Challenges of Teaching English Vocabulary at the Higher Secondary Level in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a challenging venture. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher must learn to constantly adapt to their students' needs. Many times, this means dealing with a variety of problems in the classroom, many of which are all too common occurrences. Vocabulary learning involves activating students' apprehension and use of words that the students are likely to learn to improve their language proficiency, with the goal of increasing students' receptive and expressive vocabulary, year by year, in order to support reading comprehension, listening, speaking and enjoyment. As vocabulary learning is essential in achieving the target language competence, the common attitudes of the learners towards the target language and the use of the mother tongue need to be investigated. Thus, this study purported to examine how foreign language learners' attitudes and achievements are associated with vocabulary teaching and learning techniques in English language. The data for the present study were collected from 10 higher secondary colleges, located in urban and rural areas in Bangladesh. The respondents were 100 higher secondary students studying English for 200 marks as a compulsory study subject. Data were collected through questionnaire survey and analysis of the documents. The investigation revealed that the majority of the respondents were positive attitudes towards learning new words in isolation and in context. The study also disclosed the need for the use of the learners' mother tongue when situation demanded.
Keywords: *Vocabulary, teaching and learning, achievement, attitude, EFL*

1. Introduction

English teachers around the country face many of the same difficulties. The English classes can be large, sometimes with over 100 students. Teachers often have multiple English proficiency levels in the same classroom, which makes planning lessons and meeting all our students' needs troublesome. Some of us have limited materials, or have to adapt or create our own. Providing opportunities for students to practice the language can also pose a challenge, especially if we have shy students or big classes. This study was focused on the difficulties of teaching vocabulary faced by the English teacher and the causes of the difficulties of teaching 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 also central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner. Positive attitude facilitates the learning, though attitude necessarily does not determine behaviours. It is only one variable which determines success or failure in anything. Learners are usually motivated towards learning English as it is closely related to employment opportunity and better earning. They know that English and vocabularies of the target language will help them more than their mother tongue. This attitude covers some specific types of social and psychological

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phenomena of the learners, which are somehow directly or indirectly related to learning a second or a foreign language, the target language community, culture, and that may have either positive or negative impact upon the learners' achievement in the target language.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) demands learners' interests and the target language teaching methods focus directly on *learning* factors. Learning *outcomes*-oriented teaching is another process of competency-based language teaching. Communicative competence involves acquiring both sociolinguistic and linguistic knowledge and skills. In a classroom, a teacher must follow a teaching method to produce a successful result. The method mentioned in the *English for Today* for class xi and xii is CLT.The textbook is based on the principle of learning a language (the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing) through continuous practices. Language skills, functions, grammar, structures, and new vocabulary are presented in an integrated manner in CLT approach of teaching and for that reason; the learners cannot separate them according to their needs which directly affect their achievement negatively.

In classroom, most of the teachers do not deliver lectures in English for the better understanding of the learners. Teachers and students translate texts and the new words from L1 (mother tongue) to L2 (target language) and students memorize them. In order to teach the communicative textbook, teachers employ the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to make the lessons easily understandable to students. As a whole, the attitude of teachers and students towards teaching vocabulary communicatively is not positive. To attain proficiency in English language, curriculum at the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) level has been changed to corroborate CLT. With the change of curriculum, attitudes and motivation of teachers need to be changed. According to Allport (1954), a person's beliefs about the object, feelings towards the object, and action tendencies with respect to the object make up his/her attitudes towards the object and an attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related.

In Bangladesh context, learning English has got an important place and students are intrinsically and instrumentally motivated to learn English in the classroom for various reasons. Teachers' and learners' attitudes play an important role as belief and attitudes accelerate the outcomes. Learners' learning outcomes are influenced by the interpretation of teachers' interpersonal behaviours; how teacher acts and asks students to act. When the teachers believe that English is a skill-based subject, they will involve students in language practices and their reaction to students' mistakes will be positive. If the teachers believe that English is a knowledge-based subject, they themselves and their students will tend to use mother language and show negative attitudes towards CLT. Before the introduction of CLT, teachers used to teach English language applying the GTM. CLT focuses primarily on teaching the meaning, functionality and use of language in a learner centered manner utilizing real life situations in order to develop learners' communicative proficiency in English. But because of both learners' and teachers' attitudes, communicative competence has turned into linguistic form.

