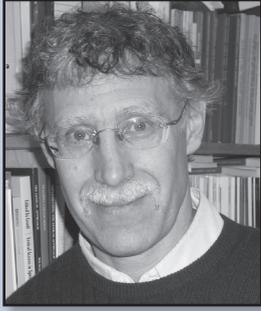# Teaching Vocabulary

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There is no "right" or "best" way to teach vocabulary. The best practice in any situation will depend on the type of student being taught, the words targeted, the school system and curriculum, and many other factors. A number of principles, however, should be considered when developing a vocabulary component to a language course, some of which I'll outline here.

1. How many words and which words to teach

Research shows that learners need to know approximately 98 percent of the words in written or spoken discourse in order to understand it well (Nation, 2006). Reaching this percentage of coverage in written texts takes about 8,000–9,000 word families. The spoken mode requires slightly fewer word families, about 5,000–7,000. A word family consists of the root (*stimulate*), its inflections (*stimulates, stimulated, stimulating*), and its derivatives (*stimulation, stimulative*). Thus, each word family will have several members. For example, 6,000 word families equals about 28,000 individual words, and 8,000 families equals about 35.000 words. Of course, learners can cope with smaller vocabulary sizes than these, but if they wish to function in English without unknown vocabulary being a problem, then vocabulary sizes in line with these figures are necessary. The point is that students must learn a large number of words to become proficient in English, so teachers must help them learn as much vocabulary as possible.

The next question is which vocabulary to teach. The most frequent word families in English are essential for any real language use and are, therefore, worth the effort required to teach and learn them explicitly. Teachers often trust their intuition about which word families are the most frequent, but probably the best way of determining them is to refer to frequency lists, which have been compiled from language databases (called corpora) totalling 100-million words or more. Probably the best source is *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English* (Leech, Rayson, and Wilson, 2001). Another way to ensure that high-frequency words are taught is to use textbooks which are written with the aid of frequency data from corpora.

An example of this is a textbook focusing on academic vocabulary, *Focus on Vocabulary: Mastering the Academic Word List* (Schmitt and Schmitt, 2005), in which my wife and I used an academic frequency list to decide on which academic words to include.

2. The importance of learning the spelling and pronunciation of a word

The first step in vocabulary acquisition is to establish an initial form-meaning link, which is what the vast majority of vocabulary materials and activities attempt to do. A common assumption, however, seems to be that learning the meaning is key, while the form element is either downplayed or disregarded. In fact, research shows that second-language (L2) learners often have trouble with word forms (Koda, 1997; Laufer, 1988). Words with similar forms, for example, are particularly confusing for students, especially words that are alike except for the suffixes (*comprehensive/comprehensible*) or the vowels (*adopt/adapt*). This problem is particularly acute if there are many other words that have a similar form in the L2. The word *poll*, for example, may not be difficult in itself, but the fact that there are many other similar forms in English (*pool, polo, pollen, pole, pall, pill*) can lead to potential confusion. Learners can also mis-analyze words that look transparent, but are not, leading to misinterpretations. The word *outline*, for example, looks like a transparent compound to mean "out of line," and *discourse*, looks as if it has a prefix to mean "without direction." It makes sense, therefore, to allot attention to learning form.

3. Taking advantage of the first language

There is no doubt that the first language (L1) exerts a considerable influence on learning and using L2 vocabulary in a number of ways. In terms of learner output, Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) found that nearly one-quarter of the errors in compositions were attributable to L1 influence. Learners also typically employ their L1 in learning an L2, most noticeably in the consistently high usage of bilingual dictionaries (Schmitt, 1997). Learners also strongly believe

that translating helps them acquire English language skills such as reading, writing, and particularly vocabulary words, idioms, and phrases. Evidence from psycholinguistic studies also demonstrates that the L1 is active during L2 lexical processing in both beginning and more advanced learners (Hall, 2002; Sunderman and Kroll, 2006).

Although using the L1 in second-language learning is unfashionable in many quarters, given the ubiquitous nature of L1 influence, it seems perfectly sensible to exploit it when it is to our advantage. One case where there is a clear advantage is in establishing the initial form-meaning link. Research consistently shows that more new words can be learned using L1 translations than with L2-based definitions (Laufer and Shmueli, 1997; Ramachandran and Rahim, 2004). Furthermore, since we know that learning word forms can be problematic, using the L1 to facilitate the form-meaning linkage (by providing an easy access to meaning) may allow more cognitive resources to be focused on learning the form. It is unlikely that learners will absorb much contextualized knowledge about a word at the beginning stages anyway, so there is little disadvantage to using the L1 to establish initial meaning. After the initial stage, however, meeting the new word in L2 contexts becomes important to enhance contextual word knowledge; therefore, the value of the L1 lessens. Thus, using the L1 at the beginning stages of learning a word is most efficient, but after this, L2 context is better. This suggests that different teaching methods may be appropriate at different stages of vocabulary learning.

