

Reflection on Variables of Vocabulary Acquisition in the DLIFLC Learning Context: Language Anxiety, Motivation, Learning Strategies, and Teaching Methods

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Vocabulary acquisition is crucial to language learning, yet is also quite challenging. To master a word means not only to know its general and specific meanings in isolation but also its written forms, phonological representations, syntactic categories, sociolinguistic connotations, and other features. Vocabulary acquisition is a long-term learning process affected by various factors, such as language anxiety, motivation, learning strategies, and teaching methods. This article summarizes valuable vocabulary learning strategies and pedagogy, discusses theoretical aspects of two affective variables of vocabulary retention (language anxiety and motivation), identifies their relevancy to DLIFLC students, and proposes rules of thumb to alleviate language anxiety, develop motivation, and improve vocabulary learning and teaching.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Motivation, Learning Strategies, Teaching Methods

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is crucial for students' academic success, effective communication, and cultural awareness. A grasp of a basic vocabulary is an important achievement in L2 acquisition. Vocabulary was "the most statistically significant predictor" to DLIFLC's Korean language students' listening comprehension performance and "played a vital role in both reading and listening" (Bae, 2021 as cited in Bae et al., 2023, p. 20). Having a large vocabulary size does not guarantee that students will pass the DLPT/OPI, but not having a large vocabulary will certainly negatively impact a student's chance of success. Many current academically recycled or recently disenrolled Chinese Mandarin students experienced challenges in passing vocabulary quizzes,

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recognizing textbook glossaries in reading and listening practices, and retrieving and using them in written and oral communications.

Vocabulary isn't acquired instantly. Vocabulary acquisition is a protracted task that demands patience and persistent efforts and is affected by a variety of variables, among which language anxiety, motivation, learning strategies, and teaching methods are most significant in the DLIFLC learning context. Given their stress and anxiety levels, students need constant encouragement and deserve the most appropriate learning and teaching approaches to grasp vocabulary. In this article, I will (a) review vocabulary learning strategies and teaching methods in general, including those from an influential second language (L2) teaching handbook chapter; (b) discuss the role of language anxiety and motivation in vocabulary learning; and (c) conclude with concrete examples to help students cope with language anxiety and develop motivation, and help teachers and students improve vocabulary teaching and learning.

VARIABLES OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Strategies and Teaching Methods

In order for students to learn new words, they need to engage in self-study, be taught in direct instruction, and be exposed to the words via natural exposure. Students need to understand the meaning of words, go over their meaning and use frequently, and see them in context (Hulstijn, 2001). In order for this to occur, students must engage in different learning strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) summed up three categories of vocabulary learning strategies: (1) metacognitive strategies, such as time management, emotion management, and advance preparation; (2) cognitive strategies, such as taking notes, using dictionaries, creating word maps, guessing meaning from contextual cues, requesting corrections and clarifications, applying mnemonic devices; and (3) social strategies by working with teachers and peers to check understanding and use communicative opportunities. These strategies move from what students can do on their own to what teachers can do in class, helping students engage in the social aspect of learning.

Also important to vocabulary retention is ensuring that students learn words at the right level. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is helpful here. The ZPD is the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Regarding L2 vocabulary acquisition, teachers may interact and provide students with individualized feedback to help move them from their current performance level to the next achievable goal. This can occur via negotiating the meaning of new words to develop lexical breadth and depth for a deeper understanding of word complexity and sophistication, e.g., to distinguish what is said from what is meant in context.

Learning and Teaching Vocabulary

Beyond general learning strategies, students need extra support as they struggle to learn many new words in a short timeframe. Teachers can consider various points (Cook, 2016):

- Mastering a word means not only knowing its general and specific meanings, but also the orthography (writing system), phonology (sound system), semantics (making meaning), morphology (grammar), lexical combinations, register (level of formality), and other aspects of the word. Many students struggle to learn the meanings of words in all these areas.
- Most words in languages are polysemous (i.e., have multiple meanings); thus, words should be learned through meaning components. For example, “girl” can be learned via the semantic components of “female,” “human,” and (usually) “non-adult.”
- The most important words in a speaker’s native language that the human brain automatically processes in early childhood are concrete words; therefore, basic level target language words should be taught before more general, superordinate level words. Teachers can help structure the learning of vocabulary in this way.
- Students are often keenly aware of not knowing words, more than they might be aware that they struggle with grammar or phonology. This awareness of being less proficient in vocabulary can lead to increased anxiety for students.

