

# STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES FOR ENHANCING VOCABULARY AMONG ADULT ENGLISH LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** This article examines diverse teaching methods and techniques designed to promote strong vocabulary growth in adult learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Acknowledging the crucial role of vocabulary in language learning, especially for adults, this research investigates effective approaches used by teachers to support vocabulary development. Through a blend of research synthesis and instructional strategies, this paper showcases practical methodologies customized for the specific requirements and interests of adult EFL learners. By emphasizing the importance of focused vocabulary teaching and presenting tangible examples of implementation approaches, this study provides valuable guidance for educators aiming to enhance language learning results in adult EFL settings

**Keywords:** Explicit vocabulary, pictorial reading story, illustrated story, repetition, semantic mapping

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Mastering English opens doors to global connectivity. In today's interconnected world, English serves not only as a means of communication but also as a universal language bridging cultures and continents. Proficiency in English facilitates interaction with individuals from diverse backgrounds and regions, fostering international connections. Furthermore, proficiency in English enhances employment prospects, increasing access to job opportunities. Additionally, acquiring English proficiency nurtures essential life skills, enriching both personal and professional development.

Across all levels of education, there is a critical need for enhanced vocabulary instruction. Students are tasked with learning a significant number of words, typically aiming for 3,000 to 4,000 new words each year (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002). To achieve desired results, educators must utilize the most effective methods for teaching vocabulary. This is vital because insufficient vocabulary skills can greatly impede students' participation in reading, listening, speaking, and writing tasks.

English learners can effectively enhance their vocabulary by employing efficient strategies guided by teachers. According to research, common strategies utilized by learners include using bilingual dictionaries, repeating words orally and in writing, practicing spelling, deducing meaning from context, and asking for clarification on word definitions (Schmitt, 1997). Various efforts have been made to categorize and group these vocabulary learning strategies. For example, O'Malley et al. (1985) found that students in Asia tended to prefer rote memorization over imagery and

categorization strategies, yet they achieved better outcomes. Schmitt (1997) expanded on this classification through interviews with 600 Japanese students, confirming that dictionary use and repetition were favored and deemed most practical, while strategies involving imagery and semantic classification were considered less effective.

There's a belief that advanced learners tend to employ more complex and meaning-focused strategies compared to those with lower proficiency levels. Supporting this idea regarding the connection between vocabulary learning strategies and learners' language abilities, Wilcox (2013) underscored the significance of environmental factors, exposure, active participation, and practical application integrated into various instructional approaches, which contribute to learners' success in retaining vocabulary. Schmitt (1997) echoed Wilcox's views, stating that effective vocabulary teaching involves providing students with frequent exposure and active involvement. All the authors mentioned emphasize the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction and intentional vocabulary learning, especially in foreign language settings. Through explicit teaching and deliberate practice, learners notably enhance their ability to recall words and use them effectively in different contexts.

In essence, improving vocabulary is essential for mastering a language, as it enhances proficiency across all language skills. Although foreign language learners may struggle with memorizing and applying new words, teachers can provide various successful strategies to assist them in this endeavor.

## 2.1 SUBJECT OF THE STUDY

This article focuses on five individuals from Uzbekistan, aged thirty-one to thirty-two, who are learning English as adults. They work as experts in an investment department of a government organization and aim to pursue master's degrees abroad, requiring proficiency in English and high scores on the IELTS exam. Despite being raised in Uzbek families and attending Russian schools, their English skills remain at a basic level due to limited practice since completing their education. Their main difficulty lies in expanding their vocabulary, which hampers their ability to express themselves effectively. Despite their busy schedules, they dedicate time to improve their English by watching videos for listening and pronunciation practice and reading texts to enhance their vocabulary. Their passion for travel serves as a motivation for further English learning. While they have made progress, they still struggle with remembering new words and often mix up Russian and English words, especially in speaking and writing. Based on observations, it is evident that they are primarily visual learners and tend to use newly learned words incorrectly, indicating ineffective vocabulary learning strategies.

After assessing students' language abilities in accuracy, vocabulary, and pronunciation, it is evident that they struggle with vocabulary and demonstrate moderate accuracy in language usage. As a result, their communication on various everyday topics such as family, hobbies, work, and travel is ineffective, often relying on circumlocutions, errors, and influence from their native language. While some students have received formal English education in school settings, others have opted for additional instruction through supplementary courses. Therefore, this study aims to investigate effective methods and strategies for vocabulary instruction tailored to address their specific weaknesses and improve their English vocabulary proficiency. The course is scheduled in the evenings, allowing learners to return home with ample energy to start their day positively and productively.

## 2.2 METHODS

In the methodology section, I have chosen to gather data regarding the learners' objectives, the specific difficulties or errors they encounter, and which strategies prove effective in enhancing their vocabulary acquisition.

This article includes the following steps:

- a. Preliminary interview
- b. Visual storytelling video
- c. Picture-based reading narrative
- d. Follow-up interview

Initially, I conducted a preliminary interview to address their concerns and experiences with learning English.

