Vocabulary in the Approaches to Language Teaching: From the Twentieth Century to the Twenty-first

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Abstract—This study gives an overview of the nine twentieth-century approaches to language teaching and demonstrates how vocabulary teaching was regarded and what techniques were used to teach vocabulary in each of the approaches. The reasons of the emergence of a new approach to language teaching are pointed out for each approach as well. Finally, the current status of vocabulary teaching and the causes of debates among vocabulary researchers are discussed. It can be concluded that although a systematic and principled approach to teaching vocabulary has not yet been found, teaching vocabulary learning strategies explicitly has attracted the attention of many researchers around the world.

Index Terms—vocabulary teaching, language teaching approaches, strategy training

I. INTRODUCTION

After many decades of being neglect and receiving little importance, teaching and learning second language (L2) vocabulary has now markedly become into the focus of interest of many applied linguistic researchers and language teachers (Barcroft, 2004; Decaricco, 2001; Read, 2000). Moreover, lexical competence is currently acknowledged to be a core component of communicative competence by many vocabulary specialists, which provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read and write (Coady & Huckin, 1997; Richards & Renandya, 2002). In the past, it was thought that vocabulary could simply be learned effortlessly, and received only incidental attention in many textbooks and language programs. However, mastering vocabulary is one of the most challenging tasks that any learner faces when learning a foreign language and, thus, many language learners devote a great deal of time on memorizing lists of L2 words and rely on their bilingual dictionary as a basic communicative resource; furthermore, they consider L2 acquisition as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary.

The low status of vocabulary teaching in past years can largely be attributed to the language teaching approaches which were dominant at that time. Changes in language teaching approaches throughout history have reflected shifts in theories of the nature of language and of language learning; they have also reflected recognition of changes in the kind of proficiency learners need. Takefuta and Takefuta (1996) in their bibliographic study emphasized the close relationship between vocabulary teaching and teaching methodologies of English. In this light, the purpose of this article is to explore how vocabulary instruction was regarded in the different approaches to language teaching based on the classification proposed by Celce-Murcia (2001), and more specifically to give an overview of the importance each approach has placed on vocabulary teaching and to discuss the possible shortcomings of each approach. Finally, the current status of vocabulary teaching is discussed.

Celce-Murcia (2001) classifies the major trends in language teaching in the twentieth century into nine approaches, namely, (1) Grammar-Translation, (2) Direct, (3) Reading, (4) Audiolingualism (United States), (5) Oral-Situational (Britain), (6) Cognitive, (7) Affective-Humanistic, (8) Comprehension-Based, and (9) Communicative. The importance given to vocabulary and the way it was taught within each of these approaches are briefly discussed in the next part.

II. THE HISTORY OF VOCABULARY TEACHING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A. Grammar Translation Approach

Grammar Translation, an extension of the approach used to teach classical languages to the teaching of modern languages, dominated foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s. In its modified form, this approach continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today. The fundamental goal of learning a foreign language in Grammar Translation Approach is to be able to read its literature. In order to do so, students are expected to learn the

grammatical rules and vocabulary of the target language using bilingual word lists. It seems that the advocates of this approach had chosen the principles of Faculty Psychology as the basis for their learning theory (Chastain, 1988). It was thought that memorizing vocabulary items, grammatical rules, and translation would provide language learners with useful mental exercise, which would enhance their intellectual growth. Although the prescriptive grammatical rules and their exceptions formulated by traditional grammarians were taught in this approach, it lacked a justified theory of language or learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2003).

Vocabulary lists are a familiar part of the lesson in this approach and a typical exercise is to translate lexical items or sentences from the target language into their mother tongue using dictionaries to (or vice versa). Another exercise given to the students is a list of words which they are required to find their antonyms or sometimes their synonyms in the reading passage they are studying or define the words that they encounter in the reading passage. Recognizing cognates is an exercise mostly given to students in this approach, which means they should identify and learn the spelling or sound pattern that corresponds between the target language and mother tongue (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Although along with teaching grammatical rules deductively emphasis was placed on vocabulary, the main objection to this approach was that it lacked realistic oral language and the result of this approach was an in ability on the part of the student to use the language for communication. Zimmerman (1997) states that these objections hold implications for vocabulary instruction. One of the critics of this approach in the 1860s was Prendergast, in his manual he described how children learn languages in ready-made chunks and listed what he believed to be the most frequently used words in English. Prendergast (1864) emphasized that the high frequency words should be taught in ready-made chunks. Unfortunately, his interest for teaching vocabulary did not catch on.

