



TEACHING VOCABULARY: BRINGING RESEARCH INTO CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In the present article, an attempt has been made to review present research in vocabulary its nature, various aspects, and the process of its acquisition. The review has been brought bear on the practice of teaching vocabulary in a second language classroom. Beginning with the reasons for neglect of explicit vocabulary teaching during the middle of 20th century, the article highlights different issues involved in teaching of vocabulary as they have been focused in the recent research, followed by the proposal for certain sophistications in the techniques for teaching vocabulary. As an example, a poem of Alice Walker, 'First They Said; as been used to demonstrate the ways in which vocabulary can be fruitfully taught in the second language classroom.

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The best way to learn vocabulary is to consult dictionaries of languages concerned. However, it is commonly observed that learners do not make use of dictionaries either to learn new words or to expand the knowledge of the words they already know. The case is more severe the context of second language learning. For this matter, in second language classrooms, teachers have to make certain deliberate attempts to teach vocabulary and also to promote students to use dictionaries whenever the learners face difficulties in this regard. However, s will be discussed in the following part of the paper, vocabulary teaching involves many sues which need to be taken care of systematically. The teachers need to decide upon the vocabulary to be taught in the classroom and implement those decisions carefully.

In spite of the general awareness about the need of teaching vocabulary explicitly, the discussion of teaching vocabulary and the techniques to be used for the same are constantly neglected in books dealing with language teaching. This is disturbing in the light of the fact that vocabulary plays a primary role in the communication process. This has been lamented by many scholars (for example, Jack Richards, 1976) and, fortunately, the situation redressed by three books specifically addressing the issue: (1) V. F. Allen's Techniques Teaching Vocabulary (1983), (2) Hiebert and Kamil's Teaching and Learning Vocabulary: Bringing Research to Practice (2005) and (3) Chaco'n-Beltra'n, et al Insights into Non-native Vocabulary Teaching and Learning (2010) and some research carried out recently. In spite of the realization of the importance

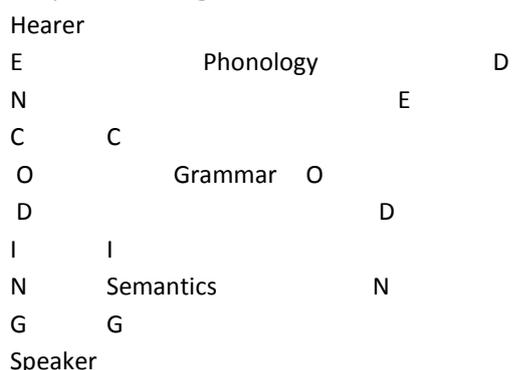
of vocabulary to the experienced second language teachers, vocabulary has been treated as a step child in teacher training programmes too. Allen (1983:3) refers to three reasons for this neglect:

1. Many who prepared teachers felt that grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary, because vocabulary was already being given too much time in language classrooms.
2. Specialists in methodology feared students would make mistakes in sentence construction if too many words were learned before the basic grammar had been mastered. Consequently, teachers were led to believe it was best not to teach much vocabulary.
3. Some who gave advice to teachers seemed to be saying that word meaning can be learned only through experience, that they cannot be adequately taught in a classroom. As a result, little attention was directed to techniques for vocabulary teaching.

(Emphasis in original)

For Allen, this neglect during 20th century is the result of excessive emphasis on vocabulary teaching during the earlier period.

However, the importance of teaching and learning vocabulary has been clearly visible in various tests used to assess the language abilities of learners. One of the possible reasons for the inclusion of vocabulary items in proficiency tests could be the understanding of the process of linguistic communication. Leech (1974), for example, presents the process of linguistic communication as follows:



As the diagram shows, in the process of linguistic communication, the speaker encodes the message (meaning) in language which the hearer decodes. The major part of the message is conveyed with the help of vocabulary. This also explains why words (i.e. vocabulary) are divided into Structure Words and

Content Words. Whereas the former are useful for the grammatical structuring of the message, the latter represent the core message the speaker intends to communicate.

