

Short Communication

Usefulness and Learnability in Teaching Vocabulary to ESL/EFL Students

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Abstract

It is known that vocabulary is a must in teaching English Language because without a sound knowledge of vocabulary students are not able to understand others or express their own ideas. Although vocabulary deals with words, yet vocabulary is much more than just single words. Therefore, vocabulary can be defined as “the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do”. Vocabulary is so important that Wilkins (1972, p. 111) said: “Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”.

Innumerable ways of presenting and teaching vocabulary are there, but this paper is going to focus on the ways briefly without any detailed explanation of those ways because most of the ESL/EFL teachers are already aware of those strategies. What our paper aims to focus is that selection of vocabulary is very important for the learners if a useful vocabulary is to be built up quickly. As teachers of vocabulary, we know, or we must know why we should teach certain items to our learners and not others. In teaching vocabulary to learners there are two general criteria: usefulness and learnability which this paper is going to discuss in detail, and it will also show why selecting what to teach, based on usefulness and learnability, according to the needs of the students, is essential.

Keywords

presenting vocabulary, usefulness, learnability, selection, strategies


1. Introduction

It is known that vocabulary is a must in teaching English language because without a sound knowledge of vocabulary students are not able to understand others or express their own ideas. Although vocabulary deals with words, yet vocabulary is much more than just single words. Therefore,

vocabulary can be defined as “*the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do*”. Vocabulary is so important that Wilkins (1972, p. 111) said: “Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”.

There are many different ways of presenting and teaching vocabulary, but selecting what to teach, based on frequency and usefulness according to the needs of the students is very important. As soon as the teachers choose what to teach, the next steps are to consider what students need to know about the items, and how those items can be taught. We can take a quick look at the following diagram before going on to the discussion.

Table 1. What to Teach While Teaching Vocabulary

<div style="text-align: center;">  </div>		pronunciation
		spelling
		inflections
		derivations
<div style="text-align: center;"> Meaning basic and literal meanings derived and figurative meanings semantic relation connotation </div>		
		<div style="text-align: center;"> Usage sub-categorization collocation sociolinguistic and stylistic restrictions slang and idioms </div>

Source: Teaching Vocabulary-Auburn University.

Based on the diagram, we can come up with the following points which students need to know about an item:

Pronunciation

This can be particularly problematic for learners of English because there is often no clear relation between how a word is written and how it is pronounced. It is very important to use the phonemic script in such cases so the students have a clear written record of the pronunciation. Teachers must not forget also to drill words that they think will cause pronunciation problems for their students and

highlight the word stresses.

Spelling

Teachers should remember to clarify the pronunciation before showing the written form the words to students.

Meaning

It is important to get across the meaning of the item clearly and ensure that students have understood correctly by asking questions.

The form

Learners must be familiarized with the aspects of vocabulary. They need to know if it is a verb/a noun/an adjective, etc., to be able to use it effectively.

Unpredictable grammatical patterns

For example, man-men/information (uncountable) and if the word is followed by a particular preposition (e.g., depend on).

Denotation and Connotation

Denotation is the basic or core meaning. In other words, the dictionary and literal meaning of a word is denotation. Connotation is an emotional or social association with a word giving meaning beyond the literal definition. For example, the word *bachelor* is a neutral/positive word whereas *spinster* gives a more negative image.

Usage of the word

Is the word formal/neutral/informal? For example, the words specs, spectacles or glasses. Is it used mainly in speech or in writing? *To sum up* is usually written whereas *mind you* is spoken. What needs to be found out as well is that whether the word is outdated or not.

How the word is related to others

For example, synonyms, antonyms, and lexical sets.

Collocation or the way that words occur together

We describe things “in great detail” not “in big detail” and we use the expression “raise your hand”, we don’t say “lift your hand”. It is important to highlight this to students to prevent mistakes in usage later.

2. Meaning of Affixes (Prefixes and Suffixes)

It is really important to teach affixation as it helps learners guess the meaning of new words they find, and make new forms successfully. For example, in the word *substandard* “sub” means under. This is particularly useful at a higher level.

Which of these areas you choose to highlight will depend on the item you are teaching and the level of your students. Now it’s time to think about how we can get the meaning across.

As is already mentioned above that innumerable ways of presenting and teaching vocabulary are there, this paper is going to focus on the ways briefly without any detailed explanation because most of the ESL/EFL teachers are aware of the following strategies.

