

# Vocabulary Teaching in English Language Teaching

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**Abstract**—Vocabulary is one of the three essential components that constitute language knowledge, and vocabulary teaching is an essential part in English language teaching. In this paper, we discuss some vocabulary teaching strategies, so as to help the memorizing of vocabulary and enhance the efficiency of vocabulary teaching and learning.

**Index Terms**—vocabulary, language knowledge, vocabulary teaching strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human being's language is based on the vocabulary, which consists of three basic language units—pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Grammar provides the overall patterns, and the vocabulary is the basic material to put into the patterns, cause there is no sentence, no essay, and even no language without vocabulary. As one of the famous English applied linguists Wilkins said "out grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." (Wilkins, 1987, p.135) Therefore, to a great extent, students' ability of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating is all influenced by the vocabulary. Vocabulary teaching is a process, but its aims are clear: not only make college students memorize words as much as possible, but also make them master their skills of vocabulary memorizing and train their ability of guessing words' meaning from contexts. In order to teach English effectively, strategies are very important.

Vocabulary is the most important element in learning well a foreign language as one of three basic parts (phonetics, vocabulary and grammar). In the conventional college English teaching, grammatical translation is a common way to teach new words. Usually, teachers teach words and phrases one by one in the list, giving several sentences that are far from students' comprehension. Both teachers and students make great efforts to learn and remember new words but the result is not satisfying. The problem makes us consider: what's wrong with our brain, or are our methods incorrect? According to psycholinguistics, learning should be as significant as possible so that it can be stored into long-term memory; learning will not be easily forgotten after deep processing; creating some certain settings can help our memory. Therefore, the words learning will be more effective if we are able to follow those cognitive regulations.

## II. VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

In vocabulary teaching researches, vocabulary knowledge can be divided into internal knowledge and external knowledge, including the definition or conceptual meaning, its grammar, connotations, pragmatic rules and the socio-cultural message it carries. Vocabulary does not only refer to the single words but also the "chunks" such as phrases and idioms. Thus, integrated vocabulary teaching should include following parts:

### A. Pronunciation and Spelling

In Standard pronunciation and correct spelling are the essential parts of vocabulary teaching and learning. The college students have to know what a word sounds like (pronunciation) and what it looks like (spelling). When teaching vocabulary, teachers should draw them attention to pronunciation and spelling together, and clarify the relationships between them.

### B. Grammar

The grammar of new vocabulary will need to be taught if this is not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An English word may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical contexts or may have some idiosyncratic way of connecting with other words in sentences. For example, when teaching a new verb, teachers should give its past form if this verb is irregular (forbid, forbade), and teachers might note if it is transitive or intransitive. Similarly, when teaching a noun, teachers need to present its plural form if the noun is irregular (criterion, criteria), or draw them attention to the fact that it has no plural at all (people).

### C. Word Formation

Vocabulary items, whether one-word or multi-word, can often be broken down into their component bits, and how these bits put together is another piece of useful information which may be worth teaching. If students know the meaning of sub-, un-, and -able, this will help them to guess the meaning of words like *substandard*, *ungrateful* and *renewable*.

## III. VOCABULARY TEACHING STRATEGIES

According to the study of Hatch and Brown, learners' strategies for learning vocabulary fall into five essential steps: 1. having sources for encountering new words; 2. getting the forms of the new words; 3. learning the meanings of the words; 4. making a strong memory of the words; and 5. using the words. Based on the vocabulary acquisition theory, while teaching vocabulary, teachers should take into account the three important aspects of vocabulary learning—word form, word meaning and word use. In other words, vocabulary teaching should cover both the central features of lexical items and their relations with other words.

On the basis of above-mentioned theory, I have used the following methods in my lexical teaching, which have proved to be very powerful and effective.

