Chapter 2

Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we will review the related literature. In doing so, we will focus on important broad areas regarding the teaching of the various aspects of the English language in general and English vocabulary in particular. Though there is not a single work done on this topic in Assam as far as our knowledge goes, there are some related published and unpublished works which will be reviewed here to find out the shortcomings, if any, in those works.

2.2 Vocabulary Studies

N. Dasgupta’s unpublished Ph.D. research work submitted to Gauhati University entitled ‘Vocabulary: A study’ (1975) is a major attempt to study vocabulary. He has shown how important vocabulary is in teaching English along with the criteria of selection and gradation for teaching English vocabulary. He discussed the theoretical background of words, its nature and growth. He has mentioned the factors affecting language development as general growth rate, intelligence, sex, family relationship, bilingualism, socio-economic status etc. He tried to locate the problem at the hypothetical gap that exists between the students of age level 12 (plus) reading in non-English medium schools in Meghalaya. He tried to prepare the glossaries of English words containing the weight of each word and the difficulty value of each word in respect of the students of class VI. Though the work incorporates the possible aspects concerning vocabulary, yet it fails to focus the difficult areas of a vernacular medium student’s learning
different aspects relating to a word. The work ignores the pedagogical implication of different aspects of English vocabulary items.

Another work on vocabulary study is ‘An Investigation into the Basic Assamese vocabulary’ (1978) by Nandita Sarma submitted to Gauhati University for Ph.D. She has shown the learning of basic vocabulary in the first language perspective as well as how the vocabulary grows. Besides this, she tried to show how vocabulary crop up as a problem area in reading materials in Assamese for children. According to her the reading materials may be presented in number of forms- such as an effective conversational form, a simple narration, an interesting story or dialogue and good verses and activity that involves the child readers – all these forms can be used with effect, provided the form is comprehensible and suits the purpose. She has in mind how to help produce the effective reading materials for the children. According to her since Assamese is the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam, it is necessary that a systematic study should be undertaken in order to locate the words which are understood by children.

2.3 Factors of word Difficulty

In order to determine the difficulty of a word, there are a number of factors for a learner. They are usually categorised as ‘intralexical factors’ (intrinsic properties related to the word’s form and meaning) and ‘interlexical factors’ (pertaining to the relationship between the word and familiar words either in L₂ or other languages).

2.3.1 Intralexical Factors

The following is a summary of comprehensive surveys on intralexical factors, which can be found in Laufer (1990b, 1997) and Ellis and Beaton (1995)
although Ellis and Beaton do not explicitly refer to ‘intralexical’ factors, their list is quite comparable to Laufer’s as interlingual aspects inevitably crop up in Laufer’s account. Batia Laufer (cited in Norbert Schmitt and Michael McCarthy, 1997) has shown the intralexical factors of word difficulties with research evidence in “What’s in a word that makes it hard or easy: some intralexical factors that affect the learning of words” Knowing a word involves knowing its form, morphological structure, syntactic pattern, meaning, connotation, pragmatics, lexical relations, and collocations. There are factors that increase learning difficulty includes pronounceability, foreign phonemes and phonotactics, supra segmentals, spelling, morphological complexity, and existence of similar forms, register restrictions, idioms and polysemy.

(A) Phonological factors (Pronounceability)

This seem to particularly affect lower level learners who tend to experience acoustic coding interference rather than semantic clustering exhibited by advanced learners (Henning, 1973, as cited in Ellis and Beaton,1995:109). Of course pronounceability is hardly a purely intralexical factor as Ellis and Beaton (1995) point out that the degree of difficulty that a second language learner faces is determined by the overlap between the articulate feature sets of L₁ and L₂. As Laufer (1990a) has pointed out that phonological difficulty not only affects production, but comprehension as well.

(B) Orthographic factors

This includes sequential letter probabilities and sound–script incongruence. Again it has to be noted that in a sense these are not really intrinsic factors as difficulty occurs only by comparison with corresponding L₁ values.
(C) Morphological factors

This include inflexional and derivational complexity, notably ‘deceptive transparency’, the words that look as if they were combined of meaningful morphemes, e.g. ‘discourse’ meaning to be taken as ‘without direction’

(D) Synformy

Laufer (1988, as cited in Laufer, 1997:147) carried out a study of similar lexical forms (synforms) in order to investigate their error inducing potential and classified them into ten categories, each representing a different kind of similarity, after taking a cue from Henning (1973) and Meara (1982), who demonstrated interference from similar sounding, already known words. Results showed that the most difficult synforms are those differing with respect to suffixes (industrial/industrious) and synforms identical in consonants but different in vowels (affect/effect).

