

TEACHING AND LEARNING VOCABULARY – A REVIEW OF SOME USEFUL APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES

*Senior Lecturer, Sonia Shtereva
Varna University of Economics*

Abstract

Key words: vocabulary, approach, structure, lexis, context

The paper emphasizes on the importance of teaching and learning vocabulary in EFL courses. It starts with stressing on the reasons why an extensive vocabulary is such an important asset. It is pointed out that words are the building blocks of thought. They are the means by which we understand the ideas of others and express our own opinions. Words are the tools with which people think, communicate, and learn. The paper reviews three approaches to teaching and learning vocabulary. The first one is the analytical approach, i.e. analyzing the structure of words. The learners must have a clear understanding of the component units of words and how these units are put together to form new meanings. The second approach reviewed in the paper is the contextual approach, or guessing the meaning of words from the context. It is important to teach students to recognize and utilize the function of the context and teachers should know how to train students in this skill. Finally, the paper dwells on the so called lexical approach, referring to some authors, led by Lewis, who argue that language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word pre-fabricated chunks. Chunks include collocations, fixed or semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and according to him, occupy a crucial role in facilitating language production, being the key to fluency. In conclusion, it is underlined that the goals of vocabulary teaching must be more than simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. And the most important task of the teachers should be to foster learner independence so that learners will be able to deal with new lexis and expand their vocabulary beyond the end of the course.

What the elements are to chemistry, what the sounds are to music, are words to language.

Dr. Ernest Klein

Why is an extensive vocabulary such an important asset?

Words are the building blocks of thought. They are the means by which we understand the ideas of others and express our own opinions. Without a

sufficient vocabulary, one cannot communicate effectively or express ideas. Words are the tools with which you think, communicate, and learn. The more words you know, the better you can think, communicate, and absorb knowledge; not just about English, but about everything that is important to you. There is a general agreement that a possession of a large number of vocabulary items is necessary to success in social, professional, and intellectual life; that vocabulary is a vehicle for thought, self-expression, interpretation, and communication.

Vocabulary is one of the major problems confronting EFL learners. Because of their limited vocabulary, they cannot communicate their ideas as clearly as they would like to and they cannot grasp the ideas transmitted to them. Their listening-comprehension, writing, and reading abilities are hampered by their limited vocabulary.

Having a limited vocabulary is also a barrier that prevents students from learning a foreign language. If learners do not know how to expand their vocabulary, they gradually lose interest in learning.

There is not one best method to teach vocabulary. Teachers may use a number of helpful approaches to enrich the learners' knowledge of words, thus improving their reading ability, promoting and fostering their listening comprehension, and enhancing their communicative skills.

Analyzing the structure of words (analytical approach).

Learners must be taught the structure of words regularly and systematically. They should have a clear understanding of the component units of words and how these units are put together to form new meanings. Students often try to build up their word power through rote learning, memorizing words as separate units unrelated in structure and meaning – a process that is both boring and frustrating. Words are elusive, and unless we understand their structure, by analyzing them into their component units, we cannot fix them permanently in our minds. Students should be equipped with an understanding of the principles of word construction – how the words of the English language are constructed of smaller elements and how they can be taken apart into their component units. An understanding of the structure of English words will facilitate learning and enhance recall.

For example, a vocabulary-building program can utilize the roots as the basic elements around which other derivatives cluster. The base can be introduced first with its meaning (most often derived from Latin or Greek), then a list of the derivatives with examples illustrating the use of each. E.g.

ROOT	MEANING	WORD
cred	believe	credible, incredible, credulous, credulity, credibility, credit, credo
spir	breathe	inspire, conspire, respiration, perspiration, inspiration, spirit
ver	truth	verify, veracity, verity, veritable
voc	call	evoke, revoke, invocation, vocal, evocative, convocation
duct	lead	induct, conduct, deduct, induction, deductible, aqueduct

The suggested program, of course, should not rely exclusively on the 'root' paradigm technique. Words can be grouped into clusters on the basis of their affixes, too – that is, the prefixes and suffixes. Knowing the meaning of a prefix or suffix will definitely help learners understand the meaning of a word. It should be noted as well that prefixes usually do not change the class of the base word while suffixes do.

Here are some examples with prefixes:

PREFIX	MEANING	EXAMPLES
dis	the converse of	discomfort, disarmament, discourage, disconnect, disembark
mal	bad	malfunction, maltreatment, malnutrition, malpractice,
mis	wrong	misconduct, misdeed, mismanagement, misunderstanding
bi	two	bilateral, bilingualism, biannual, bicentenary, bigamy

What are the advantages of such an approach?

