



## Language Learning Beyond the Classroom: Intentional and Incident Vocabulary Acquisition in JNTU Engineering Programs

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### Abstract

As vocabulary is crucial for effective communication, engineering students need to be proficient in the use of appropriate vocabulary. If not, their word-choice will be limited which leads for poor communication. The current research arose from the observations of the research scholar as an English lecture in a private engineering college. It was noticed that engineering students were not using appropriate vocabulary in their speech and writing. As a result, their communicative purposes were not properly realized. It was also observed that learners who were good in their choices were scoring more marks than those who could not do so, even though the content was the same. Even the campus interviewers were dissatisfied with low vocabulary knowledge of a large number of students.

Campus interviews are generally held when students are in their third year of engineering. As English prescribed as a course of study only in the first year, either the English textbook should be able to help students in their lexical growth; or, learners should be able to improve their levels of vocabulary through incidental exposure to their subject textbooks. So, the present research wanted to assess the effects of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning of first year engineering students.

**Key words:** vocabulary, effective communication, engineering students.

English has attained the status of an international language facilitating communication across the world. It has been acquired as a first, a second or a foreign language and has been used for internal, external and international purposes. It is the world's main language of communication in

books, learned journal, newspapers, computers, sciences and technology and so on. As the world has become global, anyone can study, get employed and live in any other country. So, in many countries, English is learnt as a second language. In fact, we find a large group of non-native speakers of English whose number is

quite overwhelming in relation to the number of native speakers of English. Non-native speaker needs to communicate effectively in English to be understood by the native speaker or another non-native speaker coming from a different country.

As a result, teaching English as a second language has become relevant and important. India is one of the countries where one can find a number of learners who learn English as their second language. Hence, India, an erstwhile colony of the British Empire, has a history of development of English and English language teaching.

Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University was established in the year 1972 with a vision to provide for the advancement of learning and knowledge in engineering and technology, physics and social sciences by teaching, research and experimentation or practical training. When the research was conducted, JNTU was a single body. But, now, it is split up into JNTU, Hyderabad; JNTU, Kakinada; JNTU; Anantapur. On the whole JNTU has more than 350 private engineering colleges affiliated to it. JNTU's curriculum included English as a subject of study in I B.Tech. The syllabus states that it has been designed to develop linguistic and communication competence of engineering students. It is also mentioned that the stress in this syllabus is on skill development and practice of language skills. It can also be noted that one of the objectives of the syllabus is to improve the language proficiency of students in English with emphasis on LSRW skills.

A communicative syllabus is learner-centered aimed at language learning as independent of teachers as possible resulting in language acquisition rather than language learning. Nagaraj (2008) describes the features of communicative syllabuses as follows:

1. They aim at making the learner attain communicative competence that is

using language accurately and appropriately.

2. They focus on the learner. the teacher is a facilitator managing the environment and material which in turn help the students become autonomous learners.
3. They depend on authentic materials.
4. The tasks set are purposeful and meaningful. This, in turn, means that the task can be judged by the learners for its success.
5. Functions of language are stressed upon rather than rules.
6. The tasks aim to make learners fluent as well as accurate in their use of target language.

As Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is more learner-centered, the role of learner becomes paramount. He/she is an active contributor of ideas who follows a give-and-take policy. Breen & Candlin (1980) describe the role of the learner as a negotiator between the self, the learning process and the object of learning. They also suggest that learners should learn in an interdependent way – gaining and contributing. Students are expected to communicate by communicating. They should make themselves understood even though they have inadequate knowledge of the target language.

The teacher is seen as a facilitator who manages classroom activities. He/she should help the learners take part in activities which promote communication. Breen and Candlin (1980) describe the three important roles the teacher has to play in the classroom. The first one is to facilitate the process of communication among all the participants in the classroom. The second role is to be an independent participant within the teaching-learning groups. The third one is to be researcher and learner, contributing in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities.

It is surprising that CLT which gives importance to communicative competence achieved through appropriateness of language use does not give due recognition to vocabulary. It is a well known fact that appropriate use of language consists of appropriate grammatical structures and appropriate vocabulary. As Wilkins (1974) states, knowledge of a language demands mastery of its vocabulary as much as its grammar. The learner is expected to get as much exposure to vocabulary as possible. CLT begins that as vocabulary development is natural in L1 through contextualized language, it will be natural also in L2 through communicative exposures.

"Vocabulary knowledge constitutes an essential part of competence in a second or foreign language" (Bogards, 2001, p.321). Even in one's L1, vocabulary knowledge almost always leads to effective communication. Often, one's language ability is associated with his/her mastery of vocabulary. "Vocabulary is widely acknowledged as one of the key components necessary for second language proficiency" (Schmitt, 1999, p.189). So, to speak fluently, to listen attentively with understanding, to write clearly, logically and effortlessly, to read and comprehend, to chat freely, to be a part of a team, an individual needs to have a good amount of vocabulary.

There has been considerable amount of research done with respect to the importance of vocabulary knowledge for second language learners in reading (Haynes & Baker, 1993), listening (R. Ellis, 1994), speaking (Joe, 1998), and writing (Laufer & Nation, 1995).

Schmitt (2000) observes that second language learners need to know 2,000 words to maintain conversation, 3,000-word families to read authentic texts and 10,000 words to understand challenging academic texts.

No text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language without understanding the text's vocabulary (Laufer, 1997a). This does not mean

that the other factors like the main idea of the text, relevant background knowledge, application of general reading strategies do not play a role. They do, but not as significantly as the role played by vocabulary. Generally, an improvement in reading comprehension is attributed to the improvement in lexical knowledge because understanding a text's content is dependent upon the reader's ability to understand, grasp, guess the meanings of the words used. If a word is not known, then what that word suggests or means is also not known which in turn results in confusion and inability at comprehending the whole text. Haynes & Baker (1993) came to the reader. But, 98% of the words used should be known for effective and trouble-free comprehension. As lexical problems obstruct successful comprehension, increasing one's vocabulary knowledge is almost inevitable.

