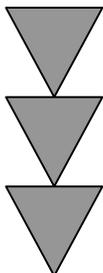


## ASPECTS OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

**Luminița ANDREI COCĂRȚĂ**

---

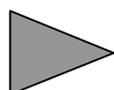
---

***Abstract***

---

---

*The present article focuses on some aspects of English vocabulary acquisition, starting from factors influencing this process and going through statistics of vocabulary size, approaches and strategies of language learning, as well as instances that could be considered barriers in the acquisition of English vocabulary.*



---

---

***Factors influencing the acquisition of a foreign language***

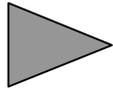
---

---

There are many factors influencing the acquisition of a foreign language. Usually, students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse needs and goals. These very goals may determine how they use the language being learned, how native-like their pronunciation will be, how lexically-elaborate and grammatically-accurate their utterances will be, and how much energy they will spend to understand messages in the target language. Learners' goals can vary from "wholly

integrative” (the desire to assimilate and become a full member of the English speaking world) to “primarily instrumental” (oriented towards specific goals, such as academic or professional success), terms used by Gardner in a study of contemporary education (1999: 7).

One aspect which is, nevertheless, essential for every learner is knowledge of the vocabulary. In what follows, I will present some relevant statistics concerning vocabulary acquisition, and focus on different vocabulary learning strategies and techniques.



---

---

### *Vocabulary acquisition – some statistics*

---

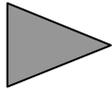
---

It is obvious that one should have sufficient vocabulary knowledge to communicate in a foreign language, because vocabulary knowledge enables language use. Not being able to find the words you need to express yourself is one of the most frustrating experiences in speaking a foreign language. Possessing a rich vocabulary is seen as something valuable, because vocabulary size is a reflection of how educated, intelligent, or well-read a person is.

The vocabulary of a language is continually changing, adding new words and new uses to old words. If compound words, archaic words, abbreviations, proper names, alternative spelling and dialect forms are excluded, and when words are classified into words families, consisting of a base word, inflected forms and derivations, Webster’s 3-rd, for instance, has a vocabulary of around 54,000 word families (Nation 1990: 34). This is a very difficult learning goal even for native speakers, not to mention that for second language learners it is beyond reach. Up to a vocabulary size of around 20,000 word families, we should expect that native speakers will add roughly 1,000 word families a year to their vocabulary size. This means that a university graduate will have a vocabulary of around 20,000 word families (Nation, 1990: 35). These figures exclude proper names, compound words, abbreviations and foreign words.

A study carried out by Jamieson (1996: 580) on the vocabulary of adult non-native speakers (learners of English as a foreign language) reaches the conclusion that the

vocabulary size of this category is much less than 5,000 word families, in spite of having studied English for several years. The question is how many words are needed to do the things a language user (as our student in business English, for instance) needs to do. Research shows (Nation: 43) that under favorable conditions, a vocabulary size of 2,000 to 3,000 words provides a good basis for language use. Although there are over 54,000 word families in English, and although educated adult native speakers know around 20,000 of these word families, it is possible to make use of a smaller number, around 2,000 to 3,000 for productive use in speaking and writing.



---

---

### *Approaches to vocabulary teaching/learning*

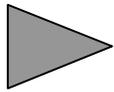
---

---

When we think of the learning process, we should remember that different students have different learning styles, that intrinsic motivation aids learning, and that the quality of classroom interaction matters a great deal. According to Skehan (2000: 12), for example, some learners are more analytically oriented and work on picking apart words and sentences, others are more globally oriented, needing to experience overall patterns of language in meaningful contexts, before making sense of the linguistic parts and forms.

The communicative approach to language learning seems to be of great help in the learning of vocabulary. There are many studies showing the effectiveness of such learning in terms of amount and speed of learning. Learning from context, on the other hand, does occur, but it requires learners to engage in large amounts of reading and listening, because the learning is small and cumulative. A lot of authors still agree that it is by far the most important vocabulary learning strategy and an essential part of any vocabulary learning programme. Nevertheless, for fast vocabulary expansion, it is not sufficient; a combination of communicative, cognitive and pragmatic strategies of language learning would be necessary. Therefore, grammar (form-focused) instruction is a valuable component of vocabulary learning. The important issue is to achieve a balance between meaning-focused activities, form-focused activities and fluency development activities, to achieve better results.

Direct learning of vocabulary, on the other hand, from word lists or word cards, can also give a sense of progress to the learner, particularly if numerical targets are set and met. They are portable and can be used in idle moments in or out of class, either for learning new words or for revising old ones. It should not be assumed that learning from word lists or word cards means that the words are learned forever, nor does it mean that all knowledge of a word has been learned. Learning from lists of words is only a stage in learning a particular word. It is however a learning tool for use at any level of vocabulary proficiency. There will always be a need to have extra exposure to the words through reading, listening and speaking as well as extra formal study of words, their collocates, associations, different meanings, grammar and so on. This shows a complementary relationship between contextualized learning of new words and the decontextualized learning from word cards.



