



What a Word Is and How to Learn it with Ease

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Abstract

Learning a language and learning its vocabulary are two sides of the same coin. Yet, knowing a good deal of a target language words is not an easy task, at all. Many difficulties arise. They relate to its form, grammar, meaning, and use. All of which language teachers should take into account while designing and presenting their lessons. Based on research findings in this area, this paper discusses the learning burden words put on learners and some teaching strategies to elevate this burden. It aims at raising teachers' awareness to the fact that different measures should be taken when teaching vocabulary: which words to teach, in what order, with what frequency of exposure, and via which activities.

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1. Introduction

Because words are the building blocks of a language, learners try to know as many of them as possible, but they find some words much more difficult to learn than others. This is so for many reasons. The phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of a word may make it easy/hard to learn. This word learnability is a decisive factor in language instruction; it should not be neglected at any of the various stages of the teaching process, namely selection of would-be instructed words, their grading, presentation, practice, and review. Based on the work of authorities in vocabulary research, this paper starts with a discussion of what a word is. In the light of this discussion, it proceeds with a depiction of the causes of vocabulary learning load, the difficulties each word's feature poses, and the ways to resolve them and ensure better vocabulary learning and retention by learners.

2. What a Word is

What is a word? This is a question that remains with no such a complete, convincing answer despite efforts by researchers to look for it. One major concern for scholars was to reach a universal definition. Therein, however, lies the first difficulty. There is no possibility to have a universal definition that is pretty applicable to all languages, for each language has its own specificities, and 'word' can only be defined in language-specific terms (Haspelmath, 2011). First of all, providing a clear-cut definition is problematic because of what to consider a 'word': A token or a type

(Singleton, 2000). Tokens refer to the number of concrete occurrences of an item; hence, writes, wrote, written, and writing are considered five words. Types, on the other hand, refer to the family or identity of the item which causes the four words in the example abovementioned to be counted as one word: The verb 'write' (Singleton, 2000).

According to Nation and Meara (2002), the reason for defining 'word' suggests to consider it either a token or a type; for example, we count a word every token a speaker utters in order to calculate his speed in words per minute, but we count types of words to evaluate a reader's sight vocabulary size. Therefore, the repetition of the same words is taken into account in example one but not in example two. It is also difficult to delimit word, Thornbury (2002) asserts, because of the many elements involved, namely the class and family the word belongs to, how it is formed, how it sounds, how it looks like, which other words it usually associated or collocated with, and how it is used to mean different things in different situations. Furthermore, there is no agreed-upon definition for 'word' because it is possible to define it in varied ways (Jackson & Amvela, 2007). In fact, different theorists describe the term differently, each in the light of his own field of interest or specialization. Primarily four perspectives are used to account for what 'word' is, specifically phonological, orthographic, semantic, and grammatical (Trask, 2004).

2.1 The Word in Phonology

From a phonological standpoint, 'word' can be defined as an array of sounds uttered uninterruptedly (Harley, 2006), or

it is an isolated unit of sounds preceded and followed by a pause (Elordieta, 2014). However, these boundaries are not so obvious in a stretch of speech where words mix up making it very hard, if not impossible, to delimit each word by a pause before it and a pause after it (Singleton, 2000). Consequently, pauses are not the clearest hints to identifying the start and end of a word; other more obvious cues are needed.

Elordieta (2014) proposes stress, for words in most of the world languages are stressed either at their beginnings or ends. But, this is not the case of English where words usually have only one stressed syllable that can be initial, middle, or final (Harley, 2006). Once more, stress cannot be a reliable way for word characterization because it is inconsistent. Moreover, some words are not stressed at all (e.g. yet, the, if); conversely, some word groups have only one main stress (e.g. harbour master, holiday camp) (Harley, 2006). As a result, the definition of 'word' was stretched to become a phonological unit that can pronounced separately and which does not necessarily equate a word; contractions, compounds, and idioms are good examples of the phonological units, where two or more words form one element with pauses on its right and left edges, making a meaningful unit (Harley, 2006).

To sum up, the phonological word is a designation of any string of speech taken as a unit of pronunciation and which expresses an idea (Harley, 2006). Dixon (2010), on his part, concluded that the phonological word has phonological defining properties (1) segmental features such as pause and word boundary phenomena (2) prosodic features like

stress, accent, vowel harmony and nasalization (3) phonological rules, namely rules of pronunciation which is characteristic solely of phonological word; that is, applied within the boundaries of word and not across it such as vowel harmony. Gardiner's quote (1922, p. 355) is a good summary, too:" A word is an articulate sound-symbol in its aspect of denoting something which is spoken about."

2.2 The Word in Orthography

Orthographically speaking, a word is a combination of letters preceded by a blank space and followed by a blank space; these spaces match the pauses in speaking (Singleton, 2000), and with no spaces in the middle (Harley, 2006) with focus put on the written form only because an orthographic word does not exist in speech (Trask, 2004). A number of arguments against this orthographic definition are found in the literature. In fact, every idea in it has been criticized. For organizational matters the arguments are presented in relation to each part of the aforementioned definition:

... a combination of letters preceded by a blank space and followed by a blank space: Carter (1998) wonders what about languages with systems where no spaces between words are used at all, with Chinese and Japanese languages as typical examples? Besides, in some languages other symbols are used to separate words; Ethiopic languages use a colon-like sign between words instead of pauses (Haspelmath, 2011). In addition, thinking of 'word' in terms of characters' sequence and blanks raises the issue of types, tokens, and lemmas, Carter (1998) notices. He explicates that affixed and inflected

forms are to be counted as separate words, which causes them to appear as separate entries in the dictionary, but of course they do not. The same thing goes for polysemic words; are they to be viewed as different words or only one word with different meanings? (Carter, 1998). In the same vein, Singleton (2000) affirms that this description tends to be relying on word form and token and overlooking the abstract unit 'word' embodies.