Language Anxiety and Motivation

A notable affective variable that influences vocabulary retention is language anxiety, the negative emotional response characterized by fear, tension, worry, and uneasiness while processing L2. According to Horwitz and colleagues (1986), language anxiety manifests as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Language anxiety functions to activate a “mental filter” that obstructs linguistic input and impedes learning (Krashen, 1981, 1982). It significantly distracts learners’ attention and causes serious efficiency issues in vocabulary recall and other learning activities. Factors like learners’ self-assessment on language aptitude, classroom experiences, and difficulty levels may trigger language anxiety (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021). Teachers can work to help students reduce their anxiety over vocabulary and language learning.

Another notable affective variable in vocabulary acquisition is motivation. Many students come to DLIFLC motivated but begin to lose motivation as time goes on and stress rises. Students can be taught about the types of motivation and how it impacts their learning. For example, students with *intrinsic motivation* learn for learning’s sake, inherently enjoy learning itself, and are prone to working diligently with increased levels of autonomy and decreased levels of anxiety (Koeske & Koeske, 1989). Students with *extrinsic motivation* are prompted by practical and instrumental goals like reward, threat, and usefulness with a strong sense of success and failure and higher anxiety levels to meet performance standards. The third category is *amotivation*, which refers to those who lack the intent to act. As students understand these categories, they can learn to become aware of and manage their own motivation levels and ability to study. Interesting and

challenging learning tasks intrinsically motivate learners (Ehrman et al., 2003), and learning atmosphere, course contents, and teachers' personality traits, teaching styles, and communication skills impose a profound impact on motivation (Heydarnejad et al., 2022).

TEACHING VOCABULARY AT DLIFLC

DLIFLC Basic course students typically experience a large amount of stress from the intensive language programs, miscellaneous military obligations, and social and family commitments. As a Chinese Mandarin teacher, I have witnessed students who suffered from mood swings seemingly from stress and anxiety and who developed severe insomnia and at times could only catch a couple of hours of sleep per night. This impacts their ability to learn.

Mastery of a word is much more than knowing its meaning and pronunciation in isolation. In a listening class during the 45th week of instruction, after listening to a news report about a Chinese city's preferential policy for military personnel, a student promptly responded that though he didn't get all details but was confident it was something about "house moving" since he caught the word as 搬家 (bān jiā); it turned out the word he heard should have been 半价 (bàn jià) instead, i.e., giving Chinese service members a half-price discount for boat and train tickets. Minutes later, after listening to another report on Chinese military personnel's insurance policies, the same student responded again and told the class it was about "internet surfing," as he heard the word as 上网 (shàng wǎng); however, it should have been 伤亡 (shāng wáng), related to a casualty policy. This 19-year-old trainee was highly disciplined and motivated. I praised his learning attitude and active participation: he was very attentive, responded quickly, understood all the pronunciations right but the tones, and knew the meanings of those words. What he needed to improve was the ability to continuously broaden and deepen the understanding of the words and differentiate them in context.

It was time to test out possible solutions and use effective learning strategies and pedagogy to effectively mitigate UGE students' learning-related stress and anxiety and help them establish realistic self-expectations and develop intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to improve vocabulary learning.

RULES OF THUMB

To assist students in the acquisition of a basic vocabulary demands teachers' extended dedication. A teacher's awareness of a students' personal background and personality traits, considerate pedagogical planning, careful class preparations, and open-ended teacher-student communications all facilitate vocabulary learning. Based on my teaching practices, as well as on relevant literature, I came up with these rules of thumb as follows:

- *Give students enough exposure to new words.* A learner needs to be exposed to an L2 word at least six or seven times in different contexts to grasp it, regarding its meanings, lexical relations, written forms, phonetics, metaphorical use, register, and other features.