During this interview, seven questions pertaining to their learning journey were asked, with the session lasting approximately six minutes. Following this, the second stage involved the implementation of "semantic mapping" instruction, wherein participants were presented with 10 words along with their definitions. Their task was not only to provide accurate definitions for these words but also to repeat them and utilize a dictionary to prevent forgetting or confusion when using them in written and spoken contexts. Subsequently, their learning progress was observed over the course of a week, during which they were provided with a short visual storytelling video, tailored to their interest in both watching and learning from visual narratives. For the subsequent stage, a visual storytelling video titled "All are welcome" was selected, featuring the same vocabulary used in the initial task. Participants watched the video, learning new vocabulary in conjunction with the accompanying illustrations. They then revisited the task of writing definitions for the words. The outcomes showed improvement compared to the previous attempt. Building on cognitive strategies, particularly the mnemonic approach, the following week involved the introduction of a short picture-based reading narrative titled "A beautiful bird." This aimed to further enrich their vocabulary repertoire and encourage the appropriate usage of words in their oral communication. Additionally, their memory retention was assessed by identifying words they found challenging during a multiple-choice task. Subsequently, a follow-up interview was conducted to gather learners' feedback and insights on their experiences with the process and the instructional methods utilized to enhance vocabulary retention and usage. The interviews were conducted in English, considering their improved understanding and proficiency in the language.

## 3 DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS

### 3.1 PRESENT SITUATION ANALYSIS

I enthusiastically commenced data collection for the research, focusing on pre- and post-interview questions to gather insights from my adult learners. Initially, I crafted a set of questions aimed at understanding the participants' motivations and future aspirations in learning English, as outlined in Appendix I to establish the learner profiles.

During the first day of observation, respondents were queried about the strategies they had previously employed and their overall impressions. Subsequently, I administered a questionnaire and analyzed their responses. Participants shared their experiences with starting to learn English, sources of inspiration for learning the language, and encountered difficulties in language acquisition. Upon reviewing their answers, it

became apparent that they struggled with using vocabulary appropriately and recalling newly learned words. Initially, they relied solely on conventional methods such as maintaining vocabulary notebooks for memorization and revision. However, with my encouragement, they expressed willingness to adopt new approaches.

Their sentiments regarding the challenges of learning new words were less than satisfactory, often feeling frustrated due to word confusion. Additionally, I inquired about their efforts to enhance their vocabulary, to which they mentioned watching videos, revising new words, phrases, and expressions, as well as improving pronunciation skills. From their responses, it became evident that the learners predominantly relied on methods of vocabulary learning that were not conducive to their progress. Consequently, they expressed a willingness to explore alternative strategies to facilitate greater improvements.

In the second observation, participants were tasked with providing definitions for words extracted from the short video story "Everyone is welcome." They were given ten minutes to review the words along with their definitions and commit them to memory. After a week, the same set of words from the video were presented again to assess their memory retention and ability to use them in conversation. Participants were required to watch the visual video story and provide clear definitions for each word from the provided list.

Following this, considering the participants' inclination towards visual learning and their engagement with reading and video content, a captivating picture-based reading was selected. Participants previewed the new words featured in the text, each accompanied by samples and definitions. After reading the story, participants confirmed their understanding, and two exercises were completed within ten minutes due to their familiarity with the meanings of the words.

### **3.2 WANTS AND LACKS ANALYSES**

After conducting the initial and subsequent observations, I found that learners struggled to recall definitions for half of the words, particularly longer or less common ones. This indicated a challenge in understanding and using these words in speech. However, after reviewing the same words through a video lesson the following week, their retention improved notably, with 8 out of 10 words remembered. Their enthusiasm for the task increased, which I attributed to the benefits of wide reading and repetition. During a subsequent activity involving a picture-based reading story, most participants made only one mistake and eagerly summarized the story afterward. I recognized the effectiveness of the semantic mapping

strategy, where listening, reading, and viewing occur simultaneously, in enhancing vocabulary learning. Finally, during the post-interview phase, I observed that the previously conducted activities had positively impacted the participants' language proficiency, as they could readily apply the learned skills.

## **4 DISCUSSIONS**

The needs assessment pointed out that students lack proficiency in vocabulary, particularly in speaking and understanding diverse cultural norms and preferences. Their aspirations include becoming proficient and fluent language users through effective approaches. However, existing teaching methods don't offer ample opportunities for oral practice, such as discussions, role-plays, presentations, and peer interactions. Moreover, vocabulary development is not adequately emphasized in each lesson, hindering the smooth acquisition of the targeted language. But the participants could enhance their language proficiency skills, in particular vocabulary skill, through effective and fruitful techniques and activities.

