

ABSTRACT

One of the most overarching training objectives of the Institute for International Relations (IIR), Hanoi is to turn out diplomats for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam. At this institution, English is considered to be one of the most important subjects in which all the fundamental skills of listening, reading, writing, speaking and translation are taught.

Although great importance is attached to English at the IIR, no project has ever been conducted in the domain of vocabulary acquisition and teaching. Over the past few years, research projects have been formulated for listening comprehension, reading comprehension, translation, grammar and secretarial English (a type of ESP). However, at the IIR, vocabulary acquisition is a neglected area of research. This is unfortunate against the background, as McCarthy observes, that “no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way” (McCarthy, 1990: xiii). Schmitt shares the same point of view as he points out, “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. Vocabulary and lexical units are at the core of learning and communication” (Schmitt, 2000: xi). In the light of McCarthy’s (1990) and Schmitt’s (2000) position about the importance of vocabulary acquisition for communicative competence, this issue should be seriously considered at the IIR, especially since English plays such an essential role in the training programme there.

Since research into vocabulary acquisition is complex and multi-faceted, this thesis narrows its investigative focus to vocabulary learning and teaching strategies. Specifically, it seeks to investigate what kinds of strategies successful and

unsuccessful EFL learners at the IIR employ in learning vocabulary, and what vocabulary teaching methods are employed in class instructions. The findings of this study may sharpen awareness among teachers and learners in IIR about the effectiveness of various vocabulary learning and teaching strategies which can then be utilized in the classroom as well as for fostering learner autonomy.

The participants in this study are 60 students and 15 teachers from the Foreign Languages Faculty, IIR. The findings, derived from the collection of data from three sources of questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations, indicate that in general:

1. Teaching strategies employed in class are not varied. The teachers tend to stick to traditional methods that they have been applying for years and years. In all likelihood, they may not be conscious of other strategies.
2. The teachers do not see it as their task to equip students with a good system of vocabulary learning strategies which they can bank on to improve their learning.
3. Apart from the coursebooks that the teachers are supposed to teach, they are aware of providing extra exercises and activities to enrich student's vocabulary.
4. Successful vocabulary learners use a greater variety of learning strategies and apply them more effectively and systematically than their unsuccessful counterparts. Even so, successful learners fail to apply a wider range of strategies. Unsuccessful learners are hardly aware of the effectiveness of different strategies and do not know how to switch to better ones when their vocabulary learning does not fare well.

5. Both successful and unsuccessful students encounter difficulties in learning vocabulary, with unsuccessful students encountering more. Successful students still have difficulties in poor memory and inadequate productive vocabulary. Unsuccessful students have acute problems in using monolingual dictionaries, poor memory, poor productive vocabulary, L1 transfer in using vocabulary, lack of a good system of learning strategies and thus inflexibility to switch to other strategies when the ones they are using fail to work.
6. Regarding the principles of fostering learner autonomy, successful students adopt more principles than their unsuccessful counterparts. The principles that students are fond of adopting coincide with the ones strongly advised by their teachers. However, the number of principles is comparatively limited.

Having yielded these findings, the study concludes with a number of pedagogical implications as well as suggestions for further research.