

SIGNIFICANCE OF VOCABULARY IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Students often find it difficult to use the right words at the right place while writing or speaking. There is dearth of vocabulary in possession of youngsters, limited to repetition of words such as “very much”, “like”, “cool”, and “good”. This predicament is attached to the students’ inability to collect ample words for right usage or most of the words remained dormant in student as passive vocabulary. Effective teaching and learning strategies could help the student to overcome with tenacity the smoldering desire to use right words at right time. “Vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner.” (Swan and Walter 1984) David Wilkins summed up the importance of vocabulary for language learning: “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

“If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!” (Thornbury 2002, p. 13) To have a broader insight into the vocabulary segment, it is important to have a glance at the two language learning techniques: grammar-translation method and communicative approach. The grammar method emphasizes on presenting language as set of forms: grammatical, phonological and lexical. While communicative competence presents language as a functional system which is used to fulfill all communicative purposes.

Grammar-translation method

In late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries .The grammar-translation method of foreign language teaching is one of the most traditional methods. It was originally used to teach the contexts of Latin and Greek literatures. The grammar-translation method focuses on learning the grammar rules and their relevance in translating texts from one language into the other. This is one of the common methods of teaching, foreign language to the SLA learners. Vocabulary and grammar is presented systematically in students’ native language and practiced through translation. As a matter of fact, the rationale of teaching or learning language is Holistic development of learner; at grammatical accuracy and communication. Albeit, grammar competency enhances linguistic ability and accuracy, while “speaking they incline to have a hesitant style that is often difficult to listen to”(Krashen 1987) Nancy Thuleen, in her article

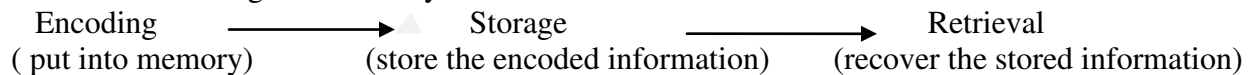
criticizes the nature of this method ' "The worst effect of this method is on students' motivation. Because (s) he cannot succeed - leads to frustration and lack of confidence in language usage. However , The supporter of grammar translation method, Rao Zhenhui, emphasizes the importance of the language structure as a fundamental element which allows us to generate sentences. "Only correct grammar structure can assure comprehensible communication."

Communicative approach

Communicative language teaching emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as the emphasis switched from the grammar – translation method to activities that engaged the learner in more meaningful and authentic language use , where learners communicate and tasks are completed by means of interaction with other learners. The first concern of communicative approach is language acquisition rather than conscious learning. It believed that, when learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language. According to Krashen, "acquisition is a natural process, similar to the way children develop ability in their first language. It is subconscious process when students are not aware of the fact they are acquiring language but are using the language for communication." (Krashen, 1987, p. 10) The role of a teacher and classroom environment provide opportunities for rehearsal of real-life situations and provide opportunity for real communication. Emphasis is on creative role-plays, team simulations, surveys, and projects - all construct spontaneity and improvisation of the student. To sum up, communicative approach refers to classroom activities in which students use language as a vehicle of communication, and the main purpose is to complete some kind of task.

The two methods of learning: grammar method teaches words in isolation, practice and memorization help the learner to remember the words. Whereas, communicative approach teaches vocabulary contextually, students are awarded of connection between communication and grammar. The effectiveness of any method is depended on the ability of the mind to remember and to recall the stored information. Memory is a quintessential component in learning vocabulary. Therefore, it is imperative to understand, in brief, tacit role of memory and its part in learning and recalling information out of the mind box.

There are three stages of memory



Short-term memory

When information is attended, it gets encoded into short-term memory. Encoding means information is deposited in memory in a certain form, or code. Short-term memory has very limited capacity. On the average, the limit is seven items, some people store as few as five items; others can hold onto as many as line. For instance, YTDRAES contain seven single-letter items, but when they are rearranged to form a word STRAYED there is only one item or unit. " Such units are called chunks, and the capacity of short-term memory is best expressed as 72 chunks" (Miller,1956) . Each item entering short-term memory goes into its own slot. We can recall the items perfectly. When all the slots are filled and a new item enters it displaces the old one. This is how an item is lost from short-term memory. Perhaps, in teaching and learning process, the student often absorbs many words, but too many words facilitate learned material rapidly fade away. Consequently, the encoded words have to be stored in long-term memory.

Long-term memory

Long-term memory has an enormous capacity and its contents are durable over time. In short-term memory the process of discarding is important to make room for learning and new memories. But once a memory is stored in the long-term memory, it is stored there forever. In this memory storage and retrieval are considered together. The two factors that increase the chances of successful retrieval: organizing information in storage and ensuring that the context in which we retrieve information is similar to the context in which we encoded it.

Example to construe the working process of memory

The three stages: encoding, storage and retrieval can be compared to an office filing system. A phone message is received and encoded into a typed document suitable for filing. The document is then stored in the files using possibly the date, the caller's name, or the topic of the conversation to determine where it is placed. When the information is needed, at a later time, it must be retrieved by searching files. The failure to remember may involve faulty encoding, failure to have stored the information, or inability to retrieve it when needed. Modern psychologists state that “ some information, due to lack of attention ,may not have reached short- term memory from the sensory register; or due to inadequate encoding and rehearsal, the information may not have been transferred from short-term to long-term memory.”

