

The Role of Vocabulary Acquisition in Students' Attitudes towards Reading

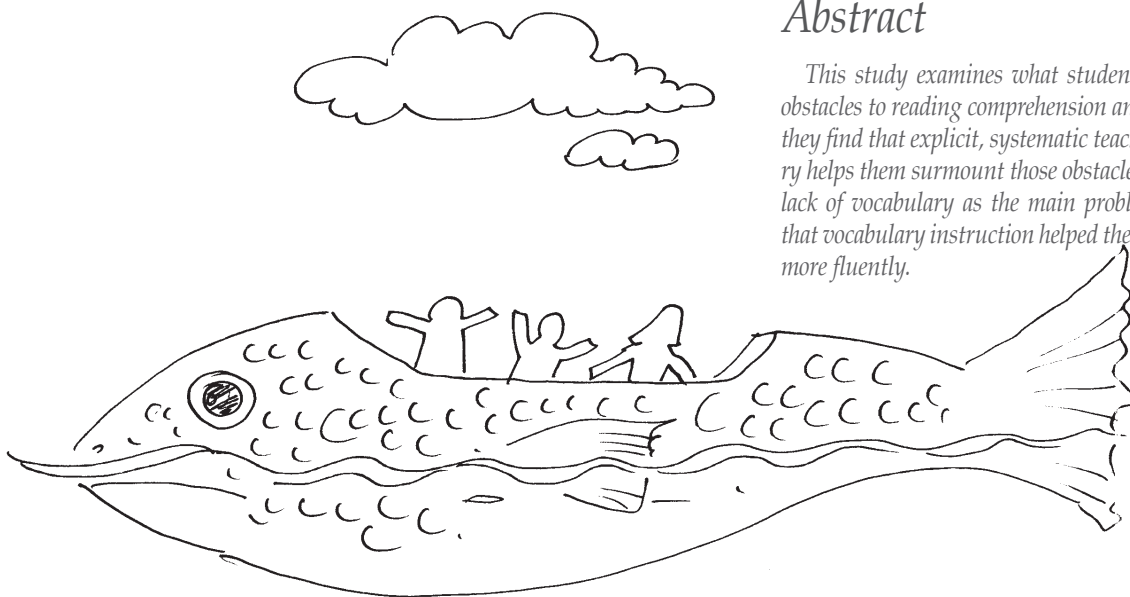
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Resumen

Se estudian las dificultades que los estudiantes de inglés encuentran cuando leen así como su opinión sobre la enseñanza sistemática y explícita del vocabulario. Ellos creen que el vocabulario limitado es su principal problema y que su enseñanza les mejoró la comprensión y la velocidad de lectura.

Abstract

This study examines what students consider to be obstacles to reading comprehension and whether or not they find that explicit, systematic teaching of vocabulary helps them surmount those obstacles. They reported lack of vocabulary as the main problem and affirmed that vocabulary instruction helped them read faster and more fluently.



PALABRAS CLAVE

vocabulario, comprensión de lectura, adquisición, actitudes, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras

KEY WORDS

vocabulary, reading comprehension, acquisition, attitudes, foreign language teaching

Reading lies at the heart of formal education. Very little can be accomplished at school or in the workplace without the ability to read fluently and with good comprehension. Nevertheless, parents and educators in Costa Rica must frequently deal with the awful truth that many students, from grade school to college, have not acquired the basic skills for confronting the printed page. Most of them seem to lack the minimal linguistic and background knowledge necessary to read with ease. Equally alarming is the ridiculously small number of students who read for pleasure. This problem is compounded by the fact that many of those concerned educators and parents, who should be setting an example for the younger generations, do not do any voluntary reading themselves either.

In the foreign language classroom, reading is one of the main sources of input for learners. In addition, the ability to read well empowers them to continue developing and refining the language skills they have acquired in the classroom. They can do this on their own, outside the classroom; that is, reading makes them autonomous. It also provides a path for personal development. Consequently, foreign language teachers who accept the premise that good reading skills are vital to the success of language acquisition have a twofold job ahead of them: to lead learners in acquiring necessary reading strategies and to inspire them to discover and experience the exciting

adventure of reading for pleasure.