- Learners can master and more easily retain words whose relationship can be clearly seen and understood. Each word then reinforces and is reinforced by others.
- Learners are usually unable to identify or recognize words that are related or are derived from the same root unless such relations are pointed out to them. When this is done, they gain a better insight into familiar words and a clearer and sharper picture of their meaning. Their enjoyment of reading will eventually increase, and they will learn more through extensive and intensive reading.

- Knowledge of how the language is built makes the learners feel more secure with unfamiliar words. This feeling of security will develop their confidence in themselves, an important factor in language learning.

Guessing the meaning of words from the context (contextual approach).

Many professionals support the idea of inferring word meanings from contexts. Kruse (1987)¹ suggests introducing vocabulary items in such a way as to allow the student to infer or guess the meanings from the context. She believes that students should be encouraged to make intelligent guesses about word meanings. Clarke and Silberstein (1977)² think students can often obtain a general understanding of an unfamiliar word if they continue reading. Krashen (1986)³ supports the position that vocabulary is best acquired incidentally and effortlessly through reading.

Undoubtedly, guessing word meaning from the context is possible. However, the question is whether it is also possible subjectively for students to be prepared to recognize and utilize the function of the context. So we need to know how to train students in this skill.

Nation (1983)⁴ gives a very good model on how to guess the meaning of unknown words:

- Look at the unknown word and decide its part of speech. Is it a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb?
- Look at the clause or sentence containing the unknown word. If the unknown word is a noun, what does this noun do, or what is done to it? And what adjectives describe it? If it is a verb, what nouns does it go with? If it is an adverb, what verb is it modifying?, etc.
- Look at the relationship between the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and other sentences or paragraphs. Sometimes this relationship will be signaled by conjunctions like *but*, *because*,

¹ Kruse, A.F. 1987. Vocabulary in context. In Methodology in TESOL. pp.312-17. Ed. Michael H. Long. New York: Newberry House Publishers.

² Clarke, M.A., and S. Silberstein. 1977. Toward a realization of psycholinguistic principles in the ESL reading class. *Language Learning* 2, 7, pp.135-154.

³ Krashen, S.D. *We acquire vocabulary by reading: Teaching our students in a proficiency-based classroom*. Schenectady, New York: New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers, 1986.

⁴ Nation, L. S. P. 1983. *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. English Language Institute, Wellington: University of Wellington.

if, when, or by adverbs like *however, as a result*, etc. The possible types of relationship include cause and effect, contrast, time, exemplification, and summary.

- Try to guess the meaning of the word.
- Check if your guess is correct.
 - See that the part of speech of your guess is the same as the part of speech of the unknown word.
 - Replace the unknown word with your guess. If the sentence makes sense, your sentence is probably correct.
 - Break the unknown word into its prefix, root, and suffix, if possible. If the meanings of prefix and root correspond to your guess, it is good.

According to Nation (1983:89), in order to acquire this strategy the students must learn to watch for the following clues:

- *Structural clues*. Students use structural clues to determine the type of grammatical category of the new word. This tells them the kind of meaning to infer or look for.
- *Definition clues*. Students should learn to notice the various types of definition clues. Among these are the parenthesis and footnotes, which are the most obvious ones. Synonyms and antonyms also often play a definitional role.
- *Inference clues*. These require a higher level of analytical skill and practice than the previous types. By using the sum of information in a sentence or paragraph, students can understand an unfamiliar word.
 - Students can infer meanings of words by recalling similar situations or experiences and by making the appropriate inferences.
 - Students can often guess a word because it causes a result, or it is the result caused by something described in the text.
 - Sometimes students can guess the meaning of a word by an explanation or a description given in the same sentence or paragraph.
 - Students can learn a definition through the association between an object and its function or purpose for use.
- Many English words are formed by using prefixes and suffixes. Teaching these meanings can help students decipher meanings of unknown words by analyzing the words' structure.

The teachers should organize the teaching so as to facilitate the development of the basic skill of guessing (Twaddell 1980)⁵. A certain amount of vagueness in guessing the meanings of words must be accepted. The teacher should not expect students to come up with exact meanings while guessing in this manner. Teachers should also help students realize that “through successive encounters with a word and successive guessing in context after context, we sooner or later learn more and more precisely the meanings of the once unfamiliar word. By the time we have encountered a word often enough, the accumulated exclusions have subtracted enough from the vagueness, and the associations of the word with its meanings have become increasingly precise.” (Twaddell 1980).

