Effective Vocabulary Teaching Strategies to Enhance EFL Learners' Reading Abilities: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The past decades have witnessed an increasing focus on teaching vocabulary. Such interest includes all the aspects that are vital to enrich this important language element. The present research aims at highlighting the importance of incorporating effective vocabulary teaching strategies to enhance EFL learners' reading abilities by investigating the significant effect of vocabulary on improving reading abilities. It attempts to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data obtained from participants. Guided by the assumption that poor vocabulary creates problems for L2 learners and the claim of Macaro (2003) who believed that most second language teachers tend to neglect the significance of vocabulary teaching. This study adopted mixed-methods research to confirm our assumptions. The research instruments are a questionnaire submitted to one hundred and twenty first-year EFL learners in three Algerian universities, and a semi-structured interview with eight university teachers. The study used SPSS to analyse the data obtained from participants. The findings of this research reveal that teachers find obstacles when introducing new vocabulary to learners; however, they also reveal that are many strategies that can be followed to enlarge the lexis of L2. The study provides theoretical guidelines to enhance reading abilities since the latter is considered the main source of new vocabulary.

Keywords: Vocabulary; Reading comprehension; Vocabulary teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is the cornerstone in learning or teaching any language since it strongly affects other language skills, "no matter how well learners master the grammar or pronunciation" (Wilkins, 1972, p.111). Therefore, it is crucial to have a considerable amount of "words to be able to communicate effectively in any given context" (Shen, 2003, p.188).

Lexical knowledge is one important building block in learning a second or a foreign language. Accordingly, rich vocabulary assists language users in producing and presenting ideas. The current study is focusing on the teaching strategies used by educators to enhance the vocabulary background. More specifically, this study is concerned with the significant effect of vocabulary knowledge on reading abilities. The present research, indeed, is devoted to seeing the impact of vocabulary teaching strategies on improving reading abilities.

It is worth mentioning that reading and vocabulary are two connected words that complete one another. Thus, the more learners know words the more they will be able to understand what others say or write. In addition to that, a large vocabulary permits language users to become better in terms of producing a language. The main goal of this research is to check the existing literature by determining the significant effect of vocabulary teaching strategies on improving EFL learners' reading abilities in Algerian universities.

Moreover, within the specific Algerian context, research has shown serious problems faced by Algerian university students when tackling vocabulary in the reading process (Slimani, 2005). It would be useful to examine the extent of these difficulties to provide alternative strategies that might help in remedying this problem. Hence, the main objective of this research revolves around highlighting the importance of using effective teaching strategies to develop students' vocabulary in the second language. In other words, this study investigates the useful methods that are applied by educators and that are appreciated by learners.

Definitions of vocabulary

To have the ability to communicate in a particular language, language users need to know a wide range of words and how to replace some of them with synonyms and opposites. In this context, Taffy (n.d.) mentioned that "words are the primary building blocks of effective communication" (p.2). Chatrsimab (2015, p.9) defined "vocabulary as a stock of words of a certain language that includes words, chunks and expressions that carry a certain meaning". Read (2000, p.16) stated that "testing vocabulary can be done by measuring learners' potential vocabulary package in terms of words' meanings, synonyms", and definitions or even by translating the word into their mother tongue.

Each language has its specific features. Those features are usually the reasons behind learners' success or failure in that language. Thus, knowing the list of words and their explanations paves the way for learners to develop their level since it allows them to know and control their way of thinking in different situations. In other words, to make these definitions clearer, words' knowledge can be classified into two categories, the first one contains oral and print vocabulary and the second one contains receptive and productive vocabulary as it is clarified by the National Reading Panel (2000) and Alqahtani (2015).

Oral vocabulary refers to words learners may speak or hear, whereas print vocabulary refers to words that learners may read or write. The second category is receptive and productive vocabulary. The receptive vocabulary is the words that learners recognize or acquire while listening or seeing. Productive vocabulary refers to the words that learners can produce, understand and apply in speaking or writing. It is an active process that includes receptive vocabulary as well as the ability to speak and write correctly.

