

This Language Skill Called Vocabulary, How Best Can It Be Taught in Kenyan Secondary Schools?

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Abstract: This paper argues that to understand language, the meaning of words has to be understood. These words have to be as many as possible. Language is used to communicate one's ideas, feelings and information either orally or in written form. This however is only possible if teachers understand that vocabulary plays an important role as a means of understanding the meaning of words and that mastery of vocabulary cannot be ignored. I further argue that vocabulary is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot understand other speakers or express their own ideas. I have also suggested that when vocabulary words are being taught, teachers need to consider how to teach these words to students based on the learner's age, educational background, area of interest and other sociolinguistic variables in which the words will be used. It is also argued that direct instruction of vocabulary may make little differences in terms of vocabulary development, whereas direct instruction in specific words might be extremely beneficial, while vocabulary development can be enhanced if students learn to relate to new concepts to their existing concepts and background knowledge. In this paper, I use the Kenyan secondary schools to state that vocabulary must not only be known but must be readily available for use. However, it is my feeling that Kenya shares a considerable similarity with other nations in terms of approaches, techniques and strategies to vocabulary teaching and hence many issues raised may be relevant to other countries.

Keywords: Language skill, vocabulary, communication, instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of vocabulary can be defined in various ways, but teachers need to be aware of three significant aspects and focus on them i.e. form, core meaning, and use. According to Nation [1, 2], the form of a word involves its pronunciation, spelling, and any word parts that make up this particular item which include prefixes, roots, and suffixes. An example for word parts can be seen with the word *disagreement*, where the prefix *dis-* means *negative* or *opposite*, *agree* is the root word, and *-ment* is a suffix denoting conflict. Here, they all go together to refer to a conflict of people's opinion or action or character, hence *disagreement*. Nation [1] states that core *meaning* encompasses the way that form and meaning work together, in other words, the concept and what items it refers to, and the associations that come to mind when people think about a specific word or expression. On *Use*, Nation notes that it involves the grammatical functions of the word or phrase, collocations that normally go with it, and finally any constraints on its use, in terms of frequency, level, and so forth. For *fluency and use*, Crabbe and Nation [2] declare that groups of words should be learned as units. They further argue that learning is made easier in most cases

if the meanings of the single words that make up the multiword units are also understood. Vocabulary must not only be known, it must be readily available for use. Fluency should be developed in all the four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. When teachers teach vocabulary to build students' knowledge of words and phrases, they need to help them learn any and all of the different components to assist them in enhancing their English vocabulary knowledge and use. Whether this happens in the English language classroom during vocabulary lessons is the concern of this paper.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- a) How do the teachers of English language execute existing techniques and strategies in teaching the vocabulary skill during vocabulary lessons?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Possible Sentence

In general, the purpose of possible sentence is to help students determine the meaning, of unknown words by pairing with known words in the sentence they think might be 'possible to be found in a text.' Nagy and Anderson as cited by Robert, *et al* [3], clarify that "possible sentence could be used by the students to

encounter unfamiliar vocabulary during reading assignment in subject matter discussed.” Thus, possible sentence can be taught if the students have the ability to guess the meaning of words in the text. As regard with possible sentence strategy stated before, the last study conducted by Moore and Moore [4] reveal that it was designed to help the students to: learn new vocabulary to be encountered in reading assignment, make predictions about sentences to be found in their reading, provide purpose for reading and arouse their curiosity concerning the text to be read.

From a linguists' words, it may be clarified that possible sentence is designed to help the students to determine independently the meanings and relationships of unfamiliar words in text reading assignment. In addition, the students can also use the text to evaluate and refine their prediction about the meaning words. Based on both explanations, it is clear that possible sentence places great emphasis on recognizing the meaning words in the context when the students read.

Contextual Redefinition

It is designed to enable the students to use context to make an informed guess about a words' meaning. Moreover, it attempts to provide the students with a strategy for using context in reading situation, Hence, Readance [5] identifies that contextual redefinition can be defined as "a strategy that stresses the importance in predicting and verifying word meanings. In this case, context enables the students to make more informed guess about the meaning of words in print and to monitor those predictions by checking them for syntactic or semantic appropriateness as reading progress.” On light of the definition, it may be recalled that the contextual redefinition provides a format from deriving the meaning of known words by using the context as a means for the students to predict them. But, before applying this strategy, the teachers of English should be able to provide the procedure accurately, among, these are; select unfamiliar words, write a sentence, present the isolated words, present the words in context, and use a dictionary for verification.

