

Principles and Practices of Teaching/Learning English Vocabulary in EFL Classrooms: A Study at a Private University in Bangladesh

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***Abstract:** Teaching vocabulary well is a key aspect of developing the four basic skills of language among the learners. However, it is daunting to be reminded that the vocabulary of a language like English consists of several hundred thousand words. Although vocabulary learning is not the top priority in EFL (English as Foreign Language) or ESL (English as Second Language) classes, and not even considered in content areas, the crucial role of vocabulary knowledge across the four basic skills has been well recognized in first language situation and this has appeared to be true of foreign language setting as well. However, in relation to the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh, where English is designated as foreign language in academic curriculum, very little is known as to the principles, practices and pedagogical implications of teaching/learning English vocabulary in the EFL classrooms. This paper intends to examine the existing principles and practices of vocabulary teaching/learning in the tertiary level in Bangladesh with a view to exploring the weakness of the prevailing approaches and techniques in vocabulary instructions. In accordance with the emerging pedagogy, attempts have also been made to recommend some techniques and procedures that might be followed in the instructions of English vocabulary in EFL/ESL situations in a private university in Bangladesh.*

***Keywords:** Principles and practices of teaching, Teaching and learning vocabulary, Pedagogical implications, EFL/ESL classroom, Vocabulary*

1. Introduction

Michael Wallace (1988) claims that a good knowledge of how the system of a language works may not necessarily enable one to communicate, but it is usually possible to communicate if one has the vocabulary. The importance of vocabulary learning has been linked with conversation and written work as Cook (1991) maintains that vocabulary learning provides

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input for these skills. Besides, vocabulary 'is the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language' (Nation 1990). With this in mind and the shift in emphasis on vocabulary in language, "comes the responsibility of helping students to effectively store and retrieve words in the target language" (Sokmen 1997), which necessitates the use of effective pedagogical methods in teaching/learning vocabulary.

English has been taught as a foreign/second language for several decades in Bangladesh. In spite of the fact, it is observed that the target proficiency in the four basic skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking - is lacking among the learners, although they spend a handful amount of time in learning them. Often, the learners' poor performance in the four basic skills is ascribed to their lack of good command over vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is an essential part in foreign language learning as the meanings of new words are very often emphasized, whether in books or in classrooms. It is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. David Willis (1990) remarks, "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Sternberg (1987) also adds that 'one's level of vocabulary is highly predictive, if not deterministic, of one's level of reading comprehension'.

However, vocabulary teaching/learning at the tertiary level in Bangladesh has not always been very responsive to the students' problems with vocabulary, and teachers and learners have probably not fully recognized the tremendous communicative advantage in developing an extensive vocabulary. For a long time, teaching methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method greatly prioritized the teaching of grammatical structures. In order not to distract from the learning of these structures, the number of words introduced in such courses was kept fairly low. Those words which were taught were often chosen either because they were easily demonstrated, or because they fitted neatly into the structure of the day. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late nineties set the stage for a major re-thinking of the role of vocabulary. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focuses on teaching the meaning, functionality and the use of language in a learner centered manner utilizing real life task, situations and roles in order to develop learners' communicative proficiency in English.

The recognition of the meaning-making potential of words meant that vocabulary became a learning objective in its own right. Swan (1997) writes that “vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner.” Nevertheless, students, teachers and parents alike are more concerned about the examinations and results rather than about acquiring the target skills in vocabulary. They are only interested in learning the vocabulary only to be able to answer the questions that require good command over vocabulary. Word lists, teacher explanation, memorization, vocabulary books, and quizzes often are used in an effort to help students learn new words ignoring the appropriate research and theory regarding the concern which cannot serve the diverse real-life situations.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study intends to investigate the prevailing principles and practices of teaching/learning English vocabulary to the EFL/ESL learners in tertiary level of Bangladesh. To be more specific, the study finds answers to the following questions:

1. What are the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in teaching vocabulary to the EFL/ESL learners?
2. What are the dominant practices of teaching vocabulary in the EFL/ESL classrooms at the tertiary level in Bangladesh and to what extent are they suitable for better acquisition of vocabulary?
3. What are the impediments of vocabulary teaching in EFL/ESL classrooms? And,
4. What pedagogical measures are needed at the methodological level to improve the teaching of vocabulary to EFL/ESL learners at the tertiary level?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The present study was conducted on three hundred and forty students (194 males and 146 females) studying at a private university in Bangladesh. All of these students are studying Communicative English courses I & II as compulsory in their first two semesters. The study incorporated thirty-six English teachers teaching these students. All of the teachers have the experience of teaching English at tertiary level for more than 2 years at different universities in Bangladesh.