---

---

### *What might go wrong*

---

---

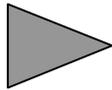
This vital aspect of language learning, which is vocabulary, presents many instances where it might go wrong, when the learner is not a native speaker. Michael Wallace (1989: 9-11) identifies seven such instances:

1. Inability to retrieve the vocabulary that has been taught. This is the most basic kind of vocabulary fault. The student has been exposed to a vocabulary item at some stage, but cannot bring it to mind when he needs it. In this situation, the student has to use some repair strategy, such as expressing the meaning in a different way, to avoid breakdowns in communication.
2. Inappropriate use of vocabulary to the given situation. We can take the example of the word *advise* used in a financial/commercial context and the same word used in a normal/common context.
3. Use of vocabulary at the wrong level of formality. The words we choose have to relate to the formality of the situation in which we are speaking, and the relationship between the speakers. Thus, we go from the very formal "Be seated ladies and gentlemen" to the command "Sit down" used in class etc.

4. Possessing the wrong kind of vocabulary for one's needs. If the learner is going to be involved into a face to face contact with native speakers, then, what he needs is the conversational language for those situations: it will not be of much help to him to have a large reading vocabulary of words he can hardly pronounce. On the other hand, if the learner, as far as can be known, is going to be spending the rest of his life in his own country and needs English only for reading books in his area of interest, then an extensive reading vocabulary may be precisely what is required. Here, of course, the area of study is also important.
5. Using vocabulary in an unidiomatic way. There are situations in which one should adapt to the specific idiomatic way of speaking English. In the business English vocabulary, for instance, one may encounter phrases like: *blue ocean=a metaphor of the holy Grail of business strategies, uncontested market space*. It is obvious that in a common context the meaning is different. The learners of business English should be aware of that and try to acquire as many such phrases as possible.
6. Using vocabulary in a meaningless way. In such cases the student is using the target language, but he or she is not learning it, because no connection has been made between the vocabulary and the meaning. We may take the following example from a text in Business English where some words have been replaced with nonsense words: "Let us return to *retities*. In some banks there are clerks or managers which are not merely *bisced*, but evaluated and *yented*." It is possible to ask a learner questions about this passage and get answers from him or her in this way:

Question	Answer
What happens to the <i>retities</i> ?	They are <i>bisced</i> , evaluated and <i>yented</i> .

7. Incorrect use of a dictionary. Some students are not aware of the most efficient way to use a dictionary. Others go to the other extreme and are over-conscious of the importance of checking individual words. The wide range of denotations of apparently very clear words is another problem. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English comes with the following examples for the simple word *table*: cold *table* (a display of cold food); He kept the whole *table* amused (everyone sitting at the table); table of contents (list); Children learn their *tables* (multiplication table); to be at table (to eat) etc.



---

---

**Final remarks**

---

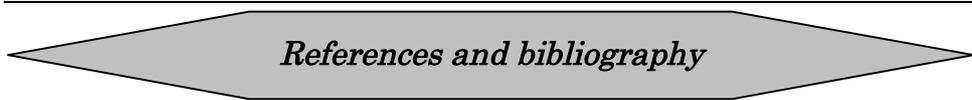
---

There are many aspects of vocabulary that I have not discussed in the present article: structure words and content words, aspects of pronunciation in English, false friends, productive and receptive vocabulary, word frequency and others. My intention has been to refer only to the most used strategies in learning/teaching English vocabulary and to some instances where acquisition might go wrong.

It is certain that a learner's first and second vocabulary knowledge are linked together in their mental lexicon, phonologically, semantically and associationally. Some authors consider that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching, because language consists of grammaticalized lexis not of lexicalized grammar, and this is justified especially when it comes to English for specific purposes. It is generally agreed that vocabulary should be taught indirectly, by presenting new items as they appear in reading or sometimes listening texts. This indirect teaching means that vocabulary expansion will happen through the practice of the other language skills. Therefore, learners should be made aware of what a lexical item means and be given opportunities to use the items learned as well as develop their own written storage systems.

---

---

**References and bibliography**

---

---

- Gardner, H.** 1999. *To Open Minds: Chinese Clues to the Dilemma of Contemporary Education*. New York: Basic.
- Jamieson, J.** 1996. 'Developing Profiles of EFL Users' in *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, pp 575-585.
- Nation, P.** 1990. 'How Large Can a Receptive Vocabulary Be?' in *Applied Linguistics* vol. 17 no. 182, 30-43.
- Skehan, P.** 2000. *Individual differences in Second Language Learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Wallace, M., J.** 1989. *Teaching Vocabulary*, Oxford: Heineman Educational Books Ltd.

**The author**

**Luminița Andrei Cocârță** is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the “Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași. She has been teaching business English since 1992 and has published textbooks and studies in the field, among which: *Episodes in Business English*, Editura Sedcom Libris, Iași, 2003, *Episodes in Business Communication*, Editura Sedcom Libris, Iași, 2004, *Insights into Business English*, Editura Universitas XXI, Iași, 2005, *Business English Grammar*, Editura Timpul, Iași, 2006. She has a special interest in Applied Linguistics and Intercultural Communication.