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TEACHING VOCABULARY - WHAT IT MEANS

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the history of vocabulary teaching and the developments that place in the modern times. It begins with the proposition that there was no obvious of vocabulary till the beginning of the 20th Century. The belief that simple vocabulary enhance teaching languages led to further research in the area that spearheaded by scholars such as Michael West. The offshoot of such research resulted in producing new types of controlled and graded materials (West's Graded Readers). In the modern day' invention of the computers taking frequency counts of huge corpus has become also provided newer insights into vocabulary teaching. The paper ends with a these developments.

Without grammar very little can be conveyed... but without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.

-Wilkins D A

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching has been an ancient art and perhaps can be dated back to the beginnings of human civilization. Right from the time, huh learnt to communicate, there existed language in some form and every into the community was taught (learnt) the language, and this include vocabulary as well. It is easier to say this, but to find evidence of w teaching happened is very difficult. However, we have recorded the history of early civilizations from different parts of the world that dates back to five or six thousand years. In all these civilizations, interestingly, teaching was confined to the learning of religious texts and most of the learning happened orally leaving little scope for changes or growth of languages. This was because the teachers expected reproduction of the texts without any scope for change in tone of the utterance or use of lexis and grammar. As days progressed, and the population began to grow triggered by curiosity, man started discovering natural resources, migrate of comfort, food and wealth thus resulting in diversification of languageof region specific new vocabulary. The diversifications when they became gave birth to new languages.

As mentioned here, language teaching was holistic and teaching vocabulary per se was not practiced. The first instance of teaching vocabulary in some attributed to Amarasimha who compiled his thesaurus during the 12 India. His work popularly called Amara Kosha is in three cantos. This is in

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Sanskrit of all the existing nouns and verbs and their synonyms. were asked to memorize this entire work to become familiar with all the language. This attempt was restricted to the learning of Sanskrit language, it is worthwhile to remember this as a singular and isolated incident in t i language teaching in India. This paper has a focus on the teaching of English and the subsequent part of the paper will discuss the developments in the area of vocabulary teaching with respect to teaching English in the Indian context.

A brief history of ELT in India: Though the British came to India in the year 1600 CE, no systematic teaching of English existed till the beginning of 19th Century. Teaching English became a formal part of the Indian education scene after 1853 CE with the publication of Wood's Despatch. During the initial days, with the use of Grammar Translation and the Direct Method, vocabulary teaching was nonexistent. It was at the beginning of 20th century that certain psychologists surmised from anecdotal evidence the problems learners faced in learning English as a foreign language. Two scholars Thorndike and Lorge came out with a list of 10,000 most frequently used words that could help build a `permanent part of students' stock of words' (Thorndike 1921) This created awareness among others that there was a 'need to pay special attention to the teaching of graded vocabulary. Subsequently this idea was carried forward by another pair of scholars Richards and Ogden. Richards was a psychologist and a critic whereas Ogden was a linguist and a language philosopher. A list of 850 words which was called Basic English' was produced with the argument that this would facilitate learning English easily and promote international communication. Ogden and Richards rewrote classics using Basic English and this was not a very successful process. Though Basic English was not put to extensive use in language teaching, it enjoys a place in the history as an attempt to extend the facility to learn English by larger mass of people. In the next section we will look at the work carried out by Michael West and in many ways this was a pioneering work.

Michael West and GSL: Michael West came to India as a school inspector and worked in Dacca (1913 — 1932). Legend has it that while observing one of the classes he found the teacher being very effective but using little English in his class. On enquiring he found that the teacher was in fact using English all through the class, but was speaking it with a heavy Bengali accent. This led West to rethink on the priorities given to teaching English in India and surmised that teaching reading and writing should take precedence over listening and speaking. Further, he believed that the reading texts could be written using simplified vocabulary.

In order to achieve this goal, West resorted to the frequency counts with a corpus of five million words. He was able to identify the 2000 most frequently used words (word families2) and listed them in an alphabetical manner and compiled them in the form of a book known as General Service List of English Words (popularly called GSL3). This book has several pedagogic implications, for each item entered in the book provided the following information:

a. Frequency of the word (the number of times the word occurs in five million words)
b. Different meanings the word has and the frequency of meanings (This is indicated in percentages)
c. Meaning with less than 5% use has a set of square brackets against the meaning [].This is to indicate that such meanings need not be taught.
d. 2000 Headwords are listed alphabetically
e. Each headword is followed by a list of its derivatives and these are not numbered. Therefore GSL effectively helps one become familiar with more than 2000 words

Modern research conducted by Paul Nation and others has established that knowing these 2000 words in today's world helps one understand 90-95% of the colloquial speech and 80-85% of common written work. This is indeed commendable. (Nation 1990)

Michael West went further to make GSL an applied instrument. The 2000 words on the list were divided into six plateaus or levels. Each level had words progressing from more frequent to less frequent words or becoming progressively more complex, thus facilitating learning by the young learners. West used words in each plateau to

produce reading materials, and these books were called Graded Readers or New Method Readers. At the end of each lesson, a list of new words learnt was given and the learner was also informed about the total number of new words learnt in the lesson, and the total number of words in learners' repertoire.