B.   Direct Approach

By the end of the nineteenth century Direct Approach or Method emerged as a reaction to the Grammar Translation Approach and its failure to produce learners who could communicate in the foreign language they were studying. This approach stressed the ability to use rather than analyze a language as the goal of language instruction or in other words, the main goal was to train students to communicate in the target language and to have an acceptable pronunciation. The idea behind the Direct Approach was that we learn languages by hearing them spoken and engaging in conversation (Hubbard, Jone, & Thornton 1983). In this approach, the learners are expected to imitate and practice the target language until they become fluent and accurate speakers and, as there is no translation, it is assumed that they will learn to think in the target language.

It is supposed that vocabulary can be acquired naturally through interactions during the lesson; therefore, vocabulary is presented in context and is graded from simple to complex. In this approach, vocabulary is emphasized over grammar (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Concrete words are taught through objects, pictures, physical demonstration, and abstract words are taught by grouping words according to a topic or through association of ideas (Zimmerman, 1997).

The Direct Approach was perceived to have several drawbacks. It required teachers who were native speakers or had native-like fluency in the foreign language. Although it offered innovations at the level of teaching, it lacked a through methodological basis (Sweet, 1899). Brown (1973) describes his frustration in observing a teacher performing verbal gymnastics in an attempt to convey the meaning of Japanese words, when translation would have been a much more efficient technique. Takefuta and Takefuta (1996) in their work on teaching methodologies summarize that before the 1940s, vocabulary teaching had been "taken lightly" under Grammar- Translation Method, or Direct Method.

C.   Reading Approach

Following the Coleman Report in 1929, reading became the goal of most foreign language programs in the United States and its popularity lasted until World War II (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). This approach began to function as an alternative to the Direct Approach and was chosen for practical reasons, limited class hours, the qualification of the teachers, and the need of the learners. It was claimed in this approach that reading knowledge could be achieved through the gradual introduction of words and grammatical structures in simple reading texts.

The vocabulary used in the reading passages is controlled at beginning levels and is chosen according to their frequency and usefulness. The acquisition of vocabulary is considered to be more important than grammatical skills and is expanded as fast as possible through intensive and extensive reading. The translation of vocabulary items and sentences are permitted.

The Reading Approach held sway in the United States until the late 1930s and early 1940s (Darian, 1972; West, 1941). When the World War II broke out and made it imperative for the U.S. military force to quickly and efficiently learn foreign languages, the popularity of this approach waned. The deficient vocabulary knowledge gained through the Reading Approach and its lack of emphasis on oral-aural skills gave rise to language learners who could not communicate in the target language (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

D.   Audiolingualism (United States)

The Audiolingual Approach which was dominant in the United States during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s is known to be a major paradigm shift in foreign language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The combination of structural linguistics theory (Bloomfield, 1933), contrastive analysis (Fries, 1945), oral-aural procedures, and behaviorist psychology (Skinner, 1957) led to the development of Audiolingual method. The theory of language underlying

Audiolingualism is structural linguistics which its fundamental tenet is that speech is language. This approach adopts the behaviorist view as its theory of learning which claims that learning is a matter of "habit formation" (Decarrico, 2001). The main emphasis in this approach is placed on the grammar of a language which should be overlearned.

The new grammatical points and vocabulary are presented through dialogues. Most of the drills and exercises that follow the dialogues are manipulative and pay no attention to content. In this approach, the major objective of language teaching is to acquire the grammatical and phonological structures of a language; thus, vocabulary learning is kept to a minimum (especially in the initial stages) and new words are introduced and selected according to their simplicity and familiarity to make the grammar practice possible (Zimmerman, 1997). Takefuta and Takefuta (1996) claim that one reason that vocabulary was "restricted" under Audiolingual Approach is that it emphasized the phonological aspects of language learning.

