IMPROVING VOCABULARY THROUGH READING CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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Abstract

Over the last decade, focus on vocabulary has greatly increased in English Language Teaching (ELT). The paper discusses the impact of reading contemporary literary prose, focusing on words that are not likely to be found in the course book, but only in materials related to real-life situations. The study referring to efficiency of acquiring everyday language has revealed that lexical units of contemporary literary texts are more challenging and attractive for ELT learners. The factors that seem to influence the approach of learners to vocabulary acquisition are the context-based naturalness of word stock and its linkage to real life. Learners are more engaged in reading literary texts as they want to satisfy their curiosity related to the plot and lexical units enable them to get answers to their questions concerning real-life problems.

Key words*: vocabulary acquisition, literary texts, naturalness, context, real-life situations*

1. VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

In the past, vocabulary teaching and learning was overshadowed by teaching and learning grammar as the latter was considered more complex and more challenging for language learners. In traditional teaching, new words were presented in isolation or taken directly from the text, which was artificially created for a particular course book. The course curriculum or teacher books were more specific about aspects of teaching grammar or language skills, however, little specification was given to the role of vocabulary. According to Renandya and Jacobs (2012) two aspects has changed the status of vocabulary:

a) the notion of a word, which has been broadened to include lexical phrases and routines, necessary for the initial stages of learning
b) access to lexical corpora, which enables applied linguists to access huge samples of language in order to find out how words are used.

In current language teaching, presenting individual words does not meet the goal of vocabulary acquisition as words occur as collocations and in idiomatic phrases and lexical chunks that are part of a learner's lexical competence.

Research on vocabulary in Slovak primary and secondary schools in recent years has helped us clarify the approaches of teachers to vocabulary teaching in the country. Students are not expected to build up their own vocabularies, many times they only write down the Slovak expressions above the English words in their course books. They do not build up their vocabulary systematically, and problems related to insufficient teaching might be summarized as follows:

a) words are not acquired together with other words that they are related to
b) word formation processes are not emphasized
c) the distinction between formal and informal vocabulary is not thoroughly trained
d) figurative meanings are postponed only for higher-proficiency learners
e) choice of idioms is based on their occurrence in course books rather than their frequency in real-life English.

As efficient reading is influenced by the level of vocabulary acquisition, it is very important to focus on teaching vocabulary from the very beginning of teaching a foreign language in a systematic way. A number of studies related to vocabulary acquisition have confirmed that many words are learned incidentally, through extensive reading (Nagy, Herman & Anderson 1985; Knight 1994; Zimmerman

1997), which needs to be supported by teachers of languages as their students can benefit from it significantly.

2. READING CONTEMPORARY LITERARY PROSE

In 2013, reading competence of first-year master-degree students of the English Major was measured in several steps, testing reading comprehension, using authentic texts focusing on:

a) the main ideas
b) specific information
c) detailed information through analyzing the text.

Since the results of the students were not satisfactory (Test 1 – 45%, Test 2 – 53%, Test 3 – 42%), the students were provided questionnaires related to their problems in reading, which resulted in these conclusions:

a) most students (69%) have never read any authentic material for pleasure
b) many students (56%) were not expected to read outside of class during their secondary-school studies
c) quite a high number of students (39%) were not taught how to read efficiently
d) majority of students (71%) claimed that their reading comprehension is inefficient due to insufficient vocabulary.

Many studies focus on the number of words required for effective reading at the university level, for example, Laufer (1992) estimates a minimum of about 3,000 words, while 5,000 words might be sufficient for achieving academic success. Some checklist tests, e. g. Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (1990) are recommended for estimating vocabulary size. Recognizing the limited size of the first-year master-degree students' vocabulary, we decided to provide opportunities for learning vocabulary through reading modern literary prose.