(E) Grammatical factors

Grammatical factors of a word relates to different parts-of-speech. Research evidence suggests the order of difficulty of a word is noun <verbs, adjectives< adverbs. Ellis and Beaton (1995) speculate that may be due to differences in imageability. However, Laufer (1997) cautions that results of most studies may be influenced by confusion with other factors, and suggests considering grammar (part-of-speech) as a factor with no clear effect.

(F) Semantic factors

Laufer (1997) has pointed out that the main factors affecting word learning in this area are specificity and register restriction, idiomaticity and multiple meaning. Specificity and register restriction refer to the fact that register –specific
words are more problematic than general words, as the high frequency of register-related \( L_2 \) mistakes attests. Idiomatic expressions place a considerable learning burden on the \( L_2 \) speaker though these are frequent but opaque by nature at the same time. There the difficulties crop up even for closely related \( L_1 \) and \( L_2 \) with similar use of idiom. Kellerman (1978, as cited in Laufer, 1997:152) found that Dutch learners of English only transferred idioms involving core meaning into English, even when the transfer of peripheral meanings would have yielded a correct \( L_2 \) expression. Multiple meaning refers to the phenomena of homonymy and polysemy. According to Laufer (1997:152) the problem occurs as of “discriminating between the different senses of the same form and using each sense correctly”. Abstract words are often claimed to be more difficult than concrete words as because of their intrinsic complexity. However, Laufer (1997) has pointed out that learning of many abstract words simply requires relabeling of familiar concepts, whereas concrete words may be rendered to be difficult by some other factors.

2.4 Studies on Phonology

Though there are a number of works available in Assamese phonology and English phonology separately, still it is limited as far as the comparative study of English and Assamese phonology is concerned. The works so far done by G.C. Goswami are pioneering on Assamese phonology and morphology. G.C.Goswami’s published research work ‘Structure of Assamese’ (1982) gives a basis for the analysis along with the description and analysis of Assamese phonemes prepared by RCILTS, IIT, Guwahati. Besides this, the contrastive work ‘Sound Patterns of English and Assamese: A study in contrastive ontogenetics’

G.C. Goswami has shown that there are twenty-three (23) consonant and eight (8) vowel phonemes in Standard Colloquial Assamese. There are eleven continuants: two frictionless, viz. the semi-vowels /w, j/; four spirants /s, z, x, h/; one lateral /l/; one trill /r/, and three nasals /m, n, ŋ/ which are stops as well as continuants. He has shown /ɒ/ as low back rounded vowel to represent the sound for Assamese /ɒl/ in the example /l 1/ which means ‘strength’. According to him /ɔ/ is a lower-mid back rounded vowel to represent the sound for Assamese /ɔl/ in the word /b ɔl/ meaning ‘let’s go’. According to him, /a/ is a low central vowel.

According to Goswami there are no diphthongs phonemically found in Assamese although there are phonetic diphthongs /i, e, o, u/ available in unstressed positions after another vowel, or in between vowels. Goswami (1982) shows there are nineteen two-vowel clusters that form two syllable nuclei in all occurrences. He says, ‘there may be clusters of as many as five vowels. There are only two vowel nuclei in clusters of three or four vowels, and three vowel nuclei in clusters of five vowels.’

Anita Verma Tamuli in her research work ‘Sound Patterns of English and Assamese, A study in contrastive ontogenetics’ (2002) has shown the phonemic inventory of English and Assamese through the commutation tests involving minimal pairs. She has also established the phonetic parameters with allophonic variations. According to her, Assamese has 8 monophthongs and there are eleven diphthongs in Assamese. She has shown /a/ a front open unrounded vowel. She has used the symbol /O/ for Assamese /ɒ/ and also /U/ for Assamese /ʊ/.
Verma Tamuli has shown the allophonic variants of both English and Assamese. She has shown by comparing the vowels individually in phonetic details so that a more accurate idea of the similarities and differences involved can be obtained along with the overall conception of the correlates between individual members of the two vowel systems. Similarly as far as consonant phonologies of both English and Assamese are concerned, she has shown the segmental elements of both the languages by establishing and setting out the consonant phonemes along with their allophonic variations. She has shown /ph, th, kh/ as aspirated stops while /bh, dh, gh/ as murmured stops. She uses the symbol /b̤, d̤, g̤/.