4. Engagement with vocabulary

It is a commonsense notion that the more a learner engages with a new word, the more likely he or she is to learn it. But which activities lead to greater engagement? Research suggests that the *need* for a word is important, such as needing to know a particular word in order to understand a passage (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001). Also, actively *searching* for information about a word seems to help, like looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary. The greater engagement that comes from *evaluating* the suitability of a word also facilitates acquisition. Many other factors can also increase the level of engagement, and thus learning, such as:

- Increased frequency of exposure.
- Increased attention focused on the lexical item.
- Increased intention to learn the lexical item.
- A requirement to learn the lexical item (by teacher, test, or syllabus).
- Increased manipulation of the lexical item and its properties.
- Increased amount of time spent engaging with the lexical item.

- Increased amount of interaction spent on the lexical item.

Overall, it seems that virtually anything that leads to more exposure, attention, manipulation, or time spent on lexical items adds to students' learning. In fact, even the process of being tested on lexical items appears to facilitate better retention. In essence, anything that leads to more and better engagement should improve vocabulary learning. Promoting engagement, therefore, is the most fundamental task for teachers and materials writers, and indeed, for learners themselves.

5. Phrasal vocabulary

Teachers should not become too focused on individual words because phrasal vocabulary is also a key component of the English lexicon for at least three reasons:

1) It is very widespread in language.

2) It is used for a number of purposes, including expressing a message or idea (*The early bird gets the worm* = do not procrastinate), realizing functions ([*I'm] just looking [thanks]* = declining an offer of assistance from a shopkeeper), establishing social solidarity (*I know what you mean* = agreeing with an interlocutor), and transacting specific information in a precise and understandable way (*Blood pressure is 150 over 70*).

3) It allows more fluency in production.

Although there is no consensus of how to teach phrasal vocabulary explicitly, highlighting phrasal elements to students appears to be effective in raising their awareness of these items. Beyond this, maximizing the exposure learners have to English will ensure they will meet the most frequent phrasal items and have a chance to learn them incidentally from context.

6. Combining explicit teaching with incidental learning

In any well-structured vocabulary program, there needs to be a proper mix of explicit teaching and activities from which incidental learning can occur. With true beginners, it is probably necessary to explicitly teach all words until students have enough vocabulary to start making use of unknown words they meet in context.

Beyond this most basic level, incidental learning should be structured into the program in a principled way. This is important for at least two reasons: meeting a word in different contexts enhances what is known about it, which improves quality of knowledge, and additional exposure helps consolidate it in memory. Taking an incremental view of vocabulary acquisition, such enhancement and consolidation are both crucial. Explicit approaches to vocabulary learning, whether led by a teacher in a

classroom or generated through self-study, can only provide some elements of lexical knowledge. Even lexical information amenable to conscious study, like meaning, cannot be totally mastered by explicit study because it is impossible to present and practice all creative uses of a word that a student might come across. Other types of lexical knowledge, such as collocation or connotation nuances, can only be fully grasped through numerous exposures to the word in various contexts. Explicit and incidental approaches, therefore, are both necessary in learning vocabulary.

7. *Explicit teaching*

A number of principles for the explicit teaching of vocabulary have been suggested, such as the following:

- Build a large sight vocabulary.
- Integrate new words with old.
- Provide numerous encounters with a word.
- Promote a deep level of processing.
- Make new words "real" by connecting them to the student's world in some way.
- Encourage independent learning strategies.
- Diagnose which of the most frequent words learners need to study.
- Provide opportunities for elaborating word knowledge.
- Provide opportunities for developing fluency with known vocabulary.
- Examine different types of dictionaries, and teach students how to use them.

In addition to these principles, a few other points are worth remembering. The list mentions integrating new words with old, which is often done by grouping similar words together. If two or more similar words are initially taught together, however, learning them might be more difficult. This is because students learn the word forms and the meanings, but confuse which form goes with which meaning, a phenomenon known as *crossassociation*. As a beginning teacher, I often confused my students in this way by teaching *left* and *right* together in the same class. After extensive drilling, I would ask the students at the end of class to raise their left hands. To my consternation, a large number always raised their right. The problem was that the meanings of the words *left* and *right* were the same except for "direction."

Research shows that crossassociation is a genuine problem for learners. Perhaps as much as 25 percent of similar words initially taught together are crossassociated (Nation, 1990). Antonyms are particularly prone to crossassociation, because they tend to be taught in pairs like *deep/shallow* or *rich/poor*, although synonyms and other words from closely related semantic groupings (e.g. days of the week, numbers, foods, and clothing) are also at risk.

