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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of language learning and, as such, should hold a central place in every foreign language classroom. However, teaching vocabulary properly is both difficult and time-consuming, and so is often taught using randomly selected lexical items, which are taught incrementally and without sufficient structuring and reinforcement. The result is that students become frustrated and lose motivation. Moreover, the crucial component of student confidence is diminished which does, in fact, directly affect other areas of language competency. To combat this, and to achieve excellence in vocabulary-building, it is essential that instructors apply appropriate techniques to facilitate students' rapid acquisition of new lexical items while ensuring long-term retention. This includes systematically selecting vocabulary to be taught by considering the academic needs and competency levels of the students, as well as explicit instruction in strategies that promote learner autonomy. This article aims to demonstrate methods for choosing vocabulary items, and ways to organize and implement vocabulary curricula.

語彙の獲得は語学学習の重要な要素であり、クラス内で中心的な役割を果たすべきだ。しかし、語彙を適切に教えるのは困難で時間がかかる。よって講師たちは戦略や理屈を考えず、適当に語彙を選んで教えることが多い。その結果、学習者は不満を持ち意欲を失くす。そして最も致命的なことに、自信も失ってしまう。自信の喪失は、すべての言語能力分野に直接影響を及ぼす。この問題を防ぎつつ語彙の迅速な獲得を達成するためには、講師が適切なテクニックを使用することが不可欠だ。それには、学習者の自律性を促進するような戦略的な指導と、学生のニーズやレベルを考慮して教えるべき語彙を体系的に選択することが含まれる。本論文の目的は、語彙を効果的に選択する方法と語彙カリキュラムを整理し適用する方法を示すことである。

キーワード：Vocabulary acquisition, foreign language, ESL, strategic learning

Vocabulary Acquisition Overview

Vocabulary-building, despite being a crucial component of language learning is unfortunately very often

sidelined in favor of other skill sets which are deemed more important, such as grammar or reading. Additionally, due to time constraints, when vocabulary-building programs *are* implemented, they are executed erratically or without clear guidelines. However, “vocabulary is commonly considered a one of the main factors required for L2 [second language] proficiency [...] and [is] crucially important for L2 students” (Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi, 2016, p. 141), and so explicit vocabulary instruction cannot be ignored or consigned to whim. As Keith Folse (2004) observed, “Lack of grammar can limit conversation; lack of vocabulary knowledge can stop conversation” (p. 3). Moreover, according to Hunt and Feng (2016, citing Stahl, 2003), “the most prominent indicator of oral language proficiency is vocabulary knowledge, which is particularly important for comprehension” (p. 5). Thus it can be seen that vocabulary knowledge, or the lack of it, has a wide impact on all other areas of language proficiency; it is a vital component of every foreign-language program, and should be treated as such. Consequently, rather than relying on incidental or student-directed vocabulary building, instructors should develop a clear, focused process for teaching new vocabulary, and have a structured plan of which items they wish to teach, and why. As noted by researcher John Crow (1986), if we are to improve this aspect of language pedagogy, “research into vocabulary acquisition must concentrate on the *process* of vocabulary acquisition itself” (p. 248). It is not enough to simply choose words at random or teach vocabulary incidentally; instead, lexicon must be developed deliberately and systematically, focusing on context and meaning as it relates to the needs of students. As Hunt and Feng (2016) have noted, it is important for students to have not only a knowledge of vocabulary, but depth as well. Moreover, they should “really understand and know the words and be able to apply the words in different situations” (p. 5).

In order to accomplish this seemingly monumental task, instructors face a number of obstacles, most notably in conveying complex, multifaceted meanings effectively, and also in deciding which items to teach. Instructors struggle with choosing words appropriate to students’ level and corresponding to specific academic programs. To compound this problem, students often cannot use dictionaries effectively, making it nearly impossible to work autonomously. This, in turn, leads to frustration during study, and the wasting of valuable time. These obstacles cause deep frustration in many instructors who consider the undertaking impractical or impossible, ultimately entrusting the responsibility of vocabulary-building to students. Instead, through deliberate and informed effort, instructors should “employ the most effective strategies that will enhance and expedite the vocabulary learning process of the [...] language learner” (Mukoroli, 2011, p. 40).

