

## ***Explicit instructional techniques used in teaching vocabulary through reading***

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### ***Abstract***

The objective of this action research is to find out the instructional techniques used in class to teach vocabulary items that are encountered in reading passages. A combination of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was used. Primary data were collected through self-observation and attentive classroom observation supported by record keeping in the form of note taking. First, a checklist of techniques for direct vocabulary instruction reflecting the researcher's own teaching was made. This checklist was based on the sample checklist of 'Techniques for Direct Vocabulary Instruction' published in Grabe & Stoller, 2002. The data were analyzed to find out the trends in the use of certain vocabulary-teaching techniques and to understand why certain approaches had been preferred over certain others by the teacher. The explicit vocabulary teaching techniques that had been used are analysis of word parts, anecdotes or stories highlighting word meaning, definitions, dictionary consultation, discussing of word meaning, games, illustrations /drawings on the blackboard, synonyms/antonyms and translation. The data very clearly show that the vocabulary-teaching technique that is used mostly, with a total of 76, is giving dictionary definitions to students. The techniques that are under-used are games and analysis of word parts.

***Keywords:*** Teaching Vocabulary, Instructional Techniques, Teaching Reading, Action Research, Self-observation

## ***Introduction***

Teaching vocabulary is an essential part of second language teaching. Research has emphasized the importance of vocabulary teaching for developing learners especially in reading (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Schmitt, 2000; Stahl, 1999). For example, how many word meanings a student will know in his or her second language is a strength to a learner as that knowledge will contribute directly to his or her ability to communicate in the second language (Stahl & Nagi, 2006). Research shows that learners definitely benefit from direct and explicit teaching of vocabulary items (Graves, 2006; Stoller & Rosen, 2000). Therefore, it is important to find the most effective methods of teaching vocabulary explicitly. In the present study, explicit instructional techniques used in the classroom to teach vocabulary and specifically, observations on teaching vocabulary through reading are analyzed.

Research questions:

What are the explicit vocabulary teaching methods used in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom?

To what extent are explicit instructional techniques used in teaching vocabulary?

Research objective:

The main goal of this action research is to inquire into the instructional techniques used in a 21<sup>st</sup> century tertiary level class to teach vocabulary items that are encountered in reading passages. It is believed that an objective inquiry into one's own teaching practices will improve skills in teaching and will eventually benefit the students in their acquisition of vocabulary.

## ***Literature Review***

According to Michael Graves (2006), there are four essential components of vocabulary instruction. They are, providing rich and varied language experience, teaching individual words explicitly, teaching word learning strategies, and fostering word consciousness. Explicit vocabulary teaching strategies can target each of these components in vocabulary teaching. For example, one of the word learning strategies could be using a dictionary or using context clues and by doing so, the teacher can inform the students the meaning of individual words explicitly. Graves' categorization helped the researcher to understand the purpose of each explicit vocabulary teaching technique that was used in the present study.

Baumann et al. (2003) report that direct teaching of word learning strategies such as using dictionaries or semantic mapping helps students to become independent vocabulary learners. This research strengthened the purpose of this action research. Nagi (1988) discusses the most effective methods of vocabulary instruction for improving reading and these methods were included in the record keeping form of the present research. Lee (2003) in her research concludes that target vocabulary instruction

improves vocabulary production. In her study using 65 secondary school students she showed a 13.19 % improvement in recognized target vocabulary production.

The reading activities of the present study are limited to passage level as in the lesson material that was used in this action research, the reading or comprehension passage was simply one component of the lesson among many other components such as grammar explanations and activities. Therefore, the study by Elleman et al. (2009) was of particular relevance as it had examined the impact of vocabulary instruction on passage level comprehension of school-age children. This study manifests that students with reading difficulties benefitted more than three times as much as students with no reading difficulties through vocabulary intervention.

The Report of the National Reading Panel published by The National Institutes of Children's Health and Development (2000) not only concludes that vocabulary instruction is effective, but provides instructional recommendations stating that direct instruction should be used in teaching vocabulary and a variety of instructional approaches should be used for optimal results.

By reviewing the research on the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary teaching techniques, we can conclude that explicit vocabulary teaching techniques are essential for vocabulary acquisition in learners.

## ***Methodology***

### ***Courses observed***

Data collection was achieved by gathering information from four different courses currently conducted by the English Language Teaching Unit, (ELTU) University of Kelaniya. The four courses were English for Communication (ELTU 13012), English for Communication and Further Studies (ELTU 22032), Introduction to Literature (ELTU 22022) and Teaching Methodology (ELTU 12052). None of these courses focused on reading mainly or exclusively. The focus of data collection was on the reading passages given in the lesson material of these courses. The lesson material for two of the courses viz. English for Communication (ELTU 13012) and English for Communication and Further Studies (ELTU 22032) had been designed by a member of the ELTU teaching staff. The role of the researcher as observer and participant is part of the methodology used, as the present researcher had designed the lesson material for the other two courses. After each class, the researcher filled out a self-observation record sheet, categorizing the methods of explaining vocabulary items in the class, for the duration of a month.

### ***Participants***

The number of participants is of little importance to this action research since the focus is on the teacher, the vocabulary items and the teaching techniques. However, information on the participants of the courses would be relevant in order to understand the choice of vocabulary teaching techniques. Seventy one undergraduate students participated in this action research. The students belonged to levels one, two and three of the university system. There were approximately 10 regular students in the English for Communication course, 30 students in English for Communication and Further Studies course, 20 students in the Teaching Methodology course and 11 students in Introduction to Literature class.

