

Teaching Strategies for Vocabulary Acquisition in Junior High School English Language Learning

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Abstract: *This study explores strategies to enhance vocabulary acquisition among ESL beginners, focusing on junior high school students in China. Vocabulary is critical for language proficiency, but students often struggle with memorizing new words due to limited exposure and the cognitive need to learn new languages. The research compares deliberate learning methods, such as rote memorization and flashcards, with incidental learning through context-rich activities like reading and listening. Deliberate learning is efficient for short-term gains but may not ensure long-term retention, whereas incidental learning will promote deeper integration of vocabulary over time. This study proposes a blended approach that combines two methods to maximize efficiency. Additionally, it highlights the importance of using multimedia tools and contextual learning to reinforce new vocabulary and demonstrate its practical applications. By presenting words in relevant contexts and participating in multimedia, students can better grasp and memorize new vocabulary, thereby improving their language performance. This study provides practical insights for ESL educators. It advocates a balanced teaching strategy to enhance vocabulary acquisition and support the overall language development of middle school students.*

Keywords: *ESL vocabulary acquisition; Teaching strategies; Deliberate learning*

1. Introduction

This essay primarily explores the challenges that ESL beginners face in learning and memorizing vocabulary, focusing on solutions from the teacher's perspective to enhance vocabulary acquisition in junior high school students. This essay is divided into five parts, each of which helps to understand the issue comprehensively. The first section introduces the importance of vocabulary in language learning and the structure of the essay. The second part provides a background introduction, which details the specific teaching environment and students' characteristics. It focuses on the Chinese junior high school setting, where limited English exposure creates significant obstacles. This section also identifies the core problems the essay attempts to address. The third part is a literature review, which examines two main types of vocabulary learning: incidental learning and deliberate learning. Deliberate learning involves using structured methods such as rote memorization and flashcards. Incidental learning, on the other hand, helps acquire vocabulary through context-enriching activities like reading or listening. The review highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and identifies key conditions for successful vocabulary acquisition, such as repetition, context, and active engagement. It also recommends potential solutions, including multimedia tools, contextual learning, and interactive activities promoting vocabulary retention and usage. The fourth part combines these theoretical insights with practical considerations specific to the teaching environment. It selects the most suitable methods that address the student's needs. Finally, the essay concludes by summarizing the key points, discussing the limitations of the proposed solutions, and reflecting on the author's learning experience. This essay aims to provide practical strategies for ESL educators to effectively address the challenges of vocabulary learning and ultimately improve students' language performance.

2. Context and problem

The author chose the internship experience during the university academic year to analyze. This class consists of 55 Chinese students, all of whom are native speakers of Chinese and have little exposure to English during their primary school years. This lack of foundation made vocabulary acquisition particularly challenging. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages^[1], their English proficiency level was estimated to be below A1, meaning that many

students struggled with basic tasks such as introducing themselves and understanding simple daily communication in English.

In China, the high school entrance examination is an important milestone for ninth grade students. It determines which high school they will attend and influences their future academic and career paths. English, as one of the three core subjects alongside Chinese and mathematics, plays a vital role in this examination. Therefore, students should start preparing for the English section of the exam from the first year of junior high school.

Ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning of each session are used to introduce new vocabulary. This was a crucial part of the lesson, as it set the stage for learning new material. The process began by writing the spelling and phonetic transcription of the new words on the blackboard, following the glossary sequence in the textbook. The goal was to establish a solid foundation by familiarizing students with essential vocabulary. Students were encouraged to pronounce the new words, using the phonetic transcription as a guide. When pronunciation errors occur, they will be corrected and students will be required to repeat the words several times after the teacher to reinforce correct pronunciation. In addition, time has been allocated for students to practice spelling new words as the final step in teaching new vocabulary.

The problem encountered in vocabulary teaching was that students were very bad at learning and memorizing single words, not to mention phrases. In terms of dictation scores, only 20% of the students passed the pass line (the full mark was 100, the pass line was 60). It is challenging to learn grammar and sentence patterns if students do not have the basic vocabulary and know how to use the vocabulary. There is a need to start by improving vocabulary teaching and providing students with effective methods for memorization. There are two significant types of vocabulary learning: deliberate learning and incidental learning. Teachers need to arrange these two types of vocabulary teaching appropriately according to the situation of students. To make the full use of these two types of vocabulary learning, some certain learning conditions are required.

