

# TEACHING AND LEARNING VOCABULARY: AN INTRODUCTION FOR ENGLISH STUDENTS

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*The purpose of this article is to give English students a general picture of some of the most important issues in vocabulary teaching nowadays and acquaint them with invaluable contributions of different outstanding applied linguists in this field. The autor does not assume responsibility for the typographic making up.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT WE MEAN BY «VOCABULARY» AND «WORD»

**T**O start with, we will clarify what we mean when we use the terms «vocabulary» and «word».

According to the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1989: 1629), «**the vocabulary of a language** is the total number of words in it» and «**someone's vocabulary** is the total number of words in a language that he or she knows». However, this term will be used in a more restricted sense in this paper: we will limit ourselves to what Michael Wallace in his work *Teaching Vocabulary* calls «**content words**» as opposed to «**structure words**», and which would include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs derived from adjectives. According to this author, structure words are almost deprived of meaning when considered in isolation and, therefore, should be considered as part of the grammar of a language (Wallace 1988: 18).

As regards the term «**word**», it will be used as an equivalent to **lexical item** or **lexeme** (Richards et al. 1992: 210) and, therefore, refers to expressions made up of one or more terms which form units of meaning. Thus, «to put up with» or «to paint the town red» would be considered as words from the point of view of vocabulary teaching in the same way as a single word like «chair», for example, would. Therefore, idioms and multi-word verbs such as phrasal and prepositional verbs will be included.

## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is obviously a very important element within a language as the overwhelming majority of meaning is carried lexically; and, therefore, something to be taken into consideration both in Second and Foreign Language Teaching - although not the only one that conveys meaning. There are certainly other elements such as grammar, stress, rhythm, intonation, tone of voice, pauses, hesitations or silences, not to mention the use of non-vocal phenomena such as kinesic and proxemic features. Learning a language cannot be reduced, of course, to only learning vocabulary, but it is also true that «no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way» (McCarthy 1990: VIII), an idea defended by many applied linguists, e.g. Allen (1983: 1), Wallace (1988: 9), Corder (Rossner & Bolitho 1990: 113), Taylor (1990: 1), Willis (1990: 1-14) etc. Nevertheless, in spite of the importance of this element, vocabulary is often the least systematized and the most neglected of all the aspects of learning a second language, not only in EGP but in ESP as well (Kennedy & Bolitho 1984: 65). This lack of attention is not only characteristic of older grammatical syllabuses but of more recent communicative approaches. On the contrary the emphasis is rather placed on structures, «functions, notions and communicative strategies» (Dubin & Olshtain 1986: 111-112).

In our opinion, our students need to be made aware of the importance of this element because we have observed that, in general, there is a tendency to concentrate on grammar, paying little attention to vocabulary. This can be done through the so-called «awareness» activities such as the one that follows. Two texts are produced from an English passage, one containing all the content words (text A) and the other all the structure words (text B). Half of the class is given A and the other half, B; and they are all asked to infer what the original text is about. It is obvious that those having the content words can make at least some guesses whereas the others do not have a clue as to what the passage deals with.

## 3. WHAT IT MEANS TO KNOW A WORD

Learning vocabulary is a rather more complex process than it might at first sight appear. It does not mean acquiring the same amount of knowledge for every word in a language. After all, we must take into account that even native speakers of a language can understand many more words than they actually use. As a result there is an important

distinction to be made between **productive/active vocabulary** (i.e. the words learners need to be able to use and understand) and **receptive/passive vocabulary** (i.e. the words they need to recognize only), distinction which the teacher must bear in mind in his/her practice as there is obviously a lot more work involved in giving a student a productive knowledge of a word than a receptive one.

Now, what does it mean to «know» a word then?

According to Linda Taylor (1990: 1-3), knowledge of a word implies the acquisition of information of various types, which seem to be language universals. These different kinds of knowledge are as follows:

1. Knowledge of the **frequency of occurrence** of the word in a language. Thus, some lexical items in English are far more likely to appear in speech than in writing, such as «indeed» or «by the way», whereas others like «former» or «latter» may only occur in written media.

