Vocabulary Attainment, Insights on Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The teacher should be aware of several aspects of vocabulary learning and teaching in order to effectively teach. The first section of this paper considers what it means to actually 'know' a word. For the learner to 'know' a word, several elements are involved, including meaning, pronunciation, grammar, collocations, word formation, connotation, and register. Each of these elements will be examined in turn. The next section looks at major groups of vocabulary: high and low frequency words, academic words and technical words, and how much attention should be given to each depending on the learning purpose. The third section looks at the role of dictionaries in vocabulary learning. This includes the advantages and disadvantages of dictionary use, as well as monolingual and bilingual dictionary usage. The next section looks at how meaning, or definitions, of words can be effectively conveyed by the teacher. Lastly, the need for, and types of vocabulary assessment will be briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

What exactly does it mean to "know" a word?

Depending on which type of dictionary one uses, the answer to this question might vary. For a second language teacher, a more complicated mixture of several elements should be considered. Not coincidentally, most teachers tend to concentrate on these three: meaning, pronunciation, and grammar, which are the easiest to teach and learn. Crothers and Suppes (1967) indicate an average of six to seven repetitions are necessary for learning to occur. Additionally, Higa (1965) contends that words used in a meaningful context (the students own realia and relevant texts) contribute significantly to actual learning. Six to seven repetitions can be achieved through intensive reading, dedicated vocabulary books, and other vocabulary-specific materials. How much time is spent by the teacher on a given word depends on the students' requirements. Academic, technical, or relevant low-frequency words should be given more time if the student will actually have a greater use for them in the future. Low-frequency words and topic-specific words may not require as much time.

Meaning

There are several elements associated with the 'meaning' of a word. There is 'denotation', the precise, literal definition of a word that students would typically find in a dictionary. There is also meaning in context, the meaning in relation to the other words around it. "The aspect of word knowledge involves having a clear idea of the underlying meaning of a word running through its related uses, and also involves being aware of the range of particular uses it has, that is, what it can refer to" (Nation 2001, p.102).

"Knowing the meaning of a word is not just knowing its dictionary meaning (or meanings), it also means knowing the words commonly associated with it (its collocations) as well as its connotations, including its register and its cultural accretions" (Thornbury 2002, p.15). Practically speaking, the learner should know the actual meaning of the word in the context

of how it is encountered in that instance. When possible, the teacher should then give one or two more examples of various other ways to use the word. However, depending on the student level, the teacher should be careful not to confuse or overload the student with too much information.

Pronunciation

It is the teacher's prerogative to decide how much emphasis should be placed on pronunciation. Often, spending too much time dwelling on correct pronunciation may be counterproductive by inhibiting the flow of a conversation or dialog. "Research shows that words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn. Potentially difficult words will typically be those that contain sounds that are unfamiliar to some groups of learners - such as 'regular' and 'lorry' for Japanese learners" (Thornbury 2002, p.27).   When introducing a new dialog, a useful technique is for the teacher to model the correct pronunciation as part of the dialog so as not to give the appearance of an actual correction or disrupt student output. A much more basic approach to pronunciation, especially for lower level learners, is for the teacher to simply put the target words on the board and have the students repeat them after giving the correct pronunciation.

An additional factor to consider in regards to pronunciation is the teacher's own receptiveness to students' poor pronunciation. In other words, the experienced teacher is so used to being exposed to strongly accented English that they can usually easily understand it. As a result, many students complain that when visiting an English speaking country, they could often not be understood. Therefore, teachers should not become overly complacent about accepting poor pronunciation.

Grammar

For correct usage in speaking and writing, two factors are essential for a learner to know concerning a word. First, what part of speech the word is: a noun, verb, adjective, etc. Second, its derivative forms. Derivatives are the different forms a word can have. For example: employ, employer, employee, employed, etc. It is up to the teacher how far they want to go in explaining correct grammar. Usually, grammar correction is done more often in writing. This can be beneficial for students in that they can actually see the written corrections. While grammar correction during speaking is also beneficial, students may not always retain this knowledge unless they take notes. It can also affect fluency improvement.

