

ON VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ESP: A STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the role of vocabulary learning in English for Specific Purposes. When learning ESP, vocabulary is viewed as a micro-skill that needs to be developed, while in ESP teaching, we may speak of semi-technical vocabulary (Baker 1988) characterized by its association with a specific subject area, which shares characteristics of both technical and core vocabulary. The focus of this paper is to identify the main vocabulary problems faced by students in ESP. The investigation will reveal that the chief problem faced by ESP students is their narrow knowledge of vocabulary, which leads to difficulties in speaking and understanding oral and written messages.*

Keywords: *semi-technical vocabulary, core-vocabulary, taxonomy of vocabulary*

I. Introduction

Starting from Lewis' (1993) assumption that the lexis is the core of language, the focus of this paper is to discuss the role of vocabulary learning in ESP. Specifically, the paper investigates the chief vocabulary problems faced by students in ESP. In order to better understand its role, we will first briefly introduce and comment on the types of vocabulary in ESP.

We will start from the observation that the literature (Baker 1988, Dudley- Evans and St. John 1998, Widdowson 1993 a.o) distinguishes between *core-vocabulary*, *technical vocabulary* and *semi-technical vocabulary*. The former, also known as *common core* designates the 2000-3000 words which account for 80 percent of the vocabulary likely to be encountered. The *technical vocabulary* refers to the stock of words and phrases that are used in a specific subject area while the *semi-lexical vocabulary* is concerned with words and phrases that are neither highly technical, nor too general. The semi-lexical vocabulary is of major concern in ESP courses, due to its "elusive and confusing" features, as noted by Baker (1988:91).

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Semantically, the vocabulary of ESP has been divided into three classes (cf. Robinson 1991): (a) *the ultra-specialised vocabulary* which pertains to each scientific/technical field or subfield where every word has a precise meaning, (b) *general scientific and technological words* which are common in technological fields and (c) *articles, auxiliaries, prepositions and linking words* which do not belong the ESP per se, but they are essential as no complex meaningful sentence can be built without them.

So far, we have seen that vocabulary knowledge is both a complex and multidimensional issue. In line with Richek et al (1996), there are two approaches to vocabulary learning: a direct vocabulary learning approach, also named explicit learning approach in which learners are taught specific words and language specific structures; this approach is necessary for learning the core vocabulary. By way of contrast, the indirect vocabulary learning approach involves the implicit learning of new words, unconsciously, through reading or listening, without being aware of the goals of learning. In the same line of thought, studies have shown that both approaches combined can bring about better results, as compared to either direct or indirect vocabulary learning alone.

Last but not least, it is also important to mention that there are four categories to vocabulary learning: listening, speaking, reading and writing, as shown in the diagram below (cf. Pikulski and Templeton 2004).

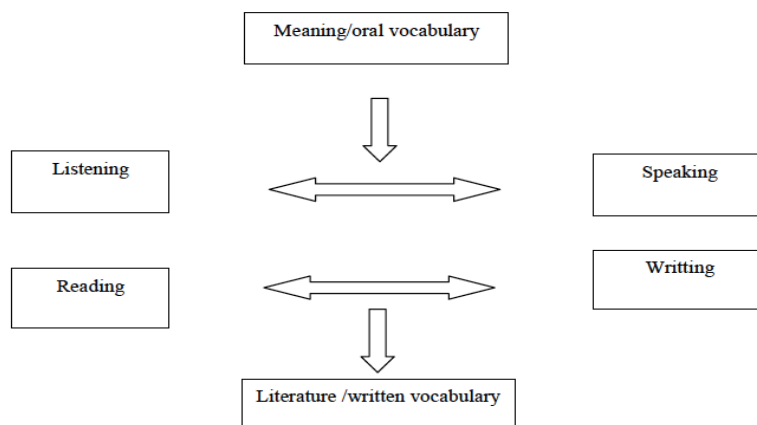


Fig. 1. *Vocabulary and the four language skills*

Following the diagram, listening and speaking belong to oral vocabulary, while reading and writing fall under the written vocabulary. It is worth mentioning that establishing a connection between spelling (the written vocabulary) and pronunciation (the spoken vocabulary) can enhance ESP vocabulary recognition, where word recognition ability further improves ESP reading comprehension and speed. Moreover, the knowledge of affixes, and word formation can also help learners decode ESP vocabulary (in line with Nation 1990 and Hsueh, 1997).

