Working with Vocabulary at Tertiary level in Bangladesh

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Abstract:

Providing vocabulary instructions is one of the most effective ways through which EFL teachers in Bangladesh can facilitate the tertiary learners' development of communicative competence in English. Because weak knowledge of vocabulary causes learners' comprehension ability to suffer and this troubled comprehension creates barriers in achieving the target competence level in all major skills. Therefore, our present study aims to find out the difficulties that teachers and students face in teaching and learning vocabulary in English at tertiary level in Bangladesh. The study has been done through questionnaire survey both from teachers' and students' point of view. And with the help of some statistical tools, the present study concludes that the problem primarily lies within the vicinity of teaching techniques.

Keywords: Audio-lingualism, lexical set, synonym, antonym, word formation, flash card, EFL.

1. Introduction:

Teaching vocabulary involves not only providing the knowledge of single words as a lexical item or of the word that consists of more than one item but also how these words can be put into practical usage in various sentences in several contexts. On the other hand,

learning vocabulary engages the process through which knowledge is built up over a series of varied acquaintance with the word. The main problem lying with these two tasks are that only a few words and a small part of what is required can be dealt with effectively at a time in classrooms. When teachers teach vocabulary in language classes, they can provide only one or two of these meetings. The rest is to be arranged by the students themselves.

In Bangladesh most of the tertiary students come from Bangla medium background and have very little pre exposure to English as a foreign language. As a result, it becomes a huge work for the language teachers to teach their tertiary students the necessary vocabulary items in English within such a short span of this level. Moreover, without rich vocabulary the students will face various problems in comprehending and producing the major skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing in English. Sequentially, they will not be able to become communicatively competent in the target language. They may even remain far away from achieving the desired result in higher studies, since most of the reference materials at this level

are available in English. From this perspective, the present study has been done through questionnaire surveys and tends to find out the challenges that the teachers and students have to overcome while working with vocabulary.

2. Purpose of the Study:

This study is set to find out the barriers to teaching and learning vocabulary in English at tertiary level in Bangladesh. It further aims to clarify whether the teachers' ineffective applications of teaching techniques are responsible in this regard or the students themselves are also accountable for not being able to achieve their goal.

3. Literature Review:

Vocabulary can be defined as the words that have been taught in a foreign language and a new item of vocabulary can be of more than a single word expressing a single idea and meaning (Ur, 1996). In the pursuit of acquiring a Second or Foreign Language, the development of a rich vocabulary is an important factor. Though the practice of teaching vocabulary was neglected during 1950s while audio-lingualism prevailed on the methodology followed by language teachers, it came back in 1970s due to the development of communicative approaches to language teaching (Nunan, 1991). Proponents of this approach hold that in the early stages of learning and using a Second Language, one is better served by vocabulary than grammar.

According to Stahl (2005) the knowledge of vocabulary includes not only the definition of that particular word but also how that word can be used for serving practical purposes. Besides, Lindsay (2000, p. 43) thinks that "How much of the new vocabulary becomes part of the learners' vocabulary will depend on how actively it is used and practiced." Therefore, while teaching vocabulary the primary emphasis should be given on the activities which will be practiced in the class.

3.1 Activities for Enhancing Vocabulary:

In order to teach and learn vocabulary in effective ways, it is very important to follow some techniques. Many of the traditional techniques do not work well because the students who are learning vocabulary in those procedures forget the meaning of the new terms beyond the tests. So, now-a-days a variety of them have been mediated by the language teachers to help the students in comprehending and remembering the new terms. Lindsay (2000) has mentioned the following ways to develop vocabulary:

1. Knowing lexical sets
2. Using synonyms and antonyms
3. Guessing
4. Word formation
5. Remembering words
6. Using a dictionary

Now these techniques are described below:

3.1.1.   Knowing lexical sets:

Lexical sets help the adult students in learning a foreign language not through a random collection of words but rather going through sets of similar words. If each lexical item refers to something that can be distinguished specifically, the approach will work well. Teachers can introduce brainstorming by asking the students to think about a particular word in connection with other associated words. (Ur, 1996)

3.1. 2. Using synonyms and antonyms:

Teachers require synonymous words to facilitate students in getting a quick idea of the meaning of the unknown item because synonyms are one of the best ways to explain the unknown words simply and quickly. In contrast, learning opposite meaning of words can also be helpful in improving vocabulary. Teachers have to be careful while they teach antonym of words, as in lexical items there is also a reciprocal relationship called 'converseness' like husband-wife, selling-buying and gradable opposites (i.e. based on polar extremes like enormous-thin, love-hate etc.)

