



MJAL 2:4 June 2010

ISSN 0974-8741

Teaching Vocabulary in the ESL/EFL Classroom: Central Pedagogical Issues
by Anindya Syam Choudhury

Teaching Vocabulary in the ESL/EFL Classroom: Central Pedagogical Issues

Anindya Syam Choudhury

Department of English, Assam University, Silchar

Author

Anindya Syam Choudhury has an MA in English and a PGCTE and a PGDTE from EFL University, Hyderabad. He has also completed the Trinity College Certificate in TESOL at London recently. Presently, he is with the Department of English, Assam University, Silchar, as an Assistant Professor, his areas of interest are Grammar Pedagogy, Task-Based Language Teaching, Language Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy.

E-mail: anindyasyam@yahoo.com

Content

Abstract

1. Introduction

2. 1940s to 1960s

3. 1970s to 1990s: The Turnaround

4. The Lexical Approach

5. The Implications of Lewis's Lexical Approach

6. Elaborating Word Knowledge: The Author's Procedure

7. Developing Vocabulary Learning Strategies

8. Conclusion

References

Abstract

The paper focuses on some of the central pedagogical issues related to teaching vocabulary in the ESL/EFL classroom, beginning with a brief survey of the history of teaching vocabulary since the 1940s and showing how vocabulary teaching in the ESL/EFL context came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, thanks to some groundbreaking researches in corpora studies and vocabulary acquisition studies. The



paper also looks at some of the main vocabulary teaching and learning approaches, drawing on the author's own experience of teaching vocabulary 'explicitly' to a batch of EFL learners as a part of the Trinity College London *Certificate in TESOL* Course which he completed at Saint George International, London, in October 2009.

1. Introduction

"Without grammar, very little can be conveyed. Without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed." — Wilkins (1972: 111)

This significant comment made by the British linguist David Wilkins in 1972 seemed to cut no ice with most of his contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) theorists, syllabus designers and practitioners as vocabulary continued playing second fiddle to grammar in the *English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/English as a Second Language (ESL)* classroom right through the 1970s and even 1980s. If we make a survey of ELT practices even before this period, from the 1940s onwards, we find that vocabulary study and vocabulary teaching were relegated to a low position as grammar and phonology took centre stage. Let us consider the main reasons for this.

2. 1940s to 1960s

The dominant ELT method of the times, the Audio-Lingual Method, had its genesis in the principles of American Structural Linguistics whose central tenets were, as Knight (2001: 149) puts it, "that language is primarily oral, and that it is a rule-governed system understandable in terms of increasing levels of complexity." Charles Fries, one of the chief proponents of the Audio-Lingual Method, influenced by these "sound linguistic principles" (Fries, 1945), put forward his thesis that language learning should begin with grammar. He also borrowed the behaviourist model of learning which regarded language as a behavioural skill mastered by forming the right habits. Classroom activities in an audio-lingual class centred around intensive drills focusing on basic grammatical patterns and their pronunciation. Therefore, in the Audio-Lingual Method, as Decarrico (2001: 285) puts it, "because the emphasis was on grammatical and phonological structures, the



vocabulary needed to be relatively simple, with new words introduced only as they were needed to make the drills possible.” The belief was that vocabulary would take care of itself once the students learnt the grammatical structures. This belief was not abandoned even after the ELT world, influenced by the Chomskyan revolution in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, overturned the behaviourist paradigm of language learning as habit formation, supplanting it with the view that language learning is basically acquisition of the rules of grammar.

