

# A Brief Discussion on Strategies for Developing Depth of Vocabulary based on the Theory of Deep Learning

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## Abstract

Vocabulary is the most basic element to language learning, which can assist learners comprehend and convey connotations in realistic situations. Successful learning to a large extent lies in that learners can understand and apply words in diverse and complicated contexts. Majorities of students attach more importance to memorize words repeatedly to enlarge their quantity of vocabulary, yet the quality of vocabulary to words are ignored. That's why many second Chinese learners find it still hard to learn English well in spite of continuous and strenuous efforts made by them. Compared with colossal vocabulary size, vocabulary depth to some extent depends on how well a learner can learn and how far they can go. Therefore, this paper aims to explore possible ways or strategies to aid learners developing depth of vocabulary knowledge from the perspective of deep learning theory. Hoping these suggestions or measures can be conducive to improving the learning efficiency and providing some implications.

## Keywords

Depth of Vocabulary; Deep Learning; Teaching Strategies.

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary as one of the components of language knowledge is the foundation for language learning. Vocabulary learning plays a pivotal role in language learning. Vocabulary, or knowledge of words, is a fundamental building block of literacy that involves at least two core dimensions: breadth and depth. Colossal studies highlight that vocabulary as a critical predictor determines the quality of reading comprehension and learning performance. However, when it comes to vocabulary, the majority of people focus on the vocabulary size, yet the value of vocabulary depth is underestimated. Without sufficient vocabulary breadth and depth of knowledge, learners may find it difficult to understand and express meanings in different and specific contexts. Therefore, vocabulary learning should not only involve the expanding of vocabulary size, but also understand a word comprehensively. The current severe and urgent problem is that numerous learners just rote the words mechanically so as to expand the quantity of vocabulary, they haven't known a word in detail. That's to say, they are deficient in learning a word of depth of vocabulary. Therefore, mastering a word's depth knowledge is quite necessary and crucial for English deep learning. This study aims to achieve a more comprehensive understanding about strategies on helping learners develop depth of vocabulary knowledge based on the theory of deep learning. The present article explores the vocabulary deep learning from a new perspective, aiming at provide some guidelines and useful implications for teaching and learning, which has a strong practical value and significance.

## 2. Problems Exist in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

Vocabulary is the basis of all language activities. Mastering the vocabulary depth knowledge is encouraged and advocated in today's teaching and is also conducive to developing the core key competence of learners. However, vocabulary teaching and learning still have fragmented and

superficial phenomena at present, which are hard to develop the depth of vocabulary and foster English deep learning. Hence, vocabulary problems in current situation that lead to the difficulty of developing depth of vocabulary will be analyzed from following perspectives.

### **2.1. Vocabulary Teaching is Fragmented and De-contextualized**

Problems of fragmented teaching mainly manifest in the following aspects. Firstly, teachers focus on vocabulary presentation and practice in vocabulary teaching, and nearly no attention are paid to application, immediate and delayed detection of vocabulary. Besides, a variety of teachers tend to present vocabulary in isolation, neglect the role of contexts and discourses. They only pay attention to the explanation of isolated morphology and meaning, ignoring the connection between sound, form and meaning within and among vocabularies. Most importantly, the usage of words is not emphasized and taught with great care. Students are required to do repeated shallow recitation and memory as well as a series of single vocabulary exercise, which in the long run make students feel tedious and less motivated. De-contextualized teaching mainly indicates that teachers regard vocabulary as independent content, adopt separate vocabulary teaching method. They just teach followed by the sequence of pronunciation, spelling and meaning, aiming at helping learners achieve vocabulary memorization through explicit teaching. Students can't effectively memorize and apply words according to different themes or registers fields.

The latest curriculum standard indicates that vocabulary learning had better be in theme-based discourses and teachers should center on cultivating learners' awareness of word chunks in contexts to eventually develop students' understanding and expressing meaning ability.

### **2.2. Not Enough Attention Paid to the Depth Knowledge of Vocabulary**

Parts of teachers still hold the traditional teaching beliefs that successful learning is achieved through numerous practice and repeated recitation. As long as students spend sufficient time and energy, they can make great progress and learn English well. Hence, students are demanded to memory lots of words to expand the vocabulary size but the development of vocabulary depth knowledge is neglected. However, some teachers are always concerned and confused about "what should be taught in vocabulary teaching?" Due to the shortage of comprehension, the explanation of vocabulary often stays at the shallow level of knowledge such as spelling, pronunciation and core meaning. They do not pay enough attention to the depth knowledge of vocabulary such as register, collocation, derivation, word meaning relationship and cultural connotation of vocabulary. As a result, it is difficult for students to obtain the ability to accurately understand and use vocabulary in diverse spoken or written discourses. Only by expanding the accumulation of depth of knowledge, can learners learn English more efficiently and joyfully.