3.1.3. Guessing:

Guessing as a technique needs proper understanding of the context in which words appear. To comprehend the context students at least need to have knowledge on vocabulary, parts of speech and word formation to identify the contextual clues given in a sentence. The students who are at upper-intermediate level can do better in guessing the meaning of words from a particular context.

3.1.4. Word formation:

To extend learners' vocabulary and to guess the meaning of words, knowledge of word structure and forming new words by adding prefixes and suffixes are also important. In the formation of new words, a wide variety of affixes creates difficulties in learning. It may be helpful to face the problem through meaning. For example some prefixes like dis-, non-, un- implies negative meaning or opposite words after adding to the root.

3.1.5. Remembering words:

Words can be memorized in two ways: keeping vocabulary notebooks and using advertising techniques. Firstly, keeping notebooks is a useful way to keep an eye on the new words. Use of these note books also helps the teachers to check on students' efforts to build their own vocabulary. Instead of selecting the words randomly for a note book, it is better to point out them under some common categories based on lexical sets. Noting down the pronunciation, parts of speech, common usage and other associations of the words will be helpful for the students to remember them. Secondly, students can use advertising and selling techniques like exaggerating the particular image that is invoked by the word, using colored pictures or different colors to underline new terms and utilizing all the senses, music and songs to remember newly learned items.

3.1.6. Using a dictionary:

Dictionary is first and foremost tool for the students who want to improve their vocabulary through self-study. Teachers will advise their students to have an English-English dictionary and will help them to recognize the phonetic and grammatical symbols, grammatical and other abbreviations and the differences between formal and informal use of words.

Teachers can further suggest their students to use flash cards because those cards "provide not only multitude of avenues for learning, reinforcement, and drill, but they are fast and fun." (Stutz, 1992, p.1323). On the top of that, audio-visual presentation of new words is also very effective in teaching and learning vocabulary because students can learn the pronunciation and meaning of the new words at the same time

(Nunan, 1991). Again, Graves (2000, p. 116) refers that once students get interested in playing with words and language, they will become the 'word-conscious' learners who will make words a field of life long interest.

Further, teachers have to teach different aspects of meaning beside the dictionary meaning or denotation. They also have to teach connotation i.e. "the associations or positive or negative feelings it evokes, which may or may not be indicated in a dictionary" (Ur, 1996, p.61) and the appropriateness of the word in a particular context. In addition to that, Rivers (1968, p. 209) has observed that "Vocabulary for any specific subject of interest is soon acquired when circumstances demand it." Lindsay has also advised:

> "Students who are learning a foreign language can ignore many words because they will not need them in order to achieve everyday communication and to express basic needs. Teachers similarly should distinguish between the vocabulary that their students need for active use and the vocabulary they need for passive, receptive purposes (for understanding the gist of a text) […] and spend more time and effort on the meaning and sound (pronunciation and syllable stress) [...]" (Lindsay, 2000, p. 43)

Similarly, Nation (2005) thinks that while teaching a new word, less important words should be dealt quickly. More time should be allotted to the words which are used frequently. Therefore, teachers can administer a need analysis before starting to teach vocabulary in EFL classes. Besides, attention should be given on learning the correct spelling of the words. So, teachers need to be watchful that all these aspects are presented properly in language classes during vocabulary teaching.

4. The Study Method:

4.1. The Study Participants:

For the questionnaire survey, one hundred and fifty students and thirty teachers were selected by Simple Random Sampling (SRS) method from seven private and two public universities in Bangladesh. The universities surveyed were Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, Daffodil International University, Stamford University, State University, Northern University, Eastern University, East West University and North South University. The data were collected in April 2011.The teachers who were the respondents had either taught a particular course on developing vocabulary in English or delivered instructions on how to improve vocabulary knowledge in their EFL classes. And the students were from various Faculties like Faculty of Business and Economics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and Faculty of Science and Information Technology.

