

ENHANCING THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY: A CHALLENGE FOR ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN TOGOLESE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This study weaves together survey and classroom observation to explore appropriate ways of implementing vocabulary lessons so as to help foreign language learners improve their communicative capacity. It argues that English vocabulary is better mastered when effective and efficient strategies and tasks are used. Through the lenses of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach that focuses on the knowledge of the minimum foreign language vocabulary that is necessary for any communication, the study has found that the use of vocabulary games, word derivation, teaching words in association, activities of word spelling are some key strategies that can help enhance students' level in vocabulary.

Keywords: vocabulary, enhance, derivation, association, communicative

AMELIORER L'ENSEIGNEMENT DU VOCABULAIRE : UN DÉFI POUR LES ENSEIGNANTS DE L'ANGLAIS, LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT SECONDAIRE AU TOGO

Résumé : La présente étude combine la collecte de données quantitatives avec l'observation des cours en situation de classe pour explorer les méthodes d'enseignement des leçons de vocabulaire de l'anglais afin d'améliorer la capacité communicationnelle des apprenants. Elle soutient que les élèves ne pourront maîtriser et améliorer leur vocabulaire que lorsque les enseignants opteront pour des stratégies innovantes et des techniques appropriées dans l'enseignement de cette activité. A travers la théorie de la « Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) » qui met l'accent sur un seuil minimum de connaissance du vocabulaire sans lequel aucun adulte ne peut se communiquer en langue étrangère, l'étude a trouvé que l'enseignement des mots en dérivation et en association, l'enseignement du vocabulaire par les jeux sont certaines techniques qui pourront aider à renforcer le vocabulaire des élèves.

Mots-clés : vocabulaire, renforcer, dérivation, combinaison, communication

Introduction

In the language learning process, vocabulary is one important component which requires much attention. Indeed, without the knowledge of vocabulary, the language learner's efforts to listen, speak, read and write will be unsuccessful. Vocabulary is, therefore, a cornerstone in language knowledge and needed for an efficient and effective communication involving the input (listening and reading) and the output (speaking and writing) strands (Nation, 1990; Richards and Renandya, 2002). Nowadays, the knowledge of vocabulary is considered by many language specialists as the heart of any

communicative competence and should be necessarily enhanced. In this regard, Richards and Renandya (2002, p.225) argue, “Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write.”

In the previous years, the emphasis was not put on vocabulary learning and people thought that it could be learnt through personal reading and listening (Richards and Renandya, 2002). Today, some language teachers continue neglecting the systematic teaching of vocabulary in favour of other language activities such as letter writings and grammar courses. In this regard, Schmitt and Meara (1997, p.18) note, “Total language proficiency consists of much more than just grammatical competence.” Yet, the teaching of vocabulary and especially the English vocabulary is one of the most relevant activities that should be considered by language teachers because it is accepted that the participation to any oral or written communication requires the knowledge of a certain number of words or word families in the particular language. The knowledge of these word families provides the language speaker with a large amount of lexical resource that is necessary for a meaningful communication (Schmitt, 2007). The knowledge of this amount of English vocabulary becomes, therefore, a prerequisite for an English learner who expects to be effective in the communication.

Though expectation for the knowledge of English vocabulary is required for an effective classroom and everyday communication, “many [Togolese] secondary school students’ written and spoken English remain [...] weak in vocabulary use” (Tarno, 2014, p. 3). This situation raises therefore the problem of vocabulary use either in its written or oral form by Togolese secondary school students. Indeed, students’ low level in the use of lexical items can be explained by teachers’ methods in the teaching of vocabulary. Another observation is that “word knowledge is power as words serve as building blocks to learning” (Moeller, Ketsman and Masmaliyeva, 2009, p.1), this study is an attempt to delve into the perceptions of Togolese English teachers concerning their approaches and strategies in transmitting vocabulary skills.

1. Background to vocabulary teaching and vocabulary knowledge

Laymen generally use the word ‘vocabulary’ without knowing what it really means and how it should be efficiently handled. According to OALD¹ (2010, p.1662), vocabulary means “all the words in a particular language or all the words that a person knows or uses.” Vocabulary is therefore used to refer to words we use to communicate in oral and written form. Two kinds of vocabularies are generally known: receptive and productive vocabulary. The receptive vocabulary refers to the words that are understood through reading and listening, whereas the productive vocabulary refers to the words we use to communicate through writing and speaking (Nation, 2001). The present study is concerned with the teaching and learning of English words in such a way that their knowledge can allow Togolese learners to use them efficiently in their daily conversation, either in the receptive or productive fields. For that purpose, a brief overview of vocabulary teaching and vocabulary knowledge is provided in this section.

