Increase the Effectiveness of Morphology as the Vocabulary-Teaching Strategy for Chinese EFL Students

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Abstract: *Vocabulary is identified as one of the key components of reading comprehension. However, EFL students face potential obstacles in vocabulary learning and reading comprehension due to various impact factors such as over-emphasis on grammar and ineffective vocabulary instruction. The aim of this research is to analyze the challenges in vocabulary learning and deficits in vocabulary instruction in the Chinese setting and proposes morphology as the teaching strategy. The research question of this paper is: how to integrate morphology effectively into vocabulary instruction for Chinese EFL students. Two approaches are suggested accordingly, which are teaching morphology explicitly as a strategy to students, and teaching vocabulary in context with the use of morphology.*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of second language acquisition. Garcia [1] (1991) has identified the relationship between Latino English learners' vocabulary knowledge and their reading comprehension. More recently, Helman and Burns [2] have demonstrated a significant correlation between English as a foreign language (EFL) students' acquisition rate of sight words and their English proficiency (2008), where the importance of vocabulary learning in second language acquisition is underscored.

Granted the importance of vocabulary in language acquisition, vocabulary teaching is not conducted effectively, especially in non-English speaking countries, for instance, China, as Chen [3] stated that vocabulary instruction is compromised by the excessive focus on structure and grammar (2009). Consequently, due to the lack of effective vocabulary instructions, vocabulary learning has always been a daunting challenge for EFL students.

As reflected by EFL students from a university southwestern China, Chinese EFL students have experienced various types of vocabulary instructions such as rote memorization and borrowing characters from the Chinese pinyin system; unfortunately, among those instructions and methods, few are rated as effective by students. Most Chinese teachers adopt teacher-centered teaching method in the vocabulary instructions regarding the considerable number of students in class and the tremendous content required by the curriculum. Some of the teachers adopt the audiolingual theory; hence teaching vocabulary by introducing the frequently used grammar patterns of those words, while others simply lead students to read through the words together with the Chinese translation. These vocabulary instructions fail to provide students with an approach to acquire vocabulary, which is in line with the composition of English. Consequently, the pressure of acquiring new vocabulary is left for students, which leads to various ineffective approaches such as rote memorization and using Chinese pinyin to acquire pronunciation.

Given the limited time and the tremendous content objectives in class, it is impossible to teach each word directly to students, therefore, one possible solution for teachers is to give students tools and to teach them strategies to learn vocabulary explicitly, and morphology is one of the effective tools (Kieffer & Lesaux [4], 2010). Kieffer and Lesaux defined morphology in linguistics as the study of the structure of words, which infers to morphemes, the combination of smaller units of meaning within words (2010). This is also supported by Chinese scholars who suggested the approach of cognitive linguistic-based lexicography (Zhao [5], 2003; Li & Wang [6], 2005).

Morphology is a helpful approach in vocabulary acquisition especially for EFL students whose first language is entirely different from English. Therefore, this strategy is especially helpful for Chinese students, given the distinctiveness between Chinese and English characters. While it is feasible to scaffold Latino students to identify the similarity between the Spanish word "planta" and the English word "plant", which demonstrate the definitions of both vegetation and factory; and the similar rule of word formation between the Spanish word "ferroviario" and the English word "railway", such connections between languages are non-existent between Chinese and English.

Therefore, through the analysis of online videos regarding the application of morphology in classroom teaching, and the status quo of vocabulary instructions in China, the author identified a paradoxical fact that although morphology has already been integrated into classroom instructions in China, it did not facilitate students' vocabulary learning in that they still find it challenging to remember new vocabulary which can be manifested in their in-class assessments.

In the videos, a typical example is that in one class, the teacher stated the content objective is learning 100 new words, during the class, the teacher used morphology to introduce related words, such as success, successful, and succeed, which made the overall amount of words exceed 100, and this resulted in students' complaints. This reflected students' unawareness of morphology since they failed to spot the relativeness between the words and thus regard them as extras rather than add-ons. In addition, the videos also reflected the phenomenon that in those vocabulary lessons, although some students developed the awareness of using morphology, they easily forgot the newly acquired words in class. The reason for this problem is that vocabulary acquisition requires adequate exposure, which means students should encounter the words in different contexts before they finally acquire them (Manyak & Bauer [7], 2009).

Therefore, the research question of this paper is: how to integrate morphology effectively into vocabulary instruction for Chinese EFL students, and the author suggests two approaches to deal with the use of morphology in vocabulary instruction: teaching morphology explicitly as a strategy to students, and teaching vocabulary in context with the use of morphology.

2. Literature Review

For EFL students, a considerable amount of vocabulary plays an important role in their reading comprehension as well as second language acquisition. Researches carried out by Helman and Burns have stated that EFL students make efforts on both decoding and understanding during the reading process; therefore, a larger vocabulary can increase their efficiency in the decoding process and thus scaffold EL students to reach a better understanding of the content (2008). The finding of the research, at the same time, highlights the importance of acquiring more academic vocabulary for EFL students. Academic vocabulary refers to the high-frequency words in expository texts which rarely appear in daily conversation (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2010). They form the base for learning new concepts and provide the foundation for academic reading and writing (Kieffer & Lesaux). Therefore, it is necessary for EFL students to learn the academic language for their future academical success.