... *These spaces match the pauses in speaking*: But, spaces in writing do not always match pauses in speaking (Murphy, 2010). To clarify, the verb 'draw back' is two words in orthography but is one word in pronunciation with pauses only before 'draw' and 'after' back and with no pause in between. Thus, in many similar cases there is a mismatch between blanks in writing and pauses in speaking. Furthermore, pauses are sometimes used not to separate words but to mark emphasis, to check on the listener's comprehension, to signal forgetting, or to rephrase what has been said (Carter, 1998).

... *and with no spaces in the middle*: This description fails to cover a great deal of English words which can be written with or without a hyphen, or which include a white space in the middle and yet remain one word because they mean one thing (Trask, 2004). Among many other examples, the following may be thought of:

- frontline but also front line,
- email but also e-mail,
- lifestyle, but also life-style, or life style.

A writer may opt for any of these orthographic forms freely since it is simply, Trask (2004) affirms, a matter of

individual preference. Besides hyphens and blanks, other characters such as apostrophes can be added to the set of letters forming a word (Carter, 1998). In English, for instance, apostrophes are used in contractions to signal that two different words with two different concepts are squeezed into one element located between two white spaces (Harley, 2006), like in they're = they are, and you've = you have.

... *Focus is on the written form only because an orthographic word does not exist in speech*: Writing took place long after speaking and thus the spoken word existed well before the written one, Singleton (2000) ponders; then, he wonders how about some American indigenous languages which have never being written down? How can 'word' in such languages be defined in terms of orthography?

On the whole, Carter (1998) has qualified the orthographic definition as being substantially practical, yet he has criticized it for being only partial; it is restricted to the writing medium of the language, and it applies neither to the spoken, nor to the semantic, nor to the grammatical aspect of the word. Furthermore, for one thing, each spelling system mirrors the language structural characteristics; and for another thing, many languages have their own irregularities in spelling, so it is hard for a definition of 'word' based on orthography to be workable across various languages (Haspelmath, 2011).

2.3 The Word in Semantics

Writers gave diverse labels for 'word' in semantics: A morph (Haspelmath, 2011), a lexical morpheme (Lipka, 1992), a lexical item or lexeme (Trask, 2004), or a listeme

(Harley, 2006). 'Word', under this view, refers commonly to the minimal linguistic sign (Lipka, 1992); stated differently, it is the smallest unit of language carrying meaning (Harley, 2006). However, there are a lot of words in English that this definition does not capture; compounds and idioms are good examples (Singleton, 2000).

Consider the following: 'homework' is one word with one meaning, but it is made up of two parts 'home' and 'work'; each of which is a separate word itself. In other instances, the two words are not attached even as in 'holiday home', yet the meaning conveyed is one (Harley, 2006). In a totally opposite direction, Singleton (2000) argues that meaning can be expressed in units smaller than 'a word'; these are affixes. To exemplify, let's take the prefix 'un' which means 'not' or the suffix 's' which marks the plural form when added to a noun, and the singular form when added to a verb conjugated in the simple present tense.

Therefore, featuring 'word' as the unit of meaning is too narrow because it cannot consider compounds as words but as phrases, let alone idiomatic expressions (Haspelmath, 2011). Broader semantic definitions of 'word' make up for these shortcomings. Jackson and Amvela (2007) characterize 'word' as being "a unit of thought". This unit can be one word (e.g. book), one block with two units of thought (e.g. bookcase), or a unit of thought stretching over many words (e.g. book a room). Trask (2004) shares the same view. In his terms, a lexical item, or a lexeme, is an abstract unit of the language which can take many forms and express an idea. Explaining his view, he states that any

spoken or written form of any abstract unit is a lexical item; a singular or a plural form is a lexical item, and word tokens (take, takes, took, taken, taking) all refer to the same lexical item 'take' since they are no more than forms the item takes to fulfil some grammar roles in speaking or writing. All in all, meaning is not a satisfactory criterion to rely on to define 'word' for the simple reason that it fails to set off a phrase from a word (Haspelmath, 2011).

2.4 The Word in Grammar

Following a grammar line of thought, words are 'syntactic atoms' combined to form syntactic structures according to some rules (Di-Sciullo & Williams, 1987). Singleton (2000) clarifies these rules when stating that 'a word' is a unit which can take different positions in a sentence without distorting the sentence meaning (positional mobility); still, the unit itself cannot be altered, i.e. no changes are possible at the level of letters (internal stability), like in

- Finally, Cinderella achieved her wish.
- Cinderella achieved her wish, finally.
- Her wish Cinderella finally achieved.

As the examples above show, words can change their places in the sentence, but letters in words must remain unchanged to convey the same message.

In Trask's terminology (2004), a grammatical word is called a grammatical word-form or a grammatical form. As the name suggests, 'a word' denotes 'a form', among many others, that a lexical item takes for grammatical aims. The various grammar forms meant here are the inflections and derivations of the word's base form, he explains. In this fashion, 'form' is at the heart of this definition of

word. Di-Sciullo and Williams (1987) confirm Trask's claim and add that it is the job of morphology to deal with the rules to follow to create what they termed 'the morphological objects' or the word's inflected, derived, and even compound forms.