The main goals of the present study are, first, to determine the main problems that learners face while reading textbook materials and novels, and second, to examine the impact of vocabulary instruction on the learners' attitude towards reading. To this end, learning tasks recommended by the proponents of the Lexical Approach were used in a reading comprehension course for EFL students. In addition, surveys were used to elicit information concerning reading problems and attitudes towards reading.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

What is the Lexical Approach?

Using Anthony's terminology (1963: 63-67 cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001) an approach is "a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. An approach is axiomatic. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught." Therefore, an approach is not the same as a method. The theoretical framework described in an approach may be put into practice in one or several ways, originating one or several methods. It is important to clarify this issue before attempting to describe the lexical approach to language teaching. Throughout the history of language teaching, vocabulary has seldom been considered critical to pedagogy. (Thought-provoking discussions of this topic can be found in Boyd Zimmerman, 1997 and in

Richards & Rodgers, 2002.) In the Grammar Translation Method, for example, students were provided with bilingual vocabulary lists. The words were not chosen because they were considered useful or frequent since the vocabulary that was taught was not expected to be used in oral form. Instead, the words selected were necessary to understand classic literary texts; therefore, these words were often obsolete or uncommon. With the advent of the Direct Method, vocabulary teaching changed. The words selected were familiar and related to the immediate context. An effort was made to explain meaning by means of visual aids or associations of ideas. During the first part of the twentieth century, linguists, especially in Great Britain, started to introduce a more systematic teaching of vocabulary based on frequency-lists. Meanwhile, in the United States, proponents of the Audio Lingual Methods argued that, at the beginning stages, teachers should introduce only a limited number of words, those that would make sentence pattern drills possible. Too many words would make the process of language learning unnecessarily complicated. As a reaction to the limitations of the Audio Lingual Method and its emphasis on linguistic competence, Communicative Language Teaching changed the direction for language instruction. The focus was then on communicative competence, and fluency was considered as important as accuracy. Furthermore, the status of

vocabulary became equal to that of grammar.

In 1993, Michael Lewis published his book *The Lexical Approach* in which he gave greater prominence to the teaching of vocabulary. He discusses his views on the most appropriate organizing principles in language learning. He argues that a language program should not be based on a linear syllabus planned around grammatical items and some associated vocabulary but on lexis, that is, words, and more importantly, word combinations because the lexical approach views vocabulary as largely phrasal. Lewis (1997: 9) explains that vocabulary is more than a list of words. It is "combinations which are not only possible but highly likely." For implementation of his approach, he suggests using a type of communicative approach in which there is a clear focus on the lexical chunks that emerge from a given situation. Nation and Newton (1997:244) describe the features of communication activities that encourage vocabulary learning as follows:

- The face-to-face nature of communication in group activities can help speakers to set their speech to a suitable level for the particular listener.
- Communication activities generally provide a meaningful context [which] may not only provide sufficient evidence for learners to make a reasonable guess as to the meaning of unfamiliar items, but also

assists in remembering new items.

- There is a good chance learners will also be exposed to repeated use of the new items during the course of the activity.
- Learners are likely to be required to use [new items] productively in the activity.
- Group-based peer interaction typically provides a learning environment in which learners can make errors and express lack of understanding without the adverse effects of exposing their weaknesses to the whole class or to the teacher.

In sum, teachers must design learning tasks that allow the learner to receive significant amounts of comprehen-

sible input and to request clarification or expansion, tasks that promote the use of language in a meaningful context, tasks or series of tasks that afford repeated encounters with the words as well as productive use of the new language items. These characteristics, in conjunction with a supportive environment, are critical to the acquisition of vocabulary.

How is vocabulary acquired?

Morgan and Rinvolucri (2004: 7) describe the process of vocabulary acquisition as follows:

- a branching process rather than a linear one
- an intensely personal process

- a social process, rather than a solitary one
- not a purely intellectual, effortful process, but an experiential hands-on process too

