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Recent Trends and Innovative Practices in Teaching of English Language Vocabulary for ESL Learners

Abstract

Teaching practices in the field of language are increasingly being subjected to changes at a significantly faster rate. The primary factor for this increased change has been the ineffectiveness of traditional methods and techniques of teaching the English language in ESL classroom. This paper has, therefore, attempted to explore and discuss the recent trends and innovative teaching practices that are driving teaching of English language vocabulary for ESL learners. By drawing on a large body of literature, the paper has established that the current ESL teaching environment is driven by new information and communication technologies, computer-based tools and resources, mobile devices, and innovative theories in the teaching of English language vocabulary for ESL learners. The paper has also established that these new teaching approaches and techniques are quite effective in enhancing the teaching of English language vocabulary for ESL learners. This is particularly due to the numerous advantages and benefits offered by these innovative teaching practices.

Keywords - Trends, Innovative Practices, English Language Vocabulary, Information and Communication Technologies. ESL.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical practices in the field of language have been increasingly changing at a faster rate. Traditional methods and approaches to education are being abandoned for newer and more innovative approaches to learning, teaching, and acquisition of knowledge (Eaton, 2010). Researchers have noted that when learners learn a second language, many consider learning vocabulary as an important, fundamental, but difficult endeavor (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Shen, 2003). With the magnitude and complexity of the mental lexicon of English native speakers' and its association with ESL syllabus objectives, knowledge and skills for teaching English language vocabulary effectively should be considered important, if this essential element of language learning is to be achieved (Nunan, 1999). Thankfully, new trends and innovations are emerging to facilitate the teaching of English language vocabulary for ESL learners. In this paper, some of the most influential innovations and trends in the teaching of English language vocabulary in an ESL environment are discussed, and their effectiveness in enhancing learner competency is analyzed.

The use of computer-assisted vocabulary teaching tools in teaching English language vocabulary has emerged as a significant innovation driving learning in an ESL classroom. For instance, Kilickaya and Krajka (2010a) established that a number of computer-based resources and tools available as software, CD/DVD, or on the Internet, have emerged as innovative approaches that can be exploited by language teachers to teach English vocabulary in the ESL context. Some of the notable computer resources include online glossing tools (e.g., Ultralingua and Word champ), blogs (e.g., WordPress), Online or Internet-based dictionaries, Wikis (e.g., PBworks), and CD/DVD dictionaries (Kilickaya & Krajka, 2010a). Others include digital platforms (e.g. Edmodo, Facebook, cloud-based tools, and multimedia manual), which have created a safe online environment for teachers to interact with learners and their parents; and online corpora, which today allow teachers to access information about appropriate and authentic use of words in speech and texts (Chong, 2016; Kilgarriff et al., 2014). In essence, the use of computer-based online and offline resources in the teaching of English vocabulary in ESL setting provides numerous benefits. From increased interactivity among learners and between learners and teachers to increased convenience of accessing information about English language vocabulary, these tools and resources have become major drivers of current teaching practices in ESL classrooms and vocabulary learning (Kilickaya & Krajka, 2010b).

Within the wider technological context, the emergence of mobile technology coupled with the proliferation of smartphones has made it possible for many non-native speakers to learn English language vocabulary. Mobile phones are essential technological devices, which offer innumerable opportunities in language learning as they can be used both inside and outside the classroom setting, and learners are free to use them anywhere and anytime (Azabdaftari & Mozaheb, 2012; Saran, Cagiltay, & Seferoglu, 2008). According to Chong (2016), mobile learning has helped students to benefit from podcasts like Luke's English Podcast and apps like WIBBU, while teachers have been able to improve on their teaching skills and knowledge through podcasts, such as the TEFL Commute or by listening to hundreds of thousands of fellows on EFL talks. Despite the many benefits of mobile devices for teachers and learners, some ESL classrooms still ban students from using them in classrooms (Chong, 2016; Ramamurthy & Rao, 2015). However, ESL teachers are increasingly realizing the importance of allowing learners to bring their own devices (BYOD) to class for ESL practice in general and teaching of English language vocabulary in particular. As noted by Azabdaftari and Mozaheb (2012), mobile devices can be very effective in enhancing vocabulary teaching in ESL setting. This is because apart from facilitating learning anywhere and anytime, mobile devices also enable learners to get instant feedback, access the Internet whenever they encounter mistakes and problems, and to interact more with their teachers and other learners (Chinnery, 2006).

