On the Enhancement of English as a Foreign Language
Learners’ Productive Vocabulary

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Vocabulary enhancement has always been a big issue for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially for beginners. Although Chinese college EFL learners have a large reservoir of English words and expressions, when it comes to speaking and writing, they find it difficult to retrieve these words, and consequently, they overuse a word or an expression throughout their talk or writing instead of using other alternatives. This paper attempts to explore this phenomenon and to analyze these EFL learners’ difficulties in retrieving vocabulary productively. First, a brief literature review is made so as to set a theoretical framework for the paper. Next, the paper probes into three categories of factors that hinder words retrieval, based on the current foreign language teaching and learning situation in China. Afterwards, some strategies for enhancing productive vocabulary are proposed to Chinese EFL learners and instructors. Words retrieval will no longer be a problem for EFL learners, when a comprehensible input, an effective consolidation, and a meaningful output are guaranted.

Keywords: productive vocabulary, retrieval, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Introduction

When asked what is most difficult in the process of foreign language learning, most college students may rank vocabulary as first. A great number of students complain that after entering the college, some of the words they have learned in the middle school have been forgotten and large numbers of newly learned words are very likely to be left in the “forgetting curve” very soon. Still worse, students complain that they tend to use words they have learned for many years and seldom use those newly learned words, so that their compositions seem quite dull due to the overuse of certain words repetitively. A similar phenomenon can also be found in speaking. Students cannot retrieve the right expressions for the message so that they stammer and pause a lot, which in turn will wear away their confidence, and consequently they dare not speak English in public. However, if these same expressions appear in listening or reading, most students will find them easy to understand. Therefore, it appears very interesting as well as necessary to explore this problem and to provide possible solutions as well.

The Productive Retrieval of Vocabulary

First of all, it is essential to define the term “productive retrieval”. In defining “knowing a word”, McCarthy (1990) raises a question when it can be said a language learner knows a word in L2. He points out

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that if a language learner cannot actively use a particular word when it is needed, without too much mental searching, then it might be felt that he is dealing with an incomplete knowledge of the word, or at the very least this incomplete knowledge of the word should be distinguished between receptive and productive knowledge. In other words, if the learner knows the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of the word but cannot produce it in speaking or writing, s/he only has receptive knowledge of the word. If the learner can make a step forward: to produce it when needed, s/he has a productive knowledge of the word. According to McCarthy, learning a word involves three phases: input, storage, and retrieval. Input usually takes the form of orthographic shape as well as phonological shape. How words are stored in people’s mind is quite complicated. McCarthy uses metaphors like “nets”, “boxes”, “webs”, and “lines” to describe vividly the storage of words. He uses “receptive retrieval” and “productive retrieval” respectively to refer to the use of a specific word. Receptive retrieval takes place when the learner matches the spoken or written input to the stored sound and orthographic forms and their associated meanings, which often occurs in listening or reading. However, productive retrieval is different in that learners have to produce the form as well as the meaning of a word with no visual or aural stimuli at all. More often than not, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are more capable of retrieving words receptively than productively, while native speakers have less difficulty in retrieving productively.

Vocabulary learning and teaching has been widely researched with fruitful outcomes. Based on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Ellis’s division of input, intake and output, Dr. Joseph H. W. Hung formulated a model of second language acquisition (see Figure 1) and presented it in a speech entitled Input and English Teaching—Learning in 2005.

From the model, it is clear that motivation is the crux of the matter. If learners’ motivation could be aroused and maintained throughout the whole process of learning, more output could be ensured. Furthermore, vocabulary learning needs to be comprehension-based (Nunan, 2001). Also, the field of cognitive psychology indicates activities requiring a deeper, more involved manipulation of information promote more effective learning (Schmitt & McCarthy, 2002). Learners’ active and deep processing of the new information can lead to further consolidation of the information. Therefore, if comprehensible input could be provided, interactive environment between the teacher and the students and that among students could be built up, meaningful output could be designed, then learners’ motivation would be prolonged and information would be retained over long periods in the learners’ mind and would be retrieved quickly.
Factors That Impede EFL Learners’ Productive Retrieval of Vocabulary

The reasons why learners are not able to memorize as well as retrieve newly learned words vary from person to person. Nevertheless, those factors concerned may be roughly classified into three categories: biological factors, linguistic factors, and socio-cultural factors.