### **2.3. The Problem of "Separation of Teaching" in Vocabulary.**

The "teaching separation" of vocabulary teaching manifests in that teachers attach importance to the teaching of vocabulary and its related elements, such as sounds, forms and meanings, and pay special attention to the degree of learners' memory of the taught knowledge. When teachers present, practice and consolidate words, they always do it in isolated texts with lack of authentic contexts. The best teaching should be based on discourses or authentic situations to teach learners how to develop and expand the depth of knowledge and theme-based words. Only by this, can learners understand and guess what's a word meaning in another new context. However, in realistic situation, some problems which are closely related to learners' learning ability do not enter teachers' vision and attract their attention, leading to the weakening of learners' awareness and ability of independent learning. For example, how are words pronounced? How are the forms of words formed? How are word meanings remembered and acquired? How is the contextual meaning of words understood according to the text? How are

words consolidated through recall? In reality, those problems reflected the neglect of depth of knowledge in teaching.

#### **2.4. Neglecting the Cultivation of Thinking Ability**

Majorities of teachers won't cultivate learners' thinking capacity, they deem that this is the math or Chinese teachers' responsibility. English teachers' job is to equip students with vocabulary, grammar and so on. Such kind of teaching is definitely impossible to cultivate students' thinking quality. Many teachers are inclined to explain the usage of vocabulary directly, and rarely in class guide students to learn vocabulary actively by means of observation, analysis, classification, association activities to develop the higher order thinking. Thinking vocabulary activities such as word meaning guessing and word meaning generalization based on text are rarely carried out. Students are rarely allowed or required to analyze, judge and evaluate text themes and viewpoints by vocabulary in discourse teaching. However, discourse are the best texts to develop and accumulate diverse vocabulary instead of single words. Due to those diversified reasons, vocabulary teaching has always stayed at the level of simple repetition and mechanical memory, so students generally feel that vocabulary learning is boring.

#### **2.5. The Single Form of Vocabulary Teaching and Test**

Many teachers only focus on explaining of isolated morphology and meaning with the traditional teaching method, ignoring the relationship between each aspect of words and their use in different contexts and text types. When students encounter a word in another new text, they still don't know what's its meaning and usage. Teachers seldom guide students to classify the vocabulary they have learned and carry out theme-based vocabulary teaching activities, while learners memorize vocabulary by unit vocabulary lists, which results in students' storage and retention of vocabulary in a disordered state and lexical, vocabulary forgetting phenomenon is so serious.

Besides, vocabulary test mainly depends on dictation or silent writing. Considerable teachers first explain the main usage of vocabulary, give students a certain amount of time to memorize and recite, and then tests are done in the form of dictation or dictation. Vocabulary teaching has always stayed at the level of simple repetition and mechanical memory. Hence, students generally feel that vocabulary learning is boring and tedious.

The above vocabulary teaching methods obviously deviate from the requirements of the Curriculum standards, and the teaching efficiency is relatively low. Seeking for vocabulary teaching methods and strategies under theory of deep learning is one of effective ways to address the aforementioned problems.

### **3. Teaching Strategies for Developing English Depth of Vocabulary based on Deeping Learning**

Mastering depth of vocabulary knowledge needs the vocabulary deep learning. It's impossible to command a word comprehensively just from surface learning. The purpose of vocabulary deep learning is to improve the application ability of words, that's to say, learners can accurately comprehend and apply words to express meanings specifically. Vocabulary teaching to deep learning should adhere to the three principles: the construction of knowledge, the contextualization of contents, the activities involved the thinking participation. Generally speaking, the presentation, practice and production is the widely used method to teach vocabulary.

### **3.1. Present Vocabulary Surrounded with Themes and Build Vocabulary Networks**

Vocabulary deep learning attaches importance to the connection between knowledge as well as information and the integration of multi-contents of words. Developing depth of vocabulary knowledge needs to establish relations among different kinds of vocabulary knowledge. The more connections it makes, the deeper the learners acquire the vocabulary depth of knowledge. Vocabulary presentation is an essential stage for vocabulary teaching. At present, the new textbook presents vocabulary in the form of unit topics, which stresses more the relations of vocabulary. Cluster presentation based on the relationship between words is recommended, which involves semantic clustering and thematic clustering. Teachers can first establish lexical semantic field centered on subject words through thematic clustering, and then use semantic clustering to summarize, classify and organize vocabulary to build knowledge network. Let's take the unit one: Teenage Life from People's Education Press as an example to explore the teaching strategies to facilitate the vocabulary deep learning. The thematic context of unit one is man and self, the theme is school life. Text of reading and thinking part is about the freshman challenge, which mainly introduces Adam's challenges meet in senior high. We can ask students to take freshman challenges as the central word to carry out vocabulary association and cluster themes. Then the teachers and students jointly generalize and classify the listed words to help students internalize vocabulary connotations, understand the semantic relationships, conduct semantic clustering, and form a lexical network centered on the subject words. For example, students can base the freshman challenges to brainstorm theme clusters, such as, curriculums, activities. Interpersonal relationships, opinions and feelings about new school life, school rules, school facilities. And then, they specify each category with semantic clustering, such as the curriculums can also cover required lessons, like the Chinese, history, and the selective lessons like, music, sports and so on. In this way, learners can accumulate considerable words from thematic and semantic clustering, knowing their generic relations. Therefore, the categories of vocabulary by topics under the theme can not only help students expand their vocabulary, but also aid students establishing the connection between prior and new knowledge and deepen their understanding on words.

