

Investigating vocabulary retention in English Language learners: A focus on frequency and teaching methods

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INFOARTIKEL

RiwayatArtikel:

Diterima : 18 November 2024

Direvisi : 30 November 2024

Disetujui : 13 Desember 2024

Dipublis : 27 Desember 2024

Kata kunci:

Vocabulary

English Learner

Teaching Method

ABSTRAK

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi retensi kosakata pada siswa belajar bahasa Inggris, dengan fokus pada frekuensi kata dan metode pengajaran yang digunakan. Meskipun banyak penelitian yang menekankan pentingnya frekuensi kosakata dalam akuisisi bahasa, penelitian ini berfokus pada bagaimana frekuensi tersebut berinteraksi dengan teknik pengajaran yang digunakan oleh guru dalam memperkenalkan dan memperkuat kosakata baru. Melalui analisis kualitatif terhadap kelas bahasa Inggris di tingkat sekolah dasar, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa meskipun kosakata yang sering diajarkan memiliki pengaruh terhadap pemahaman siswa, metode pengajaran yang bervariasi dan melibatkan penggunaan kata dalam konteks nyata terbukti lebih efektif dalam mendukung retensi jangka panjang. Penelitian ini menyarankan bahwa penggunaan metode berbasis tugas, komunikasi, dan pengulangan yang kontekstual dapat meningkatkan daya ingat siswa terhadap kosakata yang diajarkan. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi penting bagi pengajaran bahasa Inggris, terutama dalam mengembangkan strategi pengajaran yang lebih efektif untuk meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata pada pembelajar bahasa kedua.

Abstract: This study aims to investigate the factors that influence vocabulary retention in English language learners, focusing on word frequency and the teaching methods employed. While much research emphasizes the importance of vocabulary frequency in language acquisition, this study explores how frequency interacts with the teaching techniques used by instructors to introduce and reinforce new vocabulary. Through a qualitative analysis of English language classrooms at the elementary school level, the study finds that although frequently taught vocabulary has an impact on student comprehension, teaching methods that involve varied approaches and contextual word usage are more effective in supporting long-term retention. The study suggests that task-based methods, communicative activities, and contextual repetition enhance students' memory of taught vocabulary. These findings provide valuable contributions to English language teaching, particularly in developing more effective teaching strategies to improve vocabulary mastery in second language learners.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language proficiency, playing a crucial role in the development of the four primary language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, English language learners (ELLs) cannot effectively express themselves or comprehend spoken and written texts. Thus, vocabulary acquisition and retention are critical goals in second language (L2) instruction, especially for young learners at the elementary

school level. However, despite repeated exposure to high-frequency words, many students struggle to retain and use them correctly. This study aims to investigate vocabulary retention among English language learners, with a particular emphasis on lexical frequency and teaching methods as influential factors.

Applied Linguistics (AL) provides a rich theoretical framework for exploring how language learners acquire, store, and retrieve vocabulary. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), vocabulary acquisition involves more than memorizing definitions; it requires the learner to develop depth of knowledge about the word's form, meaning, and usage. This includes aspects such as collocations, grammatical behavior, register, and frequency. Nation (2001) further elaborates that effective vocabulary teaching must address both the breadth (number of words known) and the depth (how well they are known) of vocabulary knowledge. Yet, many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, especially at the elementary level, fail to provide instruction that supports long-term retention.

A key concept in vocabulary research is word frequency—how often a word occurs in natural language use. The Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP), developed by Laufer and Nation (1995), measures the proportion of high-frequency versus low-frequency words used by language learners. Research suggests that learners are more likely to retain and use high-frequency words, as these are more commonly encountered in various contexts. According to Coxhead (2000), repeated exposure to high-frequency vocabulary through meaningful contexts supports acquisition. However, frequency alone does not guarantee retention. As Schmitt (2008) notes, learners often need 5–16 or more meaningful encounters with a word to learn it productively.