3. Literature Review

3.1. *Incidental learning and deliberate learning*

Deliberate learning is “learning vocabulary through the completion of exercises and tasks where the primary aim of the activity is to learn target words” [2]. In the development of deliberate learning, Krashen^[3] claims that deliberate learning is useless because it does not affect the acquisition of language knowledge, and he insists that value of naturalistic usage-based learning. More recently, however, naturalistic usage-based learning is not enough to master second language vocabulary. It needs to be supplemented by deliberate learning^[4]. Deliberate learning provides an efficient and convenient way of memorizing vocabulary^[5]. Learner can use flashcards or memory techniques to pick up new words in deliberate learning^[6]. The role of the teacher in deliberate vocabulary teaching is to guide students to finish tasks during a class time like matching activities.

Incidental learning is defined as “the acquisition of vocabulary learning as a by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to lexical acquisition” [7], which means learners “do not deliberately try to commit these words to memory” through reading or listening such activities. For example, when reading an English novel or listening to an English song, the focus is on the novel or the song. However, new words or phrases might be acquired incidentally if they are encountered repeatedly over time, as repeated exposure can gradually lead to recognition and understanding.

The characteristics of these two types of vocabulary learning will be stated in the following passage. It is worth noting that although the traits of the two vocabulary learning styles are different, they are not in conflict, so it is better to have both types of learning in vocabulary acquisition. The incidental learning requires a large amount of input to ensure that these new words are encountered in different ways sufficiently. This is time-consuming and impractical in an actual teaching situation. It can be conducted from Laufer’s experiment that incidental learning is not the best way to acquire vocabulary in a foreign language context, while deliberate learning like word-focused activities plays a vital part in building students’ vocabulary.

All in all, deliberate learning is more essential compared with incidental learning for beginners. Since the students are beginners, more emphasis should be placed on providing opportunities for deliberate learning. The specific activities will be described in the part of the solution.

3.2. Conditions contribute to vocabulary learning

Learning conditions established through learning activities are basically what prompt language learning. It will facilitate learners' vocabulary learning if the teacher can make full use of activities to maximize the occurrence of those learning conditions. Two types of learning conditions are beneficial to vocabulary learning: one is repetition, and the other one is the quality of attention at each encounter. Noticing, retrieval, varied encounters & varied use and elaboration are related to the quality of attention. Comparing the two main conditions, the quality of attention at each encounter is more influential to vocabulary learning^[8].

3.2.1. Repetition

Repetition is a way to memorize new materials by repeated rehearsal while it still in working memory^[9]. In fact, "learning is remembering". Memory system can be divided into three types: short-term store (STS), working memory and long-term memory. The short-term store means holding limited things in a short time up to a few seconds. Long-term memory is the ability to remember enough things for a long time, which is a sign of learning. To successfully remember things, the learner must transform memory into long-term memory. The function of working memory is to focus on words long enough to operate them, and it is the bridge between short-term memory and long-term memory. Repetition is an important part of working memory. At least seven repetitions with intervals are required to remember a word. Two experiments conducted in New Zealand show that two deliberate encounters in an oral story reading context with the teacher's explanation contributed a lot to beginners' vocabulary acquisition^[10]. Generally speaking, the more repetitions, the more learners can learn certain aspects of vocabulary.

3.2.2 Quality of attention

Noticing

Noticing means taking note of something is unknown. For example, when you learn a new word, you will see it everywhere subsequently^[11]. "Intake is what learners consciously notice"^[12], which indicated what a learner notices is what they really learned. The teacher's guidance can help students be aware of the new vocabulary, which is the very beginning of learning vocabulary and make vocabulary learning more efficiently.

Retrieval

Retrieval refers to the process of "accessing stored information"^[13], which must happen after the first encounter. The two types of retrieval are receptive retrieval and productive retrieval. The former one refers to when retrieval happens in the form of listening and reading. For instance, guessing the meaning of a new word from the context or looking at the dictionary after first encountered the word. Therefore, the latter one means retrieval occurs in the form of speaking and writing. The findings of Joe Barcroft^[14] indicated that leaving enough time for students to retrieve words leads to better language acquisition. Teachers should provide more change for students to retrieve instead of showing the meaning of the words directly. Using a flashcard is one of the essential ways to create more chances to retrieve, which will be stated in the solution part.

