Chapter 4

Acquisition of English Vocabulary Items

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter we will discuss various vocabulary learning strategies along with students’ role in learning, motivation of the students and also situation of the Assamese students prevalent especially in rural areas.

4.1 Importance of Vocabulary Learning

“Vocabulary acquisition is the target and most important task facing the language learner.” (Swan and Walter 1984). Vocabulary acquisition is considered as an integral area of language teaching by linguistic researcher. According to Schmitt (1997), a vocabulary learning strategy is any strategy that results in learning of vocabulary. If we go on to extend learning strategy, this covers vocabulary teaching strategy as well since this also leads to vocabulary acquisition or learning. Both are treated in a mutually exclusive manner. The distinction between vocabulary learning and vocabulary teaching strategies is not clearly drawn as O’ Malley et. al. (1985, P.22) rightly comments, “Learning, teaching and communication strategies are often interlaced in discussions of language learning and often applied to the same behaviour.” To arrive at a point vocabulary learning strategies, be defined, as how learners perceive unfamiliar words and vocabulary teaching strategies as teacher’s action in the process of teaching or practise target vocabulary. Learner’s strategies encourage greater overall self-direction for learners. Self directed learners are independent learners who are capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning and gradually gaining confidence, involvement and
proficiency. (Oxford, 1990). Learning strategy includes the learner’s own effort in- learning his / her problem areas whether it be in the area of pronunciation on spelling. It is a self-employed strategy by the learner which includes more motivation and as a result the retention of the word knowledge will last longer. On the other hand, if the teacher assigns students homework that involves writing new words introduced in the class for a problem with the spelling, say five times, until next time, it will be counted as teaching strategy, taken by the teacher.

However, our main interest, here is not to demarcate the line between learning strategies and teaching strategies, yet the same behaviour on the part of the learner is noticeable on the part of the teacher in teaching learning scenario.

Effective second language vocabulary acquisition is particularly important for English as a foreign language learner (EFL) who frequently acquire impoverished lexicons despite years of formal study. (Hunt & Beglar, 2005:1). It is undoubtedly agreed that both learners as well as their teachers are well aware of the fact that learning a second language involves the leaning of large number of words, but how to accomplish this task is often of considerable concern to them. Although researches and language teachers are becoming more and more convinced that vocabulary knowledge constitutes an essential part of competence in a second or foreign language, no comprehensive theories have been proposed up to now that try to explain foreign language growth in terms of lexical development (Bogaards, 2001:321)

4.2 Factors Influencing Learning

The second language learner, while using learning strategies, is
dependent on certain factors so that the learning process becomes effective:

(a) The learner has to be very much dependent on the learner himself or herself. The most widely reported learner factors include sex, language aptitude, intelligence, prior knowledge, motivation, self-concept/image, personality, cognition and learning style. Motivation, emotion and socio-cultural factors may affect the way in which human processes information (Laufer and Hulstjin, 2001 P.7).

(b) The learner has to be dependent on the learning task at hand (e.g. type, complexity, difficulty and generality). Task can be defined as an activity or action which is carried out as a result of processing or understanding language.

(c) The learner has to be dependent on the context. (which includes the learning culture, the richness of input and output opportunities.) Learning context covers two types of context. First it refers to the “learning environment and includes the teachers; the peers; the classroom climate or ethos; the family support; the social, cultural tradition of learning; the curriculum; and the availability of input and output opportunities” (Gu, 2003:2) Second, language context refers to the textual or discoursal place in which a particular word can be found. Activities and reading materials that present words in meaningful contexts may contribute to vocabulary gains and are valued highly by students. (Zimmerman, 1977:136)

4.3 Students’ Role in learning English vocabulary

The students should not only have the urge to learn English vocabulary, but they also should use English in the class-room, so that they can learn the
language by practice. As far as students’ role in vocabulary learning is concerned, they should realize their particular goals on the one hand, and should have the willingness to work hard in learning activities and to progress on the other. In this section, we will deal with motivation of the student and situation of the motivation of the Assamese students in learning English language in general and vocabulary in particular.

