Exploring Effective Ways of Learning English Vocabularies

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Abstract. Increasing your vocabularies, mastering vocabularies in efficient ways are particularly crucial link of English learning for learners. This paper first shows us the current situation of students learning English vocabularies: 1) Fault attitudes and vicious circle. 2) The difficulty in mastering both receptive and productive vocabularies. 3) The negative influence of mother tongue on English learning. Based on the serious situation, this paper then puts forward some effective ways of learning English vocabularies for learners: 1) Right attitudes. 2) Overcoming interference of native language thinking. 3) Making good use of word-formation. 4) Learning critically by using association. 5) Persisting in study. The result of application of these ways and strategies is very effective to students’ vocabulary accumulation, which is the crucial part and basis of English learning. So, learning vocabulary effectively will be a great help to English acquisition on the whole in the end.

1. Introduction

One without enough vocabularies cannot listen, say, read and write effectively, neither can communicate. The famous linguist Leaf thinks that enough vocabularies are the key to use foreign languages successfully. No words, no thoughts.[1] Linguists have also pointed out that the vocabulary is large in quantity, irregular and difficult to control and has other features; it is often very difficult for learners. Therefore, vocabulary learning plays a decisive role in one’s English language acquisition. In the following parts, this paper first shows us the current situation of students learning English vocabularies: 1) Fault attitudes and vicious circle. 2) The difficulty in mastering both receptive and productive vocabularies. 3) The negative influence of mother tongue on English learning. Based on the serious situation, this paper then puts forward some effective ways of learning English vocabularies for learners: 1) Right attitudes. 2) Overcoming interference of native language thinking. 3) Making good use of word-formation. 4) Learning critically by using association. 5) Persisting in study. The result of application of these ways and strategies is very effective to students’ vocabulary accumulation, which is the crucial part and basis of English learning.

2. Current Situation of Students’ Learning English Vocabularies

2.1 Fault attitudes and vicious circle

Many students always ask the question, “Why do Chinese learn English?” In their mind they think learning English hasn’t the actual significance, and it’s just for test. So learning English wastes time and energy and the knowledge learned cannot be used in daily life. As a result of those reasons, some students will hold a contemptuous psychology to learning English, while others even may exclude learning English. All in all, in general most Chinese students hate studying English, so they are forced to take English for passing exams. However, English vocabularies are like bricks to building houses, which are the basis and key points to learn English well. Yet some students think that the vocabulary is not important, which is just needed to pass the examination.[2] We can see these students’ goal is simple, that is, If they can get very good scores in the examination, everything is OK while the real usage of the language and vocabulary in practice isn’t in their consideration. So the terrible case we often observe is like this: Many more students learn vocabulary like monks chanting scriptures without thorough understanding the vocabularies. They recite vocabularies only in a mechanical way and do not want to find proper and efficient ways to seek good solution.
learn vocabularies. As time goes by, they will feel vocabulary learning is dull like ditch water. Therefore they may form a conflicted psychology gradually.

When students get an article with many new words, first of all they will doubt their ability, and step back. When they finish reading the article again and they feel blank in their brain. The articles with many new words need to spend a lot of time and energy in understanding them thoroughly, so the students will have the psychology of anxiety and dreariness. They must be agitated until encounter the words once again.[3] The result of this process is that students have to give up in the end. From above description, we can see that lacks of vocabulary accumulation are difficult for students to learn English, which leads to the consequence: students not only lose their confidence but also form a psychology of fear, and this kind of condition is a very terrible situation for teachers to teach English.

2.2 The difficulty in mastering both receptive and productive vocabularies

Receptive vocabulary refers to words that one is able to recognize or comprehend in reading or listening but unable to use automatically in speaking or writing. Whereas, productive vocabulary refers to words that one need not only recognize but also able to use in speech and writing.[4] For example, the word “vocabulary”, students will not only be able to pronounce it accurately, but also know its meaning and usage. However, from the teaching experience, we know the vocabularies students have mastered are mostly receptive vocabularies, which impairs students expressing their thoughts or ideas in speech and writing. As to the aspect of listening, some students’ receptive vocabularies are rich while listening comprehension is bad. In terms of writing, there is the same problem because writing not only needs to master the receptive vocabularies, but also needs to learn the knowledge in other aspects of vocabularies, such as how to use the right word properly in different cultural context, etc.