Teaching English comes with its set of hurdles, and it's vital for educators to utilize effective instructional techniques. Stimulating students' interest can be accomplished through enjoyable methods. By integrating activities that make learning fun, instructors can fully engage students throughout the learning journey. Given the plethora of English learning methods available, students often lean towards those that are enjoyable. Beginning with captivating content can ignite students' curiosity and create an enjoyable learning atmosphere, thereby nurturing their enthusiasm for mastering English. Below are some recommended methods worth considering.

### **Preliminary interview**

The primary focus of the research is to investigate the impact of interview activities on the vocabulary skills of English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Since these students often require assistance in improving their speaking and vocabulary abilities, the study aims to explore the potential advantages of interview-based communication. Quynh and Van (2021) highlighted that interviews typically involve a reciprocal exchange of questions and answers. In this process, the interviewer asks questions, actively listens to the responses, and provides their own answers. Learners can answer the questions based on existing knowledge. This interactive approach can promote a more engaging, meaningful, and stimulating communication experience.

### **Visual storytelling video**

Visual storytelling involves narrating a story using visual mediums like video, photography, illustrations, infographics, and animations. It encompasses various techniques, such as stories told from a single person's perspective, sequential images that convey a narrative, or glimpses into a particular topic evoking strong emotional responses to encourage specific actions. The aim of visual storytelling is to swiftly and efficiently engage the audience. Images are processed rapidly by the human brain, making this method highly effective in capturing attention. Teachers frequently introduce new vocabulary using visual aids, like presenting words within the context of a story unfolding in a book. Similarly, various forms of entertainment, such as movies, television series, and graphic novels, heavily rely on visual storytelling techniques to convey narratives.

### **Pictorial reading story**

Learners derive greater meaning from encountering words within a picture book compared to completing a worksheet. When adults engage with a story that resonates with them, they can better comprehend words within context. Simply completing a worksheet may not facilitate understanding or retention of word meanings. By utilizing the story's context, learners can more effectively decipher the meanings of intermediate-level words, as they have textual details to draw upon. Engaging with a story that captures their interest enhances understanding. Furthermore, using picture books to teach vocabulary aids in better retention of word meanings among adults. As educators teach and discuss words within a picture book, learners form connections with the narrative, leading to better recall of those words.

### **Follow-up interview**

A strong vocabulary enhances various aspects of communication, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is crucial for a child's success due to its direct correlation with academic performance. In my view, vocabulary instruction should follow a consistent approach, which is what we implement at word learning system. To attain a thorough comprehension across various subjects in the curriculum, students need to have a solid grasp of vocabulary. Often, students can conceal their lack of understanding when completing comprehension tasks. They may simply locate the keyword in the text to answer questions without truly comprehending the words involved. This is a possible reason why many students seem to perform adequately in classroom and homework assignments but struggle during exams. We should focus on thoroughly

examining and analyzing words by regularly prompting students to explain how they understand the meanings of individual words. Additionally, we should encourage them to explore the meanings of words by identifying prefixes, suffixes, and root words.

### **CONCLUSION**

After carefully reviewing the entire dataset, one can conclude that effective vocabulary strategies play a vital role in language learning. Adult learners, in particular, require more time, practice, and determination compared to younger learners when acquiring new words in a foreign language. This topic was chosen specifically because I observed similar difficulties in memorizing and using words accurately among respondents attempting to learn English. Despite their diligence and enthusiasm for language learning, these individuals sometimes feel discouraged due to challenges in learning new words. Therefore, my aim was to assist them in overcoming these obstacles by teaching them proper vocabulary learning techniques.

To facilitate the development of their vocabulary knowledge, it is essential for instructors to teach effective strategies that enhance learning efficiency. During this study, I discovered that the respondents are visual learners who are interested in reading and watching pictorial reading and video stories. These methods greatly motivated them to expand their vocabulary. Some popular strategies among the learners include learning words through reading, using monolingual dictionaries, repetition, and mnemonic devices, such as incorporating various English-language media and using new English words in daily speech. However, strategies that require cognitive processing, such as listening to words in a video, semantic mapping, and writing down new words and meanings, pose challenges for the participants.

Therefore, I tailored the approach to suit their preferences by utilizing pictorial reading and video stories, which helped us identify learners' difficulties and determine their preferred learning styles. The hypothesis was validated through this study, as there was noticeable improvement in their vocabulary usage in both writing and speaking. It is crucial to identify the primary reasons for inaccuracies in word usage and forgetting, and to suggest appropriate strategies for learners based on the results. This study has several implications, including increasing language learners' understanding of the importance of vocabulary learning strategies in second and foreign language acquisition. As noted by Oxford (2003), vocabulary is often not explicitly taught in many language classes.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**



The findings of this study offer valuable insights for language teachers seeking to enhance their teaching methodologies. Teachers who closely monitor their students' progress in learning English vocabulary can guide them in adopting effective vocabulary learning strategies and techniques through relevant tasks and assignments. However, regrettably, the interview revealed that participants are unaware of the various strategies available for learning words beyond simply using dictionaries and memorization techniques. I contend that reading illustrated stories and watching videos with subtitles serve as excellent motivators for learners aiming to retain as many words as possible

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