Vocabulary

To begin the discussion of teaching vocabulary, it will be appropriate here to cite some meanings of the word 'vocabulary' and its nature. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (5th Edition) contains the following three meanings of the word:

1. The total number of words in a language
2. All the words known to a person or used in a particular book, subject, etc.
3. A list of words with their meaning, especially one that accompanies a textbook in a foreign language.

The first of these meanings considers language as a whole and the total number of words it consists of, whereas the third meaning understands the word in terms of a textbook. The second is the only meaning that refers to the knowledge of words of 'a person: Whereas the third meaning is the means, the ultimate objective of teaching vocabulary is the mastery (or near mastery) of all the words in a language, the second meaning can be thought of as the 'lexical competence' of an individual. Thus, in the process of teaching vocabulary, the ultimate aim is to develop the Lexical Competence of the learner to the extent that it includes all the words of a language and the means for the same are the prescribed textbooks.

However, learning of vocabulary is a lifelong process. It is difficult to find a person who can claim to know all the words and their meanings in a language. That is why Kamil and Hiebert (2005:2) assert:

Vocabulary is not a developmental skill or one that can ever be seen as fully mastered. The expansion and elaboration of vocabularies is something that extends across a lifetime.

Richards (1976) refers to eight assumptions in the context of learning vocabulary, which also highlight the nature of vocabulary. The assumptions, in turn, are also helpful to finalize appropriate teaching methods. The assumptions are:

1. The native speaker of a language continues to expand his vocabulary in adulthood, whereas there

is comparatively little development of syntax in adult life.

2. Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print. For many words we also know the sort of words most likely to be found associated with the word.

3. Knowing a word implies knowing the limitations imposed on the use of the word according to variations of function and situation.

4. Knowing a word means knowing the syntactic behavior associated with the word.

5. Knowing a word entails knowledge of the underlying form of a word and the derivations that can be made from it.

6. Knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and other words in the language.

7. Knowing a word means knowing the semantic value of a word.

8. Knowing a word means knowing many of the different meanings associated with a word.

(1976:83)

Out of these eight issues, seven are about the nature of vocabulary knowledge and one is about the specific period useful for learning vocabulary. As stated earlier, the assumptions about vocabulary knowledge can be utilized while finalizing a technique for teaching vocabulary.

Issues involved in Teaching Vocabulary

One way to classify vocabulary is to divide it in two categories: productive and receptive. The productive vocabulary refers to the use of various words in production skills like speaking and writing, as opposed to the receptive vocabulary, which is the knowledge of vocabulary used in receptive skills like listening and reading. There are different methods and techniques used to teach vocabulary in the context of different skills. The first issue, therefore, in the selection of appropriate methodology for teaching vocabulary is to decide upon an effective method for the purpose.

The second issue is to finalize the specific aspect of vocabulary to teach in the classroom. The knowledge of vocabulary may refer to the formal knowledge of the words (i.e. the categories like Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb) and the formal changes in process

of word transformation from one category to the other (i.e. the various prefixes and suffixes that are attached to or deleted from a word). It may also refer to the knowledge of the meaning of the words. In fact, Kumil and Hiebert (2005:3) define vocabulary as 'the knowledge of meaning of words'. However, there are various kinds of meanings of language. Leech (1974) refers to not less than seven types of meanings: Conceptual, Connotative, Social, Affective, Collocative, Reflective and Thematic. Out of these seven types of meanings, the conceptual meaning is the primary meaning, which also has been referred to as logical, denotative, or referential meaning. Without this meaning linguistic communication is not possible. But it is observed that many words have more than one conceptual meaning.

Therefore, the students are expected to know these various conceptual meanings and also ~s. the other meanings of a word. Moreover, the knowledge of vocabulary may also refer to the ability to identify the appropriate synonyms and antonyms of a word. This is important in the light of the assertion that there are no exact synonyms in any language. Thus, the knowledge of various lexical relations present among words— Synonymy, Antonymy, Polysemy, Homonymy, Hyponymy, etc. is also the part of vocabulary knowledge. Since a single technique cannot help in the effective teaching of all these aspects of vocabulary, various techniques need to be utilized.

