RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXPLORING PROBLEMATIC AREAS OF WORD DIFFICULTY ENCOUNTERED BY SUDANESE EFL LEARNERS OF ENGLISH A CASE STUDY OF ATBARA SECONDARY SCHOOLS

*Dr. Mohammed Bakr

Nile Valley University

ABSTRACT

Nowadays Sudanese students who are learning English as a foreign language usually experience difficulties on the part of lexical studies,which represent a stumbling block for the language acquisition, especially the these words have become part and parcel of the universal concept of the language and its knowledge. These difficulties can be classified into two main types:

- **Inter - lexical factors:** These are directly associated with the inner parts of the word such as pronunciation, form, inflection, and interference with the similar sounds ,in addition to the parts of speech, and aspects of the idioms and the semantic knowledge of the language.
- **Intra –lexical factor**s: These are externally related to the word, such as the concepts of classification , linguistic limits and cultural differences ,with regards to the use of the word.

The distinction between these classifications may contribute to the reduction of the word's difficulty and it may also assists the learners in their acquisition. Itaims atdisplaying the useful channels that are liable to support the student's rate of vocabulary acquisition, finding out the extent to which the Sudanese learners of English can overcome the problems of word difficulty learning, and investigating aspects pertaining to vocabulary difficulty among Sudanese learners of English.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, vocabulary has` been widely overlooked in the ESL and EFL classroom.Maiguashca (1993: 91), stated that teaching orstudying grammar is based on a set of rules, with a coherent structure which students follow to remember, but the same is not true for vocabulary .Within the last few years, vocabulary has become viewed as an important aspect in second language learning.In fact many consider its importance as no less than the main skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Nation as cited in Nation and Waring (1997:6) explained" […] *Vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the world enables the increase of vocabulary and language use and so on*"

Learning vocabulary is a continuous ongoing process that takes time and requires practice. Nakata, (2006:19), commented that vocabulary acquisition requires continual repetition in order to achieve effective vocabulary learning.

This study attempts to investigate the problems of vocabulary difficulty by addressinga number of questions:

Corresponding author: Dr. Mohammed Bakr,
Nile Valley University.

- What are the problems the Sudanese learners are facing in the acquisition of new vocabulary?
- Weather there are any difficulties of vocabulary learning among Sudanese learners of English as a foreign language?

This study aims atdisplaying the useful channels that are liable to support the student's rate of vocabulary acquisition, finding out the extent to which the Sudanese learners of English can overcome the problems of word difficulty learning, and investigating aspects pertaining to vocabulary difficulty among Sudanese learners of English .Hughes (1989:146) expresses the significance of second language vocabulary acquisition. He states that knowledge of vocabulary is essential to the development and demonstration of linguistic skills .One can argued that Sudanese learners of English as a foreign language experience problems with vocabulary difficulties in different terms and through different factors.

A General survey of Vocabulary Problems

Ur "2001:60" states that vocabulary can be defined ,roughly, as the words we teach in the foreign language.However , a new item of vocabulary may be more than a single word: for example, post office, and mother-in-law, which are made up of

4307

*Dr. Mohammed Bakr et al. Exploring problematic areas of word difficulty encountered by
sudanese efl learners of english a case study of atbara secondary schools*

two or three words but express a single idea. On the other hand Hornby (2003: 1447) defines vocabulary as "[…] *all the words that a person knows or uses , or all the words in a particular language or the words that people use when they are talking about a particular subject"*.According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, (1990:1117), vocabulary is "*words known, learnt, used, etc*".So, vocabulary may be defined as knowledge of words and word meanings in both oral and print language in addition to productive and receptive forms.

Factors of Word Difficulty

What makes a word difficult? Nuttal 1986:66 states that "[…] *Not all words are difficult, and many are difficult only in some contexts or for some readers*". However, some kinds of lexical items can be identified. There are numbers of factors that determine how difficult a word is for a learner (bearing in mind that difficulty in language is a some- what elusive concept). They are usually categorized as inter-lexical factors (intrinsic properties related to the word's form and meaning) and intra-lexical factors (pertaining to the relationship between the word and familiar words either in L2 or other languages). Thus inter-lexical, contrary to intra-lexical, is not just a more specific L2 vocabulary acquisition term than the corresponding SLA term inter-lingual, but a qualitatively different one, as it is not restricted to transfer from other languages. Likewise, some researchers mention factors relating to the learning experience (High 1965) as cited in Nation (1990). However, Swan (1997: 161), Singleton (1999: 74) point out that this deceptively straight forward distinction suffers from the so-called "attribution problem", that is certain error types resist simple classification in either terms. For example, overgeneralization of an L2 rule or both. Another aspect of this classification problem is that many intra-lexical factors, such as pronounce ability, are not necessarily intrinsically difficult, but only in relation to the corresponding L1 factor.