After a long period of widespread popularity, this approach faced criticism on two fronts: (1) its theoretical foundations was questioned and was averred to be unsound in terms of both language theory and learning theory. (2) The learners were unable to transfer skills acquired through Audiolingualism to real communication situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). However, vocabulary learning seemed to be fruitful in this method as stated by Coady (1993) it is thought that exposure to language and good language habits leads to an increased vocabulary.

E.   Oral-situational Approach (Britain)

This approach was developed by British applied linguists as a reaction to the Reading Approach and its lack of emphasis on oral-aural skills; it enjoyed popularity during the1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Similarities can be found between the Direct and Situational Approaches but a great deal has been added to it from the works of British functional linguists, especially J.R. Firth, who believed that language form is determined by its context and situation (Celce-Murcia, 2001). The theory of teaching of this approach is characterized as a type of British "Structuralism" and its theory of learning is a type of behaviorist habit-learning theory. In this method all lexical and grammatical items are presented and practiced in situations (e.g. at the supermarket, at the bank, at the post office).

The vocabulary items are chosen according to the situations being practiced. Vocabulary selection procedures are followed to ensure that an essential general service vocabulary is covered (Richards & Rodgers, 2003).

Oral-Situational Approach and Audiolingualism share a great deal of similarities; thus, they confronted the same criticisms and like the Audiolingual Approach the view of language teaching and learning underlying the Oral-Situational Approach were called into question in the mid-1960s .

F.   Cognitive Approach

The Cognitive Approach offered relief to the criticisms bombarded to the behaviorist features of the Audiolingual Approach. It was influenced by cognitive psychology (Neisser, 1967) and Chomskyan linguistics (Chomsky, 1959, 1965). According to Chomsky's Generative linguistics, language is represented as a speaker's mental grammar, a set of abstract rules for generating grammatical sentences. The rules generate the syntactic structure and lexical items from appropriate grammatical categories are selected to fill in the corresponding slots in the syntactic frames. In this approach, language learning is viewed as rule-acquisition, not habit-formation. Vocabulary is important, especially at intermediate and advanced levels.

Although no teaching method directly stems from the Cognitive Approach, Gattengo's Silent Way (1976) shares certain principles with it. The principle of Silent Way which states that "teaching is subordinated to learning" is in keeping with the active search for rules ascribed to the learner in the Cognitive Approach. In this method, a distinction is made between several classes of vocabulary items. As cited in Richards and Rodgers (1986), the first class consists of common expressions in the daily life, the second class consists of words used in communicating more specialized ideas such as politics and the last class consists of more functional words of language.

G.   Affective-humanistic Approach

This approach which emphasizes respect for the individual (each student, the teacher) and for his or her feelings, emerged as a reaction to the Audiolingualism and Cognitive Approach that lacked the affective consideration (Celce-Murcia, 2001). In this approach, learning a foreign language is viewed as a self-realization process. Much of the instruction involves pair-work and group-work; peer support and interaction are viewed as necessary for learning.

A teaching method which can be illustrative of this approach is Lozanov's Suggestopedia (1978). In this method, the memorization of vocabulary pairs, in which a target word is followed by its native translation, is emphasized. In this method, lexis is emphasized and lexical translation is emphasized more than contextualization and claims about the success of the method often focus on the large number of words that can be acquired (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Another teaching method which is the result of the influence of Roger's humanistic psychology and like this approach advises teachers to consider their students as "whole persons" is Curran's Community Language Learning (1976). This method is most often used in the teaching of oral proficiency. It does not use a conventional language syllabus which determine in advance the grammar and vocabulary to be taught, but learners nominate the things they wish to talk about. Particular grammar points, pronunciation patterns, and vocabulary are worked with, based on the language the students have generated (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

H.   Comprehension-based Approach

Comprehension-Based Approach establishes that listening comprehension is very important and will allow speaking, reading, and writing to develop spontaneously over time, given the right conditions. It is claimed in this approach that there are similarities between the process of first and second language acquisition (Postovsky, 1974, Winitz, 1981). Second language learners, like first language learners, should be exposed to a great deal of authentic language, pass through a pre-production period and during this period they can respond nonverbally in meaningful ways and learn grammar sub-consciously.

