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## Learners Perception on Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition at the Tertiary Level

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### **Abstract:**

A priority in educational psychology is to understand the learning process, that is, the procedures and the strategies that students use to acquire new information. The paper makes an attempt to find how the second language vocabulary is acquired by the learners in an Engineering college. The sample includes sixty students from a class handled by the investigator. The tools include two questionnaire- one to find the type of exposure the learners have to English language and another questionnaire to find the strategies employed by them for learning vocabulary. Overcoming lexical blocks while communicating is essential for communication, the study findings will greatly help the material developers and the teachers of English to consolidate the strategies that are useful for increasing and establishing the vocabulary of the at the tertiary level. Since learning cannot happen in a vacuum, the study findings help in identifying the best strategies that can be used for teaching vocabulary.

**Keywords: Vocabulary learning , acquisition, strategies**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Learning a Language**

All languages began as sound. Though today one can read, write, print, type, word process, language is still primarily vocal and auditory. Even children while acquiring language, self- correct as they begin to use various sentences through listening. But learning of new languages takes place through teaching in classroom contexts. Learning can be explained as the difference between the initial and terminal behavior or state of knowledge of the learner and this difference is caused by exposing him/her to experience. In language learning, the students obtain facts of the language and also an exposure to it. Such exposure, constant practice and frequent reinforcement will help a learner to become proficient in the use of a new language. Thus learning a new language means a perceptible difference in the levels of performance before and after taking a particular training or a course. Learning a new language involves learning new words in a particular language which can be used when a situation arises. Exhaustive research has been carried out in the area of second language vocabulary teaching, with the proponents of lexical approach from 1980s with Nation and Jonathan Newton (1997) openly declaring that, "Vocabulary knowledge enables language

use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the world enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge and language use and so on...”

According to Krashen (1989), the reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary are: “First, a large vocabulary is of course essential for mastery of a language. Second, language acquirers know this; they carry dictionaries with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that the lack of vocabulary is a major problem”. In other words, the more vocabulary a language learner has, the better they are considered to master the language. Theorists like Krashen (1989) argue that grammar cannot be overtly taught and it is acquired by exposure to people speaking the language in naturally occurring social situations. Tuan (2011) quotes Gee (1989) who states that English teachers should create situations for learners to learn language in a variety of social contexts, but he is doubtful whether this can be achieved outside naturally occurring situations. Many teachers these days avoid correcting grammatical mistakes and focus more on communicative methods of teaching, which almost led to avoiding explicit grammar teaching.

Language is learnt based on the motivation, learning styles and the exposure to language in naturally occurring situations. In the process of learning new words, it is interesting to note the observations of Richards J (1976) who in his article *The Role of Vocabulary Teaching* lays out a set of eight assumptions which characterize the relevant theoretical concerns of linguists at the time he was writing. He suggests that, for a native speaker of language, vocabulary expansion occurs even in adulthood, whereas there is comparatively little development of syntax in adult life. He feels that knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print and also knowing the limitations imposed on the use of the word according to variations of function and situation. For Richards, knowing a word means knowing the syntactic behavior associated with that word, and it entails knowledge of the underlying form of a word and the derivatives. It is further explained that knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and the other words in language and knowing the semantic value of a word. Finally, knowing a word means knowing many of the different meanings associated with the word Richards J (1976). The next few sections briefly review literature in the area of vocabulary teaching.

**Language Learning Strategies:** Research in the area of language learning strategies focused on empowering the learner to become more self-centered, autonomous and effective in learning language. Researchers like Chamot and O’Malley (1989) Ellis (1994) and Canning (2004) have identified the following features of strategies in learning a language:

1. Strategies refer to both general approaches and specific actions or techniques used to learn L2.
2. Strategies are deployed by a learner to overcome some particular learning problem, i.e., strategies are problem oriented.
3. The use of strategies varies according to the task purpose or demands of the task and according to individual differences in learning style and other learning preferences.
4. Some strategies are behavioral and hence directly observable while others are mental and hence not observable.
5. Strategies contribute both directly and indirectly to learning. Indirect strategies are those which give information to on language, the language learning process as well as on themselves as (personal knowledge). Direct strategies contribute directly to language acquisition (e.g. memorization strategies).

