defined as the building blocks of English and have found themselves a lofty position of extreme importance in the ever evolving studies such as Science, Technology and Maths.

Words derived from Latin and Greek can be separated into parts, namely prefix, suffix and roots for easy comprehensibility and applied in vocabulary enhancement activities so that the students may be able to grasp the ideology of word formation and apply them in understanding various subjects. For example:

Latin Root	Definition	Examples
Ambi	Both	ambiguous, ambidextrous
Aqua	Water	aquarium, aquamarine
Greek Root	**Definition**	**Examples**
Auto	Self	autobiography, automobile
Bio	Life	biology, biography

Prefix	Definition	Examples
anti-	Against	Anticlimax
de-	Opposite	Devalue

Suffix	Definition	Examples
-able, -ible	is; can be	affordable, sensible
-al, -ial	having characteristics of	universal, facial

Examples taken from http://www.readingrockets.org/article/root-words-roots-and-affixes

A study of these affixes and root words enable the possibilities for educated guesses in career oriented studies and offers opportunities for enhancing comprehensibility of varied subject areas. Such morphological breakdown of words makes the assimilation of the word forming process much simpler and easier.

Mathematics, a subject most abhorred by even the studious set of students, could in fact be made easily comprehensible by providing a background knowledge of base words and terminology used in the subject at the primary stages of education. The meanings of these base root and affix morpheme meanings would promote a clarity of subject description. Making the students aware of word root meanings such as the ones below fosters an understanding based on familiarity with the concept while being taught the subject. Some such roots that provide an idea of the shape of concept are noted below for reference:

Mono - one
Deca - ten
Tri - three
Poly – many
Quadra - four
Fract – break
Hemi – half
Numer - number

Science is another notable subject that contains similar word building techniques as a part of its core being. Early scientists and inventors resorted to naming their inventions with the official languages in that period of time especially Latin and Greek. Many scientific names are offshoots of the Greek and Latin affixes and root words. It can be said that most of scientific subjects may be easily comprehended with the knowledge base that may be acquired through the study of basic roots and affixes. Some of such root words and affixes are noted below:

Aur – ear
Branchi – fin
Calor – heat

Anemo – wind
~arium – a place for something
~duct – lead
~emia – blood
~logy – study of something

      A great way to bring English into other subjects is to start off with interactive sessions of touring the world in language, seeing English from the perspectives of other subjects and going through interesting words derived from the language while inquiring into the social scenario and culture in that country. This could also be taken as a project- based learning system where students are split up into groups to discuss and find information on the origin of words and their significance in the countries of their origin.

      Word association can be introduced by helping the students identify and make connections among the words with similar morpheme meanings and apply them across various subjects within their curriculum. This technique is equally beneficial to the adult ESL, EFL, ESP and EAL learners as it is to the early language learners of young age. Not only does it enable active acquisition it helps promote active critical thinking and process information at greater speed with increased efficiency.

      One way to introduce such an active vocabulary acquisition can be seen in the following example. The class could be given flash cards containing prefixes, suffixes and roots. A pack of cards should be given to each team to try and form at least 10 meaningful words of their own. Each group then shuffles the flash cards and tries out the other set. By the end of the session, students would have many words which were in existence or created by themselves. Encouraging the student to look into a dictionary to see if the words they have created are real is a fantastic way to introduce vocabulary in a less boring manner. Each pack is unique and will therefore test the students ability to make meaningful words.

Photo + Syn + thesis
(Light)+ (Put together)

Crypto+ Graph
(Hidden) + (record/writing)

Pneumono + ultra + micro + scopic + silico + volcano + coniosis
(lung disease caused by minute silica dust and fine sand from the volcanic or mining areas)

      In another method, the whole class can be engaged in a vocabulary quiz. **Hangman**- a popular and fun game could be utilised and moulded for the purpose of vocabulary acquisition. The meaning for the word shall be given and students will have to guess the word from the dashes available. Since this is a class game, not all students will actively participate, however, the effect of this game will reach everyone as the aim and objective is simply to come up with words suiting the description and to learn the new words which peers have suggested. This becomes an effective peer-group learning tool.

      Allen in *"Words, words, words: Teaching vocabulary in grades 4-12"* suggests word questioning as another effective developmental strategy to improve vocabulary and aid in the acquisition of greater vocabulary. This method involves critical thinking and enables the student to examine the words in terms of its meaning, form and context. It could possibly involve dividing the word into meaningful morphemes, recalling and connecting the morphemes thus identified to other words having similar morphemes, identifying the meaning of the word, examining the scenarios or situations in which the word may be used, what makes the word an important addition to the vocabulary, its synonyms and antonyms and their applications in sentences. This extensive analysis of words helps in understanding the word as a whole and its parts. It further enhances the chances of practical usage and bring it into the realm of active vocabulary.

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Rhebus puzzles are very common and this can certainly be used in the classroom as well. It is an easy way to make students understand preposition usage. Prepositions are one of the most mistaken parts of speech in writing and speaking. Rhebus puzzles stimulate the minds of students to think about various prepositions and their usage.

Word ladders as suggested by Rajiv Vasisht in his book *Interactive Vocabulary Drills* is a new tool which is greatly useful and highly puzzling as well. A word is given to the students and written vertically, for example , we write the commonly used word such as **SAID** vertically. **SAID** is a commonly used word, students are encouraged to find synonyms which are used in lesser degree for each letter.

S – Stated

A – Asked

I – Indicated

D - Deciphered

This enhances vocabulary in relation to familiar terms. These word ladders can be put to practise using feasible technology in schools as well. Students could be allowed to use computers to help with finding synonyms. As a student becomes familiar with more words, vocabulary increases, language skills improve, communication becomes easier and the overall performance sees a drastic change.

The current scenario in language teaching is that English is simply taken as works of literature and the learning of literature. As the student is bound to browse through only a single piece of literature, functional and useful English is not extensively taught. Vocabulary in most schools is at a standpoint. Students do not get first-hand experience in using the language functionally and in situations where they might need it the most. The aspect of having a fixed portion for learning a language should be abolished. A healthy scenario where literature can be explored in connection which other subjects as well as English should be fostered instead. Ideas for improving this state could be to ask students to present skits and speak about their general experiences. This makes them fluent in expression- which is truly something of worth to the student and their life. Writing activities should be encouraged in students creatively. Asking students to imagine and write is also a wonderful tactic for description of objects in detail. Reading and listening should also be emphasised through interactive classes, whereas speaking and writing can take place through inquiry-based learning where students themselves dive deep into the subject. In the end, practice alone gives a student an exemplary vocabulary, but a good teacher is enough to give all students a functional vocabulary.

Conclusion

A world without words is simply unimaginable. The creation of each and every sentence, each and every word, remains a marvel. A good vocabulary cannot be taken as a joke or of trivial importance anymore. Children should look forward to the task and not regret it. Language goes beyond a literary piece. Language transcends all borders. When a language could be so important- vocabulary fuels it into a flame.

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