- *Help students understand word parts (i.e., radicals, roots, prefixes, and suffixes) and common words.* Structure lessons and homework assignments to focus on the most common words in your target language. For example, as Team Leader I selected the 48 most common Chinese radicals and explained them to students. Radicals are the base components of each Chinese character. I focused on explaining meanings and pronunciations of these radicals and the way they combine into new characters. For example, the character 忍 is constructed by the meaning and pronunciation radical 刃 (rèn), which means “a sword” or “a knife,” on the top and the meaning radical 心 (xīn), which means “heart,” at the bottom. The character’s pronunciation follows that of the former radical as rěn whereas its meaning being the combination of the two: a knife above the heart, which means “bear,” “endure,” or “tolerate.” In your language, what are the most common words and how can you structure class to help students learn and remember those words?
- *Teach students vocabulary in groups.* For example, when you explain polysemous words (i.e., words with multiple meanings) to students, make sure you focus on semantic components. In my classes, I teach the extended meanings of words in our textbooks. For example, after students have memorized the original meaning of 疾 (jí), “illness,” as a noun, I introduce and explain the word’s extended meanings as (1) “suffering” or “agony” as a noun; (2) “hate” as a verb; and (3) “swift” or “violent” as adjectives, in different reading, listening, speaking, and communicative contexts. You can also teach vocabulary in groups or topics such as economic, social, political, scientific, and other themes to reinforce words in context. I try to point out to students words they have learned before that are related. In this way, they are reminded of words and their groups. Keep in mind that students can’t learn too many words at once. Discuss with your students and your teaching team and chair how many words are realistic for students to learn in one week. Giving students too many words is frustrating for them and might be counterproductive.
- *Structure lessons and homework so that students preview glossary and other course materials.* Students benefit from looking over new material before class. For example, for homework, you can ask them to look at a reading text and mark any unknown words before class. You can also ask them to look up five to ten of what they think are the most important unknown words and write down what they mean. That way, they come to class prepared for the day. Or, you can ask students to listen to a passage before class, asking them only to focus on main ideas. If there is a transcript of the listening, students can read it and also identify unknown words so that they can bring questions to class. Another option is to start class by asking students to skim a reading passage and mark words they don’t know. The key here is not to spend too much time on previewing. Students need to be taught how to preview and not get frustrated or stuck on what they don’t know.
- *Ask questions to students that match their proficiency and confidence level.* Some students’ proficiency level in class will be higher than that of others. For lower-proficiency students, I ask questions that are more fact-based and will be easier for them to understand. This allows

them to build their confidence. For higher-proficiency students, I ask them questions that go beyond the facts, such as implication questions or background questions. In this way, I can include all the students in the discussion. Teachers can also recommend to students that they write down anything they didn't understand during the discussion, so they can go over that topic or question during 7th hour or some other time during the class day.

- *Help students learn how to learn.* Many students don't have strong study habits. We as teachers can help them. We can ask them to identify any challenges or obstacles to their learning, such as time management problems or any mental roadblocks they face. We can then guide them through the process of setting up specific goals and processes to try to overcome those challenges. For example, if a student struggles with time management and concentration, we can teach them the "pomodoro technique." This is where the student decides on a specific task (e.g., studying a list of words) and sets a timer for 15 to 25 minutes and focuses on that task until the timer rings. Then, the student gets a short break of approximately five minutes. During the break, the student can do whatever they would like. Next, the student decides on another task and sets the timer again for 15 to 25 minutes. This process teaches students how to concentrate on specific tasks. The key is they need to practice until their concentration improves, and they can't allow themselves to take a break before the timer goes off. Teachers can practice this with students as appropriate.
- *Use positive reinforcement.* Students can become frustrated easily. I try to keep them motivated by acknowledging good quality homework/quizzes/tests, congratulating them if they help their peers, or noticing if they contribute to a club or newsletter or other departmental activity. At the same time, it is important to not overuse this technique. Students need to feel that it is genuine and that they need to earn the praise. It is helpful if teachers can be specific about what they are praising and not just say "Good job." Teachers can also encourage students to use new words with their peers or teachers, acknowledging and praising them when they do so.

CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is the key to DLIFLC students' OPI and DLPT results. Yet, vocabulary acquisition is a painstakingly long-term process that requires persistent hard work. Stress and anxiety can demotivate trainees. Our students deserve effective learning strategies and instruction to help them acquire a basic high-to-mid-frequency L2 vocabulary.

This article reviewed practical learning strategies and pedagogy in vocabulary acquisition and theoretical grounds of language anxiety and motivation, identified their relevance to the DLIFLC learning context, and proposed rules of thumb to lessen language anxiety, develop motivation, and improve vocabulary learning and teaching. These rules of thumb are far from being complete, and some may not necessarily apply to specific training conditions. Yet, the hope here is this would draw colleagues' attention to continuously exploring suitable learning strategies and teaching methods to assist students in vocabulary learning.

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