Previous studies reveal an interest in the teaching of vocabulary. According to Moeller, Ketsman and Masmaliyeva (2009), foreign language teachers should be

¹ OALD stands for Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English.

equipped with the knowledge of what, why, and how to teach in order to help learners best acquire vocabulary. This knowledge can allow teachers to design the best pedagogical practices in order to increase the vocabulary of their students and by so doing improve efficiently and effectively their language proficiency. The current study corroborates the findings of Moeller et al. and calls for the teachers' own reflection on the 'what' and 'how' to teach a vocabulary lesson.

For Schmitt (2007), teachers have an important role to play in the acquisition of new words in an effective vocabulary teaching process. They should equip language learners in order to use successfully the vocabulary they need at the input and output level. Moreover, Schmitt (2007) reports that if teachers want to promote the vocabulary knowledge, they should teach sequences of words together, word pairs and word parts. Schmitt's findings are relevant in the vocabulary teaching and learning but depending on the context, other methods are such as the study of word according to their semantic and lexical families instead of individual words need to be taken into consideration.

Hunt and Beglar (2002) have found that in the teaching and learning of vocabulary, three methods need to be implemented: the incidental, intentional, and independent approaches. These learning methods require from the teacher a planning of a wide range of activities and exercises. Teachers need also to consider their students' level and the educational goal before deciding to emphasize on one approach or another. All the above studies agree that language teachers play a key role in the transmission of new lexical items to learners. The present research corroborates previous studies on these points but goes beyond their findings and suggests some techniques that the English teacher in the foreign language context can use in order to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

This section deals with the methods and theories used in the collection and the analysis of the data on enhancing vocabulary teaching in secondary schools in Togo. In the field of language learning, vocabulary appears to be one of the essential components in the learner's knowledge (Schmitt, 2000; Pan and Xu 2011). The teaching strategies of such a field need to be improved in order to help enhance the language learner's knowledge.

2.1 Theoretical framework

Studies on second/foreign language teaching and learning show different theories such as the Comprehension-based Approach, the Grammar Translation Approach, the Direct Approach, the Audiolingual approach, the Cognitive Approach, the Communicative Approach and so on. But the present research is based on the Communicative Approach (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1970). The Communicative Approach was established by Hymes (1972) in reaction to grammar-based theories. For the communicative approach theorist, the first and foremost goal of any language learning is communication. The aim of the Communicative Approach is then the development of language learners' ability to communicate fluently using their second or foreign language in and outside the classroom. According to Richards and Rodgers (1999, p.66), the Communicative Language Teaching "aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four

language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.” Though there have been different interpretations of the Communicative Language Teaching approach, I believe that this language teaching approach is applicable to my study because it allows language teachers to design strategies, tasks and techniques in such a way that their students will acquire the necessary resources in order to be effectively fluent communicators.

2.2 Methodology (data collection and data analysis)

The data for this study were collected through classroom observation and questionnaire from English language teachers from two secondary schools in Lomé. The questionnaire was handed to eight English language teachers. The two schools from which the data was collected are Agoè Ouest Junior Secondary School (CEG Agoè Ouest) and Agoè Nord Senior High School (Lycée Agoè Nord). Lycée Agoè Nord is a two level school made up of a junior secondary level and a senior secondary level. This study focused on the junior secondary level because it constitutes the zone of study where learners come across English for the first time and their motivation for it is surely high. In both schools, I visited Form Three and Four² classrooms and observed how vocabulary lessons were conducted. Each classroom was visited four times in order to collect necessary data for the analysis. In each classroom observation, I took full notes of the vocabulary taught and the methods used in the teaching of new items. These notes were analysed in order to come out with useful findings. The classroom observation was very relevant for this study because not only was it the major data collection method, it allowed me to be exposed to English teachers’ activities and strategies in handling their vocabulary classes and the different aspects or components of words that were taught to English language learners. Many reasons explain the choice of the two schools but three reasons are presented here. The first is based on the observation of the vocabulary lessons in the English text books of my child who is a student in one of these schools. My observation showed the teaching of synonyms or antonyms in the vocabulary lessons. Furthermore, the two schools are not far from my dwelling place and more importantly because I attended university with three of the English teachers in both schools. With such a relationship, I could easily carry out research on enhancing vocabulary in secondary schools. In addition to classroom observation, I submitted a questionnaire to eight (8) English teachers in order to get their opinion on their vocabulary classes. Four main questions on vocabulary teaching were answered by the teacher respondents. Due to size and place matters, the full questionnaire and the results are put in the appendix at the end of this paper. The analysis of the questionnaire was performed by the database using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program.