Vocabulary in listening of all the four-language skill - listening, reading, speaking, and writing - listening is the most difficult and demanding task especially when one is listening for meaning. It is difficult and demanding because the listener cannot control the speed of the information input. If one is reading a text, one can always go back to the previous page or section for better understanding. This is not possible in listening. While reading, one can look up a difficult word in a dictionary which is not possible in listening. One can read a text at his/her own pace. But, one has to listen and comprehend the information at the pace of the speaker. So, listening comprehension is not easy, and successful comprehension presupposes attention from the listener, sufficient background knowledge coupled with good vocabulary knowledge, especially of confusable words like *judicial-judicious*, *ingenuous*, *official-officious* and so on. There are a number of minimal pairs in English like *affect-effect*, *construct-constrict*, *prescribe-proscribe* etc. Lack of knowledge of these words results in confusion. Generally, listening does not allow time for guessing. In many instances, either one

understands a word or one does not. Hence, a large amount of vocabulary is indispensable for successful listening comprehension.

Vocabulary in speaking, spoken language has become more important in language teaching with emphasis on language for communication (McCarthy & Carter, 1997). Speaking requires lexical competence. Speaking is always geared towards the listener. If the listener is not able to grasp the meaning of what is spoken, the whole communicative event becomes invalid. So, the speaker must have an appropriate estimation of the target listener's size of vocabulary and then should be able to modify his/her utterance. So, a speaker should have both breadth and depth of vocabulary. If the speaker understands that the listener is finding it difficult to understand the message, then, he/she should be able to communicate defining or supporting vocabulary to help the listener understand the message. The speaker should also have correct pronunciation of the words to avoid any kind of misinterpretation. Above all, the speaker should know the use of discourse binders such as even though, on the contrary, in fact etc. which help the listener prepare for the content of the next idea. The speaker should also use gap fillers like *er*, *mm*, *erm* etc. to maintain discourse connectivity. These may not be words in the term's fullest meaning but, they are in the top of the frequency of occurrence (McCarthy & Carter, 1997).

Vocabulary and writing, spoken and written utterances are considered the productive use of vocabulary. While speaking, the speaker can take the help of gestures, body language, and intonation for clarity in communication. Writing does not have this advantage. Feedback is almost instantaneous in spoken communication and is almost unavailable for written communication excluding class progress test and leave letters. So, the writer needs to be very careful in presenting the material in a clear and logical manner which is achieved through appropriate use of vocabulary and suitable grammatical

structures. Use of formal vocabulary is important in writing. Words like chap, guy etc. should be avoided totally. Errors in written communication are taken rather seriously because it has a particular advantage. One can always read what has been written and make corrections if necessary. Excluding exam papers and leave letters, most of time, the target readers are not known to the writer. So, the writer should carefully select the words he/she is going to use. Excluding serious academic writing, it is always advisable to use those words which are understood a large number of people.

"Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language" (Richards, 2000, p. ix). Even without taking much help from grammar, vocabulary alone can enable an individual to communicate his/her message. As the world is revolving around effective communication skills, one needs to improve his/her size and depth of vocabulary that is one should know as many words as possible and one should know different aspects like meanings, synonyms etc. of the words known. To achieve sufficient mastery over the required amount of vocabulary, one needs to engage oneself in constant development of the number of words and aspects of word knowledge. Though one's vocabulary knowledge is increased without any deliberate effort, those who want to aim for higher education and/or professional advancement need to develop their vocabulary volitionally.

Appropriate use of vocabulary is an important component of effective communication. As Swift states one has to use proper words in proper places. Inappropriate use of words mars the communicative event. When it comes to discourse, the selection of words is decided by the context or situation. Widdowson (1993) gives an example. If a wife asks her husband, *Have you put out the small domesticated furry feline animal?* Definitely the utterance is contextually out of place. Similarly,



"Pass the sodium chloride, please" is a valid utterance in a chemistry laboratory but totally out of place at the dining table unless it is used deliberately to elicit laughter. Use of collocations also comes under the realm – appropriacy. For example, the phrase strong coffee is a valid collocation, but not weak coffee. Similarly, heartfelt is mostly used with thanks and condolences, not congratulations.

So, as vocabulary is central to one's communicative competence, sustains rudimentary communication, makes a communicative even effective, helps one in successful reading and listening comprehension, enables one to write lucidly, second language learners need to focus on their vocabulary growth.

### Conclusion

The purpose of study was to measure the incident and intentional learning capacities of engineering students before and after a course. This knowledge will help the teacher, syllabus designers and paper-setters in getting a better understanding of the amount and nature of vocabulary students need. So, that, syllabus designers will include those aspects of vocabulary which are needed by students; teachers will change or modify their techniques of teaching vocabulary; paper setters will include the necessary vocabulary items while developing question papers. At the end, students will be able to improve their existing levels of receptive and productive and vocabulary.

Engineering students study English in them in their first year alone. After that, they encounter English only as a medium of instruction. If the students are able to acquire vocabulary knowledge incidentally, there will not be any problem. If they are not able to do so, explicit vocabulary instruction should be provided to learners throughout their course of study. The pre-test shows us the effect of instruction and the ability of the students to acquire words through incidental exposure.

Knowledge of student's level of vocabulary helps the teacher in paying systematic attention to the aspect of lexical development of students. The teacher may devise regular exercise and conduct regular exams on vocabulary, so that learners will have attained a considerable mastery of the words they need to know.

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