THE CHALLENGE OF EFFECTIVE VOCABULARY TEACHING

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Helping students develop vocabulary competence is one of the main challenges English language teachers face. This paper addresses the main aspects we should consider when planning and developing lessons in terms of vocabulary improvement. To achieve that objective, we will analyse the linguistic background and principles of vocabulary teaching and learning, as well as some ways of opening up vocabulary.

Introduction

Teacher training books and materials concerning English language teaching have promoted the teaching-learning process in terms of communicative functions. Even methods and aims that are mainly concentrated on improving the four skills, general improvement, and the importance of vocabulary have not been very relevant. That is because grammar and pronunciation have been given the most emphasis. It is obvious that those areas involve words, but teachers do always have to cope with the students' perennial question 'How can I learn more vocabulary?'. Words are essential, and the lack of them leads to feelings of insecurity, a very common syndrome among foreign or second language students. Consequently, the major explanation one can give to this situation is that students are not taught enough words in class; words needed when talking to people, watching TV and reading.

Recognising those motives, this paper focuses on the main aspects teachers should consider when planning and developing lessons in terms of vocabulary improvement. We will start by identifying common problems in learning vocabulary. We will then focus on basic elements of vocabulary learning and teaching. After that, we will address key principles of teaching and learning vocabulary, and finally, highlight some options for handling vocabulary in the classroom.

1. Common problems in learning vocabulary

Perhaps we ought to begin by looking at some things which can go wrong when someone tries to learn vocabulary in another language. Some of the symptoms of bad vocabulary learning and teaching are:

• Inability to retrieve incorrect vocabulary that has been taught. This is the most notorious kind of vocabulary-learning fault.
• Use of vocabulary inappropriate to the given situation.
• Use of vocabulary at the wrong level of formality. This is rather similar to the previous symptom — it also has to do with inappropriate use of the language. We tend to use the most formal language found in textbooks in normal conversational situations, with results that sound strange to the native speaker. The reverse can also happen when a learner picks up a slang or colloquial expression and uses it inappropriately.

• Possessing the wrong kind of vocabulary for one's needs. It is necessary to lead learners to the vocabulary related to the situations and/or areas of study they are going to be involved in.

• Using vocabulary in a non-idiomatic way.

• Using vocabulary in a meaningless way. This is frequent when students are required to report information from texts. To do it, the learners merely lift phrases from the text. It means that the grammatical and contextual clues in the passage are enough to give the framework for the answer. The effect is that the students are using the target language, but they are not learning it, since no connection has been made between the vocabulary and meaning.

• Incorrect use of the dictionary. Some students are not aware of the most efficient way to use a dictionary; others go to the other extreme. This can kill interest and even interfere with comprehension because the reader/listener is so concerned with the individual words that he or she is less aware of the context which gives them meaning. It also results in very slow and inefficient reading/speaking.

• Use of incorrect grammatical form, spelling, pronunciation, or stress.

2. Basic elements of vocabulary learning and teaching

Given the preceding problems in learning/teaching vocabulary, it seems important to look at the basic elements in the study of lexis which have obvious teaching implications and which were highlighted by Wallace (1984). The first element to consider is form and meaning. It is possible to 'know' a word without necessarily knowing how to use it in all its various forms. For example, a learner can know the use of the adjective 'big' before knowing its comparative and superlative forms.

The second element refers to the common argument which infers that it is better to teach common words before we teach more unusual ones. However, we need to remember that frequency is not the only criterion for vocabulary selection. In certain learning situations, rather unusual words may be of the greatest use. So, words may be learned or taught because they are seen to be of special relevance to particular situations in which the learners find themselves, or might find themselves. In the following sample, the student uses vocabulary on the basis of the context of the definition he writes about castles.

In general, all the castles has a lake and big gardens, and forrest's with many tree's and waiters in the kitchen. In the door, a watchman and a barman in the tearoom. In the towers boxes old clothes and reserved food.

Definition of "A Castle" by Luis Guillermo Forero C. (10 years old).
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The third element has to do with English for specific purposes vocabulary. This element deals with the idea of special kinds of vocabulary (words or expressions) which are relevant to special interests or fields or knowledge. There is another aspect to this, however, and it is the question of learnability. In situations where English is taught as a second language, learners have a more difficult task. The serious problem for them is probably not technical language as such, but the language framework in which the technical expressions are placed. Apart form certain typical grammatical or rhetorical features, the non-technical framework will probably consist of two kinds of language: first, basic lexical items, and secondly, other subtechnical words and expressions typical of academic discourse (that is, such as, hence, etc.) which the subject specialist may assume the student should already know.

