

VOCABULARY TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION¹

Abstract: *This paper aims at presenting various strategies and techniques used in vocabulary teaching and learning while reassessing the importance and role of vocabulary knowledge in second language acquisition. Lexical knowledge has proven to be central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language. Besides, vocabulary knowledge involves much more than knowledge of single words, but knowledge of how words work together to achieve a communicative function.*

Keywords: *vocabulary, teaching strategies, learning strategies, word, meaning.*

Introduction

Over the last decades, applied linguists and specialists in the field have studied and discussed thoroughly a wide range of issues related to the learning and teaching of English as a second or foreign language. However, there was little emphasis on vocabulary teaching in the specialized literature during much of the twentieth century, as the central focus was on grammar and pronunciation. There were several reasons for neglecting vocabulary and emphasizing other aspects of language acquisition. One of the reasons was that the knowledge of English words alone with their meanings was not enough for a learner to speak English. The learners need to know how words work together, so the learning of grammar rules appeared to be more important than vocabulary. Thus, for a certain period of time, teaching and learning methodologies focused more on grammar acquisition, as a central key to successful communication skills in a foreign language. However, we have to bear in mind the fact that, although grammar knowledge is a necessary tool, in the absence of words no communication act can take place. Grammatical knowledge alone can't lead to any communication act without the help of vocabulary. On the other hand, vocabulary knowledge alone can sustain to a certain extent a rudimentary communication even without the mediation of grammar knowledge. This view is also supported by Wilkins: "*The fact is that while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.*" (Wilkins, 1972: 111)

The importance of vocabulary instruction is also sustained by Schmitt who states that, while grammar consists of a limited set of rules which can be learned in a definite period of time, vocabulary acquisition is an ongoing, lifelong process, as "*a person is unlikely to ever run out of words to learn*". (Schmitt, 2000: 4)

Therefore, in recent years vocabulary has become extremely central to language teaching, as research has shown that vocabulary is essential, especially in an approach which values the ability to communicate. There are two important arguments which account for the recent focus on vocabulary instruction:

1. Words are carriers of meaning, and they are at the core of communication. No communication can take place in their absence.
2. Words are not instantaneously acquired; they are gradually learned over a period of time from various exposures.

Nevertheless, at an advanced level, knowledge of both grammar and vocabulary is necessary in order to use the language for effective communication. Besides learning the

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meaning of words, the learner needs to know how to use the words in sentences. Consequently, mastery of vocabulary and the skill to use it effectively go hand in hand with good grammar knowledge.

The recent focus on vocabulary teaching techniques is due to fact that the lack of lexical knowledge more than often leads to communication failures. Researchers have come to the conclusion that understanding of the nature and importance of vocabulary in second language acquisition has to play a central role. There have been various approaches to language learning and teaching, each of them with a different perspective on vocabulary, on the way in which vocabulary is used in discourse and its relation with other aspects of linguistic knowledge, such as phonology and grammar. Over the time, language teaching methodology has swung between language instruction as language analysis and language use.

Vocabulary learning and teaching strategies

Language learning strategies are the often-conscious steps or behaviours used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Rigney, 1978; Oxford, 1990). According to research in the field (see Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983) and investigations with language learners (see Skehan, 1989; Oxford 1989a; Oxford & Crookall, 1989) proficient learners are likely to use learning strategies appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own aims, needs, and stage of learning. They use a whole range of strategies in various situations compared to less proficient learners. However, the relationship between strategy use and proficiency is multifaceted. Research shows that language learners at all levels make use of strategies (see Chamot & Kupper, 1989), but some of them are not totally aware of the strategies they use or the role of strategies in their study. (see Oxford, 1989b)

According to Oxford's taxonomy of learning strategies, learners make use of various strategies:

- Metacognitive strategies for planning, monitoring, and assessing the learning process;
- Affective strategies for handling emotions or attitudes;
- Social strategies for interacting with people to improve language learning;
- Cognitive strategies for language manipulation and transformation;
- Memory strategies for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it;
- Compensation strategies, such as inferring or using gestures, to overcome deficiencies and gaps in the learner's language knowledge (see Oxford, 1990).

To Oxford's classification, there was added another strategy, Determination strategy, used by learners when discovering the meaning of an unfamiliar word without recourse to other people's knowledge. Researchers further divided the group of strategies into Discovery strategies (used when discovering the meaning of a new word) and Consolidation strategies (used when remembering a word).