3.2 Instruments

Since this research required information from people actively engaged in the teaching/learning activities, the researcher used two separate versions of questionnaire to gather data - Version I for students and Version II for teachers. In the students' version, the students were asked to express their opinion on different questions about vocabulary teaching/learning. In the teachers' version, the teachers were also asked to provide information about different questions on the same issue.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the responses to some of the items in the questionnaires, which seemed noteworthy. Some of the responses received significant results, while others did not. This section briefly presents those responses which were statistically significant. However, it should be noted that some of the most prominent responses (items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 13, and 16) of the students' questionnaire and (items 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 12, and 14) of the teachers' questionnaire are briefly discussed here.

In items 2 of students' and 1 of the teachers' questionnaires, the subjects were asked to express their opinion about the role of vocabulary in language learning. The results are presented below:

Table 1: Role of vocabulary in language learning

Role of vocabulary in language learning	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	226	29	114	7
Percentage (%)			66.47%	80.55%	33.52%	19.44%

Table 1 reveals that 66.47% of the students expressed their belief that vocabulary has great role in language learning. On the other hand, 80.55% of the teachers also expressed their opinion in favor of the role of vocabulary in language learning. So, conclusion can be made from the results of this item that both learners and teachers strongly favor the teaching of vocabulary in language teaching/learning activities.

In items 4 of students' and 2 of teachers' questionnaires, participants were asked to express their opinions about the suitability of the existing techniques and methods of teaching/learning vocabulary. The results are given below:

Table 2: Present techniques

Usefulness of present techniques	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	112	13	159	23
Percentage (%)			32.94%	36.11%	67.05%	63.88%

Table 2 shows that 67.05% of the students and 63.88% of the teachers expressed their opinion against the present techniques of teaching/learning vocabulary in the classrooms. They are of the opinion that present techniques need to be reconsidered for better vocabulary instructions. In items 5 of students' and 3 of teachers' questionnaires, the participants were asked to know the information as to how much students depend on memorization, verbatim translation, guessing meanings, using words in sentences and thinking relationships between words in learning vocabulary. The results are given in following tables 3,4, 5, 6, and 7 respectively:

Table 3: Memorization

Memorization	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	298	31	42	5
Percentage (%)			87.65%	86.11%	12.35%	13.88%

Table 3 indicates that 87.65% of the students depend on memorization for learning vocabulary. The teachers' questionnaire also reveals the same kind of information. That is the students of H.S.C level are still following the traditional ways of learning vocabulary rather than following the principles of CLT.

Table 4: Avoiding verbatim translation

Avoiding verbatim translation	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	126	11	214	25
Percentage (%)			37.05%	30.55%	62.94%	69.44%

Table 4 shows that 37.05% of the students can avoid verbatim translation while 62.94% of them largely depend on it. Among teachers, 30.05% agrees that students can avoid verbatim translation, while 69.44% disagrees with the fact. That means it is necessary to encourage students to avoid verbatim translation in learning new vocabulary.

Table 5: Guessing meanings

Guessing meanings	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	181	19	159	17
Percentage (%)			53.23%	52.77%	46.76%	47.22%

Table 5 exhibits that 53.23% of the students learn vocabulary by guessing meaning from the contexts. 52.23% of the teachers also agree with the fact. So from the results of this table it can be said that half of the students is following one of the principles of CLT in learning vocabulary, while the other half is still far away from realizing the tremendous advantages of learning vocabulary by guessing from the contexts.

Table 6: Using new words in sentences

Using new words in sentences	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	71	7	269	29
Percentage (%)			20.88%	19.44%	79.11%	80.55%

Table 6 shows that only 20.88% of the students are able to use new words in sentences creatively, while some 79.11% cannot properly use new words in sentences. The teachers' questionnaire also reveals similar pictures.

Table 7: Thinking relationships between words

Thinking relationships between words	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	79	5	261	31
Percentage (%)			23.24%	13.89%	76.77%	86.11%

Table 7 reveals that 23.24% of the students think of the relationship between words and in the process learn new words. However, 76.77% of them remain unable to do that. The teachers' questionnaire also shows similar picture where the ratio is 13.83% and 86.11%. But in CLT this principle is highly regarded as one of the important ways of learning vocabulary.