Vocabulary teaching strategies

Teachers need to update their techniques that facilitate the process of acquiring vocabulary. Those techniques encourage students to perform, promote their conversational skills, monitor their improvement as well as develop their level. Research findings have shown that teachers can affect learners strongly. Thus, adopting effective techniques would help with better communication.

Games

Games are a crucial strategy to attract students' attention and lead them to feel the need of building up vocabulary (Marzano et. al., 2011). As students get involved in such games, they will learn new words since games create a relaxed atmosphere that makes both learners and teachers enjoy. More importantly, through games, learners can get more energy because they forget the dull routine of daily sessions and start to practice the language amusingly. Most of the time, learners do not figure out that they are involved in real–life situations; because simply they access those games as a kind of challenge and competition to win.

Vocabulary cards

Using vocabulary cards can fortify the learners' stock of words (Marzuki et al., 2021). This kind of practice involves putting students in pairs or in small groups to discuss and exchange thoughts about a particular question that the teacher asks them with giving them enough time. The card contains only one activity. The teacher may use a multiple choices exercise, true false or an error identification exercise. Vocabulary cards allow learners to successfully communicate and exchange their techniques of remembering (Folse, 2008).

Word mapping

Word mapping or semantic mapping or clustering refers to a very effective strategy in which learners develop words through drawing visual display. This strategy helps students for better and deeper understanding since it pushes them to explore words and to use them with related words (Graves, 2008).

Flashcards

Mohammednejad & Nikdel (2012, p.398-399) believed that "flashcards help both teachers and learners." The teacher uses cardboards that consist of the new L2 words with a clear image on one side. The other side includes the translation. It is a tool that is no longer used to teach language recently. Flashcards are a helpful technique since it enriches the vocabulary with new words that are possibly going to be used in different situations.

Vocabulary journals

Vocabulary journals are a helpful strategy that assists learners to put all of their vague meanings and implied concepts that come from reading, literature or textbooks. They include students' investigation of new vocabulary and how to make connections by relying on prior knowledge to extract appropriate definitions through using their styles. Therefore, they differ from notebooks. In notebooks, learners are likely to copy teachers' explanations and notes usually without making serious changes. Thus, the main aim of those journals is to let students be aware of gathering words, looking for meaning and making connections between words which leads to finally developing their skills. This strategy may apply in pre-reading, while reading and post-reading (Byon, 2012).

As we have seen earlier, mastering a language is based on the number of words that language users know and use. It is worth mentioning that vocabulary is considered a crucial component in language development. Several studies have shown that the more you build up vocabulary, the more you develop your language proficiency. In this respect, Khabiri & Pakzad (2012, p.74) asserted that "vocabulary is crucial for language learning." Moreover, the growing interest in the chief role of vocabulary leads to the emergence of different approaches, methods and techniques to teach lexicons.

Grabe (2004) believed that vocabulary and reading comprehension are two connected terms. In other words, this connection reflects that vocabulary strongly affects reading comprehension. Zhang & Annual (2008) and Khabiri & Pakzad (2012) stated that rich vocabulary leads to a better comprehension of a particular text. In addition to that, skilled readers, who use more reading comprehension skills to understand a text, tend to acquire and memorize more vocabulary. Students can enrich their vocabulary through being exposed to oral language and this latter can be practised through reading. Furthermore, it is worth noting that vocabulary is considered a crucial component of comprehension of texts. In fact, the collection of words reflects the level of thinking of a person. Several studies have been conducted on vocabulary and have shown that vocabulary knowledge is one of the significant predictors of text difficulty (Yu-han Ma & Wei-ying Lin, 2015). As Alqahtani (2015) put it, one of the major difficulties language users suffers from while practising a reading skill is the lack of vocabulary.

