TEACHING VOCABULARY TO LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: *Vocabulary is a vital part of language teaching. New words have to be introduced in such a way as to capture the students' attention and place the words in their memories. Students need to be aware of techniques for memorizing large amounts of new vocabulary in order to progress in their language learning. Vocabulary learning can often be seen as a laborious process of memorizing lists of unrelated items, however, there are many other much more successful ways to learn and teach vocabulary. This paper is an attempt to study and explore the various methodologies that can be incorporated in the teaching of vocabulary items in a language classroom.*

Key words: *vocabulary teaching, form, grammar, collocation, aspects of meaning, word formation.*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign. Although vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching, interest in its role in second language learning has grown rapidly in recent years and specialists now emphasize the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary by both the teacher and the learner. The increased interest in this topic is evidenced by a rapidly expanding body of experimental studies and pedagogical material, most of which addresses several key questions of particular interest for language teachers. These questions reflect the current focus on the needs of learners in acquiring lexical competence and on the role of the teacher in guiding them toward this goal.

2 .Teaching Vocabulary

When we teach new vocabulary we shall pay attention to the following important aspects:

1. Form: pronunciation and spelling

The learner has to know what a word sounds like (its pronunciation) and what it looks like (its spelling). These are fairly obvious characteristics, and one or the other will be perceived by the learner when encountering the item for the first time. In teaching, we need to make sure that both these aspects are accurately presented and learned. Sadly it is not uncommon for learners of a foreign language to find that their lexical knowledge is rendered almost useless by their inability to make themselves intelligible when they speak. Such painful experiences are not confined to production either, for it is equally true that unfamiliarity with correct pronunciation can result in the learner failing to understand words in connected speech that he understands clearly in written English. Careful attention to pronunciation is therefore an essential part of vocabulary teaching of new lexis is to be used effectively, or understood without difficulty, in spoken English.

2. Grammar

The grammar of a new item will need to be taught if this is not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An item may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts or may have some idiosyncratic way of connecting with other words in sentences; it is important to provide learners with this information at the same time as we teach the base form. When teaching a new verb, for example, we might give also its past form, if this is irregular (*think, thought*), and we might note if it is transitive or intransitive. Similarly, when teaching a noun, we may wish to present its plural form, if irregular (*mouse, mice*), or draw learners' attention to the fact that it has no plural at all (*advice, information*). We may present verbs such as *want* and *enjoy* together with the verb form that follows them (*want to, enjoy –ing*), or adjectives or verbs together with their following prepositions (responsible for, remind someone of).

3. Collocation

When two items co-occur, or are used together frequently, they are said to collocate. The collocations typical of particular combination sound 'right' or 'wrong' in a given context. So this is another piece of information about a new item which it may be worth teaching. When introducing

words like *decision* and *conclusion*, for example, we may note that you *take* or *make* the one, but usually *come* to the other; similarly, you *throw a ball* but *toss a coin*; you may talk about someone being *dead tired* but it sounds odd to say *dead fatigued.*

Collocations are also often noted in dictionaries, either by providing the whole collocation under one of the head-words, or by a note in parenthesis.

4. Aspects of meaning (1): denotation, connotation, appropriateness

The meaning of a word is primarily what it refers to in the real world, its denotation; this is often the sort of definition that is given in the dictionary. For example, *dog* denotes a kind of animal; more specifically, a common, domestic carnivorous mammal; and both *dank* and *moist* mean slightly wet.

A less obvious component of the meaning of an item is in its connotation: the associations, or positive or negative feelings it evokes, which may or may not be indicated in a dictionary definition. The word *dog*, for example, as understood by most British people, has positive connotations of friendship and loyalty; whereas the equivalent in Arabic, as understood by most people in Arab countries has negative associations of dirt and inferiority. Within the English language, *moist* has favourable connotations while *dank* has unfavourable; so that you could describe something as 'pleasantly moist' where 'pleasantly dank' would sound absurd.

A more subtle aspect of meaning that often needs to be taught is whether a particular item is the appropriate one to use in a certain context or not. Thus it is useful for a learner to know that a certain word is very common, or relatively rare, or 'taboo' in polite conversation, or tends to be used in writing but not in speech, or is more suitable for formal than informal discourse, or belongs to a certain dialect. For example, you may know that *weep* is virtually synonymous in denotation with *cry*, but it is more formal, tends to be used in writing more than in speech, and is in general much less common.

5. Aspects of meaning (2) meaning relationships

The meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language. In our native language, we can easily identify the relationships between words; we know that: 'Revolting' can be a synonym for 'disgusting' in certain contexts. 'Sharp' is the antonym for 'blunt' in certain contexts. 'Hatcher', 'pickaxe' and 'chopper' are all types of axe, and can be sharp or blunt.

There are various such relationships; here we present some of the main ones:

a) **Synonyms:** items that mean the same, or nearly the same; for example, *bright, clever, smart* may serve as synonyms for *intelligent*. It is rarely the case that two words will be synonymous on every occasion – if they were, there would be little need to have both words in the language. So, when we use the term synonymy we are actually talking about partial synonymy, and the following examples illustrate how synonymy may differ:

flat = apartment   different dialect i.e. GB versus US

kid = child   different style i.e. colloquial versus neutral

skinny = thin   different connotation i.e. 'skinny' is more pejorative

conceal = hide   as transitive verbs, but 'hide' may also be intransitive, thus different grammar

As long as these differences are highlighted, the use of synonyms is often a quick and efficient way of explaining unknown words.

b) Antonyms: items that mean the opposite; *rich* is the antonym of *poor.*

There are a variety of different forms of oppositeness which are relevant to learners and teachers; these include *complementarity, converseness, multiple taxononomy* and *gradable antonymy.*

Complementaries (also 'binary antonyms' or 'binary taxonomy) – are forms of antonyms which truly represent oppositeness of meaning. They cannot be graded and if one of the pair is applicable, then the other cannot be. They are said to be mutually exclusive: e.g. X is male Y is female.