The process of learning new vocabulary is both difficult and time-consuming, so it is essential to streamline the process using strategies that will help keep students focused and motivated. To begin, the instructor must have a clearly organized method for choosing which items to teach. Vocabulary must be chosen precisely according to the students’ level and academic needs. Moreover, the program must teach students how to use lexical items correctly in context, as well as offer strategies for long-term retention. Further, there must be sufficient instruction in dictionary use in order for students to work autonomously and use their time effectively. Students often fail to notice that there are multiple meanings or uses for a single word, or simply choose the wrong word form from a list. Alternatively, they may choose the right word and definition but use it incorrectly anyway. Explicit dictionary usage instruction can help students to

avoid these errors and focus their energies appropriately.

Finally, instructors should teach both cognitive and metacognitive strategies for vocabulary acquisition. Cognitive strategies might include analyzing and manipulating new lexical items in a meaningful way, e.g. using new items to create personalized (and therefore *memorable*) sentences, whereas metacognitive strategies would focus more on the student's ability to plan how best to acquire new items based on personal study preferences, as well as honest evaluation of methods that have worked well in the past. This includes acknowledging and using the similarities between the student's native language (L1) and the target language (L2) to maximize acquisition and avoid errors. Referred to as positive transfer, this process allows students to use L1 structures and rules to construct "interlanguage hypotheses", and to use the L1 to help make sense of the L2 (Ellis, 1997, p. 36). Similarly, Odlin (1989) asserted that "cross-linguistic similarities can produce positive transfer in several ways. Similarities between native language and target language vocabulary can reduce the time needed to develop good reading comprehension" (p. 36). Likewise, this process may be utilized in language classrooms to help students decipher unknown meanings and differentiate between subtle variations in new lexical items.

Further, instructors should teach students to make multiple associations between their own languages (L1) and the target language. This may include mnemonic associations, potent memories and ideas, or similarities of sound. Furthermore, creating a vocabulary-building process that is collaborative, where students exchange ideas and methods, has proven very effective. Often students have their own strategies for remembering vocabulary. By sharing these strategies, students enable each other to become more successful learners (Yongqi Gu, 2003 and Murphey and Arao, 2001 qtd. in Mehring, 2005).

While the role of instructor is crucial in structuring the program and providing source material, it is vital that the students remain *active and motivated participants* in tasks of repetition and recycling, effective dictionary use, and the memorization of words. Further, they must be willing to invest a substantial amount of time to the development of their L2 lexicon. Without this, no program -however well-meaning or structured -can be effective. Students must be active participants in the learning process, and this can be accomplished by using both strategies and dictionaries effectively, and through a sufficient investment of time. If students meet these criteria, vocabulary acquisition can evolve from the drudgery of rote memorization into a more effective, and ultimately more rewarding, endeavor.

Obstacle 1: Deciding what to teach

The first obstacle faced by instructors is deciding which words to teach. Professor Nisbet (2010) observed that "teachers simply cannot directly teach all of the words that their second language students need" (p. 10). Indeed, this is a very complex issue, and many educators simply follow textbooks or proceed on a whim, allowing students to determine which words to memorize. Fortunately, there *are* simple, identifiable criteria for choosing vocabulary words in a foreign language classroom. According to research by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), there are two main ways of categorizing words: by tier and by purpose. "Tier One consists of the most basic words -*clock, baby, happy*" (p. 19). "Tier Two" consists of high frequency words,

and “Tier Three” generally consists of words that are rather obscure, often low-frequency lexical items specifically related to special topics, words like *deoxyribonucleic acid* and *paronomasia*, words that would not usually be important to students unless they were required for a specific field. With the exception of very early beginners, whose target would be “Tier One” words, the target for instructors is generally “Tier Two.” These words “are likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts [...] in the written and oral language” (ibid). The criteria for selecting these words are based on three things:

- *Importance and utility*: Words that are characteristic of mature [native] language users and appear frequently across a variety of domains.
- *Instructional Potential*: Words that can be worked with in a variety of ways so that students [can make] connections to other words and concepts.
- *Conceptual Understanding*: Words for which students understand the general concept but provide precision and specificity in describing the concept (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002, p. 19).

