Vocabulary Learning Theories-A Keen Perspective

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The present paper deals with the strategies involved in learning vocabulary. Generally speaking, strategies are the tools applied for participation in learning a skill or subject. Vocabulary learning strategies are the tools utilized in the task of learning vocabulary in the target language. They can be employed in all kinds of tasks. Hosenfeld's(1984) list of strategies of successful readers includes a few vocabulary learning strategies, such as guessing a word's meaning from the context, identifying the grammatical category of a word, looking up words or recognizing cognates. By the same token, general learning strategies, such as planning or assessment of learning, can be used in vocabulary learning.

Vocabulary is typically taught in lists and a high priority is given to accuracy and the ability to construct correct sentences in the Grammar-Translation Approach. Prabhu mentions that traditionally, English was taught by the grammar translation method. In the late 1950s, structurally graded syllabi were introduced as a major innovation into the state systems for teaching English (10). The idea was that the teaching of language could be systematized by planning its inputs, just as the teaching of a subject such as arithmetic or physics could be. The structural approach was sometimes implemented as the direct method, with an insistence on monolingual English classrooms.

By the late 1970s, however, the Behavioral-psychological and philosophical foundations of the structural method had yielded to the cognitive claims of Chomsky for language as a "mental organ". There was also dissatisfaction within the English teaching profession with the structural method, which was seen as not giving the learners language that was "deployable" or usable in real situations, in spite of an ability to make correct sentences in classroom situations.

In retrospection, the structural approach as practiced in the classroom led to a fragmentation and trivialization of thought by breaking up language in two ways: into structures, and into skills. The form-focused teaching of language aggravated the gap between the learner's "linguistic age" and "mental age" to the point where the mind could no longer be engaged. The emphasis thus shifted to teaching language use in meaningful contexts.

British linguists argue that something more than grammatical competence was involved in language use; the term "communicative competence" was introduced to signify this extra dimension. The attempt to achieve communicative competence assumes the availability of a grammatical competence to build on, and indeed the communicative method succeeds best in the initial stage, introducing variety and learner involvement into classrooms where both teachers and learners have confidence in their knowledge of the language, acquired through exposure. However, for the majority of learners, the issue is not so much communicative competence as the acquisition of a basic or fundamental competence in the language (13).

Later, input-rich theoretical methodologies such as the Whole Language, the Task-Based, and the Comprehensible Input and Balanced approaches aim at exposure to the language in meaning-focused situations so as to trigger the formation of a language system by the mind.

It is said that some deliberate learning strategies such as word part psychoanalysis, learning using word

cards, and dictionary use are also valuable shortcuts as far as learning vocabulary and vocabulary growth are concerned. Nation also notes that learners need to acquire a few important vocabulary learning strategies such as guessing from context, using word cards, using word parts, using mnemonic techniques, expressing the keyword techniques and making use of dictionaries. (Nation: 2001).

Hedge (2000) also mentions that despite the traditional methodology, recent studies have greatly focused on vocabulary learning and teaching containing the following issues:

- Learners' mental lexicon is organized.
- What strategies learners use to acquire vocabularies.
- How some words are easier to learn than others?

Hedge (2000) points out that linguistic studies focus on lexical system and acquisition studies focus on how vocabulary is learned. The idea of how vocabulary is learned is principally related to strategies used by learners as well as approaches to teaching vocabulary.One of the principal controversial issues in vocabulary teaching and learning in the field is how to identify significant approaches and strategies to teaching and learning vocabularies, which result in longer and easier retrieval of the vocabularies.

A classification is available that considers three approaches to vocabulary teaching:

1) Incidental learning {i.e., learning vocabularies as the by-product of other activities as reading, listening, etc.}

2) Explicit or intentional instruction and

3) Independent strategy development (Hunt and Beglar, 1998; cited in Richards and Renandya, 2002).

As proven by many studies, teaching approaches and learning strategies are two main factors affecting learners' performance. Examining the effects of diverse modes of teaching vocabularies incidental and intentional on learners' acquisition of new vocabulary items might lead to influential and fruitful pedagogical implications on how to teach vocabularies. In terms of Hedge, (2002) such strategies can be either cognitive (i.e., direct mental operations to understand and store new words) or meta-cognitive (i.e., indirect strategies that facilitate the conscious efforts to remember new words).

Moreover, examining the relationship between learners' use of vocabulary strategy use and learning vocabularies may lead us to pay more attention to the role of learning strategies. Therefore, the current study is basically concerned with main approaches to vocabulary learning and teaching. The use of vocabulary learning strategy is one of the factors investigated by the current study.

