

TOPIC FAMILIARITY AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract

For EFL learners whose exposure to English is limited, one crucial means for academic knowledge to transmit is through reading. If a student is to develop reading comprehension, he must possess and activate a number of linguistics skills and cognitive resources. Based on Primary National strategy (2006) vocabulary knowledge, grammatical skills, pragmatic abilities, and metalinguistic awareness are included in linguistics skill, while cognitive resources includes knowledge of engagement with the text and world knowledge. To comprehend reading successfully, the identification of words and the retrieval of their meanings are needed, and world knowledge takes a whole range of unspoken and unwritten facts that the familiarity of the facts are taken for granted by every texts. Many studies have shown that background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge can help student read and comprehend better. This paper examines the relationship of topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge as they impact reading comprehension, and focuses on instructional approaches that foster vocabulary knowledge.

Introduction

Brain and mind are two terms that describe what humans always do, “thinking”. The brain is a magnificent physical organ with its own intricate chemistry of nervous system, in which the mind has a life of its own. To read is to engage the mind in thinking. Reading is a powerful means of putting language to use purposefully, whether it is to enjoy, to imagine, or to comprehend. Scott (2010) stated that reading comprehension is influenced significantly by a students’ level of word knowledge, which includes vocabulary, spelling skills, as well as the ability to decode words in print. In comprehending, reading involves complex thinking in which a number of linguistics skill and particular cognitive processes happen in the brain. Grabe (NY: 9) explains that there are two reading processes which occur in working memory that can be understood as the pattern of cognitive neural network activations. The lower level processes that includes fast, automatic lexico-syntactic processing in which word parts and morphological information are recognized automatically and parsing the immediate clause for syntactic information, and semantic processing the immediate clause into relevant meaning units. And the higher level processes which involves lower level processes and form main idea meaning, recognize related and thematic information, build a text-model of comprehension, and use inferencing, background knowledge, strategic processing and context constraints to create a situation model of reading.

Referring to the explanation, in order to make the lower level runs automatically is by knowing as many vocabulary in a text, and to reach the higher level processes successfully, it takes more than just knowing word and understand the syntactic and

semantic meaning of a clause, vocabulary as the smallest meaning unit in a text should be recognized automatically and automatically processes the clause for its syntactic information and then combining with the other knowledge that the reader have to build what the text is actually about (text model of comprehension). In short, the key to reading comprehension is vocabulary, as supported by Comprehension depends on successful word reading (Grabe, 2009: 22), and background knowledge on the topic speeds up the comprehension, as explained by Hirsch (2003:13) prior knowledge about the topic speeds up basic comprehension and leaves working memory free to make connections between new material and previously learned.

Regardless the main role of vocabulary in comprehension, in the process of English teaching and learning in the classroom, vocabulary only become a small part where the vocabulary itself taught indirectly to the students by the teacher. Widiati and Cahyono (2008:9) found that it was a common situation in Indonesia where vocabulary teaching and learning was considered as secondary or neglected. This situation impacts on the low vocabulary which includes a small number of familiar and less familiar words mastery. Thornbury (2002) in Vossoughi and Zaghar states that the lack of vocabulary knowledge impedes comprehension and production. This is related to the process of comprehending a text explained by Grabe (2009:200). Before the students can read, their brains are doing visual words recognition. After the first words are recognized, the brain started to extract syntactic information in which the phrasal and clausal units that support the construction of semantic propositions are built. After that, the structural information is taken from the recognized words and specific words groupings are recognized. In brief, without the ability to recognize words in the first place, reading will be meaningless. Besides vocabulary, low background knowledge also the source of unsuccessful comprehension to some students (Murdibjono, 2001). The low of vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge are also experienced by ESL students (Aslanian, 1989; Shen, 2013; and Al-Mumtassim, 2014).

Vocabulary which is included as part of linguistics skills; besides the grammatical skills, pragmatic abilities, and metalinguistic awareness (Primary national Strategy, 2006) together with topic familiarity which is included as one of the background knowledge in the higher level process resources, are the skill and factor that affect the success of comprehension (Nagy, 1988: 2; Elwer, 2014: 19; Daneman in Richek, 2005: 414; Awabdy, G.W, 2012). Regarding the importance of vocabulary and topic familiarity, and the problems that many EFL/ESL students have related on vocabulary and background knowledge, this paper examines the relationship of topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge as they impact reading comprehension, and focuses on instructional approaches that foster vocabulary knowledge.

