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DEVELOPING A TESTING TOOL TO INCREASE THE VOLUME OF VOCABULARY FOR STUDENTS OF ESL



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ABSTRACT

It is not denied that English language has become a famous Lingua-Franca in the world. Thus, the knowledge of English is indispensable and it is to be developed. Its development depends on many components. Vocabulary or Lexicon is one of them. For students of ESL, vocabulary development is quite important to master the language. And there are another set of reasons why they have to improve their vocabulary. For instance, they use English in their education, especially in higher education, to express their intentions, describe their feelings, understand the ideas of others, etc. The students will feel good about themselves when they have a larger command of English language. To acquire all these said things perfectly and effectively, they have to make their English vocabulary rich. There is a common accepted statement in English pedagogy, i.e. if someone wants to learn a second language (target language) successfully, first of all, he or she has to develop the vocabulary of that language because language development depends on its vocabulary development. Wikipedia states that vocabulary development is a process by which people acquire words. In this process, teachers' responsibility is great. One of the most important responsibilities of every teacher is to help students develop a strong working vocabulary in their English language learning. The improvement of a student's vocabulary cannot be separated from the teachers' corporation and motivation. Hence, having considered the teachers' contribution towards the vocabulary development in second language learning, a simple but effective testing tool is developed to improve the vocabulary for the good side of

the ESL students.

KEYWORDS :vocabulary, Lingua-Franca, second language, English pedagogy, Wikipedia, testing tool, ESL students .

INTRODUCTION:

The term vocabulary is defined by Hodges (1984) as:

The vocabulary, or lexicon of a language encompasses the stock of words of that language which is at the disposal of a speaker or writer. Contained within this lexical storehouse is a core vocabulary of the words used to name common and fundamental concepts and situations of a culture, as well as subsets of words that result from one's personal, social, and occupational experience. Probably, the most important influence on one's speech is the simple circumstance of the languages spoken in the country of one's birth. Each of us grows up interacting with and interpreting the world around us, to a large degree through the medium of language.

English vocabulary is the basis for learning English language, i.e. it is central to English language learning and also teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Wilkins (1972) wrote that “. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. Educational research shows that vocabulary strongly relates to language skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing, and general abilities.

Like a mechanic who has a toolbox full of tools, a learner of ESL has to use an effective toolbox in learning English. This toolbox is constantly growing and is filled with items like grammar, punctuation, capitalization rules, figurative language, rhyme, rhythm, vocabulary, etc. Just as really good mechanics can pull out the right tools to make a good engine even stronger, good learners can pull out the right tools at the right time to make their language even more powerful. One tool that can *power up* their language is a strong vocabulary. A strong vocabulary causes a student's high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) level. In addition to this, there are many practical benefits the students can gain by a strong vocabulary. For instance, a rich vocabulary improves the lives of the students both personally and professionally. And further, they are able to communicate their ideas to people in a much more effective manner. Though others commonly judge the learners based on their outward appearance, the real fact is that they judge them by the way they speak. Thus, vocabulary is an element that people will use to judge the students' intelligence. When a student is found with a poor vocabulary, it can cause others to look down on him. Instead, when he speaks to someone, and he uses the proper words that are not spoken daily by the average person, he will convey the impression that he is a person who is educated and well read. Moreover, he will also show that he is great at carrying on a conversation. That is why, it is emphasized that developing a good vocabulary is crucial and it makes a student well-noted and is fruitful for his smart learning. It is surely agreed that actions speak louder than words, but sometimes words speak louder than anything else. The words a person uses, or his vocabulary, will often tell others who he is and where he comes from, i.e. totally his story. For example, isn't it shocking when a person who looks educated and dignified opens his mouth and his vocabulary horrifies everyone around him? Thus, it is strongly said that vocabulary learning is a vital part of education and in second language learning for a student. Further, the researchers (Baumann and Kameenui 1991; Stanovich 1986; Becker 1977) have stated that vocabulary deficiencies are a primary cause of academic failure. Hence, building vocabulary is inevitable for a student of ESL to make him bright in his academic career, especially in language learning.