2. Knowledge of **style, register and dialect**.

**Style**, in a broad sense, would refer to the level of formality, e.g. slang, colloquial or informal, neutral, formal, frozen, etc. as well as styles such as humorous, ironic, poetic, literary, etc. For example, «Would you like a ride in my car?» is a neutral formula, appropriate in most contexts. «Fancy a spin?» may be acceptable between friends, but somewhat rude if made to a stranger.

**Registers** are varieties of language defined by the topic and context of use, e.g. the language of medicine, law, engineering, ... come into this category:

- «to fold in» (cooking term for «mix»)
- «cephalalgia» (medical term for «headache»)
- «insolvent» (banking term for «penniless»)

**Dialect** refers to differences in geographical variation, e.g. «American English, British English, Scottish English», etc.:

- «elevator» (US) - «lift» (GB)
- «loch» (Scottish) - «lake» (GB)
- «G'day» (Australian) - «Hello» (GB)

3. Knowledge of **collocation**, both semantic and syntactic (sometimes termed **colligation**), i.e. knowing the syntactic behaviour associated with the word as well as the network of associations between that word and other words in a language. For example, the word «injection» will normally appear in the context of medicine or nursing. It is likely to be used with the transitive verb «to give», which can be either active or passive, and it is usually

preceded by an article. It may be substituted by the term «shot» in colloquial speech.

4. Knowledge of **morphology**, i.e. knowing the underlying form of a word and its possible derivations, e.g. the word «communication» comes from «communicate».
5. Knowledge of **semantics**, i.e. knowing what the word means or denotes as well as its connotations, e.g. «thin» (neutral) as opposed to «slim/slender» (positive) or «skinny/emaciated» (negative). Care must be taken as well with what are known as «false friends», e.g. «actually», «sensible», etc., which may lead to confusion.
6. Knowledge of **polysemy**, i.e. knowing the different meanings associated with a word. For example, let us take the word «quiet» in the following examples:

Be *quiet* and listen.

Peter is a *quiet* young man.

In the *quiet* of the night, not a word was heard.

7. Knowledge of the equivalent of the word in the mother tongue, that is to say, its **translation**.

In addition to these, other types of knowledge should be considered such as knowledge of the spelling of a word and knowledge of its pronunciation, including stress.

As regards **spelling** there may be different acceptable written forms for the same word within the same variety of English (e.g. «hello/hallo/hullo») or, most commonly, due to the fact that they belong to different varieties as happens with many British or American English terms (e.g. «centre» (BrE) or «center» (AmE)).

**Pronunciation**, on the other hand, is frequently problematic owing to the great lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation. Thus, the same grapheme may often be uttered as different phonemes, e.g. «t» as in «table» (/t/), «action» (/ʃ/), «picture» (/tʃ/) or «ballet» (mute «t»). To make matters worse, we have homographs («lead» pronounced as /li:d/ or /led/) and homophones («knew/new»).

Within pronunciation, suprasegmental features are often extremely important as far as intelligibility is concerned. Their incorrect use may cause misunderstandings or even a breakdown in communication. Thus, the different placement of stress in the expression «English teacher» produces different meanings: «English» here may be interpreted as nationality or as a school subject.

It will be the job of the teacher then to create the learning conditions so that the learner can acquire some or all of these different types of knowledge of the target vocabulary to be learnt according to the students' needs.

## 4. SYMPTOMS OF BAD VOCABULARY LEARNING AND/OR TEACHING

There are different things that can go wrong in learning vocabulary. Probably the most basic type of problem is the inability to retrieve vocabulary that has been taught. In this situation either communication breaks down altogether or else the student has to convey the message in a different way by drawing on his strategic competence.

The use of vocabulary inappropriate to a given situation is another fault. Thus, for instance, «right/left» are usually acceptable ways of indicating direction, although not on a ship, where «starboard/port» are more appropriate.

Another common error is the use of vocabulary at the wrong level of formality, e.g. «Be seated, ladies and gentlemen» vs «Sit»; or possessing the wrong kind of vocabulary for one's needs, e.g. academic instead of conversational English.

Further problems may be using vocabulary in an unidiomatic way or even in a meaningless way («verbalism»), or the use of an incorrect grammatical form, spelling or pronunciation as well as the improper use of a dictionary, the source of numerous mistakes.

