

Enhancing young learners' vocabulary: What can we do?

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Vocabulary is one of the influential elements that young learners must master in order to be fluent users of English. Fluent users mean that they are able to involve actively in different kinds of activities by using their receptive and productive skills of English: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Uberman (1998:20) states, "Vocabulary acquisition is increasingly viewed as crucial to language acquisition". At this stage of life, young learners are capable of absorbing rich exposures of English if given appropriately since they are still in the stage of life called the golden age. This means that they are surprisingly able to learn and acquire vocabulary fast. Therefore, giving right scaffoldings may result in better learning outcome. On the other hand, young learners learn English quite differ from those of adults do. They need certain approaches in order to reach the learning objectives since they have unique characteristics in learning. Thus, the teaching and learning vocabulary should be designed in such a way catering their learning characteristics. This paper will discuss 1) challenges in vocabulary learning, 2) activities in teaching vocabulary, and 3) and suggestions to the teaching and learning of vocabulary

Key words: young learners, vocabulary, learning characteristics, activities

Background

As an influential international language, English is taught since elementary level of education. Although there is a shift of position; beforehand English is included in the curriculum and now it is served as an extracurricular subject, the importance of teaching and learning it doesn't change. For examples, many parents still send their children to English courses to give them more exposure of English to them. They think two hours a week of English lesson at school is not sufficient. They believe that by giving their children more lessons of English may result in better learning outcome. What they believe is relevant to Musthafa (2002) who states that children who get good quality of exposure, such as good pronunciation; and sufficient frequency and volume of contact with the target language may be good user of English.

The importance of vocabulary learning

Vocabulary is defined as the knowledge of words and the meanings of words. Quoted from Diamond and Guthlon, Steven Stahl (2005) states, "Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world". This means vocabulary cannot be fully mastered only by completing a series of vocabulary courses. Students need vigorous exercises so that they comprehend of how to use the words correctly.

To be able to actively use English, young learners should have sufficient vocabulary repertoire. Therefore, young learners should be facilitated to learn vocabulary. Teachers tend to

teach grammar because it is a finite system, while vocabulary is not. Vocabulary develops from time to time. Consequently, teachers should keep up with the ever-expanding words. The argument on the importance of teaching vocabulary is strong. Uberman (1998:20) states, "Vocabulary acquisition is increasingly viewed as crucial to language acquisition". Moreover, Meara (1995) indicates that knowing only 500 words is functionally in vain. English learners with such number of vocabulary will find difficulty in understanding a text. Furthermore, Richards (2000) states that it is lexical competence not the learning of grammatical structures became the priority for language learners because lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence.

On the other hand, Read (2009) states that vocabulary and grammar are closely interrelated in young learners' early language learning, both in L1 and in second or foreign language. They started from learning chunks of language which combine vocabulary and grammatical patterns, in a holistic and unanalyzed way. Moreover, young learners often appraise their own language learning progress in terms of 'how many words they know'. Learning vocabulary can be one of the most noteworthy and rewarding outcomes in the first year of English lessons. It boosts young learners' confidence and self-esteem. Thus, the teaching of vocabulary is inevitable in learning English.

Young learners' learning characteristics

Young learners differ from adults. They have their own learning characteristics which are different from those of adults. Recognizing young learners' learning characteristics would be advantageous for teachers in setting the teaching methods and designing suitable activities. As the result the teaching and learning process may run smoothly. Following are the characteristics of young learners' learning from several resources:

- 1) Through physical experience; young learners learn by way of physical experience (hands-on experience). This means their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and, crucially, have an opportunity to touch and interact with. Harmer (2002:38), Musthafa (2002), Harmer (2002:38) and Scott and Ytreberg (1990:2). Shin (2006:3) also that young learners' understanding comes through hands, eyes, and ears
- 2) One thing at a time; young learners are able to cope with one thing at a time without a great deal difficulty. Teaching a lot of things to them at once may cause frustration and failure, both to young learners and the teacher. Sinaga (1997) suggest when teaching 'preferences', for example, a teacher does not have to use all the subjects at once as it is possible to be done in adult classes. He should limit based on their timely need (I and You first then next session followed by He and She). Shin (2006:4) also recommends to teach the lesson in themes. So, giving a variety of activities is good to facilitate their short attention span, but it is important to have them connect to each other in order to support the language learning process.
- 3) Learn when kept as a whole; learn indirectly; Brown (2002) states that young learners often learn indirectly rather than directly that is they take in information from all sides, learning from everything around them rather than focusing on the precise topic. And they generally display enthusiastic manner for learning and a curiosity about the world around them.
- 4) "I"-centered characteristic; young learners are keen to talk about themselves, and respond well to learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topics in the classroom. So,

it is worth considering giving them topics that are within their prior knowledge so that by sufficient demonstration they will learn the language outlined by Nunan (2002).

- 5) Learn fast forget quickly; unless activity are extremely engaging young learners can easily get bored, losing interest after several minutes of the activity. Because they are centered to here and now, on the functional purposes of language, therefore, activities should be designed to capture their immediate interest Nunan (2002), Brown (2002) and Shin (2006).
- 6) Fun learning; young learners cannot be expected to sit down and do a certain activity for a long time. Activities should be planned to capture their interest, short, and varied to allow a change of their mood.
- 7) Responsive; young learners respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual word Harmer (2002).

The above characteristics of young learners learning should be taken into consideration in designing the teaching techniques so that the target of teaching and learning can favorably achieved. The pedagogical implications are teachers need to can be done facilitate young learners' learning characteristics. This can be carried out by setting up a fun, engaging yet meaningful learning atmosphere. Then, the material given should be within young learners prior knowledge and relevant to their 'here and now' need. The activities should be designed by grading the level of difficulty in each task.

Then modifying the tasks into silent and rigorous ones is recommended to avoid boredom. There should be physical activities, such as role-play, play games, or do Total Physical Response activities. Sensory aids can help them to internalize concepts. The smell of flowers, the touch of objects and fruits, the taste of food, and so on, the use of audiovisual aids like video, pictures, tape, music are important elements in their language teaching. In short, the physical world is dominant in young learner's life.

Challenges in vocabulary learning

To teach English means to exercise young learners' four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing, including grammatical points, pronunciation and vocabulary. However, Indonesian young learners face challenges in learning English as a foreign language both in informal as well as formal setting.

The first challenge concerns with lacking use of English language in real life situations. This lack of exposure to functional uses of English makes it complicated for them to see learning English as a useful and relevant activity (Mustafa, 2002). This is in line with Brown's (2001), who states that young learners are good meaningful acquirers of language because they associate sounds, words, structures, and discourse elements with that which is relevant and important in their daily quest for knowledge and survival. In other words, they can learn better when the knowledge to be transferred is within their needs and interests. They will find that the learning of English is meaningful. Thus, exposure from the environment plays a great role for young learners learning English.

The second challenge lies on the differences between English and Bahasa Indonesia in some ways. This may cause problems for them. Firstly, in Bahasa Indonesia there is no change

of verb form when using third person singular subject when talking about present or daily activities, but there is in English. Another problem relates to the way English words are written as opposed to the way the words are pronounced (Mustafa: 2002). English words are spelled and pronounced differently from those of Bahasa Indonesia. Another problem is word pattern used in English is also different from that of Indonesian. This may confuse them who are used to Indonesian word pattern. If in Indonesian People say *boneka lucu* and the equivalent in English is *lucu boneka/a cute doll*. Of course to do this, children will need some time to comprehend the switch of word position when they are dealing with English pattern.

