

The Design of Vocabulary Activities: Focus on Grade 9 English Textbook

Alemu Hailu*

Abstract: The main aim of this paper was to analyze the nature and organization of vocabulary exercises/activities in the currently in use Grade 9 English Textbook. The focus was to see the extent to which current vocabulary organizing principles that advocate the use of awareness-raising vocabulary learning strategies are accommodated in the textbook. To this end, the vocabulary sections in the 14 units of the textbook were sorted out and analyzed based on the guideline principles given by Cunningsworth (1984; 1995), and McDonough and Shaw (1993.) The findings of the analysis show that target words in the textbook are not selected because of their potential for training learners in guessing strategies, but probably, because the material writer(s) is/are interested in them. Moreover, it has been revealed that there is no single case in which current vocabulary organizing principles such as the use of 'sense relations' (synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms), 'collocations', 'authentic reading texts', 'contextual guesswork', and 'grammatical clues' advocated by practitioners are used/adequately used in the textbook. Based on the findings of this study, it has been recommended that material developers take into consideration the apparent weaknesses observed in the currently in use English textbooks and use current vocabulary organizing principles in the textbooks to be developed in the future.

Introduction

It has often been reported that successful second language learning requires the active participation of the learner in the learning process. There is now a consensus among scholars that it is practically impossible to teach all vocabulary items that learners need. This means that learners need to get are actively engaged in the learning process to find meaning for themselves. This implies that second/foreign language vocabulary teaching and learning should focus on training learners in developing vocabulary learning

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University.

strategies rather than teaching learners randomly selected lexical items. The trend is now to help learners develop skills in vocabulary learning rather than teaching them the meaning of discrete lexical items. In other words, current practices in vocabulary teaching emphasize how learners learn rather than what they learn so that they become keenly aware of every opportunity of vocabulary expansion (Gairns and Redman, 1986; Carter and McCarthy, 1988; McCarthy, 1990; Redman and Ellis, 1990).

Through research, scholars such as (Brumfit, 1979; Alatis et al; 1981; Johnson, 1982; Gairns and Redman, 1986; Nunan, 1989; McCarthy, 1990; Widdowson, 1990; Allwright, 1996; Richards, 2001; Ellis, 2003) have tried to analyze the underlying processes involved in second language learning and have recommended approaches to be employed in the classroom which bring the learner closer to the centre of the teaching and learning process. Such approaches reduce the role of the teacher to an organizer, or a director and an initiator of the activities.

Statement of the Problem

Particularly since the 1970s, practitioners have strongly recommended training learners in techniques that enable them to tackle the meaning of particular lexical items (Gairns and Redman, 1986; Carter and McCarthy, 1988; McCarthy, 1990; Redman and Ellis, 1990). Following the socio-political change that took place in the country in June 1991, Ethiopia designed a new education policy in 1994. One of the priorities given in this education policy was changing the syllabuses and textbooks that had been in use. It was felt that the then syllabuses and textbooks would not go with the new socio-political situation of the country and the prevailing principles of teaching/learning processes: learner-centeredness.

The policy stated that the teaching/learning processes should be based on the problem-solving approach that brings learners to the center of learning. Accordingly, it was decided that teaching English as a foreign language in the country be based on the insights gained from the theories and practices

of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It was also claimed that the use of CLT techniques would improve the students' English language proficiency (Alemu, 1994). Accordingly, the Ministry of Education prepared English textbooks for the primary level within four years, 1994/95 to 1997/8, and published ***English for Ethiopia series*** for the secondary level in 1996 under the guidance and technical assistance of experts from the British Council. These textbooks were revised and reprinted by Kuraz International Publisher and Educational Works Consultant Enterprise and reprinted in 2006.

Since the publication of the ***English for Ethiopia series***, a number of studies, particularly MA projects, have been conducted on the status of the implementation of CLT techniques, particularly focusing on what teachers and students do in the classrooms (Berhanu, 1999; Denne-Bolton, 2001; Alemu 2004; Abreham, 2008; Almaz, 2008; Tesfaye, 2008). The studies generally agree that CLT is not often practiced by many teachers. Time constraints, teacher - related factors, learner-related factors and are some of the hindering factors reported in the studies (Denne-Bolton, 2001; Alemu, 2004).