4.3.1 Motivation of the Student

In simple terms, motivation, based on the Latin verb for ‘move’ is the force that makes one to do something. It is a process that involves goals, physical or mental activity, and is both integrated and sustained (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996:4-5; Williams, 1997). It is characterized in terms of direction, duration and intensity. Crookes & Schmidt (1991:480) defines motivation as producing engagement in and persistence with the learning task. This is especially true amongst teachers who would describe a student as motivated if he or she becomes productively engaged in learning tasks and sustains that engagement without the need for continual encouragement or direction. Motivation is variously defined, but it is usually conceived as a construct which includes at least the following compositions. (Oxford and Ehrman, 1993; Dörnyei, 2001)

- Significant goal or need
- Desire to attain the goal
- Perception that learning $L_2$ is relevant to fulfilling the goal or meeting the need
- Belief in the likely success or failure of learning $L_2$
- Value of potential outcomes/rewards
Gardner’s motivation theory is considered as the most influential theory in second language teaching/learning scenario. Gardner (1985:10) defined motivation as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language.”

Roe (1977) suggests three levels of motivation to learn English. These are as the following:

- **Level One**: The highest level when English is required to obtain a degree or a desirable job or to get promotion.

- **Level Two**: To improve exam grades or influence career prospects positively.

- **Level Three**: Where English could increase the student’s status, be useful if he went abroad, or widen his knowledge and interests.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguish two types of motivation:

a) Instrumental motivation, which occurs when the learner’s goal has a purely practical value, for example, to gain employment or just pass an examination.

b) Integrative motivation, which occurs when the learner has a desire to associate with the people who use it or because of an intention to participate or integrate in the second language using speech community. Emotional or affective factors are dominant here.

Gardner and Lambert (1959) introduced these concepts and claimed that integrative motivation was more influential among English speaking students’ learning French in Montreal. He found that French proficiency scores obtained
by integratively motivated learners were much higher than those received by instrumentally motivated learners.

4.3.1.1 Integrative Motivation

Integrative motivation is defined as the positive attitudes of learners to identify with and integrate into the target language culture. Integrative motivation is highly correlated with achievement, so of the two orientations, integrative motivation has usually been held superior (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991). Gardner et.al (1992) demonstrated a strong correlation of integrative attitudes with the learning of vocabulary items. Integrative motivation has also been correlated with persistence. Ramage (1991) conducted a study to find what relationship exists between various motivations and the likelihood of a student to continue in a programme. She found that an interest in the foreign culture and in learning the language, but not for instrumental reasons, thoroughly distinguished these students who would continue in a programme from those who would not.

Gardner (Gardner et.al.1992:198) has recently attempted to expand upon the original theory to include other factors. His socio-educational model is “operationally defined in terms of a composite of variables including measures of integrativeness, attitudes towards the learning situation, and motivation.”

Whatever the case, there is still a widespread agreement that integrativeness is one of the number of factors that is closely associated with achievement and proficiency (Benson, 1991; Clément et al, 1994; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gardner et al, 1992; Ramage, 1991; Skehan, 1991; Spolsky, 1988). Even in a context where foreign language learning is largely an
academic matter, student motivation remains socially grounded (Clément et al, 1994:42).

### 4.3.1.2 Instrumental Motivation

Instrumental motivation can be defined as learner’s desire to learn a language for practical purposes (Gardner & Lambert 1959, 1972).

Instrumental motivation is characterized by learning the language for functional purposes, such as gaining employment or passing a test (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991), and reading research materials and translation (Brown, 2000). The functional goals lying behind learning a second language are associated with the pragmatic and practical advantages of language proficiency (Dörnyei, 1991).