2.1 The benefits of extensive reading

Many studies related to extensive reading have confirmed that language as a dynamic, complex, nonlinear system is self-organizing, given sufficient input and feedback, and that reading provides one source of such input and feedback (Larsen-Freeman 1997). In Slovakia, intensive reading is believed to produce good and fluent readers as they spend a lot of time analyzing short texts under the teacher's supervision. Students are expected to construct detailed meaning from the text, which enables them to enhance either their vocabulary or their grammar knowledge. On the other hand, many texts in the course books might be old-fashioned or uninteresting for students as they cannot see the reason why they should focus on those particular words they will never use in their personal or professional context. Apart from many various advantages, extensive reading increases knowledge of the world, fosters a positive attitude toward reading, increases the possibility of developing a reading habit, develops knowledge of culture of target community, increases acquisition of vocabulary related to real life, and improves general vocabulary.

2.2 The benefits of reading contemporary literary texts

In the last 30 years, there has been a remarkable revival of interest in literature as a resource for stimulating language activities, and this has become a primary concern of current trends in language teaching and learning. Although the aim of using literature in ELT is not to teach learners how to study literature either from literary critical or stylistics viewpoints, interaction between the text and the reader should be supported as literary texts are open to multiple interpretation. This variable understanding of or reaction to a literary text enables students to develop critical thinking, express their own opinion and justify it.

According to Collie and Slater (2011) literary texts offer genuine samples of a very wide range of styles, registers, and text types at many levels of difficulty, and touch on themes to which learners can bring a personal response from their own experience. Therefore the suitability of literary texts should

depend on the criteria related to a particular group of learners, their needs, interests, cultural background and language proficiency.

3. THE IMPACT OF READING LITERARY TEXTS

The research sample consisted of students of the master-degree program who entered the extensive reading program, lasting two semesters in their first year of study. The background of these students was the same – the school-leaving examination in English and six semesters of the English Major bachelor-degree program. Before the experiment, these students had been tested in reading comprehension, and their achievements revealed weaker reading skills due to limited vocabulary. Their vocabulary related to theory of linguistic disciplines and British and American literature of the 19th and 20th centuries was sufficient enough for passing the examinations obligatory in their bachelor-degree program. During their previous six-semester studies they were exposed to intensive reading rather than extensive one. When their reading competence was measured, they could recognize that while their academic vocabulary had increased significantly, their general English vocabulary had missed regular training.

The goal of the experiment was to improve their vocabulary systematically as they had experienced the lessons of lexicology and were theoretically introduced into the world of lexical units, their meaning, forms, and divisions according to various perspectives. They experienced the ways of vocabulary acquisition through their own portfolios. As literary texts offer samples of a different range of styles, registers and culturally-induced information, the students were presented a list of books, taken into consideration their needs, interests and proficiency level. Democratically-run discussion resulted in the selection of two books, one book per semester, as follows:

The choice was based on several factors: current issues of society, contemporary literature, both main variants of English (British and American) and attractiveness of topics. The first list of books was quite long as it was done by means of a popularity chart among readers, of the sort displayed in bookshops. Therefore they included detective books written by Scandinavian writers and vampire stories, which seem to become very popular with young people. The former ones were crossed out due to culturally-induced texts and translation transfer, the latter ones were refused due to the topic being irrelevant for our purposes. The books, finally chosen, were *The Chameleon's Shadow* (CS) by Minette Walters and *Now you see her* (NYSH) by James Patterson.

In the very beginning of the experiment, all of the students wanted to participate in the extensive extra-curricular reading program, but in the end the total number of students (18) was successfully completed the whole experiment. As teacher education in our country is significantly feminized, the group consisted of 14 females and 4 males. The students were expected to read both books (one per semester) for pleasure and then analyze those lexical units which they considered interesting, challenging and motivating for reading. The analysis was based on the categories and divisions acquired during their lexicology course. The samples provided by students are organized as follows:

a) word formation processes
b) stylistically marked words (formal and informal words)
c) words in combination (collocations and idioms)

All of the examples illustrating the above-mentioned categories and aspects are taken from the two literary works: one written in British English and one written in American English.

3.1 Word formation

Word-formation processes result in the production of a specific type of word and might be distinguished into two categories: principle and minor processes. While principal processes are those ones that are productive processes of building new words such as affixation, compounding and conversion.