The techniques of teaching vocabulary also need to be changed according to the level of the students. The techniques used at the primary school level may not be rewarding for the advanced students at the undergraduate level. This is important in the light of the introduction of English as a subject at the first standard and the way it is taught at the level. The focus here is on the learning of language by repeating what the teacher says. The listening abilities of the students are comparatively more developed than their writing abilities. Therefore, while teaching vocabulary in written form at this level, the teacher should realize that the oral vocabulary of the students is comparatively larger than their written vocabulary. And accordingly, the teacher has to employ the techniques. But the same may not be true of the undergraduate students,

where the students need to learn pronunciation, formal and semantic aspects of words.

The next issue involved in vocabulary teaching is — should vocabulary be taught implicitly or explicitly? This issue is important in the context of Implicit vs. Explicit learning. It was Krashen (1981) who first made a distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning': Whereas 'acquisition' is said to be an implicit process, 'learning' is an explicit one. In the context of vocabulary teaching too, it has been asserted that students should learn vocabulary implicitly and automatically when they learn other skills. However, it has been argued that since implicit learning may not help students acquire the required vocabulary, it should be taught explicitly to a certain extent. Kumil and Hiebert (2005:8) also support this view when they assert- 'the effect of comprehension on vocabulary was found most consistently when at least some words are taught directly'. Richards (1976) also supports this view.

The last issue that needs to be included here is — Which words to be selected to teach explicitly? This question has been answered in at least two ways — on the basis of frequency of the word and its importance and utility for the students. Beck et al (2005) propose that the frequency of all the words in a lesson should be counted. In such a count, it is assumed that the most frequent words are known to the students, whereas the least frequent words are difficult and will be taken care of during the actual teaching of the lesson. Therefore, words with middle level of frequency should be selected. Another criterion they propose is the selection of vocabulary on the basis of its importance and utility for the students. However, it is quite possible that the important and useful words might have been learned by the students already. Another problem here is the identification of 'important' and 'useful' words for the students, for which the teacher has to depend upon self-perception. Therefore, the best way is the selection of middle level frequent words in a lesson which are possibly important and useful for the students.

Techniques for Teaching Vocabulary:

In the process of teaching vocabulary, the first step is to finalize the words to be taught explicitly from the lesson. Here a poem of Alice Walker, 'First They Said'

is taken as an example. When the poem is analyzed, it is seen that there are 102 words which appears 260 times in the poem. Out of them, only Content Words are identified. Table 1 indicates the frequency of those words:

| Frequency | Words |
|-----------|--|
| 11 | knew |
| 9 | said |
| 5 | people |
| 3 | Inferior, land, obstructing, progress |
| 2 | army, backward, backwardness, fault, immoral, money, savages |
| 1 | agree, appetite, burned, children, clothing, coming, days, eat, eating, equal, eventually, existence, exterminate, father, finally, ground, immorality, inferiority, infestation, insulting, minimal, mouth, protected, racial, raise, raised, rhythm, right, savagery, starving, take, taking, took, treated, village, villages, wait |

Frequency of Content Words in 'First They Said'

The selection of words on the basis of frequency is out of place here, for many of the low frequency words (words that occurred only once) are common and might be already known to the students. Therefore, word should be selected by taking into consideration the level of the students and the nature of the lesson. If the poem is prescribed for undergraduate students, it can be assumed that words like- 'people', 'knew', 'agree', 'eat', etc. might be already known to the students, whereas words like — obstructing, exterminate, infestation, etc. are more difficult, requiring direct teaching in the context of the poem itself. Therefore, words like 'inferior', 'progress', 'backward', 'appetite', 'existence', 'immoral', 'racial', 'savage', 'rhythm', 'starving' should be selected. Once the words are selected, they can be taught using various techniques listed below.