2.3 The negative influence of mother tongue on English learning

The students’ native language is Chinese and English is regarded as a second language for Chinese students; everybody learns English on the basis of Chinese. However, their learning methods and attitudes formed in the long-term language learning will migrate and influence on English learning. After formatting of this mental attitude, students study methods and thinking will tend to stimulate the negative emotion of language learning clearly. So we can see negative transfer from mother tongue frequently occurs in English learning. This is a serious problem which English learners have to confront because it increases the difficulty in English learning and affects English learning greatly in many aspects. Vocabulary learning is no exception. A study shows that these two language learners tend to use their mother language to do meta linguistic tasks thinking, and to use the second language to do the functional language use. Therefore, controlling of these two language proficiency simultaneously is a tough job for language learners.

3. Effective Ways of Learning English Vocabularies

3.1 Right attitudes

High school is the developmental stage of English learning for students, yet the output of studying English is only measured by a simple manifestation of passing the exam or not. So it’s hard to let the students understand the far-reaching significance of English learning, and the importance of learning English itself as well. We all know English is undoubtedly as the world’s most important tool of communication, and English is the ladder of progress: it helps you know more about the world; it is the necessary tool to know more about domestic and abroad knowledge. Furthermore, more than half of the world’s newspapers and journals are published in English. In the world the computer correspondences take the percentage of 75% in English. The radio stations in English accounts for 3/5. The English level is higher, the life is more abundant, and the world is more exciting, which brings about more open fields of vision. It is no exaggeration to say that to learn English well, you can travel all over the world. Only we know English, can we really enter into this changeable world? [5] For example, If you can learn English very well, you can understand more wonderful music, watch more international films, understand more human life in other countries, appreciate more the world famous books, and understand all kinds of business wider and
deeper, meet more international friends and so on. So to learn English very well is of great importance and useful and passing exams is only a tiny part of it.

3.2 Overcoming interference of native language thinking

Since all kinds of languages have their universality and similarities, the theories, the rules and the transfer of regulations are inevitable, which can help language learning to a certain extent. However, the natural formation habits in the mother tongue language often influence and intervene our foreign language learning consciously or subconsciously. In order to learn English effectively, we need reduce the mother tongues’ negative transfer gradually, so as to overcome the adverse effects caused by the mother tongue.[6] When learning two languages, students need to analyze and contrast them so as to understand their intrinsic meaning and tell the similarities and differences between English and Chinese vocabularies. As a result, students can find out the key to memorize and practice vocabularies. At the same time, students should seize the essence and the real connotation of foreign language vocabularies. If the students do by following these ways, they can master foreign language vocabularies easily. For example, In Chinese “read a book”, “see a play”, “watch TV”, all of them have a same word “kan”, while English need to use “read a book”, “see a play”, “watch TV”, and other different expressions. If students understand these words’ meaning and differences, they can make their learning more targeted and predictable. Besides, let students think more flexibly so they can master English vocabularies and their application systematically.

3.3 Making good use of word-formation

Because English vocabulary learning is different from the mother tongue learning, students cannot rely on the study model “stimulus – response”. We need to understand and discover the regularities and laws hidden in English vocabularies. Therefore, it’s necessary and useful for students to master the vocabulary form at first. In the following, three types of word formation are listed with examples to illustrate.

3.3.1 Derivation

Derivation is the creation of words by modification of a root without the addition of other roots. Often the effect is a change in part of speech. The combination of derivative affixes and roots, or bound re to form the new word method. [7] Examples are in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affix</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>re-</td>
<td>recycles</td>
<td>un-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dis-</td>
<td>disagreement</td>
<td>en-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-er</td>
<td>worker</td>
<td>-ist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ly</td>
<td>badly</td>
<td>-ful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-</td>
<td>antisocial</td>
<td>super-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inter-</td>
<td>international</td>
<td>over-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.2 Compounding

Compounding forms a word out of two or more root morphemes. The words are called compounds or compound words. In Linguistics, compounds can be either native or borrowed. Two or more independent words together to constitute the new word were called synthetic method. Examples are in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>green + house</td>
<td>greenhouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snow + fall</td>
<td>snowfall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>green+ hand</td>
<td>green hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swear+ word</td>
<td>swearword</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deaf + mute</td>
<td>deaf-mute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>summer+ flowering</td>
<td>summer-flowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>familiar+ sounding</td>
<td>familiar-sounding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.3 Conversion

A word without any change can be used for another class of word. The forms of word need not change, just make the word transform from one part of speech into another so that it becomes a new word with new meanings and functions. Examples are in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fuel n.</td>
<td>to fuel = to provide with fuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man n.</td>
<td>to man = to provide with men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
skin n.  to skin = to remove the skin from
hand n.  to hand = to give with hand
brave adj.  to brave
rough adj.  to rough

3.4 Learning critically by using association

Zhu Xi held that reading must be modest and objective. He proposed that when we read the book, we should insist on the original meaning of the book. Learning vocabulary also needs this attitude. However, many learners often make some mistakes in remembering the original meaning of the words, esp. about the similar words. The reason of making the mistakes is that learners don’t learn critically and make use of some learning strategies such as association method.