Affixation is a very productive process in which new words are formed out of existing ones by the addition of a derivational affix. Most students focused on negative prefixes as they give them some

trouble in usage, for example, 'He is too spineless to be angry about anything' (CS, p. 340), 'If my plan was going to work, it would have to be flawless, perfect in every way' (NYSH, p. 166). As far as a current productive suffix – ish is concerned, students were able to find many examples such as 'a tallish woman' (CS, p. 313),

Compounding is a process of building new words by combining at least two bases, and is considered the most productive and the oldest way of forming words in English. In both books students were able to find more than a hundred of samples, focusing on those they had never seen before, such as adjectives: crowd-pleasing image (CS, p. 312), melon-sized breasts (CS, p. 313), a homeless drop-in centre (CS, p. 314), blue-veined lids (CS, p. 344), swept-back hair (CS, p. 384), high-necked, figure-hugging outfit (CS, p. 384), sunlit water (NYSH, p. 166), heart-melting beauty (NYSH, p. 217), bloodshot eyes (NYSH, p. 321), triple-digit parking tickets (NYSH, p. 247) nouns: a pay-as-you-go (CS, p. 485), guesswork (CS, 379), toerag (CS, p. 379), in the swinging kitchen doorway (NYSH, p. 378), Justin´s bloodstream (NYSH, p. 409), painkiller (NYSH, p. 411), verbs: press-gang him (CS, p. 316)

Conversion as the process of coining new words in a different part of speech without adding any derivative elements was illustrated in the samples such as to picture (CS, p. 313), I ducked (NYSH, p. 217), 'one of the reporters cupped a hand over his mouth' (NYSH, p. 409), or 'When will you be heading back to New York?'(NYSH, p. 419).

Apart from other ways of adding new words (such as ellipsis, shifts, formation by sound interchange), minor processes include **shortening** (clipping and abbreviations), **back-formation** and **blending**.

Clipping is the reduction of a word to a shorter form, by removal of one or more syllables of a word, for example, my premed boyfriend (NYSH, p. 25), lab reports (NYSH, p. 327), college prep (NYSH, p. 262), Columbia Law School grad (NYSH, p. 223), rehab work (NYSH, p. 219).

Abbreviations are distinguished into two groups: acronyms and initialisms (Kvetko 2001) and students expected to find more of them in American texts but this assumption was not proved in case of the mentioned literary books they decided to read. Students' samples included 'PDQ with reasons' (CS, p. 378) and 'I got my first fake ID' (NYSH, p. 220). Back-formation needs a thorough study of the words as it is the removal of a presumed affix taken both diachronically and synchronically, it was necessary to encourage students to focus on this way of word formation processes, providing them exact samples such as: 'I was even more careful to retrieve every scrap of trash' (NYSH, p. 172). Both novels did not contain samples of blending the students had not been exposed to in their previous studies.

3.2 Stylistically marked words

This criterion refers to words associated with formality. Since the vocabulary of English is not socially or geographically limited, it might be used in different situations by different people. **Formal vocabulary** concerns the words related to science, literature and official vocabulary. **Informal vocabulary** includes colloquialisms, slang words, jargon, argot and words with local colouring (Kvetko 2001).

While formal expressions are more likely to be found in technical or specific literature, literary texts include this vocabulary as well, for example, 'There is not statute of limitations for murder' (NYSH, p. 419), in which the expression statute of limitations belong to law specific vocabulary referring to the legal limit on the period of time within which action can be taken on a crime or other legal question (Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary 2005, p. 1500). Another example is taken from Walters' novel – 'We'll give your client as much latitude as he needs' (CS, p. 482), in which the expression latitude refers to freedom in formal English. Informal expressions are naturally expected to be found in literary texts as characters might also be depicted by their speech. While the expression to bug is neutral in its usage such as to put a small device somewhere in order to listen secretly to other people's conversation (Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary, 2005, p. 194), it is considered informal in the meaning to annoy sb, for example, 'It's really bugging me!' (CS, p. 261). All the presented sentences with informal vocabulary were produced by characters in their direct speeches: 'Press-gang him into

the God squad' (CS, p. 316), 'Did you get a buzz from hurting Jen?' (CS, p. 342), 'That took guts' (NYSH, p. 420), 'We don´t have time to fruit the beer' (NYSH, p. 420), 'Enough chitchat' (NYSH, p. 424).

