Towards Building Curricula for Fostering Autonomous Vocabulary Learning: A Case of Vietnamese EFL Context

Hoi Ngoc Vo
Quy Nhon University, Vietnam
vongochoi@qnu.edu.vn

Abstract: Adopting a problem-solving approach to curriculum design, this paper is an attempt to illustrate a case of a Vietnamese university where the vocabulary learning and teaching practices are not satisfactory. Drawing on relevant research literature in the field, it first identified the problems associated with the underachievement of learners in terms of vocabulary learning. Several suggestions would then be made towards integrating into the existing curricula elements of a learner autonomy strand where learners find ways to relate the public and private learning domains.

Keywords: *Curriculum design, learner autonomy, public domain, private domain*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is an essential aspect of the language learning process. A focus on strengthening vocabulary plays an important role in any stages of the learners' language development (Balcı & Çakir, 2011). Numerous scholars in the field are unanimous that communication can take place without syntax and grammar, but not vocabulary (Folse, 2004; Lewis, 1993; Willis, 1990). Therefore, the teaching and learning of vocabulary should constitute an important component in the designing process of any language curricula. Unfortunately, this is not actually the standard practice at many tertiary institutions in Vietnam including Quy Nhon University (QNU) – the case being explored in this paper. To put it another way, the situation of vocabulary learning and teaching at QNU is not unfolding as expected. This paper, adopting a problem-solving approach, attempted to elucidate this problem by gradually unpacking the underlying reasons and suggesting possible solutions.

2. A brief description of the problem

QNU is currently offering TEFL and general English courses to more than 1000 undergraduate students from 7 provinces in the central and highland areas of Vietnam. The general educational aim is to equip students with sufficient knowledge and skills for seeking jobs in the field of English teaching and translating after their graduation. Therefore, in addition to theoretical subjects underlying second language learning, the language curriculum also includes practical linguistic skills, which adopt a communicative approach with an emphasis on interactional and task-based activities. However, there are no official vocabulary courses for students to choose. Instead, vocabulary learning is implicitly subsumed in the reading course's

objectives and verbally articulated to students from the very beginning of the term that after the course, learners should acquire sufficient amount of vocabulary to be able to comprehend academic reading texts and to function adequately in communicative situations. Over the past four years, the faculty of foreign languages at QNU, as many other English education institutions in the country, has engaged in a comprehensive review and modification of the syllabus in response to the national project of "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 – 2020" (Hien, 2015) . Students' feedback was also collected to help inform the curriculum adjustment process and teachers' professional development. Yet, while the effectiveness of the national project is still in question (Anh, 2016), it is evident at QNU that learners are still struggling with their learning English. They are nowhere near to becoming a confident and independent user of English as stated in the objectives of the project (Hien, 2015). Anecdotal evidence suggested that students' failure to improve their communicative skills could be attributed to, among other things, a lack of vocabulary (Balcı & Çakir, 2011). Presumably, due to insufficient vocabulary they are unable to decode the underlying meaning of written and spoken texts and to express their ideas when it comes to interactional activities. A closer look at the whole language program and at teachers and students' critical retrospection on their own teaching and learning practice reveals more specific reasons behind this failure.

3. The vocabulary learning goals

Locke and Kristof (1996) found that specific, difficult goals consistently led to higher performance than did vague goals or goals that were specific but easy. It is conceivable that, unlike specific goals, a general goal like do-your-best has no external referent, which allows for a wide range of acceptable interpretation and performance. The absence of specific and appropriate vocabulary learning goals at QNU probably confused learners and deprived them of the conditions under which the gap of public (learning in class) and private (learning beyond the classroom) learning domains could be bridged, thus rendered their learning ineffective.

4. Motivation

Setting vague and general goals is likely to induce a lack of motivation on the learners' part to put more effort into their learning practice. Locke and Latham (2002) indicated that the more important the value of the goals are and the higher the students' self-efficacy is, the more they are committed to fulfilling the goals. Since the goal is too general and its feasibility is not adequately highlighted, students have low expectancy of their future success, which in turn may demotivate them and ultimately damage their performance. In fact, many students have voiced concerns over their motivation to learn vocabulary. Although they are aware of the importance of vocabulary, they may not be confident that they will be able to gain "sufficient vocabulary" for communicative purposes.