In line with above description, Riddell (2010) mentions three challenges when learning new words. Firstly, it relates to meaning. A word may have more than one meaning. Words may have different connotations, i.e. the meaning can be interpreted in different ways, for example, *slim*, *thin*, and *skinny*. Secondly, it connects with form. The spelling may be very different from the sound, for example, *cough*. A word may be more than one part of speech. Some words are irregular, different varieties of English, for example, the plural of *person* is *people*, and the plural of *sheep* is *sheep*. Spelling patterns are not obvious, e.g. *cut/cutting*, *happy/happier*. Lastly, it relates to pronunciation. The sound may not correspond to the spelling. Learners may find difficulty knowing how many syllables the word is broken up into (the word *clothes* often mistaken to be pronounced as two syllables). Some words have shifting stress, e.g. *conduct* and *import* as a noun and a verb. Some words with different spelling and meanings are pronounced the same, e.g. *bear/bare*.

Activities in teaching vocabulary

Read (2007:85-86) highlights some points in vocabulary teaching. Firstly, young learners should learn the words and concepts. They need to be able to remember it whenever they need it, and in the long term, to gradually extend their understanding of its use. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) indicate criteria for knowing a word:

- 1) understand the words in written and spoken form,
- 2) recall it when need it,
- 3) use it in the correctly in grammar and meaning,
- 4) pronounce and spell it correctly,
- 5) use it in the right situation.

Secondly, recycling is essential in vocabulary learning. This is useful in helping to remember the words taught in long term period. In relation to this viewpoint, McCarthy (1990) proposes three strategies in teaching vocabulary:

1. By topic or theme, for example, colors, rooms in the house, in the supermarket, food
2. By focusing on meaning, such as, collocation, semantic sets, register, discourse analysis
3. By focusing on form, for example, word formation, like, roots, suffixes, and prefixes; compounds and phrasal verbs

Thirdly, it is important to give adequate vocabulary practice. It is appropriate to teach concrete vocabulary items which relate to the 'here and now' of their immediate environment and personal experience. In practicing vocabulary, allow young learners to have opportunities to:

- Associate words and meanings and develop their recall of vocabulary
- Think about the properties and meanings of words
- Improve their recognition and spelling of vocabulary
- Reinforce connections between words
- Personalize vocabulary learning
- Develop strategies in inferring meaning
- Develop strategies for conveying the meaning of unfamiliar words
- Collaborate and interact with others

Building language awareness is another factor that needed to develop in the vocabulary learning activities. This can be carried out by employing variety of forms.

Cited from Shin (2006) "One way to capture young learners' attention and keep them engaged in activities is to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visual, toys, puppet, or objects to match the one used in stories that you tell or songs that you sings". Riddell (2010:69-70) added tips to illustrate meaning to young learners:

1. Use pictures or drawings, for example, rather than explaining what *lorry/truck* is, show them a picture of one.
2. Use realia (actual object), for example, rather than explaining what *a credit card* is, show them one.
3. Use mime. For example, rather than explaining the word *tired* and *jump* is, just mime it. Also with *heavy*, ... try to pick up something in the class and *exaggerate* the fact that is heavy to lift
4. Use contrast. For example, with *heavy* you could also *pick* up something which is not heavy to *emphasize* the point.
5. Use synonyms of a *lower* level, for example, for *exhausted*, you could say 'a word meaning *very tired*'.
6. Use spoken gap-fill sentences, for example: *I ate four pieces of cake. I was very if the students know the word greedy, they will complete the word greedy.*
7. With higher levels, try to use students-centered approaches to increase independence.
8. Matching exercises can combine some of the above approaches.
9. Following a reading task, students can look at given words in the text and match them with or deduce their meaning.
10. Avoid too much of teacher-centered approach and instead encourage students to work more independently.

Suggestions to the teaching and learning of vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of the influential elements that young learners must master in order to be fluent users of English. Fluent users imply that they are able to involve actively in different

kinds of activities by using their receptive and productive skills of English: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Therefore, giving right scaffoldings by applying appropriate techniques may result in better learning outcome.

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