West had definite views on vocabulary teaching. Based on his studies he concluded that the ratio of new words to known words in a running text should be ideally placed at 1:50. This meant a new word had to be introduced to the learner once in every 50 words. He maintained this ratio in the books he produced for the learners. This ratio, though it is difficult, is maintained in the production of textbooks to dates. Having made a statement on a few scholars who created awareness about teaching vocabulary, let us now focus on the actual teaching techniques.

What does teaching vocabulary mean? In order to understand this we should know what a 'word' is. In fact it is difficult to define a word6. Definitions such as: smallest meaningful unit; a unit of grammatical analysis; etc are not complete in themselves. A word is something we realize because of the boundaries it has. The boundaries can be perceived more easily in a written text rather than in continuous speech. Whatever the definition, a word and its concept are subconsciously acquired by each one of us in our mother tongue and this holds good for any other language we learn subsequently. How we learn words and what do we mean by learning these words will form the larger focus of this section.

Knowing a word means knowing it's from, meaning and use, construction, derivatives and other factors such as these. These aspects become clear to us when we use the words in speech or become familiar with them through reading. When we think o° a language like English, a word may have a set of affixes and a root. A combination of these two or the root alone can constitute a word e.g. both come and coming are words. In this pair the first member has no affixes, while the second has ing as an affix adding a specific meaning to the word. This means that we should be familiarnot only with words like come, but also with smaller parts called affixes such as: a-, it-, im-, -tion, -ing, -ment; etc.

Occasionally these smaller parts are not visible, particularly when they combine with a noun to form its plural e.g. cattle + plural = cattle; or with a verb to form its past form e.g. put + past = put. This aspect constitutes a very important part of learning vocabulary.

Another aspect brought out by M Lewis in his Lexis Approach8 is to focus on lexical chunks or formulaic expressions. English used by most of the native speakers is characterized by the use of such expressions and they form a major part of vocabulary learning (Choudhury, A S 2010). Look at the following examples where the meaning is derived from a group of words rather than individual tokens: by the way; to cut it short; in sum and substance; last but not the least; heartbeat; grassroots; upset an applecart; here you are etc. The lexical chunks constitute what is called collocations9 or multi-word units for a group of words tend to occur together.

Words are largely learnt through exposure to the language. One way we can explain this is by using an analogy. Words are like people. They are born, they develop or grow, and as they age, they meet their death exactly the same way we people do. Let us extend this analogy. The towns and cities we live in are crowded with people. We cannot claim to know every individual who lives there. However, we are able to recognize some people by their names and face. Some faces are familiar to us, but we do not know their names. These are people who commute with us, or live in the same locality as we do, or shop in the same area. There are certain people whose names we know, but we do not know them nor are we able to recognize them when we see them. These are people who occupy some positions of importance in the city council or hold an official status. Words are also similar to these people we have described. All the words in a language are like the people who live in your town. No one knows all these words nor is it necessary for us to know them all. We know some of these words which are essential their meanings, use, spelling etc. These words are like people who we know by name and also recognize them when we meet them. This is possible because we come across them frequently and work in close association with them. There are

certain words we can understand when we read them, but we do not use them in our own language. These are words like people whose faces we are familiar with but do not know their names. There are certain other words which we can understand in the context of their use but are remotely familiar with them.

This analogy tells us three things. Firstly, in our repertoire we have certain words which we can use easily. These form part of our productive vocabulary, or we can use them while speaking and writing. Secondly, there are certain other words which we understand, and these form part of our receptive vocabulary. We recognize them and understand them when we hear someone speak or come across them while reading a book, but hardly use them in our speech or writing. Our receptive vocabulary is always larger than our productive vocabulary. Thirdly, there are certain other words when we hear them get a vague idea of what they could mean but do not understand them properly or be sure of their meaning. We may need a dictionary to understand their meaning, use or reconfirm our guess. Such words are yet to become part of ourreceptive vocabulary. They are on the border, and depend on how soon we can make them part of our receptive vocabulary. And then there are hosts of words we do understand at all except recognize them as English words.