The grammar approach to defining word, according to Singleton (2000), has two strengths. The first one is that it is the least problematic definition of word even though it is not completely problem free. Empty words, he points out, such as articles and prepositions are internally stable but not externally mobile since they occur only before a noun. Haspelmath (2011) challenges this idea of positional mobility, too. He pinpoints that most words in many languages come almost always in the same order and so they show no external mobility. He continues clarifying that most of the time it is phrases and not words which are movable. Taking the example of English, he notices that the adverbial phrase can change its position in the sentence. The second strength of the grammatical definition is that it can be applied to different languages successfully (Singleton, 2000). Haspelmath (2011), however, does not hold this view; he asserts that since 'word' is a hazy vague notion, it can be defined only in a language specific fashion, and any assertion about a general cross-linguistic conceptualization of 'word' should be taken with caution.

The four definitions of word presented above have been analyzed, criticized, and rearranged. For instance, Allwood, Hendrikse, and Ahlsen (2010) provide a classification of word definitions based on the source of the definition. They maintain

that there are three such sources and definitions may be founded on any of them resulting in

1. definitions based on observation of linguistic communication,
2. definitions based on manipulation, and
3. definitions based on abstraction.

Set one, they explicate, includes the orthographic and phonological words along with the 'gestural word' found in the sign language of the deaf. A gestural word consists of a portion of gesture communication which conveys meaning or a 'gestured message', in Allwood and his colleagues' words. Set two encompasses the syntactic word as discussed earlier, and set three relates to the semantic word with focus on the concepts of word type (the abstraction of token) and word token (the concrete use of type). Jackson and Amvela (2007), on their side, outline three ways by which 'word' was described; these are the word representation, meaning, or formal criteria where: Representation matches the orthographic definition; meaning matches the semantic definition; and formal criteria match the phonological, lexical, and grammatical definitions.

Haspelmath (2011) believes that the definitions of word as discussed so far are biased by the writing traditions and structural properties of the few languages that are well known and well studied. This is a problem that research has to overcome via accounting for each language in its own terms because what goes true for one language does not for the others. He also contends that the many definitions provided here can neither apply to different languages, nor even to different situations within the same language.

This point of view is backed up by Jackson and Amvela (2007) who confirm that whatever definition is given to 'word', it is pledged to some fuzziness, imprecision, and indefiniteness because of the nature of language in general and of 'word' itself in particular, viz. abstractness, multi-facetedness, and multi-meaningfulness. Yet, in an attempt to provide a comprehensive definition for 'word', Jackson and Amvela (2007) suggest to demarcate the concept as a continuous unit of one or more morphemes arranged in a structure that appears in phrases, where a morpheme is the minimal grammatical component and the smallest unit of meaning in the language. To exemplify, one morpheme may equals one word (e.g. in, boy, cat), or more as for complex or compound words (e.g. boys, boy-like, boyhood, cats, catty, cat box) (Jackson & Amvela, 2007, p. 59). They also aver that the phonological word /raut/ corresponds to the orthographic word 'wrote'; both of which connect to the grammatical word 'past tense of the irregular verb write'; all of which match the lexicon word or lexeme 'write', the base word with no modifications (Jackson & Amvela, 2007, p. 58)

According to all these givens, it can be deduced that each definition, be it grounded on phonology, orthography semantics, or grammar, singles out certain aspects of word but none encompasses all of them. A sound definition for word would be one that includes at once more than one feature, similar to Oxford Dictionary's definition where the entry 'word' means "a single unit of language which means sth and can be spoken or written (Hornby, 2000, p. 1551). A word

then is a unit of language, or a morpheme, (grammatical) carrying meaning (semantic), and it can be spoken (phonological) or written (orthographic).

Learning a language is synonymous with learning its words (Zimmerman, 2006; Nation, 2001), and to know a word means to gain knowledge of all the aforementioned aspects: Spoken, written, semantic, and grammatical (Nation, 2001). 'Word knowledge' (Laufer, 1990a) is also referred to as 'lexical knowledge' (Richards, 1976) or 'vocabulary knowledge' (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005),

In this paper, vocabulary and words are used interchangeably based on the definition Ur (1996, p.60) provides for vocabulary. She maintains that, in the context of foreign languages, vocabulary is viewed as "the words we teach in the foreign language. However, a new item of vocabulary may be more than a single word." Therefore, chunks, fixed expressions and idioms, such as *great-grand father, passed away, and kicked the bucket*, are considered by Ur as vocabulary 'items' whose meaning is conveyed by their combination, for they act as one item and mean one thing.

3. The Word Learning Burden

Vocabulary is the core element or the heart of a language (Harmer, 1991; Lewis, 1993), and learning it is vital for language learners (Zimmerman, 2006), but it is a labour-demanding and time-consuming task; which is complicated, among other things, by the words' forms (spoken and written) and knowledge aspects (meaning and use) to be gained (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005). Putting it another way, there is a 'burden' created by learning vocabulary.

Nation (2001) explicates that in order to acquire any new word, the person needs an amount of effort; it is a kind of “mental weight” (p. 23) felt by the learner. Nation further clarifies that each word has a burden specific to it. That is, not all words are equally easy or difficult to learn; the learning burden differs from one word to another. Language learners have to shoulder the burden of expanding their lexical knowledge, and teachers have to make it as light as possible.