4.2. Survey Instrument:

 To collect primary data, two structured questionnaires were developed following Likert scale with different satisfaction levels ranging from strongly satisfied (1) to strongly dissatisfied (5). Quantitative method was applied for analysis. Data were analyzed by SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) 12.0 and statistical techniques like; frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation were used.

Both of the questionnaires for teachers and students consisted of eight multiple choice questions. The questionnaires were pre-tested several times before gathering data. The researchers themselves were present while collecting data and had explained the terms used in the questionnaires. Both the questionnaires had some common and some different questions to compare and contrast the opinions of the two groups.

Name of the Variables	Total no. of Observation	Mean of the Scores	Standard Deviation
Satisfaction with vocabulary in English at tertiary level	150	4.01	0.03
Poor vocabulary creates problem in learning English skills	150	1.92	0.50
Learning vocabulary is a lifelong interesting activity	150	3.08	0.92
Teaching vocabulary according to students' need would be helpful for future	150	2.69	0.67
The first concern besides knowing the meaning of a particular word while using dictionary (Learning pronunciation)	150	1.56	0.87
Valid N (list wise)	150		

4.3. Analysis of Students' Information:

Students' questionnaire consisted of eight multiple choice items concerning their point of view on both how to learn and increase vocabulary in English. From the descriptive statistics of the of the considered variables in case of the students (See table 1.1) it has been found that majority them are dissatisfied with their knowledge of vocabulary in English at tertiary level (Mean is 4.01). Though they agree that poor vocabulary knowledge creates problems in learning English (Mean is 1.92), they are greatly diversified regarding the issue whether learning vocabulary is a lifelong interesting activity (Standard Deviation is 0.92). Further, most of them have agreed with the statement that teaching subject related words would be helpful for serving their future purposes (Mean is 2.69).

Table 1.1 Descriptive Statistics of the considered variables under study (Students)

∗Note: A total number of four dichotomous variables with 'yes' and 'no' choices are excluded from the table 1.1 because the Mean of the Scores do not reflect any significant value in those cases

Moreover, from the frequency distribution of the considered variables, it can be found that in response to the first question 'Are you satisfied with your knowledge of vocabulary in English at tertiary level?' , almost half of the respondents (46%) have replied that they are 'Dissatisfied' with their stock of vocabulary. On the other hand one-fourth of the total respondents (28%) have remained 'Neutral' in their opinion (See Students' Table: 1.2).

Students' Table: 1.2

Satisfaction with vocabulary in English at tertiary level	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Satisfied	0	0
Satisfied	42	28
Neutral	36	24
Dissatisfied	69	46
Strongly Dissatisfied	3	2
Total	150	100

After that, we asked the students 'Do you agree that poor knowledge of vocabulary in English creates problem in learning the four major skills in this language?' As Students' Table: 1.3 shows, more than half of the respondents (64%) have 'Strongly Agreed'

Students' Table: 1.3

Poor vocabulary creates problem in learning the four major skills in this language	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	96	64
Agreed	42	28
Neutral	6	4
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	6	4
Total	150	100

with the statement that poor knowledge in vocabulary obviously creates obstacles in getting mastery over the four major skills in English, whereas 28% respondents has only 'Agreed' with this statement.

The next question to the tertiary students was 'Do you read any kind of English texts outside the books referred by your teachers?' As Students' Table: 1.4 demonstrates, 58%

 of the respondents have replied in the negative.