Relationship between Topic Familiarity and Vocabulary Knowledge

For EFL learners whose exposure to English is limited, one crucial means for academic knowledge to transmit is through reading. During reading, learners might encounter familiar, less familiar and unfamiliar words. Stahl in Hirsch (2003: 18) stated that ordinarily, when we encounter a word we do not know, we skip it, especially if the word is not needed to make sense of what we are reading. Skipping word makes the information

that we get from reading is not strong enough to access by the conscious mind. This is because the skipping makes the information related to the word get into the short term memory.

When a word is encountered for the first time, information about its orthography or spelling is connected to information from the context, so that after one exposure, a person may have general sense of the context in which it appeared, or a memory of the specific context, but not a generalizable sense of the meaning of the word. (Stahl in Hirsh, 2003:18)

When a word is encountered repeatedly, some connections related to the word and the information in the context become strengthened and become the way the word is known. To get more exposure on repeated words in reading, one way is by reading a lot. Reading various texts will help readers exposed to various topics and various words related to the topic. Hirsch (2003:16) stated that most vocabulary growth results from massive immersion in the world of language and knowledge, and that the growth of knowledge requires multiple exposures to words. By reading, readers will learn not only new information but also new words that related to the topic of the text. Therefore, the more readers read, the more they know about various information, the more they encounter general and specific words related to the topics, and the more they juggle with multiple meanings of words so that they can choose which meaning is appropriate for the word. In line with Horiba and Fukaya' (2015) statement that topic familiarity may have a profound effect on both learning of the content of a text and incidentally vocabulary learning from the context; in addition it also may interact with task condition in its effect on content recall. Also align with Grabe, et al (2011: 38) findings that the more one engages with a topic, the more likely it is that vocabulary related to that topic will be learned. Thus, the amount of background knowledge should concurrently increase with the vocabulary related to a topic.

With much information about various topics and higher amount of vocabulary knowledge, generating and synthesizing ideas of different texts will be easier. According to Grabe, et.al (2011:30) background knowledge is one such factor shown to have a large effect on reading abilities. Readers with much greater knowledge of a topic, greater expertise in an academic domain, or relevant social and cultural knowledge understand a text better than readers who do not have these resources. In conclusion, the relation of topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge can be described as an interrelationship where topic familiarity are related and tend to move in the same direction as vocabulary knowledge.

The Impact on Reading Comprehension

The most well-known effect of vocabulary and topic familiarity is their ability to influence reading comprehension. Many research on the issue have shown the crucial role of vocabulary and topic familiarity in reading comprehension. Several researcher have explored studies on vocabulary, topic familiarity and its impact on reading comprehension (Grabe, et al, 2011; Chou, 2011; Sara, et.al, 2013; Fukaya & Horiba, 2015; Baghbaderani & Biria, 2015). In 2011, Grabe, et al, sought to find out the relationship between percentage

of vocabulary known in a text and level of comprehension on the same text. The study included 661 participants with a number of L1s and involved a dense sampling of vocabulary knowledge for each text: both higher and lower degrees of background knowledge. It was then inferred that the higher level of comprehension is expected of a text, the more vocabulary needs to be understood by the reader. Therefore, in order to be able to read widely and without problem, readers need to know about 8,000-9,000 word families. The result also suggested that higher background knowledge tends to go together with higher vocabulary knowledge. Grabe, et.al explained that the more one engages with a topic the more likely it is that vocabulary related to that topic will be learned, thus, the amount of background knowledge should concurrently increase with the vocabulary related to a topic (Grabe, et.al. 2011:38).

In the same year as Grabe, et.al., Chou explored the effects of vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge in an EFL reading comprehension test. With the total of 159 Southern Taiwan college students as participant, his finding was quite different to Grabe et, al's. The result showed that vocabulary was significantly helping the students in understanding the reading passage but not for background knowledge or topic familiarity. He explained that the reason was because the participant were only familiar with the topic but did not actually process vocabulary background knowledge such as terminologies for the topic. This finding is contradicted to Grabe, et.al's finding that stated topic familiarity go together with vocabulary knowledge. The difference in those two studies is on the topic familiarity. The topic familiarity that is discussed by Grabe includes knowledge of terminologies or specific vocabulary while the topic familiarity discussed by Chou does not includes terminology. In brief, knowing about topic of a text without activate the knowledge of related words will not help readers to comprehend the text better.