Regarding the main difference between vocabulary and grammar, Thornbury (2002, p.14) states that "while vocabulary is largely a collection of items, grammar is a system of rules." He proposes that there are two types of words. The first type is "grammatical (or functional) words". These are generally prepositions, conjunctions, determiners, and pronouns. The second type is 'content words'. These carry a high information load and are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Traditionally grammatical words belonged to the domain of grammar teaching, while vocabulary teaching was more concerned with content words. However, the distinction between the two is often blurred. Sinclair (1991) and Levelt (1989) contend that word choice often determines the grammatical form a learner will use.

Collocations

Simply put, collocations can be defined as words that often occur together. For example: on the way, hurry up, and, too tired. Pawley and Syder (1983) propose that the reason native speakers can speak with such fluency is that they have a such large volume of these memorized sequences on hand and can instantly call upon them without having to think about constructing such phrases from scratch. Miller (1999) additionally shows that an important

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aspect of knowing a word is having a cognitive recognition of the contextual background of such phrases. Nation (2001) puts forth that context involves basically three areas: situational context, topical context, and local (or cultural) context as well. Some collocations border on the idiomatic while others are quite logical. As far as teaching is concerned, the more idiomatic type collocations must be memorized while the more logical ones can either be clearly explained by the teacher or deduced by the learner.

Word Formation

Word formation (sometimes known as affixation or compounding) involves knowing how words are written and spoken and how they can change their form (derivatives), such as prefixes, suffixes, parts of speech, and nouns into verbs. These are also known as word families. For example the word family for 'use' can consist of: used, using, user, misuse, usury and so on.

Word formation also includes combining two words into one, such as dishwasher, paperback, or highway. "A knowledge of affixes and roots has two values for a learner of English: it can be used to help the learning of unfamiliar words by relating these words to known words or to know prefixes and suffixes, and can be used as a way of checking whether an unfamiliar word has been successfully guessed from context" (Nation, 2001, p.264).

Idioms

Idioms, specifically 'core idioms' (Grant and Bauer, 2004), are those multi-word units that cannot be understood by a second language learner merely by understanding the meaning of their components. They must be memorized as whole units. Trying to analyze meaning through the components would prove to be impossible. For example 'break a leg' which in common entertainment parlance would mean to hopefully have good luck. Nation (2008) argues that core idioms occur with such low frequency that they need not be learned until learners have a better grasp of higher frequency words.

As mentioned above in Collocations (section 4), idiomatic expressions can only be learned through memorization. However, it would be worth the teacher's while to expose students to the more commonly used idioms that they would likely encounter in everyday English as opposed to 'textbook' English which is often lacking in such expressions.

Connotation

Connotation can be generally defined as those ideas, impressions, or other qualities implied by a word rather than its actual meaning (denotation). Sometimes there is a meaning that is not very clear from just reading or hearing the words, or even knowing the definition. In addition, dictionary definitions of two words may be the same, but there is a difference between the words which is sensed by native speakers. For example, the differences between smelly and aromatic, thin and skinny, or thrifty and miserly. Learners also need to be aware that meaning involves attitude and emotion as well as denotation. These subtle differences in meaning are best explained by the teacher as the learner encounters them.

Register

Register concerns the formality or politeness of words or phrases used. Register is determined by the relationship of the interlocutors. For example, the manner in which one speaks to friends may not be appropriate when talking to a teacher, colleague, or company superior. Conversely, a doctor will speak much differently to a patient than to his staff. Learners need to be aware of the various meanings of words and how such words can affect the speaker / listener relationship.

Teachers should correct students' experimentation with words that they do not fully comprehend, or misuse. This can be done by means of an explanation or by having the student look up the word in the dictionary. However, EFL teachers should not permit the vulgar or profane words students will sometimes use. These words are usually acquired from movie dialogs or music lyrics and students often have no idea of their actual implications. The teacher should patiently explain why these types of words should not be used in a classroom, although they may have their place among friends.

FOUR MAJOR GROUPS OF VOCABULARY

High frequency words

High frequency words consist of the first 2000 words on the General Service List. The General Service List is a list of the basic vocabulary of English in order of frequency. It was first created in 1953 by Michael West (1953a) and has been revised several times since. High frequency words are a small group of words, but cover 85% of those used in everyday reading and writing. The first 1000 words are actually the most important, and so. In vocabulary classes the teacher should do everything possible to expose students to high frequency words because they are the most important, and whatever method the teacher uses is beneficial. Basically, if learners do not know the first 2000, it is almost pointless to teach the rest, as learners will be ill-equipped to be able to read, write, or comprehend them. Of course this may not always be possible in a regular integrated- skills or speaking class. Selecting specific graded readers, vocabulary books, or short vocabulary exercises related to the current topic can be very useful.