3.3 Words in combination

Vocabulary contains simple, isolated words as well as multiword units, which might be more or less fixed expressions. In general, two different types of combinations are recognized: collocations and idioms. While the latter ones are usually divided into two groups grammatical collocations (a dominant lexical word plus a grammatical word) and lexical collocations (at least two equal lexical components, the former are stable combinations of words operating as a single semantic unit, prevailingly with figurative meaning (Kvetko 2001). For our purposes, it is not important to focus on more specific distinctions of idioms.

As far as collocations are concerned, both books encompass many examples the students were aware of, such as 'Keep my head down and my fingers crossed that …' (NYSH, p. 250), 'Charlie sat heavily in one of the folding chairs' (NYSH, p. 412). Idioms formed an enormous group of samples such as: 'He is not in the business of remembering' (CS, p. 313), 'I'm in a bit of a catch twenty-two' (CS, 313), 'He was lying through his teeth' (CS, 3013), 'What's up, Charlie? I said' (NYSH, p. 408), 'Nineteen young women had gone missing, as if they'd disappeared into thin air' (NYSH, p. 166), 'Sacrificing for my daughter, constantly looking over my shoulder as I worked my fingers to the bone?' (NYSH, p. 249).

Students still consider words in combination the most demanding part of English vocabulary. However, they know that being a teacher of English needs to be fluent and accurate and that their proficiency level (C1) for vocabulary range and control encompasses a broad lexical repertoire and good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that there are still many applied linguists who claim that literature can contribute little to language learning due to the special nature of literary texts, the three major benefits presented by McKay (2014) absolutely match our experimental achievements.

As the experiment focused on vocabulary acquisition, we will discuss two of major benefits proposed by McKay (2014). McKay (2014) claims that literary texts depend on how the language is used to create a particular effect. Students were able to recognize that the language used in literary texts is based on achieving characters´ communicative goals and the form of the language matches genres, registers, personal features of characters and their background. Since the students were enabled to focus on those words that attracted them, the variability of material collected from their papers does not allow us to cover all students' approaches and their endless lists of samples. Many sentences were selected due to the fact that words played a key role in the sentence meaning, for example, He wouldn´t have married her unless he enjoys being a doormat (CS, p. 341) or The question, unanswered, hung in the air between them (p. 342). Having passed their examinations in lexicology, students focused on various vocabulary structures such as similes such as I was as drunk as a skunk (NYSH, p. 22), and idiomatic expressions, for example, I´d spent so many hard years keeping the lid shut on the can of worms I called my life (NYSH, p. 255).

The significant benefit related to cross-cultural awareness might be narrowed in our context, as the goal was to recognize target culture related to British and American societies and encourage the necessity of developing inter-cultural awareness. The students provided many samples of culture-specific expressions such as 'Jell-O' (NYSH, p. 19), 'a responsible 3.9 GPA English major and student athlete' (NYSH, p. 20), 'the Muscles from Brussels, Jean-Claude Van Damme' (CS, 312). The first chapters of Patterson´s book related to university students and their lifestyle have enriched students´ cultural awareness and their sensitivity to the impact on culturally-induced behavior on language use and communication.

The proposed extensive-reading program provided opportunities for the incidental learning of vocabulary. Students could recognize that they had been exposed not only to new words and expressions, but also to previously acquired vocabulary which had been practiced naturally without any enormous effort. On the other hand, it is necessary to admit that quite a large group of students focused more on the structural form of words (word-formation processes) rather than meaning-oriented expressions. The most surprising feature of compounding was that prevailingly in American English, the compounds consist of several words linked together through dashes, for example, 'the now-you-see-her, now-you-don't' (NYSH, p. 26), 'currently being-cheated-on-twenty-one-year-old girl would do' (NYSH, p. 29), 'a pay-as-you-go' (CS, p. 485).

To conclude, the democratically-run choice of books was a good way to start extensive-reading programs, which should include books from variable fields of current human society as these are a good resource for contemporary vocabulary acquisition. As far as life-long learning is concerned, English Major students (future teachers of English) should go through the process of building a reading culture for their future students. Later, as professionals they will have to continue in improving their reading skills and enhancing vocabulary and grammar knowledge in a natural way while reading for pleasure on one hand, and being exposed to real-life English on the other.

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