In the items 11 of students' and 10 of teachers' questionnaires, the participants were asked to provide information about the practice of vocabulary in the classrooms. The results are as follow:

Table 8: Vocabulary practice in the classrooms

Vocabulary practice in classrooms	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	144	22	196	14
Percentage (%)			42.35%	61.11%	57.65%	38.88%

Tale 8 indicates that 57.65% of the students say that their teachers never make them practice vocabulary in the classrooms, whereas 61.11% of the teachers say that they make students practice vocabulary in the classrooms. This conflicting information actually reveals the fact that vocabulary practice in the classrooms cannot meet the demands of students or there is hardly any such practice.

In the items 13 of students' and 12 of teachers' questionnaires, questions were asked to know information about the students self-practices of vocabulary at their homes. The results are given below:

Table 9: Self practice

Self practice	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	91	8	249	28
Percentage (%)			26.77%	22.22%	73.23%	77.78%

Table 9 expresses that 26.5% of the students practice vocabulary on their own at home. 22.22% of the teachers also agree with students' self-practice of vocabulary at home.

Finally, in the items 16 of students' and 14 of teachers' questionnaires, the participants were asked to express their opinions about the role of existing assessment systems in vocabulary teaching/learning. The results are as follow.

Table 10: Role of Assessments

Role of Assessments	Number of participants		Yes		No	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
In numbers	340	36	43	12	297	21
Percentage (%)			12.65%	33.34%	87.35%	66.67%

Table 10 shows that 87.35% of the students express their opinion against the existing assessment systems. They believe that the present assessment systems scarcely help them acquire vocabulary. According to the teachers' questionnaire, 66.67% of the teachers believe that the existing examination systems hardly help student to have a good store of vocabulary.

5. Principles for Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary knowledge is not something that can be fully mastered; it is something that expands and deepens over the course of a lifetime. In learning English language, vocabulary is recognized as a vital element for ESL/EFL literary development (Coxhead, 2000). That is L2 learners' lexical knowledge may determine the quality of their listening, speaking, reading, and writing performances. However, the most difficult task in planning the vocabulary component of a course is making sure that it does not overwhelm other essential parts of the course. The best way to avoid this is for the Teachers and course designers to have a set of guiding principles that can be applied in a variety of teaching and learning situations. These can then be applied in courses where there are parts of the course deliberately set aside for vocabulary development, or in courses where vocabulary is dealt with as it occurs in skill-focused or content-focused lessons. Some principles proposed by David Nunan (2003) are outlined here.

5.1 Focusing on the most useful vocabulary first

Some words can be used in a wide variety of circumstances. Others have much more limited use. For example, the word 'help' can be used to ask for help, to describe how people work with others, to describe how knowledge, tools, and materials can make people's work easier and so on. The word 'advertise' has much more limited usefulness. It is still a useful word to know, but there are many more useful words to learn before this one. Teaching useful vocabulary before less useful vocabulary gives learners the best return for their learning effort.

According to David Nunan (2003) the most useful vocabulary that every English language learner needs whether they use the language for listening, speaking, reading, or writing, or whether they use the language in formal and informal situations, is the most frequent 1000 word families of English (Coxhead, 2000). This vocabulary is so useful that it covers around 75 percent of the running words in academic texts and newspapers, over 80 percent of the running words in novels, and about 85 percent of the running words in conversation. It contains most of the 176 function word families (words like *a, the, of, because, could*), and words like *keep, kind, know, lack, and land*. The next most useful list is the second 1000 words of English (Coxhead, 2000). There are numerous lists of these words depending on the learner's needs and area of expertise.

After this, Nunan further says that the most useful vocabulary depends on the goals of the learners. If learners want to do academic study in senior high school or university, then the Academic Word list (Coxhead, 2000) is the most useful vocabulary to learn. This is a list of 570 word families that occur frequently in a wide range of academic texts. Beyond that, the rest of the vocabulary is low frequency words. Learners need to learn low frequency words but, they are best learned after the high frequency words are known.

5.2 Focusing on the vocabulary in the most appropriate way

This principle looks at how words should be taught and learned. Here we will look at the three most important vocabulary learning strategies - using word parts, guessing from context, and using word cards - techniques that are usually followed in CLT.