We can now refer to the structure and content element. A basic distinction is often made between structure words and content words. Structure words may be considered part of the grammar of the language; they are almost 'empty' of meaning when considered in isolation. Modal verbs, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and certain adverbs (e.g. very, rather, etc.) are often put in this category. Content words are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs formed from adjectives (e.g. beautifully).

Regarding meaning, we can say that most common words have a wide denotative range; technical words tend to have a narrower denotative range, i.e. they usually have one very specific meaning, and this is another thing which makes them easier to learn. Some words, of course, have a common meaning and also a technical meaning.

When talking about connotation, we should point out that certain words are chosen because they convey some kind of feeling or judgement. Rather similar to the connotations of a word are its associations, but whereas connotations relate to the conventions of the language, associations relate more to the individual or the culture. Clearly there is not much to be done about the private associations words have for individuals, but the teacher may well feel that associations which relate to the culture of the target language, and certainly the connotations of a particular word, are part of the 'meaning' which has to be learned.

Wallace (1984: 20) explains the element connected to relationships between words, as follows: "The meanings of certain words are so closely related that they are often confused by the learners. This is specially true of words with reciprocal meanings such as words like 'borrow/lend, bring/take'. Another teaching problem arises with words which are in the same rough area of meaning or semantic field. One explanation is the words which can be used instead of the noun 'horse', such as 'colt' ('male horse or pony under the age of 4'), etc. The problem is not, of course, that such distinctions exist, but that they may not exist in the mother tongue of the learner; or, if they exist, the distinctions may be made in a different way".

Another element of vocabulary learning and teaching is concerned with productive and receptive vocabulary. Everyone who learns a foreign language is usually able to recognise many more words than he can produce. This involves pronunciation, spelling, appropriate grammatical form, and so on. It may therefore be important for a teacher to decide which words he wishes a student to produce correctly, and which words he wishes him merely to recognise. This pedagogical element of vocabulary learning and teaching is exemplified in the sample below. It can be specifically noted in the teacher's feedback.

The Most Stressing Period of my Life

vocab.   *vocab.*

Many people say that the most stressing and difficult grade or level at school is 11th grade. I don't think so, for me maybe this one has many responsibilities, and maybe pressures, but 10th grade for me was very, very stressing.

• • •

At the middle of the term, I was very bad at all the results, and I had to leave many *vocab* things and tried to focus more on school. Was very difficult, but I could make it. But all and the good results, were very stressing for me, for all the pressure on school and in my house.

But everything ended happy, by the way, I was one of the best students at the end of the level, so I felt very proud of my results and my goals. Now I know how to share time between school and other things that I like, trying to get good results, now, in the last level of school thinking about university.

good – check good vocab.

Extracts taken from the composition "The Most Stressing (sic) Period of my Life" by Luis Guillermo Forero C. (16 years old). Used with permission.

Pronunciation, spelling and stress are important aspects of a word. Stress determines intelligibility. As we know, pronunciation and spelling are related only partly in English because the English sound-symbol relationship causes many problems. This is one of the reasons why learners are puzzled by words which have very different forms but are pronounced identically, and also by words which are very similar in form but are pronounced differently.

Finally, we should refer to the cognates and 'false friends' element. Speaking a language which has a kind of relationship in certain areas with English (this is the case of 'cognates') is an advantage. Nonetheless, words often have very similar forms in related languages, but totally different meanings (this is the case of 'false friends'). For us Spanish speakers, 'important', 'secretary', and 'doctor' are samples of cognates, whereas 'exit', 'terrific', and 'embarrassed' are examples of false friends.

3. Principles of teaching and learning vocabulary

Before pointing out the principles, we should first clarify the implications that 'knowing' a word has. To 'know' a word in a target language as well as a native speaker involves the ability to: recognise it in its spoken form; recall it at will; relate it to an appropriate object or concept; use it in the appropriate grammatical form; in speech, pronounce it in a recognisable way; in writing, spell it correctly; use it with the words it correctly goes with; use it at the appropriate level of formality; and be aware of its connotations and associations.

Teaching and learning vocabulary should be based on several principles: clear aims, need, situation presentation, quantity, frequent exposure and repetition, meaningful and contextualised presentation and inferring procedures in learning. Quantity will depend on different factors varying from class to class and learner to learner. Regarding exposure and repetition, it should be said that if the word has to be part of the learners' productive vocabulary, they must be given the opportunity to use it as often as is necessary for them to recall it at will. Additionally, meaningful presentation requires that the word is presented in such a way that its denotation or reference is perfectly clear, which is not always an easy task.

Once we have the principles established above, it is important to see how they relate to the learning of vocabulary in the mother language and the second language. First, in the mother tongue, 'knowing the words' is a matter of survival, or at least of social competence. Secondly, the mother tongue learner mostly controls his own rate of learning. Therefore, he learns what he needs as he needs it. Thirdly, the mother-tongue learner is exposed to an enormous quantity of his own language and has tremendous scope for repetition of what he learns. Fourthly, the language is nearly always encountered in an appropriate situation and in the appropriate context. Lastly, since words are learnt as they arise out of a felt need in a particular situation, they usually have a clear denotation.

