

Integrating Vocabulary into an English Course in the Thai Context for Thai EFL Learners: Research to Practice

Chongrak Liangpanit¹

Abstract

It is generally accepted that vocabulary is one of the important components in effectively learning a foreign language. A question frequently asked is what vocabulary should be taught and which criteria should be considered. This article presents the objectives of vocabulary teaching and learning in terms of: what native-speaking language students know about vocabulary, how many new words English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students should learn at a time, how much time students take to remember a word, and vocabulary learning approaches. Some criteria for vocabulary selection are given, followed by the related research on vocabulary pedagogy development as used in the classroom in the Thai context.

Keywords : Vocabulary, English Course, Thai EFL Learners

Introduction

Vocabulary is regarded as an essential element for all communication and is encountered by language students on a daily basis. Success in communication depends on how well students acquire and retain vocabulary. As claimed by Nation (2001), knowing vocabulary is considered useful for language students. Meara (1996) stated that students with more knowledge of vocabulary are more proficient in language study than those with less knowledge. Kufaishi (1988) found that English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) and English-for-specific-purposes (ESP) students who are poor in vocabulary can neither communicate their ideas as clearly nor grasp the ideas transmitted to them. Their listening, writing and reading are hampered by their limited range of vocabulary. This idea is well supported by Jordan (1997) who also believed that vocabulary is the main cause of difficulties for non-English speaking students. In Thailand, where English is a foreign language in the curriculum, Wangkangwan (2007) discovered that the cause of Thai students' difficulty in

learning the English language was their insufficient knowledge of vocabulary (Liangpanit 2002; Nomsiri 2005; Duadsuntia 2008; Mongkol 2008). Obviously, vocabulary is one of the major problems in teaching and learning a language. Its importance calls for a focus on the teaching and learning of vocabulary in the English course. This paper, therefore, aims to highlight significant points for EFL teachers to consider when teaching vocabulary. This paper begins by presenting the vocabulary learning goals in terms of: what native-speaking language students know about vocabulary, how many new words EFL students should learn at a time and how much time students take to remember a word, which is followed by the types of vocabulary and vocabulary learning approaches. Finally, some criteria for vocabulary selection are provided which is then followed by the related research on vocabulary pedagogy development as used in the classroom in the Thai context.

¹ Ph.D. English Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences KhonKaen University, THAILAND

Vocabulary learning goals

Vocabulary instruction encompasses materials, methods and techniques of vocabulary teaching and learning which can be varied. Ooi and Lee (1996) proposed that the main techniques in teaching. The teaching is shaped by the objectives of the learning which has been decided ahead. The objective focuses in teaching vocabulary should be to make the learner more discriminating of word form, word meaning, and word use", while Aebersold and Field (1997) affirmed that the three main goals of vocabulary teaching and learning are to help students to: (1) know the vocabulary in the text, (2) recognize vocabulary to make sense of the text, and (3) consider what vocabulary students need to know in order to function with a second or foreign language (L2/FL) in the future. Baker and Westrup (2000) suggested that teachers need to teach students the word's meaning, its pronunciation and how it can be used. Krashen and Terrell (1983) asserted that one goal of learning vocabulary is to provide enough vocabulary to allow language use outside the classroom, and to place the students in a position to continue second language acquisition. Similarly, Catala (2003) proposed that the vocabulary learning goals are as follows: (1) to find out the meaning of unknown words; (2) to retain them in long-term memory; (3) to recall them at will; and (4) to use them in oral or written mode. Although different learning objectives can lead to slight differences in choosing materials, methods and techniques in teaching, the common goal of instruction in vocabulary should be to improve students' vocabulary learning.

The number of words needed by foreign language students

When considering vocabulary learning, many questions are asked concerning how many

words are needed by foreign language students. Many studies have discussed this problem. Nation and Waring (1996) stated that generally the vocabulary found in a dictionary consists of approximately 54,000 word families. They claimed that the native speaker adds roughly 20,000 word families a year to the size of their vocabulary. In addition, the second language student needs to know approximately 3,000 high frequency words. Allen (1983) asserted that it is impossible for foreign language students to know the 30,000 words that the native speaker knows and that foreign language students only need to know a much smaller number, no more than 3,000 words. Vocabulary size has been the topic of interest for several researchers for more than a century. But why should we bother measuring vocabulary size?