CLT was introduced to HSC level in 2001 and the textbook were designed creating opportunities for students to practice English in communicative way. But, due to the complexity of the approach, the teachers, students, teaching students cannot march together to implement the objectives of the curriculum. The quality of the students is very important for learning the target language. Therefore, the study attached importance to Foreign Language (FL) learners' attitudes towards learning vocabulary and their achievement in English.

2. Literature Review

Vocabulary knowledge is often considered as a critical tool for foreign language learners because a limited vocabulary in a foreign language impedes successful communication.

Underscoring the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" p. 55) Nation (2001) further describes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge.

The importance of vocabulary is demonstrated constantly in the schools and out of the schools. In classroom, the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary. Researchers such as Read (2000), Nation (2011) and others have postulated that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful second/foreign language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts. In English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning vocabulary items plays a vital role in all language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2011).Rivers and (Carter, 1987). furthermore, argue that the acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is essential for successful second language use because without an extensive vocabulary, learners will be unable to use the structures and functions they may have learned for comprehensible communication.

Research has highlighted that second language readers rely heavily on vocabulary knowledge and the lack of that knowledge is the main and the largest obstacle for L2 readers to overcome (Pinter, 2006). ''When students travel, they don't carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries'' (Krashen, as cited in Hoque, 2010, p25). Many researchers argue that vocabulary is one of the most important-if not the most important- components in learning a foreign language, and foreign language curricula must reflect this. Scott and Nagy (1997) states that: ''There is not much value in being able to produce grammatical sentences if one has not got the vocabulary that is needed to convey what one wishes to say … While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed'' p97). A large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language. It may possibly reflect that the open-endedness of a vocabulary system is perceived to be a cause of difficulty by learners. Another possible reason is that, unlike syntax and phonology, vocabulary does not have rules the learners may follow to acquire and develop their knowledge. In other words, it is not clear in L2/FL vocabulary learning what rules apply or which vocabulary items should be learned first. Oxford (1990) claims that vocabulary is by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language whether a foreign or one's mother tongue, because of tens of thousands of different meanings.

Despite these difficulties that language learners face in L2 vocabulary, they still have to deal with it in their examinations as ''vocabulary has traditionally been one of the language components measured in language tests'' (Schmitt, 1999, 189). Moreover, many learners see second/foreign language acquisition (SLA) as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary and therefore, they spend a great deal of time on memorising lists of words and rely on their bilingual dictionary as a basic communicative resource. As a result, language teachers and applied linguists now generally recognise the importance of vocabulary learning and are exploring ways of promoting it more effectively. Some of this research takes the form of investigation of strategies learners use specifically for vocabulary (VLS), which is our focus of attention. Hoque (2011) suggests that making the learning a fun is a key to any teaching situation and especially to teaching vocabulary. One way to generate enthusiasm and excitement about words is to create many opportunities to interact with words in risk-free, safe, and non-evaluative settings (Hoque, 2016). Therefore, the present study tried to explore how the Bangladesh learners would act in learning English vocabulary to improve their proficiency in the foreign language.

3. Research Design

The study was carried out at the Higher Secondary level among 100 respondents randomly selected from 10 HSC level colleges located in the urban and rural areas. Of the respondents 50

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were male and another 50 were female students studying English as a compulsory subject. The participants were representative from Science, Humanities, and Business Studies groups. Their age ranged from 16 - 17. All of the participants were native speakers of Bangla studying English as a compulsory subject. The data was collected through questionnaire survey and the analysis of the achievement test scores in English. The study analyzed the data using the SPSS for Windows 21 version.

3.1. Instruments

The study used two instruments: questionnaire, and achievement test scores, to investigate the learners' attitudes towards vocabulary teaching and learning and their learning outcomes. The response items were generated in the light of theoretical aspects of attitudes by the researcher. The questionnaire on attitudes involved 5 close-ended items built on a five-point Likert scale (1932) having the options: strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree to ensure spontaneous participation and for better understanding. The researcher used the translated form (Bangla format) of questionnaire.

3.2. Data Analysis

In order to investigate the study, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were applied. To ascertain the learners' attitudes towards the teaching methods, a questionnaire was developed for gathering data; students' first year test scores in English language were analyzed to check the achievement of the subject. The study carried Descriptive and Inferential statistical analysis of gathered data using the SPSS for Windows 21 version. Descriptive statistical analysed the patterns among the data; and thus they made sense of that data to describe the population or data set under the study. While descriptive statistics told the basic information about the population or data set under study, inferential statistical analyses produced more complex mathematical calculations, and allowed the study to infer trends about a larger population based on the study.

