

Enhancing Vocabulary through Academic Reading in Engineering Students

Shreeja Ghanta

Assistant Professor of English, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad, India

Abstract

The paper aims to explore the question of how language learners expand their knowledge of vocabulary in Indian context through academic reading. Students enrolled for law programme were asked to put down words that caused serious impediments in comprehending law texts and to write down, what they thought the words meant. The identified lists are analyzed in terms of core-specific vocabulary, the accuracy of the glosses and the reasons for misleading of

information. The analysis is considered with data collected in protocols and a translation task. Through the study, it can be concluded that a wide range of strategies can be used in order to learn vocabulary, each involving limitations and well as advantages. Students ought to be aware of the range so as to develop flexibility in their responses to unfamiliar words.

Keywords : *Vocabulary learning, Academic Reading, misinterpretation, Language and Context*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of process is well established in language research. Emig (1971) and Perl (1979) in the field of writing, introduced a tradition of studying on how people write rather than what they write. Zamel (1983) and Raimes (1988) carried this tradition in practice with ESL students. The process approach is increasingly affecting the field of reading, given the fact that reading being a receptive skill, is difficult to observe. Researchers like Hill and Larsen (1983) and Block (1986) introduced interview data and protocols to demonstrate that it is possible to reconstruct what goes on in readers' minds and how readers interpretation is as significant as what those interpretations are. Such process-oriented studies have proved valuable for those of us who teach reading and writing, for the knowledge of how people absorb the text which form a basis from which language instructors can advise learners to construct and reconstruct meaning.

However, a process that has been overlooked in second language research is that of vocabulary expansion. Studies in the past, have contributed on how second language learners infer word meanings from context but the question of how those inferences help build a native-like vocabulary has been considered. Consequently, language teachers develop an approach to the teaching and learning of words with their experience. Aitchison (1987) explains that the "mental lexicon" contains vast information arranged in such a way that it can be checked through with astonishing rapidity. The amount of words that learners know is huge. Aitchison supposes that the vocabulary of an average educated adult falls between the range of fifty thousand to as high as two lakhs fifty thousand. Aitchison, further, citing Fodor (1981), highlights that native speakers are affluent with the context of use and meaning of their knowledge of vocabulary.

It is not possible to judge from assessments in word recognition and association and from the errors made in aphasia as well as in slips of the tongue. Mental Lexicon must be arranged in a complex network of relationships

unlike the simple alphabetical listing we are accustomed to in dictionaries. The question of reflection is how can learners of a second language expand complex sentences of contextual vocabulary over the years or semesters, which many of them hope to do? Language Instructors must acknowledge that little vocabulary expansion is acquired through direct agency which is inside of the classrooms, for not many words are covered in class. The paper attempts to study how vocabulary building can be attained through academic reading.

The research was studied at Mahindra University which is a four-year engineering programme offering bachelor's and master's degrees within the city of Hyderabad. The college has diverse student population, of its fifty students, about hundred percent speak English as a second language. These ESL students before they could embark on their majors, they must take introductory courses that make up a core curriculum. In most of these introductory courses, teaching is confined to lectures and the assigned work is reading in standard college textbooks. There is little opportunity for instructors to check how well the students comprehend the material, and still less for the students to get linguistic help.

The area chosen for research was engineering, on the grounds that this subject would produce specialized vocabulary that could be expressed in the students' first languages without the use of loan words. Sections of the introductory law course at Mahindra University were surveyed to identify learners who were still enrolled in, or had only recently completed, the colleges ESL sequence and who had received at least a secondary education in their own country and in their own language. The students were asked to take up preliminary vocabulary test and then were asked, as they read the assignments in their law textbooks, to keep lists of words they encountered as difficult. They were even asked to write down what they guessed these words to mean and, if they chose to look the words up in the dictionary, to record the definition that they found there.

Students were approached to communicate their speculated implications, utilizing their first language for the reason in

the event that they thought that it is simpler. The glosses were compared with the original words, with the assistance of students who had proficiency in both first language and second language. The texts utilized were those recommended for the course which, on account of changes inside the Law school, ended up being diverse every year. The research intends to address three inquiries: Which words did students identify to be difficult? How effectively did they infer the meaning of the words? What factors have prompted confusion? It is simply conceivable to give a good guess of the complete number of words read, for there is no assurance that the learners read every one of the words on each page, and the quantity of words per page differs extensively.

Even this estimate portrays that the proportion of the words listed was small. This essentially does not mean that the students know all the words they have not recorded. There were several words which were recorded on a particular page appears, unrecorded, on a page that was read previously. It appears that learners read holistically much of the time and only recorded words that they were losing their grip on the text. The likelihood to skip unfamiliar words is observed in some students than in others. In the study, it is observed that few learners read much less than did all the others and proportionately recorded many words. The sources these learners were reading seemed to be more difficult than the other reading materials, which puts a greater emphasis on theory and lays out the factual information in a less systematic way. This does not account for the reference between proficiency of learners. The explanation may be that advanced level of ESL students knew more words. Another explanation may lie in their approach of the task, which the protocols depicted to be very difficult.

