On Teaching EFL Vocabulary

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Abstract:

This research aims first to shed light on some of what was written about teaching the vocabulary of English as a foreign language, with a focus on the methods that enable the student to learn and acquire vocabulary better; The research concludes with some recommendations for English language teachers in general and to learn and acquire the vocabulary of this language in particular.

This research aims first to shed light on some of what was written about teaching the vocabulary of English as a foreign language, the interest in learning it is increasing day by day, especially in Egypt, in the age of globalization and the consequent approximation of cultures between different peoples.

The research focuses on the methods that enable the student to learn and acquire the vocabulary of the language better, in light of the recent development of curricula and the latest research; The research concludes with some recommendations for teachers of English as a foreign

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language, which facilitate the process of learning English in general and learning and acquiring the vocabulary of this language in particular.

Keywords: Teaching - Vocabulary - Guessing - Acquisition - Reading – EFL.

For many years, teaching vocabulary has been neglected both in teacher preparation programs and in teacher training courses. The emphasis was always on pronunciation and grammar. One reason for this neglect was that vocabulary teaching was emphasized too much in traditional methods of language teaching.

Today language teaching has taken on a new dimension namely: communicative. Kiraly (2000) states that teachers who have trained from the very beginning that knowledge can and must be packaged and transmitted cannot accepted the fact that foreign language learners should learn to communicate in authentic situations.

Researchers are more interested in the study of word meanings. Lexical problems have been found to interfere with communication. Allen (1983) claims that " communication breaks down when people do not use the right word" (p.5.) Content approaches in teaching EFL require that the students have learned a reasonable number of English words.

The purpose of this paper is to review some literature on teaching EFL vocabulary with a focus on the techniques that can maximize vocabulary learning/acquisition. I will also conclude with some recommendations for EFL teachers.

Words are not the most important means towards the comprehension of a text (Schulz, 1983; Fox, 1987; Honeyfield, 1977; Smith, 1988). Schulz (1983) argues that when students are engaged in word-by-word decoding, they lose contextual guessing. L1 and L2 efficient readers do not work on the word level. However, active vocabulary building and structural analysis are necessary for improving reading comprehension. Smith (1988) states that putting together the meanings of individual words does not necessarily result in understanding the meaning of a sentence. He adds "individual words have so much ambiguity" (P.162).

Clark & Silberstein (1987) point out that words are vehicles of meaning and do not occur in isolation.

Many EFL teachers and learners think that as long as there are dictionaries, vocabulary is easy to learn However, Fanselow (1987) says "dictionaries highlight individual words" (P. 218)

Most of those using dictionaries only look for lexical information. Fanselow does not see that using a dictionary is completely bad. One great advantage of a dictionary is that it requires silent reading. Malkoc (1978) states that too much use of a dictionary results in increasing the difficulty of the material. We need not understand all words. Honeyfield

(1987) also argues that looking up words in dictionaries makes little contribution to vocabulary acquisition. Looking up words in a dictionary is not an effective method for learning vocabulary (Just & Carpenter, 1987). A reader is neither involved in active processing nor does he have access to the context.

As an alternative to dictionary use. some EFL teachers present the new vocabulary in the students' mother tongue.

This technique was used in Grammar-Translation Method (Brown, 1987 & Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Showing the meaning of a new word through translation has proved to be ineffective. First, the learner's focus is on the word, not the context. Second, the learner has no access to other meanings of the word. Third, it does not encourage the learner to approach the text globally.

According to Smith (1979), present methodology does not encourage the development of fluent reading since it gets the reader involved in a linear direction. Kruse (1987) contends that most programs emphasize rote memorization and vocabulary development skills are not well taught.

Instead of teaching and learning words in isolation, several alternatives have been suggested. According to Smith (1988), the best way for vocabulary acquisition is by meaningful reading. When the text is comprehensible, the reader can use the meaning of the whole to get to the meaning of unfamiliar words. Nagy and Anderson (1984) believe in

reading as a good tool for vocabulary development. They do not encourage word lists. Fox (1987) thinks that reading should be introduced early if we want to prepare students to read simplified English. Just & Carpenter (1987) claim that reading contribution to vocabulary acquisition is greater than rote memorization of words.

Krashen (1981;1985) recommends reading on only one topic and for one author in the early and intermediate stages for facilitating second language acquisition. "The more one reads in one area, the more one learns about the area" (Krashen, 1981: 190).

In newer methodologies, the teacher's task is to train the students to use strategies that help them to guess.

Kruse (1987) points to the fact that native speakers of English depend on guessing from the context in their vocabulary building. Strenberg & Powell (1983) claim that good readers are more skillful in inferring the meaning of unknown words than poor readers. Developing the skill to infer is crucial to acquiring vocabulary.

Several techniques other than training the students to infer have been suggested.