According to the forgetting curve, humans tend to halve their memory of newly learned knowledge in a matter of days or weeks unless they consciously review the learned material. That is to say, all input will go directly to the short-term memory, if adequate attention has been paid to. Then, most of the information (about 80%) that has been kept in the short-term memory will be forgotten within a couple of weeks, unless the memory has been reinforced time and again.

Apart from human beings’ biological incompetence in memory, studies have shown that words themselves play a great part in affecting the ease/difficulty of learning. For instance, on the basis of evidences obtained from empirical studies on vocabulary acquisition, Laufer points out that some intra-lexical factors affect learners’ productive retrieval. The longer the word, the more difficult it will be for learners to produce. Grammatical characteristics involving inflectional complexity and derivational complexity prove to be another barrier to words production. Next, semantic features are able to facilitate or hinder words retrieval. Specific terms and idiomatic expressions tend to be more difficult than general terms and non-idiomatic meaning expressions. Thirdly, the register of a word plays an important role in the retrieval of that word. Neutral words that can be used in all registers will be much easier to learn and thus to retrieve. Lastly, words with multiple meanings such as homonyms and polysemies are more difficult to retrieve than words with single meanings.

Another factor that counts is the impact of culture and customs. Most Chinese EFL learners, if not all, find it hard to express themselves in a foreign language. They dare not speak English because they feel their English is “poor”, despite the fact that it is often not the case. Students are afraid of making mistakes. They do not talk in class unless they feel quite certain that the utterances they are going to make are completely correct. Consequently, the lack of practice directly leads to the failure of vocabulary retrieval.

The Enhancement of EFL Learners’ Productive Vocabulary

Based on the theoretical framework and the analysis of the factors that may impede the productive retrieval of vocabulary, a couple of effective learning and teaching strategies are encouraged as follows.

Strategies for Providing Comprehensible Input

Motivation is the key to successful comprehension, efficient retention, and effective production of vocabulary, which can be ensured through two principles in the initial stage: gaining and maintaining learners’ attention and activating learners’ prior knowledge. Information can be moved from the sensory register to working memory if a learner pays attention to it (Chung, 2004). Further, learners’ background knowledge and life experience are essential to effective vocabulary instructions. Integrating prior knowledge with to-be-learned material is crucial to learning a new word. Therefore, strategies that can not only arouse students’ interest but trigger their prior knowledge are accorded top priority, such as verbal-visual word association strategy, word maps, concept wheels, brainstorming, etc..
Strategies for Effective Consolidation

Consolidation and storage of vocabulary can be achieved through instructors’ deep processing of a word and learners’ active involvement. The instructor’s active and deep processing of the to-be-learned material will provide the learners with rich information. In addition, a cooperative learning setting should be encouraged. Through peer or group negotiations, learners are expected to comprehend, construct and reconstruct the meaning of the word. Besides, the amiable learning environment can definitely be helpful to timid and introvert learners. Lastly, a successful consolidation of a word cannot be achieved without repetitive revision. Therefore, it is indispensable for EFL learners to keep an individual vocabulary notebook.

Strategies for Eliciting Meaningful Output

The meaningful production of a word is the vital criterion (if not the only) in deciding whether the learner has learned the word completely or not. Normally, meaningful output of vocabulary can be presented in two forms: writing and speaking. So far, various methods have been advocated as effective by researchers such as vocabulary chunks (LI, 2004), semantic mapping, pantomiming, drama (Chung, 2004), etc. No matter what strategy is used, there are two critical principles. One is to try different approaches so as to arouse the learners’ interest, and the other is to provide learners with frequent opportunities to practice using new words.

Conclusion

Vocabulary learning has always been a big obstacle for learners in the process of language learning. However, this obstacle can be removed as long as the three stages of vocabulary learning can be guaranteed: comprehensive input, effective retention, and meaningful output. No matter what learning and teaching strategy might be used, the key lies in the notion that all the strategies should be learner-centered with learners more involved in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language.

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