

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

In learning language there are many different aspects and details that we must consider and learn in order for anyone to effectively use the language. These aspects include the four skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Other skills that are also prerequisites include pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, appropriacy, discourse and other language skills (Harmer, 1991, p. 11). All of these language bolts and screws are crucial to native-like competency in English and should be given importance. Even if not aiming for nativeness, the lack of one or more skills will result in less fluency and possibly become an obstacle to expressing thoughts in English.

This study emphasizes vocabulary and word knowledge as a key to language learning. Teachers, parents and students know very well how important a high vocabulary capacity is for language learning. According to Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1986, pp. 4-5) students feel that teachers should pay extra attention to their vocabulary development. Vocabulary is considered the building block of the ability to use the productive skills and better understand the receptive skills. With a limited vocabulary, one may only be able to crawl. With a bigger build-up, one may walk and eventually start to jog and then run. And once word knowledge is accumulated to an advanced level, one may sprint or even begin to dance as he or she produces language in a more colorful and descriptive manner, showing precision in thought and expression.

Word knowledge includes both vocabulary and spelling. Vocabulary gives the concept of the word and spelling shows symbols of the word (Templeton & Pikulski, 1999). Therefore, word knowledge is the knowledge of meanings of the words, which includes the understanding of concepts, and recognizing the symbols of the word. Word knowledge has been shown to be one of the most important attributes for reading comprehension, more important than phonetics and syntactic knowledge. Without word knowledge, comprehension is impossible (Devine, 1986, p. 45). Moreover, Laing (1993, p. 16) states an "extensive vocabulary plays a much larger role than a knowledge of grammar in achieving communicative ability."

Regarding the influence of word knowledge on successful language learning, students gain enough word knowledge in order to achieve language abilities. In 1994, Blachowic and Fisher's study as cited in Templeton & Pikulski, 1999 stated that "Students' independent learning as they read, write and explore words will be the fundamental process of vocabulary development throughout the rest of their lives." Hence, in teaching word knowledge, instructors should plan their lessons in ways that help students develop the ability to learn through individual work as well. Individual work involves "awareness of a variety of methods to acquire word meanings, ability to monitor one's understanding of new vocabulary, the capacity to change or modify strategies for understanding new words as indicated in the work by Carr & Wixson, 1989.

Since researchers emphasize that independent learning is an effective way to develop word knowledge, it is also important for teachers to know students learning strategies to further facilitate the learning process. Understanding these learning strategies helps both teachers and students perform their role to the utmost. The implication of this is that it assists teachers in the preparation of instruction procedures that facilitate students learning strategies, in order to expand students' word knowledge. Students can learn by using more than one strategy, and each student will have a preferred primary strategy. Some students might be engaged in strategies that do not work for them at all but they are not aware of it yet. In this case, it is the teachers' responsibility to guide students to discover and use other alternative and effective means of learning.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For whatever skill one is engaged in in English, there is a need to have a certain amount of word knowledge/lexis at ones' disposal. The more terminology one has, the more he or she will have to say and write. The more he or she will also be able to understand from reading and listening. However, how does a child accumulate vocabulary and word knowledge in order to have better comprehension of text and speech and in order to be able to engage in advanced conversation and produce colorful and descriptive texts? Which strategy should they opt for? Should they resort to traditional rote learning and/or are there other alternatives for teachers to adopt? There are obvious negative aspects of memorizing words and that includes the knowledge being stored in the short-term memory section of the thinking process so it does not stick with us for very long. So the problem is to find out what suits

children the best when it comes to learning and accumulating vocabulary when studying with a private tutor on a one-to-one basis outside a typical classroom of up to fifty students.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

From the previous sections we can see that having a certain amount of vocabulary to be used is crucial for all the four skills of language. We need it to be able to communicate and to understand what is happening around us. Because this is true, we need to start spoon-feeding children as well as to help embed independent study skills with the appropriate word knowledge and build it up to a maximum. This research looks at ways and alternatives to help discover how this can be done. Therefore, the objectives of the study are to:

1.3.1. Build awareness among those involved in language learning and teaching the importance of vocabulary using various strategies.