Identify Synonyms/ Antonyms

The commonest technique used to teach vocabulary is by making students identify synonyms or antonyms of a word. Traditionally a word is given and the students are asked to identify one of the four words that is either similar or dissimilar in meaning to the given word. However, researchers

have found faults with this method: A word may have more than one unrelated conceptual meanings in addition to other semantic differences. In such cases it is difficult to teach the exact synonym or antonym of the word. Instead, they suggest using a word in the context of a sentence and asking the students to identify the meaning of the highlighted word with the help of the meaning of the other words in the sentence. For example:

Identify synonyms of highlighted words:

1. A person **inferior** in rank has to follow the orders of the superior.
A. below B. subordinate C. humble D. junior
2. South Africa suffered from **racial** conflicts for a long time.
A. national B. physical C. ethnic D. class

In both these examples, the meaning of the highlighted words can be predicted with the help of the meaning of the other words in the sentences. This kind of techniques are more rewarding than simply giving a word and asking the students to identify its synonyms, because students may get confused due to more than one conceptual meanings of the word. For example, the word 'inferior' may mean 'lower', 'junior', 'minor', 'subordinate', 'bad', 'imperfect', or 'mean' in different contexts. While asking students to identify antonyms too, this is more useful technique than the traditional ones.

Use of Lexical Sets

Many times it is complained that second language learners confuse rough similarity of meaning with the exactness of the meaning. As has been pointed out earlier, linguists say that there are no exact synonyms in any language, and if there are two words with the exact meaning, one of them will automatically disappear. The closeness of meaning of various words in any language is generally because these words may belong to various dialects, registers, styles, etc. of the language. But students generally confuse the use of exact words (Ooi and KimSeoh, 1996). In the Indian context also, many senior teachers complain that while using various lexical items, students do not pay attention to the

collocation of the words. Therefore, techniques should be devised to teach these subtle differences in the words whose meaning seems to be the same. Therefore, 'lexical sets' should be used for the purpose.

The lexical set for the noun 'progress' can be: 'advancement', 'development', 'improvement' and 'growth'. By pointing the subtle differences in the meaning of these words and also the constraints on their occurrences, these words should be taught explicitly with the help of some concrete examples.

In addition to this, some words are followed by a particular preposition. The students also need to learn it. For example, the word 'inferior' is followed by 'to' and not by 'than'; the meanings of 'look in', 'look into', 'look for', 'look after' are different from each other. This can be taught by contextualizing these words in sentences.

Conversion of words using prefixes/suffixes

Many words in English are formed by using either prefixes, suffixes or both. The learners are expected to master the skill of transferring the category of a word (like Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb) by adding such affixes. Systematic attempts need to be made to develop this faculty. Many times, it is seen that students are given some words and a list of suffixes/prefixes and they are asked to form new words by adding such affixes to the words. Instead of this, a word can be given and students can be asked to use the appropriate form of the word in a sentence. For example,

1. Many people in the undeveloped countries die of ----. (starve)
2. ---- means subordination. (inferior)

In both the above examples, nouns are required. But the noun of the word 'starve' is made with the help of the suffix '-tion' whereas, the suffix '-ity' is used to form the noun of 'inferior'. These examples make the students aware of the present form of the word and the suffixes used to make their nominal forms.

Componential analysis

As a technique, componential analysis is used first in anthropology to study kinship terms. But it has fruitfully been used in semantics to study the colour terms in various languages. This technique can be used systematically in the second language classroom to make the students aware of the various

aspects of words- their formal category, conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, collocative meaning, etc. Teachers can write a word on the blackboard and students can be asked to tell information about the word. In the case of the word 'appetite, the possible responses of the students can be:

appetite

- + NOUN
- + ANIMAL
- + STOMACH
- + HUNGRY
- + FOOD
- + EAT
- + MONEY

The first response indicates that the word is a noun, the second informs that 'only animals have appetite, that 'appetite is associated with the stomach; a word similar in meaning is 'hunger; when appetite is felt, we 'eat' 'food, and appetite can also refer metaphorically to 'appetite of money. These and such responses can be used to teach the word more effectively to the students with their active participation.

CONCLUSION

Though vocabulary was neglected in language teaching programmes during the first half of the 20th century, by the end of the second half scholars have emphatically asserted the importance of teaching vocabulary explicitly. This also explains the renewed interest of researchers in the way vocabulary is learned and the effective methods and techniques of teaching vocabulary. The issues involved in vocabulary teaching referred to in the present article are the findings of recent research; and the techniques for the teaching vocabulary discussed above with examples can be seen as the alternatives for effective teaching and learning of vocabulary by making the activity more interesting to the students. However, such techniques cannot be an alternative to the use of dictionary by the students. Therefore, efforts should be made to promote students to consult dictionaries.

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