Feature Analysis

Feature analysis is designed to help the students to improve their vocabulary and categorization skill, understand similarities and differences in related words, and expand and retain content area vocabulary and concept. Referring to this idea, it can be inferred that feature analysis is intended to provide a systematic procedure for exploring vocabulary concept through the use of categorization. Thus the use of categorization may be regarded as a key concept in applying feature analysis. Hence, the simple categorization exercises and strategies can use list group as means of introducing the concept of categorization [5].

Word Mapping

It provides a framework for developing the students understanding of concept, including the hierarchical structure of theses concept and their attributes. It is also designed to develop students' conceptual knowledge about a topic and to show hierarchical relationship of associated concepts. Shortly, the word map is a systematic teaching technique that attempts to develop students' knowledge in line with the given examples in a sentence. In addition to knowing examples from the students, applying of word map conducted by teachers of English should be relevant to the students' learning activity. Therefore, Robert, *et al* [3] explains that the key to success of the word map is the student involvement and discovery that the strategy used will be more effective.

Levin's Keyword Method

The Keyword method is a mnemonic strategy in which the students devise a keyword, which looks or sounds like original word to be learnt, to associate new information with a mental image to aid in later recall of the target word. Owing to this idea, Wenden and Rubin [6] posit that mnemonic strategy may be meant as "aiding memory" in which the students can memorize and retrieve all kind of language routine occurring in the classroom. Often, it refers, to "memory trick" where the students may utilize a retrieval plan to be developed during encoding and mental imagery, both visual and verbal. Briefly, mnemonic strategy enables the students to store verbal material and retrieve it when needed for communication. Relating to the use of keyword in mnemonic or memory strategies, Oxford [13] clarifies that this strategy combines sounds and images so that the students can more easy to remember what they hear or read in the new language. The strategy has two steps. *Firstly*, identify a familiar word in one's own language or another language that sounds like the new word. *Second*, generate visual image of thy new word and thy familiar one interacting in some way. In line with the use of keyword mentioned above, it might be inferred that keyword method is regarded as means of helping the students in remembering new vocabulary in harmony with the sound produced. But, before applying this strategy, the English teacher should need to consider not only its advantages but also disadvantages. Hence, Nagy and Anderson as cited by Robert *et al* [3], reveal that there are some disadvantages of applying the strategy, applying the strategy, among others are: “The first it could be time consuming for the teacher to generate keywords and their accompanying image. Second, the visual images initially used are teacher-provided, not students-provided that which they are less involvement in their own learning, and third, the extent to which students can transfer the keywords techniques to other areas of study is relatively unknown at this time. Based on some the quotations above, it is possible to conclude that effectiveness of keyword method

largely depends on a process of re-coding, relating and retrieving. It means that the students must be able to re-code or transform the unknown word to be learnt into a more meaningful keyword that looks or sound like original. Besides, its effectiveness also depends on the allocated-time, the students' involvement, and the length of word to be learnt.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in selected secondary schools in Kericho County, Kenya. In the education sector, this region has a mixture of registered secondary schools ranging from National, county, to extra county schools. Among these categories are some of the country's best schools. Within the county there are also institutions of higher learning, including universities, and teacher training colleges. Kericho County has produced some of the most prominent personalities in the country. However, in the national examinations, this county has always not performed very well, [7]. Like many other parts of the country, the performance in English language at the national examination level in this county has been worrying [7]. This therefore supported the selection of this region for the study.

In this study, the phenomenon studied was the teaching of English language vocabulary skill in secondary schools in Kenya. In order to effectively study this phenomenon, an interpretive study paradigm was adopted to obtain pertinent and precise information concerning the teachers' practices and competencies in the teaching of English language vocabulary skill in secondary schools in Kericho County.