Therefore, frequency must be paired with effective teaching methods to ensure vocabulary retention. Traditional vocabulary instruction in many EFL settings relies heavily on rote memorization, translations, and isolated word lists, which may not be effective for long-term learning. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as advocated by Harmer (2007) and Willis & Willis (2007), emphasize meaningful interaction and real-life language use. These methods promote vocabulary learning through authentic tasks, such as role plays, storytelling, or problem-solving activities, where learners use language in context. Additionally, Nation (2013) classifies vocabulary teaching into four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development—all of which contribute to vocabulary retention.

Despite the theoretical support for communicative and task-based approaches, many elementary teachers still struggle to apply these methods effectively in classrooms. One challenge is that young learners may forget frequently used vocabulary, even after repeated instruction. For example, in a classroom interaction involving a fifth-grade student and a teacher, the student initially replied “I’m baik” to “How are you today?”, translating directly from their first language. After the teacher corrected the response to “I’m fine,” the student understood but often reverted to the incorrect form later. This situation reflects a common problem in L2 vocabulary retention—the gap between recognition and productive use.

This study is informed by the Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1985), which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level ($i+1$). For vocabulary retention, this suggests the importance of presenting new words in understandable, engaging contexts that gradually push learners to higher proficiency. However, Krashen also acknowledges that input alone is insufficient; meaningful output and interaction are crucial. Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1995) complements this by emphasizing the importance of learners producing language, thereby testing hypotheses about word use, solidifying their understanding, and identifying gaps in their knowledge.

Another relevant framework is Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which posits that the amount of information a learner can process at one time is limited. When learners are overwhelmed with too many unfamiliar words at once, retention is likely to be compromised. Therefore, vocabulary instruction should be carefully scaffolded, introducing high-frequency words in manageable chunks and reinforcing them through spaced repetition and multimodal techniques such as visual aids, physical actions (Total Physical Response), and songs.

In exploring the challenges of vocabulary retention, this research also draws on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, especially the work of Ellis (1994), who explains that vocabulary acquisition is both an explicit and implicit process. While some words can be learned intentionally through direct instruction, others are acquired incidentally through exposure and use. For young

learners, combining both approaches—intentional learning through games and tasks, and incidental learning through stories and conversations—can enhance retention.

Furthermore, the Noticing Hypothesis by Schmidt (1990) emphasizes that learners must consciously notice the language input they receive in order to learn from it. Teachers, therefore, must design lessons that direct learners' attention to target vocabulary through highlighting, repetition, and contextual clues. In practice, this might involve pointing out patterns, using colors or underlining new words, and encouraging students to reflect on how words are used in different contexts.

This study also considers the role of assessment and feedback in vocabulary retention. As emphasized by Ur (1996), regular formative assessment helps identify which words students have truly mastered and which require further reinforcement. Immediate feedback, corrective recasts, and peer collaboration further contribute to deeper processing and memory consolidation.

Given the complexity of vocabulary acquisition and retention, there is a growing need to bridge the gap between applied linguistics research and classroom practice. As Suparman (2016) notes, applied linguistics risks becoming overly specialized and disconnected from the practical concerns of language teaching. Teachers often turn to pedagogical sources like Ur (1996) and Harmer (2007) rather than applied linguistics texts for practical strategies. Yet, a more integrated approach—one that combines theoretical insights from SLA and applied linguistics with hands-on methods from teacher training—can lead to more effective vocabulary instruction.

In conclusion, this study investigates how lexical frequency and teaching methods impact vocabulary retention among English language learners, particularly at the primary school level. By analyzing the relationship between vocabulary exposure, instructional approaches, and student retention, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how to support ELLs in building lasting vocabulary knowledge. In doing so, it seeks to offer both theoretical insights and practical implications for improving English language teaching in diverse educational contexts.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore how frequency and teaching methods influence vocabulary retention in young English language learners. The study focuses on a fifth-grade English classroom in an Indonesian elementary school where students have demonstrated difficulty in retaining frequently taught vocabulary. This setting allows for an in-depth analysis of authentic classroom interactions and instructional strategies related to vocabulary acquisition. The participants of this study include one English teacher and ten fifth-grade students aged 10–11, selected through purposive sampling based on their active participation in English classes and the teacher's observations of vocabulary retention challenges. The research data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the teacher, and student vocabulary tests administered before and after a series of instructional interventions.