It is clear then that learning vocabulary is something more than just memorizing lists of words.

## 5. DECISIONS ABOUT CONTENT

### 5.1. What vocabulary to teach: criteria for selection

When making decisions about content, one of the first questions the language teacher will have to address is what vocabulary to teach. For many of them this will be determined by the choice of the coursebook, the syllabus designers, or other factors. Even so, the teacher should be concerned about the different criteria used when designing their syllabuses and materials, the ones followed in making decisions about vocabulary content in language courses, and what the objectives of these particular decisions are. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to evaluate syllabuses and materials, to understand why particular vocabulary is to be taught as well as to explain to learners why they must learn particular words (McCarthy 1990: 79).

Lexis is, of course, derived in part from the notional-functional and grammatical inventory (time expressions, prepositions, verbs that fit the patterns being dealt with, etc.), but more significantly, it is drawn from the thematic content. The themes or topics should be selected according to the learners' interests, needs and background knowledge, while most of the lexis chosen derives from the treatment of each the-

me (Dubin & Olshtain 1986: 103). Sometimes, however, when the objective is spelling, pronunciation or word formation, for example, it is probably necessary to incorporate words which do not always have to do with the topic being discussed in the unit.

Now, different criteria can be employed to select the particular words to be taught, but before dealing with this it is important to point out that every teaching situation is different and so essential items in one context may be quite useless in another (e.g. ESP). The relative importance we attach to the various criteria about to be described below will therefore depend on our own teaching situation.

The criteria which may be used to select vocabulary are as follows:

### *a) Frequency*

It seems self-evident that it is sensible to teach the most frequent words in any language before the more unusual ones are taught as they are likely to be the most useful ones for learners of that language. But frequency is a more complex matter than it looks, and it is unlikely that any syllabus or coursebook would want to stick to frequency lists alone (Wallace 1988: 16). Thus, Richards (1974) and later Sinclair and Renouf (1991) say that the most frequent words are not necessarily the most useful ones for learners and that common sense demands that the most frequent words be supplemented by intuition:

*«The additional list will probably include, among other things, words relating to domestic reality, such as days of the week and kinship terms, and other common lexical sets; also further words to refer to physical sensations and personal emotions, and to use in making evaluations»* (Sinclair & Renouf 1991: 151).

If we want to organize our vocabulary teaching on a subject basis it may be a good idea to work out what the most frequent words are in that subject area either intuitively, with the aid of teachers of other subject matters (ESP), through the study of a limited set of related texts or with the help of a dictionary, e.g. topic dictionaries (see McArthur 1981, Pheby (ed.) 1985, Walter 1995).

### *b) Range*

A word may be quite frequent, but a majority or even all of its occurrences might be in just one or two texts. In this case, although its frequency might look significant, its range might be quite small. The most useful words for the learner then are those which are frequent and occur across a wide variety of texts.

Teachers who take their own texts into the classroom will often have to decide from experience, intuition or even the use of a dictionary, which words are likely to have the most useful range, a job which has already been done to a great extent in good coursebooks.

### c) *Availability and/or expediency*

*«Words may be learnt or taught because they are seen to be of special relevance to particular situations in which the learner finds himself, or might find himself» (Wallace 1988: 16).*

Thus, although «chalk» or «BB» have a very low frequency and restricted range, because they name things which the learner can see and touch and which the teacher can use in his or her teaching, both these words may be very helpful. The converse of this situation is where knowledge of one particular item will make others redundant as far as meaning is concerned. Thus, it may be useful to have a receptive knowledge of «sweater», «jumper» and «pullover», for instance, but one of these words would be sufficient for productive purposes (Gairns & Redman 1989: 59).

The classroom will also often dictate the need for certain vocabulary without which the SS may fail to understand their teacher, classmates or the activity they are engaged in. One of these areas is grammatical terminology. Many teachers do not wish to burden their SS with too many grammatical labels, but it is also true that understanding such items can be very helpful. On the one hand, the explanations given can be shorter and, on the other hand, the student can make a more profitable use of dictionaries and grammar books. It is the teacher who, taking into account factors such as age, course duration, etc., must weigh up the possible benefits or harm of using such terminology. The same would apply to phonological terminology.