Schmitt's taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies is organized according to Oxford's taxonomy of learning strategies and the Discovery/Consolidation distinction. Thus, Schmitt groups strategies in two categories, strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning and strategies for consolidating a word once it has been encountered, according to determination, social, cognitive, memory and metacognitive techniques. Some of the strategies for the discovery of a new word's meaning include: analyse parts of speech, analyse affixes and roots, check for LI cognate, guess from textual context,

bilingual and monolingual dictionaries, word lists, flash cards, analyse any available pictures or gestures (determination strategies), ask teacher for translation, paraphrase or synonym of a new word, ask classmates for meaning, discover, discover new meaning through a group work activity (social strategies), use semantic maps, Peg method, Loci Method, keyword method, use cognates in study, study the spelling/sound of a word (memory strategies), verbal/written repetition, word lists, flash cards, use the vocabulary section in the textbook (cognitive strategies), use English language media, testing oneself with word tests, continue to study word over time (metacognitive strategies). Consolidation strategies include: study and practise meaning in a group, interact with native speakers (social strategies), study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning, connect word to a personal experience, associate the word with its coordinates, connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms (memory strategies). (Schmitt, 1997: 207-208)

However, research showed that some individual strategies could fit into both the Discovery and Consolidation strategy group, and that almost all Discovery strategies could be also used as Consolidation strategies.

Hatch and Brown made a different attempt to classify vocabulary learning strategies by dividing them into five main steps, all of them essential to the learning process:

1. Encountering new words (through reading, watching TV, listening to the radio, conversations with native speakers, textbooks, dictionaries, etc.);
2. Creating a mental picture (visual, auditory or both) of word form;
3. Learning the word's meaning;
4. Creating a strong linkage between word form and meaning in the memory;
5. Using words (in sentences, collocations, various contexts, conversations). (Hatch & Brown, 1995: 373)

All five groups are important in vocabulary acquisition, but the use of each step depends on the learner's goal and level in the learning process. If the aim is just receptive knowledge, then the last step becomes irrelevant. Hatch and Brown conceived the five steps as connected 'sieves'. A large number of words enter the first sieve, but only a limited number of them pass through into the next sieve or step, so the number of lexical units decreases from step to step. The words which reach the last step are considered to be learned, although it has been argued that using words doesn't necessary entail long-term retention.

According to Blachowicz, teaching vocabulary involves much more than just teaching lists of new words. "*Rather, it involves a common philosophy and shared practices across teachers and classrooms, based on a solid understanding of what we know about research and best practices in vocabulary instruction.*" (Blachowicz, 2007: 3)

Vocabulary teaching strategies refer to the ways in which both the meaning and form of a new lexical unit are presented to learners, then practised and reviewed, and finally evaluated. During the last decades, there has been a great deal of vocabulary research carried on, and researchers have classified and organized vocabulary learning strategies in different ways.

The choice of a teaching strategy depends on the time available, the content, its value to the learner, the circumstance in which it is used, and on other variables including: "*proficiency level, task, text, language modality, background knowledge, context of learning, target language, and learner characteristics.*" (Chamot & Rubin, 1994: 772)

A distinction has to be made between planned and unplanned teaching strategies. A planned teaching strategy usually involves a whole lesson spent on developing

vocabulary and in this situation it will include appropriate tasks and activities. Unplanned teaching strategies refer to teachers' spontaneous reaction to help students when need arises. It may be a brief explanation in response to a particular question.

Another distinction has to be taken into consideration, the distinction between the vocabulary needed for comprehension (passive vocabulary) and the vocabulary needed for production (active vocabulary), as there are different degrees of knowing a word:

- Being able to understand it, known as receptive knowledge and usually associated with listening and reading;
- Being able to produce a word, known as productive knowledge and connected with speaking and writing. (Schmitt, 2000: 4)

Considering the vast literature and research in this field, the wide range of strategies used in teaching vocabulary can be divided into two main categories:

1. the presentation of the meaning and form of the new lexical unit (Discovery strategies);
2. review, consolidation and practise of the presented lexical unit (Consolidation strategies).

Different ways of presenting vocabulary

There are various ways of introducing new vocabulary and teachers may use different techniques, according to the goal of the lesson and the learner's proficiency. New words may be taught in isolation or in combinations.