Knowing approximately 3,000 high frequency and general academic words is significant because this amount covers a high percentage of the words on an average page. The 2,000 high frequency words in West's (1953) General Service List cover 87% of an average non-academic text (Nation 1990). Similarly, for second language students entering university, Laufer (1992) found that knowing a minimum of approximately 3,000 words is required for effective reading at university level, whereas knowing 5,000 words indicates likely academic success. Having a large vocabulary is generally seen as being desirable. However, it can be concluded that non-native speakers should expect to know no more than 3,000-4,500 words.

The number of new words that EFL students should learn at a time

After considering the size of the vocabulary that non-native speakers of English are expected to learn, this then leads to the

question of how many new words should students learn in a lesson. Wallace (1984) suggested that the quantity of new words that students should learn in a lesson was approximately 5-7 words, but that this depended on a number of factors which varied from class to class and learner to learner. He also found from his research on vocabulary growth that the number of new words that students learned per year ranged from as few as 1,000 to as many as 7,300. This was equivalent to approximately 10-20 words a week. McCarthy (1996) advised that students should learn approximately 5-15 new words each week. Baumann and Kameenui (1991) and Graves (1986) indicated that students learnt about 3,000 new words a year. Approximately eight words were learnt each time (Doff 1983; Nation 1982).

There is no exact answer as to how many new words students should learn. However, considering the measurements from several studies, students should learn approximately 10-20 new words per week.

The time taken by students to memorize new words

One of the challenges for students studying vocabulary is to actually remember the words they have just learned. Gairns and Redman (1990, pp. 86-87) stated that there are two main kinds of memory: short-term and long-term memory. Our capacity for short-term retention is limited and usually lasts up to 30 seconds. Long-term memory is the capacity to recall information weeks and years after receiving the first input. Kachroo (1962) found that words repeated seven times or more were the ones known by students. Similarly, Crothers and Suppes (1967) suggested that six or seven repetitions are the minimum requirement for vocabulary learning. Nation (1982) reported similarly, stating that students only need to see words about 7-8 times before they can

remember them and that students will remember words better if they have more opportunity to practise them. Similarly, Tinkham (1993) stated that students require 5-7 repetitions to remember words. Saragi et al. (1978: pp. 72-78) had the view that students need more repetitions (e.g., 16 times) to recall words. Wallace (1984), on the other hand, stated that words can be remembered by hearing them once. However, the greater number of repetitions is likely to be a more effective strategy for remembering vocabulary. Wodingsky and Nation (1988: pp. 155-161) stated that students need 10 repetitions to remember words. They affirmed that students can remember words if they see or use words more than once and practice them repeatedly. Later, in 1990, Nation identified that 5-16 exposures are needed in order to learn a word in its context.

Even though results so far seem to vary considerably, it is evident that repetition is essential in order to remember words in the long run. As mentioned by several experts, students normally have to encounter a word at least seven times (and possibly more) before they can remember it. Therefore, the words selected for students to learn need approximately 7-10 repetitions in order to be learnt as vocabulary.

Vocabulary learning approaches

Several learning strategies appear to be especially helpful for learning new words. According to Nation (1990), Rubin and Thompson (1994), and Richek et al. (1996), students learn vocabulary in two general ways: the direct vocabulary learning approach and the indirect vocabulary learning approach.

'Direct' or 'explicit' vocabulary learning involves conscious learning processes in which language students learn vocabulary explicitly, either in context or in isolation, through direct instruction in both the meanings of individual

words and word-learning strategies (Laufer & Hulstijn 2001). In direct learning, students are systematically taught specific words and language structures (Richek et al. 1996). This approach for vocabulary learning is necessary for learning core vocabulary – basic and important vocabulary that is used and serves in most situations. This is particularly true for learning basic lexical and semantic knowledge, particularly for beginner-level or less successful language students (Nation 1990).