### 2.5 Studies on Orthography

Vivian Cook and Benedetta Bassetti’s edited work (2010) ‘Second Language Writing Systems’ is a collection of works by individual authors at how second language learners learn and use the writing system, considering that they are affected by characteristics of both the first and second writing systems. The article ‘Introduction to Researching Second Language Writing Systems’ by Cook and Bassetti tries to present an overview of the writing systems, its types, the phonological transparency of writing systems, other aspects relating to punctuation, orthographic constraints, letter alphabets and symbol formation and of course the description of the cross-writing-system differences in reading, writing and awareness and their consequences for second language writing system users.

Ans Van Berkel’s article ‘The Role of the Phonological Strategy in Learning to Spell in English as a Second Language’ (2010) is an attempt to investigate how Dutch high school students learn to spell English. It aims to find out whether they rely on Dutch spelling strategies. According to him, Dutch
beginner English spellers rely mainly on a phonological strategy which is based on error analysis of data from dictation of familiar words, but gradually start using orthographic strategies at later stages. He vividly describes a contrastive analysis of the spelling system of both English and Dutch and the use of large amounts of elicited spelling data.

2.6 Taxonomies of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Foreign language learners use various strategies to acquire the target language word knowledge. Considering this, many second language researches have made various attempts to classify vocabulary learning strategies adopted by second language learners. ‘O’ Malley et, al; (1985) divided language learning strategies into three major types:

(a) Metacognitive (Strategies for over viewing the processes of language use and learning, and for taking steps to efficiently plan and regulate those processes).

(b) Cognitive (Strategies which involve the manipulation of information in an immediate task for the purpose of acquiring or retaining that information).

(c) Social / effective (strategies dealing with interpersonal relationship and those which deal with controlling one’s emotional constraints).

He finds that repetition was the most commonly mentioned strategy, with strategies requiring more active manipulation of information (imagery, inferencing, keyword method) being much less frequent. Even rote repetition can be effective if students are accustomed to using it. It seems that more mechanical strategies are often favoured.
Cohen and Aphek (1981) found that most students simply tried to memorize the words, which they are not familiar with. Likewise, Ahmed (1989) described different types of learners and found that most of the students took notes on vocabulary, or wrote notes in the margins of their books.

Gu and Johnson (1996) list second language vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Metacognitive strategies comprise of selective attention and self-initiation strategies. Second language learners while employing selective attention strategies identify essential words for comprehension. In the same way, while employing self-initiation strategies, the second language learner uses a variety of means to make the meaning of words clear.

Cognitive strategies entail guessing strategies, use of dictionaries and note taking. While employing guessing strategies, a second language learner draws upon background knowledge and use linguistic clues like grammatical structures of a sentence to infer the meaning of a word.

Memory strategies are classified into rehearsal and encoding. Word lists and repetition are instances of rehearsal strategies. Encoding comprises of association (imagery, visual, auditory, semantic) and contextual encoding as well as word-structure.

Activation strategies encompass those strategies through which the learners actually use new and unfamiliar words in different contexts.

Schmitt (1997) developed a comprehensive inventory of individual vocabulary learning strategies and classified them along two dimensions, thereby providing a first attempt of a serious and comprehensive taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies.
(a) Discovery strategies to determine the meaning of new words when encountered first.

(b) Consolidation strategies to consolidate meaning when encountered again.

Discovery strategies include determination strategies as well as social strategies. A second language learner when encountering a new and unfamiliar word discovers its meaning by guessing from their structural knowledge of the language, guessing from L₁ cognate, guessing from context and using reference materials. The second way to discover a new meaning is employing the social strategies of asking someone who knows the unknown word. Teachers are often asked by the learners to give them the L₁ translation, giving a synonym, giving a definition by paraphrase, using the new word in a sentence, or any combination of these. Of course, classmates or friends even can be asked for meanings. Next we can mention the consolidation strategies, which the second language learners need to employ when to practise and retain vocabulary. Consolidation strategies include social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Social strategies focus on cooperative group learning which can prepare the learners for ‘team activities’.