1.3.2. Discuss alternative and effective means of learning vocabulary and building word knowledge suitable for a one-on-one learning environment.

1.3.3. Offer suggestions and alternatives for teachers to increase word knowledge among students.

1.3.4. Guide teachers to alternative effective activities and techniques for teaching vocabulary to individual students, taking into consideration, appropriate learning styles.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study of vocabulary build-up techniques limits itself to activities and methods that could be used by teachers. It does not focus on what techniques were effective based on facts and figures or quantitative analysis. Instead it relies on anecdotal evidence and qualitative data from the researcher's private students and judgment as a teacher to what techniques were enjoyable for students and considered effective.

The activities and tools are designed for teaching individual students as opposed to a group or a classroom. The researcher has had more experience as a private tutor than in handling a classroom of more than twenty students where attention is much more dispersed among language learners. However, teachers catering to a bigger group of students may adapt these teaching techniques accordingly.

The level of words and activities that the study focuses on is for elementary school students attending local schools in Bangkok. There are no lists on what should be taught. This is left to the judgment of the teacher to see whether that particular word is likely to be used by his/her student.

1.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study does not pinpoint the order of words to learn. The researcher agrees that high frequency words should be given special attention and stops there. No list is provided as a guide to what vocabulary teachers should pay extra attention to. The researcher leaves it up to the teachers on what to focus on. It should generally be obvious and common sense what should be stressed and which can be left out for a later stage as the students mature and advance in English ability. Instead a variety of options and activities will be displayed as options for teachers who seek more ideas to break away from the monotony of techniques they have used so far.

The researcher uses these activities to teach individual students. The activities may not be suited to a bigger group. However, they can be adapted and tried on larger groups if teachers consider it effective.

1.6 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

1.6.1 **Vocabulary** basically refers to all the words of a language. However, for this research the definition is expanded to also refer to the sum of words used by, understood by, or at the command of a particular person or group.

1.6.2 **Lexis** is the total set of words in a language as distinct from morphology. Lexis should also be used to formulate sentences in written and spoken English.

1.6.3 **Word knowledge** is the knowledge of meanings of the words as well as the spelling. Again, to have word knowledge should also mean knowing how to apply and use the words.

For this entire research the above three words are used interchangeably.

1.6.4 **Learning strategies** are any sets of operations, steps, plans and routines used by learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information as cited in Wenden and Rubin, 1987.

1.6.5 **Bottom up reading process** refers to the deciphering of single units of language and working upwards to understanding a written text.

1.6.6 **Top down reading process** refers to getting a bird's eye view of the text being read and paying less attention to the individual units of language.

1.6.7 **Schema** is the background knowledge one has. It can be expanded and developed further based on new input.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.7.1. For syllabus designers and textbook writers, this study can be used as a guideline for suitable exercises, activities and suggestions when focusing on vocabulary learning.

1.7.2. Teachers will become more aware of different learning styles and adapt activities to suit students.

1.7.3. Teachers will also benefit from this study as they will be exposed to and be given alternatives to ways of drilling vocabulary to their students.

1.7.4. This study also opens up doors and sheds light for traditional Thai teachers to stray away from rote learning and experiment other alternative ways of vocabulary build-up.

1.7.5. For students interested in independent studying, they can also refer to this study to explore, independently, what tools interest them in re-capping words and terminology.

1.8 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

This study is divided into five chapters. In chapter one the background, statement of the problem, as well as the objectives are discussed. Chapter one also highlights the scope and limitations of the study along with the definition of terms important to the research. The significance of the paper is also found in the first chapter. Chapter two provides a review of the relevant literature used in support of the findings. It summarizes the work done by previous researchers to support the points discussed in this study including the importance of vocabulary, learner styles and attitudes including teaching technologies. Chapter three displays several techniques and strategies that can be used to teach vocabulary along with examples or visual guidelines to the strategies. Chapter four outlines the results of the study along with a discussion of the conclusions and recommendations for future teachers to better their teaching styles when it comes to the teaching of vocabulary. And finally chapter five

discusses the overall research by answering some questions that readers may have. It also gives recommendations and insight into an extension of the research.