‘Indirect’ or ‘implicit’ vocabulary learning, on the other hand, involves learning the meaning of new words implicitly whereby language students hear or see the words used in many different contexts, for example, through daily opportunities, through conversations with others and through reading extensively on their own (Read 2000; Laufer & Hulstijn 2001). Indirect vocabulary learning is concerned with the unconscious processes of learning through reading or listening without language students necessarily being aware of the goals of learning: new words are learned incidentally while reading or are learned from listening to stories, films, television or the radio (Anderson & Nagy 1991; Nation 1982, 2001; Sternberg 1987). Moreover, students absorb the meaning of the vocabulary, grammatical structures and concepts simply from being exposed to rich language (Richek et al. 1996). Learning vocabulary indirectly via guessing the meaning of words from their context is widely accepted as the most important of all sources of learning vocabulary (Nation 2001).

Many researchers (e.g. Carter 1997; Gu 2002, 2003; Hulstijn 1992; Nation 1990; Schmitt 2000; Sökmén 1997; Sternberg 1987) maintained that guessing the meaning of words presented in context is an effective strategy for vocabulary learning, and that most vocabulary can be learned

from a word’s context by means of strategies of inference.

Although there is evidence that indirect vocabulary learning is found to be beneficial, recent studies of second language (L2) students have provided evidence that a combination of both direct and indirect vocabulary learning approaches is superior to using either the direct or indirect vocabulary learning approach alone. Both types of vocabulary learning approaches improve students’ language abilities, and thus should be emphasized in English learning so that language students know how to maximize the effectiveness of learning, using, coping with and storing newly-learned vocabulary on their own.

Vocabulary selection

The need to give principal attention to the selection of the vocabulary that should go into a course has long been recognized. Since we cannot usually teach all of the words that a student should know in a foreign language, it is necessary to find some basis for selecting words (Worthington & Nation 1996). Harmer (1991) and Worthington and Nation (1996) pointed out that one of the problems of vocabulary teaching is how to select which words to teach.

Mackey (1976) suggested the following criteria for vocabulary selection: (1) frequency, (2) range, (3) availability, (4) coverage and (5) learning ability. Similarly, Gairna and Redmen (1986) suggested that the selected lexical items should be useful. They offered the following criteria: (1) frequency: the high frequency of an item is no guarantee of usefulness, but there is obviously a significant correlation between the two so it is worth examining some of the work on frequency word-counts that has been carried out over recent decades, such as the General Service List of Words (West 1953); (2) cultural factors; and (3) need and level.

Carter and McCarthy (1988) also supported the same criteria for vocabulary selection, as proposed by West and others, for the early stages of acquisition which are that: (1) the frequency of each word in written English should be indicated; and (2) information should be provided about the relative prominence of the various meanings and uses of a word form.

All vocabulary selection is in one way or another based on frequency counts (Gairns & Redmen 1986; Nation & Coady 1988; Harmer 1991; Hunston, Francis & Manning 1997). Words have been listed and taught on the basis of frequency, that is, the number of times they appear in average reading materials. Vocabulary difficulty is estimated in various ways: the most usual is word frequency and/or familiarity and word length. That is, sentences are more readable if they contain words that occur at high frequency and that are shorter rather than longer.

Integrating Vocabulary into an English Course

The principles of learning vocabulary were considered as the main theoretical adaptation in selecting words to be taught in the first stage. These principles were related to the objectives of vocabulary learning, how many new words students are to learn, and how many new words EFL students should learn at a time. In learning vocabulary, students and scholars in this field share some common goals, that is, assistance and guidance in how to learn, retain and use words. In terms of word forms, students have to focus on how to pronounce and spell words correctly and clearly. They also need to learn how to discover and retain word meanings. Students need to practise using words to express their real thoughts, ideas and feelings in a wide range of appropriate situations (Ooi & Lee 1996; Aebersold & Field 1997; Baker & Westrup 2000; Krashen &

Terrell 2000). A quantity of more than 3,000-5,000 words is considered to be ideal. Students should learn approximately 5-10 new words per lesson (Nation & Waring 1996; Allen 1983; Laufer 1992; Nation 1990). Therefore, about 7-10 target words should be considered in each lesson. In addition, the focus is on 7-10 repetitions of these words in order to ensure that students can see these target words 7-10 times and that they will be able to remember the words from each lesson. The criteria considered for word selection should be based on the following issues: word frequency, range, availability and coverage.

