

Vocabulary : A Problem of Thai Students in Learning English as a Second Language

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The purpose of this article is to propose some useful teaching techniques for teachers to help Thai students overcome the obstacles blocking them, to a certain extent, from acquiring English vocabulary at greatest ease. The article will be presented under the following five headings :

1. The importance of vocabulary study in language learning
2. Statistic evidence of Thai students' weakness in English vocabulary learning
3. Causes of difficulties for Thai students in learning English vocabulary
4. Suggestions for solving vocabulary learning problems
5. Summary

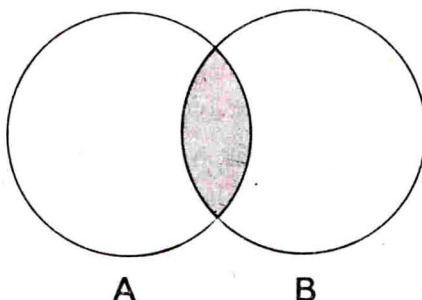
The Importance of Vocabulary in Language Learning

'Vocabulary', as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1979, is

1. a list of words and often phrases usually arranged alphabetically and defined or translated; a lexicon or glossary; or
2. all of the words of a language; or
3. the sum of words used by, understood by, or at the command of a particular person, social group, profession, trade, or the like; or
4. a command or reserve of expressive techniques, repertoire.

(William Morris, ed., 1979; L434).

The definitions clearly imply that 'vocabulary' is an essential conventional tool for transmitting ideas and knowledge, but only among people whose 'vocabulary' overlaps, if not the same.



As we are not concerned here with smoke signals, body gestures, facial expressions, and other forms of nonverbal communication; i.e. we disregard the fourth definition of 'vocabulary' we may conclude, with considerable confidence that the heart of language learning for learners is to establish within their brain a set of workable vocabulary consisting of lexical items of which meanings, syntactic and semantic features are as similar to those of the average native speakers of the language as possible, if not identical. Psycholinguistically speaking, a lexical item is projected in a person's brain together with its meaning and also with its syntactic and semantic features, which are acquired bit by bit through the learner's experience in the language, for a meaning of a lexical item is a socially-standardized concept shared among the members of a speech community as well as its syntactic and semantic features. The write out of the hypothesized imprint format of words is given the linguistic term 'lexicon'. Dr. Starosta of the University of Hawaii, the founder of "Lexicase Grammar", which takes that a grammar of a language is at the word level, is now devoting his time to the writing of a lexicon for the English language. Dependencies between words, determined by the syntactic and semantic features of each word, is a key terminology of the lexicase grammar. In other words, lexicase grammar emphasized that words can collocate only when the features of one word fit well with the features of another word without violating the selectional restriction of one another; for example, the inanimate noun 'honest' cannot appear as a subject of the verb 'see', which requires (+animate subject).¹

Viewing the learning of a language from the recognition side, one sees that "the meaning of a sentence is not the sum total of the meanings of the individual words of that sentence: (Smith, 1971 : 36). The meaning of each word in a sentence is determined by the interaction of syntactic and semantic features of each word within the sentence or a larger linguistic unit such as, a discourse; for example, the two dull's in 'a dull room' and 'a dull person' mean differently. The first 'dull' in 'a dull room' has the semantic feature (+animate) head noun attached to it, which allows it to co-occur with the inanimate noun 'room' and means "dark", while the second 'dull' in 'a dull person' has the semantic feature (+animate) head noun attached to it, which allows it to co-occur with the animate noun 'person' and means "stupid". The concept leads to the coinage of the term "contextual reading".

As the concept of dependencies between words turns to be very helpful in the development of the recognitive skill, or the ability to recognize word meaning while reading, and the productive skill, or the ability to use words correctly in writing and speaking, vocabulary study is of prime importance in the learning of a language.

Statistic Evidence of Thai University Students in Learning English Vocabulary

The results of the tests on incorrect and improper usage in English of 121 first year Science students conducted in 1975 and the results of the tests of 104 fourth year same Science students conducted in 1978 by Associate Professor Bang-Orn Savangvarorose revealed that among the eight topics of study, namely, lexical choice, articles, pronoun agreement, tenses, modals, parallel structure, connectors and miscellaneous, the mean scores calculated for lexical choice were the worst as illustrated in the TABLE below.

TABLE 1 : Mean scores of tests on incorrect and improper usage in English of Science students when being freshmen and seniors.

TESTED AREAS	FULL SCORES	MEAN SCORES	
		1st YEAR (1975)	4th YEAR (1978)
1. Lexical Choice	10	1.84	3.36
2. Article	10	2.34	4.13
3. Pronoun and Pronoun Concord	10	5.47	5.47
4. Connectives	10	4.30	4.95
5. Parallel Structure	10	4.24	5.51
6. Tenses	10	3.89	4.29
7. Modals	10	3.39	4.55
8. Miscellaneous (Conjugation, Derivatives, Spellings)	10	3.81	5.01

Note : The number of students tested in 1975 is 121 and that tested in 1978 is 104.