### A. Teaching Vocabulary in Context

Context means the words that come just before and after a word, phrase or statement and help you to understand its meaning. As Lu Shu Xiang put it, only by being in a context will a word be alive. Similarly, Stevick pointed out, vocabulary is easier to learn in contexts than in isolated word lists in that such meaningful contexts permit this more complex and deeper cognitive processing, which enhances storage in memory. Thus words should not be taught out of context. Moreover, context teaching caters to students' need for effective reading and communication by making correct use of the words learnt. More importantly, context teaching helps cultivate students' good reading habit of reading between the lines, thus improving their reading comprehension. For example, in Unit 1 College English Book 2, there is a sentence containing a new phrase: *That magazine story, and the person who wrote it, I have never been able to track down.* In light of the context, we can guess the meaning of track down, that is to find or discover. Then I added one more example: *It was almost two weeks before the police tracked down the facts they needed.*

Teaching vocabulary in the context is more helpful to learners to master a polysemy—word that carries different meanings in different context. Take the word means for example.

*Only a man of means could afford to buy such a big house.* (money, income or wealth)

*Television is an effective means of communication.* (a way of achieving sth)

— *Do you mind if I have a look?* — *By all means.* (certainly, sure)

*The load was lifted by means of a crane.* (with the help of sth)

*She is by no means an inexperienced teacher.* (not at all)

*I don't particularly like the work but I see it as a means to an end.* (an uninteresting or unimportant thing but is a way of achieving sth else)

*He was too mean to pay for the work.* (not generous)

*He has the look of man who means business.* (be serious in one's intentions)

*I do not mean any harm to you.* (have no intention of hurting sb.)

After experiencing the word means in its many contexts, students can get a complete understanding of its meaning. Meanwhile, they get to know the difference between means and mean. In a word, only if students are immersed in a context when learning new words will they be able to gradually develop a more accurate, structural framework in which they use these words.

As we all know, to memorize the isolated words is hard. So to convey the meaning of a new word exactly, it's better to present the word in the sentence or in the context. There are three advantages: Firstly, assessing the meaning of a word in context obliges the students to develop strategies, such as anticipating and inferring, which become increasingly profitable as learning progresses because they instill an attitude of self-reliance that is the hallmark of proficiency. Secondly, systematically meeting new words in context underlines the fact that words are indeed used in discourse for purposes of communication. Finally, context provides an indication of the way the words are used.

### B. Teaching Vocabulary with Semantic Field Theory

The basic assumption underlying the theory of semantic field is that words do not exist in isolation: rather, they form different semantic fields, such as a "vegetable" field which contains all kinds of words that denote vegetables: spinach, cauliflower, cabbage, pepper, eggplant, onion, tomato, cucumber. Words that belong to the same semantic class are in the same semantic field. According to the theory of semantic field, the meaning of a word is decided by its relationships with other words in the same semantic field. There are various kinds of such sense relationships, for example, hyponymy, part/whole relationships, synonymy and antonymy. By association of words in the same semantic field, we can train our students to constantly deepen their recollection of words learnt and reinforce learning and retention of newly learnt words.

English is particularly rich in synonyms. As synonyms convey the same concept, we often use them to explain new

words in vocabulary teaching. In teaching the word *peer*, we can elicit from the students words bearing the meaning *look*, soon we get *glance*, *glimpse*, *stare*, *gaze*, *glare*, *watch*. Then more synonyms *peep*, *peek*, *squint* are introduced and the differences of these words are also explained.

### C. Expanding Vocabulary by Word Formation

Word formation is an effective way to help students see words in the network of association. As Nattinger put it: “to know the meaning of a word becomes the task of knowing its associations with other words”. Therefore, to teach lexical items effectively, teachers must familiarize students with these common roots, prefixes, suffixes.

For example, in teaching the word *transplant*, students are told that the prefix ‘trans-’ means ‘across; beyond; into another place or state’. When they are aware of the meaning of organ (liver, kidney, heart) *transplant*, they are asked to tell the meanings of the following words with a given context: *transport*, *transform*, *translate*, *transact*, *transfer*, *transit*, *transatlantic*, *transparent*, *translucent*. While learning the word *scribble*, the root ‘-scribe’ is taught first. It means ‘to write’. Then more derivatives of ‘scribe’ are given to the students: *describe*, *prescribe*, *inscribe*, *proscribe*, *subscribe*. With the accumulation of common roots, prefixes and suffixes, I often encourage my students to guess the meanings of new words and to summarize the common roots, prefixes and suffixes. In this way, the students not only know how words are formed but also understand the motivation of English word formation. By and by, their vocabulary multiplies and they become increasingly interested in learning English.