Memory strategies, which are traditionally known as mnemonics, involve relating the word with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of imagery or grouping. New words can be learned by studying with pictures of their meanings instead of definitions. Second language learners can create their own mental image of a word’s meaning. Likewise new words can be linked to other words of the second language that the learner already knows. It can be sense relation, synonymy or antonymy. Other mnemonic strategy, in order to facilitate
recall of the second language vocabulary form, is visualizing the orthographical form of the word in order to remember it or to make a mental representation of the sound, perhaps making use of rhyming words. The keyword method, which claims highly effective in enhancing the recall of words (Pressley et al, 1982), entails a learner finding a word from his/her mother tongue which sounds like the target second language word.

Cognitive strategies in this taxonomy are similar to memory strategies but are not focused on manipulative mental processing. They include repetition: written and verbal and using mechanical means such as word lists, flash cards, and study aids, like tape recording and vocabulary notebooks to study words. Lastly, metacognitive strategies in Schmitt’s taxonomy are defined as those strategies that are used by learners to control and evaluate their own learning, by having an overview of the learning process in general. Testing oneself is an instance of metacognitive strategies, which provides “input into the effectiveness of one’s choice of learning strategies, providing positive reinforcement if progress is being made or a signal to switch strategies if it is not.” (Schmitt, 1997).

Nation (2001) proposes taxonomy of various vocabulary learning strategies. The strategies are classified into three general classes of strategies: ‘planning’, ‘sources’ and processes’.

Planning involves deciding on where, how and how often to give attention to the second language vocabulary item. The types of strategies employed in the first category are choosing words, choosing the aspects of word knowledge, choosing strategies and finally planning repetition. While choosing words, the learners need to concentrate on vocabulary based on vocabulary goals as well as the lists of high frequency and academic words.
Learners need to be aware of various aspects involved in knowing a word like form, meaning, and use. Most often, the focus will be to know the meaning of the word, yet the other aspects cannot be ignored as far as how to use a word in speaking or writing is concerned. Choosing strategies involve choosing the most appropriate strategy on the part of the learner from a range of known options and deciding how to pursue the strategy and when to switch to another strategy. Planning repetition entails the learner’s repeated attention to the vocabulary item.

The second category in Nation’s taxonomy involves getting information about words. Getting information of the word may include all the aspects involved in knowing a word. It includes analyzing the word, using context, consulting a reference source in L₁ or L₂ and using parallels in L₁ or L₂.

Analyzing word parts focuses on being familiar with common word parts like prefixes, suffixes, when they occur in words can provide a useful basis for getting connection between related words, checking guesses from context, strengthening form and meaning connections, and in a way working out the meaning of a word.

Using context is nothing but guessing from context, which means the incidental learning of vocabulary from reading or listening to normal language use. Learning from context includes learning from extensive reading, learning from taking part in conversation and learning from listening to stories, or other means like films, television or radio.

It is well established that consulting a reference source entails in gaining information regarding vocabulary. It includes formal sources usually written (dictionaries of various kind, glossaries, lists, etc) and more spontaneous sources usually oral including asking teacher for help. Using parallels with other language
focuses on analogies and connections with another language. These parallels can occur with all aspects of knowing a word and are most strictly with cognate words.

‘Process’ is the last category in Nation’s taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies. It includes establishing vocabulary knowledge through noticing, retrieving and generating strategies.

To Nation, noticing involves seeing the word as an item to be learned. Strategies at this level include putting the word in a vocabulary notebook or list, putting the word onto a word card and orally and visually repeating the word. He claims that though these strategies tend to be largely recording type, yet these are useful steps towards deeper processing of words. Retrieval involves the recalling of previously met items. It involves recalling knowledge in the same form in which it was originally used. Generating strategies include “attaching new aspects of knowledge to what is known through instantiation (visualizing examples of the word), word analysis, semantic mapping, and using scales and grids” (Nation, 2001, p. 222). Generating also concerns rule-governed generation through creating context, collocations and sentences containing the word. Besides, mnemonic strategies like keyword technique and using the word in new contexts which require the most effective and deeper level of processing for learning a word across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are also defined as generating strategies.

We, while investigating the Assamese medium learners’ strategies for vocabulary acquisition, adopt Schmitt’s vocabulary taxonomy as a model. Schmitt compared Japanese learners’ strategy use at four different groups of different age levels. He found that there was a trend shift from form-based memorisation
towards more meaning based processing from the lower age groups to the higher. Schmitt used a questionnaire to survey learners’ reported strategy use and how useful they rated each strategy.