Additionally, the results obtained from the cloze tests to measure the Science students' ability in reading comprehension showed that the students performed worst when content words were concerned. That is, when the full scores of the test on content words and those of the test on function words were 25 points each, the mean scores for content words calculated from the raw scores of 142 second, third and fourth year Science students and 10 second year Engineering students were 8.4506 and the mean scores for function words of the same subjects were 12.7160. The results were statistically significant at 0.05 level and confirmed that the students were poor in the area of vocabulary.

Causes of Difficulties For Thai Students in Learning English Vocabulary

According to the findings resulted from a close investigation into the learning of English vocabulary of Thai students: there are five main criteria that cause and intensify the difficulty in vocabulary learning. They are in order of importance as follows:

1. Students' ignorance of newly encountered words
2. Students' bad habit formation of using bilingual dictionary
3. Students' insufficient practice in English
4. Impossibility to create a direct teaching of a complete set of English vocabulary
5. Differences in the overall structure of English and Thai

I Students Ignorance of Newly Encountered Words.

The criterion, viewed from the students' side, intensifies the difficulty in acquiring a foreign language for ignoring new words results in failure to register them into the cortex, consequently, recognitive skill cannot be formed. Lacking the recognitive skill, productive skill can, by no means, be developed.

It has been reported by a number of English instructors that Thai students of all levels tend to overlook new words they happen to come across in reading or conversing. The problem is even more serious among poor students.

II Students Bad Habit Formation of Using Bilingual Dictionary.

A harmful but a most common practice in learning vocabulary is that students tend to look up meanings of newly seen words in a bilingual dictionary and immediately write down the meanings of the words in their native language right above the words in the passage. As such, when they go over the passage again, most probably, the foreign words fail to be perceived. Several times, teachers of English for Thai students found that some students may even go further to the point that they write down a complete translation of a sentence given by the teachers over the line. Obviously, new words can hardly be recognized and learned by 'avoiding the issue' (Chastain, 1976).

III Students Insufficient Practice in English

It has always been a fact that one will never get to know anything unless he opens his eyes and ears and makes himself available for a contact with it. By the same token, one will never learn words in a language unless he sees, hears and uses them. The more experience in a language one has; gained either through reading, writing or conversing in the language, the more words he has in his memory storage.

More often than not Thai students read only what they are assigned to read for a course, or they do not read at all. Text books in English are bitter medicine to them. Moreover, Thai students, especially poor students, as reported by English instructors at CULI, are afraid to converse in English, especially when their conversees are foreigners whose first language is English. "Deaf and mute" is the exact description of their reaction.

IV Impossibility to Create a Direct Teaching of Complete Set of English Vocabulary

Vocabulary of a language is comparable to a living creature. It goes through stages of development, i.e., it is born, grows up, and dies. New words, therefore, arise everyday. In the growing-up stage, new meaning (s) may be attached to a word and/or the original meaning of the word may be totally discarded due to certain social changes. Creation of new words and word borrowing from other languages are devices for vocabulary growth. As a result, there is no such thing as a complete acquisition of vocabulary. Consequently, direct teaching or learning of vocabulary by memorizing a dictionary or glossaries is by all means, inadequate and impractical.

V Differences in the Overall Structure of English and Thai.

In accordance with the psychological explanation on learning theory, positive learning or positive transfer requires less learning time and effort, and takes place only when the task to be accomplished has similar nature to the previously learned one.² In agreement to this, Lado stated that "similarity and difference of the native language in forms, meaning and distribution will result in ease and difficulty in acquiring the vocabulary of a foreign language" (Lado, 1972 : 283)

In the case of Thai students learning English as a second language, they have to face differences in language structures. To begin at the word level, English is grouped in the highly inflectional language group, where the concept of affixation plays an important role in the changing of word meaning, especially in terms of numbers, tenses, and word classes, and Thai is mainly a monosyllabic language, and affixation functions to attach extra meaning to the root without changing word numbers, tenses or word classes, the native speakers of Thai will certainly have hard times acquiring the mechanism of English affixation, which is different from that existing in the Thai language. At a higher level of syntax, although both English and Thai are at the surface level SVO languages; i.e., words appear in a sentence in the order of Subject-Verb-Object, the ordering of adjectives and nouns differ. In English adjectives precede nouns they modify while in Thai the reverse order of noun+adjective is grammatical.

Suggestions for Solving Vocabulary Learning Problem

The most important factor that encourages successful learning is learner's strong determination or motivation or intention to learn. To establish the motivation to learn, words on the importance of English in students' future progress in life and work are called for. However, boredom arises at times. Most of the time, it results from the badly-graded materials, the lack of good teaching aids, such as film strips, tape recorders; i.e., audio-visual aids, and the students' physically and/or mentally ill condition.

In the area of vocabulary learning, well-graded materials, consisting of topics of students' interests, are essential so as to enable students to easily learn new words from context at maximum enthusiasm. The method of extracting word meaning from context clues does not only help students improve their cognitive skill, but also help them perform better when productive skill expressed in speaking and writing are required.