Another area of classroom language has to do with the items which often appear in language activity instructions. Although constant exposure alone usually guarantees that these items will eventually be assimilated, it is possible to speed up the process by designing classroom activities containing many of these items and so avoid confusion or misunderstanding.

### d) *Specific need/interest on the learners' part*

It is possible for students to feel they need or to be interested in different words to those suggested by the teacher or coursebook, something to be taken into account for the sake of motivation. In fact, their needs or interests perhaps do not even coincide with those of the group

or class. Our challenge here as teachers is to combine the collective and the individual. To this respect, Gairns and Redman (1989: 57) suggest allowing SS to select any words they wish from a text and, within a given limit of time, to work on them using a dictionary, alongside conventional vocabulary work on the text. In this way learners are encouraged to recognize their own needs, and are assisted in developing their ability to pursue those needs in organized and productive ways (McCarthy 1990: 90).

### *e) Level of the SS*

As a rule, the lower the level, the more common and neutral the vocabulary to be taught.

### *f) Learnability*

According to McCarthy (1990: 86):

*«The difficulty, or lack of difficulty, a word presents may override its frequency and/or range, and decisions to bring forward or postpone the teaching of an item may be based on learnability».*

Here we may include words with some spelling difficulties, phonological difficulties, difficult syntactic properties, impossibility of relating the item to one's world of experience or culture («solicitor/barrister»), words very close in meaning and difficult to separate («make/do») and false friends («actually»).

### *g) Cultural factors*

A further criterion to be considered is the question of cultural differences. Gairns and Redman think one drawback of word-counts is that, being based on the utterances of native speakers, they will obviously reflect the cultural interests of these speakers. Such interests may not, however, be shared by L1 learners, who may wish to express ideas and experiences quite outside those of a native speaker's (Gairns & Redman 1989: 59). Thus, «sleet» and «double-glazing» as lexical items are as about as useful to Brazilians as «mangos» and «cockroaches» are to Scandinavians, at least while they remain in their home environment.

## **5.2. What emphasis individual words are to be given**

Polarizing vocabulary into productive and receptive categories may seem rather artificial, and in many cases the decisions made are not



clear-cut. Nevertheless it seems useful to take this distinction into account and to strive towards selectivity based on the students' needs and interests.

Normally it is the teacher who is responsible for the decision-making, but on some occasions as in ESP, the learner may be in a much stronger position to decide whether an item should be acquired productively or not.

It is also worth stating that, if the learner perceives the vital personal relevance of an item, he may acquire it whether the teacher pays great attention to it or not. On the contrary, the learner may consciously or subconsciously reject some of the items being taught.

### **5.3. How many items to teach**

We need to consider two basic questions:

- 1) the optimum vocabulary load for a lesson and
- 2) the number of items that should be covered over the duration of the course.

As regards the number of new lexical items that should be presented in a class, Gairns and Redman consider that it is impossible to be dogmatic. They suggest an average of eight to twelve productive items as a reasonable input, the lower figure being more suitable for elementary students and the upper one for those who are more advanced.

Now, if this rate of input were sustained, low level SS would be expected to achieve a productive vocabulary of approximately 1,000 items after 125 hours of study, which is rather ambitious. So, while it may be reasonable to present eight items per lesson, it is probably unrealistic to expect the majority of students to have acquired this number over the duration of the course. What we can do then to compensate for restricted classroom time is resort to homework. Thus, workbooks or practice books can allow lexical consolidation as well as give learners an opportunity to acquire vocabulary relevant to their own personal needs and interests.

### **5.4. How to group the items of vocabulary to be taught**

As vocabulary consists of a series of interrelating systems and not just of a random collection of items, lexical items should be presented in a systematised manner which will enable the learner to internalize them in a coherent way and make him aware of the organised nature of vocabulary.

At the same time, research in memory suggests that vocabulary is stored in the brain in a highly organized and efficient lexicon, although not like a dictionary (as the speed at which we recognize and recall words tells us). It seems that lexemes are stored and remembered in a network of associations. These associations can be of many types and be linked in a number of ways (Carter & McCarthy 1991: 18-38). As teachers then, we should devise different types of activities and help students develop different techniques to facilitate storage and retrieval of words. And, as organization is the key to memory, this will become an important part of our teaching.