### D. Creating Mental Linkages by Association

When teaching vocabulary, the atmosphere of classroom setting must be active, it's good to consolidate and enlarge students' vocabulary. For example, teachers write a word tree in the center of the blackboard, and then ask students to brainstorm all the words they can think of that are connected with it

The circle of associated items is in itself a meaningful context for the learning of new vocabulary; the focus is on the meaning of isolated items. Of course, teachers can use other sorts of stimulus-words or connections: put a prefix sub- in the center and invite the class to think of words that begin with it. Teachers should make good use of time in the classroom and provide chances of word consolidation as much as possible.

### E. Teaching Cultural Connotations and Cultural Differences

English vocabulary system is an open system; it consistently adopts variation, transformation and has been influenced by other languages in the world for a long history. So in vocabulary teaching, teachers should not neglect introducing the knowledge of culture background. It is said that, NEWS originated from the first letter of the four directions—N(north), E(east), W(west) and S(south), indicating that news comes from and spreads all over the world.

Vocabulary is the base of language. Meanwhile, language is a vehicle of culture, a tool to convey cultural information and to reflect the cultural life in human society. Many words have cultural connotations, that is, they are culturally-loaded words, carrying specific cultural information. Teachers should motivate students to enhance their information pertaining to western countries and their communities in every respect conceivable. Take ‘dragon’ for example. In Chinese culture, ‘dragon’ has positive connotation. It stands for ‘power, strength, and prosperity’. So the Chinese regard themselves as ‘the descendants of dragon’. The image of dragon can be seen in ancient Chinese buildings, in sculptures, in furniture---etc. However, in English-speaking culture, ‘dragon’ is a negative word, standing for ‘sth. fierce, ugly or monster’. So ‘a dragon lady’ is used in English to refer to a woman who behaves in a fierce and frightening way.

Interestingly enough, colors are used to express human emotions in English, which is different in Chinese culture:

*feel/look blue* (feel sad); *be in the blues* (be depressed); *be in a black mood* (be angry)

*He is green with envy* (*green-eyed*).

(In our culture, ‘red’ would be used instead of ‘green’.)

*a blue film* (a film about sex)

(In our culture, ‘yellow’ would be used instead of ‘blue’.)

In short, in teaching vocabulary, teachers should provide students with information about cultural background, customs whenever possible, which will not only broaden students' horizon, but also motivate their interest in English. As Harmer said, ‘Motivation is some kind of internal drive that encourage somebody to pursue a course of action.’ (Harmer, 1991, p.3)

### F. The Use of Dictionaries

Usually we are sure that students want to know the meaning of many more words than teachers can teach them, the dictionary provides one of the best resources for students who wish to increase the number of words they understand. But it's better to use the monolingual dictionary. In it there are many more words than students will ever see in class. There is more grammatical information about the words. There is information about pronunciation, spelling, word formation, and metaphorical and idiomatic use---a whole profile of a practical word. It requires teachers to introduce to their methods of choosing and using a proper dictionary. This is fairly practical, just as the Chinese proverb goes “Teach me how to fish, rather than giving me fish.”

#### IV. CONCLUSION

We have seen the importance of vocabulary teaching in English language teaching, and we also talked about some practical strategies in vocabulary teaching. Vocabulary is to the Chinese learner as building materials are to the architect. Without a large English vocabulary, no one can claim a good command of the language. (Zhang Jianmin, 2003, p.53) In a word, the aim of the article is to make us, teachers and learners, both realize the importance of the vocabulary in the language and try to give some enlightenment to the teachers and learners on the way to becoming competent language users.

Vocabulary teaching plays an important role in English teaching, so to improve the effectiveness and efficiency, teachers should not only understand the students' difficulties of word study, but also use some useful strategies and methods. Only in this way they can help to improve the students' language competence and their ability to use English freely in communication.

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