

Exploring Growth in Vocabulary Learning Through Learner Diaries

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This article aims to explore growth in the students' knowledge of vocabulary, as reflected in their diaries. During the process of vocabulary development, strategies used by learners play a significant role in enabling them to keep the meaning of vocabulary in mind, and make vocabulary learning more meaningful. 32 prospective teachers of English were expected to keep diaries over a period of one semester (14 weeks), as part of the Vocabulary course. Learner diaries were collected and analyzed at regular intervals to trace the developments in learning vocabulary, and strategies learners used in this process. Analysis of the diary entries has given useful insights into the growth of learners' knowledge of vocabulary and the useful strategies used in vocabulary learning. Sample extracts from learner diaries are given to illustrate the strategies used by the learners. It is expected that the use of strategies illustrated in this paper will give insights into the type of strategies that teachers can use while teaching vocabulary in their classes.

Introduction

The concept of finding out about *growth* and the use of strategies, particularly in the area of vocabulary learning, have been an important area of research in teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language. One of the main decisions to take in exploring vocabulary growth is related to the use of appropriate tools that will enable documenting such growth. Diary, as a reflective tool, can help document such growth in learners' knowledge of vocabulary.

Diary keeping

Vicker and Morgan (2003) define a learner diary as “audio or written, where learners record their thoughts and reflections on their language learning experience” (p.29). According to Johnson (2002), “a diary is a written account of a person's thoughts, activities and experiences recorded daily or every few weeks” (p.46).

Diary writing is a reflective tool that helps learners to record their language learning experiences, and it is a means of advancing their language learning. As stated by Bailey (1996), diaries make it possible “to tap into affective factors, language learning strategies, and the learners' own perceptions of language learning, which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to external observers”.

Objectives of diary keeping in the Vocabulary course

The present study was conducted with 32 prospective teachers of English, participating in the Vocabulary course, which lasted over a period of one semester – 14 weeks. The course was scheduled for three hours a week. The student teachers were in their first-year undergraduate education at Çukurova University, ELT Department.

The main problem in learning vocabulary is to remember the meaning of a word for a long period of time, and to learn it so well that it becomes “known” or “fixed” in the student's memory. In the present study, the diary was employed as a useful tool to help overcome this problem. Diary keeping in the Vocabulary course seemed to be ideal for several reasons: First, as suggested by (Bartlett, 1990), “in writing we not only begin to observe, but we take the first step in reflecting *on* and about *our* practice” (p.209). Second, as remarked by Richards and Lockhart (1996), diaries provide a record that students can use for ongoing reflection. Finally, diaries provide an opportunity for students to communicate with the teacher. Therefore, in the present study, it was hoped that this

dialogue would help build a closer teacher/learner relationship and thereby produce a more positive learning environment.

Having been informed about the afore-mentioned benefits of the diary keeping, each student teacher, in the Vocabulary course, was expected to keep a diary throughout the course.

The framework that the students used in keeping diaries involved:

- a) What I already knew but learned from this week's lesson on vocabulary,
- b) What I did not know but learned from this week's lesson on vocabulary, and
- c) Strategies that I used to remember the new words.

The first two questions aimed to record *growth* in the students' knowledge of vocabulary while the final statement was used to determine the type of *strategies* the students employed. Learner diaries were collected and analyzed at regular intervals to trace the developments in the learning of vocabulary and the strategies that learners used. In this paper, only the most frequently used strategies, as documented by the learners in their diaries, are reported.

Findings from the Analysis of Diaries

Analysis of diary entries revealed that the students employed the following strategies in remembering the meaning of vocabulary items. In this section, some sample extracts from learner diaries are given to illustrate the strategies used by the learners.

1. *The keyword technique*: This technique involves associating the target word one needs to learn with a word that sounds similar in the student's own language; then, forming an image that combines the keyword and the meaning of the target word, as illustrated by the following diary entries:

- a) Crumble: (to break into small fragments)

“While learning the English word crumble, I think of a man, a picture of a man who is very hungry. Because of the hunger, he has cramp in his stomach. And he starts eating small pieces of bread. Every time I see the word crumble, I remember this picture I have formed, and then remember the meaning of crumble better”.