If a human being or animal is male, then clearly it cannot be female. This is a clear-cut area of opposition and a 'safe' one for the very common teacher's question, 'What's the opposite of…?'

Converses – with certain pairs of lexical items, there is another form of 'oppositeness', called converseness, and two examples follow:

1 a) Julia is Martin's wife.

b) Martin is Julia's husband.

2 a) The picture is above the fireplace.

b) The fireplace is below the picture.

In these examples (a) and (b) paraphrase each other and we can see the relationship between the pairs as being reciprocal. Family and social relations provide many examples of converses, as do space and time relations.

Multiple incompatibles (also 'multiple taxonomy) – these are sets of miniature semantic systems which are of interest to teachers and learners as they are easily memorable, and many occur in other languages. Some of these are closed

systems, i.e. having a strictly limited number, while others are open systems, i.e. covering a much wider field, often an indeterminate number. Here are some examples of 'closed' systems.

e.g. a) spring, summer, autumn, winter

b) Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday

Using one item from the set excludes all the others in the same system.

Here are some examples of 'open-ended' systems. These are, of course, further examples of superordinates and hyponyms.Vehicles: car, bus, lorry, van … ; Flowers: lily, daffodil, pansy, geranium …

Gradable antonyms (also 'gradable opposites', 'polar opposites' and 'antonyms)

Sue's house is *big*. Mary's house is *small*.

c) **Hyponyms:** items that serve as specific examples of a general concept. It would not be accurate to say that 'fruit' equals 'orange', but we can say that the meaning of 'fruit' is included in the meaning of 'orange', as it is in the meaning of 'apple', 'pear', and 'plum'. We express this sense relation by saying that 'fruit' is a superordinate and that 'orange', 'apple', 'pear' and 'plum' are all hyponyms of 'fruit' In the same way, 'cow', 'horse', 'pig' and 'dog' are all hyponyms of the superordinate 'animal'.

d) **Co-hyponyms** or **co-ordinates:** other items that are the 'same kind of thing'; *red, blue, green* and *blue* are co-ordinates.

e) **Superordinates:** general concepts that 'cover' specific items; *animal* is the superordinate of *dog, lion, mouse.*

6. Word formation

Vocabulary items, whether one-word or multi-word, can often be broken down into their component 'bits'. Exactly how these bits are put together is another piece of useful information – perhaps mainly for more advanced learners.

There are three main forms of word building or word formation which are characteristic of English: affixation, compounding and conversion.

Affixation is the process of adding prefixes and suffixes to the base item; in this way, items can be modified in meaning and/or changed from one part of speech to another. To the base form 'man', for instance, we can add prefixes and suffixes in the following way:

Man

Man + ly = manly

Un + man + ly = unmanly

Un + man+ ly + ness = unmanliness

Sometimes the process of affixation produces changes in stress and sounds in an item:
e.g. democrat, democratic, democracy.

Compounding is the formation of words from two or more separate words which can stand independently in other circumstances. There are three different types of compound: adjective compounds (hard-working, time-consuming, short-sleeved), verb compounds (to baby-sit, to sightsee), and noun compounds. For this last group, there are three main patterns: base noun + noun (a coffee jar, table tennis, horse race); possessive noun + noun (my girlfriend's brother) and prepositional structures (a look of fear, the end of the line).

Conversion, also known as zero affixation, is the process by which an item may be used in different parts of speech, yet does not change its form:

e.g. We've just had a lovely *swim.* (noun)

I can't *swim* very well. (verb)

There are various reasons why we remember some words better than others: the nature of the words themselves, under what circumstances they are learnt, the method of teaching and so on.

Some facts should be remembered when teaching new items:

1. People tend to remember words that have personal or emotive significance (mum, dad)

2. People commonly attempt to link items together in sense units, or find some reason to associate them, or look for personal significance. All these can be harnessed in teaching. Another point worth thinking about here is the wide variety of strategies used by different learners. A strategy found useful by one learner may be quite useless to another. We cannot, of course, teach a whole class in a way that will fit every student's learning strategies – but we can encourage individual students to find what 'works' for them and to approach a learning task in an appropriate way.

3. The placing of words in a list: words at the beginning of a list tend to be remembered better, all things being equal. We shall teach more important new words first or at the beginning of a lesson.

3.Conclusions

Because of the verbal nature of the most classroom activities the teaching of vocabulary is an essential part of target language teaching. During the presentation of the new vocabulary special attention should be paid to the peculiarities of the items presented. The teacher needs to make sure

that the students have perceived both graphic and phonetic forms of the new item. It is also important to provide the learners with the information about grammatical form of the words.. The learners' attention should be also drawn to the appropriateness of an item, its connotation or collocation. Such aspects of meaning as style, register of new words, their belonging to a dialect should be also highlighted. The teacher has at his/her disposal a large number of techniques of presenting the meaning of new items: pictures and objects, definitions and context, synonyms, antonyms and hyponyms, mime and gesture, word building elements. The correct usage of these techniques ensures the successful assimilation of the new items and development of the students' vocabulary.

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