6. If the learners are made to direct their attention to their thought processes, or pay attention to what they are doing/thinking, then they will be able to identify the strategies they use. In short, learners are generally aware or can be made aware of the strategies they employ in improving their vocabulary.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample:

The questionnaire was administered to sixty students in their first year of Engineering. The students undergo training under the investigator in communicative skills. The class consists of thirty six females and twenty four males.

### Tools Used:

Based on a review of literature, a questionnaire was prepared to find the perception of the learners at tertiary level on learning vocabulary and the strategies used by them for improving their vocabulary.

**Objectives:** The objectives for using this tool were:

1. To find out the personal details of the students,
2. To find out the educational background of the students,
3. To find out the educational background of the parents of the students,
4. To find out the difficulties faced by students in communicating in English,
5. To find out whether the students have exposure to receptive skills in English, this is essential for vocabulary improvement,
6. To find out students' difficulties in communication,
7. To find out the needs of the students in improving their English.

### Tool Construction:

The questionnaire was arrived at in two stages. At the preliminary stage questions were framed and grouped together to give a suitable format to the questionnaire. Initially questions were randomly framed but later they were systematically divided into two categories: personal details and the details to elicit information about students' passive exposure to language. In the second stage the questionnaire was 'piloted' with a sample group that was not part of the experiment. Ambiguous questions were reworded and repeated questions were removed. The two faculty experts of language were taken for discussion on each item of the questionnaire for finalizing and to administer the same on the sample.

### Tool Description

There are totally twenty five questions; one to eight in Section I and nine to twenty five in the second section. Section 1 seeks personal details like the name, age, mother tongue, languages known, educational back ground like number of years of study in English medium, educational qualification of the parents and the language skills of the parents in English. Questions nine to fifteen seek information about the receptive input the students have in listening and reading. Questions sixteen to nineteen seek information about the speaking skills of the , question twenty to twenty five seek information about the difficulties of the in communicating in English, the type of effort the students put in to improve themselves and to overcome the difficulty. The last question is open ended where the students are instructed to write their preferences in learning English.

The respondents are in the age group of 18-19. The students were asked to answer all the questions as far as possible. They were given time to answer the questions, without any disturbance, so that they can answer by thinking and concentrating. The students were not allowed to discuss while answering questions, as it may lead to group answering.

### Analyses of the Responses

The analyses of responses are represented in the tables below.

Table 1: Mother tongue of the respondents

| Mother Tongue | Telugu | Malayalam | Hindi | Bihari | Bengali | Tamil |
|---------------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|---------|-------|
|               | 13     | 8         | 3     | 1      | 1       | 34    |

Table 2 : Number of languages known to the respondents

| Two | Three & more |
|-----|--------------|
| 22  | 38           |

Table 3: Years of English as a medium of instruction

| Pre Kg To Plus two equivalent | Tamil Medium |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 57                            | 3            |

Table 4: Syllabus followed by respondents at Higher Secondary Level

| CBSC | ICSE | state board |
|------|------|-------------|
| 24   | 7    | 29          |

Table: 5 showing the syllabus followed by the respondents at plus two level

| CBSC | ICSE | State Board | others |
|------|------|-------------|--------|
| 1    | 1    | 34          | 23     |

Table 6: Language spoken by the respondents at home

| Language spoken at home | Telugu | Malayalam | Hindi | Bihari | Tamil | Bengali | (English and Mother tongue) |
|-------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|-------|---------|-----------------------------|
|                         | 13     | 8         | 3     | 1      | 34    | 1       | (8)                         |

Some respondents wrote English besides mother tongue which is represented in the last column. Questions 9 to 18 seek information about the receptive skills of the students. Questions 19 to 25 seek information about the students difficulties in English Language, and the type of efforts put in by the students to overcome their difficulties. An analysis of the responses is provided below:

Table 7: Spoken English knowledge of the Parents

| Parents do not speak English at home | Both parents speak English at home | One of the parents can speak English |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|                                      |                                    |                                      |

|     |     |     |
|-----|-----|-----|
| 52% | 18% | 34% |
|-----|-----|-----|

Questions 11,12 and 13 relate to reading skills of the respondents

Table: 8 Showing the respondents Reading skills in English.

|                             |                    |             |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Read books in Mother tongue | Read English Books | No Response |
| 31%                         | 26%                | 17%         |

To Question 12 on their reading habits, 31% said they read in their mother tongue, 26 % responded that they read both in their mother tongue and English.

