

Vocabulary Development in English Reading

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Received 30 September 2011; accepted 17 November 2011

Abstract

At present, the problem of giving attention to vocabulary still remains. It is argued in this essay for the attention to vocabulary development. Five procedures are presented in vocabulary teaching and reasons for low efficiency in vocabulary learning and teaching are analyzed. Techniques as a semantic mapping activity, creating meaningful contexts, lexical phrases activity and using an integrated approach in teaching and learning vocabulary are put forward.

Key words:

Vocabulary development; Semantic mapping activity; Meaningful contexts; Lexical phrases; Integrated approach

YU Qin (2011). Vocabulary Development in English Reading. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 3(3), 174-176. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320110303.866>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110303.866>

PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPING VOCABULARY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Vocabulary is regarded as one of the four centers in Chinese English teaching and learning. Most Chinese teachers of English stress the importance of learning and teaching vocabulary. There are far more books on vocabulary learning than language teaching. Memorization of the English words seems to be the major activity among college students. The general procedures

in teaching vocabulary on the tertiary level are as follows:

Students review the new words in the text by consulting the meaning and pronunciation in the dictionary; The teacher explains in detail about the usage of the words with some illustrations and examples; Comparisons of synonyms are often the vocabulary exercises in the textbook on which teachers spend a lot of time, striving for the elaboration of nuances; Students memorize the words mechanically by reading and writing the words repetitively. This process is accompanied by literal translation of the words; Most of the students have pocket notebooks for noting the perceived important vocabulary. The words listed in the notebooks are bilingual with a Chinese translation. Students also use electronic dictionaries with different skills of developing vocabulary very often to help memorizing vocabulary.

These procedures show that great effort has been put in vocabulary learning and teaching. But the results of the effort are not satisfactory for the time and energy consumed. The reasons for this can be attributed to the quality of teaching and learning of vocabulary. First, the dictionary consultation of word meaning is not the natural way of reading, and the teacher will explain the new words in detail anyway. Recent research shows that learners put a low ranking on the value of dictionary study in learning vocabulary. Second, teachers' detailed explanations seem redundant after the students' preview. The purpose of learning vocabulary is to facilitate the students' EFL reading rather than the process itself. Furthermore, teachers' detailed explanation of the nuances of the synonyms lacks psycholinguistic support, for the interference can actually be greater when items are entirely new and unrelated to existing items. Third, memorization might be a useful method in building up EFL vocabulary but it should be in meaningful not mechanical way. Mechanical memorization does not make the memorization random, and unsystematic, but it also makes forgetting continuously.

STRATEGIES OF DEVELOPING VOCABULARY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three assumptions concerning word learning have been put forward. a) Word learning is a complex task. b) Some word learning occurs incidentally as a result of context-rich activities such as reading. c) Word knowledge involves a range of skills, and word learning is facilitated by approaches that provide varied experiences with reading, writing, speaking and listening.

These three assumptions provide us with some important implications regarding teaching and learning of vocabulary: First, attention should be paid to a number of dimensions in the use of a word, such as its general frequency of use, its syntactic and situational limitations and its collocation probabilities. Second, a meaningful context is of great help in facilitating students' mastery of a word. Third, word learning or teaching should be immersed in all four skills of language teaching, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Accordingly, the following suggestions for teaching and learning vocabulary are put forward:

A) Semantic Mapping Activity

This activity is based on schema theory. It embraces a variety of strategies designed to display graphically information within categories related to a central concept. (Johnson, as referred to in Carrell et al.) The procedures of the activity are:

- a) Teacher divides the students into groups of four.
- b) Students identify the new words.
- c) Students discuss the concepts related to the new words and draw semantic maps.

They are encouraged to arrive at the meaning of the words from the context. A dictionary can be used when students come across words whose meanings cannot be deduced from the context.

d) Class discussion. Each group sends one representative to draw the semantic map of their group.

e) Teacher evaluates the semantic map of each group and supplements important items missing in the semantic maps.

This activity enables all the students to contribute to the development of the semantic map. It promotes cooperative and meaningful learning. The procedure is creative, motivating and interesting, helping students to acquire the use of vocabulary in a meaningful context.

B) Meaningful Context for Vocabulary Learning Through Reading

If a considerable amount of vocabulary learning takes place incidentally through exposure to new words in meaningful context, properly chosen reading materials can help increase students' vocabulary by creating meaningful contexts. In this sense, reading and word learning can

facilitate each other. However when choosing the reading material, we should take the following factors into consideration.

a) Students' interests: Students' interest should be the first priority in choosing the reading material. Boring materials could hardly be meaningful in any sense to students and even ruin their reading efficiency.

b) The level of the materials. The level of the materials should be proper. It's better if it is a little bit higher than the students' present level. Otherwise it will result that students become frustrated or even lost interest.

c) Learners' own experience. Materials related to readers' own experiences mean more to readers. The sources for this kind of materials could be local customs, festivals, climate and geographical situations.

C) Lexical Phrases

The extracts about a reading material is selected for reference when vocabulary is being taught. The vocabulary in the texts is mostly an elementary level and is frequently used. The vocabulary activity lexical phrases is contextually used. The activity of lexical phrases on a topic can lead to being fluent and appropriate in speaking and writing, for they "relieve the learner of concentrating on each individual word as it is used by allowing them to focus attention on the larger structure of the discourse" (Nattinger, 1988). Lexical phrases in certain contexts or situation stimulates the students to use vocabulary correctly and appropriately. Idioms are usually regarded as they are restricted collocation not normally understood from the literal meaning of the words that make them up. Context-related idioms assist the learners to become conscious of the meanings and usages of the idioms and be aware of patterns and interrelations.

D) Integrated Approach in Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

This approach calls for vocabulary teaching and learning to be contextualized and integrated with grammar, syntax and discourse in coordination with the training of communicative skills. Word teaching and learning is not an isolated process but a branching compatible one. Teaching and learning a word is to develop the lexical competence: "learners not only know the sound, form an bilingual meaning of a word but also know that appear to mean the same; what other meaning a word might have; what other words derive from it; what kind of associative links it has with other items in the lexicon; how it behaves systematically and just as importantly, its limitations of use according to situational functions" (Richards, 1976). Words will not be able to be ultimately internalized until they have been repeated and exploited many times.

If word learning involves a range of skills, the word should be taught in an integrated approach, which covers the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This approach can be carried out in two ways. One is that

teachers of the general English course should implement the integrative principles of language teaching and use different skills in the development of vocabulary. The other way is that teachers of different courses, such as teachers of listening and speaking should also attend to students' vocabulary development through other skills. By using the integrated approach, teachers can raise students' consciousness of the style and register words in different contexts. Presentation of a word through different channels can also satisfy student's different learning styles and reinforce the mastery of a word.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay is to improve the teaching and learning vocabulary for the sake of the improvement of students' EFL reading ability and to make word learning an interesting and meaningful process. It focuses on the problems raised in teaching and learning of vocabulary, which could affect students' reading ability. Semantic mapping, using meaningful contexts, lexical phrases and using integrated approach are ways in which vocabulary learning can be taught efficiently. The above discussion about the development of vocabulary in English reading

suggests that the combination of context with a focus of different approaches in explicit vocabulary teaching. It provides an important way to aid learners discover some efficient methods of vocabulary development.

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