In connection with vocabulary teaching and learning practices, conducted studies mainly focused on teachers' beliefs about the feasibility of the awareness-raising vocabulary teaching approach in the Ethiopian context (Alemu, 1994), and learners' vocabulary learning strategies use (Getnet, 2008).

The studies conducted so far tend to reveal in general, failure in the implementation of the CLT techniques in EFL Ethiopian schools. Studies that concerned themselves with exploring the way learning tasks are designed, organized and presented in the ***English for Ethiopia series*** in the CLT context in Ethiopia are limited.

The only worth-mentioning studies conducted in this regard are the studies conducted by Mohammed (2008) and Alemu (2009). Mohammed (2008)

tried to see to the extent to which the writing tasks designed in Grade 10 English Textbook promote co-operative social skills. He analyzed the nature and design of pair/group writing task(s) in each unit in the textbook. His study reveals that the so called pair/group writing tasks in the textbook are generally poorly designed; they don't encourage learners to help each other to promote co-operative learning in order to achieve common goals. Alemu (2009) tried to see the effectiveness of the reading activities set in Grade 11 English Textbook in training learners to develop effective reading skills. He examined the nature and effectiveness of the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities set in a unit in order to help learners develop different reading skills. He analyzed each question in the reading activities in relation to the intended objective, the construction/design of the question and its effectiveness in training learners to develop effective reading skills. Results of the study show that the reading activities in the unit are so poorly designed that they do not train learners to developing effective reading skills claimed in the syllabus.

However, as far as the researcher's knowledge is concerned, there is no study conducted to see the way new lexical items are organized and presented in the *English for Ethiopia* series. This study, was designed to give us insight into the nature of vocabulary developing tasks in the currently in use Grade 9 English textbook

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was, therefore, to examine the nature and design of vocabulary developing tasks/exercises in Grade 9 English Textbook in order to see the effectiveness of their design in training learners to develop their own vocabulary. In other words, the study tried to see if the vocabulary developing tasks/exercises focus on raising students' awareness of how they can develop their own vocabulary so that they can take responsibility for how and what they learn. Specifically, it tried to:

- see the nature of vocabulary organizing principles used in presenting the vocabulary exercises/activities in the textbook (current principles, or traditional);
- evaluate whether the activities/exercises focus on vocabulary training strategies, or on reinforcing the newly learned vocabulary items; and
- examine the selection of the target vocabulary items (appropriate, or not).

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will be of great importance in giving valuable information regarding the nature of vocabulary developing tasks/exercises used in the currently in use English textbooks. Therefore, syllabus designers and textbook writers are the main beneficiaries of this study in that it gives them information on the nature and effectiveness of the vocabulary developing tasks/exercises used in the currently in English textbooks in schools. It is, thus, believed the learners would ultimately benefit because syllabus designers and textbook writers may use the findings to improve the quality of the vocabulary developing tasks in the materials to be developed in the future.

Delimitation of the Study

This study limits itself to analyzing only the vocabulary organizing principles used in designing the vocabulary exercises/activities in the textbook. It does not deal with analyzing the effectiveness/appropriateness of each vocabulary question/item under each exercise/activity. In addition, it doesn't analyze the grading principles and clarity of instructions.

Theoretical Framework

When we speak or write, we usually try to select words that express our ideas effectively and appropriately. Our ability to express our ideas, feelings, emotions, etc. in a foreign language and our ability to comprehend what

others say (whether in speech or writing) depends very much on our knowledge of the vocabulary of that language. Even if we master the grammar and the sound system of a foreign language, we cannot express ourselves effectively without adequate vocabulary knowledge.

Many scholars try to indicate the frustrating experience of the inability of people to find words to express themselves in a foreign language and express the importance of lexical items in the communication process. As Wallace (1982, p. 10) states, "Not being able to find words you need to express yourself is the most frustrating experience in speaking another language." Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1986, p. 3) write, "... words are essential and lack of them leads to feelings of insecurity."