4. The Causes

Word learning difficulty is attributable mainly to three causes. Firstly, there is the L2/L1 correspondence: The more the target language is different from the native language, the more it is likely that learners face problems with learning it (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). The opposite is true; whenever the L2 shares a great deal of similarities with the L1, learning it becomes trouble-free (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Typical examples would be Spanish-English or French-English cognates sharing relatively the same spelling and meaning, as shown in the following examples:

mucho/mucha = much

chocolate = chocolate

idea = idea (Spanish/English equivalents)

absent = absent

table = table

force=force (French/English equivalents)

Furthermore, the more languages the learner knows, the more he is likely to learn new ones easily. He will have a source to draw upon, especially if the new language has similar sound system and/or alphabet to the already learnt languages (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Following are cases in point:

visa = visa = visa

rose = rosa = rose

pyjama = pyjama = pyjama

(French/Spanish/English equivalents)

moment = moment = moment

Individual = individuell = individual

nerveux = nervos = nervous

(French/German/English equivalents).

On the whole, the more features of home and foreign languages are alike; the lighter the learning burden is (Nation, 1987).

Secondly, how students come to know about targeted words is a decisive factor in intensifying or elevating the learning load. In fact, unsuitable teaching methods add to the complexity of vocabulary learning whereas proper ones reduce it. Nation (1987) outlines some ways which proved to be effective in solving this specific issue, including attentive study of the word, for better understanding; repeated exposure to the same word over spaced periods of time, for memorisation; and tapping on learners' prior knowledge to introduce new vocabulary, for facilitating grasping unfamiliar words and preventing forgetting them. To illustrate, Nation (1987) contends that it is imperative to take into consideration the connections a word has with other words at the level of form, meaning or any other aspect when introducing it. For instance, learners should not be presented with the following threesome groups of words at the same time because they may confuse their meanings and give a word the sense of another word:

‘Introspection/extrospection/retrospection’

or ‘interpersonal/intrapersonal/transpersonal’

or ‘ascend/descend/transcend’

Thirdly, some words are inherently more difficult to learn than others. They can be

difficult because of their pronunciation, spelling, grammar, or use (Nation, 2001). Some words are hard to pronounce because of the letter clusters they are made up of, stress and shift therein, or use if blended in a longer stretch of speech. Explicit instruction is what Nation (2001) advised to recourse to in this case; teaching of the relationship between sound, script and meaning is essential. It should be done gradually; teachers move from easy-to-learn forms to more difficult ones so that students get used to the grapho-phonemic associations of the language (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Polysemous words are typical instances of word inherent intricacy; to keep their learning burden to the minimum, teachers should avoid presenting learners with the different senses of a word in one occasion; they, rather, have to deal with its basic meaning first and then move to less common meanings (Thornbury, 2002). Likewise, general words which can be used in different situations have lighter learning burden than words which fit only a specific area of use, so they must be introduced first (Laufer, 1997). In the same vein, Thornbury (2002) lays emphasis on the fact that it is much easier to grasp the meanings of individual words than of idioms and phrasal verbs which convey the same message, reason for which learners should be acquainted with the former initially.

Researchers have thoroughly diagnosed the learning problems each aspect of a word generates for learners. Likewise, they have suggested solutions in order to make learning a straightforward process. Accounts of these issues are provided subsequently.

5. The Kinds and the Cures

Form, meaning, and use are the areas which may make learning a word problematic. In the following sections, we will look, in more detail, at each source of word difficulty and how to ease the pertinent learning mental weight.

5.1 Difficulties Related to Form

Both the spoken and written forms can cause difficulty in knowing a word, especially if the primary and second languages' sound and script systems vary considerably.

5.1.1 The Spoken Form

Difficult pronunciation correlates positively with heavy learning burden (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Words made up of sound or consonant clusters difficult to pronounce do make learners feel uncomfortable not only to say them but also to perceive and remember them (Laufer, 1997). Stress, equally, burdens learning words; long, complex, or affixed words (consisting of base words and affixes) with their shift in stress are harder to acquire than words with a regular stress pattern (Thornbury, 2002). For instance, the words *be'ginning/be'gin/'beginner* are easier to learn than *re'fer/'reference/ref'ree* because stress is kept on the same syllable. Similarly, unstressed vowels (e.g. schwa vowel sound like in teacher /'ti:ʃə /) add difficulty to word pronounceability (Laufer, 1997).

The problem may be compound by what Laufer calls 'synophones' (1981) or 'synphones' (1988) (words similar in sound). The following may be good examples of synophones: (a) words like 'latter and ladder' in American English as they are pronounced nearly in the same way (b) non-existent sounds in the first

language leading to producing sentences like ‘where can I *bark*?’ (instead of ‘*park*’) in the case of some Arab speakers; or ‘This is my *browder*’ (instead of ‘*brother*’) as pronounced by several French learners. The task gets harder for students when words are heard or said in a stream of speech and become blended together resulting in new patterns of stress and intonation, very inconsistent with those of the same words when pronounced in isolation (Schmitt, 2010).