The lexical approach and Task-Based Learning

Some authors, led by Lewis (1993)⁶ argue that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching because ‘language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar’. His most important contribution was to highlight the importance of vocabulary as being basic to communication. If learners do not recognize the meaning of key words they will be unable to participate in the conversation, even if they know the morphology and syntax. On the other hand, grammar is equally important in teaching and therefore, it is not the case to substitute grammar teaching with vocabulary teaching, but that both should be present in teaching a foreign language.

Lewis himself insists that his lexical approach is not simply a shift of emphasis from grammar to vocabulary teaching, as ‘language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word pre-fabricated chunks’ (Lewis, 1997)⁷. Chunks include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and according to him, occupy a crucial role in facilitating language production, being the key to fluency.

An explanation for native speakers’ fluency is that vocabulary is not stored only as individual words, but also as parts of phrases and larger chunks, which can be retrieved from memory as a whole, reducing processing difficulties. On the other hand, learners who only learn individual words

⁵ Twaddell, F. 1980. Vocabulary expansion in the TESOL classroom. In *Reading on English as a second language*. Pp. 439-457. Ed. K. Craft. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, Inc.

⁶ Lewis, M 1993. *The Lexical Approach*. LTP.

⁷ Lewis, M 1997. *Implementing the lexical approach*. LTP.

will need a lot more time and effort to express themselves. Consequently, it is essential to make students aware of chunks, giving them opportunities to identify, organize and record these. Identifying chunks is not always easy, and at least in the beginning, students need a lot of guidance.

Hill (1999)⁸ explains that most learners with ‘good vocabularies’ have problems with fluency because their ‘collocational competence’ is very limited, and that, especially from Intermediate level, we should aim at increasing their collocational competence with the vocabulary they have already got. For Advance learners he also suggests building on what they already know, using better strategies and increasing the number of items they meet outside the classroom.

Apart from identifying chunks, it is important to establish clear ways of organizing and recording vocabulary. According to Lewis (1993), language should be recorded not in a linear, alphabetical order, but in collocation tables, mind-maps, word trees, for example. He also suggests the recording of whole sentences, to help contextualization, and that storage of items is highly personal, depending on each student’s needs.

The idea of what it is to ‘know’ a word is also enriched with the collocational component. According to Lewis (1993), ‘being able to use a word involves mastering its collocational range and restrictions on that range’. In order to turn receptive vocabulary items into productive ones, we need to refine the learners’ understanding of the item, exploring boundaries between conceptual meaning, polysemy, synonymy, style, register, possible collocations, etc., so that students are able to use the item accurately.

We must also take into account that a lexical item is most likely to be learned when a learner feels a personal need to know it, or when there is a need to express something to accomplish the learner’s own purposes. Therefore, it means that the decision to incorporate a word in one’s productive vocabulary is entirely personal and varies according to each student’s motivation and needs.

Logically, production will depend on motivation, and this is what teachers should aim at promoting, based on their awareness of students’ needs and preferences. Task-based learning should help teachers to provide authentic, meaningful texts in which students engage to achieve a concrete

⁸ Hill, J. 1999. Collocational competence. *English Teaching Professional*, 11, pp. 3-6.

output, using appropriate language for the context.

Lewis also defends the use of 'real' or 'authentic' material from the early stages of learning because 'acquisition is facilitated by material which is only partly understood' (Lewis, 1993, p.186). Therefore students need to be given tasks they can accomplish without understanding everything from a given text, because this is what they will need as users of the language. He also suggests that it is better to work intensively with short extracts of authentic material, so they are not too daunting for students and can be explored for collocations.

The Lexical Approach and Task-Based Learning have some common principles, which have been influencing foreign language teaching. Both approaches regard intensive, roughly-tuned input as essential for acquisition, and maintain that successful communication is more important than the production of accurate sentences.

Conclusion

Teaching vocabulary is a very important task in teaching English. Students might communicate well, having learned all the basic structures of the language. However, they need to broaden their vocabulary to express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wide range of situations. Students might even have a receptive knowledge of a wider range of vocabulary, which means they can recognize the item and recognize its meaning. Nevertheless, their productive use of a wide range of vocabulary is normally limited, and this is one of the areas that need greater attention. Therefore, teachers should be concerned not only with students understanding the meaning of words, but also being able to use them appropriately, taking into account factors such as oral/written use of language, degree of formality, style and register, etc.

The goals of vocabulary teaching must be more than simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. We must use teaching techniques that can help realize this global concept of what it means to know a lexical item. And we must also go beyond that, giving learners opportunities to use the items learned and also helping them to use effective written storage systems.

By using successful techniques to learn new vocabulary, students will find words easier to remember and will become more motivated in class. And the most important task of the teachers should be to foster learner independence so that learners will be able to deal with new lexis and expand their vocabulary beyond the end of the course.