The field of language learning has also seen a significant shift “from a teacher-centered, top-down approach to a student-centered, bottom-up one” (Chong, 2016, p. 1). In essence, there has been increased facilitation of learners to steering their own learning of English language vocabulary. Researchers have historically argued that student-centered approach to learning is effective since learners tend to learn more by experiencing and doing and less by observing (Zohrabi, Torabi, & Baybourdiani, 2012). In other words, the theory posits that learners should be the architects and initiators of how they learn and acquire knowledge rather than being passive ‘vessels’ who are fed knowledge from expert teachers or instructors (Brown, 2008; Duckworth, 2009; Hopkyns & Nicoll, 2013). Although the concept of student-centered learning emerged at the beginning of 20th-century, the adoption of this trend has seen a rapid increase in recent years, especially with the growing quality and quantity of information on the Internet (Zohrabi et al., 2012; Chong, 2016; Lynch, 2010). This has seen English teachers serving as consultants, facilitators, guides, and coaches; abandoning their traditional role of knowledge-transmitters. In the English vocabulary learning context,

teachers are using techniques, such as ‘negotiated syllabus,’ which involved a discussion and negotiation between teacher and learners, based on the needs and preferences of the learners with the help of the teacher’s advice, expertise, and judgment (Bowen, 1999). This approach has proved popular and effective in recent years in the teaching of English language vocabulary in ESL classroom.

In addition to student-centered learning, dogma or materials-light teaching is another popular trend in the teaching of English language vocabulary to non-native speakers. This approach is based on the understanding that teachers should move from materials-driven teaching to a ‘poor’ pedagogy in which teaching is grounded in the local context and relevant concerns of learners in the room and one that is “unburdened by a surfeit of materials and technology” (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001, p. 40). This approach suggests that teaching should be focused on, and driven by, the content that is provided by the individuals in the classroom. In other words, teachers should use only the resources that they and learners bring to the classroom (i.e., themselves) and any other thing that occurs in the classroom (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001). Although questions have been raised regarding how teachers should respond to and shape the emerging language, this teaching technique has become one of the popular trends in the teaching of English language vocabulary in ESL classroom (Thornbury, 2006). Essentially, it marks a departure from the traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching techniques to unplugged one that provides more time to learner-generated language. It has become a major trend in the teaching of English language vocabulary as a communicative approach that encourages conversational interaction between teachers and learners can be effective in establishing breadth and depth of vocabulary learning of learners.

The use of interactive whiteboards (IWBs) is also considered an important innovative practice in the teaching of English language vocabulary for ESL learners. Although this innovative teaching technique emerged in the early years of the 21st-century, it has become a common practice in many classrooms in the Western world and around the globe (Chong, 2016). Its popularity is driven by the fact that it offers endless possibilities for learners and teachers. For instance, it enables people to save and print notes appearing on the board, its screen can be used as a slide for presentations, its sound system can be used to play listening activities, it allows access to the Internet, and can be used to control the classroom computer, among advantages (Bidaki & Mobasheri, 2013; Chong, 2016). However, the use of an IWB in a classroom can be distractive and may not enhance learning experience, especially if not used effectively to complement teaching and learning (Bidaki & Mobasheri, 2013).

Nevertheless, a study by Katwibun (2014) established that the use of IWB in the teaching English language vocabulary improves learners' academic performance by enhancing their participation in the classroom and their attitude towards learning. Essentially, regardless of the problems associated with this innovative practice in the teaching of vocabulary in an ESL classroom, it remains popular a complementary approach to teaching and learning.

Finally, the emergence of the Internet and the unprecedented growth of social media have particularly created new opportunities for teachers to enhance their teaching knowledge and skills. The advent of this information, communication, and interactive technologies has created an opportunity for English teachers to form online communities that serve not just like a large global staffroom but allow individuals to engage in online continuous professional development (Chong, 2016). Although online CPD is teacher-focused, it is important to note it plays a significant role in determining the level of competence of an ESL teacher (Stoll & Louis, 2007; Tang & Choi, 2009). It also ensures that ESL teachers remain updated with best practices in the teaching of English language vocabulary in an ESL setting (Raza, 2010). Furthermore, considering the fact that most ESL teachers find it difficult to find time and resources to engage in CPD, the advent of online CPD and interactive engagement with peers can make the difference between a good and skillful ESL teacher and a bad one. ELT blogging and Twitter, for instance, have provided a platform and a network of people to offer ideas, advice, and support to one another and the ESL practice. Essentially, this innovative practice has offered new opportunities for ESL teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching English language vocabulary.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to explore and analyze some of the recent trends and innovative practices in the teaching of English language vocabulary in the ESL classroom. As illustrated in the discussion, the current ESL teaching environment is driven by new information and communication technologies, computer-based tools and resources, mobile devices, and innovative theories in the teaching of English language vocabulary for ESL learners. Importantly, it has been argued that the recent trends and innovative teaching practices in this field are largely effective and have been facilitating greater learning of English language vocabulary. This is because the practices offer a number of benefits and possibilities ranging from the increased interaction among learners and between teachers and learners, greater

knowledge and skill acquisition among ESL teachers, independence and collaborative learning, and learner-centered learning.

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