5. Self-regulation and learning opportunity

The teaching practice in Vietnam is depicted as "giving learners the fish" rather than "teaching them how to fish" (Lap, 2005). Teachers are normally considered as " the master of knowledge" (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996) and their job in the classroom is limited to transmitting this knowledge to their students rather than encouraging them to learn independently. Moreover, the influence of Confucian ideology engenders a traditionally-held belief that learners are not

allowed to challenge their teachers directly as it is an act of disrespect and may cause the teacher to lose face (Nga, 2014). Furthermore, this traditional method of teaching, which assigns teachers the central role and learners the passive roles and which presents an explicit and decontextualized language instruction does not bring about desirable outcomes (Arıkan & Taraf, 2010). A corollary of this teaching situation is the fact that learners appear to be passive receivers of knowledge and "tend not to be supported in developing autonomy during the educational process" (Nga, 2014). The teaching and learning of the reading skill in general and vocabulary in particular at QNU is par excellence an illustration of this situation. A common vocabulary teaching practice at QNU is that when learners encounter a new word whose meaning is unknown to them, teachers normally provide the meaning directly without much reference to its form or use. This is very often followed by students' using the provided meaning to comprehend the immediate reading text or to answer the comprehension questions; then the word may never be seen again. It should be noted, however, that drawing students' attention to word form and use is as equally important as its meaning since these are the three core components of word knowledge (P. Nation, 2001). Additionally, students have a tendency to naturally attend to meaning rather than to form when communicating due to their limited capacity to simultaneously process L2 form and meaning (Laufer, 2006). Therefore, the provision of meaning only may just address the receptive facet of vocabulary learning (P. Nation, 2001), leaving the productive aspect untouched. Moreover, the teachers' practice of directly disclosing word meaning instead of offering strategy-based instruction such as guessing word meaning from context, word parts, word family etc. may deprive learners of the chances to individualize their learning experience and maximize their awareness of the strategies that they can use to learn on their own outside the classroom context (Atay & Ozbulgan, 2007). Another point that is worth mentioning is the time constraints on in-class vocabulary learning. It is unequivocal that class time is not enough to afford students the amount of vocabulary needed for their communication purposes, especially when vocabulary learning is embedded in a reading course. It is too ambitious to believe that students just need to come to class regularly and work hard and then the result will come. Instead, vocabulary learning should take place beyond the language classroom or should be taken into students' private domain so as to produce positive results. Following this line of reasoning, the author would like to take learner autonomy as a foundation on which to bring about the desired transformation to the situation discussed above, namely to improve learners' vocabulary learning at QNU in particular and in Vietnam in general.

6. Suggested strategies

As discussed above, a lack of motivation and self-regulation, teacher-dominant classroom, student-as-passive receivers of knowledge and time constraints on in-class learning all conspire to render vocabulary learning unsatisfactory. A closer look at the nature of these factors suggest that learner autonomy bears some relation to the others and can serve as a basis on which to build strategies for dealing with all other issues.

Firstly, Dickinson (1995) claimed that learning success and enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning. In other words, higher motivation leads to greater autonomy and vice versa. Therefore, to foster learner autonomy in learning vocabulary, it is important to enhance their motivation. Learners' motivation can be triggered once they are aware of the value of their own learning (including the value of their

learning outcome) and the belief that they are capable of achieving the learning goal (Dörnyei, 1998). These are the basic arguments shared by the value-expectancy theories (Dörnyei, 1998) and goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002). In the case of QNU, the setting of vocabulary learning goals need to be reappraised and modified as it is too general and vague to ensure goal commitment. As such, instead of the distal goal of mastering sufficient vocabulary, the setting of proximal sub-goals may have a powerful motivating function in that they mark progress and provide immediate incentives and feedback (Dörnyei, 1998). Nation (2006) suggested that in order to achieve an ideal coverage of 98%, a 8000-9000 word-family vocabulary is needed for dealing with written text and that number for spoken text is 6000-7000. Nation and Kyongho (1995) believed that the first 2000 most frequent words of English (K1 and K2) is extremely useful, particularly for those who undertake academic study. Cobb (2007) took a step further and claimed that knowing the first 2000 most frequent words of English plus the 570 words in the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead, 2000) is tantamount to a coverage of 90% of words in any academic texts. These figures may serve as a reference point, together with the language education aims, learners' proficiency levels and available resources, for proposed modifications to the vocabulary learning goals. A possible suggestion may be that:

1. After the first year, learners are able to identify and produce the form, meaning and use of 80% of the first 2000 most frequent words of English.