To cope with such situations, Schmitt (2010) suggests the following. To begin with, teachers should explicitly establish the links between the word form, meaning and pronunciation. Next, ample practice should follow; students repeat saying the word many times, then they employ it in sentences of their own. The teacher, on the spot, gives them feedback on the pronunciation of the word. Finally, it has to be emphasized during teaching via having students say the word alone and in a stretch of speech for showing them how its pronunciation varies accordingly, Schmitt (2010) asserts.

Nation (1987) adds that gradation in the teaching of pronunciation is necessary to reduce its burden; whenever possible, first and second language words having similar spoken forms should be introduced first whereas divergent ones later on. Equally, sound and consonant clusters difficult to pronounce must be introduced gradually (Nation, 1987). That is, instruction proceeds from least to most complicated spoken forms so that students build upon their prior knowledge of sounds to produce new ones successfully. This also may develop in students a sense for logical or acceptable sound combinations

which will assist them in correctly saying the words and easily storing them in memory (Nation, 1987).

5.1.2 The Written Form

When the writing systems of the home and foreign languages differ, the latter’s spelling-related difficulties become greater and the learning burden heavier (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). It is easier for Spanish or French learners to learn the written form of English words than it is for Arab or Chinese learners. This is the case because Spanish, French, and English use the same script while Arabic and Chinese use sets of letters totally different from that of English. According to Nation (2001), teachers should highlight systematic patterns of connection between the native and target languages wherever possible, and in case the two languages are very similar, focus should be on teaching the underlying features of English that will facilitate future learning and keep the learning burden at the minimum.

Another layer of difficulty exists within English itself. Irregular grapho-phonemic correspondences cause much trouble for foreign students to learn the spelling of English words (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012); they, subsequently, fall in misinterpreting or misspelling them (Thornbury, 2002). In the same way, comprehension, learning, and production are complicated by long words, inflected, and affixed words (Laufer, 1997) and synforms (words similar in form) which include synphones (words similar in sound), syngraphs (words similar in script), and synmorphs (words similar in morphology) (Laufer, 1981, 1988),

A teaching solution is to take into consideration the relationships a word has

with other words. Words similar in form, meaning or other aspects should not be taught at the same time because cross associations may take place, making it more difficult for learners to acquire the words than when met separately (Nation, 1987). To exemplify, the antonyms 'introvert' and 'extrovert' should not be introduced together because learners may assign a word the meaning of its antonym. Also, words similar in form but dissimilar in meaning have to be dealt with one at a time, followed by the other after a certain time. For example, presenting simultaneously words like 'refuse and refute' may result in sentences like: 'He refutes her invitation for the party'. Likewise, exceptions to a rule must be delayed until acquiring the rule itself is achieved. Early teaching of exceptions uneases learning and adds burden to it (Nation, 1987).

In general, to decrease the learning burden of words' orthography, Nation (1987) recommends teaching words with regular spelling patterns first while drawing students' attention to these patterns so that further words are acquired easily. Schmitt (2010, p. 52), on his part, advocates a useful strategy: To focus on visual memory and develop in students a feeling of 'it looks right' for the words learnt. One way this is possible, according to Vadasy and Ron Nelson (2012), consists of considering closely the word's spelling, taking note of it, and learning its meaning and pronunciation, because building such connections between the word's sound, spelling, and meaning results in knowing the word, committing it to memory, and using it productively appropriately. Another way is the use of SMS-based

vocabulary instruction (Chouaf, 2021). Here, the teacher sends short messages with a number of words, their definitions, and example sentences to the students who will have to read them once they receive them on their mobile phones. The same message is resent to students five times over studied intervals of time for an optimal retention effect (Chouaf, 2021). This method assists memorization of words' spellings and meanings because of the repeated exposure to input the students are subjected to (Chouaf, 2021).

5.1.3 Word Structure

Knowing a word is also affected by its structural features. Morphology (root and affixes), inflections, and derivations are trouble inducing in word learning (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). For example, adding different prefixes or suffixes to the same base word results in new words which look alike but carry meanings that are unlike; inattentive learners may easily take one word for another either in reception or production (Laufer, 1991). Receptively, they may take 'exhaustive' for 'exhausted' or 'boring' for 'bored'; productively, they may use 'invaluable' to mean 'not valuable' or 'irradiant' to mean 'not radiant'.

Intentional teaching of word parts and raising students' awareness toward how meaning is altered by affixation and inflection would be a useful strategy (Baudoin et al., 1994). In the case of the English language, a great deal of words is formed by joining affixes and roots, particularly coming from Greek and Latin origins (Baudoin et al., 1994). Teachers should deal with these parts deliberately, and they need to start with high frequency affixes since they enter in the building of

large numbers of words; in this way, students are enabled to guess the meaning of a lot of words even when they encounter them for the first time, which makes their vocabulary stocks grow larger and larger (Baudoin et al., 1994). It is also helpful to teach students that a base word carries the core meaning and that affixes and inflections can alter both its part of speech and/or its meaning either partially or completely since they are semantic variations of the base word (Baudoin et al., 1994). Let's consider the following examples for more clarification:

1. Write – writing (same meaning;
V N no change)
2. See – foresee (different meaning;
V V partial change)
3. Agree – disagree (opposite meaning,
V V complete change)

So, it is very practical to show learners how constituent parts give the word its meaning even though the underlying concept remains the same in varying occasions of the word use (Nation, 1987).