Intra-lexical Factors: The following is a summary of comprehensive surveys on intra-lexical factors, which can be found in (Laufer 1997).

Phonological factors (pronounce ability): These seem to particularly affect less- than – advanced learners who tend to experience acoustic coding interference. Of course, pronounce ability is hardly a purely intra lexical factor where the degree of difficulty is determined by the overlap between the articulate features set of L1 and L2. As Laufer (1990: 147- 155) notes, research evidence points to the conclusion that phonological difficulty not only affects production, but comprehension as well.

Orthographic Factors: These include sequential letter probabilities and sound – script incongruence. Again, it has to be noted that in a sense, these are notreally intrinsic factors as difficulty arises only by comparison with corresponding L1 values.

Morphological Factors: These include inflectional and derivational complexity, notably, deceptive transparency.

Synformy: Laufer (1988, cited inLaufer 1997:47), carried out a study of similar lexical forms; (synforms), to investigate their

error inducing potential and classify them into categories, each representing a different kind of similarity. Results demonstrated the most difficult synforms to be those differing with respect to suffixes (industrial, industrious) and synforms identical in consonants but different in vowels (adopt/adapt).

Grammatical Factors: These relate to different parts of speech. Research evidence seems to suggest the order of difficulty in nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. However, Laufer (1997) cautions that results of most studies may suggests to regard grammar with other factors and suggests to regard grammar (part of speech) as a factor with no clear effect.

Semantic Factors

According to Laufer (1997), the main factors affecting word learning in these areas, are specificity and register restriction, idiomaticity, and multiple meaning. Specificity and register restriction than register – specific ones, has the high frequency of register – related L2 mistakes attests .Idiomatic expressions, being both frequent and opaque by nature, place a considerable learning burden on the L2 speaker. They present a difficulty even for closely related L1 and L2 with similar use of idiom. Kellerman 1978(cited in Laufer 1997:151) found that Dutch learners only transferred idioms involving core meanings into English, even when the transfer of peripheral meanings would have yielded a correct L2 expression. Multiple meaning refers to the phenomenon of homonymy and polysemy, i.e. the problem of discriminating between the different senses of the same form and using each sense correctly (Laufer 1997: 152). Abstract words are often claimed to be more difficult than concrete words because of their intrinsic complexity. However, as Laufer (1997) points out, learning of many abstract words simply requires relabeling of familiar concepts, whereas concrete words may be rendered difficult by other factors.

Inter-lexical Factors: It is worth mentioning that lexical transfer is not always negative or direct. In fact it is generally more beneficial than transfer at the level of phonology or syntax. As to the explicit instructions of vocabulary, research has proved that explicit instruction of vocabulary can help develop English language skills and especially vocabulary. It is also observed that old and moreadvanced learners benefit from intentional instruction more than younger learners .Students learning through interactive instruction were also found to develop more vocabulary.

According to El Khawli (1989:59), not all words are of equal difficulty. The difficulty level depends on several variables.

- Number of syllables: A long word i.e. with more syllables, letters or phonemes, has a higher probability of causing some difficulties in spelling or pronunciation than a short word.
- Concrete versus abstract: A word referring to a concrete being tends to be more easily taught and grasped than a word referring to an abstract concept.
- Graphic- phonemic correspondence: A word that shows correspondence between its graphemes and its phonemes is easier to spell and pronounce than the one that lacks such correspondence. For example, words such as net, fit, kid, swim, and bed have a one to one

correspondence between their graphic transcription and their phonemic transcription i.e. they are written the way they are spoken which makes them easy to spell and read.

- Problem phonemes: If all the phonemes of a word in the foreign language do exist in the native language, there will be no problems regarding the pronunciation of this word. On the other hand, if a word in the foreign language contains a phoneme, or more than donot exist, in the native language, the word may be difficult to pronounce and more practice is required in such cases.
- Form and meaning: It sometimes happens that a word in the foreign language has an equivalent in the native language, similar in form, meaning or both. For example, the English word "cinema", has an equivalent in Arabic of the same pronunciation and meaning. Further, Arabic words borrowed from English such as radio, telephone, and television are identical with their origins in meaning and similar in pronunciation. To conclude, more similarity between the words of the foreign language and the native language entails more easiness in teaching and learning those similar words (El khawli 1989: 59.60). It is very clear that what has been mentioned by El khawli can be enlisted as a part of the intra-lexical factors concerned with the word.