To obtain a representative sample for this study it was assumed that there is no significant difference between the teachers of English language and students across the various secondary schools in Kericho County in so far as the teaching and learning of vocabulary skills in English language is concerned. On the basis of this assumption, representative samples of secondary schools from three categories of national, county, and extra-county schools were considered in arriving at the target population.

According to Cohen and Manion [8], 10 -30 % of a total population is appropriate for a study in social sciences. They recognize the 10 -30 % of a target population as being an adequate representative sample in qualitative research. Therefore, 10% of the target population was preferred for this study so as to arrive at a more representative sample. Thus, out of the registered secondary schools in Kericho County, 10 secondary schools were selected for the study using the simple random sampling technique. Of the 10 schools randomly selected, 5 belonged to the county category of schools, while the other 5 belonged to the extra-county

of schools respectively. At the same time, there were two national schools in the region; of the two one was sampled using simple random sampling to represent the National schools category. Hence, the study had a total of 11 schools in its sample.

From each of the 11 secondary schools selected for the study, one class and teacher of English language, teaching vocabulary skills was purposively sampled to participate in the study. In cases of more than one stream and teacher of English teaching vocabulary skills in any of the classes, only one teacher was randomly sampled for the study. This was on the assumption that there is no significant difference between all the teachers of English, teaching English vocabulary skills. The one class that participated in the study in each school was selected randomly from any of the four classes. Also, a sample of 20 students, randomly selected from one class in each school participated in the study. Hence, this procedure provided a sample frame of 11 classes, 11 teachers of English, and 220 students. The study therefore assumed that the teaching of vocabulary and how learners handle aspects of vocabulary can be explored effectively in any of the four classes in the study sample.

Components of Data and procedure Analysis

Data collection

Based on Heaton's [9] views on data collection, the researcher developed two research instruments for this study. These instruments included an Interview guide for teachers of English language, and an Observation schedule used to record the teacher practices during English vocabulary lessons.

The Interview guide for teachers of English consisted of items intended to elicit information from the selected teachers of English on their teaching trends and practices in the teaching of English vocabulary skills and their suggestions for the improvement in the teaching of this skill. The Interview guide was administered to all the teachers of English language selected for the study.

The observation schedule was used to evaluate the teachers' practices during a vocabulary lesson. The main purpose of the observation process was to verify the pedagogical roles of a language teacher and the categories defining competencies required for the execution of these roles during the teaching of English vocabulary skills in secondary schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Vocabulary teaching techniques in general

This study established that the teaching of vocabulary as a skill is related to reading comprehension and that there are three major views about the relationship between vocabulary development

and reading comprehension. The first view is that direct instruction makes little differences in terms of vocabulary development, whereas the second view suggests that direct instruction in specific words is extremely beneficial. The third view suggests that vocabulary development is enhanced if students learn to relate to new concepts to their existing concepts and background knowledge. From these views, it can be observed, that teaching vocabulary as proposed by the teachers of English should take into consideration the students' vocabulary development during the teaching-learning activity. Also, it was found that the teachers of English were not able to teach unfamiliar or specific words which are adjusted to the students' ability when they read certain texts directly. In a nutshell, direct instruction on new vocabularies cannot be taught to the students if it focuses on relating them to the students' background knowledge.

Techniques employed while teaching vocabulary

The first research question in this paper wanted to establish how teachers of English execute existing vocabulary techniques and strategies. The findings indicate that there are several techniques concerning the teaching of Vocabulary. However, there are a few things that have to be noted by most of the teachers of English if they want to present vocabulary or the lexical items to their students. It means that if the teachers of English want students to remember new vocabulary, it needs to be learnt, practiced, and revised to prevent students from forgetting. The techniques that were employed by the teachers are discussed below.

Visual Techniques

The study established that teachers employed three forms of visual techniques; i.e. realia, pictures, and mime or gestures. In using realia the teachers used a variety of real-object brought by the students in the classroom. Students acted out what they read and associated physical sensation with specific words found in reading passages. Referring to ideas mentioned mime or gesture was used to emphasize the importance of gestures and facial expression on communication. It was used to indicate the meaning of a word found in reading passage, but also in speaking activity as it stressed mostly on communication.