Gardner and Lambert (1959) introduced the distinction between integrative motivation and instrumental motivation on the basis of the learner’s orientation (reasons) towards the goal of learning a second language. Integrative motivation is identified as the learner’s positive attitudes toward the target language community and his or her goals to be part of that group. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, is identified as the learner’s positive attitudes to learn the language for extrinsic reasons, for example, increasing occupational or business opportunities, enhancing prestige and power, accessing scientific and technical information or just passing a course in school. Integrative motivation has been regarded as superior to instrumental motivation in leading to better achievement in learning a second language.

### 4.3.1.3 Situation of the Assamese students

When we consider motivation of Assamese students learning English
language in general or vocabulary items in particular, it is found that most of the Assamese learners seem to have instrumental motivation for learning English. They learn English just for the sake of school requirement as English being a compulsory subject like any other subject. In the indigenized varieties of English (IVEs) setting, “the reasons for studying English and the skills desired are overwhelmingly the ones normally labelled instrumental” (Shaw 1981:121). Shaw’s formulation is closer to IVE reality in so far as it recognizes the existence of non-native reference group. The effectiveness of instrumental motivation in promoting second language proficiency has been demonstrated by Lukmani (1972), for a group of ‘non-westernized’ women in Bombay.

Now when we consider student’s motivation to learn a second language in a particular social setting, then we have to deal with whether there is any difference between the second language and foreign language context. Learners of a target language in foreign language context, rarely meet with the target language group. Consequently, those learners have sufficient experience with the target language group to be able to clearly establish attitudes towards that group. Therefore, those foreign language learners will not have the motivation to try to integrate with the target language group. Dörnyei (1991, 1994) believes that instrumental motivation might be more important than integrative motivation for foreign language learners.

Svanes (1987:357) concludes that motivation was an important factor in the acquisition of a second language, the type of motivation was less important.

Various studies have found that motivation is very strongly related to achievement in language learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Then the
question may arise: which is the cause and which is the effect? Does high motivation cause high L2 achievement, or is the satisfaction which results from successful L2 learning responsible for increasing motivation?

Most language teachers agree the sheer importance of the factor of learner motivation in successful language learning. Many a times, it is noticed that lack of motivation becomes one of the reasons that majority of the students fail the examination. It is a reality in front of the learners learning English in Assamese medium schools. Since motivation to learn English is low for Assamese learners especially of rural areas, they are low achievers. It is the teacher who does to increase our students’ motivation; strategies to increase the likelihood of success in learning activities should have high priority. It is an important part of the teacher’s job to motivate learners. In learner-centred approaches to language teaching, however, the teacher’s function is seen mainly as a provider of materials and conditions for learning, while the learner takes responsibility for his or her own motivation and performance.

4.4 Strategies for Vocabulary Learning

A learning strategy involves a series of actions that a learner undertakes to facilitate the learning task. The learner goes on to select, deploy, monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of his actions, and decides if she needs to revise the plan and action.

According to Nation, (2001, P. 217) a strategy would need to:

1. Involve choice that is, there are several strategies to choose from.
2. Be complex, that is, there are several steps inorder to learn.
3. Require knowledge and benefit from training.
4. Increase the efficiency of vocabulary learning and vocabulary use.
4.4.1 Asking Others

It is a classroom application. While encountering the unfamiliar words, the students ask the teacher or another student to explain the meaning of it. It is the easiest strategy that the second language learners use in the classroom. At this stage, students will be working individually. However, the teacher needs to monitor carefully to clarify meaning, check pronunciation and spelling and supply the correct answers where the occasion demands. It is the least laborious strategy on the part of the learners. Based on our observation, it is found that most of the Assamese learners undertake this strategy most without resorting to another strategy.

