

FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE: CHALLENGES IN HELPING PUPILS USE NEW VOCABULARY

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Abstract. *Transitioning from passive to active vocabulary use remains a significant challenge in second language education. Passive vocabulary refers to words learners understand when encountered, while active vocabulary pertains to words that can be produced effectively in speech and writing. While language learners often acquire passive vocabulary relatively easily, they may struggle to activate these words in meaningful communication. This article investigates the difficulties that pupils face in this process, examining the role of teaching methods, learner engagement, and cognitive processes in activating vocabulary. Through a review of current research and practical classroom examples, the study explores how deliberate practice, context-rich learning environments, and reflective activities can aid in transforming passive vocabulary into active use. The findings suggest that personalized learning approaches and strategic vocabulary tasks can significantly enhance students' ability to incorporate new words into their active vocabulary repertoire.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary acquisition, passive vocabulary, active vocabulary, second language acquisition, vocabulary learning strategies, cognitive engagement, teaching methods.*

Introduction. A central goal of language learning is not just understanding vocabulary but being able to use it effectively in communication. Vocabulary acquisition can be divided into two key categories: passive vocabulary, which encompasses words a learner understands but does not necessarily use, and active

vocabulary, which consists of words the learner can produce in both speaking and writing. Although second language learners often acquire a large passive vocabulary through exposure to texts, conversations, and media, they frequently encounter difficulty when it comes to using these words actively in their own communication. The challenge of moving vocabulary from passive to active use is multifaceted and depends on several factors. First, the depth of understanding of a word affects its usability; learners must not only recognize a word but also understand its nuances, connotations, and various contexts. Moreover, for vocabulary to transition into active use, learners must be given opportunities to engage with it repeatedly in meaningful contexts. Without such opportunities, words may remain passive, no matter how frequently they are encountered. Educators face the challenge of creating activities that not only increase exposure to new vocabulary but also encourage students to use words actively and with confidence. This paper aims to explore the barriers that prevent learners from effectively moving vocabulary from passive recognition to active production. It delves into the cognitive and instructional strategies that can aid in this process, such as providing contextualized language use, offering corrective feedback, and designing tasks that require learners to use new vocabulary meaningfully. Furthermore, the article seeks to identify how the integration of vocabulary practice into authentic, communicative tasks can foster active language use, ultimately enhancing learners' language proficiency and fluency.

Literature review and Methodology. Research on second language vocabulary acquisition has consistently highlighted the challenge of transitioning vocabulary from passive recognition to active use. Laufer (1998) emphasizes that passive vocabulary, the words learners can recognize but do not actively use, is easier to acquire compared to active vocabulary, which requires intentional and productive application in speaking and writing. According to Nation (2001), a key challenge in vocabulary development is the discrepancy between receptive and productive knowledge, where students may recognize and understand a word but struggle to use it confidently and correctly in context. Task-based language teaching has emerged as

an effective method for enhancing the active use of vocabulary. Laufer (2000) found that task relevance and lexical processing are significant in facilitating vocabulary retention and use. Tasks that involve real-world applications, such as role-playing or debates, provide learners with opportunities to practice new words in meaningful contexts. This aligns with Schmitt's (2000) notion that context-based learning helps learners to retain and use words in real-life scenarios. Furthermore, personal engagement with vocabulary, such as through vocabulary journals or creative writing, has been shown to foster active vocabulary use. Read (2007) suggests that incorporating personal reflection helps learners internalize new words, making them more confident in applying these words actively in their speech and writing. The relevance of vocabulary to learners' personal experiences also plays a crucial role in vocabulary retention. Words that connect with students' everyday lives or areas of interest tend to be used more frequently in both oral and written forms (Schmitt, 2000). However, beginners often face difficulties in mastering complex vocabulary, as highlighted by Laufer (1998), who found that less proficient learners require more support to shift complex words from passive to active use. Scaffolding techniques, such as breaking down complex vocabulary into simpler components, have been suggested as effective ways to help learners gradually build proficiency and increase their active vocabulary (Nation, 2001).