BUILDING VOCABULARY:

In the process of learning English as a second language, building vocabulary or lexicon is a crucial factor in learners' growth. Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language (Cameron, 2001). Harmon, Wood, and Keser, (2009) as well as Linse (2005) state that learners' vocabulary building or development is an important aspect of their language development. Vocabulary building falls into four categories:

- Listening: the words a student understands when he hears them
- Speaking: the words he uses when talking
- Reading: the words he understands when he reads
- Writing: the words he uses when writing

As stated above, to develop students' mental lexicon, teachers must create or encourage a curiosity about the meaning and use of unfamiliar words and promote the use of strategies that will help students find the meaning of new words. Undoubtedly, a rich vocabulary makes the skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing easier to perform.

READING AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

Reading comprehension depends upon the meaning readers give words. Vocabulary knowledge is closely related to the background knowledge required for reading a text. The more vocabulary words students know, the better they are able to comprehend a text. A wider range of reading materials helps the students grasp a large volume of lexicon which opens students' flow and power of language to great extent. Wide reading is a powerful vehicle for vocabulary acquisition for older students and more proficient readers (Stanovich, 1986). Not only reading comprehension but is *reading aloud* a common practice in classrooms and is viewed as an important vehicle for vocabulary development. Read-alouds are complex instructional interactions in which teachers choose texts, identify words for instruction, and select the appropriate strategies to facilitate word learning. The scholars, (Newton, Padak, and Rasinski, 2008) state that reading aloud is widely accepted as a means of developing vocabulary, particularly in young students (Biemiller and Boote, 2006). Read-alouds fill the gap by exposing students to look at language, which is rich in unusual words and descriptive language. Vocabulary learning is also enhanced through *repeated reading* of the text, which provides opportunities to revise and refine words meaning (Carey, 1978). These repetitions help students move to deeper levels of word knowledge from never heard it, to sounds familiar, to it has something to do with, to well known (Dale, 1965). Further, a rich working vocabulary improves English Language Learners' (ELLs) ability to communicate through speaking, listening, and writing.

SPEAKING AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

Vocabulary sharpens students' verbal communication. They need to develop their vocabulary platform as a base to state their viewpoints correctly. Therefore, it is necessary for a student to develop a good lexicon which helps him communicate his ideas to people in a much more efficient way, as lexicon or vocabulary is crucial and directly related to language and its power. Then, how can a student develop a good lexicon? Undoubtedly, it is through learning new words. If it is so, how will the nature of the new words be? Will it be to make his communication confused or simple? Definitely, to make it simple and effective. Thus, the point of having a good vocabulary or lexicon is being able to choose words with greater precision; not to use fancy, arcane or complicated words to impress or confuse

other people. For example, a bright student of ESL tells his friend who is average in English, "My aunt kicked the bucket yesterday". Then, the poor friend doesn't understand the meaning of his friend's utterance. Thus, their communication is blocked. But, if the bright friend had used the term died instead of *kicked the bucket*, the poor friend would have got the meaning, and their communication would have been meaningful and continuous. At the same time, if the bright student had used this idiom, i.e. kicked the bucket, to his teacher of English; definitely, he or she would have praised or admired him for his mental lexicon dominance or power.

LISTENING AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

It is clear that the size of a student's working vocabulary is both a measure of educational attainment and a key to academic and career success. By the time the students reach adulthood, most of them have to recognize and understand close to 50,000 words. (Stahl, 1999; Tompkins, 2005). As far as the listening activities for vocabulary development are concerned, the understanding of the unfamiliar or new words in the activities is a must to apprehend the meaning of the whole activities. Students should be motivated to listen to TV and radio news, stories, speeches, lectures, watching healthy movies and interviews, recorded texts, etc. By listening and watching all these programmes, a student grasps many unfamiliar or new words. Then, he can note the words and gets the meaning of them with the help of a good dictionary by considering the pragmatic aspects, i.e. the contexts or situations. For instance, when a student listens to an utterance, *Bill Gates is a rich man*, he can immediately understand the meaning of the word, *rich*, i.e. wealthy or a lot of money. In another situation, the same student comes to know an utterance, *It is a rich croton (a plant)*. Here, he understands the meaning of the word, *rich*, as flourishing or prospering. The word *rich* in these two utterances, *Bill Gates is a rich man* and *It is a rich croton (a plant)*, is used in two different contexts (in their natural settings). Thus, the contextual meaning in vocabulary development during a listening process is to be considered for a successful language understanding or learning. What is more, when the students listen to a text, they have to think of not only the contextual meaning but the usage of their prior knowledge to work out the meanings of the new words, as well.