Of course, there is no guarantee that the vocabulary of the second language can be dealt with in the same way as the mother tongue vocabulary. Circumstances are very different. However, it is interesting to note that many of the principles and basic elements which have been pointed out before apply equally well to both languages.

4. Vocabulary in the classroom

At what time in discussing a passage with the class should we start teaching individual vocabulary items? How should we choose items to teach? What are the main methods we should use to teach them? Besides the bad symptoms, the principles and the basic elements of vocabulary learning and teaching, as teachers we are supposed to plan our work in terms of answering those questions. Eliciting the meanings of unknown words is a time consuming process, and also, not all words can be guessed from context; consequently, as teachers, we will have to choose carefully those words we think can lead the students to an understanding, and we will also have to decide how we are going to lead the students to that kind of understanding. We will also have to be careful about the kind of habits we may promote in our students. If not, we will encourage the tendency to concentrate on individual words rather than overall meanings. This has to do with the role of the teacher as the main supplier and organiser of English language input. As noted by Cameron (1994), we need to

be aware of what is known about learning and the organisation of ideas in order to best present our learners with new language and enable them to learn it.

Another common situation is that perhaps many teachers give up too easily and give the meanings to students. Probably more time ought to be spent on getting students to make 'educated guesses' at word meanings. And this is something that needs to be practised at all stages of the class, but not with the easiest alternative of translation. That is because the result of this overuse leads to another problem: the target language can be very little emphasised in the foreign language lessons. The solution, we know, is not the other extreme. On the whole, however, translation of vocabulary into the mother tongue should be kept under control, and it should not interfere with the extra-exposure to the target language that explanations might bring. As can be seen, the teachers have to weigh up the situation, i.e. what the purpose of the lesson is and how long it will take to elicit the vocabulary.

4.1. Vocabulary techniques used in classroom interaction

The main element one should analyse when using techniques is that they should be concerned with productive vocabulary and the development of the learners' ability to use the context to infer meanings. Among the techniques we can list are the ones explained by Morgan and Rinvolucri (1986) and Wallace (1984): pre-text activities, presentation of new words, dictionary exercises, revision exercises, word sets, working with texts, vocabulary in context and idioms and multi-word verbs.

As there are detailed descriptions and exemplifications of those techniques in TESOL

(Teaching English as a Second Language) and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) books, we can now concentrate our attention on two fields that have not been promoted enough: vocabulary in context and idioms.

4.1.1. The teaching of vocabulary in context

Taking the principles of teaching vocabulary into account, it is necessary to consider various ways in which contexts can be exploited for vocabulary teaching purposes. Among the suggestions Wallace (1984) describes, we can draw attention towards the following ones:

• Inferring or guessing. The teacher looks for words the students might not know, but which are fully supported by the context, so that their meaning might be inferred or guessed.
• Listing words which are related in meaning.
• Allowing students to develop knowledge of word-meaning and also of related forms, by giving them ample information to infer the meaning and also to use the word productively.
• Inferring meanings by analysing their internal structure.
• Directing the learners' attention to the markers. By this means, students can identify the structure of a context and how statements relate to each other.
• Finding out which students know (or think they know) the meaning, then helping the others guess it, and finally, checking with the other group.
• Providing students with the meaning and then asking them to find the word or phrase. This is a useful technique, especially in the sense that it cuts out the problem of students having to produce the explanation.
• Attempting to make some sort of 'meaning bridge' between the target word and its mother language translation (this could be done by

means of drawings, posters, and picture dictionaries).

It happens very often that vocabulary is taught in context, but is not stored and memorised in context. Therefore, as with any passage for comprehension, the first task would be to ensure that students have an overall understanding of the main information in the passage. Only when it exists, should the student be asked to infer the meaning of individual words. Furthermore, a lot of vocabulary work will be done incidentally as it arises naturally out of the discussion of the meaning of the passage.

4.1.2. Learning and teaching idioms

Learning idioms has always been very difficult for second/foreign language learners. A common problem we have to face when planning and developing programmes is that idioms can be regional, short-lived and confined to a particular group. In this part we mention some reasons why idioms are difficult to learn, including the fact that most materials for teaching idioms are inadequate. To help teachers prepare materials for teaching them, criteria are suggested for deciding which idioms to teach. All of these will help students understand and produce idiomatic English.

The learning of idioms must be considered an integral part of vocabulary learning. But, as highlighted by Irujo (1986), some difficulties are involved in such process:

• *Non-literalness*: Idioms are not literal; they do not mean what the individual words mean.