Table 9: Respondents Frequency of Reading Books

|                                |           |                     |             |
|--------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------|
| More than two books in a month | Two books | Less than two books | No response |
| 18%                            | 23%       | 52%                 | 7%          |

Table 8: Respondents English listening skills.

|                           |               |                                    |                             |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Follow Lecture In English | Not Responded | Can follow most lecture in English | Cannot follow some lectures |
| 96%                       | 4%            | 15%                                | 3%                          |

Question 15 relates to comprehensive skills of the respondents in academic contexts. Only 3% responded that they do not follow some of the lectures.

Questions 16 and 17 relate to speaking skills in English

Table 9: Respondents English speaking skills at home

|       |           |        |       |
|-------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Often | Sometimes | rarely | Never |
| 11    | 53%       | 36%    |       |

Question 17 is on whether the respondents use English while conversing with their friends

Table: 10 Speaking in English language with friends

|       |           |        |       |             |
|-------|-----------|--------|-------|-------------|
| often | sometimes | rarely | Never | No response |
| 12%   | 14%       | 64%    | 5     | 5           |

To question on 18 whether they actively take part in the classroom interaction, 48% of the students responded in the affirmative. Question 19 and 20 relate to reasons for difficulty in speaking English,

Table 10: Reasons for not actively taking part in classroom interactions in English

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Lack enough vocabulary                         | 54% |
| Lack of grammatical knowledge                  | 39% |
| Fear of speaking new language                  | 23% |
| More comfortable in mother tongue than English | 4%  |

The responses exceeded more than 100 % as some opted more than one reason.

Table: 13 Respondents desire to improve English language

|                         |   |                 |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------|
| need to improve English | Do they make efforts to Improve English | Non Respondents |
| 91%                     | 91%                                     | 9%              |

Table 14: Strategies used for improving English Language skills

|                                 |      |
|---------------------------------|------|
| Speak English sometimes at home | 9%   |
| Reading Newspaper/Books         | 9%   |
| Speaking with Friend in English | 9%   |
| Seek Teachers Help              | 82%  |
| Desire to Improve               | 100% |

To question 24, on whether they expect help from their teacher, an amazing 82% responded that they expect the teacher's help in some area or the other. Question 25 is open ended type, where the students expressed the desire to improve their spoken and written English.

### Observations from the questionnaire:

It was clear from the questionnaire that the students seek teachers help in improving their communicative skills and most of the strategies employed by them need to be consolidated. Many students face lexical gaps in communication and not have problems in constructing sentences. This was even clear from the answer to the last question in the questionnaire which was open ended.

### Strategies

The questionnaire includes set of strategies which students need to identify whether they use or not. The data analysis is given below:

Table: Strategy used to determine the Meaning of a new word while Reading or listening in any subject in English

| Strategy for the discovery of a new word    | Use | Not use | Helpful | Not helpful |
|---|-----|---------|---------|-------------|
| 1. Analyze parts of speech                  | 32  | 28      | 32      | -           |
| 2. Analyze affixes/ roots                   | 40  | 20      | 40      | -           |
| 3. Check for mother tongue equivalent       | 24  | 36      | 10      | -           |
| 4. Look at pictures or analyze gestures     | 38  | 22      | 38      | -           |
| 5. Guess from the context                   | 52  | -       | 40      | -           |
| 6. Use English to Mother tongue dictionary  | 2   | 58      | 2       |             |
| 7. Use English to English dictionary        | 58  | -       | 58      |             |
| 8. From cards with pictures and information | 3   | 57      | 3       |             |
| 9. Learn from Flash cards                   | -   | -       | -       |             |