- b) Delirious: (being in an excited state)

“This word reminds me of the word *delirmek* in Turkish. I imagine a person who is going mad or crazy. In this way, I remember the meaning of delirious easily”.

- c) Alleviate: (to relieve)

“This word is similar to the Turkish word *alev*. I think of a fireman trying to alleviate the fire”.

- d) Attach: (to join or connect)

“The Turkish word *ataç*, meaning a tool for attaching papers is the most suitable word that helps me remember the meaning of the word attach”.

- e) Torture: (subject to great pain)

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“I think of a terrible person who is using a tool that produces the sound *tor tor... çır çır* to torture a poor man. In this way, it really becomes easier for me to keep the meaning of torture in mind”.

2. *Combining the target word with similar-sounding words to form a picture:* This was the next most useful strategy that the students reported to have used, which involved creating visual images or mind maps, as illustrated by the following diary entries:

a) Persecute: (hostility or bad treatment)

“I learned this word by dividing it into parts: *perse- cut- e*, and later forming some kind of imagination about it. I started off with the *cut* component. In my mind, I had a picture of someone cutting a person”.

b) Ignite: (begin to burn)

“I think of an ignorant smoker who caused a fire last *night*”.

c) Brine: (very salty water for preserving food)

“I imagine a boy named *Brian* drinking salty water accidentally, and then spitting it afterwards”.

d) Abrade: (to remove part of the surface of something by rubbing)

“I imagine a magician who says *abracadabra* by rubbing the box in his hands. Guess what happens? The box disappears. So we can say “*abracadabra* abrades the box”.

3. *Making associations and connections:* The third type of strategy the students employed involved relating the target word to a word the student already knows, as illustrated in the diary entries below:

a) Stupendous: (amazing, exceedingly great)

“To remember the meaning of *stupendous*, I list as many words as I can that could be considered *stupendous*, such as, large, huge, gigantic, extremely large, and greater than I had expected. Then, I try to make up a story picturing the word’s meaning. Recently, one of my friends told me: “I’ll introduce someone to you who is very handsome. However, when I saw him I was shocked because he was so large. In other words, he was *stupendous*”.

b) Freddy: (frighten)

“I watched a horror film named *Freddy*. In this film, the man was killing people and the whole scene was terrible. So, I associate the word “frighten” with the name of the horror film called “Freddy”.

4. *Visualization:* Visualizing or drawing a mental picture of the word, or even creating a story about it was another useful strategy that the students reported to be useful. Below are some diary entries illustrating this:

a) Tantalize: (to tease by the sight of something that is desired but kept out of reach).

“I imagine myself in the lesson having a chocolate with me. My friend loves chocolate very much but she cannot go out to buy one. I am showing the chocolate to her. In this way, I am *tantalizing* her”.

b) Destitute: (without money, food and other necessities needed for life)

“I imagine that a man died and left no financial means for his family. So, his wife and children cannot find any money, food or shelter; they are *destitute*.”

c) Walk down the aisle: (get married)

“I imagine a bride and a bridegroom walking down the *aisle* in the church to get married”.

5. *Making use of linguistic knowledge*: For this strategy, students reported that they made use of their knowledge of synonym, antonym and word formation, that is, suffixes, prefixes and roots.

Conclusion

Diary keeping in the Vocabulary course has been beneficial not only for the students, but also for the teacher. It has been found that by keeping a diary, many students revealed their learning strategies, and in many cases, they became aware of the strategies they used in learning and remembering the meaning of unfamiliar words. This awareness gave students insights into their own learning processes, helping them become more autonomous learners. It has also been found that although analyzing learner diaries required a certain investment of time on the part of the teacher, the return on time has been worth it because diaries function as a useful tool to help the teacher in evaluating the effectiveness of the course as well as the students' learning strategies. Reflecting on what strategies learners use can improve the teacher's understanding of the learning process, leading to more effective teaching.

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