Reading comprehension

Richards & Schmidt (2002, p.443) defined reading comprehension as "perceiving a written text to understand its contents." Tenkersly (2005, p.108) considered comprehension as "the essence of reading." In other words, the major objective of any reader is to understand what a writer wants to say. All the theories and models of reading that dealt with how to process information emphasized the effective ways that lead readers to better understanding. Thus, comprehension is the heart of reading. To support this view, McShane (2005) believed that reading comprehension refers to understanding the theme. It is an active process that involves decoding printed letters to extract the meaning of messages being conveyed. As readers get involved in reading a piece of writing, they link their existing knowledge with the new input to understand the script (Carrasquillo & Segan, 1998). In the same regard, Snow (2002) emphasized three vital elements in understanding prints which are, the reader, the text and the activity.

a. The reader: the doer who is involved in the process of comprehension. This includes all the qualities, abilities and prior knowledge that s/he uses to build meaning from a reading task.

b. The text: refers to the material that a reader is going to decode.

c. The activity in which comprehension takes place includes the purpose, processes and consequences that are linked to reading.

Serafini (2007, p. 191) agreed that the "first two elements have a great impact on reading which are texts and readers but he listed other key elements which are author, socio-cultural context as well as the cognitive strategies that are used by readers." He explained that an author is the one who uses letters, words and sentences to convey a message. A reader is the one who decodes what is encoded by the author. The text is material that a reader interacts with to construct meaning. The socio-

cultural context includes the pragmatic and cultural features of the purposes of a reader and what she/ he is going to infer.

Oakhill et al. (2015, p.1) stated that "reading comprehension has a great significance in our life. This importance is not related to understanding texts only." It is related to other important daily activities that people do like education and work. People rely on comprehension to interpret faxes and emails or they use comprehension to look for things via the internet, etc. Furthermore, they claimed that comprehension needs a satisfactory stock of words to have the ability to understand. To identify words, readers need to decode letters to get words and words to get sentences because the more readers understand a language, the more they comprehend what they read. Similarly, to Snows' view (2002), comprehension for Oakhill et al. (2015) depends on rich vocabulary that comes from decoding, besides, it requires a comprehender that links those words into meaningful units via using a mental model. This latter refers to the mental representation of input that readers have read or heard or seen including images that fit this information. Oakhill et al. (2015, p.2) assumed that "mental representation paves the way for a better understanding." It also assists in evaluating and remembering.

METHOD

The study under-scrutiny was conducted by adopting the mixed-methods approach. It was undertaken in three Algerian universities. The participants were assigned following the tenets of the convenience sampling technique, which we believe, suits our research. This research includes working with participants who are available and willing to participate.

Participants

This study involves working with participants because of their convenient accessibility to the researcher. In doing so, a questionnaire was submitted to one hundred and twenty first-year EFL learners in three Algerian universities, and a semi-structured interview was carried out with eight university teachers.

Data analysis

To measure the variables that were expressed in our questionnaire, the researcher used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This program is considered one of the most significant means to manipulate and present data in research work (Johnson, 2011). This questionnaire uses regression analysis to see the significant effect of vocabulary teaching strategies on improving reading abilities. Regression analysis is characterized by adopting ANOVA tests to see the relationships between the variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
RESULTS

The objective of the study was to identify the significant learning strategies frequently employed by language users in processing new lexis; because knowing them will not only evolve their reading comprehension but is also expected to make them flexible in terms of learning and using new and unusual vocabulary that is related to the reading tasks. To achieve this objective, the participants were requested to indicate their opinions through different items in the questionnaire. Based on the results from the questionnaire, the researcher described the findings. The researcher had enquired.