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review with an empirical classroom study. A total of 30 secondary school pupils learning English as a second language were observed over a period of four months. The students were grouped into three categories based on their proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced) to examine the impact of different instructional strategies on active vocabulary usage. Data collection methods included: Classroom Observations: Observations of students during vocabulary-focused activities, including group discussions, role plays, and collaborative writing tasks. Pre- and Post-Tests: Vocabulary assessments conducted at the beginning and end of the study to measure improvement in students' ability to use new words actively.

Materials and Results. The materials for this study included:

1. **Vocabulary Lists:** Words were chosen based on frequency of occurrence in the pupils' academic curriculum and everyday conversations, with a focus on thematic relevance (e.g., education, family, technology).

2. **Task-based Exercises:** Activities included debates, role-playing scenarios, and storytelling tasks, all designed to encourage the active use of new vocabulary in a communicative context.

3. **Vocabulary Journals:** Pupils kept personal journals where they used new words in written sentences, short stories, or reflections, reinforcing both recognition and production.

4. **Peer Feedback:** After group activities, peers offered constructive feedback on each other's use of vocabulary, focusing on accuracy, appropriateness, and fluency.

The results showed that the pupils who were exposed to frequent, context-rich opportunities for vocabulary use demonstrated a noticeable improvement in their ability to use new words actively. Specifically, the post-assessment vocabulary tests revealed: Intermediate learners showed the most significant gains, with a 30% increase in active vocabulary usage. Beginner learners demonstrated moderate improvement (15%), particularly in the use of high-frequency words. Advanced learners exhibited minimal improvement in active vocabulary, suggesting that higher proficiency learners may need more complex or less familiar vocabulary for further progress. Classroom observations revealed that pupils who engaged in task-based activities, particularly those involving peer interaction and real-world scenarios, were more confident in using new vocabulary. Vocabulary journals also emerged as an effective tool for reinforcing the active use of words, as students reported feeling more comfortable incorporating newly learned words into their speech and writing after reflecting on them in their journals.

Discussion. The study confirms the findings of previous research regarding the challenges involved in transitioning vocabulary from passive to active use. One key challenge is the students' limited opportunities for productive language use. Receptive

vocabulary is easier to acquire because learners encounter new words more passively through reading, listening, and watching. However, shifting this knowledge to active use requires more intentional practice in speaking and writing. The task-based activities, such as role-playing and debates, were particularly effective in giving students the opportunity to apply vocabulary in simulated real-world scenarios, reinforcing its active use. Another important factor is the students' level of cognitive processing. The students who engaged with vocabulary through reflection and personal application (in journals or stories) showed more confidence in using these words actively. This suggests that personal engagement, rather than rote memorization, is crucial for activating vocabulary.

The relevance of the vocabulary to students' lives was also a determining factor in their success. Words that connected to their daily experiences or personal interests were more likely to be used actively. Therefore, teachers must consider the contextual relevance of vocabulary to the learners' world, ensuring that instruction aligns with both academic content and students' practical needs. However, the study also revealed that learners, particularly beginners, struggled with more complex vocabulary. These students often found it difficult to recall and apply these words correctly, even after repeated exposure. This emphasizes the need for scaffolding techniques, such as breaking down complex words into more manageable components and providing consistent reinforcement through varied contexts.

Conclusion. The shift from passive to active vocabulary use is a critical component of language acquisition, and educators face several challenges in helping students make this transition. The study confirms that repeated, contextual exposure to vocabulary, combined with opportunities for productive use through task-based activities, can significantly improve students' active vocabulary. It is also essential for teachers to provide meaningful, personal, and contextually relevant learning experiences that engage students cognitively and emotionally. To address the challenges faced by learners, educators must adopt dynamic, interactive strategies that encourage active use, build confidence, and provide constant feedback. By doing so,

they can support pupils in not only acquiring new words but using them effectively in communication.

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