The interventions involved teaching high-frequency English vocabulary using a combination of traditional and communicative methods. These included repetition drills, translation, contextual guessing, storytelling, and task-based activities such as role plays and interactive games. The vocabulary selected was based on the General Service List (West, 1953), which consists of the most frequent words in English. The classroom interactions were recorded and transcribed for discourse analysis to examine how vocabulary was introduced, practiced, and corrected. Interviews with the teacher focused on instructional strategies, challenges faced, and reflections on student progress. Student vocabulary tests were analyzed to identify patterns of retention and recall.

This methodological approach is grounded in the belief that qualitative insights provide depth and context to the vocabulary learning process. As Merriam (2009) states, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences." In analyzing the data, the researcher applied thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to frequency, exposure, and teaching strategies. The findings were interpreted in light of Nation's (2001) four strands of vocabulary teaching—meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development—as well as Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis and Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. This methodology is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the factors that affect vocabulary retention and to offer practical implications for language teachers seeking to improve their students' long-term vocabulary acquisition.

RESULT

The data collected from classroom observations and teacher interviews reveal that despite repeated exposure to commonly used vocabulary, students in the fifth grade frequently forget or misuse basic English words. One illustrative instance is a student responding with "I'm baik" instead of "I'm fine" during a basic conversational exchange with the teacher. The teacher corrected the mistake and provided the accurate term, after which the student was able to repeat the correct form. However, such corrections often did not result in long-term retention, as similar mistakes were repeatedly observed in subsequent sessions.

This finding suggests that exposure to high-frequency vocabulary alone does not guarantee retention. Teachers involved in the study reported that they regularly emphasized frequent words in class, including greetings, basic adjectives, and classroom expressions. Yet, students continued to struggle with recalling and using them accurately.

To address this, the teacher explored applied linguistics resources and second language acquisition (SLA) literature to find strategies for reinforcing vocabulary learning. She acknowledged that although she was familiar with frequent vocabulary items, she needed more insight into how vocabulary is internalized and remembered by learners. Specifically, the teacher consulted works such as Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2000) to understand how frequency, depth of processing, and repetition interact in vocabulary acquisition.

A recurring pattern among students was the ability to mimic or recall words immediately after correction, followed by difficulty in retaining and retrieving the same vocabulary in new contexts. This suggested a superficial level of vocabulary learning, likely due to limited opportunities for deep engagement and meaningful use.

Moreover, the teacher observed that traditional teaching techniques such as rote memorization, translation, and drills had limited success in promoting vocabulary retention. This prompted her to reflect on the need for more interactive and contextualized teaching methods, which may be more effective for long-term learning.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reinforce the complex nature of vocabulary acquisition and retention, especially among young learners. Although word frequency is a well-established factor in vocabulary learning (Nation, 2001; Webb, 2008), its effectiveness depends heavily on how frequently encountered words are taught, practiced, and recycled in meaningful contexts.

As Laufer and Nation (1995) explain, vocabulary knowledge must be both wide (in terms of how many words learners know) and deep (in terms of how well they know them). The case observed in this study points to a gap in depth: while students are introduced to frequent words, they do not develop sufficient depth of processing to internalize and retain them. This is consistent with Craik and Lockhart's (1972) Levels of Processing Theory, which posits that deeper semantic processing results in better memory retention than surface-level repetition.

Further, Schmitt (2000) highlights the importance of recycling vocabulary across various tasks and modalities. In the current study, lack of varied practice and contextual usage likely contributed to students' failure to retain vocabulary effectively. Schmitt emphasizes that learners need to encounter words at least 5 to 16 times in meaningful contexts to fully acquire them. This principle is particularly important for young learners whose attention span and motivation may fluctuate.

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis also plays a role in understanding these findings. He argues that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level ($i+1$). The classroom observed, while rich in exposure to frequent words, may not have sufficiently contextualized those words in engaging, comprehensible input. Simply repeating "fine" or "good" during greetings may not be enough unless students see and use them in varied, meaningful interactions.