WRITING AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

It is widely known that vocabulary learning is one of the aspects in mastering and fostering a second language and literacy development respectively; and further discerning the linguistic awareness in the language. Although grammar is important for meaning, but no message is conveyed without vocabulary. The famous living linguist, Noam Chomsky, speaks about a sentence, *The colourless green ideas are sleeping furiously*, for conveying the difference between grammar and semantics, i.e. meaning. Here, the sentence is *grammatically well-formed, but semantically ill-formed*, i.e. the meaning is absurd. The words in this sentence are not connected to convey the meaning properly. Thus, vocabulary in writing is very important for the reflection of the meaning of a text. The words the students can retrieve from their mental lexicon when they write to express themselves, should be appropriate to the context. It can be described as the glue that holds ideas and concepts together in a piece of text. A rich vocabulary makes a student's writing attractive and effective. For instance, a student writes a sentence, *I wrote a letter*, which is the normal way most of the students will think of expressing the same. But this sentence can be written in some captivating way, i.e. *I penned a letter*. Here, the student uses the writing tool, i.e. pen as a verb. If a student writes the sentence this way, it will definitely show his word power and creativity to others. Another example can be stated that a student wants to express his hobby, i.e. collecting stamps or stamp collecting. If he comes to know one

word term which is *philately*, instead of the compounds, *collecting stamps* or *stamp collecting*, his writing will be admired by others. Thus, he can simply write, My hobby is philately despite *My hobby is collecting stamps*. Like this, a student's writing skill will be shaped and sharpened by the appropriate vocabulary usage which gives the academic flavours to his written text.

STRATEGIES FOR VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT:

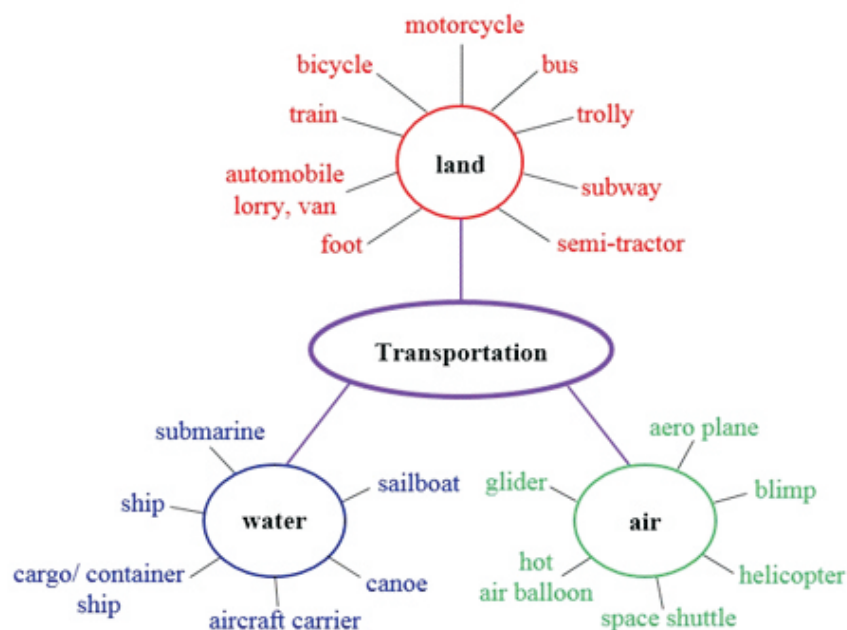
English language learning is impossible without improving vocabulary knowledge. For ESL students, vocabulary development is especially important to get the confidence to conquer the language. It is essential for a student to shine himself among others in learning process. The English Language has a very large vocabulary, estimated to between 450,000 and 750,000 words (Stahl, 1999; Tompkins, 2005). At this point, it is a predominant duty of teachers to help students enlarge on their word power. There are several effective classroom strategies that teachers can employ with students of ESL of any age. Some of the vocabulary strategies or boosters are explained here.