Even though words play such an important role in the communication process, writers such as Wallace (1982), Lewis and Hill (1985) Gairns and Redman (1986), Carter and McCarthy (1988), Tyler (1990), and McCarthy (1990) point out that the teaching of vocabulary knowledge has for a long time been a neglected area. Carter and McCarthy, in particular, trace developments in the teaching of vocabulary from 1945 onwards. They point out that in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, when the American structuralism view dominated the study of languages and the audio-lingual approach to foreign language teaching was in fashion, vocabulary was given a secondary status. During those years, foreign language learning stressed the mastery of the sound system and the grammatical structure, but vocabulary was seen mainly as a problem of selection and grading.

It was since the introduction of the notional/functional syllabus in the 1970s, particularly the work of Wilkins (1972) that we began to hear arguments against the then prevailing view of foreign language learning (Carter and McCarthy, 1988). Even though Wilkins says that the usual pattern of structure first, vocabulary later is the wisest counsel, "... his desire to bring to vocabulary teaching the insights of lexical semantics ... has become a major feeding ground for vocabulary practitioners in the 1970s and 1980s" (Carter and McCarthy, 1988, p. 2).

Nowadays, there is a consensus among scholars that teaching and learning vocabulary should engage the learners in meaningful and communicative tasks that enable them to expand their own vocabulary knowledge by themselves. In relation to the vocabulary teaching McCarthy (1990, p. 121) writes, "Success in the vocabulary lesson crucially depends on the interaction between teachers and learners, and on the work of the learners themselves put into the assimilation and practicing of new words." According to Gairns and Redman (1986), engaging learners in meaningful tasks and training them in strategies that enable them to learn the meanings of new lexical items by themselves has two practical advantages. First, students feel responsibility in what they learn. Second, it pays attention to individual needs, i.e. it personalizes vocabulary expansion according to need, purpose and goal.

In general, current practices in vocabulary teaching emphasize task-based communicative awareness-raising activities that engage the learners in the learning process rather than teaching them explicitly the meanings of discrete lexical items. To this end, scholars suggest different techniques to be used in organizing and presenting new lexical items in the textbooks and classrooms. These techniques include the use of 'sense relations' (synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms), 'collocations', 'authentic reading texts', 'contextual guesswork', and 'grammatical clues',

Methods of the Study

Analysis of the nature of the presentation of vocabulary exercises in the textbook is the main method used in this study. This was carried out according to the guideline principles given by Cunningsworth (1984; 1995), and McDonough and Shaw (1993) for evaluating tasks/activities/exercises in course books/textbooks. Thus, the number of target words in the 14 units, additional words presented in the textbook and the type of vocabulary activities/exercises were sorted out and presented in a table. The focus was not on the selection and presentation of each target word, but on the nature of the organizing principles of the vocabulary exercises/activities in the

textbook. Therefore, the main aim of the analysis/evaluation was to show whether the presentation of the vocabulary exercises/activities in the textbook was based on the current vocabulary organizing principles and techniques listed in the earlier section of this study.

Findings and Discussions

Overview of Grade 9 English Textbook

Grade 9 English Textbook was first published by Mega Publishing Enterprise in 1999 and revised in 2005. It has 14 chapters. In addition to the 14 chapters, it has one special section in its first 16 pages that deals with 'Basic Speaking and Writing Skills'. Overall, the book has 290 pages. The special section seems to have been added to emphasize the importance of 'speaking' and 'writing' skills. In fact, no justification is given regarding the special treatment given to these two skills in the textbook. Each of the 14 chapters has six sections that are sequenced according to the following order: reading, vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening and writing. Nothing has been stated about this sequence in the textbook; for example, no justification is given to show why the 'reading' section always comes at the beginning of each unit and the 'writing' section always at the end of each unit. In the international language course books/textbooks, however, a unit can begin with any of these sections: 'listening, or 'grammar, or 'reading' section.

Nature of Vocabulary Organization and Presentation

As indicated above, the 'vocabulary' section in each unit in the textbook is placed second following the 'reading' section. This placement of the 'vocabulary' section in all the units in the textbook might indicate the influence of the traditional view of teaching and learning vocabulary which, in turn, indicates the belief that vocabulary learning is an appendage to a reading text (Carter and McCarthy, 1988).