Learning a second language means learning its vocabulary, suggesting that knowing a lexical item means knowing a number of things (Gass:1999). Acquisition of vocabulary is an incremental and perhaps recursive process that involves the integration of various kinds of knowledge along with gaining different levels of ability to make use of that knowledge in communication in the opinion of Paribakht and Wesche (13).

Strategy can be understood as a 'means of achieving a goal'. There are different kinds of strategies and they differ from person to person. Strategies assist language learners as well as language teachers. It is essential for classroom teachers to be aware of different strategies employed by individual learners. Strategies can be talked about mainly in two ways. They are learning strategies and teaching strategies.

Learning strategies are procedures undertaken by the learners in order to make their own language learning effective. Teaching strategies are procedures undertaken by the teacher in order to make teaching as

effective and interesting as possible. In the present study the researcher has taken into account both the strategies in order to facilitate learning. In the process, the teachers are enquired about what strategies they follow, to what extent and in what manner.

Oxford defined learning strategies (LS) broadly as

> *Operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information (8).*

These early definition from the educational literature reflect the roots of LS in cognitive science, with its essential assumptions that human beings process information and that learning involves such information processing. Clearly, LS are involved in all learning, in spite of the content and environment. LS are thus used in learning and teaching math's, science, history, languages and other subjects, both in classroom settings and more comfortable learning environments.

Language Learning Strategy Theory:

The words students know and the strategies they have available to learn new words are critical to success in academia and in life. One of the most enduring findings in educational research is that meaning vocabulary is closely associated with educational achievement (National Reading Panel: 2000). An extensive number of empirical studies supporting the importance of vocabulary have been collected using large numbers of students of varying ages.

In a comprehensive review of the research, Daneman stated,

> *"…vocabulary knowledge is one of the best single predictors of reading comprehension." (445).*

Thus, the development of a large and varied vocabulary is a critical educational task.

According to Nation (2001), vocabulary learning strategies are defined by the following important features:

(1) They involve choice;
(2) They are complex, i.e. consisting of several steps;
(3) They require knowledge and benefit from training; and
(4) They increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and use.

Features of Vocabulary Learning Strategies:

The features of Language Learning Strategies according to Oxford are:

Problem Orientation:

Language learning strategies are the tools used to solve a problem such as to accomplish a task, meet an objective and attain a goal. Different strategies are applied for different purposes. For an instance, reasoning or guessing strategies are used to understand a passage. Memory strategies are used to remember the required information. Affective strategies are used to help the learner relax or gain greater confidence for profitable learning.

Action basis:

Language learning strategies enhance learning through various actions akin to taking notes, setting up for a

language task, self evaluating and guessing logically. The actions performed by the learners are naturally influenced by the learners' general traits such as learning style, motivation and aptitude.

Involvement:

Learning strategies promote Meta-cognitive functions like planning, evaluating, emotional, social and other functions as well. Thus, they are not restricted to cognitive functions. It involves both cognitive and Meta-cognitive aspects. Therefore, the emphasis would eventually become more balanced, because language learning is indisputably an emotional and interpersonal process as well as a cognitive and meta-cognitive affair.

Degree of Observability:

Language learning strategies are hard to observe. It is easy to observe several aspects of cooperating, a strategy in which a learner works with others to achieve a learning goal. But the act of making mental associations, an important, memory strategy is highly impossible to scrutinize.Thus, examining the strategies used by the learners is very difficult.

Level of Consciousness:

Several researchers reveal that language learning strategies are always conscious actions. The modern uses of LLS reflect conscious efforts to take control of their learning. However, after a certain amount of practice and efforts, learning strategies can become automatic like any other skill or behaviour.

Flexibility:

LLS are flexible as they not always found in predictable sequences or in precise patterns. Learners change the strategies depending upon the contexts (11-13).

Factors Influencing Strategies Choice:

Oxford opines that the factors such as Degree of awareness, Stage of learning, Task requirements, Teacher expectations, Age, Sex, Nationality, Learning style, Personality traits, Motivation level, Purpose of learning the language influence the choice of strategies ((13).

Generally, strategies are divided into two major classes direct and indirect. These two are subdivided into a total of six groups' memory, cognitive, and compensation under the direct group and Meta-cognitive, affective and social under the indirect group of strategy.

The language learning strategies can be classified into the following five categories:

- Those referring to the behaviours of successful language learners
- Those based on psychological functions (cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective)
- Those base on linguistic aspects (e.g. monitoring)
- Those based on language skills or knowledge (e.g. oral production, Vocabulary learning
- Those based on different types (or styles) of learners.

Thus, the categorization of LLS into cognitive, meta-cognitive, social and affective seems to be the most widely accepted strategies in learning vocabulary.

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