When presenting new vocabulary, it is also important to create a sense of need for vocabulary acquisition, as vocabulary is best learned when the student experiences a personal need for certain words: *"A word is most likely to be learned when the learner feels a personal need to know it. Sometimes a learner feels the need to learn certain words because those words hold essential keys to understanding something interesting or important. At other times the feeling of need is induced by the desire to express something, to produce phrases and sentences that accomplish the learner's own purposes."* (Allen, 1983: 94)

Using pictures

The first step is to help learners understand the meaning of a new word. Using pictures is one of the most common ways of presenting new vocabulary, especially for lower level students, as through pictures the meaning of the new word is communicated clearly and efficiently. Pictures can be used to explain situations and concepts, for example a picture of someone in the rain can be used to introduce the verb 'rain'. Illustrations continue to be useful even at upper secondary level, helping learners decode meaning incredibly fast.

Classroom example: The goal of the lesson is to introduce words related to roads. The teacher presents pictures showing a motorway with road markings, the inside, middle and outside lane, the slip road, the exit ramp, the toll booth, the flyover, the hard shoulder, the traffic light, and also pictures with road signs. First the teacher asks the students for the appropriate word for each picture, and if they don't know it the teacher says the word. It is best to try to elicit language from learners rather than supply it from the very beginning, as it enhances learners' involvement and interest.

Using real objects, mime, gestures for vocabulary teaching

Using real objects is an excellent way to help learners understand the meaning of a new word. Real objects are sometimes better than pictures, and if we have them in them classroom it is advisable not to waste such an opportunity. *“One of the clearest ways of explaining the meaning of something is to show it. If we hold up a book, point to it and say ‘book ... book’, its meaning will be instantly clear.”* (Harmer, 2007: 83)

For actions teachers can use mime to explain the meaning of some verbs like run, sit, stand, kiss, wave, etc. Facial expressions can be used to explain the meaning of adjectives such as happy, tired, sad, frightened, terrified, etc. By using standard gestures, teachers can show the meaning of adjectives like small, big, tall, short, etc., or the degrees of comparison ‘small, smaller, the smallest’.

Using songs, rhymes, jokes, and games

This kind of activity is based on the need to communicate with another party and participate actively in the vocabulary teaching process. Using rhymes or songs is considered the most common verbal mnemonic device to enhance memory. According to Cohen, mnemonic devices, which may be verbal, visual or a combination of both, are extremely efficient in storing words and entail long-term storage. (Cohen, 1987: 43-61)

Games encourage vocabulary acquisition, and make learners feel that they need certain words. Teachers choose games which require the players to speak during the game and use certain English words. *“From time to time during the school year, there is instructional value in playing a guessing game that requires the use of English words.”* (Allen, 1983: 51) However not all games are useful for developing language learning, and games which do not entail language use are unsuitable, as well as those involving a lot of physical activity.

Using commands

This is another way of introducing (and also practising) new vocabulary. Asking students to respond physically to oral commands resembles to what happens during the early years of learning the mother tongue. Children respond to commands a long time before mastering the words. Teachers can use this technique successfully with young learners to teach them directions, objects in the classroom, location, verbs like touch, move, go, stop, etc. When teaching the parts of the body the teacher can use a picture first to present each part of the body (as it is not appropriate to point at children), and then use commands like: raise your hand, touch your nose, bend your knees, etc. This activity involves real communication and also engages the students in the learning process.

Matching words with their definitions is a type of exercise widely used, especially with upper intermediate or advanced learners. Teaching words that are thematically linked may help learning. For example, in order to introduce words related to occupations the teacher can use this type of activity:

Match the following words with the appropriate definition:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 1. carpenter | a) someone who sells fish |
| 2. gardener | b) a person whose job is to repair water pipes |
| 3. butcher | c) a person whose job is making and repairing wooden objects |
| 4. hairdresser | d) a man whose job is cutting men’s hair |
| 5. barber | e) someone who works in a garden |

6. plumber
style
- f) someone who cuts people's hair, and puts it into a style

Word building

Word building is a technique used to introduce new words derived from the same root word, so learners use affixes to construct new words. For example, when teaching the verb 'employ' teachers may also provide the nouns and adjective derived from this verb. So, the teacher will also present the nouns 'employment', 'unemployment', 'employee', 'employer', and the adjective 'unemployed' with their meanings.