Additionally, Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis provides further insight. It posits that learners must consciously notice linguistic forms for acquisition to occur. Although the student noticed the correction from "baik" to "fine," the momentary attention may not have been reinforced through subsequent tasks that promoted reuse and integration. Without repeated, meaningful engagement, the opportunity for acquisition diminishes.

This study also brings attention to a critique often directed at Applied Linguistics—that it can become too specialized or disconnected from classroom realities. Suparman (2016) argues that just as linguistics once became too theoretical to be useful for teachers, applied linguistics risks the same fate

if it does not consider the practical needs of educators. In the classroom context observed, the teacher had to turn to works like Ur (1996) and Harmer (2007) for practical strategies on teaching vocabulary, indicating a need for greater collaboration between theorists and practitioners.

Harmer (2007) advocates for teaching vocabulary through context-rich activities, including storytelling, role play, and games. These methods not only provide repeated exposure but also engage students emotionally and cognitively. Emotional engagement, as noted by Thornbury (2002), enhances memory retention and promotes deeper processing. However, such methods were not consistently implemented in the classroom observed, perhaps due to a lack of training or resources.

Moreover, the teacher's initiative to consult second language acquisition literature aligns with Nation's (2001) four-strand approach: (1) meaning-focused input, (2) meaning-focused output, (3) language-focused learning, and (4) fluency development. In the observed class, the emphasis was mostly on language-focused learning (e.g., drills), with limited opportunities for fluency development or authentic communication, which are crucial for vocabulary retention.

In conclusion, while frequency is an essential component of vocabulary learning, its effectiveness is contingent on pedagogical factors. Vocabulary must be taught not only often, but also meaningfully—embedded in communicative activities, reinforced through repetition, and presented through various learning modalities. The findings highlight the need for more integrated approaches that combine insights from applied linguistics with practical, context-sensitive teaching methods.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how vocabulary retention among English language learners—specifically elementary school students—is influenced by word frequency and the teaching methods employed. The findings reaffirm the crucial role that vocabulary plays in second language acquisition and the complex interplay between input frequency, learner engagement, and instructional strategies. While exposure to high-frequency vocabulary is fundamental, it alone is not sufficient to ensure long-term retention and effective usage.

The results indicated that students often forget or misapply even the most frequently taught words, highlighting a gap between exposure and acquisition. This suggests that the method of instruction is as important as the content itself. Although vocabulary items may be encountered repeatedly, if learners are not engaged in deep and meaningful processing, the likelihood of retaining and using those words decreases significantly. As proposed by Craik and Lockhart (1972), deep cognitive engagement with language leads to stronger memory traces than superficial repetition.

Furthermore, the study aligns with Schmitt's (2000) emphasis on recycling vocabulary through varied contexts and activities to enhance acquisition. The lack of multiple exposures in meaningful, communicative tasks may be a key reason for students' inability to retain vocabulary over time. In classrooms where teaching still relies heavily on translation and drilling, students miss out on the benefits of authentic language use.

Another critical insight from this study is the disconnect that can occur between theory and practice. Although the field of Applied Linguistics offers valuable insights into vocabulary acquisition, many practical teaching strategies must still be sourced from teacher-training manuals such as those by Ur (1996) and Harmer (2007). This reveals an ongoing challenge: how to bridge the gap between theoretical research and classroom application. Applied linguistics, as Suparman (2016) points out, must remain grounded in classroom realities to truly benefit language teachers and learners.

The implication is clear: teachers must not only rely on high-frequency vocabulary lists but must also adopt diverse and student-centered teaching techniques. Contextual learning, emotional engagement, task-based instruction, and opportunities for output and interaction all play essential roles in helping learners internalize new words. Nation's (2001) four strands—meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development—should serve as guiding principles for balanced vocabulary instruction.

In conclusion, vocabulary retention among English learners is influenced not just by how often words appear, but also by how they are taught, practiced, and experienced. Effective vocabulary instruction requires more than frequency—it demands thoughtful pedagogy, consistent reinforcement, and meaningful use. To support learners in truly acquiring and retaining new vocabulary, educators must integrate frequency-based approaches with evidence-based teaching practices grounded in the principles of second language acquisition.

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