INTRICACIES IN VOCABULARY INTAKE FOR EFL ADULT LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is the key linguistic item besides sound-pattern and syntactic rules (Hudson, 1996) serving notable tasks in language learning. For English as a foreign language learners (EFLLs), especially adults, vocabulary has become an intimidating notion that reflects in their reluctant behaviour when learning this language. This investigation intended to seek the individual processing factors that lead adult EFLLs to such discontented condition. Undertaking the study within the extent of qualitative case study, there were 26 adult EFLLs—non-English department students and lecturers aged above 25—to answer a questionnaire set concerning the difficulties they have in English vocabulary intake. The result indicates that majority of the respondents (20 respondents) have problems with idioms, and the second major problem is the problems with synforms—the look-alike words or phrases—which is faced by 19 respondents. This interprets that most adult EFLLs in Aceh are still complying with fundamental topics in foreign language learning on the regular basis. Conclusively, knowing the factors emphasize the case of word meaning, the finding might gently suggest that English instructors for adult EFLLs can magnify more teaching approaches that leads to word-meaning preservation.

Keywords: vocabulary intake, EFL learners, adult learners, adult literacy, and vocabulary retention
INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a remarkable element of every language which plays important role in acquiring a language. This is not a devastating fact as one can not communicate and understand others without knowing any vocabulary. Also, learners’ vocabulary development itself would lead them to have a great language mastery later on. Despite being ignored to be learned for a long time, recently, many experts have been put their research interest back on vocabulary learning such as Carter and McCarthy (1988), Nation (1990), Arnaud and Bejoint (1992), Huckin, Haynes and Coady (1995), Coady and Huckin (1997), Schmitt (1997, 2000), and Read (1997) (Alqahtani, 2015). They have perceived that the preceding element of a language to be mastered is a sophisticated range of vocabulary.

The importance of learning vocabulary is elaborated as follows. Krashen as citied by Moghadam, Zainal, and Ghadepour (2012) explained that vocabulary learning is considered important since it is an indicator of a language ability. In other words, learning either first or second language is basically related to its vocabulary knowledge, hence limited vocabulary knowledge will impede or stop from learning a language. In English teaching and learning, vocabulary is addressed as the central element of it because learners definately can not express or engage in communication if there is an absence of adequate range of vocabulary. Wilkins (1972, p.111) says that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”. This means the existence of sufficient vocabulary is much more crucial to learners than grammar is. In addition, although learners do not know well about grammar, knowing some useful words and expressions will help them to manage to communicate.

Based on the proposition above, vocabulary teaching should be concerned to be taught simultaneously and effectively among EFL learners. Vocabulary teaching aims at enriching learners’ greater number of words until they can use them in a proper way during communication. A good vocabulary mastery, in a linear fashion, will effect learners’ language mastery both in receptive skills – i.e. reading and listening and productive skills – i.e. speaking and writing (Cahyono & Widiati, 2008).

Further, the problems with vocabulary intake among EFL learners have also been the focal point in this study. Vocabulary, the so-called linguistics component, was not heavenly supposed to be an essential element of language in some prior curricula in Indonesia. Looking back on
Curriculum 1960s where the portion to teach vocabulary was diminished, while grammar teaching was immensely elevated. In Curriculum 1975 – the renewal of Curriculum 1960s, little innovation brought in where word introduction was presented in each unit of topic in English textbook though list of words was limited enough.

After a long period of neglect, a greater attention to vocabulary intake among students rised up in Curriculum 1994 which voluminous numbers of words must be mastered by junior-high-school students (1000 words) and senior-high school students (2500 words). Following the rules of the prior curriculum, the greatest and overwhelming renewal of vocabulary teaching occured in Curriculum 2004 and 2006, called as Competency-Based Curriculum (KBK) and The School-Level Curriculum (KTSP) respectively. Both curricula emphasized students to be able to have communicative competence, thus vocabulary retention was much devoted to.

Underscoring the importance of L2 vocabulary intake to students as the newest curriculum announced, it can not be hypothesized there is no single issue springing up. Laufer and Sim (1985) (as cited in Hasyemi & Hadavi, 2014, p.630) say that “one of the greates problems for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is learning vocabulary as it is considered to be the most pressing need of people learning a language”. Accordingly, Nyikos and Fan (2007) (as cited in Hasyemi & Hadavi, 2014, p.630) have mentioned that L2 vocabulary learning is not taken into consideration as one of demanding task for EFL learners because vocabulary has varied types and unlimited numbers of it. Congruently, L2 vocabulary learning does not have any certainty rules that EFL learners can back up their L2 mastery (Alqahtani, 2015).

In line with the ideas proposed above, the most fundamental problem in learning English vocabulary is relying on their unsimilar pronunciation and spelling. EFL learners, in general, and Indonesian learners, in particular, encounter many hardships while pronouncing English words since the words pronounced will be different when they are written down. Another considerable issue against English vocabulary learning is about synforms. Laufer (1988) (as cited in Saigh & Schimtt, 2012) has stipulated that EFL learners were still mixep up by English words having similar forms yet the meaning is strongly different such as staff/stuff, passion/compassion, quite/quiet, and so forth.
Some problems launched above are congruent to every EFL learners in the world. However, The issue becomes more and more problematic for adult EFL learners as some researches revealed. Dubovičienė and Gulbinskiene (2014) averred that it is different teaching English to young learners from adult learners because adult learners owns obvious objective in what they want to learn and gain as well as having lack of time to learn about without spending much on uncertainty goals while learning a language. Accordingly, Green (1989 as cited in Farooqui, 2007) said that EFL/ESL adult learners were not confident enough to use English. It is believable since adults are more insecure to make mistake while learning.