In the same line of thought, vocabulary learning strategies have been developed both in ESP and general English. These strategies can be (i) *direct*, which are mostly applied for productive vocabulary skills and (ii) *indirect*, used for receptive vocabulary skills.

Within ESP, the following vocabulary learning strategies can be used: synonymy and antonymy, learning words by categories, by topic, by word families or by vocabulary cards (cf. Nation 2001); monolingual dictionaries can also be used as a vocabulary strategy.

2. The experiment

2.1. Motivation for the experiment

The present informal experiment seeks to investigate the attitude of students towards vocabulary learning methods implemented by the teacher while they were enrolled in an ESP course. For the present empirical study, two research questions have been formulated:

- a) What are the main vocabulary problems faced by students in ESP?
- b) Do ESP students need more efficient learning strategies?

2.2. Data collection

The present empirical study will be based on a questionnaire designed to examine the learners' perceptions of ESP vocabulary learning strategies and difficulties. The questionnaire was administrated to 80 students from Transilvania University of Brasov who were enrolled in an ESP course as a requirement. An electronic questionnaire had to be answered by the students by accessing a specific web address which was sent to them. The questionnaire consisted of five questions followed by a block of four answers to be rated. After reading each question, the students had to rate the five sentences using a five-scale grading task (0- "never" to five- "always").

Each task was designed to examine the learners' perception of ESP vocabulary, as follows:

- (a) Task *one* asked the students to rate the main problems they faced in English, by rating their difficulties in speaking, grammatical problems, difficulties in understanding and lack of self-confidence.
- (b) Task *two* asked the students to rate the methods they used in English vocabulary learning during seminars, by rating vocabulary tasks, reading tasks, translation tasks and speaking tasks.
- (c) Task *three* asked the students to rate the importance of the type of vocabulary which should be part of their course, by rating the general vocabulary, general academic vocabulary, general technical vocabulary and general semi-technical vocabulary.
- (d) Task *four* asked the students to rate the type of vocabulary exercise according to efficiency, by rating gap filling, matching, classifying and making collocations.
- (e) Task *five* asked the students to rate how often they do one of the following tasks: use books/ articles in English, use English on a daily basis, use monolingual dictionaries and learn English vocabulary by listening.

Let us turn to the findings and their interpretation.

2.3. Findings and interpretation of findings

The results of the experiment are graphically depicted in figures 1 to 5. Each graph indicates the four answers together with the 5 scales which have been graded by the participants.

Figure one below graphically presents the raw frequencies of the judgements pertaining to task one.

Rate the main problems faced by you in English

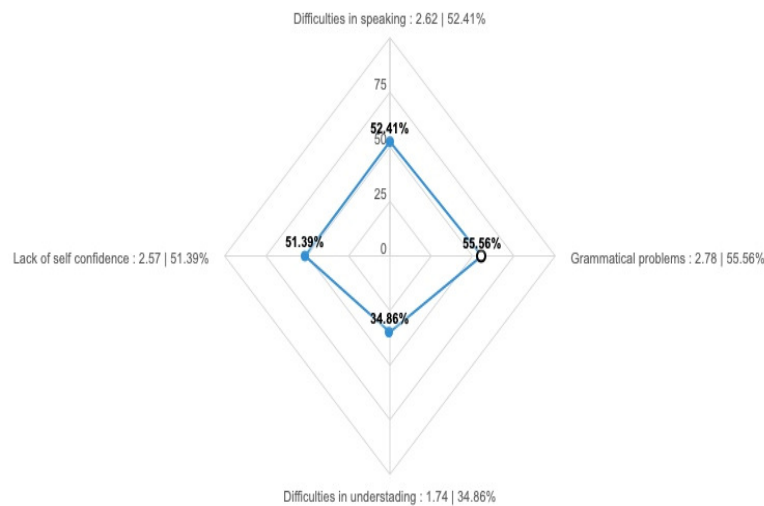


Fig. 1. *Task one. Problems faced by learners of English*

The results show that students face difficulties in speaking (52.41%), they also confront themselves with grammatical problems (55.56%) and they seem to lack confidence while using the language (51.39%). Least of all these problems is related to the difficulties that they have in understanding (34.86%). The results confirm to a certain extent our expectations as the “oral ESP vocabulary” (cf. Pikulski and Templeton 2004) is highly specific and it requires a good command of the language; the average point is reasonably high (2.62, out of 5).