When learning English, many students will be asked to intuitively define the meaning of a word. In addition, many students also insist on the method of holding the previous study. Take my own experience for instance. When I went to the primary school in fifth grade, one of my English teachers told me that words are the basis of learning English. He also told me I should recite five words each day so that I can recite at least five thousand of words after graduating middle school. Although reciting the words is boring, I still keep practicing the suggestion of the teacher. But I find several days later I can’t remember what I have recited a few days ago. I am a stubborn person, so I have insisted on the method what he taught me for nine years. Theoretically I should have accumulated the vocabulary to the quantity of 20,000 words after nine years’ learning. Yet, I have actually about 8000 words till then. Later, after reading the written word by Yu Minghong (2003), I see remembering the words should use some strategies like association method.

For example: when you recite the word “hose”, you can’t remember it. Facing this problem, how do you do? I will list some words to illustrate the association method. Using an everyday use language to recite the new word.

Nose hose rose: As an elephant's nose (nose) as the hose (hose) pouring roses (rose).
Host house: Owner (host) of the Home (house) with a nose like an elephant (nose) as the hose (hose) pouring roses (rose).

Petrol: the pet (pet) stands the car’s roll (roll), you should add petrol (petrol)
Adulterate: adult (adult) like to adulterate (adulterate)

These are the words I compiled by myself. You can code the words by your own preferences as long as you can remember. Reciting new words has no fixed methods, so you can have the option which is the most suitable to you. This is also the reason why some students can’t tell the synonyms. Now through using this method, I’m sure you can distinguish between different words.

3.5 Persisting in study

Reading must insist on the spirit of single-minded, concentration, having broad ambition and indomitable perseverance. This is the basic spirit of Zhu Xi’ reading method. Naturally, sincerely and conscientiously to study and work, personal cultivation can be successfully improved.[8] Learning English is the process of accumulation, and learning vocabulary is the same. This requires learners remember that vocabulary accumulation must not like “Go fishing for three days and bask the fishnet for two days”. In other words, they must insist on increasing vocabulary and never say giving up. From the day of entering the college, they may think they are finally free. They need not study hard like high school from the morning till the evening. So, they are busy in shopping, falling in love and making money. Furthermore, some people are busy in taking part in the community. They forget the important thing: students’ most fundamental duty is to learn. As time goes on, one day they will graduate from the school. Suddenly, many students become a bit confused. Some people think maybe they should have passed the TEM4. Some students think where they should go after graduation. They may really realize that graduation is equally to unemployment. They are anxious about how they can find jobs. They have not the ability to go further study. If they go back home, they may think their neighbors will look at them with contempt.

Looking back the four years they past: they may think they should value time. They should grasp every minute to learn professional knowledge. They should pass the TEM4 by studying hard so that they will not regret of what they have down at college. Actually if they find the duty of the student,
they may have good jobs today. Then they have the confidence to their future. They need pay much attention to the study; they also need to work hard especially in learning English, among which the vocabulary accumulation is the basic requirements to learning English well.

4. Conclusion

As everyone knows, vocabulary is the smallest unit of language, the basis of human thinking activities and ideas. Learning a foreign language, the quantity of vocabulary impacts on how much a person’s ability of language expression and his accuracy of direct thought expression. Linguist Harman once said that if the structure is the language’s skeleton, vocabulary is the most important organ and blood, which proves the importance of vocabularies learning. Through above discussion, we observe the current situation of students learning English vocabularies includes fault attitudes and vicious circle, the difficulty in mastering both receptive and productive vocabularies, and the negative influence of mother tongue on English learning. We also get to know some effective ways of learning English vocabularies for learners which include right attitudes, overcoming interference of native language thinking, making good use of word-formation, learning critically by using association, and persisting in study as well. According to my many years’ teaching experience and many students’ feedback, especially the proof of some scholars’ researches, the result of application of these ways and strategies is very effective to students’ vocabulary accumulation, which like the brick to building houses is the crucial part and basis of English learning. So, learning vocabulary effectively will be a great help to English acquisition on the whole in the end. Yet every one’s learning vocabulary habit may be different, and they can find their own way of learning except above mentioned.

5. References

[2]. Y. Xiaoqiu, W. Caixia, Thought and Behavior- Study and Practice of Vocabulary Teaching in Middle School, Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian bookstore, 2011.(In Chinese)