### ***Procedure***

The first step in designing this study was to establish the purpose of the present action research. Since there is evidence to show that direct and explicit vocabulary teaching enhances the vocabulary development of second language learners, the researcher was interested in finding out the extent to which teaching vocabulary explicitly was done. Therefore, several research questions were posed: what are the instructional approaches used in the class to teach vocabulary and to what extent is teaching done directly and explicitly? As a byproduct of the two aforesaid research questions, finding out the most effective instructional methods of teaching vocabulary was analyzed.

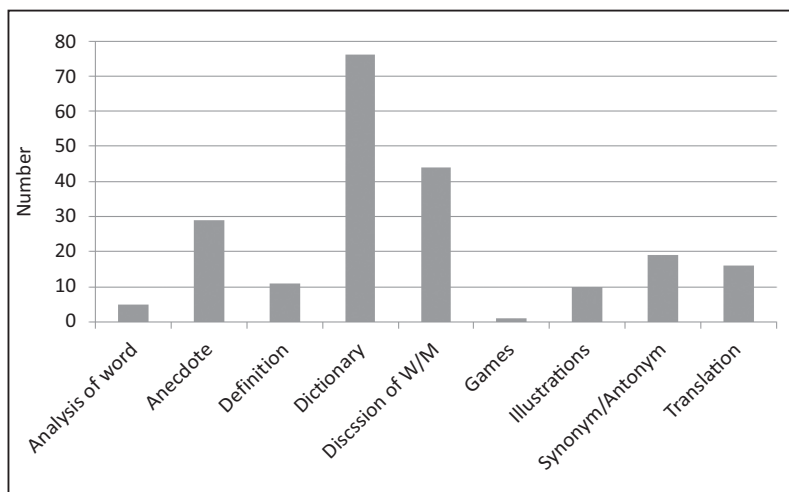
In the present study, a combination of both quantitative and a qualitative data collection methods was used. Primary data were collected through self-observation and attentive classroom observation supported by record keeping in the form of note taking. In addition, the checklist was based on the sample checklist of 'Techniques for Direct Vocabulary Instruction' published in *Teaching and Researching Reading* (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Colleagues in similar teaching environments were consulted to find out how they teach vocabulary to their students, and their approaches were added to the list.

Whenever a reading passage was taught, a record was kept of how the vocabulary items were taught, in an observation sheet. The methods of teaching certain vocabulary items had been planned, anticipating the levels of difficulty for each group. Additionally, spontaneous explicit teaching techniques in handling real time queries on vocabulary were used. Whenever possible, remarks on the technique used to explain vocabulary items were noted in the lesson material itself. Later, this information was transferred to the self-observation record keeping form.

### ***Data Presentation and Analysis***

The feedback form had seventeen teaching techniques listed. Of these techniques only nine techniques were used in teaching vocabulary items. The explicit vocabulary teaching techniques that had been used are analysis of word parts, anecdotes or stories highlighting word meaning, definitions, dictionary consultation, discussing of word meaning, games, illustrations /drawings on the blackboard, synonyms/antonyms and translation. The following figure illustrates the number of occurrences for each of the explicit vocabulary teaching techniques.

***Figure 1: The number of occurrences for each explicit vocabulary teaching technique***



A total of 211 vocabulary items were taught during the period of data collection: 29 vocabulary items to the students following English for Communication, while the students following the Teaching Methodology course had been exposed to 39 vocabulary items. The most number of vocabulary items had been taught in the Introduction to Literature course, which amounts to hundred and eight. Only 35 vocabulary items had been discussed explicitly in the English for Communication and Further Studies course. That result is not surprising as the students who follow that course are second year Science Faculty students and they are generally considered more fluent than the student populations in other faculties. Also, the fact that only data from two weeks were available for scrutiny for that particular course may have contributed to the low occurrence of explicit vocabulary teaching in that course.

The data very clearly show that the vocabulary teaching technique that is used mostly, with a total of 76, is giving dictionary definitions to students. As a percentage this figure converts to 36%. The reason for this high use of dictionary consultation could be the lecturer making notes of the vocabulary items perceived to be difficult for students using the dictionary and irrespective of student inquiry, explicitly teaching the

meaning. The techniques that are under-used are games and analysis of word parts. As a teacher and participant observer, on reflection, the researcher had assumed that teaching vocabulary items using anecdotes or stories highlighting word meaning was an excellent technique. However, the data show that use of anecdotes is only 13% of the total use of vocabulary teaching techniques. The researcher's self-observation data also reveal a preference for discussing the word meanings in class with students. Techniques such as semantic mapping, using of lexical sets and semantic feature analysis are infrequently used. The reason could be avoidance of techniques perceived to be highly technical instructional approaches. These techniques may have had the potential to enhance the vocabulary acquisition of the students better than the approaches used by the researcher. The data suggest that the techniques that are not used or rarely used can feature in future vocabulary teaching, possibly to enhance the impact of vocabulary acquisition.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

Two of the research questions were successfully answered in this action research. The researcher found out that nine different explicit vocabulary teaching techniques had been used by her. They are analysis of word parts, anecdotes or stories highlighting word meaning, definitions, dictionary consultation, discussing of word meaning, games, illustrations /drawings on the blackboard, synonyms/antonyms and translation. The second question is the extent to which explicit instructional techniques in teaching vocabulary had been used. Over a period of four weeks, in a total time limit of 28 hours, 211 vocabulary items had been explicitly discussed. The use of dictionary definitions seemed the most commonly used technique for most of the vocabulary explanations, with games being the least used technique.

As remedial work, the study suggests experimenting with at least two of the techniques which had not been used, and would no doubt add variety to teaching methodology, while exposing the students to new ways of learning.

### ***Recommendations***

Each of the explicit teaching techniques needs to be tested in class. Thereby, the suitability of the technique and its effectiveness can be investigated in terms of student performance. Such follow-up action to this study, would bring forth a more useful result that would enhance the quality of teaching of ELTU courses.

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