3. Results and Discussions

One of the methodologies used in the collection of the data on teaching vocabulary was the questionnaire. The questionnaire provided the researcher with quantitative results which are interpreted following this rule: if the score of the sum of ‘never and ‘rarely’ is between 1 and 50 per cent, it is considered low achievement. On the

² Form Three and Four refer to secondary school classes three and four in the Togolese educational system. They can be referred to as the 9th and 10th grades.

other hand, if the score of the sum of ‘often’ and ‘sometimes’ is between 50 and 75 per cent, it is referred to high achievement. The analysis of the survey data and the classroom observations has prompted some major findings in relation to specific factors.

3.1 Frequency of the English vocabulary teaching

The first question answered by the teacher informants was the frequency of their vocabulary classes. The results show that 50% of the respondents reported that they teach vocabulary three times a week, whereas 12.5% does the same activity once a week. The remaining 37.5% of the informants teach it twice a week. The answers provided by the respondents reveal that half of them teach vocabulary lessons three out of the four times granted for English classes during a week in the secondary schools of the Togolese educational system. The question of the frequency in the vocabulary teaching raises the issue of how often should the vocabulary of a foreign language be taught/learned in order to allow an effective communication. Indeed, according to Nation (2001, p.9), “second language [foreign language] learners need to know very large numbers of words.” It can be assumed therefore that the knowledge of a large number of English words can be achieved only by teaching continuously and regularly vocabulary activity. The analysis of the questionnaire, the classroom observation and the interview work together to show that vocabulary teaching in the Togolese secondary schools is sustained and need to be improved. At this stage of the language learning where young learners of elementary grades (form one, two, three and even four) come into contact with the foreign language, regular vocabulary teaching is assumed to be an efficient way of building their language input and output system.

3.2 Techniques in the English language teaching

As far as the second question on techniques adopted in the teaching of new words is concerned, teacher respondents reported in majority the use of antonym-synonyms, mimics, visual aids, demonstrations and sometimes songs. However, an important fact – the teaching of vocabulary items in context – needs to be mentioned before dealing with the strategies used in the teaching of new words. In fact, Richards and Rodgers (1999, p.8) argue that according to The Reform Movement approach, “words should be presented in sentences, and sentences should be practiced in meaningful contexts and not be taught as isolated, disconnected elements.” The teaching of a word out of context hinders the understanding of the passage under study and misleads the learner in the language learning process. The results of the data collected show clearly that all the respondents (100%) know the relevance of teaching new words in their context. The classroom observations and the interview findings corroborate the questionnaire results on teaching words in context. In all the vocabulary classes, I realized that the English language teachers while teaching focus on the context. This way of teaching backs the idea that words have a meaning only when they are put in a context (Nation, 2001). So, it can be said from all these results (questionnaire, classroom observation and interview) that new words are generally taught in context in Togolese Junior Secondary Schools. However, limiting oneself to only the context while teaching new words, for me, seems not sufficient to enhance learners’ vocabulary knowledge. The observations of the vocabulary lessons show that teachers are too much limited in their vocabulary teaching. They narrow their explanations to the context of the word they intend to study. This