Since the work of vocabulary learning is arduous, all of those blatant intricacies as explained previously, then, could turn into a dilemma for EFL learners. Consequently, it is suggested that vocabulary intake be taught in many attractive and effective techniques so EFL learners might gain it easily. In other words, their vocabulary retention is not going to disappear promptly and is stored in their long-term memory. Also, it is demanded that vocabulary teaching be preferably isolated from teaching language skill (listening, speaking, reading, writing) or to be exact, the time allocated should be elevated, thus EFL students can activate and optimalize their ability in vocabulary memorization.

Underpining the evidences and clarifications above, the question formulated for this research is as in the following: What is the most common difficulty(s) faced by adults EFL learners in learning vocabulary?

**METHODS**

This research was undertaken by using qualitative method in which all of data collected was explained descriptively. Gathering 26 respondents from various academic background (age range between 25-58) by deploying opportunistic sampling, the researchers gave a set of questionnaire to all of the samples. The questionnaire consisted of 6 premises related to vocabulary issues.

After gaining the answers from the respondents, the data was analyzed by using three steps analysis as suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013). The three steps analysis included data reduction, data display, and data verification. Data reduction means the mass of the data are organized into a conceptual category. In this case, all of the premises in the
questionnaire had been organized by the researchers based on the need of what was being researched, namely vocabulary issue. Then, to draw a conclusion from the mass of the data a good data display such as table, chart, or diagram, was used to make it more understandable. Finally, through analyzing the data obtained the researchers, then, drew a conclusion regarding to the issue being researched as suggested in the stage of data verification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the data reduction process executed, the data obtained related to the research question posed earlier in this article as in the following table.

Figure 1. Vocabulary Problems Faced by Adult EFL Learners.

Figure 1 above shows that the highest percentage is addressed to the problem with idiom, which is 77% (20 participants) and it is followed by 65% (look-alike forms) problems with multiple meaning. Then, the problem with pronunciation assembles the 58% (multiple meanings) of the overall data. The identical percentage is shown by the problems with translation and look-alike words, which is 54% (14 participants); and lastly, the problem with spelling is not the highest but still trouble 50% of the whole respondents (13 participants).

In attempt to verify these findings, the provision of theoretical considerations is essential. Indeed, besides personality, motivation, cognitive ability, experiences, and native language, age plays the main role acquiring new words and concepts in the language learning process (Rico,
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2014). To further clarify the first finding concerning the highest percentage marked in the problems with idioms, the researchers learned that since all participants are not employing English as their first language, so the acculturation appears as a problem, especially in opaque idiom—which is an idiomatic expression involving familiarity of a certain culture to translate (Alrishan & Smadi, 2015; Rico, 2014). Meanwhile in a more transparant idiomatic expression such as “walk hand in hand” can barely leads students to any significant problem. In addition, the frequency of the use of English in the regular basis can also cause difficulties in translating idioms (Najarzadegan & Ketabi, 2015). Next, it is the problem with multiple meanings as well as translation which much or less represents the problem with idiomatic expressions, for example the word “bank” which means “edge” and “bank to deposit money”.

Later, the obstacles faced in the synform or look-alike forms; for example the word economics and economical, conceal and council, cute and acute, etc. In this case, the knowledge about morpheme is vital to be associated with the mnemonic learning strategies. This is stated so because one of the key ideas for vocabulary learning for adult learners is mnemonic strategies (Sanaoui, 1995). On the contrary, most EFL learners have severe problems in recognizing morphemic form and this is—including phrasal verbs—the most avoided in EFL learning (Varatharajoo, Asmawi, & Abedalaziz, 2015; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993).

The problems with pronunciation urge due to phonemic familiarity. The consonants and vowels that exists in the target language but are absent in the native language so that their articulators are mostly not ready to produce such new sounds in the target language. Hago & Khan (2015) found in their study that EFL learners have great difficulty in pronouncing consonant clusters.

Finally, the problem with spelling—which is the least in this study—is to be seen as a reflection of nonliterarate learners—those who achieve insufficient ability in comprehending their L1, and semiliterate learners—those who are not highly proficient in their L1; these conditions are rooted to socioeconomic condition of the learners themselves (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Spellings, referring to vocabulary in general, has an extremely complex connection to comprehension. The more vocabulary acquired, the more it affects positively on comprehension growth (Curtis, 2006).
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the most common problem that causes adult EFL learners to experience inconvenient condition in learning new English vocabulary is idiomatic expressions since they involve cultural perception and familiarity. Then it is followed by the synforms which are strongly associated with the morphological rules in English. Later to that, it is the problem with multiple meaning which, indeed, have quite some similarities to that of idiomatic expressions and translation.

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