Types of Vocabulary Exercises in the Units

Units	Number of targets words in the unit	Number of additional (special) words included	Nature of vocabulary exercise(s)
1	11 words	3 words ('to take', to last' and 'to make')	-Guessing (with examples) -Matching with similar meanings -Using in own sentences
2	11 words	-	-Guessing -Matching with similar meanings -Words of Greek/Latin origin
3	9 words	1 word (to change)	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces -Using in own sentences
4	9 words	-	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces -Using in own sentences
5	15 words	-	-Guessing (with examples) -Matching with similar meanings -Word forms (as a verb, a noun, an adjective, and as an adverb)
6	13 words	2 words ('to steal' and 'to rob')	-Guessing -Matching with similar meanings -Fill in the blank spaces
7	8 words	-	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces -Matching with antonyms
8	9 words	-	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces
9	9 words	14 words that refer to different animal sounds	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces
10	14 words	-	-Guessing -Practicing pronunciation -Matching -Use in own sentences
11	9 words	-	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces (not the target words)
12	11 words	-	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces -Compound nouns
13	9 words	-	-Matching - Practicing pronunciation
14	10 words	-	-Guessing -Fill in the blank spaces -Use in own sentences

The above table presents information regarding the nature of the selection of target vocabulary items and vocabulary exercises in the Grade 9 English Textbook. All in all, 167 target words have been selected and presented in the 14 units. One hundred and fifty three of these words are selected from the 14 reading texts, of which 147 are printed in bold in the 14 reading texts. Six special words are selected from three reading texts and treated separately from the words printed in bold. Fourteen other words, which refer to different animal sounds are not selected from the given reading text. On average, there are 10.5 target words printed in bold; the maximum being 15 words and the minimum 8 words in each unit. The textbook claims nothing about the number and selection of the target words. However, it is not difficult to see that there was no systematic approach or organizing principle followed in selecting the target words from the reading texts. This is also reflected in the selection of the six words from the three units and the design of the vocabulary exercises as we see it in detail later in this work.

Guessing Words

As depicted in the earlier table, guessing the meaning of the target words given in the readings appears in all the units except in Unit 13. In fact, using reading texts and encouraging learners to guess the meanings of the target words in a reading text is one of the most common ways of presenting new vocabulary items in language course books/textbooks. However, there are some basic problems with the way guessing exercises are used in the Grade 9 English Textbook.

Above all, guessing words from contexts is a skill. If so, students have to be trained in using/identifying different clues that help them to arrive at the possible meanings of the target words that appear in texts.

Though guessing exercises are used in nearly all the units, students are not shown how to use clues in the texts in order to guess the possible meanings of the target words. Such an attempt is made only in two units: Units 2 and 3, in a very inadequate way.

Secondly, words we select for training learners in word guessing strategies should be words that have adequate clues that lead to the possible meanings of the words. In other words, words selected for training learners in guessing strategies should not be selected randomly. However, many of the target words selected for training guessing strategy in the textbook do not have clues/adequate clues; therefore, it is very difficult to guess their possible meanings from the way they are used in the texts. Some of the words selected to be guessed are so easy that students can easily tell the meanings from their previous knowledge.

Thirdly, the main aim of target words in a reading text is to train learners in vocabulary guessing strategies—they are not an end by themselves. Therefore, there should not be many words in a reading text, or a passage. The use of many new words in a reading text selected to train learners in guessing strategies frustrates and kills students' interest. However, there are a lot of cases in which many new words are selected from the reading passages used in the textbook. Sometimes two or three new words are selected from a single sentence.

Collocation

Words are not only related vertically to one another but also they can be related horizontally to each other. Vertical relationship of words refers to the relationship of words in terms of meaning, while horizontal relationship refers to the frequent occurrences of words together (Carther and McCarthy, 1988).

It is argued that what a word occurs with is as important as any other kind of statement about its meaning. Nattinger (in Carter and McCarthy) indicates two important values of collocation in foreign vocabulary learning. First, the meaning of a word has a great deal with words it occurs with. Second, collocations permit students to know the words they can expect to find together (1988: 69-70). Nattinger also explains that this enables learners to expect what sort of information can follow from what has preceded. This

helps students to guess the meaning after hearing only the first part of familiar collocations.