strategy limits also the vocabulary knowledge of the students. Words carry many types of meaning: general, figurative, specialized, and contrasting, for example. Accordingly, Schmitt (2007, p.835) posits, “Many words are polysemous in English, and often some of their different meaning senses have a common underlying trait.” A real development in the knowledge of a language takes into consideration the widening of the vocabulary. Moreover, a limited vocabulary to only the context does not allow the learner to grasp the various riches of the language and even of the sociocultural aspects of the language. The ‘decontextualized learning’ of a word allows its deep knowledge and its understanding in a variety of contexts. In this regard, the enhancement of a learner’s knowledge of a language comes from the various meanings of the words he or she learns (Nation, 2001; Harmon and Staton, 1999, p.29). As mentioned above, according to the results of the questionnaire, Togolese secondary school English teachers favour antonym-synonyms, mimics, visual aids, demonstrations in the teaching of new words. Apart from mimicry and description which received 62.5% from the respondents, 75% of the participants reported the use of antonym-synonyms, visual aids and demonstration. The vocabulary classes observed show also in majority the use of the same teaching techniques. An open-ended interview allowed a clear understanding of why teachers favour antonym-synonyms, visual aids and demonstration techniques. According to the interview respondents, antonym-synonyms are the most common types of word relation and students are most likely able to have a quick understanding of word meaning. With regard to the aforementioned techniques, Schmitt (2007, p.835) argues, “grouping similar words together when learning should be beneficial.” As far as visual aids are concerned, teachers said that the use of real objects, pictures are the surest and most effective tools to present particularly abstract words in order to impact language learners. Mimicry and demonstration can be put together and express the facial gestures and actions to teach new items. Language teachers believe that mimics and demonstrations are instructive and impressive techniques when teaching materials related to everyday communication. The least technique used in the implementation of new vocabulary is the affixation process. Only 25% of the respondents reported the use sometimes of the affixation which can be referred to the derivation technique in the teaching of new words. The questionnaire result is verified when considering the classroom observations. Very few teachers taught their students new words through derivation technique. The absence of word derivation is also observed in the enforcement (homework) activities. 50% of the respondents reported that they rarely submit their students to derivation exercises in the vocabulary enforcement. It shows that English language learners in such a context are unaware of affixes. Affixes, these attached particles to the root, can be either inflections or derivatives. They are very relevant in the building of language learners’ input and output. The teaching of a word should include its inflections and derivatives because vocabulary teaching is more than a simple individual word to word study. With regard to teaching words, Hunt and Beglar (2002, p.258) claim, “in vocabulary research, a word (also called a base word or a word family) is defined as including the base form (e.g., make) and its inflections and derivatives.” So, “Teachers can [] maximize vocabulary learning by teaching word families instead of individual word forms” (Schmitt, 2007, p.836). If students are taught to derive new words, they will be inclined to do the same exercise by themselves once they come across a new item. For an English language

teacher, the teaching of the word 'believe' for example should not be limited to the explanation but should take into account other members of its family. Then, from 'believe', the student learns other members of the word such as: disbelieve, belief, believer, disbelief, believable, unbelievable. When words are taught by prefixation or suffixation, it allows their easy learning. It can therefore be said that teaching words from their parts (prefixes, roots, suffixes) enhances student understanding and develops their knowledge and appreciation for new lexical items. Teaching how to form words, when used effectively, becomes an efficient strategy to help English learners acquire new words. Students should therefore be taught lexical items through their morphology, showing their radicals or roots and affixes (prefixes and suffixes).

3.3 Words' aspect in vocabulary teaching

The last element I wanted to check in the teaching of vocabulary in Togolese secondary schools is word aspect (form, meaning and use). For that purpose, teacher respondents were required to answer some questions related to words' meaning, form and use. According to Nation (2001), the knowledge of a word involves all of its aspects. The author observes that the form of a word involves its spoken (pronunciation), written (spelling) and morphology (derivations and inflections) whereas the form and meaning (etymology), concept and referents and associations (synonyms, opposites) account for its meaning. The last aspect of the knowledge of a word concerns its use (grammatical functions or patterns and collocations). Hence, teacher respondents were asked to grade the aspects taught in their vocabulary activities. All the three aspects put together form a whole in the mind of language learner, allowing him or her to be efficient in the role playing in conversations. The results of the questionnaire show that all the respondents (100%) reported the teaching of the written and spoken form of new words. They assume therefore that they take into account words' spelling and pronunciation in vocabulary teachings. The classroom observations support teachers' report on the teaching of pronunciation and spelling. I observed that teachers generally make their students repeat new words after them and then write new items on the board. Once on the board, students are asked to write them down in their text books. Students are somehow taught the orthographic and phonological aspects of the words and if these aspects are well considered, it will contribute to the building of English language learners in Togo. Concerning the meaning aspect, the results show that all the respondents favour the teaching of synonyms and antonyms as shown above while 50% sometimes teach new items in association. Teaching words in association is important because it enlarges the English learner's knowledge of other words either of the same lexical category or not. Even if teachers reported the teaching of words in association, the classroom observations reveal that many of them limit their word teaching to synonyms and opposites. Teaching words in association should go beyond the mere synonym-antonyms and include words of the same lexical field. So when teaching the word 'farm' for example, the language teacher should provide learners with different tools used on the farm and different activities performed. Therefore, activities such as 'hoeing', 'planting', 'weeding', 'harvesting'; tools such as 'machete', 'cutlass', 'hoe', and 'axe'; and verbs such as 'to grow', 'to plant', 'to weed', 'to harvest' could be simultaneously taught to the students. The knowledge of the associated words plays an important role because it boots students' capacity needed in the receptive and the productive arena. For that