English is a language that has been strongly affected by other languages. The core of the English language is the Germanic words from Anglo-Saxon and Norse which make up most of the function words and well over half of the first 1000 words of English (Nunan 2003). These are words like *the, a, because, home, cut, instead, iron*. Nunan further says that beyond the first 1000 words, most of the words, around 60 percent, came into English from French (through conquest), Latin (through religion) or Greek (through scholarship). These French, Latin and Greek words are typically made of prefixes, stems and suffixes: *as/soci/ation, defin/ition, col/hc/ate, con/tain, un/in/form/alive*. This means that using word part knowledge is a very useful way of learning low frequency words. Using word part knowledge enables learners' to learn words by thinking the relation between the known and the new and by guessing from the context.

Because high frequency words cover a large proportion of the running words of a text, they provide a helpful context; to allow learners to guess the meaning of the low frequency words. This means that if learners develop skill in reading by guessing from context, they will have an effective strategy for coping with the many low frequency words that they meet in their reading.

Using words cards involves making small cards and writing the English word on one side and the first language translation on the other. These cards are kept in packs of about fifty and are looked at when the learner has a free moment, while traveling, waiting for a bus, or during TV commercials. Although it may seem surprising to recommend using first language translation and deliberate, decontextualized learning, the use of the first language helps because it provides the meaning in a simple, clear, and comprehensible way. Learning from word cards is a very unfashionable technique (among teachers and students involved in communicative approach) but research (Nation, 2001, cited in David Nunan, 2003) has shown it to be very effective.

5.3 Giving attention to the high frequency words across the four strands of a course

High frequency vocabulary needs to occur in all four strands of a course. It should get deliberate attention through teaching and study and should be met and used in communicating messages in listening, speaking,

reading and writing. High frequency vocabulary should also be easily accessible for receptive and productive use.

5.4 Engaging in Wide Reading

The importance of the role of wide and varied reading in the development of vocabulary knowledge has long been recognized and is well documented (Anderson & Nagy, 1992). Growth in vocabulary for students with reading difficulties seem to require that reading be followed by other activities that extend their understanding, such as discussion of what has been read (Stahl, 1986). In particular, the greatest gains seem to occur when learners have opportunity to engage in activities that promote their understanding and elaboration of contextual use of meanings (Anderson & Nagy, 1992).

5.5 Encouraging learners to reflect on and take responsibility for learning

So far we have looked at principles that relate to choosing what vocabulary to teach and the conditions needed for learning it. There is an important principle that lies behind choosing and learning and that is that learners need to realize that they must be responsible for their own learning. Taking this responsibility requires knowledge of what to learn and the range of options for learning vocabulary, skill in choosing the best options, and the ability to monitor and evaluate progress with those options. Unless learners take control, the course will not be as effective for them. Teachers can help them by informing of the different types of vocabulary, training in the various ways of learning so that they are very familiar with the range of learning options available for them, providing genuine opportunities for choosing what to learn and how to learn, and providing encouragement and opportunity to reflect on their learning and to evaluate it. Vocabulary learning is a large and continuing task. Although teachers can provide useful input and support to help learners deal with this, it is ultimately the learners who have to learn and carry on learning.

6. Existing Practices of Teaching/learning Vocabulary at tertiary level in Bangladesh

From the principles outlined above, it is clear that vocabulary learning greatly depends on various factors as stated above. Teachers only provide

useful input and support to help them deal with this. Besides, there are some well recognized techniques and practices of teaching/learning vocabulary prescribed by CLT. However, from the results of the study given above, it can be said that the attitudes and 'practices of teaching and learning vocabulary at this level in Bangladesh are still traditional and unscientific, unsystematic and time consuming. The learners here tend to be diligent, submissive and passive; they obey instructions, learn by memorizing and seldom adopt the techniques professed by CLT in learning vocabulary. In CLT, it is assumed that the learners learn words incidentally, through the performance of various communicative tasks in the classrooms as well as in the real life situations. Carter and McCarthy (1988) have argued that the 'vocabulary development of a language, second and foreign in particular is more likely to be generally implicit or incidental beyond a certain level of proficiency'. Richards and Rodgers (1996) also point out that within the communicative framework the techniques used in vocabulary teaching/learning include inferring the meaning of lexical items from the context in which they occur, using the dictionary, using real stimulus and providing English synonyms. But the learners here largely depend on memorizing word lists without being aware of using them in real life situations. They are interested only in learning those words that are likely to enable them to cope with the questions that they usually face in the examinations rather than learning words to be able to use them in communicative situations. As a result the objectives of the present communicative syllabus are not achieved satisfactorily.