Varied encounters & varied use

Varied encounters mean "encountering a word in a context which is different from a previous encounter". Similarly, varied use means "using a word in a way which is different from a previous use". Neither of the two situations occurs when learners first encounter the word, so both processes involve retrieval. Same as retrieval, varied encounters, and varied use contain the receptive encounter and productive use. Joe's study^[15] indicated that "greater use and retrieval of the target form in the recall is likely to strengthen the learning pathway and may create favorable conditions for generation". Joe stressed the importance of varied use in his survey. The most efficient way to create more chances for varied use is a retelling, which will be stated in the solution part.

Elaboration

Elaboration is a kind of further step of varied encounters and varied use. Elaboration means encountering more aspects of the word to help to memorize the word. According to Hulstijn, J.H.^[16], the quality of the elaboration determine the retention of new vocabulary which means processing the vocabulary knowledge more elaborately will lead to the higher retention.

3.3. Solutions

There are two reasons why the students can't remember the single words: firstly, they lack the skills of memorizing words. Secondly, insufficient teaching activities were conducted to expose them to new words in various ways.

The most direct way to improve the efficiency of vocabulary teaching is to hold more vocabulary-learning activities. As mentioned before, deliberate learning is more efficient for beginners to learn and memorize new words compared with incidental learning. A bunch of activities of deliberate learning can be applied in teaching, like flashcards. The flashcard means writing the L2 word or phrase on one side and the corresponding L1 translation on the other side, which can be used in the stage of teaching and reviewing words. When teaching new words, the teacher show the side of L2 word first, and use the opposite to explain the L1 translation. If the flashcard is used in the review, the teacher can show the L1 translation and let the students speak the English word. This can help students to retrieve and increase the chance of repetition to turn the short-term memory into long-term memory.

In terms of how to make the best use of repetitions, this will be discussed in the following paragraph. Spacing the repetition is a very noteworthy point, which means when teaching students a new set of words, firstly present several words and then go back to test again. When students are better at mastering words, then lengthen the test interval. The first L2 study, conducted in Japan, indicated that "gradually increasing spacing may facilitate vocabulary learning, although introducing spacing may have a larger effect"^[17]. The advantage of spacing the repetition is that each word can be tested to the maximum extent while the students can recall the word.

As for improving the quality of attention, here are some activities the teacher can adopt. The first one dictionary use is to gain the meaning of a word or other essential information like collocation and illustrative sentences. According to Peter's^[18] study, dictionary consultation contributes to vocabulary learning. Dictionary use applies the condition of noticing, repetition, varied use, and elaboration. In the process of dictionary use, the learner must notice the unknown word firstly and then look at it in the dictionary, and finally look at the word in the text again. This process involves noticing and repetition. A single word often has more than one meaning, which means the learner has to determine the meaning that fits the context. Therefore there is a small amount of varied use and elaboration.

The second one reading with text highlighting means reading the text highlighted through various ways like the use of color and underlining to raise readers' attention to those highlighted parts. The process of reading with text highlighting applies the condition of deliberate noticing, for the highlighted part will first draw learner's attention. Once the keywords are highlighted, they will be top priority. The third one is the word part, which can help learners to memorize new words by breaking words into its constituent parts and then learn the meaning of different parts separately. Wei^[19] indicated that the word part technique has a positive effect on semantic linking the L1 and foreign words. Word part is a form of elaboration because the learner need to handle the form and meaning of the word deeply.

4. Solutions adjusted to the context

As previously mentioned, the students have a weak foundation in English, with the majority being beginners who are just starting to learn the language. According to Compulsory Education Textbook: English, Grade 7, Second Semester^[20] stipulates that seventh-grade students should master 488 words and phrases. As a result of the limited vocabulary they master, it is hard to engage in incidental learning activities like intensive reading, which requires the participants to have a necessary foundation of vocabulary. It would be beneficial to adopt deliberate teaching as main teaching method. In short, providing students with diverse opportunities to access English vocabulary and guiding them on effective vocabulary memory strategies is crucial for addressing this issue.

