

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Learners must learn thousands of words used by speakers and writers of English. Vocabulary acquisition is therefore important if a learner wants to master the English language. Channell (1988) suggested that a new vocabulary item is acquired when the learner can identify its meaning in and out of context and is able to use it appropriately and naturally.

Until recently, vocabulary has been a neglected area of English teaching. Teachers were told to emphasize on pronunciation and grammar. Fortunately, this situation has changed, and many of the newer course books include word study sections and vocabulary practice. However, as Taylor (1990) highlighted, teachers still need to be aware of the methodologies available for introducing and consolidating new lexical items. Accordingly, learners need extensive oral and written practice on the vocabulary taught.

Many learners are able to recognize words when they read and they are also able to memorize the spelling and use the word in their

writing. However, many learners have difficulty identifying a word which has not been presented to them visually.

## **1.1 Background of study**

The group of students selected for this study had been learning English with the researcher for almost a year. The skills focussed in the lessons were reading and speaking. The students did not seem to encounter many problems in the area of reading. They were able to understand reading passages given to them. However, speaking proved to be a bit of a challenge to the students. They were hesitant to speak English and at some points during the lessons, refused to speak at all.

Several reasons may have caused this condition. The students may have felt anxious and nervous in speaking a foreign language. They might be afraid of being teased and laughed at. Another possible reason was that the students may have lacked the language required to communicate. The information they were expected to communicate may have been beyond their experience and knowledge.

## **1.2 Purpose of the study**

Due to the small scale of this study, the researcher decided to focus on one of the factors that affect the speaking ability of young learners. The main reason for this study was to ascertain the effectiveness of vocabulary activities in improving the speaking abilities of young learners. Students often complained that they were not able to express themselves verbally due to limited knowledge and vocabulary in that subject.

The researcher conducted this small study on a group of standard four students who have been learning English with her. It was hoped that the study would help to determine the validity of this claim, to a certain extent.

### **1.3 Rationale of the study**

Although many students said that their main purpose in learning English was to be able to speak it, many students did not talk readily in class, and the teacher ended up doing most of the talking. Foreign language teachers often tend to assume that conversation in the language classroom involves nothing more than putting into practice the grammar and vocabulary skills taught elsewhere in the course (Nolasco & Arthur, 1987).

Some may argue that conversational competence can only be achieved through fluency activities or natural language interaction outside the classroom. There is also the view taken by others that controlled activities do help students develop confidence as well as the ability to participate in and maintain simple, commonly encountered conversations (Nolasco & Arthur, 1987).

Bearing this in mind, the researcher designed and adapted several speaking activities to help students take the first steps towards taking part in conversations in English. To provide the knowledge and information required in the speaking activities, several vocabulary activities were carried out with the students.