While the importance of vocabulary has long been highlighted in reading comprehension (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux [8], 2010), EFL students suffer from the limitation in vocabulary knowledge, which serves as a barrier to their future academic achievements (Manyak, et al. [9], 2014). Four facts are illustrated to support this claim: 1. the deficit in the vocabulary knowledge of English learning (EL) students before their entrance to school (Hart & Risley [10], 1995); 2. the ineffectiveness of schools to eliminate the deficit (Biemiller [11], 2005); 3. the challenges posed by the limited vocabulary to EL students' academic achievements (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010); 4. the severity of the deficit in vocabulary in terms of the number of students and the extent of deficit (Nagy [12], 2005). As a result, the need to improve vocabulary instruction is urgent.

Morphology studies the words structures by looking at the smaller units of meaning within words, for example, prefixes and suffixes (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2010). Acquiring morphology enables EL students to analyze unfamiliar words based on their current knowledge. In other words, students can learn to build a connection between their background knowledge and the new knowledge which will facilitate the learning process. The considerable amount of vocabulary to be learned also makes morphology a necessary tool for EFL students to deal with this challenge, especially in academic settings where prefixes and suffixes are frequently used to convey meaning concisely (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2010).

However, simply integrating morphology into vocabulary instruction cannot promise desirable learning outcomes. Instead, teachers should provide students with explicit and meaningful instruction to

help them internalize the strategy of using morphology (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2010). Previous researches have also proved the advantages of explicit instruction over incidental exposure in the aspect of vocabulary learning (e.g., Hill & Laufer [13], 2003; Knight [14], 1994; Laufer [15], 2003). This will help students to analyze unfamiliar vocabulary in their individual reading or other occasions without teachers' presence, which is important for EL students' vocabulary development as teachers can only spend limited time in vocabulary instruction in class, let alone on individual students. More importantly, students' development of metalinguistic awareness and cognitive awareness can also benefit from this approach through the process of second language acquisition.

On the other hand, vocabulary should be taught in contexts, which is in line with the integrated form-focused instruction (FFI) as is proposed by Spada and Lightbown [16] (2008). Integrated FFI demands attention to forms to be carried out through communicative language teaching (Spada & Lightbown, 2008), which enables students to grasp the actual meanings and the uses of them in specific settings. The positive role of integrated FFI in vocabulary acquisition has been bolstered by prior studies. Knight (1994) found that integrated FFI promoted students' learning of unknown words. Likewise, Watanabe [17] (1997) identified that glosses of difficult words facilitated students' reading comprehension as well as vocabulary learning. Therefore, integrate vocabulary instruction into the process of reading comprehension overweighs the isolated instruction of vocabulary.

Besides, teaching vocabulary in context can expose students to different contexts, which provides them with considerable exposure to the target language; hence helps them to acquire new vocabulary at the end (Manyak & Bauer, 2009). Using sentence frames as class materials is one suggested method of applying this approach in the classroom setting. Before the class, teachers should decide the content and language objectives of the class to choose the proper sentence frames, which should be in line with the objectives, and at the same time should be useful for vocabulary acquisition (Donnelly & Joe [18], 2010). Donnelly and Joe also stressed the importance of differentiating the instruction based on students' various English proficiency which can better meet the needs of each students (2010).

3. Application

The target students in this section are English major students in private universities in China, where students' overall English proficiency is limited but are highly frequent in their first language. The primary goal of learning English for this group of students is to pass the Test for English Major- Band 4 (TEM-4) and the Test for English Major- Band 8 (TEM-8). Consequently, the author plans to start from basic elements to develop students' metalinguistic awareness and to expand their vocabulary size with the use of authentic texts and books appropriate for their language proficiency as well as textbooks. During the process, the author will strive to find internal motivations of language acquisition for these students, which can facilitate their vocabulary learning.

To avoid the problem mentioned above that students will fail to acquire the strategy of using morphology, the author designs the lesson plan, where this strategy will be explained to students explicitly, and the instruction will start from the words with prefixes and suffixes they already know in order to guide students to explore and comprehend the concept of morphology. For example, students will be asked to find the similarity in the form of the word teacher, singer, dancer, which they already know; after that, they will be guided to connect the similarity in form with the one in their meanings; hence to learn the concept of morphology through the suffix "-er". Then the author will read the material to students and ask them to work in groups to find and highlight the words they don't know. After that, the author will teach those words by using morphology explicitly in class.

In the activity part, the author plans to select a sentence frame that is in line with the class objectives and ask students to use the new vocabulary to make sentences with the frame. For example, in a class with the objective of teaching the comparison frame, the author will provide the sentence stem "I think subject A is more difficult/ easier than subject B"; as a result, during the practice session students are likely to make sentences such as "I think biology is more difficult than geology", where the practice of the suffixes "-ology" also takes place. Finally, the author will give feedback to students' use of the sentence stem, and at the same time, draw students' attention to the use of suffix and summarize its use explicitly.

Ideally, after several weeks of practice, students can apply the strategy of using morphology in learning vocabulary independently. This activity not only achieves teaching morphology explicitly but also manages to teach it within contexts and provide students opportunities to practice and create new contexts where they can get exposure to the new vocabulary.

4. Reflection and Conclusion

There are two potential problems in carrying out this strategy: 1. how to differentiate the activity based on students' level of language proficiency and 2. how to motivate students' to be active through the learning process. To address the first problem, the author plans to put students in different groups according to their language proficiency when doing the sentence framing activity, which can ensure that students can comprehend the sentence made by their groupmates; hence encouraging students' output. To motivate students, the author believes that using students' background knowledge is an effective approach because it can guide teachers to choose materials that meet both the interests and the English proficiency of students.

Using morphology to teach vocabulary is an applicable and effective method of delivering vocabulary instruction in China. With the explicit explanation of the strategy and the in-context practice, students hold the chance of acquiring the approach to enlarge their vocabulary independently and developing their metalinguistic awareness during the process as well.

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