4. Findings of the Study

Structurally, there were four essential components of vocabulary instruction that was the concern of the study: (i) providing rich and varied language experiences, (ii) teaching individual words explicitly, (iii) teaching word-learning strategies, and (iv) fostering words consciousness. The findings emerged from the statistical analysis of the data collected through a questionnaire and document analysis has been presented below:

4.1. Findings from Test Score Analysis

The study was conducted among 100 Higher Secondary students, and their test scores in the Year Final Examination in English was analysed and presented in the following table:

Table 1: Test scores and of participants

Test scores range	Frequency (N=100)	Percent (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
31-45	51	51		
46-60	42	42	45.966	8.363
61-75	7	7		
Total	100	100.0		

It was found that the achievement of the learners was not satisfactory because 51% students attained nearly 40% marks which was nearly 'C Grade' according the present evaluation system. The study disclosed that only 07% students achieved above 60% marks, and no one obtained 80% marks in English indicating no one secured 'A+' in the examination. A number of

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factors such as teaching methodology, students' merit level, student practice, non implementation of the proposed CLT, learners attitudes etc. are responsible for this poor performance; the most important factor is probably the teaching methods and testing system. Results of the study showed that majority of the respondents approved that teacher of English are not qualified and well trained, teachers of English do not teach English in a proper manner, Audio- Visual aids are not used in English class, the course is not compatible to the present time, and the EFL teachers are not well equipped.

It was recommended that Qualified and well trained teachers may be appointed for English, teachers of English may use modern teaching method instead of traditional methods, Audio visual aids may be used such as language lab, gramophone, English course may be made compatible to the present time, Teachers may be encouraged to get linguistics knowledge.

Table 2: Analysis of test score of the respondents

	Mean attitude score by different Category of marks obtained (N=500)			Std. deviation
	31-45	46-60	61-75	
1	3.101	4.445	4.515	1.375
2	3.191	4.398	4.515	1.253
3	1.582	1.748	1.545	0.666
4	4.480	4.469	4.636	0.700
5	3.953	4.364	4.363	0.644
	16.30	19.42	19.57	3.027

(**) Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Practice makes perfect. Focus on learning a new set of words each day or practicing English skills either through writing and/or by speaking with someone in English would certainly the students proficiency and test scores. These activities will help the learners feel more comfortable and learn the language faster. If something feels difficult, it means that the learners need to practice it more often. By forcing to do these activities each and every day, the learners will reach their goals faster.
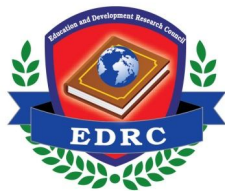
4.2. Findings from Questionnaire Survey

The present study had a strong focus on the fostering words consciousness. A more general way to help students develop vocabulary is by fostering word consciousness, an awareness of an interest in words. Word consciousness is not an isolated component of vocabulary instruction; it needs to be taken into account each and every day (Scott and Nagy, 2004). It can be developed at all times and in several ways: through encouraging adept diction, through word play, and through research on word origins or histories. According to Graves (2000), "If we can get students interested in playing with words and language, then we are at least halfway to the goal of creating the sort of word-conscious students who will make words a lifetime interest" (p.135). The study posed 5 questions representing a number of instructional issues related to vocabulary teaching and learning. The findings derived from the questions are presented below:

Question-1: I want to learn new vocabulary items-

In response to this statement, a large number of students responded that they liked to learn new vocabulary items. 36% respondents strongly agreed and 40.6% agreed and their grand

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total was 76.6 % (Table 2). 10.4 % respondents opined that they disagreed and 13% strongly disagreed to learn new words. 23.4% of the respondents had no interest in learning new vocabulary. This finding showed that learning new vocabulary items had a strong positive significance (r =0.507) on the achievement of the learners. Without knowing many words, second or foreign learning is impossible.