4.4.2 Using a dictionary

Researchers are interested in exploring the role that dictionaries play in the process of second language vocabulary learning. If the students cannot ask a teacher or a peer, he can still solve a number of problems relating to vocabulary by using a dictionary. Presently, there is a prevalent view that EFL teachers should discourage students from consulting dictionaries because student’s extensive dictionary use can lead to word for word reading (Chin, 1993:3). Again, many teachers were suspicious of the use of dictionaries, feeling that this was synonymous with laziness on the part of the student who was unwilling to use his own resources and guess the meaning for himself. (Gairns and Redman, 1986:79)

However, a learner who makes good use of a dictionary will be able to continue learning outside the classroom situation, and as a result, he will be given considerable autonomy about the decisions he makes about his own learning. There are of course occasions when contextual guesswork is
impossible and a dictionary may be the only study available (Gairns & Redman, 1986:81). It has been shown that students who use a bilingual dictionary learn more vocabulary than students who read without a dictionary. (Luppescu & Day, 1993).

There are three types of dictionaries available: bilingual, monolingual and bilingualized. Bilingual dictionaries can improve the reading comprehension of lower proficiency $L_2$ learners, they assist learning of vocabulary at all levels of proficiency (Hunt & Beglar, 2005:12). The Bilingual dictionaries (a) encourage translation (b) foster one-to-one precise correspondence at word level between two languages. (c) fail to describe adequately the syntactic behaviour of words. (Gu, 2003:8)

In contrast to bilingual dictionaries, monolingual dictionaries can be used to build and expand learner’s knowledge of vocabulary by using up-to-date and reliable examples of sentence, drawn from corpus data that seek to provide information about meaning, grammar and usage (Hunt & Beglar, 2005:12). The monolingual entry in the dictionaries can generally provide more detailed and precise information about idiomatic usage, common collocations, connotations and register. (Laufer & Hadar, 1997:189).

On the other hand, bilingualized dictionary is a combination of both types of dictionaries mentioned above and it includes $L_2$ definitions, $L_2$ sentences information and $L_1$ synonyms of the headword. It essentially provides translations in addition to the good features of monolingual dictionaries.

It is found that bilingualized dictionaries are more flexible and efficient than to use separate bilingual and monolingual dictionaries since beginning and intermediate learners can rely on the $L_1$ translation as well as advance learners
can concentrate more on L₂ part of the entry (Laufer & Hadar, 1997; Gu 2003; Hunt & Beglar, 2005)

One specific feature of the dictionary which provides a valuable learning tool is the use of phonemic transcription and stress marking and students who become proficient at recognizing, these will be even more self-sufficient.

In a learning situation, learners require to use it effectively. How to use a dictionary should be an integral part of syllabus for the intermediate learners. In order to use a dictionary effectively and more efficiently, what exactly should learners do and how their dictionary strategies influence their learning result should be taken into consideration as well.

However, it is interesting to note that a small number of basic Assamese learners follow bilingual dictionary in order to get the translations of L₂ into L₁. In this regard, they are least bothered to word associations.

4.4.3 Guessing From Context

This involves making use of the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning or in some cases to guess from the word itself. The unknown word to be guessed has to have plenty of comprehensible supporting contexts (Nation & Meara, 2002:44).

Learning vocabulary from context is often seen as something as opposed to direct intentional learning and teaching of vocabulary (Kelly, 1990). To materialize learning through guessing from context, learners need to know a large proportion of the words in the text. It is likely that at least 95% of the running words need to be already familiar to the learners for this to happen. (Liu and Nation, 1985).
Contexts provide a lot of information about a word and this to happen, if unfamiliar words appeared repeatedly (Shu, Anderson and Zhang, 1995:79). Learning from context is a cumulative process where meaning and knowledge of form are gradually enriched and strengthened.

Fraser (1999) found that retention of more vocabulary was possible by inferring from context when,

- Consultation of a dictionary followed up the inferring.
- First language based word identification was used. It includes L₁ synonym for the unknown word. L₂ synonym was also effective, but not as effective as L₁ synonym.
- Learners remembered that they had seen the word before meeting it again but they could not recall its meaning before the second meeting.

It can be drawn that for effective vocabulary learning from context, it is important that learners engage themselves in large quantities of interesting reading. Besides this incidental vocabulary learning from context, second language learners need to pay attention to docontextualised learning. Direct vocabulary learning and incidental learning are complementary activities.