Apart from well-graded materials, productive devices in guessing word meaning are to be presented to students with sufficient exercises for practice. The most useful device is the mechanism of 'affixation'.

Nonetheless, there are cases when the method of presenting words and their meaning in a list for students to study is chosen. If the method is selected, it is suggested that words appearing on the list gather around topics concerning students' lives and interests.³ The manner in which meanings of words are given should be monolingual and/or pictorial. The language used in explaining the meanings should be easy and must not exceed students' ability to comprehend. Bilingual method of giving word meanings or translation method should be avoided except that it provides exact word meaning in a few words and much shorter than the English explanation.

Encouragement for students to use monolingual dictionary of their level should be emphasized. It should be used only for consulting purposes when meanings of some words cannot be extracted from the passage.

Exercises to increase the students' ability to manipulate the words they recognize should be compiled. They are in various forms. Following are two examples of exercises used for practicing the possible co-occurrence of lexical items adapted from the exercises suggested by Dorothy F. Brown in "Advanced Vocabulary Teaching: The Problem of Collocation". *RELC Journal*, Vol. V : 2 (Dec.) 1974. The exercises are in a way, built on the concept of Dr. Starosta's lexicase grammar which talks about dependencies between words of different classes. Only words of which syntactic and semantic features fit together can co-occur.

Example exercise I

Instruction : For each of the following verbs, choose four noun phrases from the given list which you think could go together with the verbs. Write your answers in the spaces provided.

a public hospital	a conversation	young children from war
a mining company	a university	a game
the crop from thieves	your plans	his opinions
your skull from injury	a house	the trousers
a discussion	the region from the enemy	a meeting

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. to take part in _____ | 3. to found _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| 2. to alter _____ | 4. to protect _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

Example exercise II

Instruction: For each of the following adjectives, choose 2 to 3 nouns from the given list which you think could make up meaningful phrases. Try not to copy from the possible answers provided. Discuss your answers with your teacher. Be careful with articles.

Nouns: feelings reasons by marriage
 a road heat way
 an envelope a bridge a tube
 a number geography knowledge
 an idea money

- Adjectives:
- | | | | |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. intense: | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. narrow: | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. sealed: | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. political: | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5. limited: | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6. related: | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 7. various: | _____ | _____ | _____ |

- Possible answers:
1. intense feelings, intense heat
 2. a narrow road, a narrow bridge
 3. a sealed envelope, a sealed letter, a sealed tube
 4. a political situation, political geography
 5. a limited number, limited money, limited knowledge
 6. a related idea, related by marriage.
 7. various reasons, various ways, various ideas

After new words are introduced to students, repetitive use of them either in reading passages or speaking is recommended so as to make sure that the words with their single or multi-meanings and their usages break through the barriers; i.e., students' ignorance and forgetfulness, and penetrate into the cognitive area in their brain for short and later long-term storage. Compulsory outside reading plan should be promoted as a part in English courses, especially reading courses, but it should not be overridden. Through the plan, students will be exposed to more words and see them more often functioning the same or differently and meaning the same or differently in a variety of context.⁹ Encouragement for students to use the words in speaking and writing is one important way to ensure that students acquire the words.

Summary

As words are conventional units in a language that are used in transmitting ideas among people who share the same set of vocabulary, learning a language primarily aims at the acquisition of some words in the language, their functions and their possible order in a sentence. Thai students have problems in learning English as a second language in various areas. The worst is in the area of lexical choice. Possible causes for the weakness are mainly students' ignorance of newly seen words, students' preference for bilingual dictionary, students' insufficient practice in the language, the impossibility to teach a complete set of vocabulary and the difference in the structures of the two languages, Thai and English.

The suggestions start with the building up of motivation to learn and go to the preparation of good materials, i.e. well-graded materials with topics that interest students. Contextual learning is the method recommended. Audio-visual teaching aids, exercises especially those on collocation and use of monolingual dictionary of students' level are supplementary to the method. Repetition and practice are two key terms in learning a foreign language vocabulary.

Notes

1. A part of the note from a lecture for "Transformational Grammar", given by Ajarn Sarinee Aniwat at Thammasat University in 1974, taken by Nuntika Thanomsat.
2. Marton Waldemar, "Foreign Vocabulary Learning as Problem Number One of Foreign Language Teaching at the Advanced Level", *Interlanguage Studies Bulletin* (Utrecht) 2:1, 1977, pp. 33-57.
3. Honeyfield, John, "Word Frequency and Importance of Context in Vocabulary Learning", *RELC Journal* Vol. 8:2, December 1977, pp. 35-42; and Higa, Masonori "The Psycholinguistic Concept of "Difficulty" and the Teaching of Foreign Language Vocabulary", *Readings on English as a second Language for Teachers and Teacher-Trainees*, Winthrop Publishers, Inc. 1972 pp. 292-303.

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