2. After the second and the third year, learners are able to master the first 2000 most frequent words of English plus 50% of the academic word list

3. After finishing the BA program, learners are able to master the first 2000 most frequent words of English plus the academic word list.

Secondly, teacher's professional expertise plays an important role in fostering learner autonomy in learning vocabulary from within the classroom. This expertise should be reflected in the way they provide learning opportunities for students to bridge the gap between the public domain and private domain. One possible suggestion could be that: Instead of giving students the meaning of unknown words in a reading passage, the teacher may insert a glossary corner under the reading passage. This glossary should be designed to simulate the way the word is presented in the dictionary (with phonetic transcription, part of speech, verb code, meaning, examples, collocations, etc.). This presentation of glossary should be coupled with a dialogue in the classroom to provide detailed explanation and reasons why students have to learn vocabulary that way. This practice serves several purposes. Firstly, according to Crabbe (1993), unlike the public domain where tasks are initiated by teachers to meet supposed common learning needs, the private domain works the other way: It starts by identifying an end and figures out means to achieve that end. Therefore, to foster that mean-end process of vocabulary learning, teacher should sensitize students to the rationale behind the glossary provision by having a dialogue about what vocabulary learning problems that practice intends to address. Secondly, when providing input in the form of word meaning, the teachers only know what words students learn but they have no idea how the words have been learnt, how students' private work is progressing and what strategies they are using to learn vocabulary. Strategies to achieve private work (in this case the learning of vocabulary) are, therefore, not modeled (Crabbe, 1993). For that reason, the presentation of words in the glossary and the learning dialogue enable the teachers to gain more insights into learners' private domain and afford learners the opportunities they need to foster their private learning. Thirdly, glossary is a good way to instruct students how to use a dictionary adequately as many students conceive of dictionary as a tool to look up the word meaning only

rather than other important aspects. It should be noted further that dictionary use is an important component of autonomous vocabulary learning and its effectiveness has been empirically proven by research literature (Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993; Summers, 1988). Last but not least, the provision of glossary help learners to cultivate the habit of keeping vocabulary notebook, which is also a way of promoting independent learning (Fowle, 2002; Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995). In addition to the inclusion of glossary, teachers' instruction on the use of strategies such as "mnemonics" (Atay & Ozbulgan, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1991) and "guessing meaning from contexts" (P. Nation, 2001; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999) proved to be effective in helping learners deal with unknown words on their own in similar future contexts and has been extensively researched in second language reading and listening.

Finally, in order to develop self-regulation, learners should be able to set personal goals, adopt appropriate strategies to achieve their goals, devise scheme to implement and monitor strategies and evaluate their performance. Literature indicated that setting personal goals boosted self-regulated learning and resulted in higher self-efficacy, intrinsic interest and better performance (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Manderlink & Harackiewicz, 1984). Personal goal setting is influenced by various factors such as self-beliefs of efficacy, parental goals (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) and assigned goals in the organizational settings (Locke & Latham, 1990). Therefore, to enhance self-regulation in vocabulary learning, teachers can, at the very beginning of a reading course, offer individual discussion sessions on how to set personal goals, which word level they are expected to master at different stages, how to align personal goals with the overall vocabulary learning goals, etc. One possible suggestion may be to offer goal-setting conference (Schunk, 1990) in which learners meet with the teachers on a regular basis and receive a list of words they will encounter in the up-coming reading passages, select those words they would attempt to learn and are given feedback on their previous achievements. In addition, the provision of class time for learning dialogues in which learners have chances to talk about their strategy use and the keeping of vocabulary notebook with an additional column for noting the specific strategies used for each individual word, the difficulty of learning that word and the word level it belongs to may do wonder to help learners keep an eye on their progress. Finally, teachers may familiarize learners with the use of such webpage as Tom Cobb's Compleat Lexical Tutor (www.lextutor.ca/) to give them more control over their vocabulary learning, monitoring and evaluating. This website offers several self-access learning opportunities, interactive tools and various wordlists so that learners can test their vocabulary levels, compare their passive and active vocabulary, test their word grammar with concordances and track their vocabulary learning progress.

7. Conclusion

Upon description of problems associated with the learning and teaching of vocabulary at QNU, this paper attempted to suggest strategies to bring about transformations. The central focus was on enhancing learner autonomy to improve vocabulary learning. It can be seen from the discussion above that various factors and sources need to be taken into consideration when it comes to self-regulation development among which teachers should take an initiative and dynamic role in facilitating autonomous vocabulary learning. Much research effort is needed to dig deeply into this area so as to shed more light on ways in which different stakeholders can use to improve learners' vocabulary learning.