This analogy has implications to learning vocabulary. We have a repertoire of words which keeps growing. With the help of words we know well, we need to learn new words by association, use and exposure. This is similar to extending the friends circle with the help of existing friends. Both processes are lifelong events.

Having said, how vocabulary is learnt in a natural setting, we should revisit t, question `what do we learn when we learn words?' A simple answer to this question can be 'we learn to use them.' Words belong to various categories. Two ma categories of words that all of us recognize are the content words and the structure words. Structure words are just a few in number — about 200 (Tickoo 2003) while the content words are open ended and there are no exact estimates of how ma words there are in any living language. English language is said to have the large vocabulary among all the living languages with more than a million words (Grads D 2010). We cannot possibly learn a million words in our life time, nor is it really necessary for us to learn them all. Even educated native speakers have knowledge about 10% of these words, and a majority of these words are part of their receptive vocabulary rather than productive. If this is the case with first language learner learners of English as second language, may require far fewer words for their use English is in restricted contexts. Let us see if this is true. A native speaker has great exposure to the language in its natural contexts and thus is capable of acquire larger vocabulary. However in the case of a second language learner, the exposure often restricted, and while communicating with a fellow member, the learner has t' option of switching from one language to another thus reducing the need to have very large vocabulary in the second language".

We have seen that a vocabulary of 2000 words in GSL can help us comprehe~ nearly 80 to 85% of the written text and 90 to 95% of the spoken languac (Nation 1990). In today's world with many more developments having taken plac and with the introduction of computers, the need has increased to about 3000 4000 words (Nation ISP 2009). When we say that a learner learns 3000 word the number refers to the word families rather than to words in isolation. We ha' discussed what word families and lemma mean earlier in this write up. Let us tak a second look at this.

A word has several features such as meaning, pronunciation, spelling, grammar, us, collocation, derivatives, origin etc. When learning a word though it is essential for to be aware of each one of these features, it is not necessary to know each aspect for all the words we learn. In Indian schools most of the time the focus is on teaching meaning and occasionally a teacher pays attention to mentioning the grammar the word. Little or no importance is given to the pronunciation and use. Often learners repeat the same sentence that occurs in the lesson as a proof of learning use. This needs to be avoided". So the question is 'how to teach' vocabulary?

In the present day the focus of teaching vocabulary largely rests on helping the learners look

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at words in contexts, know their literal meaning or arrive at summary statements. To facilitate such learning some of the wellknown exercises available in books are matching exercises, filling blanks, substituting words, finding the odd man out, listing/sorting synonyms and antonyms, jumbled spellings, crosswords, boggle etc. In the recent days some attempts have been made to design tasks popularly known as word attack tasks. These help the learner look at the use of the word in a context and understand its meaning and later verify it with the help of a dictionary or a teacher. Such predictions and tasks have led to the use of computers which can administer such tasks using lock-step techniques.

Most of the strategies mentioned here are restricted to the learners at the school level. Learners at this level need a general proficiency and the vocabularies they acquire belong to no specific or special group. Besides, most of the words they learn are based on the textbook lessons they learn and hence strategies suggested above will suffice. However, when we move over to the tertiary level, the learner needs differ in a big way. The learners at the tertiary level are learners of English for specific purposes and need to draw vocabulary from fields such as science, mathematics, statistics, history, geography, economics and other wide variety of disciplines. Choosing the right words for them is not an easy task and we need to adopt different strategies. This area largely relates to corpus studies and use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools.

Corpus studies have become popular today. Though corpus studies date back to 18th century when the first English Dictionary was produced, a systematic building of the corpus and its analysis has become facile with the invention of computers. J R Firth was perhaps the first British linguist to have thought of corpus as a valuable source to study languages and their structure. Firthian ideas were developed further by scholars like Halliday and notably Sinclair who is a well known lexicographer. Sinclair believed in creating holistic contexts to understand the meaning of a word rather than explain it in isolation. He incorporated this idea in the production of the Collins Cobuildl3 Dictionary.