Designing vocabulary activities that enable learners to study words that are likely to occur before and after the new vocabulary item intended for learning is crucial. However, as shown in the earlier Table in this paper, no attempt has been made to use this technique in the textbook.

Sense Relations

Words are related to each in terms of meaning; i.e., they may be similar or different in meanings so that they may or may not substitute one another (McCarthy, 1990). Scholars suggest the use of these relationships as organizing principles for teaching random words. Organizing vocabulary items according to their semantic relationship is fundamental in language learning (Gairns and Redman, 1986). The most frequent sense relations that material developers can use are synonymy (sameness), antonym (oppositeness), and hyponymy (inclusion). They give coherence to the lesson, provide a useful framework for the learner to understand semantic boundaries, and help them to make deductions about unknown words.

As shown in the previous table attempts were made in Units 1, 2, 5 and 6 to use synonyms, but as appendages to the words selected from the reading texts. Therefore, they are used to reinforce the meanings of the words guessed from the context. This implies that synonyms in these units are not used as vocabulary organizing principles to introduce the meaning of the target words. Moreover, the activities are not designed to make learners aware of meaning boundaries that separate words from each other (words are rarely identical in meanings).

Antonym is used in only Unit 7 of the textbook in question and hyponymy is not used at all. It should be pointed out that the use of antonym in Unit 7 is not as an organizing principle, but it is used as a means to reinforce the already learnt vocabulary items. Moreover, the exercise does not enable

learners to see the meaning boundaries of the words- some antonyms truly represent oppositeness of meanings (male/female), some show gradable oppositeness (big/small), and others may have different opposites in different contexts (light bag/heavy bag; light wind/strong wind).

Grammatical Clues

Designing activities using grammatical clues that help learners see the formation of English words is very useful in training learners to discover the meaning of new words (Nuttal, 1982). It is also argued that textbooks should devise activities that familiarize students with affixes (Wallace, 1982). This can be practiced through supplying an affix to a number of bases,

However, a range of activities are needed to enable learners to see how affixes work in the English language. The vocabulary sections of the Grade 9 English Textbook fail to do this.

Origin of Words

One way we can help learners build English words is by designing activities that enable them to see the origin of English words. Many of the English words have been derived from Latin and Greek origin. If learners know the Latin/Greek origin of the word or part of the word, it helps them to work out the meaning of the words by themselves. For example, English words such as '*maternal*', '*matrilineal*', '*matriarch*', '*matricide*' and '*maternity*' are derived from the Latin word '*mater*' (means mother). Therefore, activities that help learners to work out meaning of words from their origins are very important in helping learners build their own vocabulary. However, attempts such as these are insignificant in the English textbook considered in this study.

Reinforcing Vocabulary Exercises

It is easy to see from the Table shown earlier in this paper that the majority of the vocabulary exercises used in Grade 9 English Textbook are

vocabulary reinforcing activities: fill in the blanks (Units 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12 and 14), matching (Units 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 13) and using the words in sentences (Units 1, 3, 4, 10 & 14). The majority of these exercises are mechanical (fill in the blanks and matching). Exercises that enable the learners to use the words are limited to only five units.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to see from the above analysis that there are a lot of drawbacks regarding the selection of vocabulary items and the organization of vocabulary exercises/activities. First, results of the analysis of the vocabulary exercises/activities in the textbook show that the target words are not selected carefully. The target words are not selected because of their potential for training learners in guessing strategies, but probably because the material writer(s) is/are interested in them. Second, traditional vocabulary presentation prevails in the textbook. Nearly all the vocabulary exercises are appended to the reading texts. There is no single case in which current vocabulary organizing principles advocated by practitioners are adequately used in the textbook. Vocabulary exercises in the textbook focus on testing vocabulary knowledge, rather than training learners in vocabulary building strategy.

Therefore, it is not difficult to see that students do not get adequate trainings from the vocabulary exercises/activities used in the Grade 9 English Textbook. Thus, it is high time to take into consideration the apparent weaknesses in the currently in use English textbooks and use current vocabulary organizing principles in the textbooks to be developed by the Ministry of Education in the future.

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