When addressing the protocol, learners read through an entire passage, which runs about eight hundred words, rapidly, marking only difficult words that they encountered. In the second reading of the passage, learners wrote words on their list, guessed its meaning and wrote the guess down (it was observed that learners have identified twenty words, and guessed meaning for about ten words). The proportion of words learners identified is higher than that recorded in their lists as a whole. There are two factors accounting for this: There is no assurance that learners read every page of the passage, that they have listed, especially since there are numerous boxed case studies that learners may not have skipped over. Second in the presence of an observer, learners were self-conscious, which could have made them less confident of their knowledge. This is a methodological problem in studies that use protocols.

Upon writing a word, guessing its meaning and entering their gloss, learners looked up the words in the dictionary before going on. Learners made their guesses very rapidly, without explicit looking at the preceding text and without articulating uses in the subsequent text and in a couple of instances learners simply gave up, leaving space for guessed meaning blank. Learners took longer duration to identify words in the dictionary and wrote down the definition found trying to identify the context. Learners with advanced level of proficiency read the text once and stopped at unfamiliar words. They spent time going back over the previous two or three sentences and sometimes going forward as well. On one occasion learners translated into their native language, albeit on their list, learners expressed only three of their thirty guesses in that language. In the two cases where learners have not guessed the meaning of the words, learners worked on the word and its context for a long time before giving up.

Learners with advanced level of proficiency were quicker at identifying the words in dictionary but when learners identified, spent time not only writing the definition but also understanding the context of the text. Learners with advanced level of language took only one hour to complete the protocol.

The fact that learners with basic level of proficiency took so long on the protocol passage also suggests why they read so little altogether. Learners in the initial level of the semester started reading very slowly and recording many words, but soon the list stopped coming in, and learners said it was because they could get all the information from the lectures, and it was not worth spending the time it took to read the text. If this was a general pattern learners explain why they knew fewer words than the others. It was observed that these learners took longer time to read, they were discouraged of the process and consequently exposed to little vocabulary. This supposition is supported by another feature that distinguishes learners with basic proficiency from the others. The proposition of words listed are of high frequency. This was verified by checking each of the words listed by each student against the counts published by Kucera and Francis (1967) and Hofland and Johansson (1982). Each of these counts portray how a particular string of letters occurs in a corpus of a million running words, the corpus being drawn from six hundred texts in twenty subject areas. In order to compare the students lists, the researcher defined as relatively any word that appears ten or more times in both of these two corpora, adding the singular and plural forms of nouns and the finite and nonfinite forms of verbs. The study identified in each students lists the words that were of high frequency and obtained the results displayed in table 1.

Table 1

Frequent words listed by students		
Students	No	% of all words listed
Venkat	2	3
Khushala	12	7
Vidhi	9	8
Aditi	35	32

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The adopted approach for this research paper is descriptive analytic method. Through this method the focus is on learner's perspective rather than the teacher's.

B. Population and Sample of the Study

This study was conducted at Mahindra University. The sample students taken for study are twenty students of first year computer science students.

C. Research Instrument

In order to improve technical vocabulary among engineering students academic reading of select books were considered. The tasks engage students to develop in sentence structures, vocabulary, subject-verb-agreement, punctuations, articles and tenses.

D. Data Analysis

Activities described in the paper were conducted with all the participants. The activities centre on the difficulties students

encounter while reading and writing English.

E. Result Analysis

Through the following tasks and activities students learn the basic tenets of writing skills. They include clarity to explain and express messages, accuracy of vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation, using simple and relevant details. Students are able to render messages with completeness; place ideas in an orderly sequence and emphasis on arrangement of words.

The figures exhibit that for all the learners most of the words that caused glitches occurred infrequently. However, learners of basic proficiency recorded higher proportion of relatively frequent ones than did the others. This makes sense if the learners are reading less, even if the reading is done carefully, for learners would have identified fewer words and

Conclusion

The research paper raises more questions than they answer. What does it mean when a learner records a word as difficult? How much can we presume that learners comprehend words that they do not record? How do students' inferences reflect their thoughts? It is thus suggested through the study that there has been correlation between how much people read and how many words they know. Learners of basic level of proficiency read little of law texts and recorded a higher proportion of words than did other level of students. There were also words proportionately of relatively high frequency. This seems to indicate a circular process: learners read little and so comes across relatively few words. Consequently, learners slowed down in their reading process

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would have had few encounters with even frequent ones. Instructors should not overemphasize for the words classified in the study as frequent cannot be considered common once in 100,000 is not a high rate of occurrence. The point highlights the major concern that advanced ESL students face, namely, that the further they progress the more they will have to learn large number of words they come across rarely. It is suggested in the study that learners include specialized vocabulary specific to law and this would make the problem of learning less, since within the field they would appear often. A glance at the reading sources shows that such words do indeed occur, but to judge from the learners lists, they were not the prime cause of difficulty. The number of law-specific words is so small that it is possible to list them all individually.

by the many words that are unfamiliar. Learners with advanced level of proficiency read a great deal and seemed to know a large proportion of the words, especially of the more frequent ones. Here the circle seems a more virtuous one: Learners with basic level of proficiency had to stop for few words, it is relatively easy for them to infer their meanings, so they can read more quickly, encounter more new words, and re-encounter sooner those that he is already getting to know. Thus, one aspect of our traditional practice in teaching ESL is confirmed: To establish a firm foundation for the vocabulary building to be done in academic courses, we should encourage our students to read as much as they can before they leave our classes. As Krashen (1989) has argued, plenty of comprehensible input may be the single most important factor in second language.

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