Students' Table: 1.4

Reading English texts outside the references	Frequency	Percentage
No	87	58
Yes	63	42
Total	150	100

Fourthly, we asked the students, 'Do you agree that learning vocabulary is a life long interesting activity?' Here, 42% have remained 'Neutral', 38% have 'Agreed' and only

Students' Table: 1.5

Learning vocabulary is a lifelong interesting activity	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	12	8
Agreed	57	38
Neutral	63	42
Disagree	18	12
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	150	100

8% students have 'Strongly Agreed'. In contrast to that, only 12% of the respondents have 'Disagreed' with the statement **(**See Students' Table: 1.5**).**

Fifthly, we enquired whether they thought teaching vocabulary according to their need would be helpful for serving their future purposes. Here, as is illustrated in Students' Table: 1.6, 40% of the respondents have 'Strongly Agreed' and 34% have only 'Agreed'

Students' Table: 1.6

Teaching vocabulary according to students' need would be helpful for future	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	60	40
Agreed	51	34
Neutral	6	4
Disagree	18	16
Strongly Disagree	9	6
Total	150	100

with the statement. On the other hand, 18% students have 'Disagreed' and 6% students have 'Strongly Disagreed' with this opinion.

Sixthly, it was asked 'Do you use flash cards or note books to increase and maintain your stock of vocabulary?' In reply to this question almost three-fourth of the respondents

Students' Table: 1.7

Using flash cards or notebooks	Frequency	Percentage
No	105	70
Yes	45	30
Total	150	100

(70%) have replied in the negative that they do not use flash cards or maintain note books to increase their knowledge in vocabulary (See Students' Table: 1.7)**.**

Moreover, we also asked the students, 'How often do you use dictionary?' Only one-fourth of the respondents (28%) have said that they 'always' use dictionary to look for the

Students' Table: 1.8

Using dictionary	Frequency	Percentage
Always	42	28
Sometimes	105	70
Never	3	2
Total	150	100

meaning of new words in English **(**See Students' Table: 1.8)**.**

Lastly, we asked them 'What is your first concern besides knowing the meaning of a particular word while using a dictionary?' Here, the students are diversified in their opinion. More than half of the students

(62.7%) have accepted that they look for the pronunciation of a particular word side by side with knowing it's meaning from the

Students' Table: 1.9

First concern besides knowing the meaning of a particular word while using dictionary	Frequency	Percentage
Learning pronunciation	94	62.7
Knowing parts of speech	33	22
Knowing synonym-antonym	23	15.3
Total	150	100

dictionary (See Students' Table: 1.5). On the other hand, 22% students have answered that they only look for the synonym-antonym of a particular word while checking it's meaning in the dictionary. In short, the analyses of students' information exhibits that most of the tertiary students of Bangladesh are still not motivated enough to take necessary steps to overcome their limitations in learning English vocabulary.

4.4. Analysis of Teachers' Information:

In the teacher's questionnaire we asked for the language teachers' opinion on different aspects of teaching vocabulary to tertiary students in their EFL classes. From the descriptive statistics of the considered variables in case of the teachers (See table 2.1) it has been gathered that most of the teachers are dissatisfied with their students' level of

Table 2.1 Descriptive Statistics of the considered variables under study (Teachers)

Name of the Variables	Total no. of Observation	Mean of the Scores	Standard Deviation
Satisfaction with students' level of knowledge in vocabulary at tertiary level	30	4.03	0.07
Students who have poor vocabulary face problems in acquiring 4 major skills	30	1.25	0.03
Satisfaction with students' level of improvement in vocabulary after attending the class	30	3.01	0.62
The most common activity that you follow while teaching vocabulary	30	2.19	0.39
Valid N (list wise)	30		

∗ Note: A total number of four dichotomous variables with 'yes' and 'no' choices are excluded from the table 2.1 because the Mean Score do not reflect any significant value in those cases.

knowledge in vocabulary at tertiary level as the Mean is 4.03 and Standard Deviation is 0.07. So, the dissatisfaction is consistent since there is very poor deviation in the data. Besides, most of the teachers have agreed that students having poor vocabulary knowledge face problems in acquiring four major skills in English as the Mean is found to be 1.26. And a large number of teachers are 'Neutral' regarding their opinion on students level of improvement in vocabulary even after attending the classes (Mean is 3.01 and Standard Deviation is 0.62).

Moreover, by examining the frequency distribution of the considered variables in case of teachers various types of information have been gathered. Firstly, it was asked, 'Are you satisfied with students' knowledge of vocabulary with which they come to tertiary level?'