Now, words may be grouped into different types of semantic fields (or lexical sets) as well as into phonological and grammatical sets. Clearly, some groupings are more appropriate at certain levels than at others. According to Gairns and Redman, the possible groupings are as follows:

- 1) items related by **topic, one of the most common and useful groupings found in course books, e.g. types of fruit, articles of clothing, etc.**
- 2) items grouped as an **activity or process** (also topic-related), e.g. steps involved in taking a photograph, opening an account, etc.
- 3) items which are **similar in meaning**, e.g. ways of walking, ways of looking, etc.
- 4) items which form «pairs», as **synonyms or antonyms**.
- 5) items along a **scale or cline**, which illustrate differences of degree, e.g. temperatures, ages, etc.
- 6) **derivatives**, e.g. «psychology», «psychologist», etc.
- 7) items grouped by **grammatical and notional similarity**, e.g. adverbs of frequency, prepositions of position, ...
- 8) **items which connect discourse**, e.g. discourse markers («to begin with»), adverbs ending in «ly» («surprisingly»), etc.
- 9) items forming a set of **idioms or multi-word verbs**, e.g. «ring up», «get through» and «ring back» or «to be out of sorts», «under the weather» and «on top of the world».
- 10) items grouped by **spelling difficulty or phonological difficulty**; for instance, within a topic area, e.g. food: «recipe», «vegetable», «tough meat», «steak».
- 11) items grouped by **style**, e.g. «cigarette/ciggy», «toilet/loo», «operation/op», «vegetable/veg», etc.
- 12) an item explored in terms of its **different meanings**, e.g. different meanings of «sentence».
- 13) items causing **particular difficulties** within one nationality group, such as false cognates, ...

Certain features of vocabulary such as collocations or connotation are probably best dealt with as they arise.

## 6. HOW TO TEACH VOCABULARY

The two most common ways in which the meaning of new items is conveyed are as follows:

- 1) Traditional approaches and techniques, which are teacher-centred, and
- 2) Student-centred learning

### 6.1. Traditional approaches and techniques

Teacher-centred approaches are divided into three main types: visual techniques, verbal techniques and translation.

#### 5.1.1. *Visual techniques*

In teaching the meaning of words, especially at the elementary stage, we should try to establish a link between the word and the meaning by using one of the following means or techniques depending on the word to be taught:

- a) realia, i.e. objects in the class, including the SS themselves, and others brought to class;
- b) pictures, photos, BB drawings, flashcards, slides, wallcharts, transparencies, etc.
- c) mime, gestures, actions, facial expressions, ...

Of course, not all vocabulary can be presented in this way. According to Doff (1988: 14) vocabulary should only be presented visually if it can be done quickly, easily and clearly. However, for suitable vocabulary, it is a very effective method: it is direct, interesting and makes an impression on the class.

#### 6.1.2. *Verbal techniques*

There are certainly other techniques which can be used to present vocabulary which are as follows:

- a) by giving examples of the type, e.g. to illustrate the meaning of superordinates

- b) by using illustrative situations, to explain abstract words, for instance
- c) through definitions
- d) with synonyms/opposites
- e) by using scales for gradable items

### 6.1.3. Translation

Used sensibly, translation can be a useful technique to convey meaning as:

- it saves time
- it allows us to check correct comprehension, if necessary (e.g. in the case of false friends)

On the whole, however, translation of vocabulary into the mother tongue should be kept under tight control. From the lower intermediate stages onwards it is better to resort to other techniques (e.g. a simple explanation in the target language). Apart from giving the student extra exposure to the target language (as students rarely listen so intently as when they are learning new words), this technique has another benefit: if on a future occasion he cannot remember the target item, he can always give an explanation or a synonym, a technique that is in fact often used by native speakers of the language. The problem with students who have been taught through translation techniques is that they often give up if the exact lexeme does not come to mind, while those who are accustomed to operating in the target language will often fall back on some type of alternative communicative strategy (Wallace 1988: 48).