Asher's Total Physical Response (1977) is the result of his investigation about the Comprehension-Based Approaches, Developmental and Humanistic Psychology and his own principles of learning theory. In this method, grammatical structure and vocabulary are emphasized over other language areas. It requires initial attention to meaning rather than the form of the items (Larsen-Freeman 2000).

It seems with the shift to generative linguistics in the 1960s, vocabulary in the Cognitive, Affective-Humanistic, and Comprehension-Based Approaches was afforded somewhat more importance, but the focus on rules of grammar was still served to reinforce the idea that lexis was somewhat secondary (Carter & McCarthy, 1988). Bridal (2003) concerning the history of language teaching states that vocabulary instruction has been treated in more or less the same way and it is apparent that direct vocabulary instruction has not been a focus of instruction in L2 classrooms for much of this century and this area has been neglected. However, after the 1970s, as Communicative Approach emerged, vocabulary teaching suddenly became a "hot topic" (Takefuta & Takefuta, 1996).

I. Communicative Approach

The method which has dominated the last several decades of this century is the Communicative Approach which is the result of the works of anthropological linguistics (e.g. Hymes, 1972) and Firthian linguists (e.g. Halliday, 1973) who view language first and foremost as a system for communication. In the 1970's attention was drawn to the importance of communicative competence and knowledge of the rules of language use (Hymes, 1972). This led to a shift away from a focus on accuracy and the forms of language, to a focus on communication and fluency. Although there are different interpretations of communicative language teaching, this approach to L2 interpretations typically focuses on functions of language use and a more authentic use of language in the L2 classroom or better to say instead of focusing on sentence levels forms it centers on discourse level functions.

With its emphasis on fluency over accuracy, and a focus on encouraging learners to communicate their messages and intentions using the linguistic resources available to them, vocabulary has not been a primary concern of this methodology and was given secondary status, taught mainly as a support for functional language use (Decarrico, 2001). As in previous approaches, it was generally assumed that vocabulary would take care of itself; therefore, it is assumed that there is no real need for direct vocabulary instruction (Schmidt, 2000).

III. THE CURRENT STATUS OF VOCABULARY TEACHING

During the last three decades, the outlook on vocabulary has radically changed and researchers have shown outpouring interests towards this area. Therefore, the movement toward effective methodologies for teaching vocabulary has emerged and researchers and language teachers have also suggested many strategies and techniques for vocabulary learning, which are dependent on the efforts of each learner (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009).

Two major directions towards vocabulary teaching and learning have been the cause of debate among vocabulary researcher: (1) Explicit instruction which involves diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting the words for the first time, elaborating word knowledge, and developing fluency with known words; and (2) Incidental learning which is acquiring vocabulary through other communicative skills such as listening, reading, speaking, or writing. Nation (2002) argues for a systematic rather than an incidental approach to the teaching of vocabulary and asserts that such a focus is an essential part of a language course. On the other hand, Hunt and Beglar (2002) recommend the combination of these two approaches and also acknowledge the need for strategy training. They suggest that learners need to be taught strategies for inferring words from contexts as well as those which can help them retain the words they have encountered. Since the onset of learning strategy research three decades ago, there is a consensus in this field that strategy training warrants time and effort both in and out of the classroom (see, among others, Fan, 2003; Macaro, 2001; Takeuchi et al, 2007). There are not yet clear insights from research studies to inform teachers what they should do to best help their learners improve their foreign language vocabulary knowledge.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to demonstrate how vocabulary teaching is viewed in each teaching approach and how a new approach has emerged due to the deficiencies and impracticalities of the previous ones. Vocabulary teaching has not yet reached the level of consistency and systematicity that the teaching of other language skills enjoy such as grammar, although it has recently gained much attention in second language acquisition research. Further studies may help recognize what are the most effective procedures for vocabulary teaching. For the time being, the most plausible approach for a language teacher is to cautiously experiment the kind of activities available in the course-books and to

measure their usefulness in assisting learners in acquiring vocabulary and also to try to involve the learners in their own learning and to make them responsible for their own vocabulary development.

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