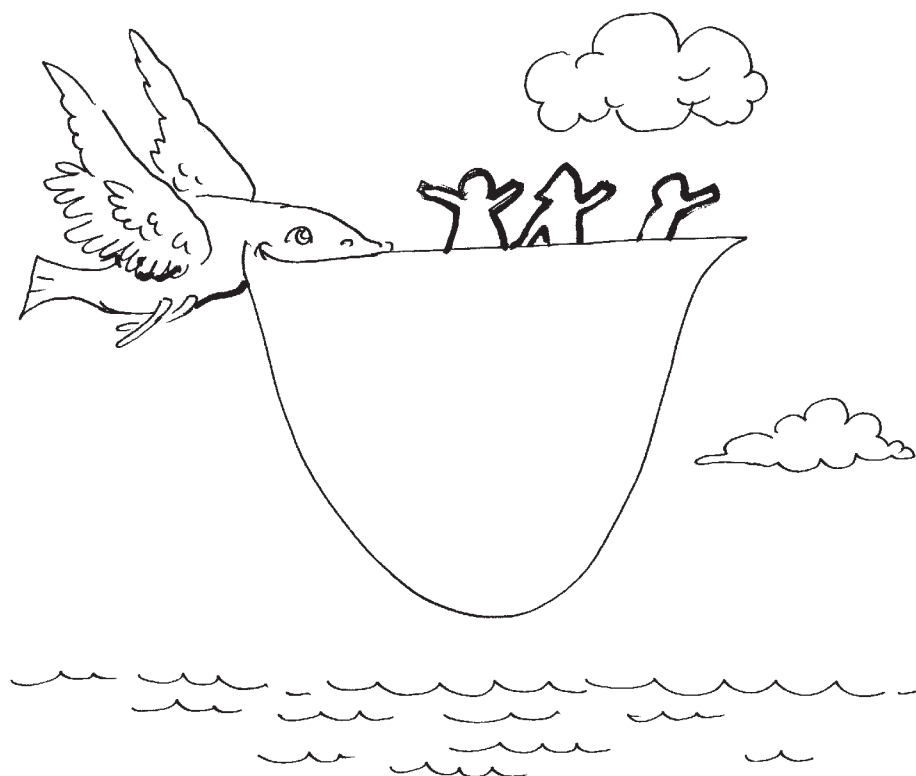
What is interesting about this characterization is the emphasis on the dual nature of the learning process. On the one hand, it requires personal investment, responsibility and cognitive engagement; on the other hand, it is most definitely a social activity.

Grabe (2004) summarizes the implications of current research for L2 vocabulary acquisition. He provides the following ten principles, some of which are implicit in the Nation and Newton's description of the features

of a good communication activity:

- Vocabulary is learned incrementally through multiple exposures.
- Vocabulary learning requires multiple contexts.
- The more intensely vocabulary is processed the better it will be learned.
- Vocabulary is learned better through spaced exposures rather than fewer massive exposures.
- Learning requires recycling
- Learning tasks need to be manageable
- Learning requires a supportive learning environment
- Students need to become active collectors of words
- Metacognitive awareness enhances learning
- Motivation enhances learning.

Grabe's interpretation of research findings is well founded and bears witness to the increasing interest in vocabulary acquisition in the field of applied linguistics. It sheds light on the process and describes the requisite conditions for vocabulary learning to take place. Perhaps the fundamental tenet here is that vocabulary acquisition takes time. On the one hand, teachers need to find ways to present words or word combinations in clear and varied contexts, to practice them in a number of ways, to create tasks in which the learners need to



wrestle with the word combinations and do interesting things with them. On the other hand, learners need to take responsibility for their own learning and become fully aware of the importance of recording, sorting and using words. This does not happen overnight.

In a recent article, Woolard (2005) disputes Lewis' (1993: vi) key principle that "Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar." Lexicalized grammar refers to the traditional fill-in-the-blanks approach in which important structures are brought into focus. These structures are presented in incomplete fashion, so the blanks are filled in with appropriate vocabulary items. On the other hand, grammaticalized lexis refers to what Lewis calls "word grammar." Words are studied in depth to find their collocations, and simultaneously, the grammatical patterns in which they tend to occur. Woolard argues that "in relation to language learning, [these two approaches] are in fact complementary. [...] he learner needs to adopt both approaches in order to achieve a full competence" (p. 47). He summarizes his beliefs about vocabulary acquisition by saying that learning vocabulary is not simply learning new words but learning familiar words in new combinations, that practice must be directed towards helping the learner collocate words and grammaticalize from word to sentence, and that the noun provides the most efficient focus for learning collocation. (46)

What is the relationship between vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension?