Of course, it is also possible to use a combination of the techniques mentioned above.

## 6.2. Student-centred learning

Student-centred learning can also take place in different ways such as by allowing them to ask other students in the classroom, by using a dictionary or through contextual guesswork.

As regards the proper and efficient use of a dictionary, it is something that students certainly ought to be trained in, if only as a way of helping the student to be independent of the teacher and the classroom. On the other hand, many of the students' errors derive from its wrong usage. Nevertheless, recourse to the dictionary should not be typical of every reading session as:

- it may encourage the tendency to concentrate on individual words rather than on overall meaning,
- the learner may not attempt to use the context to decode meaning, and
- over-frequent use of the dictionary slows up the flow of reading, and makes the passage more boring to read and perhaps even more difficult to understand since concentration is interrupted (Wallace 1988: 43).

We may also choose to teach vocabulary within a written context, specially at intermediate and advanced levels. If we are thinking about a comprehension lesson the teacher should make sure that the SS have at least a general understanding of the passage. The usual procedure would be to ask questions to establish the general sense of the passage first and then continue with more specific questions about the meanings of pieces of the text and individual words.

This technique is probably the most efficient in the long run. As the teacher will only be able to teach the student a small percentage of the words that he or she will later need, it seems to be a good idea to promote extensive reading so that the SS's vocabulary can grow naturally, and to spend some time on showing SS what Nuttall (1988: 66) calls «word-attack skills». Through these it is possible:

- 1) to infer meaning from context in the same way native speakers or competent speakers of a foreign language do,
- 2) to show SS that many words can just be ignored, probably the first and most basic word-attack skill and the most difficult one to accept.

Students must be taught to use sentence structure to establish the grammatical category of the new item, word structure to find out the type of word it is and its meaning, as well as contextual, logical and cultural clues to discover the meaning (Grellet 1990: 14-16). And FL readers certainly do require specific training in using this skill for different reasons:

- 1) Because L2 readers have less exposure to the language than L1 readers and, therefore, have to make more conscious effort to learn words (Nuttall 1988: 70).
- 2) Because most SS are not aware that it is possible to understand new words without being told what they mean (Bright & McGregor 1970).
- 3) Because we need to encourage the students to adopt a positive attitude towards new lexical items instead of the negative one they instinctively adopt (Help! Where's the dictionary?).

See Appendix I for suggested procedure.

In spite of what we have said, the teacher may choose to ignore the unknown term, unless a question about it is raised by the students. This does not necessarily mean that the teacher is not doing his duty, as it is not always necessary to understand the meaning of every single word in a passage to grasp its general sense as happens when reading in our own language. It depends on the teacher's objectives.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary is obviously an essential element within a language, and students should be made aware of its importance as experience shows that there is a general tendency to overemphasize grammar or functions. In addition to this, as teachers we should not only choose different strategies and types of tasks to convey meaning but, what is even more important, help learners develop different systems of organizing lexical items in order to speed up learning and facilitate the storage and retrieval of words as well as different techniques (e.g. contextual guesswork or the correct use of a dictionary) so as to allow them to become independent from the teacher and classmates, a necessary step towards learner autonomy.

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## APPENDIX I

A possible procedure used to make students aware of the possibility of guessing the meaning of unknown words as well as practice in this skill is as follows:

- 1st) Begin with sentences containing nonsense words and ask learners to suggest their meaning
- 2nd) Then get the SS to study the range of words which could be used to complete given sentences so that the SS begin to recognize that the possibilities are not limitless, e.g.

*«In order to write the letter I'll need a ...»*

- 3rd) The next step would be to use full paragraphs or short texts to demonstrate the fact that it is possible to work out the meaning of an unknown word by careful study of its context. For this purpose we could use either a nonsense word or blanks to replace ordinary English ones, so that they have to get clues to help them deduce the meaning. At the same time, this can help students understand the need to read on instead of puzzling over a word or sentence to help them confirm their inferences, and return to them later if necessary.
- 4th) Once the SS have been convinced that they are capable of developing the skill, they can be given some specific training by means of further activities similar to the ones just described (For instance, see Nuttall 1988 pp. 72-73).