The teachers, in contrast, are dominant and authoritative, and vocabulary lessons, if there is any, are fully teacher-centered. They lack proper knowledge and training regarding CLT approach and method and still prefer the old tradition of making students memorize word lists either from textbooks or from dictionaries and other sources of vocabulary. They are not interested or capable of dealing with the vocabulary in the ways as is suggested in the CLT in relation with the context. They do not inform students about the communicative value of words. In sum, they advocate and make students learn English vocabulary explicitly, which is contrary to the principles of CLT.

The textbooks which are usually followed have tasks on vocabulary which students are suggested to perform individually or in pairs in the

classroom or at their homes. Most of the time teachers fail to make students understand the communicative value of the words due to lack of their own knowledge. They fail to engage the students as the contents lack contextual reference and discussion in groups and pairs. It is true that there are wide range of passages on varied issues ranging from family to environment, tradition to modernity, and so on in these textbooks but the question is whether students really get much interest in reading them or not. They prepare themselves only to pass the examinations as they have been practicing since their childhood. So whenever they are faced with reading materials taken outside of their textbooks, they could not properly comprehend the meaning of the text.

According to Curtis (1987) appropriate forms of testing has a great impact on the teaching/learning of vocabulary to EFL/ESL learners. By analyzing the examination questions of the two courses, it is found that there are 10 marks allocated exclusively for vocabulary in the first course. But the formats of the questions are only the 'fill in the blanks' with and without clues and sometimes few 'multiple choice questions'. In the second semester course, there are no exclusive questions on vocabulary, but there are some questions which imply certain level of competency of vocabulary as developing a paragraph, writing a summary etc which again is dependent on certain amount of vocabulary practiced in classes. There are no other formats of the questions for assessing learners' competency in using words in communicative situations. So the goals remain far away from being achieved.

7. Some Pedagogical Implications

The present study has been conducted to gain some new insights into the principles and practices of vocabulary teaching here in Bangladesh. It is believed that the findings could feed into the classroom practice, and provide guidelines for students, teachers and the material and syllabus designers. Now the following implications can be made in accordance with the dominant pedagogy and the findings discussed in the study:

1. Teachers should make students learn contextualized vocabulary because it helps derive appropriate meanings for words. But when it doesn't help, students have a purpose for using the glossary, dictionary, or thesaurus. Using these references can expand vocabulary and encourage curiosity about words. So beside

teaching only the reading passages included in certain textbooks, teachers' responsibility is to use a fiction or nonfiction according to students' interest to teach students how context can give clues to a word's meaning in several ways, to show students that a word may have multiple meanings and finally teach them how to use context and references to help unlock appropriate meanings.

2. Knowing the meaning of a root, prefix, or suffix often gives clues to what a word means focusing on the derivatives.
3. Teachers can help students' maintain a portfolio where they can include the new words which they have learned throughout the course. After the end of the course they may have a presentation on a specific topic where they would use their newly learned words in a communicative way and thus marks would be given following a particular rubric. Thus making connections with other words whenever possible because it helps build from the known to the new. For example, when teaching the word *counterrevolutionary*, one should relate it to *revolt*, *revolution*, *act*, and *counteract* to build on what students may already know.
4. Teachers who are curious and passionate about words can model, encourage, and engage students in wordplay, adept diction, and independent investigations into words to build students' word consciousness along with interest.
5. Typically, the words and concepts students absorb and use as they listen and talk are the foundation for what they will read and write later. So teachers should make the students read literature aloud to students, stopping to explain and talk about words they may not know so that they can explore pronunciations, visual display, and meanings simultaneously, encourage students to find about the words they don't know within a small group or with their peers sometime so that students can listen to one another and use content area vocabulary in speaking before they use it in writing.

8. Conclusion

Vocabulary is a principal contributor to comprehension, fluency, and achievement in the second/foreign language learning. However, learning vocabulary is a complicated process. It cannot be left to itself. It needs to be strengthened by self motivation, careful planning and well-directed teaching. So in order to enrich the store of vocabulary of the students, the teachers, learners, syllabus and materials designers have to reconsider the

existing principles and practices of teaching/learning vocabulary. The present study has already indicated so many aspects of teaching/learning practices at this university where there are plenty of anomalies between the principles of vocabulary teaching/learning in CLT and the actual practices in teaching/learning situations. In addition to pointing out the anomalies, the present study further tries to offer some recommendations that can be followed by the concerned people to make vocabulary teaching/learning more effective and meaningful. In sum, the goal of vocabulary instruction should be to build students' independent word learning strategies that can empower them for lifelong learning whereas the teacher's role is to help learners take control of their own vocabulary learning. So, vocabulary should get special consideration in the process of teaching/learning a second/foreign language.

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