Honeyfield (1977) thinks students need to develop special skills. First, they should be trained to ignore unnecessarily unknown words.

Second, they must be trained in consulting a dictionary when unknown words carry information. but can't be guessed

from the context. They need also to develop skills in making judgments about unknown words.

Honeyfield suggests using Cloze exercises and reading purposes exercises. Cloze procedure has always been recommended both as a teaching and a testing exercise (Just & Carpenter, 1987; Haskell, 1979 & Honeyfield, 1977).

White (1988) believes that classroom activities should encourage semantic networks which help the learner to have access to words.

Crow & Quigley (1985) also suggest a semantic field approach to passive vocabulary acquisition.

Clarke & Silberstein (1987) favor the technique of recycling the vocabulary items in comprehension and discussion activities. Rivers (1968) believes that the new vocabulary should not be introduced with difficult structures for facilitating comprehension.

Honeyfield (1987) argues that word frequency is a good criterion for vocabulary selection in language teaching. the importance of frequency is realized when we know that mastering a small number of words (about 3000 in English) would enable the learner to know 80 or 90 percent of the words in a given text. Honeyfield suggests two exercises in addition to cloze exercises: He thinks that these exercises can help develop the skill of inference from context.

To train the students to infer from context. we must provide them with meaningful context at least at the primary stage. In the Audio-Lingual Method, new limited vocabulary is introduced through artificial context. Accordingly, Meaningful learning does not occur. Such a problem may not exist in the Communicative Approach where authentic language materials are used. The students are more able to infer because they also work at the discourse level.

Allen (1983) states that at the beginner level most of the vocabulary can be learned through seeing and touching.

Maher (1995) argues that words can move us by their sound, texture, shape, color, and even taste. Much of this vocabulary is also needed for writing and speaking, which gives the teacher access to recycling what has already been taught.

In other words, things present in the immediate environment should be the starting point for teaching basic vocabulary. This is clear when we observe a child acquiring his L1. According to Fanselow (1987), a basic vocabulary is two hundred words. It is usually made up to name objects in our surroundings. To draw the L2 learner's attention to the new word, the teacher needs to create a classroom situation in which the words are presented naturally.

Another good activity to teach vocabulary in beginner classes is through commands. Commands are given by the teacher and the learners perform the action which

demonstrates their understanding. In the total physical response, Asher (1982) used this technique which proved very effective. This method is characterized by its emphasis on grammatical structures and vocabulary which are embedded within imperatives. In intermediate classes, some techniques used with beginners in addition to using simple English can help the teacher present the vocabulary. Game-Like activities are highly recommended in EFL classrooms (Oller &Richard-Amato, 1983 and Paulston & Bude 1976). Guessing games, for example, create conditions in which the use of the target language becomes necessary for coming up with the correct guess. Allen (1983) favors using simplified readings in intermediate classes.

In advanced classes, the teacher's job is to help students become independent seeking and getting information by themselves. In this respect, dictionaries become important. the more the material is, the newer words are included. The teacher cannot teach all of these words and he/she shouldn't. Full dependence on dictionaries will not pay off in the long run. The teacher is required to teach strategies that take student from dependency on the teacher to independency. In this stage, students most probably work at the paragraph level rather than word or sentence level. If they do not learn how to handle the text globally, comprehension will be a problem for them.

"Knowing what we don't need to know is a vital part of understanding" (Fanselow, 1987, p.209). Schulz (1983) claims that in any advanced foreign language course such points as text selection, and prereading activities should be considered.

In conclusion, what we can do as EFL teachers in our reading classes is to teach a set of strategies that enable learners to acquire new vocabulary on their own through reading. These strategies should correspond with the learner's cognitive growth, age, proficiency level and the extent to which he/she is able to get along.

A technique which I found useful in teaching vocabulary is that the teacher selects a text a little bit beyond the student's current level. The teacher sets two objectives of the lesson. The teacher goes through the text and selects six difficult words he/she feels the students are unable to know. Those words should be selected in terms of the objectives already set. The teacher, then teaches the words, using different techniques depending upon the word itself. For example, the teacher might use morphological analysis, contextualization, demonstration, or even translation.

The researcher reached the following recommendations for EFL teachers.

- Demonstrate, don't tell.

- Try to discover your student's capabilities and help them build strategies.

- Make comprehension your primary objectives. Such a goal requires you to pay attention to the learner's cognitive processes while decoding a piece of information.

- Use translation as a time-saving device.

- Expose your students to several readings on different topics. Make sure that you select authentic texts.

- Always relate the vocabulary to content areas. When it is available, capitalize on other school subject matters.

- Keep in mind your student's level when you introduce vocabulary. Seek the most suitable ways to get the message across.

- Make use of the situation that might happen in the classroom to introduce and/or recycle some vocabularies.

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