Inferring meaning from context – advantages and drawbacks

As the communicative approach to language teaching favoured implicit incidental vocabulary learning, the focus was on guessing the meaning of the lexical unit from context and using monolingual dictionaries.

Inferring word meaning from context has been widely promoted in vocabulary acquisition. It generally refers to guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar word from the surrounding words in a written text. Successful inferring depends on a certain level of language proficiency, as well as good background knowledge of the subject and inference skills. However, contextual clues can come from a variety of sources, such as pictures, gestures or intonation.

It is generally agreed that exposure to words in various context is extremely important for the in-depth understanding of a word's meaning, but this is just one of the methods to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and shouldn't be used all alone. There are several arguments for not focusing only on implicit instruction:

1. Guessing the meaning from context may be a very slow process;
2. Inferring from context is an error-prone process, especially for pre-intermediate learners;
3. Even when learners are trained to use reading strategies to guess words in context, incorrect guessing may appear due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge.
4. Learners have different, yet successful, styles of acquiring unfamiliar vocabulary. Inferring is not the best option for every learner.
5. Inferring from context does not necessarily result in long-term retention. (Sökmen, 1997: 237-238)

Consequently, vocabulary acquisition could not rely only on implicit instruction but has to be controlled. So, vocabulary teaching strategies turned to intensive, explicit vocabulary teaching, in order to ensure that lexical development follows a systematic and logical path.

Ways of practising vocabulary

Research has shown that multiple exposures to new words are essential for successful learning. Thus, new words have to be practised and recycled constantly in order to ensure long-term retention.

Moreover, relating words to current events or past experiences has the potential of enhancing memory. Giving personal examples, providing experiences with the new words, connecting them to real life situations is a successful way of developing vocabulary acquisition. (Schmitt, 1997: 224)

As already stated in this paper, almost all strategies used to introduce new words can be also employed to review and consolidate vocabulary. Some activities practise the new vocabulary in isolation while others integrate it with existing language.

There are various activities that can be used for practising and consolidating new vocabulary: study and practise meaning in a group, use flash cards, word webs or word lists, connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms, role-plays, simulations, case studies, work with collocations, connotations, false friends, phrasal verbs, and idioms, finding the odd word, multiple choice exercises, gap fill activities, etc.

Illustrations continue to serve a good purpose in reviewing, consolidating and practising lexical items. For example, the teacher presents pictures to the class and the words are given separately and learners are asked to match them appropriately. Or the topic of a lesson is based on drawings which help students understand words and notions related to the topic. Another way of using illustrations to review vocabulary is to ask learners to match the pictures and the captions in a given exercise. Also, a picture can constitute the starting point in a conversation activity. Thus, illustrations help learners master the new vocabulary and stimulate the use of words for communication.

Opportunities to use English with native speakers are especially beneficial to language learners. In real-life communication situations, learners have the chance to practise and improve their knowledge of the language and also learn the social meaning of various words.

One way of practising language with a native speaker is to have a pen pal, which is quite easy nowadays due to the wide spread use of the Internet, social networks, chats, etc. The Internet is an extraordinary rich resource for both learners and teachers and facilitates a variety of activities. Learners can consult online dictionaries, organize webcasts, join discussion boards, use online materials, watch video, etc.

Multimedia tools are of great help in vocabulary acquisition, as they facilitate vocabulary retention, reading comprehension, and provide an excellent way of practising and consolidating new words.

Conclusions

During the last twenty years, language learning strategy research has suffered from an overemphasis on metacognitive and cognitive strategies at the expense of other kinds of strategies that are also very valuable. Social strategies are equally important and can be developed through interactive activities, such as pair work and group work. The effectiveness of a vocabulary strategy greatly depends on the language proficiency, the context in which it is used, and the learner's goal and characteristics.

Recent research has begun to focus on more intensive, explicit vocabulary teaching in order to provide a more systematic pattern for lexical acquisition. However, the issue regarding the advantages and drawbacks of explicit vocabulary teaching is still under dispute.

There is a plethora of strategies and techniques, but teachers should adapt and use teaching and learning vocabulary strategies according to their learners' needs and goals. It is important to ensure that students acquire and use the vocabulary they will actually need in their future activities.

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