Verbal Techniques

This study established the use of verbal techniques in the teaching of the vocabulary skill such as synonyms, opposites, scale, definition and categories. It was observed that teachers employed aspects such as definition and illustration sentences whereby the teachers of English introduced a word in English through the use of other word in the same language. Synonyms and antonyms; Synonyms and antonyms are especially important in building new vocabulary because learners are able to know vocabulary.

Synonyms are words that have the same meaning as the unknown in a given sentence. There may be signals that identify the presence of synonym for the readers. They could be commas, dashes, and colons. Meanwhile, antonyms are words that have the opposite meaning of the unknown word in a given sentence. Signals which identify the presence of the antonyms for readers which teachers used include instead, *although*, *but*, *yet*, and *however*. Another aspect was Scale. This technique is the presentation of related words in scales that include the combination of both verbal and visual techniques, for example, in the term 23° Celsius, the degree sign is the visual. Explanation was the other aspect. This technique explains the meaning and the use of a foreign word in the foreign language itself. Taking into account the points of technique presented, it seems that there are several similarities of techniques for teaching vocabulary development skills to be recognized

Encouragement and taking responsibility in learning as a technique

The Technique of encouraging students' interest in learning English vocabulary was not introduced by teachers. They were to enhance it by providing something challenging and making the students eager to study. Kustaryo [10] reveals there are some possible ways of learning activity to motivate students and thus increase the learning English especially regarding to the meaning of words. They include: Learning vocabulary through creativity, learning vocabulary through context clues, Learning vocabulary through guessing, learning vocabulary through definition and Learning vocabulary through derivation.

From the provided ways above, it can be further understood that learning vocabulary through creativity is an effective way to make the students to be more creative since it provides the pictures as the media of teaching. The pictures provided, of course, should be really interesting and challenging. Hence, the pictures provided by the teachers of English should attract the students to study pictures given and to make efforts find out their meaning. By this way, the students may gradually increase their vocabulary proficiency. Besides, some interesting pictures should be given some days before the oral work, and the students should be asked to prepare a talk regarding to the pictures. In this case they can choose any aspect of the pictures for their talk. If they encounter difficult words they can consult the dictionary. It is a good way to encourage the students to be more creative in learning English vocabulary. In addition to using pictures, Wallace [11] suggests that the teachers of English can also use a number of games. Language games have become more widely used recently probably for two reasons: Firstly, they increase emphasis on the importance of motivation and the appropriate kind of positive and effective

atmosphere in the classroom. Secondly they increase emphasis on the importance of 'real communication'. If a game is working properly, it very often supplies a genuine desire to communicate in the target language, even within the artificial confines of the classroom. Referring these reasons, it is clear that language games can be employed to make the class enjoyable for the students. Also, the language games are able to increase the students' motivation in learning English as they stress mostly on real communication. Briefly, the teachers of English should be more careful to choose games if they want to make them profitable in learning process. If games are expected to bring the objective result, they must correspond the students' level and age or to the material that is being taught. Hence, Angela [12] suggests that not all games can be appropriate for all students irrespective of their age. It means that the difference in age requires various topics, materials, and modes of games. Furthermore, structured games that reinforce a certain grammatical aspect of language should be related to students' abilities, and prior knowledge. Thus, games become difficult when the task or the topic is unsuitable or outside the students' experience so that they will not be interested in learning English vocabulary.

RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends that to improve the reading vocabulary skills of ESL students, teachers should determine the goal of teaching vocabulary; teach students word-building, Definition clues, such as the parentheses, footnotes, synonyms and antonyms.

CONCLUSION

From the above findings, it can be concluded that students and teachers of English have positive attitudes towards learning vocabulary skill for it arouses the learners' interest, enriches their imagination and develops their critical thinking by freely expressing their ideas and opinions. The process also develops learners' accuracy and fluency in English language and fosters their four learning strands; listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, unavailability of proper techniques and strategies in teaching vocabulary in the English language classroom may impact negatively on students' competence in English language. Vocabulary learning cannot be left to itself. It needs to be strengthened by careful planning and well directed teaching.

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