Teachers' Table: 2.2

Satisfaction with students' knowledge of vocabulary with which they come to tertiary level	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly satisfied	0	0
Satisfied	0	0
Neutral	0	0
Dissatisfied	18	60
Strongly dissatisfied	12	40
Total	30	100

As Teachers' Table: 2.2 indicates, most of the respondents (60%) are 'Dissatisfied' and the rest of the respondents (40%) are 'Strongly Dissatisfied' with the students' knowledge of vocabulary with which they come to tertiary level.

Secondly, the teachers were asked to express their opinion about the following statement 'The students who have poor vocabulary face problems in acquiring four major skills in

Teachers' Table: 2.3

The students who have poor vocabulary face problems in acquiring four major skills in English	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	18	60
Agreed	12	40
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Total	30	100

English.' Here, (See Teachers' Table: 2.3) 60% of the total respondents have 'Strongly Agreed' and the rest of them that means, 40% of the respondents have only 'Agreed' with the statement.

Thirdly, we asked the teachers 'Are you satisfied with students' level of improvement in vocabulary knowledge after attending your classes?' As Teachers' Table: 2.4 reveals, 56.7% of the respondents are 'Neutral' in their opinion regarding the level of

Teachers' Table: 2.4

Satisfaction with students' level of	Frequency	Percentage

improvement after attending your classes		
Strongly satisfied	2	6.7
Satisfied	4	13.3
Neutral	17	56.7
Dissatisfied	7	23.3
Strongly dissatisfied	0	0
Total	30	100

improvement of the tertiary students even after attending their classes and 23.3% of the respondents have replied that they are 'Dissatisfied' with their students' progress.

Fourthly, the teachers were asked, 'Do you conduct any need analysis while teaching vocabulary?' In answer to this question a considerable number of respondents (40%) have replied that they do not conduct any need analysis while teaching vocabulary in EFL classes at tertiary level. (See Teachers' Table: 2.5)

Teachers' Table: 2.5

Conducting need analysis while teaching vocabulary	Frequency	Percentage
No	12	40
Yes	18	60
Total	30	100

Fifthly, we enquired whether the teachers used audio-visual aids while teaching vocabulary. In response to this question only most of the respondents (86.7%) have answered in the negative (See Teachers' Table: 2.6). On the other hand, only 13.3%

Teachers' Table: 2.6

Using audio-visual aids while teaching vocabulary	Frequency	Percentage
No	26	86.7
Yes	4	13.3
Total	30	100

respondents have accepted that they use audio-visual teaching aids while teaching vocabulary. Sixthly, the question for the teachers was 'Do you think teaching correct pronunciation is as much important as the meaning of a particular word?' A large number of respondents (83.3%) have agreed that teaching the correct pronunciation of a particular

Teachers' Table: 2.7

Teaching the correct pronunciation is as much important as meaning	Frequency	Percentage
No	25	83.3
Yes	5	16.7
Total	30	100

word carries as much importance as teaching the meaning of the word (See Teachers' Table: 2.7).Seventhly, it was asked 'Do you usually teach parts of speech, synonym, and antonym of a new word while teaching its meaning and pronunciation?' As Teachers' Table: 2.8 demonstrates, more than half of the total respondents (53.3%) have replied that they do not usually teach vocabulary in this way. That means they do not teach parts of speech, synonym-antonym of a new word side by side with teaching its' meaning and

Teachers' Table: 2.8

Teaching parts of speech, synonym-antonym of a new word while teaching its meaning and pronunciation	Frequency	Percentage
No	16	53.3
Yes	14	46.7
Total	30	100

pronunciation at the tertiary level EFL classes. Lastly, we asked the teachers about the most common type of classroom activity that they practice while teaching vocabulary. As Teachers' Table: 2.9 illustrates, more than half of the total respondents (60%) have replied that they usually follow various kinds of exercises like fill in the blanks, multiple choice questions, changing parts of speech, make sentence and matching etc. in the EFL classes to build up students' vocabulary. Besides, 26.7% of the respondents have said that they usually start the classroom activity concerning vocabulary learning with 'guessing meaning from context' whereas, only a few of the respondents (13.3%) practices the classroom activity like preparing 'lexical set'. In brief, the analyses of teachers' information reveals that most of the teachers are still using the age old techniques for teaching vocabulary in the EFL classes at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Teachers' Table: 2.9