3. 1970s to 1990s: The Turnaround

When Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) evolved on the horizon, thanks mainly to the work of Hymes (1972) who put forward his notion of ‘communicative competence’ and Halliday (1973), the focus was on the functional use of language, encompassing various sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors. Vocabulary continued playing a secondary role, taught mainly, as Decarrico (2001: 286) puts it, “as support for functional language.” However, CLT gradually brought in its wake a major re-think on the role of vocabulary as people started recognizing the meaning-making potential of words and, therefore, their importance for the second and foreign language learners. Swan and Walter (1984), for instance, stressed the importance of vocabulary acquisition, pointing out how it is one of the most important tasks facing the language learner. Also, in the late 1980s and 1990s some ground-breaking developments took place in lexicography which involved, as Carter (2001: 43) puts it, “extensive corpora of spoken and written language and the creation of sophisticated computer-based access tools for such corpora.” An example of such developments is the Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD) project at the University of Birmingham, UK, in the late 1980s which influenced all other subsequent researches in EFL lexicography. Suddenly, we were flooded with an abundance of examples of authentic, natural language use with corpora providing us evidence of what native speakers of English thought to be acceptable in the language. The empirical data offered by these corpora studies enabled researchers to study the behaviour of words and expressions which in turn led to them



questioning the traditional notions about the primacy of grammar in language and language pedagogy. Sinclair (qtd. in Carter 2001: 45), for instance, pointed out a central theoretical issue:

Words enter into meaningful relations with other words around them, and yet all our current descriptions marginalize this massive contribution to meaning. The main reason for this marginalization is that grammars are always given priority and grammars barricade themselves against individual patterns of words.

This ‘marginalization’ of words was challenged by Michael Lewis (1993) who put forward his ‘lexical approach’ (focusing on developing learners’ lexical proficiency) as an alternative to grammar-based approaches.

4. The Lexical Approach

Lewis’s Lexical Approach centred round two very important points. First, he used the word ‘lexis’ to broaden the traditional notion of vocabulary, including under his umbrella term both individual words and ‘lexical chunks’, i.e., groups of words which are commonly found together. Collocations like ‘lasting happiness’ and ‘happy occasion’ could be thought of as ‘lexical chunks’, but in the way in which Lewis conceived of lexical chunks, they also included other set phrases and formulaic expressions like ‘by the way’, ‘if I were you’, etc. Second, Lewis proposed that native speakers of English had a large store of lexical chunks which they habitually drew upon to produce fluent, accurate and meaningful language. His rallying point was that language was basically ‘grammaticalised lexis’ rather than ‘lexicalized grammar’, thereby positioning ‘lexis’ at the centre of meaning-creation and relegating grammar to a secondary position.

5. The Implications of Lewis’s Lexical Approach

The immediate implication of Lewis’s Lexical Approach for ELT is that teachers should help in the development of the learners’ store of words and, especially, lexical chunks in order that they are able to retrieve them from their memory during language use. In other words, teachers should help in the development of the learners’ lexical competence,



which, among other things, includes the ability to use words and chunks in a variety of contexts in which their use is possible. But the pedagogical question which immediately arises is: ‘what can teachers possibly do to enable their learners develop their lexical competence?’ When we seek an answer to this question, we find that there are three broad approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning: incidental learning, i.e., as Richards and Renandya (2002: 256) put it, “learning vocabulary as a by-product of doing other things such as reading or listening”, explicit teaching, i.e., teachers teaching directly by engaging learners in activities which centre round the development of vocabulary, and teachers developing in learners strategies which they then would be able to use independently for expanding their vocabulary bank. Although all the three approaches have their relative merits, language teachers ought to be aware of which approach to focus on in their own pedagogical situation and when. Obviously, they have to take into account myriad factors like the learners’ proficiency level and their specific needs while deciding upon the approach. However, a debate has always raged between whether teachers should create opportunities in which incidental learning of vocabulary could take place or whether they should resort to explicit teaching of vocabulary items. For one thing, one must acknowledge the fact pointed out by Hunt and Beglar (2002: 256) that “most words in both first and second languages are probably learned incidentally, through extensive reading and listening.” This really helps when it comes to getting multiple exposures to the different ways in which words are used in different contexts. These multiple exposures in turn go a long way in enabling learners understand the multifarious meanings of words. Moreover, vocabulary acquisition has long been thought to be what Schmitt (2000: 117) says “incremental in nature”, with different aspects like form, meaning, register constraints, etc., picked up not all at once but over a period of time. Hence, there is no gainsaying that the incidental learning of vocabulary through extensive reading and listening is greatly beneficial for learners. However, one must also realize that probably only proficient upper-intermediate and advanced learners would benefit more from such incidental encounters with vocabulary items. For absolute beginners and intermediate learners, perhaps, a properly structured vocabulary



