
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Key Issues in Vocabulary Teaching: A Brief Overview

Souad En-nda¹ ✉ and **Bani Koumachi²**

¹Doctotal Student, English Department, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

²Associate Professor, English Department, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Souad En-nda, **E-mail:** souad.ennda@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is still neglected in EFL classrooms. Many language educators consider the teaching of vocabulary to be challenging; therefore, they do not devote their teaching time to exposing their students to this vital skill. This article attempts to shed light on some of the vital issues related to the teaching of vocabulary to help teachers who are not yet ready to teach this skill. It begins with a discussion on the importance of teaching vocabulary by addressing the main reasons why vocabulary needs to be taught. Then, it gives a brief account of the different aspects that language educators need to take into account when teaching vocabulary to their learners. Besides, it introduces a list of the most useful strategies that language instructors can incorporate into their classrooms to teach vocabulary effectively. Finally, it sheds light on the different ways teachers can utilize to assess their students' vocabulary learning. Results of the study provide insights on how language educators, who encountered difficulties in teaching vocabulary and decided to neglect it in their classrooms, can make teaching vocabulary effective.

| KEYWORDS

Vocabulary, lexicon, assessment, strategies

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a significant role in language teaching. It is a vital skill that is needed in reading, writing, listening, and speaking courses. Without having a sufficient amount of vocabulary, learners cannot express their ideas fluently or understand others. Wilkins (1972) points out ". . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (pp. 111–112).

Teaching vocabulary may be problematic for the teachers, especially when they seem to be less confident about the efficient ways to choose to teach vocabulary. The purpose of this article is to provide language teachers, who often face a dilemma in trying to organize their vocabulary lessons and choose the most effective method to teach them, with some useful practices, which they can incorporate into their classroom to teach vocabulary.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The importance of teaching vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a powerful role in making learners understand what they read and hear. The central importance of vocabulary lies in the fact of enabling learners to become successful language users. That is, teaching vocabulary should aim not only to develop learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge but also to improve their productive knowledge of vocabulary by encouraging them to become active vocabulary users (Laufer, 1998).

Teaching vocabulary is of great importance for learners. Thus, teachers often strive to increase learners' vocabulary through reading comprehension. Students should have sound knowledge of vocabulary to read and comprehend text successfully (Joshi, 2005; Qian, 2002; Nation, 2006). Vocabulary is indeed crucial for effective reading comprehension and academic achievement. Vocabulary

teaching makes listeners follow the speaker's talk successfully. Because they have a rich lexicon, active listeners will find it easy to understand what is said by the speaker.

When teaching vocabulary, teachers contribute to the development of their learners' fluency and expression in English. It is essential to make students aware of a wide range of vocabulary and expressions, including collocations, fixed, semi-fixed phrases, expressions, and vocabulary, by giving them opportunities to identify, organize and record these vocabularies under teachers' guidance. Later on, after recognizing these vocabularies, learners should acquire productive vocabularies, which they can use to express themselves (Zhou, 2010).

Teaching vocabulary is extremely important in language teaching. It paves the way for learners to accumulate knowledge about vocabulary and expand their lexicon to become fluent speakers of English. Knowledge of vocabulary is much more important than knowledge of grammar. Richards and Schmitt (2010) argue that "learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books" (p.4). This means that vocabulary is a basic unit of communication and not grammar. Consequently, one can manage to maintain his/her communication if he/ she has vocabulary and not grammar. In this case, the speech will be characterized by a lack of accuracy and not fluency. Without grammar, meaning will not be affected, but without vocabulary, meaning will not be expressed (Wilkins, 1972).

2.2 What needs to be taught?

When teaching vocabulary, language educators have to take into account what to teach to their learners. Teachers have to adapt the teaching materials to the level of their students so as not to lag behind learning the vocabulary they are introduced to. Ur (1996) introduces six basic aspects to be emphasized throughout a vocabulary course. These aspects include form (pronunciation and spelling), grammar, collocation, aspects of meaning, aspects of meaning: meaning relationships, and word formation. The teacher should focus students' attention on what the word sounds like (i.e. its pronunciation) and what it looks like (i.e. its spelling). Thus, teachers have to present these two aspects accurately in a way that can help students learn them easily.

Teachers have to draw learners' attention to grammar when teaching a new item. This does not mean that teachers have to teach grammatical rules, but rather they have just to provide their students with the information that may help them to learn vocabulary without making many mistakes. Teachers can teach nouns and, at the same time, shed light on the fact that, for example, the noun "mouse" has an irregular plural "mice".

They can also draw students' attention to the use of collocation; this aspect has to do with context, specifically words that go together. Therefore, students have to be taught how to put particular items together to form meaningful combinations. Teaching collocations help learners distinguish between what is odd to say and what is not in a given context. Additionally, they may focus on other aspects, including denotation, connotation, and appropriateness to address meaning. Denotation is the meaning that a word refers to in the real world. On the other hand, Connotation stands for the association that one can make with the meaning of a word; or positive or negative feelings that a word evokes. These associations vary from one culture to another. Appropriateness should also be emphasized by the teachers to help their learners distinguish between what is appropriate for a situation and what is not. In this case, learners will be able to distinguish between vocabularies that are used in formal and informal speech and writing.

Aspects of meaning, particularly meaning relationships, should be emphasized by educators throughout their teaching. It is necessary to pay attention to how the meaning of one item relates to the meaning of others. In this case, one has to consider the following relationships:

Synonyms: They include items of the same meaning, such as bright, clever

Antonyms: They include items with opposite meanings, such as rich is an antonym of poor.