PRE-TEACH VOCABULARY:

Pre-teaching vocabulary is always suggested and helpful before doing an activity like reading a story in the class. It will give the students the chance to identify the words and then be able to place them in context and remember them. Pre-teaching vocabulary can be used in the ESL methods such as role playing or pantomiming, using gestures, showing real objects, pointing to pictures, doing quick drawings on the board, using the native language equivalent and then asking the students to say the word in English, etc. To ensure mastery of more complex words and concepts, the teacher can follow the six ESL steps: 1. Pre-selecting a word from an upcoming text or conversation. 2. Explaining the meaning with student-friendly definitions. 3. Providing examples of how it is used. 4. Asking the students to repeat the word three times or more. 5. Engaging the students in activities to develop mastery. 6. Asking the students to say the word again. By sticking to the said six steps, the teacher can set a related scene and bring the students into the learning environment.

SEMANTIC MAPPING:

Semantic mapping involves a web-like graphic display. Semantic knowledge, or word and world knowledge is a key area of vocabulary growth. Semantic mapping is also known as learning map in which students are presented with a concept that is central to understanding a selection or subject. Then they try to find out the associate words based on their own understanding and experiences with the related concept. They are able to understand the links and differences between semantic concepts such as synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and categories. For example, in the unit of transport, the teacher targets the words transportation, land, water, air, train, ship, helicopter, etc. from the students. Look at the diagram below:



Semantic mapping is helpful for developing students' understanding of almost any concept. As a result, he enriches his mental lexicon or word bank, because a student must learn 2,700 to 3,000 new words per year (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Nagy & Herman, 1987) or about 7 new words per day to achieve nearly the 40,000 vocabulary words in the second language learning.

FOCUSING ON COGNATES:

Cognates are words in different languages that are derived from the same original word or root. It is believed that about 40% of all English words have similar cognates in Spanish. This is an obvious bridge to the English language if the student is made aware of how to use this valuable resource. By telling the cognates in different languages, the students can be asked to tell the English equivalent of the cognates, for example, words like *family* and *familia*, and *conversation* and *conversacion*. There are some false cognates as well, but they are the exceptions to the rule. For instance, *mano* in Spanish means *hand*, not *man*. Thus, the teacher has to encourage the students to guess at words and try to decipher text based on this existing knowledge. The more familiarity a teacher has with Spanish and other languages like French and Greek, the easier it is to point out these connections for the good side of the students' vocabulary development.

USING A DICTIONARY:

Teachers should inculcate the habit of using dictionaries among students who should be taught how to use dictionaries to look up the meanings of unknown words. Small pocket dictionaries are not expensive and they can provide a wealth of information, provided that students know how to use them. Dictionary skills such as *using guide words*, *understanding parts of speech*, and *deciphering phonetic spelling*, should be explicitly taught and practised. Dictionaries are also fruitful in introducing multiple meanings or senses of words.

USING WORD PARTS:

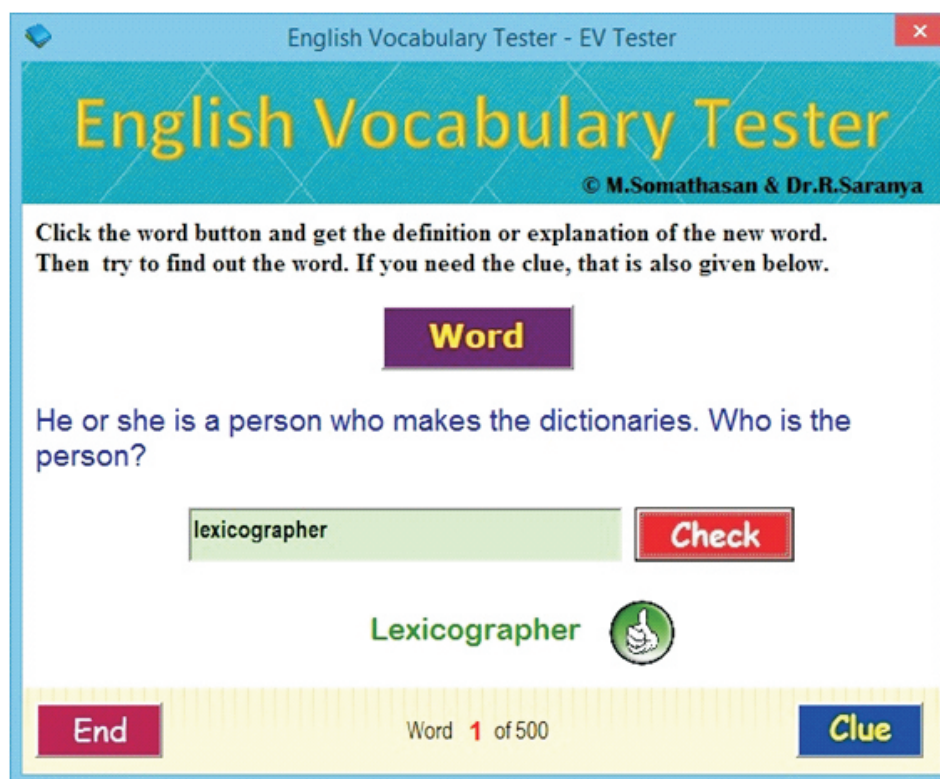
As prefixes, suffixes, and roots help students unlock the meanings of new words based on their

understanding of word parts or components or morphologically *morphs*, teachers have to give the students an opportunity to create the prefixes and suffixes reference chart in the text the students deal with. It is stated that more than 60% of new words can be broken down into elements or parts which the students use to figure out their meanings.

USING COMPUTER PROGRAMMES:

Nowadays computers perform an inevitable role in the educational domain. With the help of the computer technology, a student can develop his knowledge vastly. While taking the English language learning, computer technology-incorporated ways are very special for the students of ESL. When geared to them, computer programmes are the learning and even teaching tools which are proven supplements to helping the students build language skills and especially word power. A computational tool is a non-threatening way to help learners study or work on their own. As far as vocabulary development and computers are concerned, there are ample software and online sources available for students to increase the lexicon. A student-friendly computer programme related to vocabulary development can help him study the new words digitally and efficiently. Based on this concept and for this paper, a computational testing tool called *EV-Tester*, is designed to teach the ESL students the English vocabulary successfully.

Sample visual of the developed testing tool (EV Tester):



METHODOLOGY OF THE DEVELOPED TOOL:

While considering the vocabulary for ESL students, it is a must for their language learning process and it should be imparted contextually and meaningfully. In the developed testing tool, the definition or explanation of a word is displayed and sometimes with example. The students have to

identify what it is. If they like, they can get the help from the clues about the word to guess it. For instance, the explanation is: *He or she is a person who writes dictionaries. Who is the person?* The clue is: *The word begins with the initial sound in level.* The answer is *lexicographer*. By doing so, students are motivated or inspired to use the existing knowledge to guess the word; or they are stimulated to look at the contexts in the definition or explanation and try to find out the new word form. This tool was tested in a group of students and the result was successful; especially it was noted that the students had shown a keen interest in working with this tool on their own. Further, the students' curiosity was observed in improving the word knowledge, i.e. vocabulary. The tool is simple and user-friendly, but strongly effective in promoting the mental lexicon of the ESL students.

CONCLUSION:

Vocabulary development refers to getting the knowledge of new or unfamiliar words and their meaning and usage in the context for advancing language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Vocabulary knowledge is considered as a critical one for second language learners. It creates a crucial literate environment for them. When a student enriches his word knowledge, he becomes an independent word learner and user. Vocabulary development brings *word consciousness, an awareness of, interest in, and curiosity* about words. Teachers apply many strategies in the classroom to improve the students' vocabulary. Some of them are pre-teaching, cognates focusing, dictionary usage, word parts analysis, semantic mapping, using existing computer programmes, and self-developed computational testing tools like EV-Tester. By using *EV-Tester*, students of ESL will be able to master many ESL terms concretely and therefore, their language power raises to praises. Further, they will use the proper contextual terms or words in their daily language and linguistic communication positively and productively.

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