References

Anh, Y. (2016). National foreign language teaching program's effectiveness in doubt. *Vietnamnet*. Retrieved from http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/education/162476/national-foreign-language-teaching-program-s-effectiveness-in-doubt.html

Arıkan, A., & Taraf, H. U. (2010). Contextualizing young learners' English lessons with cartoons: Focus on grammar and vocabulary. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2*(2).

Atay, D., & Ozbulgan, C. (2007). Memory strategy instruction, contextual learning and ESP vocabulary recall. *English for specific purposes, 26*(1), 39-51.

Balcı, Ö., & Çakir, A. (2011). Teaching vocabulary through collocations in EFL Classes: The case of Turkey. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning, 1*(1).

Bandura, A., & Schunk, D. H. (1981). Cultivating competence, self-efficacy, and intrinsic interest through proximal self-motivation. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 41*(3), 586.

Cobb, T. (2007). Why & how to use frequency lists to learn words. from http://www.lextutor.ca/research/rationale.htm

Coxhead, A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOl Quarterly, 34*(2), 213-238.

Crabbe, D. (1993). Fostering autonomy from within the classroom: the teacher's responsibility. *System, 21*(4), 443-452.

Dickinson, L. (1995). Autonomy and motivation a literature review. *System, 23*(2), 165-174.

Dörnyei, Z. (1998). Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language teaching, 31*(03), 117-135.

Folse, K. S. (2004). *Vocabulary myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press

Fowle, C. (2002). Vocabulary notebooks: Implementation and outcomes. *ELT Journal, 56*(4), 380-388.

Hien, P. (2015). Challenges and support needs of native TESOL teachers in Vietnam: An exploratory case study. *Asian EFL journal, 17*(4).

Knight, S. (1994). Dictionary use while reading: The effects on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition for students of different verbal abilities. *The Modern Language Journal, 78*(3), 285-299.

Kramsch, C., & Sullivan, P. (1996). Appropriate pedagogy. *ELT Journal, 50*(3), 199-212.

Lap, T. Q. (2005). *Stimulating learner autonomy in English Language Education: A curriculum innovation study in a Vietnamese context*. Amsterdam: PrintPartnerIpskamp.

Laufer, B. (2006). Comparing focus on form and focus on formS in second-language vocabulary learning. *Canadian Modern Language Review/La revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 63*(1), 149-166.

Lewis, M. (1993). *The lexical approach*. Hove, UK: Language Teaching Publications.

Locke, E. A., & Kristof, A. L. (1996). Volitional choices in the goal achievement process. *The psychology of action: Linking cognition and motivation to behavior*, 365-384.

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (1990). *A theory of goal setting and task performance*. Eaglewood,NJ: Prentics-Hall.

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American psychologist, 57*(9), 705-717.

Luppescu, S., & Day, R. R. (1993). Reading, dictionaries, and vocabulary learning. *Language learning, 43*(2), 263-279.

Manderlink, G., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (1984). Proximal versus distal goal setting and intrinsic motivation. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 47*(4), 918.

Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, T. E. (1991). *Teaching students ways to remember: Strategies for learning mnemonically*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Nation. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening? *Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes, 63*(1), 59-82.

Nation, & Kyongho. (1995). Where would general service vocabulary stop and special purposes vocabulary begin? *System, 23*(1), 35-41.

Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nga, N. T. (2014). *Learner autonomy in language learning: Teachers' beliefs*. Thesis.

Paribakht, T. S., & Wesche, M. (1999). Reading and "incidental" L2 vocabulary acquisition. *Studies in second language acquisition, 21*(02), 195-224.

Schmitt, N., & Schmitt, D. (1995). Vocabulary notebooks: Theoretical underpinnings and practical suggestions. *ELT Journal, 49*(2), 133-143.

Schunk, D. H. (1990). Goal setting and self-efficacy during self-regulated learning. *Educational psychologist, 25*(1), 71-86.

Summers, D. (1988). The role of dictionaries in language learning In R. Carter & M. Mccarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary and language teaching*. New York: Routledge.

Willis, D. (1990). *The lexical syllabus: A new approach to language teaching*. London: Collins ELT.

Zimmerman, B. J., Bandura, A., & Martinez-Pons, M. (1992). Self-motivation for academic attainment: The role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. *American educational research journal, 29*(3), 663-676.