Examples of using vocabulary learning pedagogy in class in the Thai context: research to practice

A number of Thai teachers and researchers have been constructing vocabulary teaching and learning materials with the main focus being to integrate the vocabulary component into the English course thus enabling students to learn more words and improve their learning of vocabulary.

An example of successful materials used for constructing vocabulary exercises for Mathayomsuksa's five students can be seen in Liangpanit (2002) and involved designing supplementary vocabulary exercises in the news section of the Student Weekly. The results showed that this could be used in class for these participants. The Student Weekly, which is one of the English newspapers published in Thailand, can help students to learn more words and, in particular, vocabulary in the Thai context.

With the same intention of facilitating the Mathayomsuksa 1 students to improve their vocabulary learning, Maneeganont (2012) designed a Theme-Based Vocabulary Learning program (TVLP) for these students which were also used to study their attitudes towards the program.

Maneeganont's example of designing the TVLP words. The students were taught through web-based instruction for six weeks and spent about 60 minutes doing each exercise. Then, students were required to complete the questionnaire and the interview. The results of the questionnaire were used to study the effectiveness of the web-based instruction. The theories applied to each activity in the TVLP lessons are presented in Table 1 below.

The TVLP consisted of five units in accordance with the themes in the curriculum. Each unit was completed in class time (60 minutes for one lesson). Each unit consisted of eight words that were presented in three activities and four vocabulary exercises. It is included totally seven repetitions for exposures

Name of activity	Purposes of the activity	Theory
1. Words study	The words study was aimed at facilitating the students' recognition of eight words in each unit.	The students study eight words per lesson which is an appropriate number of words in order to acquire new words and to retain the meaning of words (Ek 1975; Gains & Redman 2007).
2. Vocabulary test	The vocabulary test was designed to check the words which students knew and did not know.	The students have to evaluate their vocabulary first in order to know how their learning is progressing when they are learning vocabulary (Read 2000).
3. Noticing words	Noticing words was aimed at noticing eight words. The students must learn the unfamiliar words.	The students need to notice the word and to be aware of it as a useful language item. While listening or reading, the students notice or think that a word is new (Nation 2001).
4. Retrieval words	Retrieval words was aimed at letting the students guess the meaning of the words in the exercises through the TVLP.	The second major process that leads to a word being recognized is retrieval (Nation 2001). A word may be noticed and its meaning comprehended in the textual input to the task, through providing the explanation.
5. Exercises	Exercises were aimed at students practising the vocabulary that they had learned. The TVLP exercises included matching words, word association, word collocation and gap filling.	The exercises can be used to focus on some aspect of vocabulary learning. The vocabulary exercises are to develop the students' command of target language vocabulary (Wallace 1985). An exercise is an explicit learning. Explicit learning is particularly essential for beginning students whose lack of vocabulary limits their reading ability (Coady 1997).
6. Vocabulary test	The vocabulary test was designed to measure the progress of the students' vocabulary learning after finishing each unit.	After learning, students have to know their vocabulary learning progress in order to gain feedback (Nation 2001).

In the words study, the students studied the words that related to the theme by using various techniques such as pictures, illustrations, passages, guessing from the context, or through translation. In each unit, the students studied eight words per lesson which was an appropriate number of 7-10 words in order to acquire new words and retain the meaning of the words. Gains and Redman (2007) stated that an average of learning eight to 12 new words should be achieved in a 60-minute lesson. If students are exposed to too many new words, they will fail to memorize those words. In terms of noticing words, this was aimed at noticing eight words (Gains & Redman 2007). The student must learn the unfamiliar words: they are asked to learn a word and then to listen for the word in sentences and passages. When they clicked on the words

provided, the words would automatically be changed to red. The students saw the words appearing in each package as a useful aid in becoming familiar with the words they had to learn in each package.