These criteria help instructors choose appropriate words by helping them to understand the multiplicity of students and teaching situations and help them compensate for this by specifically determining students’ needs. While the usefulness of these concepts is self-evident, the criteria are as yet insufficient for choosing vocabulary to teach. There are three other essential areas to consider that deal with the “purpose” of words: “new meanings for known words, new words for known concepts, and new words for new concepts” (Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996, p. 77). Blachowicz and Fisher, teachers and vocabulary instruction researchers, have noted that these concepts are essential to the process of lexical acquisition. Because students have differing active vocabularies and differing backgrounds, among other things, it is important to be aware of the various ways in which vocabulary is absorbed. A student may know the meaning of the word *marriage* but not of *matrimony*. This would lead the instructor to relate the new word to a familiar concept (ibid). However, a student may be familiar with a concept, that of a stamp sticking to an envelope, but they are not familiar with the word *adhere* (ibid). In this case, the instructor would be teaching a “new word for a known concept” (ibid). Lastly, a student may not know the word *asteroid* or even the concept of such a thing (ibid). To the student, the word and the concept are equally foreign, both in the first or native language (L1) and the second or “target” language (L2). In this case the instructor would be teaching both words *and* concepts. It is important that these distinctions are made when choosing vocabulary for foreign-language students. The words that are taught must be specific to the knowledge and the needs of the student, and it is only through careful inspection of the aforementioned criteria that this is possible.

Obstacle 2: Communicating meaning in vocabulary instruction

The next aspect of teacher responsibility in vocabulary instruction is the meaning of the words to be taught. Words should always be taught by including both the definitional and the contextual information. Steven Stahl (1999) noted that “our knowledge of a word’s meaning involves knowing more than a definition” (p. 31), while Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi (2016) have remarked that “vocabulary knowledge is a multidimensional construct” (p. 143). Consequently, it is true that an explicit definition holds great value, and

sometimes that is all a student needs to get by; however, new vocabulary becomes more accessible and more useful when the instructor uses “methods that provide both contextual and definitional information” (Stahl, 1999, p. 31), thus allowing the students to engage the new language on multiple levels.

In order to teach definitional information about words, teachers may use a variety of methods. One such example is communicating definitional information through the use of synonyms or antonyms. Synonyms are the more obvious solution because words often relate on several levels, and discussion, at least among higher-level students, is very memorable and enjoyable. However, antonyms may also be used to make distinctions on how words relate. Stahl (1999) uses the example of *pandemonium* to illustrate this point. The word *pandemonium* “implies lawlessness, or clutter, but its antonym, *order*, focuses on the ‘chaos’ part of the word’s meaning” (p. 31). This type of focus causes the student to concentrate on the critical aspects of the word’s meaning and make associations with other words.

Stahl further discusses focus through what he calls “contextual information” (ibid). Using the same word, *pandemonium*, the instructor may have the students discuss various meanings of the word in different contexts. For example, students could write sentences about “chaos in the classroom, chaos in terms of clutter and mess, [or] chaos in relations among people” (ibid). In this way, students begin to understand that a word can mean the same thing in many different ways, and that the more they learn about the versatility of a word, the better command they will have of the target language.

Obstacle 3: Using a dictionary effectively

Finally, it is a teacher’s responsibility to make certain that students know when and how to use a dictionary. According to professors Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999), “frequent and elaborate dictionary use seems to provide a solid base for lexical learning” (p. 190). In light of this, dictionary instruction is important because it allows students to become more autonomous by encouraging them to study outside of class. However, it may be best for an instructor to begin with this word of caution: “The student who knows how to use a dictionary, but doesn’t, has no advantage over the student who does not know how to use one” (ibid). A teacher must convey the importance of student dictionary use in autonomous vocabulary acquisition, specifically regarding when and how to use it. For those students who are having trouble comprehending words while listening or reading, they should ask themselves questions such as, “Do I know the category to which this concept belongs?”, “Do I know some distinguishing characteristics”, “Do I know some examples?” (Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996, p. 109). If the answer to these questions is “no,” then the student should consult a dictionary. With time, questions such as these should begin to surface in a student’s mind whenever comprehension begins to break down. If necessary for practice, Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) recommend that students use a “Concept of Definition Map”. This is a visual representation of the above questions, and it requires students to diagram answers to those questions. Sometimes students may surprise themselves by knowing more than they thought. This is particularly useful in testing situations, where students may be too nervous to think and remember clearly. Regardless, if a student has insufficient information to map out a definition, then a dictionary should be used. However, in order to develop the ability to use a dictionary

efficiently, students need to exhibit competency in the following areas:

1. Knowing when to use a dictionary (knowing that you don't [sic] know the meaning of a word),
2. Knowing how to locate a word,
3. Knowing the parts of a dictionary entry,
4. Choosing between multiple meanings, and
5. Applying the meaning. (Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996) p. 107

These are skills that should be taught by the instructor and, as the phrasing of the above principles suggests, "knowing" is a key factor for students. They should have the required skills embedded in their minds to be used at a moment's notice. They must *know* what they are doing if they are to become autonomous learners, an aspiration that will lead to improved efficiency in the development of target language use. Teaching the above concepts is the instructor's responsibility, but use of those concepts falls entirely upon the student. The use of strategic concepts will be addressed in the next section, which discusses the ways in which students' become active participants in the learning process.