1. While reading, what makes certain terms difficult?

53 participants (30.5%) think that words with several meanings are the root of all misunderstandings in a language. For them, it is so frustrating to run into a word that has more than one meaning. Furthermore, 52 participants (29.9%) had chosen the idiomatic expressions as the hardest thing to use or understand. These expressions are usually of "a figurative meaning and completely unreasonable and one cannot simply guess the meaning from the consisting words in that idiom" (Grant & Nation, 2006, p.1). For about 38 participants (21.8%) agreed that technical words are what makes a language difficult and from their name, it can be deduced what the problem is. These words are technical, special and confined to some fields of study or life (Nuttul, 2005). In addition, 19 participants (10.9%) said that phrasal verbs represent one category of unfamiliar words; because they are not known and there are thousands of them in the English language and it is a bit difficult to keep track of all of them and their meanings. In other words, they are some of the most inconsistent words in terms of meaning and formation (Bronshteyn & Gustafson, 2015).

2. What is the most useful strategy through which you learn more vocabulary?

In response to this question, 71 participants (51.8%) stated that they prefer using games to help themselves to learn new vocabulary. This strategy is a helpful way which is filled with fun and upbeat. Students got motivated when teachers use such a tool to introduce new words. That is, it spreads a positive atmosphere among students and makes them eager to compete with each other (Marzano et al., 2011). Word mapping was chosen by 32 participants (23.4%) as the effective way to learn vocabulary. Word mapping is a visual organizing technique that helps learners to develop their vocabulary learning (Graves, 2008). Meanwhile, 19 participants (13.9%) showed support for the idea that miming could be a great way to learn vocabulary from time to time. Miming, to most learners, is considered a kind of a fun game where one tries to give the meaning of a word or a concept to another without actually saying anything. As it has been said, games are a crucial strategy in introducing new items (Shaptoshvili, 2002; Folse, 2008; Bromley, 2012; Klinger et al.,2015). In addition, 15 other participants (10.9%) chose flashcards as the technique that helps them to learn new items of vocabulary. Flashcards are an effective way of learning; they are great for both young and adult language learners. Moreover, it is fun and entertaining and that is why these participants favoured it. More importantly, "flashcards have been proven to help learners remember all the vocabulary they learn" (Sitompul, 2013, p.54).

3. Do you face problems while trying to understand a given text?

There 84 participants (70%) answered yes to this question. Indeed, they face different problems while reading a text or trying to understand it. They feel awkward and uncomfortable every time they run into an obstacle while reading. According to them, these obstacles range from unknown words, foreign concepts, the type of texts, interference of the mother tongue, and the low vocabulary range. This view was confirmed by Shen (2003, p.189) and Vacca & al. (2006, p.260-261) who said that "encountering new vocabulary, for the first time, may create problems to learners which would hinder their improvement in that language." According to them, the type and the style of a text is another problem for them. On the other hand, 29 other participants (24.2%) answered that they do not run into any sort of problems while reading and understanding any given text.

4. Do you think that your adequate vocabulary helps you more in understanding a text?

There 88 participants (73.3%) answered positively that an adequate stock of vocabulary helps them a great deal with understanding any given text they try to read. This is because they experienced many situations in which their understanding has been affected by the lack of words. It is worth mentioning that among the most challenging things happening to learners while reading a text is understanding new ideas and words (Vacca et. al., 2006).

5. Do you use the vocabulary you learned from reading texts to communicate with those who surround you?

Based on the data, 43 participants (35.8%) answered with a sure yes to this inquiry. They confirmed that they do use this learned vocabulary every time they have the chance to. These participants showed self-awareness and confidence, for they loved to practice newly learned vocabulary in class and outside the class to what is a better way to master them. These findings were confirmed by Nation (2001). He asserted that there are three aspects involved in knowing a word which are knowing the word's forms, meaning and use.

6. Do teaching strategies, such as; games, flashcards, word mapping...etc help you to enrich your vocabulary?

The greater part of the participants answered positively about the fact that teaching strategies help them with increasingly gaining more vocabulary, making them the majority of the percentage (94.2%). These participants cherish and support the above-mentioned teaching/learning strategies, for mostly they are learner-oriented and they facilitate the learning process for them and encourage them to engage in the teaching/learning process. Rentzel & Cooter (2008, p.94-95) stated that "word mapping tends to be another effective way of teaching new words." Shen (2003) and Mohammednijad & Nikdel (2012) believed that the aforementioned strategies help enlarge students' vocabulary.