RESEARCH METHODS

300secondary school students including both girls (150) and boys (150), were selected from different schools in Atbara town to sit for an achievement test in vocabulary.The test consisted of ten categories each of which examines a specific area .The areas included the general word (super ordinate), word grouping, names of professions, filling the gap, matching antonyms, matching synonyms, using prefixes, using suffixes, inserting from the list, and using words in meaningful sentences. The students wereselected randomly from different schools from Atbara town.The number of the students in each of the classes ran between 30-to 50, but some school classes ran between 20 up to 30. The administrations of the various schools were informed about the purpose of the exam, and they were interested in the idea and extended their best help. The exam was well managed to take place at one time in all over the schools. The researchers had made sure that all the words in the exam have been previously taught to the students. The words were selected from the Spine series, including Spine (4) of the first level, Spine (5) of the second level and Spine (6) for the third level, making sure that the words have not exceeded their present destination n. In terms of the students age, education and background, the groups were similar, so it was concluded that comparisons could be made between all classes.

Research Design: The research was designed to investigate the problem of vocabulary loss for secondary school students in Atbara Locality, Sudan. The study examined (300) students including both boys and girls, to answer the question (Is there a vocabulary difficulty among Atbara secondary school students, third level?). Thus, the test was designed with reference to what the students have already studied.

Research Population: The research population for this study is represented in Sudanese Secondary school students, third level.

Research Sample

The research sample, was represented in third year secondary school students in Atbara locality.

- (100) students who were selected to run the piloting for the test, where a test and retest took place to examine the validity.
- (300) students consisting of both genders (150 boys) and (150 girls), third level, on whom the achievement test took place. They are identical in their level of education and age. This was actually meant for the sake of reducing variables.

The Instruments of Data Collection

For the collection of the data for this research, an achievement test of vocabulary, consisting of different items was designed . Validity of the Test: A test is considered to be valid if it tests what it is supposed to test (Harmer, 2001:322). The students test was approved by a committee selected from experts in the field of English language Teaching. The jury committee consisted of two associate professors, and one expert teacher.The professors are from both Nile Valley University and University of Qatar. The expert teacher is working as a manager in the field of English language teachingsupervision in Atbara Locality, the River Nile State. They gave their observations and recommendations on some of the test questions.

Test Reliability: For checking the reliability of the test, the researchers used the test and retest method. A test and retest were held for a selected school in Atbara (ShiekhHamad Secondary school for the students, where (100) students were tested and retested again three months later. Table 1 below, which resulted from the (SPSS) Statistical Package for Social Science shows that the correlation is significant at 0.01level.

RESULTS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results can presented as:

Boys responses to the achievement test:

Table 1. Results of boys responses to the achievement test

No	Correct responses		Partially correct responses		Wrong responses	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
1	820	55	78	5	602	40
2	327	22	-	-	1173	78
3	432	29	373	25	695	46
4	285	19	-	-	1215	81
5	640	43	-	-	860	57
6	322	21	-	-	1178	79
7	1101	73	-	-	399	27
8	1088	73	-	-	412	27
9	417	28	-	-	1083	72
10	126	8	-	-	1374	92
Total	5558	37	451	3	8991	60

The above table summarizes the achievement test from question (1) up to (10). The questions were designed to examine vocabulary difficulty among secondary school

students taking into consideration Atbara locality as a case study. The questions examined the following:

- Knowledge of the general word "super ordinate"
- Knowledge of jobs and professions.
- Identifying words which are related to each other.
- Inserting the suitable word in a sentence.
- Knowledge of antonyms.
- Knowledge of synonyms.
- Attaching the right prefix.
- Attaching the right suffix.
- Using a suitable word from the list.
- Using words in correct meaningful sentences.

Girls' responses to the achievement test

Table 2. Results of girls' responses to the achievement test

No	Correct responses		Partially correct responses		Wrong responses	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
1	743	50	141	9	616	41
2	273	18	-	-	1227	82
3	368	25	381	25	751	50
4	244	16	-	-	1256	84
5	487	32	-	-	1013	68
6	332	22	-	-	1168	78
7	1232	82	-	-	268	18
8	1054	70	-	-	446	30
9	352	23%	-	-	1148	77
10	133	9%	-	-	1367	91
Total	5218	35%	522	3%	9260	62

Number of boys' correct responses is 5558 percentage 37%. Number of boys' partially correct responses is 451 percentage 3%. Number of boys' wrong responses is 8991 percentage 60%. On the other hand, the above table shows the summary of girls responses to the whole questions from one up to ten. Number of girls' correct responses is 5218 percentage 39%. Number of girls' partially correct responses is 522 percentage 3%. Number of girls' wrong responses is 9260 percentage 62%. Comparing both table, it is very clear that the rate of vocabulary loss among girls is 2% higher than vocabulary loss among boys in secondary school students, third level, in Atbara locality. Bearing in mind that the number of subject is 300 boys and girls, consisting of 150 boys on one hand, and 150 girls on the other hand, representing the different governmental secondary schools for both genders in Atbara locality.