In terms of retrieval words, the second major process that leads to a word being recognized is retrieval (Nation 2001). A word might be noticed and its meaning comprehended in the textual input to the task through providing an explanation or dictionary use. If that word was subsequently retrieved during the task, then the memory of that word was strengthened. Retrieval words were aimed at letting the students guess the meaning of the words in the exercises through the TVLP (Nation 2001). In addition, the students could listen to the word and see a picture if one was available. The meaning of words could also be explained in Thai.

The vocabulary exercises were used to develop the student's command of the target language vocabulary (Wallace 1985). The students did exercises which were provided through the web-based of TVLP. The exercises were aimed at checking on students' recognition of the words, their understanding of the words and their appropriate use of the words. In addition, the students became familiar with the meaning and practised using the words by doing exercises. There were four exercises in each unit. The exercises were comprised of: matching words, word association, word collocation and gap filling. Matching the word with a definition and a synonym were presented in Exercise 1. This exercise aimed to achieve students' recognition of the words and their understanding of the meaning of the words. Word association was presented in Exercise 2. This exercise addressed the way in which words come to be associated with each other (Richards et al. 1995). Moreover, Richards et al. (1985) also claimed that word association

influences the learning and remembering of words. Abdullah (1993) stated that teaching of this kind of exercise is undertaken in order to help students to organize information or words according to concepts or topics. In addition, the students who can associate the words with other words can expand their vocabulary and choose the right word for the right context (Richards 1991). Word collocation was presented in Exercise 3. This exercise addressed the way in which words are regularly used together (Richards et al. 1995). It was aimed at students' understanding of the meaning of the words and their appropriate use of the words in context. Gap filling was presented in Exercise 4. This exercise aimed to help the students to comprehend the sentences, recognize the words, understand the meaning of the words and be able to use the words appropriately.

Another example is the design of the Corpus-Based Business Vocabulary Learning Program (BVLP) conducted by Liangpanit (2010) which is presented below.

To select a list of words to be learned, through WordSmith Version 4, a corpus of the 4,375 most frequently appearing words was chosen from a total of 238,558 words in 420 business news stories published in a one-month period in one of the two most read English newspapers in Thailand, and through the British National Corpus, a total of 2,170 words was also chosen. From the list of 890 words which overlapped between the two corpuses, 380 words were chosen by 10 experienced Business English teachers and 450 words were selected by 46 participants. A comparison between these two lists yielded 100 words which were to be mastered. To help students master these 100 words, the BVLP was constructed based on a theoretical framework derived from Constructivism

Theory, Second Language Acquisition Theory, and vocabulary learning and teaching theories.

The results showed how students improved their vocabulary knowledge: they could recognize the words, understand the meaning of words and correctly use the words in business contexts. The results also revealed that three types of vocabulary exercises, namely: matching, gap filling and word association, helped students to improve their vocabulary knowledge. The gap filling exercise helped them to understand the meaning of target words. Similarly, the students revealed that this exercise helped them to correctly use the target words in business contexts. The matching exercise made it easy to recognize the words and to understand the meaning of the words both in Thai and English. The findings also indicated that seven to 10 repetitions of words helped the students to remember the target words better. The study of 10 words for each lesson was an appropriate number for the students to learn. Seeing the repeated words at least 7-10 times helped them to remember the words more quickly and easily.

The corpus-based business news enabled them to

use the correct words which were mostly from business contexts. Furthermore, they also reported that the BVLP helped them to improve their reading skills and vocabulary knowledge. The BVLP also promoted their autonomous learning.

Conclusion

This paper reviews research on vocabulary learning in teaching EFL with a focus on vocabulary selection: it has an emphasis on the objectives of vocabulary teaching and learning in terms of what native speakers and second language students know about vocabulary, how many new words EFL students should learn at a time, how much time students take to remember a word, and vocabulary learning approaches. Some criteria for vocabulary selection are discussed. The paper ends by offering some examples of integrating vocabulary into vocabulary pedagogy in Thai context for Thai EFL learners. Future work, therefore, needs to take into account all previous findings.

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