Memory and its subcomponents play an important role in language learning ((Schmitt2000).Ellis 1996 found evidence that shows that short-term memory capacity is a good predictor of eventual vocabulary achievement. Craik& Lockhart 1972 proposed that ,the durability of memory traces is affected by the depth f processing .They later in 1975 specified that retention is not merely determined by the presence or absence of encoding, but by the richness of encoding. A more elaborate encoding results in a more durable connection, that is, the deeper the processing, the better the learning. Many researches poured into, to discover what is remembered and what is forgotten, especially with regard to vocabulary acquisition, they suggested a number of principles that may aid long-term retention. The most important principles are mentioned by Thornbury, 2002

- Repetition – repetition of a word in context as well as, attaching it to an object or situation is very important, useful and effective. If the word is met several times over space interval during reading activities, students have a very good chance to remember it for a long time. •
- Retrieval – providing opportunities through activities, which require retrieval, such as using the new items in written, oral and reading tasks, help students to be able to recall it again in the future.
- Spacing – to teach vocabulary in small groups and to provide ample space between them. This reduces overlapping of information and losing of it before it reaches long-term memory.
- Pacing – to respect different learning styles and pace; means to provide the pupils enough time for particular work because each of them has his or her own pace and to enable them to work silently and individually
- Use - putting words to use, preferably in an interesting way. This is so called “Use it or lose it” principle.
- Cognitive depth - the more decisions students make about the word and the more cognitively demanding these decisions are, the better the word is remembered. .

- Imaging – It is one powerful source of memory. Pictures or images are easily coded and remembered therefore ,visualized words are better memorable than those that do not evoke with any pictures
- Mnemonics – tricks to help retrieve items or rules that are stored in memory. The best kinds of mnemonics are visuals and keyword techniques.

Teaching vocabulary

“Perhaps the greatest tools we can give students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words.” (John J. Pikulski) The role of teacher undergoes fundamental changes to change a classroom from teacher centered classroom to student centered and to alter from a language-based to a needs-based. It is always important for a teacher to start teaching vocabulary; knowing a word involves knowing its form and its meaning at the basic level. In deeper aspects it means the abilities to know its (Harmer 1993):

- Meaning-contextual and general meaning attached to the word
- Usage - . Knowledge of its collocations, metaphors and idioms, to be aware of any connotations and associations the word might have
- Word formation - ability to spell and pronounce the word correctly, to know any derivations (acceptable prefixes and suffixes)
- Grammar – knowledge to use it in the appropriate grammatical form.

A comprehensive approach to develop and teach vocabulary involves to get the act together, so that students benefit in the classroom processes.

The role of the teacher is to know: what is to be taught, which words, how many.

- ✓ Provide direct instruction in the meanings of clusters of words and individual words
- ✓ Focus on the need – target vocabulary should respond students’ real needs and interests.
- ✓ Systematically teach students the meaning of prefixes, suffixes, and root words
- ✓ Teach the effective, efficient, realistic use of dictionaries, thesauruses, and other reference works
- ✓ Frequent exposure and repetition
- ✓ Meaningful presentation of words – clear and unambiguous denotation or reference should be assured.

Furthermore, Coady(1997a,282, drawing on research done by Stahl & Fairbanks 1986) states three principles that underlie any effective vocabulary teaching : Providing learners with both definitional and contextual information about words, encouraging learners to process information about words at a deeper level,and providing learners with multiple exposures to words.

Nation 2001 provides a description of how new vocabulary items can be taught -

Direct Teaching	: Teacher explanation ,peer explanation
Direct Learning	: Study from word cards ,dictionary use
Incidental Learning	: Guessing from context in extensive reading , in communication activities.
Planned Encounters	: Graded reading, vocabulary exercises.

Methods to help students learn vocabulary

It is important to encourage students to systematically and effectively record words that are taught in the classroom; diligent learners to transfer this record into their long-term memories. As part of teaching, to maximize the quality and quantity of learning, following methods have to be involved in regular classroom.

- ✓ Organized material with new lexis should be integrated into language already known by the learners.
- ✓ Encourage students to note down vocabulary in a notebook. This facilitates the habit of collecting words and to add items and further information about an item already recorded.
- ✓ Explain students about the kind of information to be included, while taking a word: pronunciation (in phonetic symbol), definition, collocation, word's family and insist on writing an example sentence using the word.
- ✓ A systematically organized store is essential to trace a word by topic, or theme.
- ✓ Students' interest and curiosity about words are also stimulated when they learn the logic behind word origins and the many stories that underlie how words came about and came to mean what they do.
- ✓ Activities and tasks to be framed around the words, so that; the learner could recall and retrieve the words to use contextually.
- ✓ To motivate students to read books –fiction and non-fiction, as well as, to read daily news paper, this is a treasure trove of practical and literary vocabulary.

Conclusions

“Words, so innocent and powerless as they are, standing in a dictionary; how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to choose and combine them.” — Nathaniel Hawthorne. It does seem hard to overstate the importance of vocabulary, but it encompasses the general social and economic success of an individual. Researches' unveiling the facts of mind and memory perhaps broadens the teachers' and students perspective in learning vocabulary. Understanding the constitution of brain precludes all preconceptions regarding teaching vocabulary. However, language itself is not only individual lexemes put together, but it is necessary to follow a set of grammar rules to assure correct comprehension of speaker's intention. Therefore, vocabulary together with grammar rules acquisition plays significant role in foreign language teaching. Extensive reading plays a critical role in developing knowledge, and teachers facilitate this process by teaching strategies for learning words independently, and exploring the link between spelling and learning words.

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