### **3.2. Use Context to Understand Vocabulary and Promote in-depth Processing**

Cognitive processing has two levels, namely form and semantic processing. The former refers to the processing of pronunciation and spelling of words, which belongs to the shallow level. The latter refers to the processing of word meaning and collocation, the source of meaning and the evolution of meaning of the target words, which calls the deep processing. The deeper the processing level, the better the retention of memory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Context is the core element of vocabulary teaching. Rich context is conducive to the memory, retention and use of target vocabulary. Following ways can be employed. Firstly, explore different meanings of a word in situations. Besides, create situational context to promote knowledge construction. Last but not least, pay attention to word collocation and excavating cultural connotation.

### **3.3. Cultivate the Ability of Learning Polysemy and Word Formation**

In English learning, it's not uncommon to encounter polysemous words so that students may deem it difficult to learn. Majorities of students feel helpless for these polysemous words and tend to adopt rote memorization, which brings about poor learning effect. Generally speaking, there is a core meaning, namely the archetypal meaning, while the other meanings are extended or radiated through the semantic extension mechanism. While metaphor is the major means of extension and expansion of polysemy meanings. Therefore, teachers should help students understand the correlation between the meanings of polysemous words, find out the cognitive basis of the core meaning and meanings to eventually achieve deep comprehension

of words meanings. For example, students may at first learn word “run”, while this word can derive different meanings based on its core meaning. When teachers teach this word, they can first show the sentence in the text: We have a music club in our school. It is great because it’s run by the students for the school. Next, teachers can give some sentences with the target word involving different meanings and let students translate and guess their meanings. Sentences are: 1. He has no idea of how to run a successful business. 2. Water was running all over the bathroom floor. 3. The color ran when my mom washed my new jacket. 4. He is running for a second term as President. 5. You shouldn't leave the engine running when the car is standing still. Later students find the same meaning among those sentences as the example sentence. Last, let the students discuss the connection between the above meaning and its prototype meaning, and the teacher summarizes and instructs the students to draw the semantic structure of run.

Word formation not only helps learners enlarge vocabulary size in a short time, while also facilitate learners understand the words relations and connections among numerous words. Mastering the word formation method is conducive to comprehending a words’ pronunciation, form, meaning and use efficiently and effectively. Teachers should convey the skills and strategies for stem, affix, suffix to form vocabularies. The conversion, compound and derivative methods are also necessary deserving teaching. The rules of word formation allow language learners to transfer them in different situations and know considerable other relative words. If learners know these rules, they can quickly infer or guess the stress, speech of word, connotations in a new or unfamiliar text. For example, when teach the word predict, teachers should first divide it into two parts, that’s to say, the affix “pre” and stem “dict”. Pre is similar to before, and dict means speak or say. After that, teachers can guide students to learn the derivative words about prediction, predicative, predicable in authentic contents or discourses. I believe as long as teachers adhere to the word formation method in a longer period, students will gradually develop the awareness of word formation to analyze different words and find out their connections.

### **3.4. Create Situations for Vocabulary Application and Facilitate In-depth Expression**

The ultimate goal of vocabulary learning is to use instead of storing. The learner's application of target vocabulary is beneficial to achieve deep processing and promoting the memory of target vocabulary. The use of vocabulary oriented to deep learning emphasizes the meaningful and realistic expression around a certain topic, rather than the sentence level mechanical vocabulary production practice and drilling. Teachers are supposed to combine the theme and content of the text to create specific situations in life and builds a platform for students to use the vocabulary they have learnt. Teachers can design various exercise for learners use words in contexts, such as choosing words to create situation, text imitation writing and so on. Let’s first take text imitation writing as an illustration. A teacher creates a real context that our school will host a writing competition in next week for imitation writing, and ask students to write surrounded with “My New School Life’ to introduce the school life and their feelings as well as challenges during the month. The contents can include the school facilities, activities, favorite subjects, interpersonal relationships and academic plan and others. The teacher asks students try to use the words, sentences, grammar they have learnt as much as possible. Such writing activity is authentic, relevant and valid. The topic can arouse students' interest in writing and activities can establish a high degree of correlation between writing, reading and others.

## **4. Conclusion**

People can’t express anything without vocabularies. Depth of vocabulary plays a significant role in the development of learners’ comprehensive language application ability. Through the

reflection of teaching practice, the paper summarizes the vocabulary problems existed in middle school and also explains some vocabulary teaching strategies to help learners develop depth of vocabulary according to the deep learning theory. This paper is expected to provide some inspirations for front-line teachers in vocabulary teaching and for some vocabulary strategies for struggling students. However, it should be noted that the in-depth design of vocabulary teaching strategies should be adapted to the learning situation, the needs and level of learners to ensure the effectiveness of the deep vocabulary teaching strategies. Deep vocabulary learning does not exclude vocabulary memorization, timely and appropriate reinforcement of memory and necessary vocabulary practice are conducive to the consolidation of vocabulary. Teachers should integrate it with other vocabulary learning methods in order to maximize the teaching benefits.

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