- *Illustration/Drawing pictures*

This is very useful for more concrete words (ball, rain, tall) and for visual learners. It has its limits though, not all items can be drawn.

- *Mime/Demonstration*

This lends itself particularly well to action verbs and it can be fun and memorable.

- *Synonyms/Antonyms*

Using the words a student already knows can be effective for getting meaning across.

- *Definition*

Make sure that the word is clear (teachers can check in a dictionary before the lesson if they are not confident). Remember to ask questions to check that learners have understood properly.

- *Etymology*

Learning the origin of a word will promote students' comprehension of new words.

- *Translation*

If teachers know the students' L1, then it is fast and efficient. Teachers need to remember that not every word has a direct translation. There are differences in the pragmatic meaning of synonyms and of L1 translation equivalents.

- *Context*

Think of a clear context when the word is used and either describe it to the students or give them example sentences to clarify meaning further.

3. Selection of Vocabulary

Which words you choose will depend on the item you are presenting. Some are more suitable for particular words. Often a combination of techniques can be both helpful and memorable.

What this paper aims to focus is selection of vocabulary is very important for the learners if a useful vocabulary is to be built up quickly. As teachers of vocabulary, we know that or we must know why students need to know certain words for using them actively rather than using them passively. A distinction is made between active and passive vocabulary. Doff (1998, p. 19) says "words which we want students to understand" (e.g., when reading a text) but which they will not need to use them, we call them "*passive vocabulary*". Words which students will need to understand and also use themselves, we call them "*active vocabulary*". There are some criteria for selecting vocabulary which are shown below.

(1) Learnability: means how easy or challenging lexis is in terms of length, pronunciation, spelling, meaning, grammar, word order in a sentence, etc. By usefulness, we can decide which lexical items are going to be planned for the learners to learn receptively (for recognition only) and productively (for use in speech and writing). Of course, receptive learning is easier.

(2) Range: the extent to which a word occurs in the different types of texts. Some words are relatively frequent but restricted in the range of situations or registers in which they are used. Words which are used in various situations are more useful, though often words of greater range also have greater frequency.

(3) Coverage: means the capacity of a word to replace other words. Some words are semantically covered by others. For example, vegetables cover eggplant, lettuce, beans, etc.

(4) Frequency: the number of occurrences of a word in the target language. In other words, frequency means knowing the degree of probability of encountering the word in speech or in print. It is observed that frequency also differs in speech and in writing. There are high frequency and low frequency words. For example, “of course” or “actually” will occur very frequently in speech rather than in print form. The word “former” or “latter” may only occur in the written language (Taylor, 1990, p. 1). Other examples of words which are used frequently are: all day, always, all the time, usually, sometimes, etc.

(5) Association/Collocation: means the words or types of words which occur with particular ones. According to experts, collocations “teach students expectations about which sorts of words go with which ones. Students will not go about reconstructing the language each time they want to say something”. Taylor (1990, p. 2) says that collocation means knowing the syntactic behavior associated with the word and also knowing the net work of association between that word and other words in the language. It shows the relationship between words. For example, we can say *heavy rain*, but *not heavy sun*.

(6) Familiarity: How often some words are used. According to experts, it is better to start off with the words with which learners are familiar in order to give the learners a basic set of tools for communication. For example, the words *tardy*, *tardily* and *tardiness* will hardly sound familiar to the learners because they are familiar with the synonym of *tardy* which means *slow*.

(7) Easy Pronunciation: In the very early stages, it is wise to exclude words which are difficult to pronounce. Such as, appreciative, nocturnal, amputation, etc.

(8) Transparency: It is not difficult for a learner to absorb a new item whose meaning is transparent formed from familiar words than to learn some unfamiliar words. Many phrasal verbs are not transparent such as: *give up* or *went off* and so on. Teachers need to expose the learners to transparent phrasal verbs first which can be decoded by recognizing the meaning of each word: the verb and the preposition.

4. Conclusion

In summing up, it can be said that teaching vocabulary can seem to be a daunting task, but once teachers choose what to teach their learners, the important steps are that they need to think what learners need to know about the items, and how those can be taught to them. Teachers must encourage learners pick up vocabulary through extensive reading, communicative interactions, and through exposure to natural input such as movies, TV, etc. As students develop greater fluency and expression

in English, it is necessary for them to acquire more productive knowledge of vocabulary. It must be remembered that learners need to be taught vocabulary explicitly and in context, so that they are not overwhelmed by the exposure to vocabulary.

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