It is found that guessing from context hardly takes place in vocabulary learning process by Assamese medium learners, as their own vocabulary size is very limited. We are aware of the fact that a critical factor influencing successful guessing is the learner’s vocabulary size, because this will affect the density of unknown words in a text. Second language learners in general, due to their inadequate grasp of target language are less effective guessers and less effective incidental learners of English vocabulary. (Gu, 2003:4)
Similarly, basic Assamese learners are poor meaning focused readers. The rate of gaining lexical knowledge incidentally through reading is low. The zoom on meaning-focused reading will result in incremental increases in vocabulary size, the elaboration of lexical knowledge and development of reading fluency. A considerable amount of word learning takes place incidentally through exposure to new words in meaningful contexts. (Zimmerman, 1997:123). The core of meaning-focused input strand of a course is a well-organized, well-monitored, substantial extensive reading programme. (Nation & Meara, 2002:40). It highlights that learning lexical knowledge from context through extensive reading is one of the important sources in children’s vocabulary growth.

4.4.4 Deliberate Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Contrary to some recent opinion, deliberate learning of vocabulary appears actually to be more effective than learning the word in context. (Nation, 2001). After getting lexical knowledge, learners may take notes in the form of vocabulary notebooks, vocabulary cards and simply notes along the margins or between the lines (marginal glosses).

Note-taking is one of the basic strategies often recommended by researchers in the field of vocabulary learning. Learners write the words, they encounter, on their vocabulary notebook and add \( L_2 - L_1 \) translation or other knowledge they gradually acquire about the words such as collocation, semantic associations, frequency tallies, roots and derivations. Learners can be reminded to go through their notebooks regularly in order to add more information and rehearse what they already recorded (Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995).
Vocabulary cards are invaluable in consolidating initial gains because of their probability, ease of use and number of communicative activities in which they can be used, as well as their potential for increasing student’s motivation.

Paul Nation (2001) advocates the effective aspects of vocabulary cards use:

- The cards are most effective with the target word on one side, and the first language equivalent (rather than a definition or a picture) on the other.
- Saying the word to them as they look at it helps memorization.
- The card should be regularly shuffled to avoid ‘serial learning’
- Initially, packs of 15-20 cards are best. Later on, gradually groups of up to 50 may be practicable.
- It is desirable to avoid grouping words with similar meanings. (e.g. ‘elbow’ and ‘shoulder’ could easily be transposed in the memory if learnt together). Learning from word cards helps with learning the written form of the word, learning the concept of the word and making the connection between form and meaning.

Glossing serves as a valuable resource. In a comparative empirical research, Hulstijn et. al. (1996:336) conclude that the effect of marginal glosses will be greater than that of dictionary use because readers often do not make use of the dictionary. However, they then refine their conclusion that when learners consult a dictionary, the incidence of incidental vocabulary learning will be as good as, or even better, when they are provided with marginal glosses.

It is found that basic Assamese learners do use marginal glossing more than using vocabulary notebooks or vocabulary cards. They gloss the word in
the margin of the textbook or between the lines. For example,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{‘The cuckoo’} & = \text{‘kuli’} \\
\text{‘The sugarcane’} & = \text{‘kuhiyar’}
\end{align*}
\]

4.4.5 Memory Strategies

Most memory strategies (traditionally known as mnemonics) involve relating the word to be retained with some previously learned knowledge, using some form of imagery, or grouping.

The mnemonic method consists of linking a new word to another family word, usually in L₁, which resembles the new word in form, meaning or both.

(i) Keyword Method

One of the most mnemonics studies is the keyword method, which consists of associating the target word with a word that is pronounced or spelt similarly in the mother tongue, but is not necessarily related in terms of meaning.