Another reason why some words are hard to learn is 'deceptive transparency' (Laufer, 1989). This occurs with idioms, false friends, polysemous words, synforms, and words with similar morphological structure; when learners, relying on their previous knowledge of "intra and/or inter-lingual clues in the word itself", fail to guess the meaning of such expressions and words (Laufer, 1989, p. 11). In the case of morphological deceptive transparency, for instance, learners may think that when words are made up of roots and affixes, they have just to add the meanings of these parts to get that of the whole word. However, what

if the parts do not mean what they usually mean, i.e. they seem 'transparent' while they are not, indeed? (Laufer, 1989).

To answer this question and by way of exemplification, let's take the words 'disagree and discriminate'. The prefix 'dis' means 'not' and the root 'agree' means 'having the same opinion as someone else... or accept'; accordingly, the meaning of 'disagree' is 'not having the same opinion as... or not to accept'; it is the sum of the meanings of 'dis' and 'agree'. Here, the sense resulting from the combination is correct because the word parts are 'transparent'. This is not the case for 'discriminate', where the meaning of the whole word does not equal the sum of its parts' meanings. In fact, 'discriminate' means 'differentiate', but because it is deceptively transparent, English Language Learners (ELLs) may assign it the meaning 'not charge/accuse', coming from 'not' for 'dis' and 'charge/accuse' for 'criminate' (discriminate = not charge or not accuse), which is a wrong definition or significance.

5.2 Difficulties Related to Meaning

In many instances, meaning-related difficulties arise because of the influence one language has over the other (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Learners with rich first language vocabulary knowledge are likely to acquire target language words more easily and deeply than learners with poor first language vocabulary knowledge do. This is so because they have a source to draw on to learn the words of the new language (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Laufer (1991) spotlights two instances where learners may face problems in learning English. First, when an English word does not exist in L1 (or vice versa),

as in the case of the verb 'to be' which is non-existent in Arabic. Second, on the contrary, when there is more than one-to-one correspondence between a word and its translation. This happens when the same concept in one language is designated by many referents in the other language, as there is only a partial overlap of meaning between L1/L2 pair of equivalents. For example, the adjective 'nice' in English has many counterparts in Arabic depending on the context:

1. a nice view: منظر جميل
2. a nice time: وقت ممتع
3. a nice woman: امرأة طيبة
4. a nice smell: رائحة زكية
5. a nice pass: رمية جيدة
6. a nice suit: بدلة أنيقة

The same applies for the personal pronoun 'you', for it can be used to mean all of the following:

1. you: أنت (singular, male)
2. you: أنت (singular, female)
3. you: أنتما (two males)
4. you: أنتما (two females)
5. you: أنتم (plural, male)
6. you: أنتن (plural, female)

Word meaning can also be problematic for the reason that some English words are intrinsically not easy to learn. Aspects such as polysemy, abstractness, registeral restrictions, and idiomacity lie behind this fact (Laufer, 1997). Polysemous words, or words bearing multiple connotations (e.g. the affective connotations or pragmatic uses of the words: mean, frugal, stingy), and words having overlapping meanings proved to be challenging for ELLs (Thornbury, 2002). That is to say, ELLs find it hard to add new meanings to a word which they already learnt as having a given significance (Laufer, 1991). A

case in point would be the word 'right' and its many corresponding items in Arabic:

1. Right = يمين (opposite of left)
2. Right = صحيح (correct)
3. Right = ملائم (appropriate)
4. Right = حق (prerogative, antonym of duty)
5. Right = حق/عدل (just)
6. Right = تمام! (fine, alright)

Once Arab learners are taught that 'right' means 'يمين', they often face difficulty allocating the other meanings 'تمام!', 'صحيح', 'ملائم', 'حق/عدل' to the same word 'right'. Laufer (1990b) concluded that word inherent factors which interfere with its ease or difficulty of learning relate to the presence or absence of regularity in its aspects. If phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features are regular, difficulty in learning the word lowers and easiness rises. The reverse is true.

Furthermore, teaching that is not suitable increases the burden of learning words meanings. In the case of polysemous words, for instance, it would be unwise to present learners with all the word shades of meaning; this will not but create confusion in students (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Instead, only the core or most useful meaning should be subjected to instruction at first; later on, other senses of the word are dealt with gradually (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Particularly, for first meetings with new words, teachers can use contexts rich with elements from the students' homeland culture to facilitate the learning of these words, then the host culture can be used in further exposure to the same words (Chouaf, 2017). This is a better order of

presentation because tapping on students' own culture to introduce novel vocabulary proved to assist them in better guessing and attaining their meanings (Chouaf, 2017). Another good strategy is to train students in dictionary use skills so that they become able to use words according to their various definitions autonomously (Baudoin et al., 1994; Nation, 2001).

'Deceptive transparency' should be given special attention while teaching vocabulary, for it brings about many ELLs' errors in reception and production. There are learners who think that they know some words, but in fact they do not as these are 'deceptive' (Laufer, 1992). Hence, words with unrepresentative morphology (word parts), idioms, false friends, polysemes, and synforms can be assigned meanings that are not theirs as a result of deceptive transparency. To solve this situation, Laufer (1988; 1989; 1992) approaches the topic in two different ways. On the one hand, she supports raising students' awareness of such deceptively transparent words via instruction; on the other hand, she suggests not overlying on morphological cues to get the meaning of a word or an expression; instead, using the dictionary seems to be more effective since it restricts learners' errors in this regard. A further strategy can be metacognitively-oriented instruction of guessing word meaning from context and/or morphology (its parts) whereby students gain several kinds of knowledge about each strategy: declarative (what the strategy is), conditional (why and when to use it), and procedural (how to use it); indeed, this type of instruction proved to be effective for enabling learners to grow into

autonomous users of such tactics to uncover word meanings and ensure better comprehension of the TL (Chouaf, 2009).