Sinclair's philosophy is captured in the following quotation:

John Sinclair believed that natural language use constituted the best source of linguistic evidence. Such use can only be found in authentic communicative texts. He believed in the importance of language as text (not as words or sentences), and therefore urged the inclusion of whole texts (not text extracts) in the corpus. Lexicography, operating at the level of lexis, involves the least degree of abstraction away from the text and therefore incurs the least accompanying loss of meaning. A corpus-driven approach involves a bottom-up methodology, beginning by selecting unedited examples from the corpus, identifying their shared and individual features, and only then grouping them for the purpose of lexicographic presentation (Krishnamurthy, R, 2008: 1)

The philosophy put forth by Sinclair holds good to this day. Today there are corpora available to us, the most noted among them being the British N Corpus, (BNC), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), Intern, Corpus of English (ICE), Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICAS- The corpora are compiled using recordings of spoken text and written texts f° possible varieties to represent true language before analyzing them.

Computers can analyze data more efficiently in less time to yield a van results. One outcome of analyzing the language corpus by computers is the b concordances. Concordance provides all the uses of a word used in a text w immediate contexts e.g. if we look at the word sin used in certain texts whey meanings in which the word is used may refer to the concept as a social value, a reprimand or warning, an immoral act, a value in life and any other meaning might be. All these contexts may have been used in a variety of ways in a s, text and a concordance list can produce all these meanings in one place. Her, small list of concordance for the word 'sin' given to help you understand the concept. This is obtained by analyzing 8 lines of text from the Shakespearean play Rome; Juliet.

1. Thus from my lips, by yours, Sin is purged.
2. Then have my lips the Sin that they have took.
3. 3.Sin from thy lips? 0 trespass sweetly urged!

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4. Give me my Sin again.

This example provides four illustrations of the word 'sin' as it occurs in a short ex from the play Romeo and Juliet (Text referred Act I Sc v lines 104 — 112)15. Using corF and concordance provides the learner with wider scope to use the word. It provides a Sit, words and phrases, as used in structures along with immediate contexts. Such uses car taken from a corpus or a collection of specially chosen texts assembled for language study.

How do we use the information so obtained from concordances is an important quest we need to ask ourselves. When we look at a table as given above, we need to probe in and discover the uses of the word in different contexts. The word in question occurs in middle printed in bold with rows containing structures where the word is used. These printed both to the left and right of the word as can be seen in the illustration. Within such arrangement, we may look for collocations, concord between nouns and adjectives, or of and adverbs, nouns and verbs etc. If our choice is the relation that exists between a noun the adjective, we look to the left of the word. Similarly the relation between a verb and adverb can be found out by looking to the left of the entry. If we are looking for collocations, we may get to the right and find the right type of associations.

By going through data it is also possible for us to find out whether the use of the w is more in spoken discourse or written discourse. A disciplined exposure to concordar.Introduces a learner to a disciplined way of looking at a word in its various ramification or uses. It facilitates discovering various features a word has in a subconscious manner and this constitutes real learning. Further this ties up with the current thinking on language teaching which subscribes to learning by doing or getting the learner involved in problem solving tasks. Here the tasks are construed by the learner and also solved by him to make the learning more effective.

Besides using corpus, today language teaching is focusing much more on developing ESP courses. ESP courses it is realized are heavily vocabulary based"', and vocabulary abstracts from technical books gives us lists of words which can be categorized as technical, semi-technical and non technical words. Though technical words are taught by the content teachers, essential it is for the language teacher to focus on such terms.

To facilitate this, today, lexicographers and scholars working in the area of corpus studies have compiled the Word List. The best known such list is produced by Coxhead in the year 2000. This list has 570 head words and these are spread across several semantic fields covering most of the academic disciplines. The list has a further sub-list of words (in the form of derivatives and conjugations) bringing the total number to 3500 words. This list has deliberately not included words that already exist in West's GSL, and thus becomes a useful supplement to it. The reason for producing this list as stated by Coxhead is:

> The AWL was primarily made so that it could be used by teachers (especially teachers of English as a Second Language) as part of a programme preparing learners for tertiary level study or used by students working alone to learn the words most needed to study at colleges and universities. Coxhead (2000)

Lexicographers have produced Academic Dictionaries and these are useful sources of learning vocabulary. Besides this, the other genre of learner dictionaries is today available in their soft forms either as diskettes or in downloadable forms. These dictionaries help the learner to know the pronunciation of the word, its meaning, frequency of their occurrence in speech/writing, associated forms and exercises to practice and master the word. A teacher today can facilitate learners to sources such as these. A teacher can also help the learners to become familiar with other sources such as lexicons, thesauruses, activators and wordlists.

It needs to be understood from this discussion that learning vocabulary is largely a self-learning task. It depends on the type of exposure one gets and the opportunities one finds to use the vocabulary acquired. A teacher at best can facilitate both by directing the learners to proper sources and creating contexts for language use. The exercises in textbooks do offer help in providing mechanics of reinforcing the words learnt by the learner.

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