### II. Social Strategies to understand a new word:

| Strategy  | Use | Not use | Helpful | Not helpful |
|---|-----|---------|---------|-------------|
| 1. Ask teacher for mother tongue equivalent       | 2   | -       | 2       | -           |
| 2. Ask teacher to paraphrase, synonym of the word | 32  | -       | 32      | -           |
| 3. Ask teacher for a sentence using the new word  | 13  | -       |         |             |
| 4. Ask classmates for new word meaning            | 42  |         |         |             |
| 5. Discover meaning through group work activity   | 43  |         |         |             |

The conclusions are as follows:

Memory strategies are used by students to learn new words or phrases by memorizing them. These strategies are used especially preparing for tests in other subjects. Since most of the subjects are new to the students, new vocabulary that they come across in other subjects are underlined or noted down and memorized. This strategy is also employed by students in third year while preparing for GRE and TOEFL. The investigator observed that words are learnt from the dictionaries, Baron's word lists while preparing for such tests. While the jargon from their subjects are remembered as they are repeated in their books and also in the text books, memorizing word lists will not lead to deeper word processing which leads to remembering and retention.

Cognitive strategies involve remembering words and learning to use the sound of the word by repeating it immediately or noting it down while listening and reading. This strategy is used by learners with low vocabulary trying to learn English by memorizing, summarizing, using the words while speaking, writing English. This process is time consuming but helps in learning a language for day today communication. Compared to the memory strategies employed by those preparing for exams, the cognitive strategies take deep processing of information.

The Compensation Strategies are used when a learner comes across a new word while listening and reading. A learner with high vocabulary knowledge can overcome the problem by understanding the word from the context, but this is not possible for those with low vocabulary knowledge. The students from Tamil medium said they use English to mother tongue dictionary to overcome the problem.

Meta cognitive strategies are used when learners with high vocabulary knowledge and high proficiency of language make attempts to still add on to their existing vocabulary through extensive reading and listening to the target language. The students who have the habit of reading books and speaking to peers in English have high range of vocabulary. One student said that she does not speak English with friends but watches English films and reads through the script on TV to improve her vocabulary.

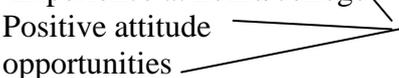
The affective strategies are less used strategies. These strategies are used when the learners try to use new language and do not mind making mistakes in the usage of words. The students from other states use this strategy while trying to learn Tamil. They do not mind making mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. But this risk is not taken by them while learning English due to peer pressure.

The social strategies involve asking others for meaning and discussing words with friends and peers while discussing the culture of a place they visit. Many students stay in the hostel. This is useful strategy they employ while learning the local language and also learning Engineering subjects. Students using these strategies are aware of the importance of learning a new language and ask questions in that language and try to seek the help of proficient speakers of the language.

One important observation that was made based on questionnaire given to the students on the strategies used by them for learning English words, many of them seem to lack knowledge on language learning in L2 situations. While students from other states seem to be activating many of the strategies to pick Tamil words, they seem to remain passive in doing the same for learning English words. Hence steps need to be taken to provide strategy training in learning English vocabulary. Students mostly use cognitive strategies which have a lot of impact on their learning. A study on vocabulary learning strategies and mental lexicon are already investigated prior to this study which are mentioned under self-citation Sripada( 2008, 2014) in the references.

### Other Findings:

1. The personal details of the students showed that some of them are first generation learners in their families to pursue professional education so the input for receptive skills is lacking.
2. Most of the students concentrated on subjects, in their preparation for entrance examinations to professional colleges in plus two. They need to develop the habit of reading books and also need guidance in reading.
3. Most of the students were highly motivated. They enjoy interactive classrooms than teacher controlled classes. Learning occurred in classes where the students had independence in choosing the materials to be learnt and also autonomy in testing themselves.
4. Many students lack knowledge of basic vocabulary, after studying fourteen years in English medium schools.
5. Vocabulary was not taught to the students based on a rationale. They were taught synonyms, antonyms in de-contextualized conditions but not based on network theories suggested in the research on mental lexicon.
6. The students enjoyed maintaining word note books and referring to them whenever they were free.