Table 3: The statement of respondents' attitude towards teaching vocabulary

No.	Frequency				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Frequency %	Frequency %	Frequency %	Frequency %	Frequency %
Q- 1	36	40.6	0	10.4	13
Q -2	34.2	40.8	0	19.6	5.4
Q- 3	0	3.6	0	54.2	42
Q- 4	56.2	40.2	0	3.2	0.4
Q- 5	29.2	57.4	13	0.4	0

To be efficient in SL/ FL, learning new vocabulary items has a strong positive significance on the achievement of the learners. Students who get poor marks in the achievement test, they do not know the meaning of more words. Moreover, the responses showed that the students did not always try their best and in many cases, they blamed themselves for their failure in learning English.

Question- 2: I like how my teacher teaches me new words –

In reply, most of the learners showed positive attitude towards the technique their teacher would teach vocabulary. 34.2% respondents strongly agreed and 40.8% agreed. A small number of respondents showed negative attitude towards current teaching style of new words. 19.6% disagreed and 5.4 % strongly disagreed (Table 3). Teaching and learning new words in a foreign language is an important factor which affects the achievement of the learners. According to the finding, most of the respondents were satisfied with their teachers' method of teaching new words. Attitude towards teaching new vocabulary and achievement of the respondents was highly positively related. Most of the respondents agreed that their teacher should use L1 while teaching the SL or FL and should also translate those words and phrase that were rather difficult to comprehend in their second/foreign language classrooms.

Question – 3: My English teacher teaches me in context–

Only 3.6% respondents agreed their teacher taught contextually and no one strongly agreed. Most of the respondents showed negative attitude towards it. 54.2% learners disagreed and 42.2% strongly disagreed with teaching method of new words (Table 3). Most of the teachers did not teach new words in sentences in the classroom.

Question-4: My English teacher teaches me new words in isolation-

Question 3 and Question 4 directly determine teachers' attitudes towards teaching vocabulary. The frequency measurement of Q.4 showed that 56.2% strongly agreed, 40.2% agreed, 3.2% disagreed and 0.4% strongly disagreed with teaching method of new words in isolation (Table 3). This finding showed that teaching new words applying the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was widely applied among students in the classroom. This finding showed that L1 must be fully utilized to help them understand the meaning of those new vocabulary items. The students opined that their English teachers used satisfactory amount of L1

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to ease them in the learning of foreign languages. In such a practice, vocabulary items were taught in isolation and then were memorized by the students in their own time.

Question- 5: Learning vocabulary improves my language proficiency

Most of the students want to have command on the four skills of language. They expressed positive attitudes towards it and considered the learning new words helpful to developing their four skills. Only very few weak students (13%) could not provide their decisions. The learners who were strongly agreed belonged to 29.2 % and agreed 57.4%. This finding is supported by the finding of the Question1.

5. Recommendations

There are several effective explicit (intentional, planned instruction) and implicit (spontaneous instruction as a learner comes to new words in a text) strategies that learner can employ with readers of any age. On the basis of the findings the study put forwarded some recommendations to be implemented by the EFL teachers to improve the present situation.

1. The EFL teachers should review the vocabulary they teach through a game or activity and encourage their students to do the same at home.

2. The teachers may encourage autonomy in their learners, and encourage them to read, watch films, listen to songs etc and note the useful words

3. For teachers, it is a good idea to teach/learn words with associated meanings together

4. Teachers should encourage their students to listen to sports commentary and use class time to highlight the benefits of this.

5. Teachers may teach their students the grammatical names for the parts of speech and the phonemic script.

6. Teachers should encourage reading of different interests and areas.

7. Teachers need to give extra examples sentences to the students if they are unsure and encourage them to write the word in an example sentence (maybe for homework)

6. Conclusion

Students, teachers, materials, teaching methods and techniques, and evaluation are the essential components for language teaching and learning. The study has revealed the attitudes of learners and teachers towards the CLT and the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The use of mother tongue helps them understand the lessons more clearly and quickly same as (Zhao, 2005). Thus, L1 serves as a medium in effective foreign language delivery and the needs of learners of various mother languages has to be taken into consideration prior to actual classroom teaching. This attitude has a strong positive significance on the achievement of the learners. Most of the learners firmly believe that teaching and learning new words helps develop their four skills and is an important factor which affects the learners' achievement also. Attitudes towards learning new words always depends on learners' teaching and learning environment, desire of learning, industry, motivation etc. Though the test scores are not the same to all learners, both instruments provide the result that a vast majority of learners and teachers show their positive attitudes towards learning of new words for language acquisition.

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