

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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The Role of Dictionary in Language Learning

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The Use of Dictionary in Language Learning

Dictionary plays an important role in learning a language that is not our own. In Pakistan, for example, we learn a variety of languages such as Arabic, Persian, English, other European languages and some important Asian and African languages. As these languages are not generally spoken in day-to-day living, students benefit by the use of bi and multilingual dictionaries while learning these languages. Even the learning of Urdu, which is widely known and used in Pakistan, will benefit by the use of dictionaries, as the standard language tends to use vocabulary that needs to be consciously learned.

Vocabulary Learning

Importance of vocabulary knowledge, the building blocks of communication, cannot be exaggerated. Good, relevant and purposeful vocabulary is an essential component of becoming a fluent speaker. Many a time, in Pakistan, vocabulary learning takes place as a by-product of reading, since most of our learning another language especially English is by reading and writing, not by actually speaking it. A sentence could be made incomprehensible by the occurrence of a single unknown word. The learner, then, could consult a dictionary to comprehend the text, not necessarily to learn and remember the new word. But through regular reading, she may remember and recognize some new words she came across in her reading in a subconscious way.

Vocabulary learning, in the reading process, is not learner's conscious decision, and thus learning words becomes incidental or unintentional, and this process is called incidental vocabulary learning.

The Stages of Knowing a Word

However, learning a new word is an intricate process in itself and involves many stages. Nation (1990) has classified the process of knowing word or vocabulary knowledge into following stages.

Form Spoken form	R What does the word sound like ? P How is the word produced ?
	Written form R What does the word look like? P How is the word written and spelled?
Position Grammatical patterns	R In what patterns does the word occur? P In what patterns must we use the word?
	Collocations R What words or types of words can be expected before or after the word? P What words or types of words must we use with this word?
Function Frequency	R How common is the word? P How often should the word be used?
	Appropriateness R Where would we expect to meet the words? P Where can this word be used?
Meaning Concept	R What does the word mean? P What word should be used to express this meaning?
	Associations R What other words does this word make us think of? P What other words could we use instead of this one?

Table 4.1: Knowing a word (based on Nation (1990, p.31))

Keys: R = receptive knowledge, P = productive knowledge

Tono's Classification

But as an improvement over Nation (1990), Tono (2001:18) added "Stages of Vocabulary Knowledge Acquisition."

Primacy	P/R	Knowledge category
1	R	Meaning / concept Form / recognizing the word through spelling and sound

	P	Meaning / concept Form / spelling and pronouncing the word correctly
2	R	Position / grammatical patterns (part of speech) Position / collocations
3	P	Position / grammatical patterns Position / collocations
4	R/P	Function / frequency and appropriateness
	R/P	Meaning / association

Table 4.2. The stages of vocabulary knowledge acquisition. (Adopted from Tono (2001:18))

The Importance of Knowing the Meaning

Based on the process of vocabulary acquisition, we can say that the first and foremost important stage of vocabulary acquisition is to know the *meaning* of a word, along with the receptive and productive knowledge of *form*.

The second stage is that of Receptive knowledge of position, while the productive knowledge of position is on the third stage. Receptive/productive knowledge of function and meaning is the next stage of vocabulary acquisition. But these stages do not always follow the set order. Sometimes first and second stage can occur simultaneously or stage four could be developed at an earlier stage.

The Scene in South Asia

Since the South Asian nations such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have a long tradition of having the English language taught by the nationals, not necessarily by the native speakers of English, our focus on form was clearly related to the process of reproducing at the sound level the correct spelling of the words being taught. Our pronunciation tended/tends to mimic the spelling rather than the actual native or native-like form of pronunciation. We are guided more by the spelling in our pronunciation.

Studies on the Role of Dictionary

Many researchers (Summers (1998), Krants (1991), Hulstijn (1993), Laufer (1993, 2000), Luppescu and Day (1993), Laufer and Melamed (1994), Knight (1994), Nist and Olejnik (1995), Hulstijn et al. (1996), Fraser (1999)) have conducted research to study the role of dictionary in vocabulary learning (particularly L2 vocabulary learning).