7. Experience at home/college  
Positive attitude  
opportunities  Increased vocabulary Learning leads to better comprehension

8. Laufer, ( in Schmitt 1997) based on the small number of words that L2 know, small vocabulary gains from reading, problems with guessing and a limited available L2 input, argues that the vocabulary knowledge in the L2 learner is due to instructed vocabulary teaching. The study proved that repeated exposure helps in learning new words to L2 compared to reading only.

Future studies can focus on finding the range of strategies used by students with a different mother tongue and also the strategies used by males and females.

As a prelude to the paper, a descriptive study on mental lexicon can be found @ Sripada PN (2008) "Mental Lexicon" in: Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, 34, No. 1, p. 183

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## APPENDIX - 1

### QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE STUDENTS

#### PERSONAL DETAILS

Date:

Name :

Age :

Mother Tongue :

No of Indian Languages known :

5. Number of years of study  
in English Medium :

6. Board / CBSE / ICSE Matric in X :

7. Board / CBSE / ICSE Matric in XII :

8. Language spoken at home :

Tick the relevant columns in the following questions:

9. Can your parents speak English? Yes/No

10. If Yes is it -  Both /  Father/  Mother
11. Do you have the habit of reading books for pleasure?  Yes /  No
12. If yes, do you read in  Mother Tongue/  English/  Both
13. If yes, to Q 12, how frequently do you read?  More than two in a month/  Two books a month/  less than two
14. Do you follow the lectures in English in all the subjects?  Yes /  No
15. If no, is it –  Most of lectures /  some of them
16. Do you speak English at home?  Often/  sometimes/  rarely
17. Do you speak in English with your friends and classmates?  
 Often /  sometimes/  rarely.
18. Do you actively take part in classroom interactions?  Yes /  No
19. If no mention reasons for not participating.
20. If you don't speak English is it because (tick all the columns relevant)  
 you struggle for words to express /  grammatical knowledge  
 fear of speaking  4 more comfortable in mother tongue than English
21. Do you think you need to improve your English?  Yes /  No
22. Do you make any effort to improve your English?  Yes /  No
23. If yes, how do you try to improve? Mention some strategies employed by you-
24. Do you expect your English teacher to help you in improving your language in any areas.
25. If you are given a choice to choose what you want to learn in English, mention the areas to be concentrated upon in the class:

## APPENDIX – 1A

Questionnaire on Strategies in Improving Vocabulary: adapted with changes from Schmitt (1997) model

Name

Branch

Roll No.

Date:

Tick the column USE if you use the strategy, tick HELPFUL if you use and feel it helpful; Not helpful if you feel it dint help you.

I. Strategy used to Determine the Meaning of a new word while Reading or Listening in any subject in English

| Strategy for the discovery of a new word    | Use | Not use | Helpful | Not helpful |
|---|-----|---------|---------|-------------|
| 1. Analyze parts of speech                  |     |         |         |             |
| 2. Analyze affixes/ roots                   |     |         |         |             |
| 3. Check for mother tongue equivalent       |     |         |         |             |
| 4. Look at pictures or analyze gestures     |     |         |         |             |
| 5. Guess from the context                   |     |         |         |             |
| 6. Use English to Mother tongue dictionary  |     |         |         |             |
| 7. Use English to English dictionary        |     |         |         |             |
| 8. From cards with pictures and information |     |         |         |             |
| 9. Learn from Flash cards                   |     |         |         |             |

II. Social Strategies to understand a new word:

|   | Use | Not use | Helpful | Not helpful |
|---|-----|---------|---------|-------------|
| 1. Ask teacher for mother tongue equivalent       |     |         |         |             |
| 2. Ask teacher to paraphrase, synonym of the word |     |         |         |             |
| 3. Ask teacher for a sentence using the new word  |     |         |         |             |
| 4. Ask classmates for new word meaning            |     |         |         |             |
| 5. Discover meaning through group work activity   |     |         |         |             |