First of all, from the method mentioned above, using a flashcard is appropriate for the students. Flashcards can be used in the stage of review. After teaching the pronunciation and meaning of words, students can be shown the L2 word, and they need to try to retrieve the translation. Changing the order of flashcards is the right way to test students. After the students have mastered the words for a while, changing the word order can increase the difficulty of retrieval and help the flashcard functioning better. In the next class, students can be shown the L2 word after new words have been taught, and they should try to recall the translation. Additionally, students should be taught how to use flashcards to test themselves independently outside of class. When considering the use of flashcards, it is beneficial to

incorporate both traditional paper flashcards and digital versions into teaching methods to meet different learning preferences. Digital flashcards enable tracking of usage records for organizing flashcards effectively, and diverse patterns in digital flashcards can enhance students' engagement.

The second key point to help memorize vocabulary is spacing the repetition. When teaching a set of new words to students, several words are introduced first, followed by a test before continuing with further teaching. As students gradually master words, extend the interval of review. Another key point is reviewing the words in next lesson to create more chances of repetition and strength students' memory. This method helps students to review the new items in time and repetition with regular intervals can strengthen students' memory when their short-term memory is going to fade.

The third one dictionary use can not only increase the repetition of words but also serve as a resource of vocabulary acquisition. Introducing a bilingual dictionary to low-level learners can be beneficial for their language acquisition. Dictionary use plays a vital role when students meet unknown words in a text but they fail to guess the meaning from the context, or when students need to check their spelling. There are a plenty of examples for one single item so that students can get a comprehensive understanding of the word. Encouraging students to focus on word forms and identify words that share the same affix can greatly aid in memorization and vocabulary retention.

The fourth one reading with text highlighting is suitable to adopt in vocabulary teaching. Printing out vocabulary lists for students and highlighting core words in advance is a helpful strategy to draw attention and promote learning. Controlling the number of highlighted words is an essence at the same time. During teaching, it should remind students to pay attention to the prominent parts. It is also convenient for students to review the key words by reading the highlighted text. The last word part is beneficial for learning some complex compound words. For example, breaking down words like "classmate" into its components, such as "class" and "mate," can help students understand the word's structure and the meaning of the individual parts, like "mate" as a suffix. This approach can enhance students' understanding of word formation and make it easier for them to remember new vocabulary. Referencing related words like "deskmate" and "soulmate" when teaching the word "classmate" is a great way to show students how similar word parts can be used in different contexts. Breaking the word into different parts can help students learn some prefixes and suffixes, which can save them much time in memorizing the same type of words.

5. Conclusion

This essay mainly explores the challenges faced by ESL beginners in learning and memorizing vocabulary, with a focus on strategies to improve language acquisition. A key aspect of this discussion is the adoption of deliberate vocabulary teaching methods, which are particularly suitable for beginners. Deliberate vocabulary teaching involves a structured approach where specific words are targeted, taught, and reinforced through various classroom activities. This method is effective for beginners because it allows for a more controlled and focused learning environment. It helps students build a strong foundational vocabulary that is essential for further language development. In addition to adopting deliberate teaching methods, classroom activities that actively promote vocabulary acquisition are also important. These activities might include exercises that encourage repetition, use of new words in context, interactive games, and multimedia resources that make learning more engaging. By integrating such activities into the classroom, teachers can create a dynamic learning environment.

However, the approach discussed has a notable limitation: it does not explore solutions from the perspective of the students themselves. Understanding how to improve students' enthusiasm and motivation for learning vocabulary is equally important, as motivation plays a critical role in language acquisition. Students who are engaged and interested in what they are learning are more likely to put in the effort required to memorize and use new words effectively. Future research or practice should consider strategies to increase student motivation, such as incorporating student interests into vocabulary lessons and using positive reinforcement. Creating a supportive and encouraging classroom environment is also important for enhancing student engagement and learning.

The implication for teaching practice is clear: the choice of vocabulary teaching methods must be closely aligned with the actual situation and needs of the students. Teachers need to be flexible and responsive, adapting their methods based on student progress and feedback. By doing so, they can ensure that vocabulary instruction is not only effective but also relevant and engaging for students, ultimately leading to better language learning outcomes.

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