Vocabulary-learning strategies, part 1

When students are actively engaged in the learning process, they assume responsibility for using the strategies they have been taught. This includes strategic use of a dictionary, and any other cognitive or metacognitive strategies that the teacher endorses. In this case, the application of strategies for dictionary use is vital. If a student *does* not or *cannot* use a dictionary to assist independent study, vocabulary growth and competence will suffer accordingly.

Blachowicz and Fisher (1996) recommend teaching a strategy known as the "PAVE Procedure" for instruction in dictionary use. PAVE is an acronym that stands for: "Prediction, Association, Verification, and Evaluation" (p. 118). The procedure has been reported by students to be "enjoyable" and to help them "remember words better". The procedure consists of the following six stages:

1. Students write the sentence or context in which the word appears.
2. They write the word again [...] and predict its meaning.
3. They write a sentence of their own that demonstrates their understanding of the word [what they think the word means].
4. They check the word's meaning in a dictionary and write its definition.
5. They examine the sentence from step 3 and write a better definition if this one is inadequate.
6. They draw an image to help them remember the meaning of the word by creating an associative link (Blachowicz and Fisher, 1996, p. 118).

This procedure should be practiced in the classroom regularly until the students are able to remember and utilize it efficiently. The PAVE Procedure is the application of the "skills that should be taught by an instructor" (ibid). By engaging in each of the prescribed steps, students develop specific skills such as educated guessing and predicting, both of which are often skipped in favor of a "quick fix," i.e. a dictionary search. In fact, students *so often* dive for their dictionaries before even considering the meaning of a word

that many teachers have banned them from use except at designated times. Students must learn to mentally engage with the words, and to use dictionaries as an *assistive tool* rather than as a crutch which, when removed, leaves the student helpless.

Vocabulary-learning strategies, part 2

Other strategies for vocabulary acquisition include Pressley's (et al., 1982) Mnemonic Keyword Method, and Green's (Eyraud et al., 2000) Word Wall Approach. The object of Pressley's (et al.) method is to enable students to remember "materials that have an associative component" (p. 61). Basically, this involves making use of cognates and semi-cognates which, admittedly, is not always possible between the L1 and the target language. Nevertheless, whenever possible, it is a very useful method. Cognates and mnemonics are very valuable tools, and instructors who wish to be effective should jump at the chance to use them. In this case, "the keyword method is a two-stage process for learning foreign vocabulary words" (Pressley, 1982, p. 62). Essentially, students must make an association between the unfamiliar word of the target language and a similar word from the L1. By creating an "interactive visual image" or a "meaningful sentence" a student can stabilize this association. To use Pressley's (1982) example, the English word "cart" could be remembered by an association with the Spanish word "carta" (which means "postal letter"). The Spanish-speaking student can either remember this as the visual image of a postal letter in a cart, or by linking "the keyword to the vocabulary word definition," as in "The cart transported the letter". In either case, the student has a solid, visually reinforced example of the word's meaning. While this does not work for all words, it is still an important skill for students to develop. Every strategy that helps students to engage with vocabulary mentally is an advantage in L2 vocabulary education, and the Mnemonic Method greatly contributes to students' becoming autonomous, active participants in the learning process.

Vocabulary-learning strategies, part 3

Another effective way of expanding L2 vocabulary knowledge is by using Green's Word Wall Approach. Eyraud, et al. (2000) describe this method of promoting vocabulary learning as "incidental learning" (p. 2) that involves bulletin board displays "each with a different background color corresponding to a different curricular objective (e.g. phonic elements, word form classes, grammatical forms, or spelling patterns)" (ibid.). The Word Wall, with its comprehensive list of classroom-learned words, is used as a "thesaurus and spell-check during writing assignments [as well as] a resource for language development lessons" (ibid.). The objective of the Word Wall is the recycling and repetitive use of vocabulary items. It is generally accepted that multiple exposures to words is one of the most significant aspects of vocabulary building. Stahl (1999) advocates this idea by saying, "As we encounter a word repeatedly, more and more information accumulates about that word, until we have a vague notion of what it 'means.' As we get more information, we are able to define that word" (p. 14). This is the central purpose of the Word Wall; students are able to have repeated exposure to words, including their meanings in a variety of contexts, as well as spelling and assorted word

forms. There are a limitless number of activities that can be produced from a Word Wall. However, because of the numerous possibilities and specific learning needs of students in different contexts, it would be impossible to attempt to list here the activities that fall under the heading “Word Wall Approach.” However, Blachowicz and Fisher (2004) emphatically agree that the Word Wall Approach accomplishes the *goals* of “word learning in the classroom through word play” (p. 218). Their research details four principles that must be used in “word play” activities:

1. Word play is motivating and an important component of the word-rich classroom;
2. Word play calls on students to reflect metacognitively on words, word parts, and context;
3. Word play requires students to be active learners and capitalizes on possibilities for social construction of meaning; and
4. Word play develops domains of word meaning and relatedness as it engages students in practice and rehearsal of words.

(*ibid.*)

It is clear that all of these criteria are directly addressed in the Word Wall Approach; this is what makes it such a popular and effective classroom tool. It meets all of Blachowicz and Fisher’s criteria, and it is remarkably versatile. There is, however, one more instructional aspect of vocabulary acquisition that needs to be addressed: building a vocabulary through reading.

Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) noted that “the volume of experience with written language, interacting with reading comprehension ability, is the major determinant of vocabulary growth” (p. 234). According to Kate Parry (1991), the concept of building vocabulary through reading has become quite clear. Parry describes a study in which students were asked to write down words they did not know while they were reading, and to “write down, if they could, what they thought the words meant” (p. 629). The resulting lists revealed a variety of strategies that students had used to guess the meaning of the words, some which worked better than others. However, the outcome of the study, according to Parry, emphasized the need for students “to be aware of the range [of strategies] so as to develop flexibility in their responses to unfamiliar words” (*ibid.*). There is much work to be done on particular strategies used for inferring meaning from context, which can be extremely difficult and/or misleading, but the important thing to note is that “there is a strong correlation between how much people read and how many words they know” (p. 629). There is also a very strong correlation between the amount students read and the amount of words they recorded as being “unknown.” Out of context, this proves nothing, but it has often been suggested, as in Parry’s article, that this does, in fact, indicate a circular process: a student “reads little and so comes across relatively few words; consequently, [the student] is slowed down in [his/her] reading by the many words that are unfamiliar; this, in turn, means that [he/she] does not read much, and so on” (Parry, 1991, p. 649). Likewise, a student who reads more, learns more words, especially the most frequent ones, and thus is more driven to read, which causes him/her to learn more words *ad infinitum*. However, this should not be permitted to create hasty or false assumptions. In the same study, the students who read faster and more often also had less precise definitions of the words they encountered. The words they learned seemed to be roughly understood, as opposed to the students who were slower and took time to look up and write out definitions, and consequently knew fewer

words, but knew them better. The assumption here is that whether students are great readers or poor readers, what matters most is the amount of time spent reading. Stahl (1999) supports this and promotes the idea that “increasing the amount of reading that [students] do maybe [sic] the most reliable way of improving [students'] vocabulary, more so than specific teaching techniques” (p. 29). Regardless of the approach students' take, it is clear that reading volume directly effects vocabulary expansion.

The final piece of the puzzle: time investment

There is no substitution for a large time commitment in lexical development. The usefulness of acquisition methods, strategies, and activities has been clearly demonstrated and yet, ultimately, the most important facet of vocabulary acquisition is time. Students should commit a significant amount of time to lexical acquisition, whether it is spent in the use of strategies, activities, or reading. Instructors, too, must devote a significant amount of time to vocabulary development, especially at the beginning levels and in ESL/EFL classes. Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) recommend that teachers “employ a variety of language learning activities and spend more time on lexical acquisition” (p. 190). Vocabulary building is difficult and complex, but it is manageable if all those involved make the appropriate effort. In the end, what is crucial to the development of vocabulary in ESL/EFL situations is that the students are aware of “all the possible ways vocabulary acquisition can be approached and, ultimately, to make them responsible for their own learning” (p. 191).

Conclusion

The information on vocabulary instruction contained herein by no means encompasses the vast field of research on vocabulary acquisition methods. Rather, it is meant as a guide for instructors who wish to build a structured vocabulary program that will prevent wasted time and effort, while helping to motivate students to participate in the process of building their L2 lexicon. Vocabulary acquisition is a complex task, and it is common for both students and instructors alike to feel frustrated, but these times need not be overwhelming. Vocabulary acquisition methods, strategies, and activities, paired with a considerable time commitment, make it possible to avoid many of the pitfalls of teaching vocabulary and to make the process both efficient *and* enjoyable.

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