There seems to be a very close relationship between vocabulary knowledge and a student's ability to read in a second or foreign language. Although reading comprehension is not determined by vocabulary knowledge alone, it plays a pivotal role. "By far the greatest lexical obstacle to good reading is insufficient number of words in the learner's lexicon. Lexis [is] the best predictor of success in reading, better than syntax or general reading ability," argues Laufer (1997:31). She points out that there is a minimum vocabulary required for successful L2 reading to take place. Her research findings place that vocabulary threshold at about 3,000 word families.

One of the most common strategies recommended for the acquisition of vocabulary is extensive reading. Because of the teaching practices observed in many Costa Rican classrooms, one might jump to the conclusion that it is not necessary to teach vocabulary if the students engage in substantial extensive reading. However, many researchers have observed that learners cannot be expected to pick up substantial or specific vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading without the teacher's guidance (Coady, 1997). For example, in a study conducted with university L2 students, Paribakht and Wesche (1997:177) found that although reading for meaning alone did result in significant

acquisition of L2 vocabulary, direct instruction led to acquisition of even greater numbers of words as well as more depth of knowledge.

Coady (1997: 229) describes the beginner's paradox. He asks, "How can [beginners] learn enough words to learn vocabulary through extensive reading when they do not know enough words to read well?" He mentions a possible solution proposed by Nutall (1982 cited in Coady, 1997: 229). She talks about the vicious/virtuous circle of L2 reading. She explains that when learners do not understand a text, they will read slowly. In consequence, they will not enjoy reading, and therefore, they will tend to read very little. She then proposes that the only strategy to escape that vicious circle and replace it with a virtuous circle is for learners to enjoy reading and to read a lot. If teachers agree with Nutall, then they must design tasks that might help learners understand what they are reading so that they can enjoy the activity. If a sense of success is achieved, then the students will read more.

According to research, syntactic complexity does not affect the level of reading comprehension significantly. Ulijn and Strother (1990 cited in Laufer 1997) claim that "while a complete conceptual and lexical analysis may be necessary for reading comprehension, a thorough syntactic analysis is not (p. 38). Therefore, teachers must concentrate their efforts on helping learners

acquire what it takes to understand a text: the lexis.

Hasbún (2005) conducted a study with twenty-five EFL college students to determine whether there is significant vocabulary development if vocabulary is explicitly and systematically taught in a reading course. The textbook used in the course includes a vocabulary comprehension section (matching items to definitions, identifying the odd word out, etc.) followed by another where the learners are encouraged to use the vocabulary items in alternative contexts. For every chapter, the instructor designed additional exercises similar to those suggested by Lewis (1993, 1997, and 2000), Nation (1994, 2001) and Thornbury (2002). A pretest and a posttest were administered to determine vocabulary gains throughout the semester. This vocabulary test included 39 words explicitly taught and 9 that were not. By means of a *t-test*, the number of correct answers in the pretest and the number of correct answers in the posttest were compared to find out if there had been significant differences. Results indicate that there was a significant difference for 42 (87.5%) of the words tested. Of the six remaining words, half were never studied in class. In other words, there was no significant gain for only three of the words systematically practiced. That is, most of the students were able to recognize most of the words. As a matter of fact, 31 out of 39 words taught were recognized by at least 80% of the students.

Part Two

Imagine a dialogue or a short narrative where the following words or phrases from the reading are used.

1. save the Earth
2. recycled materials
3. alternative-materials movement
4. Earth's resources
5. environmental consequences
6. wasteful
7. waste products

What is the general topic of the dialogue or narrative?

Part Three

Write a short dialogue or paragraph using as many of the words in the list above as you can.

Still another activity type is a typical end-of-the-unit exercise in which students are asked to write sentences using the new words. What makes this activity useful is the fact that the learners are specifically told which strategies to use and what behaviors to avoid. Once they have written all the sentences, they are encouraged to share those sentences they are most proud of with their teacher and peers. There is no question that learners need to experience success: nothing succeeds like success. Finally, there were exercises with word families in which the learners are not given the member of the family that appears in the reading so that they pay closer attention to derivations.

Another important component of the course was teaching the students how to use different types of dictionaries efficiently. In class, they practiced looking up words and shades of meaning. For homework, they did exercises that accompany the *Oxford's Learners Dictionary*. Finally, vocabulary was discussed as it came up in the class. The students knew that the instructor welcomed all questions concerning lexis. Nation (as cited in Anderson, 1999, p. 26) claims that this is perhaps the single most common type of vocabulary instruction.