This study includes conducting an interview with university teachers, which is a qualitative instrument, to collect data about our study. The analysis revealed:

1. Obstacles while delivering and explaining new words to beginners at university.

Three-quarters of the sample (75%) confirmed that they face difficulties in teaching new items. They stated that when a word is introduced for the first time, students, especially beginners, find it hard to perceive the new words since this kind of vocabulary is not familiar at their level. In fact, the data obtained from participants confirms the fact presented which suggested that non-native students face problems when it comes to learning and memorizing new vocabulary (Cohen et. al., 1988). Many researchers believe that the problem goes back to teaching strategies that teachers employ while delivering the lesson. According to Macaro (2003), most second language teachers tend to neglect the significance of vocabulary teaching because they were not taught to emphasize vocabulary knowledge during their period of studentship.

Example Taken from Interview:

Excerpt 1
"Of course. Any new vocabulary creates problems for learners because it is the first time they come across it. The difficulty lies in the way teachers present the new terms." (Participant 3)

2. The strategies are followed by EFL learners when they encounter unusual words.

Based on their answers, all teachers (100%) answered that when encountering new words, students use a dictionary to check them. In learning a second language, learners may come upon different words that they do not know. At this level, they prefer to use a dictionary to understand difficult words. In fact, a dictionary is among the first things a learner of an FL purchases (Gu, 2003, p. 107). Among our participants, there were five teachers (62.5%) who pointed out that students try to anticipate and guess the meaning of words from the context. According to half of the interviewed teachers (50%), EFL learners tend to ask teachers for clarification and explanation of ambiguous and new words.

Example Taken from Interview:

Excerpt 2

"The first strategy they do is checking a dictionary; whether it is a paper-based dictionary or an electronic dictionary. Recently, students have become familiar with electronic dictionaries on their mobiles so every time they come across difficult words they look them up. I think it is the most used strategy for students. It is very rare to find students checking the context or guessing or looking for synonyms or putting it in a sentence to understand the whole meaning. As I said, using a dictionary is an easy and effective way to check new words. Some students ask the teacher for clarifications but nowadays with the availability of technology, students do not ask questions to clarify the meaning of the words since they have the tool to do so. Thus, it is very rare. Probably, they ask such questions in a lecture when a student does not understand an idea, not a word. So, as I said very rarely do students ask the teachers unless this vague word is a keyword in a sentence which affects the whole meaning." (Participant 4)

3. The most successful strategies used by teachers in teaching vocabulary in their sessions.

Half of the interrogated sample (50%) declared that using flashcards and pictures may be very useful in presenting and explaining new terms. Another half of the respondents (50%) said that games are considered a reputed way to teach vocabulary. Since language learning is not an easy task, some teachers intend to exploit this technique to encourage students and get more feedback. four respondents (50%) said that illustration is an efficient way to build up vocabulary since it moves away from obscurity by providing examples to clarify and make ambiguous words more understandable. Four of the interrogated teachers (50%) said that miming is one of the most common strategies in teaching vocabulary. Songs are another preferable technique to introduce new vocabulary terms. Three of our interrogated sample (37.5%) called attention to applying such a technique as a break from the pressure of studying in the traditional ways. Kusnierek (2016, p.23) stated that songs and music are the main sources of English outside the classroom.

Example Taken from Interview:

Excerpt 3

"First of all, vocabulary should be explicitly taught; using some illustrations like flashcards, notebooks where students are supposed to chop down the new words and go back to it whenever it is necessary. Besides that, I prefer language games such as crosswords, guessing the tools, jigsaw and many other games." (Participant 1)

4. Poor vocabulary stock influences students' reading skill.

All the interrogated teachers (100%) strongly agreed that vocabulary shortage affects students' different reading abilities in one way or another. As vocabulary represents the critical element in facilitating the reading of a given passage, students should possess satisfactory vocabulary amounts. The statistics of the table express the fact represented by Kamhi (2009) and Howerton (2011) who believed that readers understand passages and texts through recognizing words. That is, vocabulary knowledge is crucial in reading.