Academic vocabulary

Academic vocabulary encompasses groups of word families that regularly appear across a broad range of academic subjects and fields. The Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) contains 570 word families. A word family consists of the various forms a word can take (see Word Formation above). Nation (2008, p.125) states that "the 570 word families make up around 10% of the running words in academic text, about 4% in newspapers and less than 2% of novels." Subsequently, these words deserve serious attention for those going on to academic study, or who have specific academic goals. Nation (2008) recommends that academic vocabulary be learned both receptively and productively through the four strands, including deliberate teaching and study of the words. The teaching of academic vocabulary should be focused directly on those items needed for the intended area or purpose.

Technical words

This of course refers to those words specific to various specialized fields (physics, engineering, geology, medicine, etc.). In general they are considered low frequency words; however, in relation to their respective fields they can be considered high frequency words. These words should be a part of the study of the subject and taught as they are encountered, not pre-taught by the EFL teacher. Nation (2008) contends that it is essential for the learning of technical vocabulary to occur as part of meaning- focused input through listening and reading, especially intensive reading pertaining to the particular field.

Low frequency words

Low frequency words, which actually comprise the vast majority of words in English, are nevertheless not worth spending an inordinate amount of time on, as there are just too many of them, and the cost- benefit ratio is not worth it. The teacher's goal should not be to teach actual low frequency words, but rather to be able to deal with them as they occur. Nation

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(1990) determined that is more efficient to spend class time teaching learning strategies such as guessing from context, using root words, or memorization techniques. If low frequency words are indeed taught, it should be in the context of the specific topic in that instance.

DICTIONARIES

Their role

Without a doubt dictionaries play an important role in language learning. Scholfield (1997) distinguishes between the various requirements and strategies for dictionary use. Namely, dictionaries being used for comprehension (reading and listening), and those used for production (writing and speaking). It is rare to see a paper dictionary these days in Japan, at least in vocational schools and university classes. Some feel that since students work harder to find a word in a paper dictionary they will have greater retention. Research by Harvey and Yuill (1997) has shown that in writing tasks, the most common reasons students gave for using dictionaries, in order of frequency were:

1.   To check spelling.
2.   To find meaning.
3.   To see if a word exists in the second language.
4.   To find a synonym.
5.   To check grammar.

The key point for consideration is when and when not to use dictionaries. This will be discussed below in 'Advantages' and 'Disadvantages'.

Monolingual vs. Bilingual Dictionaries

The debate has been going on for years about the disadvantages and advantages of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Some argue that monolingual dictionaries usually do not provide sufficient grammatical information, information about pronunciation, word formation, and idiomatic use. There also may be not enough, or even no examples of words used in sentences and phrases. Others argue the same about bilingual dictionaries. In Japan at least, this debate is pretty much irrelevant, as today's electronic bilingual dictionaries used by most students provide all of this. In addition to being faster and easier to use, these dictionaries often include a useful oral pronunciation feature. They do, however, contain quite a number of strange or inappropriate words, as well as unneeded abbreviations.

Advantages

From the student's perspective dictionaries (especially electronic ones) are convenient, fast, and easy to use. Looking up the meaning of a new word and finding its derivatives can take very little time. From the teacher's perspective they also can be convenient and can save time in the sense that they eliminate lengthy and possibly confusing explanations by the teacher. With higher level students however, teacher- provided explanations can be highly advantageous for additional receptive learning. Nation (2008, p.64) states that "Dictionary use, like guessing from context, is a useful vocabulary learning strategy. When used for high frequency words or technical words, dictionaries have the double benefits of helping to develop a useful strategy and giving attention to useful words." For low frequency words dictionaries also help to reinforce learning strategy in the sense that learners can readily check words they have guessed from context.