The keyword Method is highly effective in enhancing the recall of words. (Atkinson and Rough, 1975). The keyword method has two steps: the student chooses a word in L₁ which is acoustically similar to the one to be learned and then creates a visual image of that L₁ word along with the L₂ meaning. For example, to learn the English word ‘cot,’ basic Assamese learner could choose an Assamese word ‘katari’ meaning ‘knife’ in English, as being acoustically similar and then imagines a knife is lying on the cot. Although, it is effective with all age groups, children find this technique to be an especially enjoyable way to learn vocabulary.

The unknown word because of its formal similarity to the keyword
prompts recall of the keyword. The keyword prompts recall of the image combining the keyword meaning and the meaning of the unknown word.

Although not every word lends itself so easily to this method, it does provide a powerful tool with respect to words which have a high degree of ‘imageability’ (Richardson, 1980:99) or to word pairs between which the learner can form some kind of semantic links (N.Ellis, 1995). While not all students will be disposed to using keywords on a regular basis, yet most will find some use for the technique with words that are particularly difficult to remember.

(ii) Rote Learning

Rote learning involves repetition of target language items either silently or aloud and may involve writing down the items perhaps, more than once. These items commonly appear in the list form such as. (a) Items with their translation equivalents; for example, ‘Polite’ = /nOmrO/ in Assamese, (b) Items with their definition, for example nap=short sleep. (c) Paired items like ‘hot-cold’, ‘big-small’ and (d) irregular verbs; for example, ‘go’-‘went’- ‘gone’ ‘leave-left – left’

Rote repetition can be effective if students are accustomed to using it (O’ Malley and Chamot, 1990). It is invaluable for the basic learners of English. Repetition gives the students the opportunity to manipulate the oral and written forms of vocabulary. As a result of this, many learners of English derive a strong sense of progress and achievement. Repetition can transfer vocabulary items into long-term memory where there is a direct mother-tongue equivalent and very little semantic coding is involved in the vocabulary learning process.
(iii) Word Part Strategies

Knowledge of decomposing a word into its parts enables a learner to guess what a word means, why a word is spelt the way it is, and to remember the word. Students should learn to identify morphemes which recur in a number of words and which can help them to predicate at least part of the meaning and thus assisting them to interpret the apparently novel words. (Rivers, 1981:465)

Knowledge of affixes and roots has two values for a learner of English. It can be used to help the learning of unfamiliar English words by relating these words to known words or to known prefixes and suffixes, and it can be used as a way of checking whether an unfamiliar word has been successfully guessed from context.

Word parts strategies are useful with morphologically transparent words where the meaning of words can easily be determined on the basis of word parts. For example, if the learner knows ‘happy’ then he will be able to understand the meaning of ‘unhappiness’, with the knowledge of prefix ‘un’ and suffix ‘–ness’.

On the other hand, there are some morphologically opaque words for which the components contribute almost nothing to the meaning. These are deceptively transparent words that look as if they were combined of meaningful morphemes. For example, ‘outline’ if decomposed into its morphemes will be misinterpreted as ‘out of line’. Similarly ‘discourse’ will be taken as ‘without direction’. In pseudo familiar words, meaning should be checked against wider context.
In order to make use of affixation, a learner needs to take into account of three skills: breaking an unfamiliar word into parts so that the affixes and roots are revealed; knowing the meaning of the parts; and being able to connect the meaning of the parts with the meaning of the root word.

4.4.6 Summary

Vocabulary acquisition can be best conceived as a process in which L2 learners negotiate word meaning from a text level to a word level. Word knowledge includes the ability to recall meaning, infer meaning, comprehend a text, and communicate orally. No single approach can satisfy all of these skills. The most efficient and practical learning approach of vocabulary involves a carefully selected combination of both explicit and implicit instruction of learning. Generally, it is found out that a learner’s vocabulary increases through three main ways: through being taught or deliberately learning new words, through learning new words by meeting them in context and through recognising and building new words by gaining control to prefixes, suffixes and other word building devices. (Nation, 2001:263).

However, the choice, use and effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies are dependent on the learner himself along with the target words.