Krants (1991) studied L2 vocabulary learning (with the help of dictionary) while reading a lengthy text. 52 Swedish undergraduate students took part in his research and they were allowed to consult an electronic dictionary. To check the subjects' vocabulary knowledge, before and after test, a pre-post test was designed. The results showed that 213 different words were looked up, equivalent to 42% of unknown test word types. The interesting fact is that one-fifth of test words were actually learned by the subjects.

Situation in Pakistan

I wonder how students in Pakistan would respond to such tests. Our general tendency is to guess the meaning based on the context of the sentences. This is an important skill, but this tendency may have a dominant role only in our adulthood! Checking a dictionary when one encounters an unknown or unfamiliar word is something that needs to be encouraged when we learn a language not our own. In addition, access to dictionaries is not easily available in our classrooms. Perhaps keeping a good dictionary, which gives meaning(s) and usage examples, in the classroom, must be encouraged.

A recent report from a rural school in southern India indicates that parents have begun to demand such action. In a Parent-Teacher Association meeting at St. John's Nursery and Primary School, Tenkasi, Tamilnadu, parents wanted that every classroom be equipped with a good dictionary of English and that students be encouraged to regularly use the same as part of classroom activities. Please see the picture below. (Information and photo provided by M. S. Thirumalai, Adjunct Teacher, St. John's Nursery and Elementary School, Tenkasi, India.)



Laufer (1993), in her research, compared the effectiveness of only definition, example and of both, in comprehension and production. The results showed that the combination of definition and examples yielded the best results in learning the new vocabulary. Results also suggest that the definition factor is more effective for subjects' comprehension of new words, then come examples.

Use of Definition to Teach a Word

While I tend to agree to this suggestion, and while I am for implementing this in classrooms in Pakistan, it is important for us to clearly understand what we mean by *definition*, and also the age and level of education in which recourse to definition will result in better vocabulary acquisition.

For example, Thirumalai (2003) suggests,

Definition is an important tool for the process of scientific inquiry. A concept is identified, described, and its limits and spread well established in devising a definition for it. In essence, meaning of a word or phrase is well established for proper use in the making of a definition. Definition may be considered a naming

process as well as a process of elucidating a word/phrase and its reference to a concept.

The process of arriving at a definition is somewhat closer to the way we teach vocabulary items not known to the learners. In the teaching of vocabulary items, we bring out their meanings in a number of ways. We may show the object or a picture of it and utter the word. We may explain the meaning by means of a paraphrase; we may explain the meaning by giving equivalent terms in another language known to the learners; or we may explain the meaning indirectly by indicating more complex relations between a term and other lexical units appearing in the context.

In South Asian contexts, verbal descriptions alone will not be useful as a means of providing definitions of words. Additional techniques suggested above will help to achieve our goal of introducing and learning a new word better.

For the purpose of production, a combined entry (definition + example) is more useful. Laufer (1990) believes that when a word looks familiar but makes no sense in the context in which it is found; the learners should be encouraged to consult a dictionary.

Comparing the Amount of Vocabulary Learned

In another research, conducted by Luppescu and Day (1993), a comparison of amount of vocabulary learning was made when

- a) students use dictionary while reading a text
- b) students do not use a dictionary while reading a text

The results showed that students' performance, in a vocabulary test, is highly affected by dictionary use. Those, who used dictionary, scored higher as compared to those who did not use dictionary.

The Role of Inferring the Meaning of a Word

Fraser (1999) showed that only inferring or consulting a dictionary yield 30% or 31% rate of recall while a combination of both (inferring + consulting a dictionary) can bestow 50% of recall. All these findings show that role of dictionary in vocabulary (L1 & L2) learning is vital and students must become skilled at (from the early stages of learning) using dictionary as a tool to enhance their vocabulary.

Conclusion

Vocabulary learning is an important part of learning another language. Use of Dictionary plays an important role as a tool to learn new words in the language that we learn. A well-written dictionary with pronunciation guidelines will help South Asian learners to acquire not only the meaning but also the correct form of pronunciation in addition to mastering spelling. Definition

of meaning along with appropriate example of the object, act or quality intended by the meaning of the word will be very helpful.

I plan to submit my proposals on the use of dictionary for decoding activities in my next paper.

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