• *Exposure to idioms*: Idioms are usually omitted in the speech addressed to second-language learners. But learners' first exposure to idioms occurs mainly in non-interactive situations – such as TV and movies -, where

there is no opportunity for negotiation of meaning, rather than in interactive situations which allow learners to seek meaning clarification and receive feedback on use.

• *Correct use*: Even when learners do master the meanings of some English idioms, it is still very difficult to learn to use them correctly. Idioms vary in formality from slang ('You got it') and colloquialisms ('He kicked the bucket') to those which can be used in formal situations ('Run the risk'). In addition to situational appropriateness, many idioms have grammatical constraints. On the other hand, if learners try to rely on their mother tongue to help them use idioms in the second language, they will be successful in only a very few instances. In most cases, this strategy will produce an incorrect and often comical form of use.

·   *Teaching materials*: Many second-language teaching materials ignore idioms or relegate them to the 'other expressions' section of vocabulary lists without providing exercises or other aids to learning. Materials designed specifically to teach idioms do provide exercises to help learners master them, but many of them are inadequate: exercises which involve understanding usually require comprehension only and do not ask students to produce idioms. These include matching the idiom with its definition or substituting one for the other; multiple choice exercises where the correct definition or paraphrase is chosen, and completion exercises where the correct idiom is chosen from a list and inserted into a sentence. In some cases, exercises requiring production of idioms are included only in review lessons which occur no more than two or three times in the book. Thus, one of the difficulties in learning English idioms is the lack of suitable materials for teaching them.

As the teacher has to decide which idioms to teach, there are some criteria that can be

considered when doing so: First, frequency of use — even when no frequency lists of English idioms exist. Secondly, appropriateness — colloquial use or slang should be avoided. Thirdly, simplicity of form and vocabulary. Fourthly, similarity to first-language idioms (this is useful only if the members of the class share the same first language and the teacher knows it). And fifthly, student-generated idioms lists. One way to avoid having them is to teach those idioms students encounter and want to learn i.e. through pop music. Below I present a sample in which the student integrates idioms in a composition about music after having been exposed to a song.

Their first two albums, "Bon Jovi" (1983) and 7800° Fahrenheit (1985) had not much success, but gave them a name in the music industry. Was their third album, called "Slippery When Wet", released in 1986 with a song called "You give love a bad name", the one that made Bon Jovi, one of the most important and successful bands ever. Their next album, "New Jersey" (1988), had five top ten, number one songs. Being the most important U.S band of that time, they gave lots and lots of concerts around the world. When the tour end in 1989, they were sick of the music business, and sick of each other so they took a time. In 1990 Jon made the soundtrack of "Young Guns II" a successful movie of that year, and Richie a solo project with Eric Clapton, called "Stranger In this Town". In1992 they decide to talk each other, Jon and Richie decided to gave up their fights, so in that year, Bon Jovi published their fifth album called "Keep the Faith", one of the most important albums of their career. In 1994 they released "CrossRoad" an album with their big hits, that included their most important hit: a power ballad called "Always". But this was one of the most difficult years for the group. The bass player, Alec, was fired after having serious problems with the members of the band. The group didn't replace him. Since 1994 the bass has being played by High McDonald, a guy that has been working and helping them since their first album.

good — be careful with tenses and negative past

Extract taken from the composition "Bon Jovi"
by Luis Guillermo Forero C. (16 years old). Used with permission.

The aspects mentioned above lead us to a common assertion: we need to integrate idioms into the English language programme. Learning idioms is, or should be, an integral part of vocabulary learning in a second language and they should be included even at beginning levels.

Conclusion

What has been said about how vocabulary is acquired should be encouraging since it shows us that learners can be their own best teachers if and when they are exposed to the target language in an appropriate way. It is unfortunate that most learners of a second/foreign language are not exposed to it in situations outside the classroom as native speakers are. They can, however, be exposed to the target language in appropriate forms: access to books and magazines which are within their vocabulary range, a class library, encouragement to continue reading at home, a record of what each student is reading, and activities demanding the use of vocabulary learnt before, are some of the alternatives one can easily propose.

For learning to be effective, attention must be paid to the students' own process of learning; and for adequate, motivated learning to take place, we have to go beyond the descriptive frame of lexicography and semantics: the 'dictionary meaning' is only a first step.

What has been featured does not mean that there should always, or even most times, be a separate section of the lesson plan for vocabulary practice. This is sometimes done because many textbooks have lists which tempt the teachers to do it that way. In general, the teacher should prepare in advance lists of words or phrases to be explained — if possible by the students as they arise naturally from the text or the situation. Additionally, it should be stressed that it is safer for us teachers to devise our own vocabulary questions, techniques and activities since it is very likely that they respond better to our learners' characteristics.

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