5.3 Difficulties Related to Use

Knowing how to use a word, according to Nation (2001), entails having knowledge of its grammatical behaviour, collocational relationships, and limitations of use. Being knowledgeable of the grammar rules according to which a word is patterned in the TL is integral to word knowledge and use, but the differences between the first language and the second language grammars may induce confusion in learners (Laufer, 1991). This, Laufer added, manifests itself mainly in production where mistakes, most of the time, are made because of the mother tongue interference. Arabic learners, for instance, use the plural form with uncountable nouns producing words like: advices (for pieces of advice), homeworks (for homework assignments), and informations (for bits of information). Conversely, nouns in some languages have no singular-plural forms distinction; therefore, for speakers of such languages, learning nouns in English in their distinctive singular and plural forms adds difficulty to vocabulary acquisition (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012).

Furthermore, the unpredictable syntactic structure of many English words makes learning them daunting (Laufer, 1991).

Grammar learning burden can be reduced, Vadasy and Ron Nelson (2012) ascertain, if grammar and vocabulary are not taught separately. On the contrary, teaching the syntactic behaviour of a given word has to go hand in hand with teaching its meaning. One method is studying example sentences: the teacher with: Students are

set to explain the target word's meaning, to analyse how it is patterned in the grammar structure, to assimilate the rule(s) behind, and finally to produce similar sentences where the word is employed accurately (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012).

For Schmitt (2010), it is not true to think that after learning the word meaning, learning its morphology will take care of itself. Rather, while teaching a word meaning, teachers should talk about its parts and derivational forms. He added that similar attention should be given to instructing the word part of speech because it has been proved crucial for the word acquisition and memorisation; second language learners use their knowledge of word class as a retrieval strategy to remember words. Many studies have also shown that some parts of speech are easier to learn than others; accordingly, instruction should move in line with easiness of learning word categories: form nouns, over adjectives, verbs, to adverbs (Schmitt, 2010). He deems it important to teach such word aspects because they count both receptively and productively. In receptive use, sight vocabulary is important to listen and read with comprehension; in productive use, this knowledge enables students to use words of the same family or of similar morphology appropriately (Schmitt, 2010). A common mistake is students' use of 'different' instead of 'difference' in the structure: The *different* between A and B is....

A further tricky area is that of collocations (Nation, 2001). A good illustration is that of phrasal verbs. The combination 'get+preposition' results in phrasal verbs

such as get up, get in, get across, get ahead, get along, get around...etc. Each one fits a specific context. Being fully aware of which combination among all these should be used to convey the intended meaning is not easy at all (Nation, 2001). Students may produce sentences like: 'They get together (instead of 'get along') very well'.

In fact, collocations are said to have one of the highest rates of learning burden. Nonetheless, it is possible to make them 'lighter' to acquire; Nation (1987, p. 38) advises to teach students to anticipate which "company a word keeps" because of its form, meaning, or a first language equivalent. The prefixes at the beginning of some phrasal verbs allude to the prepositions the verbs go with, because they equate their meanings, like in

1. *Cooperate with* → Co = with
2. *Insert into* → In = into
3. *Transport across* → Trans = across

Similarly, the word 'exam' usually accompanies the verbs: take, retake, sit for, pass, and fail, among others.

Like grammar and collocations, limitations on use have their own burden that they impose on learners. It is a hard task for ELLs to know if a word is frequent or not, formal or not, polite or not, old fashioned or not, technical or not, appropriate for the situation or not, spoken or written (Nation, 2001; Hatch & Brown, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). To reduce this load, Hatch and Brown (2001) propose to sensitise learners to the registeral differences vocabulary have and to train them in dictionary use as this provides them with a wealth of information about words, including their uses. Pair and group work on comparing and contrasting

registers is a good task; students may look for similarities and differences between written stories and oral anecdotes, texts from a popular newspaper and texts from quality newspaper, or extracts from blogs, emails, and films (Hatch & Brown, 2001). In this regard, word-focused activities are also useful. Intensive study of words helps students to grasp their meanings and use (Chouaf, 2021). In an experiment, students were set to deal with words in different exercises; they had to guess their meanings from context, to fill the gaps in sentences using them, to select the right words' equivalents from a list, to paraphrase sentences including the instructed words, and ultimately to use the words, or any form of them, in sentences/a paragraph of their own. The tasks proceed from easy to difficult and from receptive to productive use of the words in question. Post to the intervention, participants were able to improve their receptive as well as productive knowledge of the words (Chouaf, 2021).

From a wider standpoint, researchers proposed to teach vocabulary by lemmas (Hedgcok & Ferris, 2009) or by word families (Nation, 2001; Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012). Using a lemma, instead of a word, as a lexical unit dramatically decreases the learning load because learners will have to handle less and less items (Hedgcok & Ferris, 2009). Using word families as the teaching unit makes learning vocabulary even faster, lighter and more practical as the number of word families is much smaller than that of lemmas (Vadasy & Ron Nelson, 2012).