Data Collection

On the first day of class, the students completed a survey whose aim was to determine the learners' reading preferences and their attitudes towards reading. On the last day of the semester, they filled out a questionnaire that elicited information concerning problem areas in reading as well as their attitudes towards reading in general, and reading for pleasure in particular. They were assured that their responses in no way would affect their grade for the course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The First Survey

The following is a summary of the responses given by the students on the first day of classes.

The first question reveals that most of the students in this group find reading easy. Only 2 find it difficult. However, 24% reported not knowing whether the activi-

Question 1: How do you find reading?		
Responses	Raw Scores	Percentages
Difficult	2	8%
Easy	17	68%
Don't know	6	24%

Question 2: Do you enjoy reading in Spanish?		
Responses	Raw Score	Percentage
Yes	16	64%
No	0	0%
Sometimes	9	36%

Question 3: Do you enjoy reading in English?		
Responses	Raw Score	Percentage
Yes	16	64%
No	0	0%
Sometimes	7	28%
Don't know	2	8%

Question 4: What are the main problems you find when you read in English?		
Problems Mentioned	Raw Score	Percentage
I don't know /understand the vocabulary	25	100%
Old words, slang, idioms, British English, expressions	6	24%
My mind drifts off	7	28%
I don't know anything about / understand the topic	6	24%
There is ambiguity. The book is ambiguous.	4	16%
I don't like what I am reading	3	12%
I have to use the dictionary too much.	2	8%
I get bored (easily).	2	8%
I read (very) slowly.	2	8%
I don't understand the meaning /grammar of a sentence.	2	8%

ty was difficult or not. This reply is puzzling because it seems to imply that the learners are not familiar with the activity. The second question specifically refers to reading in Spanish and sheds some light on this problem.

Basically, the same number of students who affirmed that they found reading easy in question 1 report that they enjoy reading in Spanish. For this question, obviously nobody chose the alterna-

tive "don't know," which suggests that those who did not know in question 1 were probably thinking in terms of reading in a foreign language. However, because of the way in which the question was worded, there is no specific information for ascertaining what makes nine of these learners enjoy the activity only "sometimes."

Question 3 reveals that the same number of students who enjoy reading in

Spanish also enjoy reading in Spanish. The only difference is that two of the nine who chose "sometimes" in question 2 now chose "Don't know." Therefore, the general conclusions we can arrive at are: 1) Nobody hates reading; 2) About 60% of the students find reading easy and enjoy reading in English and in Spanish; 3) About 25% of the students sometimes enjoy reading (but we do not know the factors that determine whether they enjoy the activity or not); 4) About 8% of the students have probably not experienced reading in English except for what they have read in class.

For the following question, the students were free to mention as many problems as they could. The percentages in the second column represent the percentage of students who mentioned that problem. They might have mentioned others or that might have been their only choice.

The answers to question 4 are enlightening. First of all, in the students' opinion, lexical problems are the major obstacles to successful comprehension. All the students reported experiencing miscomprehension because they were not familiar with the vocabulary. Even more telling, they mentioned individual instances of vocabulary problems such as the use of obsolete words, slang, idioms, British English, and difficult expressions. Syntax, on the other hand, is disregarded. Only 2 students mentioned grammar problems as an obstacle to reading

comprehension. The rest of the problems mentioned by the students had to do mainly with lack of concentration or background knowledge, poor reading skills or finding the process boring.

The Second Survey

The following is a summary of the responses given by the students on the last day of classes. Notice that the questions are different. At this point, the students had already read at least 3 novels of their choice.

Percentages do not add up to 100 because learners were free to mention as many difficulties as they wanted to.

At the end of the semester, the number one problem encountered when reading was still vocabulary. However, the percentage of learners who mentioned it dropped from 100% to 80%. The second most frequent answer was lack of time. They felt that having to read about 50 pages a week was hard to accomplish, which seems to indicate that either they did not read much for pleasure in their L1 or they had never done sustained reading in English before. In addition, they reported other problems that directly deal with the type of novel chosen: too much description, too much fantasy, too many characters, characters with which they could not identify, topics that they did not like or had no background knowledge about.

The answers to question 6 are encouraging because they are indicative of improvement. All the students

Question 5: What was the most difficult thing about reading the books you chose?