programme which can possibly strike a nice balance between explicit teaching and activities providing opportunities for incidental learning would be more appropriate. It is actually quite commonsensical to think that explicit teaching is an absolute necessity for beginners as their limited range of vocabulary would hinder their efforts to read and listen extensively. Coady (1997: 229), calling this “the beginner’s paradox”, points out the need for explicit instruction for beginners wondering how they can “learn enough words to learn vocabulary through extensive reading when they do not know enough words to read well.” The solution that he offers is teaching around 3,000 most frequently occurring words which would supplement the learners’ extensive reading. Here Coady also talks about how translating a second language (L2) word into a first language (L1) equivalent could be helpful. Of course, there is no sound pedagogical grounds on which translation in the L2 classroom can be banned altogether, but there is also this fear that indiscriminate translation from L2 to L1 could hamper the development of L2 lexical competence of learners since knowing a word is, as Hunt and Beglar (2002: 261) put it, “knowing more than just its translated meaning or its L2 synonyms.” Hunt and Beglar (2002) go on to talk about a couple of L2-based explicit teaching approaches like providing “opportunities for elaborating word knowledge” and providing “opportunities for developing fluency with known vocabulary.”

6. Elaborating Word Knowledge: The Author’s Procedure

Elaboration, in the way conceived of by Hunt and Beglar, “involves expanding the connections between what the learners already know and new information (261).” This approach formed the basis of the vocabulary teaching which the author did as a part of the Trinity College London *CertTESOL* (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) which he completed at Saint George International, London, in October, 2009.

The author’s procedure for teaching vocabulary explicitly comprised the following six steps:



1. Setting the context
2. Eliciting vocabulary
3. Drilling
4. Asking relevant Concept Check Questions (CCQs)
5. Boarding
6. Practice activity

Setting a good context which is interesting, plausible, vivid and has relevance to the lives of the learners, is an essential prerequisite for vocabulary teaching as it helps in both engaging the attention of the learners and naturally generating the target vocabulary. Maintaining the context and making sure the language surrounding the context is easy to comprehend, the teacher should start eliciting the target vocabulary. Elicitation ensures that the learners work towards understanding the meaning as this is more likely to help them remember and recall the vocabulary taught. Moreover, elicitation also makes the classroom more learner-centred, and helps the learners make connections between the old and the new. One must remember here that our learners are, as Tudor (2001: 15) puts it, “not...blank sheets of paper onto which a pre-ordained body of knowledge can be transferred in a neat, predictable manner.” On the contrary, they are thinking individuals who given a chance can take responsibility for their own learning. Vocabulary elicitation can be done in a variety of ways like explaining, narrating anecdotes, miming, using pictures, using sound associations and synonyms, realia, etc. Of course, even after repeated attempts at eliciting if the learners are unable to come up with answers there’s no harm in giving the vocabulary items to them, but it’s absolutely essential to model words and phrases clearly before drilling them. A drill is invaluable because it gives highly controlled practice of a word or chunk of language, aiming to aid memorisation of the form and phonology of the new vocabulary through repetition. On the flip side of it is the fact that drills can become mechanical quite easily, which can lead to them becoming meaningless and boring. Hence it’s important to use different types of drill like choral drills, individual drills, chain drills, back and front chaining, etc., putting energy into



them and making them quick, snappy and fun. Then to ensure that the learners understand the underlying concept of a lexical item, appropriate Concept Check Questions (CCQs) need to be asked. CCQs are also important to avoid questions like ‘Do you understand?’ and ‘Are you following?’, the answers to which could be in the affirmative without indicating any true understanding of the concepts involved. A good simple CCQ would be ‘Is a skyscraper a tall building?’ while teaching the word ‘skyscraper’. Another important stage in this explicit vocabulary teaching programme is the board stage, when the teacher boards the vocabulary items to clarify spelling and stress. Now, having been presented with the new vocabulary, learners should be set an activity that forces them to use the new vocabulary items in pairs/groups to help reinforce learning. Here are examples of some practice activities which the author has used successfully:

1. Defining Activities:

- Learners invent true and false definitions of words and chunks to test other learners.
- Games like pictionary (drawing what partner describes), taboo (verbal definition without key words), etc.
- Completing crosswords.
- Board game with definitions on squares.
- Bingo: Teacher gives definitions and learners cross off words.