6 Pedagogical Implications

Word learnability, or what makes a word easy or difficult to learn, plays an

important role in vocabulary instruction as it informs teachers about the most suitable decisions to take when it comes to teaching words. Research findings discussed in this paper clearly show the numerous didactic implications issued from information word learnability provides in different areas, specifically word selection, presentation and memorization. On the whole, instructing vocabulary requires the following:

- ☑ using L1 whenever possible to introduce L2 vocabulary form, meaning, or use,
- ☑ grading the material to be presented, moving from easy to difficult when dealing either with form, or meaning, or use,
- ☑ tapping into students' prior knowledge of the target language when acquainting them with novel vocabulary by moving from familiar to unfamiliar forms, meanings, or uses,
- ☑ varying the methods of presentation, practice, and production of the instructed words, including the use of cognitive, metacognitive, affective strategies, and of old as well as new instructional techniques,
- ☑ strengthening the affective side of vocabulary learning whereby students develop a sense or a feeling for the right form, meaning, or use of words,
- ☑ recouring to spaced repetition and distributed practice over time intervals, for research proved them to be effective for the learning, retention, and use of words,

- ☑ training students in autonomous strategy use to cope with the large amount of words' forms, meanings, and uses which they are expected to utilise in varied situations successfully, and
- ☑ fostering students' both receptive and productive knowledge and use of vocabulary by means of different tasks and activities.

With regard to the difficulties issued from a word's spoken form, viz. clusters difficult to articulate, stress and shift therein, unstressed sounds, homophones, homographs, and homonyms, the learning load can be alleviated if the following requirements are fulfilled

- ☑ The teaching of pronunciation has to be both explicit and gradual.
- ☑ L2 words having similar pronunciation as L1 words should be instructed first, then the move is made towards more divergent ones.
- ☑ The pronunciation of a word must be linked to its form and meaning.
- ☑ It is essential to say and repeat the word in isolation then in combination with other words in a stretch of speech to spot the differences in pronunciation.
- ☑ Productive practice is vital, through having students use the word in sentences of their own, for example.
- ☑ The teacher's feedback on the pronunciation must follow learners' performance.
- ☑ Plentiful opportunities for practice are required to reduce the pronunciation burden.

As far as the written form is concerned, a number of measures should be taken to

make the learning of words' orthography weightless; for example, teachers ought to:

- ☑ call students' attention to the similarities and differences between the native and target languages, especially if they have the same alphabet,
- ☑ establish connections between L1 and L2 scripts and systems for word formation,
- ☑ teach words with regular spelling patterns first, then move to words with more complicated orthography,
- ☑ teach words that are generally confused because of their similar form or morphology such as homophones, homographs, homonyms, and synmorphs,
- ☑ introduce the above mentioned types of words separately to avoid cross associations and leave some time between the introduction of words comparable in spelling,
- ☑ study thoroughly words' parts, or affixes and roots, starting with those involved in the formation of many English words, and those which alter the meaning of the base word, and
- ☑ recourse, on the one hand, to intentional vocabulary teaching putting emphasis on visual memory, spaced review, and production tasks; on the other hand, to unintentional teaching via reading, games, and more recent pedagogical methods like SMS texting.

As for complexity of learning word meaning, it is basically due to the L1 and L2 interrelationships, the intrinsic

difficulty of the word itself, or the inappropriate teaching method via which the learner was taught the word meaning. Here are some ways teachers should think about to lift the heavy load of meaning learning:

- ☑ Words with regular aspects (phonological, morphological, syntactic, or semantic) should be introduced at the beginning of the course.
- ☑ The core meaning of a given word is to be presented first before digging deeper into its other possible nuances of meaning; this is especially true in the case of polysemous words.
- ☑ Initial meeting with vocabulary words is better to be done through the students' homeland culture; this helps learners succeed not only in guessing their meanings, but also in committing them to memory permanently.
- ☑ Cognates, false friends, and strangers, which are words that do not exist in the L1 or L2, should be given special attention.
- ☑ Ample work is needed for raising learners' awareness towards words and expressions, such as fixed expressions and idioms, which are deceptive and not transparent; that is to say, they do not mean what they seem to mean at the surface.
- ☑ Dictionary use is vital to cope with the great number of words to be learned for both reception and production purposes.

Use-related complexities stem from grammar, collocations, and use constraints. Otherwise stated, to use a

word, one needs to know how it fits in a larger context, with which other words it fits, and where and when it fits into it appropriately. Learning how to use vocabulary may be the most problematic as it involves the other aspects of form and meaning, too. Some solutions for lightening this burden are listed below:

- ☑ Teaching grammar is more fruitful when contextualised and coupled with vocabulary instruction; a word's syntactic use and semantic meaning need to be taught concurrently by means of sentence analysis for patterns and rules. In this way, learners can see for themselves the grammatical behavior of the word in question.
- ☑ Recognition exercises are not enough; application of the rules to produce the words taught within the right structures in a variety of contexts is essential, and so is repetition of such tasks.
- ☑ Despite the heavy load collocations impose on learners, still they can cope with them by developing a sense for the words that are likely to go together, based on their forms, meanings, or first language counterparts.
- ☑ Limitations on word use are to be handled via direct instruction of registers, word-focused activities, and rehearsal spread over periods of time.

7 Conclusion

When used sensibly, knowledge about the learning burden vocabulary inflicts on learners helps making the right pedagogical choices. It dictates the approach to follow to teach words' forms, meanings and uses; this can be planned or unplanned. It hints to which new words to introduce in a given lesson and which other words to associate, or not, with them in the same occasion. Being aware of

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