Hyponyms: These items serve as specific examples of a general concept such as; dog, lion, mouse are hyponyms of an animal.

Co-hyponyms or co-ordinates: They represent other items that belong to the same kind of thing, such as: red, blue, green, and brown belong to colors.

Translation: It has to do with the words or expressions that belong to learners' mother tongue and are equivalent in meaning to the item being taught.

Word formation plays a crucial role in enabling learners to easily recognize the meaning of vocabulary items. Thus, teaching common prefixes and suffixes such as sub, un, and able facilitate learning of vocabulary items.

These are the main facets of knowing a word. Besides these aspects that need to be taught, Nation (1990 as cited in Schmitt, 2000, p. 5) suggests other facets of knowing a word, including:

The meaning(s) of the word;

The written form of the word;
 The spoken form of the word;
 The grammatical behavior of the word;
 The collocations of the word;
 The register of the word;
 The associations of the word;
 The frequency of the word.

Nation refers to these aspects as types of word knowledge. He also claims that a good mastery of all these aspects is impossible, but still, learners have to make efforts in making their learning of vocabulary a successful process.

Teaching vocabulary is not an easy task. To teach vocabulary more effectively, language educators should go beyond explaining the meaning of words; they should involve lexical phrases and knowledge of English vocabulary.

2.3 Strategies for teaching vocabulary

Many studies have proved the effectiveness of acquiring vocabulary on students' achievement (Coady and Huckin, 2003; Tahmasebi, Ghaedrahmat and Haqverdi, 2013). Students with a large amount of vocabulary tend always to achieve good results. The way teachers expose their students to new vocabulary affects their acquisition of these vocabularies. It is the teacher's role, then, to contribute to the development of students' vocabularies. Duke and Moses (2003) suggest essential strategies to improve young children's vocabulary knowledge.

2.3.1 Read to them

The main advantage of reading aloud to learners is to encourage them to learn words from different sources such as; books, magazines, or storybooks.

2.3.2 Get them reading

This is extremely an effective way of engaging learners in the process of learning new vocabularies. Through independent reading, students learn many words. To encourage students to read on their own, it is important to engage them in motivational activities to develop their vocabulary. Thus, exposure to motivational activities is a prerequisite for improving students' vocabulary.

2.3.3 Engage children in rich oral language

Talk is especially important in helping students learn new words. Students will develop their vocabulary because they are expected to listen and participate in conversations. Since there is room for turn-taking, learners will have the opportunity to listen and to take part in conversations.

2.3.4 Encourage reading and talk at home

Although some people may think that vocabulary development can occur only in an educational setting, vocabulary can also be learned at home. The teacher can maintain his/ her role in developing students' vocabulary, even when they are at home. He/ she can suggest extra-reading activities to be accomplished at home, such as extensive reading materials. Development of students' vocabulary can be done by inviting students to view certain TV programs and asking them to report on them.

2.3.5 Teach important words

Teaching new words requires teachers to be aware of what to teach, how to teach it, and in what order. To teach important words, the teacher has to select words they have the intention to teach.

2.4 Assessing vocabulary

Assessing vocabulary is a very crucial step in the process of teaching. Teachers need to check students' progress by measuring their knowledge of vocabulary. Similarly, students need to self-assess their improvement. Vocabulary is mainly assessed to know how effective the teaching sequence has been. It provides both learners and teachers with feedback about their teaching and learning. This form of feedback tends to assess the progress and improvement of students as well as teachers. The purpose of assessing vocabulary is to motivate learners to review and recycle their vocabulary on a regular basis. Ur (1996) suggests several useful techniques to assess learners' vocabulary knowledge.

2.4.1 Multiple choice

This technique assesses learners' ability to recognize vocabulary. Students are provided with different options, from which they have to guess the correct answer. Although this testing technique seems to be less demanding on the part of the learners, it can be very tricky for them to do and time-consuming for the teacher to compose.

2.4.2 Matching

It is a technique that assesses the student's ability to combine words to form meaningful collocations. Through matching items together, teachers know the extent to which students are aware of the meaning of words.

2.4.3 Odd one out

Through this technique, the teacher wants to assess meaning by making sure that students can omit the word, which does not express the meaning of a given item.

2.4.4 Writing sentences

Assessment through this technique can be challenging for some students since it assesses their productive skills (i.e. writing). Students are assumed to form sentences in which they can include the given vocabulary to explain their meanings.

2.4.5 Dictation

The purpose of the teacher when using dictation is to target students' aural recognition and spelling abilities. Dictation reflects learners' knowledge of meaning.

2.4.6 Dictation-translation:

This technique involves both dictation and translation. Teachers use such combinations to encourage learners to develop their aural skills, spell appropriately, and translate from the mother tongue into the target language correctly.

3. Conclusion

This article has been about the teaching of vocabulary. It has addressed several issues, including the importance of teaching vocabulary to students, the aspects they need to focus on when teaching this fundamental skill, the strategies to be adopted by the teachers to help students progress in their vocabulary knowledge, and the most useful techniques to use to assess students' learning of vocabulary. This article has been an attempt to give insight and better understanding to language teachers, who still consider the teaching of vocabulary as a challenging task, and that this skill should be neglected in the classroom, to how to teach vocabulary using the most effective ways.

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ORCID iD: **Souad En-nda** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2981-2048>, **Bani Koumachi** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1722-3038>

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