Example Taken from Interview:

Excerpt 4

"For sure. Sometimes, as a teacher, you set certain aims in a lesson. Those aims could not be achieved simply because of the vocabulary shortage of some students. Teachers devote time to explaining these words. They lose the attention and the focus of the whole lesson in explaining difficult vocabulary. It is all about the poverty of lexis. When a student is not rich in terms of vocabulary, for sure he/ she is going to stop you every time you introduce new vocabulary which hinders the smooth running of the lecture or the reading comprehension task." (Participant 8)

Excerpt 5

"Of course. The fact of not knowing much vocabulary or ignoring some words or expressions leads to poor comprehension of what we read. Students may read the passage perfectly I mean without making mistakes in pronunciation or intonation ...etc. But at last, when they are asked any comprehension questions, they will not be able to answer. Their comprehension really will be affected because they do not understand all the words of the passage. Vague vocabulary affects the general understanding of the text students are reading." (Participant 1)

5. Vocabulary teaching and students' reading skill.

There is a complete agreement among the entire sample that having a rich vocabulary will improve text comprehension. They said that as much as students get exposed to new vocabulary, their understanding of texts will be enhanced. In other words, students with adequate amounts of vocabulary can approach a text easily to grasp meanings from it. Three participants (37.5%) out of eight answered that reading becomes easier if students are well equipped with words. They said that the more

students have vocabulary the better they read. In fact, "reading has a positive impact on all aspects of language whether it is a first language or second language" (Khabiri & Pakzad, 2012, p.74). In other words, a considerable amount of lexis facilitates the process of reading. Anjomshoa & Zamanian (2014, p.91) mentioned that "vocabulary knowledge is the key ingredient to successful comprehension."

Example Taken from Interview:

Excerpt 6

"For sure if students learned vocabulary before the reading comprehension task or exercise, this will ease the way for them to grasp the meaning and they will focus on the message more than the vocabulary itself. Moreover, a student who is rich in terms of vocabulary will spend less time comprehending a text. She/he will enjoy reading compared to one who is not rich in terms of vocabulary because the latter will face challenges while reading because of the lack of vocabulary. I would call this the pleasure of reading. When a student has a rich vocabulary she/he will enjoy reading, unlike a student who has a deficiency concerning vocabulary since he will find difficulties and challenges while reading. Consequently, she/he will get easily bored or disappointed because she/he cannot figure out the meaning of a text." (Participant 5)

CONCLUSION

The current study has managed to gather distinctive perspectives and points of view related to enhancing the lexical knowledge and reading abilities of EFL learners that are shaped by different factors. The data gathered led us to deal with useful implications of this study as it corroborates that the previously-mentioned strategies have a significant effect on the reading process. In other words, the agreement among participants and the contradictory views represent different facts that should be taken into consideration.

The findings of the present research reflect that many strategies can be followed to enlarge the lexis of L2. Moreover, this research allows detecting other difficulties students suffer from when they come across unusual words and it suggests which learning strategies ought to be used to overcome the problem of vague words. In fact, teachers need to be familiar with the effective strategies to enhance lexical knowledge for their students to achieve their learning objectives. It is vital to get students exposed to different vocabulary items. More importantly, using different reading materials improves the learners' level of a language. Using games and flashcards, for instance, could promote collaborative work among students. In other words, learners can compete with each other using their own experience or they could use their knowledge to share ideas and concepts by shaping a group where learners could benefit from each other. Applying these effective ways could encourage students to show more creativity in terms of finding enjoyable ways to enrich the vocabulary knowledge that affects the process of reading positively. Traditional teaching strategies, like questioning and discussing ideas lead most of the students to feel bored since they act according to teachers' orders. Applying distinctive strategies creates a relaxed atmosphere where students can enjoy and learn.

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