One way of avoiding crossassociation is to teach the most frequent or useful word of a pair first, such as *deep* in the previous example, and only after it is well established, introduce its partner, which in this case would be *shallow*.

Another principle is teaching the underlying meaning of a word. Many words are polysemous in English; that is, they have more than one meaning sense. The word *bank*, for example, means "a financial institute," "the side of a river," or "tilting when turning." In addition, some of these different meaning senses often have a common underlying trait. The word *chip*, for example, is "a small piece of something," "a computer chip," or "a potato chip," all of which have the underlying trait of being small, flat, and thin.

As another example, let's examine the word *fork*, which can be a *fork* to eat with, a *fork* in a road or river, a *tuning fork* for use with music, a *pitch fork* farmers use to throw hay, or several other things. The meaning sense of "implement used for eating or in gardening" comprises the vast majority of occurrences of the word *fork*, while "anything so shaped," like *a fork in the road* makes up a minority. This would suggest that an "eating fork" is the most important meaning sense, but in this case, we can capture all of the meaning senses by defining the word with a drawing shaped like a "Y." By defining the underlying meaning, we maximize the effect of the teaching because we enable students to understand the word in a much wider variety of contexts.

We can also maximize vocabulary learning by teaching word families instead of individual word forms. When teachers introduce a new word, they should mention the other members of its word family. In this way, learners form the habit of considering a word's derivations as a matter of course. To reinforce this habit, teachers may eventually ask students to guess a new word's derivatives at the time of introduction. Including a derivation section as part of assessment also promotes the idea that learning the complete word family is important.

My research in Japan indicates that most people tend to think of vocabulary learning as an individual pursuit, unaware that cooperative group learning promotes active processing of information, enhances the motivation of the participants, and prepares participants for team activities outside the classroom. And, because there is less instructor intervention, students may have more time to actually use and manipulate the vocabulary. One study found that about half the words required by the tasks in the class were known by at least one, though not all, members in the student groups (Nation and Newton, 1997). Furthermore, the students were generally able to negotiate unknown vocabulary successfully, indicating that learners can be a useful vocabulary resource for one another. Thus, teachers may well find it useful to set up

vocabulary learning groups where members work together and encourage each other.

8. Incidental learning from exposure

In contrast to explicit approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning, the key to an incidental learning approach is to make sure learners get maximum exposure to language. In input-poor EFL environments, having students read more is probably the best way of doing this. Research shows that incidental learning from reading adds up significantly over time but is relatively slow compared to explicit learning (Horst, 2005). It appears that, on average, it takes 7–10 exposures to a word to learn the initial form-meaning link, which would require a great deal of reading. In fact, one study estimates that L2 learners would have to read more than eight million words of text, or about 420 novels, to increase their vocabulary size by 2,000 words. This is clearly a daunting prospect, and thus, it is probably best not to rely upon incidental learning as the primary source for learning new words. Rather, incidental learning seems to be better at enhancing knowledge of words that have already been introduced because it fills in the contextual knowledge that cannot be easily taught explicitly. Repeated exposures in different contexts consolidate fragile initial learning, moving it along the path of incremental development. In other words, reading may not lead to the learning of many *new* words, but it is very useful in developing and enriching partially known vocabulary.

There are a number of ways teachers can be proactive in maximizing incidental learning from exposure. The most obvious way is to simply maximize the exposure itself by establishing an extensive reading program. Research shows that substantial vocabulary learning can be derived from such a program. In fact, one study reported that participants learned more than half of the unfamiliar words they encountered in the graded readers they read (Horst, 2005).

Furthermore, extensive reading facilitates more than just vocabulary growth; it has been shown to improve reading speed and attitudes toward reading as well. Teachers can also train their learners in lexical inferencing strategies. If teachers are creating their own materials, then unknown words can be glossed for students in the text. The best place to do this seems to be in the margins, and it doesn't appear to matter much if the gloss is in the L1 or L2 (Yoshii, 2006). But perhaps the most effective way of improving incidental learning is to reinforce it afterward with explicit learning post-tasks. Numerous studies show that this incidental + explicit approach leads to far better results than just incidental learning alone (Mondria, 2003). This emphasizes the point that every vocabulary program needs to have explicit and incidental elements, which may be most effective if integrated together.

9. Conclusion

Teachers need to take a broader view of what vocabulary instruction entails, and take proactive charge of both explicit and incidental vocabulary development. It is important to acknowledge the incremental nature of vocabulary learning, and to understand that an effective vocabulary learning program needs to be principled, long term, and have high vocabulary learning expectations. There will never be one ''best'' teaching method, but teachers will not go wrong following the overall principle of maximizing sustained engagement with words.

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