2. Matching Activities:

- Target word or chunk with a definition.
- Target word or chunk with a synonym or antonym.
- Target word or chunk with a picture.

3. Gap Fill Activities:

- Sentences with target word or chunk omitted.
- Story with several words or chunks omitted.

4. Creative Use:

- Learners write true sentences about themselves using target words or chunks



- Learners write a story incorporating the target words or chunks.
- Discussion or debates involving the use of target words or chunks.

7. Developing Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Another aspect of ESL/EFL vocabulary pedagogy is the realisation on the part of teachers that however much they try, as Sokmen (1997: 225) puts it, it is “not for possible for students to learn all the vocabulary they need in the classroom.” Hence it’s important for teachers to help learners learn strategies to develop their vocabulary. These strategies for learning vocabulary are a part of language learning strategies which have been defined by O’Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) as “special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to comprehend, learn or retain new information.” Obviously, a training in learning strategies would make learners more autonomous as they take control of their learning process. One vocabulary learning strategy discussed very often in the literature of vocabulary pedagogy is guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context.

This strategy involves, as Nation (2002: 271) puts it, “learners consciously focusing on unknown words, interrupting their normal reading, and systematically drawing on the available clues to work out the unknown word’s meaning.” Among other vocabulary learning strategies are the development of sound dictionary skills, the Keyword Method, which is basically a mnemonic device, which helps in linking a vocabulary item with its meaning and consolidating this linkage in the memory, and the setting up of Vocabulary Notebooks in which, as Decarrico (2001: 291) points out, learners can possibly “write word pairs and semantic maps which help them visualize the associative network of relationships existing between new and familiar words.

8. Conclusion

In summing up, it is important for language teachers to realise that in ESL/EFL vocabulary learning (or learning of any kind, for that matter!), there is always an incubation period, i.e., learners might need to be exposed to a vocabulary item several



times in different contexts before being able to use it naturally in speech and writing. Hence, what teachers can do at best is to use the many techniques that they have at their disposal to help the learners build, as Tickoo (2003: 216) says, “a ‘web of associations’ of different kinds which give every new word, word form and word meaning a strong base in the learner’s mind.” The ultimate aim of all teachers, of course, should be to make learners more self-reliant and autonomous and to achieve this, developing independent vocabulary learning strategies in learners could prove most effective.

References:

Carter, Ronald. (2001). Vocabulary. In Ronald Carter and David Nunan (eds.). *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. (pp. 42-47). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Decarrico, Jeanette S. (2001). Vocabulary Learning and Teaching. In Marianne Celce-Murcia (ed.). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. (pp. 285-289). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Fries, Charles. (1945). *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*. Michigan: Michigan University Press.

Hunt, Alan, and David Beglar. (2002). Current Research and Practice in Teaching Vocabulary. In Jack C. Richards and Willy A. Renandya (eds.). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. (pp. 258-266). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Knight, Paul. (2001). The Development of EFL Methodology. In Christopher N. Candlin and Neil Mercer (eds.). *English Language Teaching in its Social Context: A Reader*. (pp. 147-165). London: Routledge.



Lewis, Michael. (1993). *The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a Way Forward*. Hove, England: Language Teaching Publications.

Nation, Paul. (2002). Best Practice in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning. In Jack C. Richards and Willy A. Renandya (eds.). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. (pp. 267-272). New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Malley, J. M. and A. U. Chamot. (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, Jack C., and Willy A. Renandya (eds.). (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sokmen, A. (1997). Current Trends in Teaching Second Language Vocabulary. In N. Schmitt and M McCarthy (eds.). *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy*. (pp. 237-257). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swan, Michael, and Catherine Walter. (1984). *The Cambridge English Course 1 (teacher's book)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tickoo, M. L. (2003). *Teaching and Learning English*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Tudor, Ian. (2001). *The Dynamics of the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilkins, David A. (1972). *Linguistics and Language Teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.