Disadvantages

Deriving meaning from context is almost universally acknowledged as the most effective vocabulary learning technique. Dictionary use can be a distraction when doing timed or extensive reading, as it may hinder higher to mid-level students from thinking in context. Some benefits from guessing from context are that it gives learners a greater sense of independence if there is no teacher or dictionary to rely on, and is an important strategy for developing fluency in reading. When dealing with lower level students, though, this strategy is not very realistic and dictionaries must be relied on.

Retention is another point to consider. Every time a new word or expression is learned without much effort on the part of the learner, there is a tendency to forget it soon after. Common knowledge would say that a majority of English learners who used dictionaries all the time, although they may have learned the meaning of many words, find it difficult to remember those words the next time they encounter them. This is particularly true when using graded readers as Extensive Reading with no comprehension test looming. Vocabulary books stressing use of recycled words from previous chapters fare somewhat better, though students still often have to look up words encountered in earlier chapters. Most importantly, dictionary use should not inhibit spontaneity. Some teachers encourage students to write new words in a class vocabulary notebook to be looked up at a later time. In summary, it is best left to the teacher to determine the use of dictionaries whenever they think it appropriate.

DEFINITIONS

Nation (1994) contends that useful definition of words can be accomplished in several ways, including:

1. Demonstration - conveying the meaning without using words. This would include actions, pointing, gestures, acting out, showing objects, and using diagrams and pictures on the board.

2. Context - by showing how the word is used in a natural situation, the   learner deduces meaning. For example, the word 'softly': "the mother sat softly so as not to wake her baby."

3.   Translation - by means of either the teacher or a dictionary. This is used to save time if the teacher thinks it appropriate.

4. Abstraction - the learner tries to find the most important ideas the word contains.   Sometimes giving the etymology of the word can be helpful. Abstraction should only be used with the highest level students.

In reality, most teachers rely on a range of techniques to convey definition. For more complex or abstract definitions, especially those for technical vocabulary, it is more practical to use a bilingual dictionary. Nation (1994) further contends that the type of definition given by the teacher should depend on:

1. The importance of the word: is it high frequency or low frequency, and how much does the learner need it?

2. The words that are available to define it, namely: what does the learner already know and understand about the word?

3. The learner's age, interest in the subject material, level of sophistication, education, and life experience.

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4. The need for variety of presentation: the teacher should use various types of definitions to keep the learning situation interesting.

ASSESSMENT

The necessity for measuring vocabulary acquisition is obvious, and the testing of vocabulary is fundamental to the teaching process (Nagy et al., 1985). The reasons for testing vocabulary depend on the needs of the learner or institution. Nation (2008, p.144) gives the following reasons for testing: "to work out what needs to be taught, to monitor and encourage learning, to place learners in the right class, to measure learners' achievement by giving a grade, and to measure learners' vocabulary size or proficiency. Vocabulary can also be used to evaluate teaching and learning activities."

In general, vocabulary tests can be divided into two distinct types. The first is testing 'out of context' (word recognition). Here we are looking for meaning only, not usage. Examples of test types would include multiple choice, matching definitions, or matching synonyms or antonyms. What is being tested here is basically how many items learners know.

The second type of testing is 'in context' (productive). Here we are looking to see how well the learners know a word and whether they can use it correctly in regards to meaning, grammar, context, and so on. This type of test is much more difficult but can be adapted to various learner levels. The most commonly used would be a cloze exercise in which there are several blanks in a paragraph dealing with one topic; or it could be single unrelated sentences. These exercises can have a word list to choose from or not, depending on the level of difficulty the teacher deems appropriate. Another, and more difficult type, would be writing exercises using words from a list that have been previously taught. Again, it can be a paragraph dealing with one topic, or single unrelated sentences. Nation (1982) argues that vocabulary should be measured for recognition as well as recall.

CONCLUSION

The teacher's most important priorities for the teaching of vocabulary should be proper training, planning, class preparation, and a good knowledge of various vocabulary strategies. If both teachers and learners are well- versed in vocabulary learning techniques and strategies the learner's chances for second language learning are greatly enhanced. Chall (1987) contends that the wider the learner's reading experiences are, the more this will contribute to their ability to derive meaning from context. The learning goals can be met for a specific time period be it a single class or a semester, but the ultimate aim is to instill a set of skills that will continue functioning long after the course has ended. Learning a language, particularly vocabulary, its principal component, is a never- ending process.

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