The most common activity that you practice while teaching vocabulary	Frequency	Percentage
Crossword puzzle	0	0
Drawing picture	0	0
Guessing meaning from context	8	26.7
Exercises (fill in the blanks, MCQ, Matching)	18	60
Lexical set	4	13.3
Knowing the origin of the word	0	0
Total	30	100

5. Major Findings of the Study:

From the above analyses, it has been gathered that both teachers (40% 'Strongly Dissatisfied') and students (46% 'Dissatisfied') are dissatisfied with the tertiary students' knowledge of vocabulary in English. Even then, it has been found that the students still do not take the necessary attempts in increasing their vocabulary knowledge, since 58% students do not read any extra textual material in English to enhance

their vocabulary stock, only some of them (30%) use flash cards or note books to maintain their knowledge of words and only 38% of the students consider vocabulary learning as an interesting lifelong activity. As a result of these lacks of interest ant initiatives, the students do not come across new words very often and even the words which they have already known. So, most of the words remain to them only as 'receptive words' i.e. the words which readers understand but usually do not use (Nunan, 1991).

Moreover, only a few numbers of tertiary students (28%) have developed the habit of using dictionary regularly and among them, most of the students (56%) use the dictionary only to look for the meaning. So, they do not search for the parts of speech or synonym-antonym or different usage of that particular word in sentences as has been suggested by Lindsay (2000). As a result, their knowledge in vocabulary remains limited in most of the cases only to the pronunciation of a new word and they do not develop the capability of using that word in sentences.

On the other hand, from the teachers' information analysis it can be observed that though almost one-fourth of the teachers are 'Dissatisfied' (23.3%) with their students' level of improvement in English vocabulary knowledge even after attending their classes, most of them teach this area without using any audio-visual aids and have very little variation in classroom activities regarding vocabulary. Sequentially, the act of learning vocabulary remains quite uninteresting to the students and the students are not motivated enough to follow their teachers' instructions. Further, it has been located that though most of the students (40% have 'Strongly Agreed' and 34% have only 'Agreed') think that teaching vocabulary according to their needs would be helpful for them in future, a considerable number of teachers (40%) do not teach vocabulary following this direction. That means these teachers do not conduct any need analysis while teaching vocabulary at tertiary level. In these circumstances, whatever vocabulary the students learn they seldom apply those for serving practical purposes.

6. Implications:

From the above research findings, it can be concluded that most of the EFL teachers in Bangladesh at tertiary level are still using the traditional techniques to enhance learners' vocabulary. As a result, the teachers are not getting the response needed from the tertiary students to improve their knowledge of vocabulary in English. In short, it can be recommended that:

1. Teachers should do a need analysis before starting to teach vocabulary in EFL classes. Through the analysis they will be able to know about the students' specific needs regarding vocabulary.

2. Teachers should keep the explanations of passive words short and simple and they have to emphasize the learning of active words in the EFL classes.

3. Problem words or phrases should be identified at first from a reading passage and then students should be encouraged to guess the meaning of the word from the context i.e. in relation to other words used in that particular sentence.

4. Teachers should introduce audio-visual aids and graphics to make the new words easier to understand. It will also make the learning process interesting to the students.

5. Teachers will not only encourage their students to use flash cards or note books for enhancing their vocabulary but also teach them how to maintain those tools. Furthermore, teachers will have to motivate the students in such a way that the activities of learning synonym-antonym, parts of speech and the usage of the particular word in sentences become an interesting game to them. Thus the teachers will be able to prevent the students from memorizing only the meaning of a particular word.

6. Classroom activities related to building vocabulary must be kept up-to-date and have full of variations. Teachers have to give preference to the activities that students like most.

7. News papers can be a very useful source of extra textual materials for both teachers and students in the EFL classes for teaching and learning vocabulary. So, teachers can use newspapers as a source of material while working with vocabulary.

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