Figure two graphically describes the second task.

Rate the methods you use in English vocabulary learning, in class

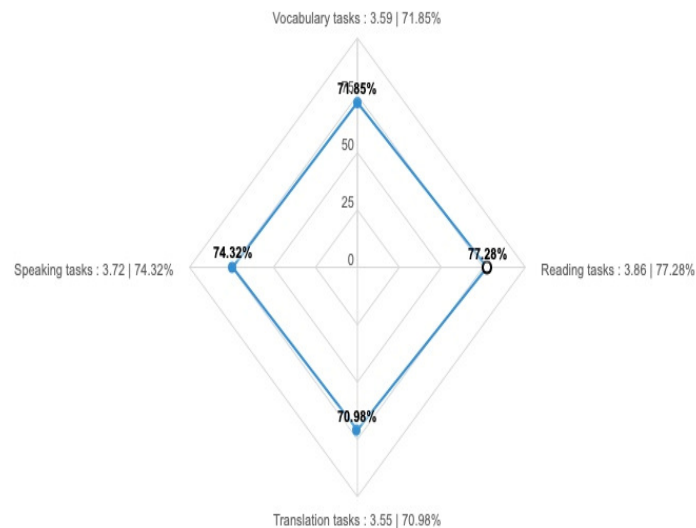


Fig. 2. Task **two**. Methods used in English vocabulary learning

The results indicate that the syllabus is structured equally, covering vocabulary tasks where the mean is high (3.59 out of 5), which brings about improvements in reading comprehension. This would explain why reading comprehension tasks are used so often (77.28%) during the courses and in an effective manner. Speaking tasks (74.32%) and translation tasks (70.98%) are also other two strategies of ESP teaching which are intensively used during the seminars.

It is important to mention that vocabulary can be sometimes considered an obstacle to non-native speakers of English, especially ESP vocabulary, which is full of low frequency/specialised words which cannot be learned instantaneously, but they are acquired over a period of time. However, with appropriate teaching materials, learning strategies and interactions between learners and teachers, the existing learning difficulties could be solved. Moreover, the teacher faces a great challenge by having to motivate the students to read specific texts, due to lack of vocabulary and guessing strategies.

In *Figure three* below, the third task is graphically described, as follows:

Rate the importance of the type of vocabulary that should be part of your course

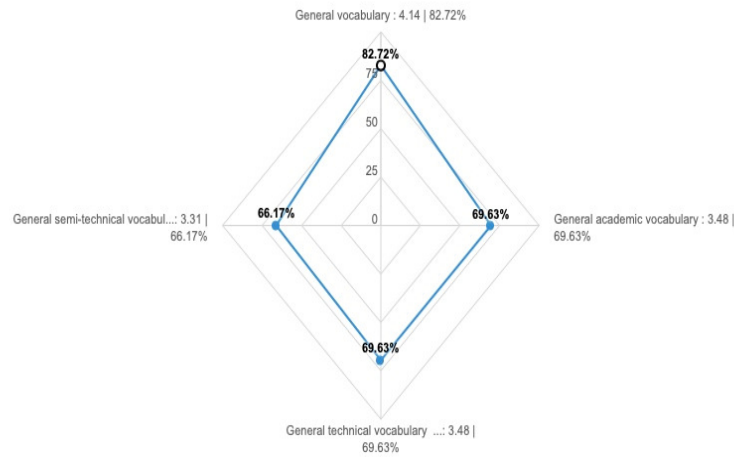


Fig. 3. Task **three**. The importance of the type of vocabulary being taught

The results indicate a preference for the general vocabulary with a mean of 4.14 (out of 5), where 85% of the students need to learn general vocabulary, and 69.63% general academic vocabulary. This may be explained through the fact that the students are aware that their general vocabulary is not on a proficient level and they feel the need to improve. The results further indicate a lower need in ESP vocabulary as compared to General English (GE) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). However, the mean is still high for both vocabulary classes (3.31 and 3.48 respectively), where 69.63% of the students found the General technical vocabulary important and 66.17% found the need to improve the General semi-technical vocabulary.