Difficulty	Raw Score	Percentage
The new vocabulary (too elegant, too old, slang, expressions, idioms, invented words)	20	80%
Finding the time to read	5	20%
Reading descriptions that were too long. Little action. Nothing happens.	4	16%
Reading about sad situations. I like happy endings.	3	12%
Choosing an inappropriate book for me. Books were boring/ not what I had expected. If I don't like the book I am not motivated.	2	8%
Trying to read without stopping to look up words.	1	4%
Too many characters in the book.	1	4%
Sometimes I misunderstood what I read.	1	4%
Old-fashioned spelling.	1	4%
There was too much fantasy.	1	4%
I couldn't identify with the characters.	1	4%
Sometimes I forget what I read the day before, so I have to go back	1	4%

Question 6: How much have your reading skills improved during the semester?

Responses	Raw Score	Percentage
A lot	14	56%
Some	11	44%
A little	0	0%
Not at all	0	0%

Question 7: Are you doing more voluntary reading now?

Responses	Raw Score	Percentage
Yes	20	80%
No	4	16%
The same as before.	1	4%

reported that their reading skills had improved a lot or at least some during the semester. However, the real test of improvement is found in question 7 since concerned teachers and parents want children to read more and to read for pleasure.

Out of 25 learners, 20 reported doing more voluntary reading at the end of the semester. One student said she was doing the same amount of reading as before, but she added a note explaining that she had always enjoyed reading in Spanish and that the

Question 8: Is reading more enjoyable now than at the beginning of the semester?		
Response	Raw Score	Percentage
Yes	23	92%
Why?		
I have learned more vocabulary. I understand better because I use reading strategies.	15	
I had never tried reading a book in English before.	9	
It doesn't take as long as before.	3	
I've always read a lot in Spanish. Now I read in English.	2	
I pay attention to collocations, so I understand better.	2	
I have more free time.	1	
It is fun.	1	
I'm more interested.	1	
I am more patient.	1	
I have the habit of reading now. It is easier.	1	
No	2	8%
Why?		
Because I've always liked reading.		

only difference was that she was also doing it in English now. Finally, 4 students said that they were reading more than before; all of them remarked that they did not have time.

At the end of the semester, all the students claimed that they enjoyed reading. The most frequent reasons they gave were that they knew more vocabulary and that they used better strategies to read. They specifically mentioned guessing meaning from context, using the dictionary, and paying attention to parts of speech.

CONCLUSION

The results of this and the preceding investigation (Hasbún, 2005) indicate that teaching vocabulary and reading strategies in a reading comprehension course is definitely worthwhile. The stu-

dents' mastery of the vocabulary items included in the study increased significantly, and they reported being able to read faster and more fluently and doing more voluntary reading as a result of instruction. Needless to say, reading for pleasure is the ultimate goal of a reading teacher. However, as with most studies where questionnaires or surveys are used to collect data, what learners report is not necessarily the same as what they actually do. This happens for a number of reasons: participants might not be able to describe their own behavior, they might not be aware of their problems, or they might feel compelled to say what they perceive that the researcher, in this case their instructor, expects them to say. Nevertheless, the final grades for the course were very good, which implies that there was in-

creased reading comprehension. In addition, the final evaluation of the course, which was conducted not by the instructor but by the department, revealed that the students were very pleased with the class, and they specifically mentioned their satisfaction at having learned a great deal of vocabulary.

The results of this study should encourage those teachers who argue that it is difficult to have effective vocabulary teaching because it is time consuming. They claim that they cannot make time to recycle the lexical units and present them in multiple contexts to guarantee acquisition. They add that it is almost impossible to predict what vocabulary is useful, that is, what vocabulary their learners are going to need in the future. However, this assertion is misguided. In the present study, the time invested in vocabulary building produced a very good return. As a general rule, the more word combinations learners know, the easier it will be for them to guess meaning from context. The more strategies they practice, the easier it will be to tackle texts appropriately. The more explicit the teaching of vocabulary, the more likely the students will recall it because it has become salient; it has been brought into focus. The more proficient they become as readers, the more they will enjoy it. Once again, beginning and intermediate learners cannot be expected to acquire a significant number of word combinations completely on their own. Teachers need to raise awareness and provide

scaffolding. They must design tasks that help learners understand what they are reading so that they can enjoy the activity. To do this, they must change their own attitudes towards teaching and learning.

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