purpose, Schmitt (2007, p.836) urges teachers to “maximize vocabulary learning by teaching word families instead of individual word forms.”

The last aspect considered in the teacher’s questionnaire on vocabulary teaching is words’ use (Nation, 2001). Words’ use includes grammatical patterns and collocations. The knowledge of words’ grammatical patterns and collocations is generally relevant for a proficient and coherent essay and letter writing. English is said to be a language very rich in lexical phrases, involving particularly phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions. According to the results of the questionnaire, few respondents (12.5%) reported the frequent teaching of grammatical functions, while 62.5% said that they rarely mention them in their vocabulary classes. The analysis of the results show that teachers neglect collocations while teaching new items. Negligence of collations and grammatical patterns is perceived as one of the obstacles to the enhancement of students’ vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions and other longer formal expressions which constitute collocations should be systematically taught to Togolese English language learners if teachers want to improve their students’ vocabulary knowledge.

3.4 Consolidation of vocabulary lessons

There is no successful teaching without consolidation. The results of the question on the consolidation methods of new vocabulary taught show that Togolese English teachers never give exercises on odd and crossed words. Only scrambled words/letters receive a little attention from teachers. According to the results of question (4), 50% of the respondents reported that they sometimes consolidate their vocabulary lessons through word derivation exercises. As far as scrambled exercises are concerned, only 37.5% of the respondents approved their inclusion to their teaching tasks. The analysis of these results shows a total absence of a varied reinforcement exercises. Without vocabulary exercises, students cannot be equipped for a successful communication. Exercises such as ‘pick the odd word out’, ‘find 10 words related to animals/plants/technology from a grid’ (the words can appear across, backwards, up, down or diagonal), ‘write the correct word out of the scrambled letters’ are some of the games that can be given to English learners to be done in pairs in the classroom or at home. One thing is to equip the English language learner with the necessary vocabulary teaching through different meanings, word families, collocations but the imparted knowledge need to be consolidated by vocabulary games. Accordingly, in the language learning, the teacher plays the role of designer and facilitator, helping students to build their knowledge or create their own meaning out of the games and information they are taught during vocabulary classes. Students are more likely to improve their vocabulary knowledge if they are frequently submitted to vocabulary games. Once the student’s vocabulary is enhanced, he/she can easily discuss facts surrounding him/her. In this regard, Stahl and Nagy (2006, p.5) argue, “A person who knows more words can speak, and even think, more precisely about the world.”

Conclusion

This study has investigated the implementation of English vocabulary to Togolese secondary school learners. It has firstly shown that the knowledge of

vocabulary is very important for an effective communication that involves listening, understanding, speaking and writing activities. Consequently, without a good command of English vocabulary, learners cannot be able to express themselves in and outside their classrooms. The research has also shown that due to the fact that vocabulary plays a crucial role in English language, teachers have the obligation to revisit their vocabulary teaching so as to improve its effectiveness and efficiency by designing new and useful tasks, techniques, strategies and methods. The study has revealed that Togolese English teachers favour the teaching of individual words, synonym-antonyms and they forget to include other aspects of words' knowledge. It has found that since the potential knowledge of a word is rich and complex, its teaching should involve not only the meaning(s), but its written and spoken form (pronunciation), grammatical behaviour, collocations, and associations as well. Consequently, it has disclosed that the teaching of words in associations, derivations, and collocations speed up and facilitate their storage in the learner's mind and allow their retrieval in the productive language activities. The work has finally shown that teaching vocabulary is successful when words are taught in context and consolidated by vocabulary game activities.

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