Thus, according to this question, students extensively experience the need to improve their general vocabulary, to a large extent, and, to a lesser extent, the ESP vocabulary.

Let us now turn to *Figure four*, as exemplified in the graph below.

Rate the type of vocabulary exercises according to efficiency

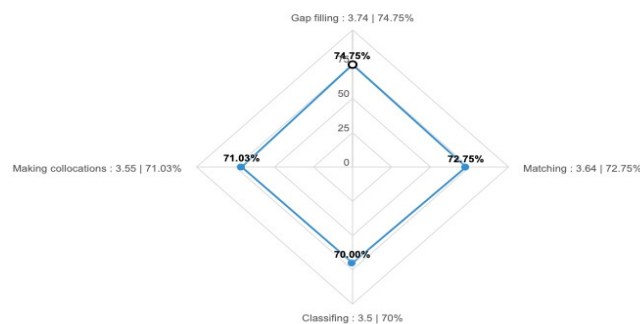


Fig. 4. Task **four**. Types of vocabulary exercises according to efficiency

In *Figure 4* above, the task looked at different vocabulary learning strategies such as gap filling, matching, classifying and making collocations, according to efficiency. The ratings of the three exercise types did not vary greatly, which points towards a homogeneity in efficiency. The highest rated ones were the gap filling (74.75%) and matching (72.75%) tasks, followed by making collocations (71.03%) and classifying (70%) tasks, where all have a productive nature.

Last but not least, I will now turn to task five, as shown in *graph five* below.

Rate how often you do one of the following:

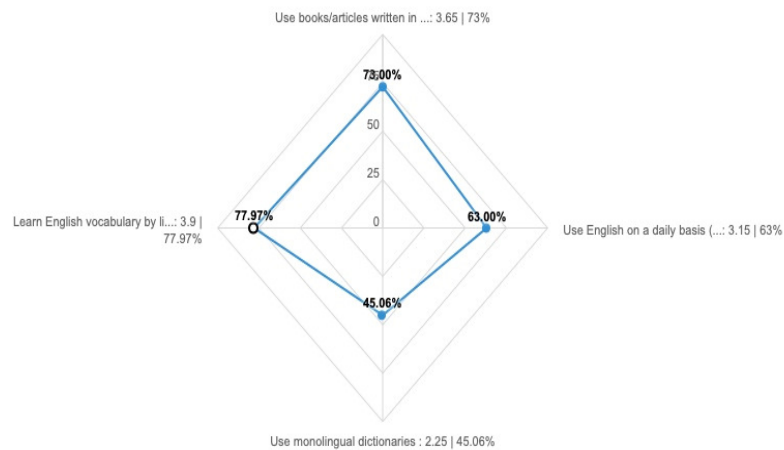


Fig. 5. Task five. Frequency of use of certain vocabulary learning strategies

Figure five graphically describes the frequency of use of certain vocabulary learning strategies which students use. 77.97 % of students admitted that they learn English vocabulary by listening, 73 % said that they use books or articles written in English, 63% use English on a daily basis; thus they are exposed to it and can freely learn new words. Monolingual dictionaries are used by students as a vocabulary strategy, however, to a lesser extent (45.06%).

The present empirical research has its own limitations. Firstly, it tackles a small number of strategies related to vocabulary learning and thus, it does not allow us to make far-reaching conclusions. Secondly, it deals with a small number of students, from a particular university, therefore it should be carried out on a wider basis.

3. Conclusions

The experiment performed allows us to draw the following conclusions, thus answering the two research questions formulated at the beginning of Section 2.1. In line with the results, the main vocabulary problems faced by students in ESP lie in their narrow knowledge of both ESP and GAE vocabulary. As a result, they face difficulties in speaking and understanding both the core vocabulary and the specialised one. In order

to enrich their vocabulary, it is the teacher's responsibility to compensate for this disadvantage and come with new and efficient teaching strategies, which should be purposely developed in the process of teaching. In a nutshell, vocabulary alone might not ensure understanding, but the lack of a proper understanding of it will lead to failure.

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