The previous finding of Chou's is quite similar to the finding of Sara, et al's, who examined topic familiarity, passage sight vocabulary, and L2 lexical inferencing, in 2013. With 114 undergraduate university student in Iran who worked on 2 more familiar and 2 less familiar narrative texts, they found that although there is a substantial impact on topic familiarity on L2 L1, it was established that the difference in the perception of the participants in inferring the target words of the more and less familiar topic was not significantly significant.

In 2015, Fukaya and Horiba studied the effect of reading goal, topic familiarity, and language proficiency on the text comprehension and learning to 145 Japanese EFL college students with high and low topic-familiarity read and recalled a text. They proposed three questions: first, the effect of reading goal on content recall of L2 texts, as well as on L2 learning, and whether the reading goal which is effective for language learning is equally effective for content recall. Second, the effect of topic familiarity on content recall of the L2 texts, as well as on L2 learning, and the interaction between topic familiarity and the reading goal. Third, how the topic familiarity and language proficiency affect the content recall of the L2 texts, as well as on L2 learning, and how the effect of topic familiarity differs from the effect of language proficiency. Their finding suggested that: first, language proficiency and topic familiarity are both important and function additively and in some compensatory way to some extent. When the effects of language proficiency and

vocabulary knowledge were statistically controlled, Second, language proficiency in combination with general world knowledge facilitates the processing and representing of content information in a text in a general way. And third, topic familiarity affects specifically the processing and representing detailed information that is relevant to the topic of interest.

Referring to the research above, topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge are interrelated to some extent, including the reading goal, and identity of the reader as a native or EFL/ESL reader. For non-native reader, the relation between topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge the reading process from L1-L2 may impact differently to the native speaker, depends on the language proficiency of the readers and the reading frequency of the reader.

Instructions to Foster Vocabulary Knowledge

There are various instructional principles concerning effective vocabulary knowledge instructions. But mostly, experts on vocabulary categorized instructional approach into implicit and explicit (Nation ,2011:60;Sokmen in Schmitt and McCarthy ,1997:237, Grabe, 2009: 372). This paper proposes the combination of those experts' instructional approach with the findings discussed on the previous sub-chapter.

Provide a Language Exposure and Word-Rich Environment for the Learner

As mentioned previously, most vocabulary growth results incidentally from massive immersion in the world language and knowledge. Therefore, EFL/ ESL instructors can start with instructor excitement about words by teaching spelling and share the enthusiasm with the learner to motivate the learner in learning and juggling with words (Tompkins &Blancfield in Quirter, 2004).

Then the instructor needs to provide various reading for the students to be read and provide experience for the learners to get multiple exposure to words. The instructors can help the learners by building a large sight of vocabulary, integrate the new with the old one or provide a number of encounters with a word (Sokmen in Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997) by classifying words, creating word maps, manipulating word in multiple activities for multiple purposes or attending glosses. (Nation, 2011; Grabe, 2009).

Develop Independent Reading Strategy and Word-Learning Strategy for the Learners

In order to make sense of increasingly dense academic texts, learners must possess strategies to understand and use words, which will, with other types of text-based support, increase comprehension (Townsend, et.al. 2013:17). It is impossible for the instructor to guide the learners in reading and knowing or encountering with new words.

Instructors can help the learner to develop independent reading and word learning strategy that match to the learner style of reading by introducing strategies such as re-reading, paraphrasing, finding synonym, or guessing meaning in the context (Nation ,2011;Sokmen in Schmitt and McCarthy ,1997, Grabe, 2009). As previously explained, re-reading can help the learner to slowly recognize the word and find the appropriate definition.

Raising Awareness of Words and Language

The awareness of words and language during reading a text is important in totally comprehend a text. For to a text is not only about word and semantic meaning, but also about culture that influence how the text is communicated. Without the awareness of words and language, learners will not be able to learn new words and will not be able to grasp the idea that the writer wants to convey.

To raise the awareness can be done by helping the learner in introducing learner to semantic feature analysis, answering questions, facilitate imaging and concreteness, and choosing words to learn and help the learner to be aware of the word by attracting the learner in realizing the function of the word

Conclusion

The interrelationship between vocabulary and topic familiarity influence reading comprehension is significant. Deep vocabulary knowledge is built through a growing bank of vocabulary knowledge. Yet, as an EFL/ ESL instructor, providing word rich environment is not enough. Instructors need to engage the learners not only with word rich environment, but also the learners themselves, to motivate them in improving their knowledge of vocabulary and background.

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