The overall responses

Table 3. The overall total of subject responses out of (30.000)

Responses	F	%
Wrong responses	18251	61
Partially correct responses	973	3
Correct responses	10776	36

Seriousness of Vocabulary Difficulty

The problem of vocabulary difficulty represents a threat on the way of developing the students' target language, and therefore needs much effort and hard work. It is a heavy responsibility not only on the teachers' burden, but also on the syllabus designers' and the learners'.The researcher has set forth some suggestions and recommendations which may help in the reduction of students' vocabulary difficulty on one hand and in supporting of vocabulary acquisition on the other hand. Some of these recommendations and suggestions are concerned with the syllabus, some are concerned with the side of teaching and others are concerned with the learners.

Summary of findings

With reference to the achievement test, the number of the boys' correct responses is 5558 (37%) and the number of the boys' partially correct responses is 451 (3%), while the number of the boys' wrong responses is 8991 (60%). On the other hand, the girls' correct responses is 5218 (35% and the number of the girls' partially correct responses is 522 (3%), while the number of the girls' wrong responses is, 9260 (62%) . The total number of vocabulary loss among both boys (150) and girls (150), is 18251(61%). Comparing both boys (150) and girls (150), it is very clear that the rate of vocabulary loss among girls is 62% i.e. 2% higher than among boys which is 60% bearing in mind that the whole subject number for both genders is (300 students) , consisting of (150 boys and 150 girls) representing the different governmental secondary schools in Atbara locality.

Conclusion

The study concludes the following:

- There is a rate of vocabulary difficulty among Atbara secondary school students, third level, Atbara locality, for the school year 2009-2010 which reaches at 61%.
- The rate of vocabulary difficulty among boys students is (60%) and among girls students is (62%) .i.e. the rate of girls' vocabulary difficulty is (2%) higher than that of boys.
- The rate of vocabulary acquisition for Atbara secondary school students' third level (school year-2009-2010) is generally weak.
- The four language skills are not sufficiently implemented to support vocabulary exposure.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

- English language teachers should always take into account the nature of new words of each lesson, and the best technique to teach them.
- Teachers should be able to determine whether the vocabulary items at hand are needed for their learners' active use or passive use. Active use necessitates much care from the teacher and thorough exercise from the learner. And when teaching vocabulary, teachers should take into consideration that guiding a learner to " know" a word in the foreign language means enabling him / her to recognize the word in its spoken and written form, to recall it at will, to relate it to an appropriate object or concept, to use it in an appropriate grammatical form, to pronounce it correctly in speech, and in writing to write it correctly, to use it with the words that it appropriately and correctly goes with, (in correct collocations), and to use it at appropriate level of formality.

REFERENCES

Al khawli, Mohammed Ali, 1983. Teaching English to Arab Students. Riyad University.Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Harmer, J. 2001. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*.3rd edition.

Hornby, A.S. 2003. *Oxford Genuine Learners Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford University Press.

Laufer, 1997. *What's a word that makes it Hard or Easy*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Maiguashca, R. U. 1993. "Teaching and Learning Vocabulary in a Second Language: Past, Present and Future Directions".*The Canadian Modern Language Review*.

Meara, P. 1982. "The Importance of an Early Emphasis on L2 Vocabulary".*The Language Teacher* 19(2) 8.-10

Nakata , T. 2006. "Implementing Optimal Spaced Learning for English Vocabulary". *The JALT CALL Journal* 2(2),3-18

Nation. I.S.P. 1990. *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. Boston. Mass; Heinle&Heinle Publishers.

Nuttal, Christine 1986. Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language. Heinman, English Language Teaching.

Swan Michael & Walter Catherine 1988. *The Cambridge English Course*. Teachers' book (1) Cambridge University Press.

Ur, Penny, 2001. *A Course in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Waring, Rob 1997. "Scales of Vocabulary Knowledge Assessment". *The Occasional papers of Notre Dame*.

****