

Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary

B. Anuthama

Abstract

Vocabulary is difficult to teach because of the complexity of its linguistic, semantic and psycho-cognitive aspects. So teachers should keep looking for ways to substitute rote repetition with more effective techniques. This paper first throws light on current research and practice in teaching vocabulary and moves on to explain some of the innovative methods for teaching vocabulary. The first strategy discussed is called "The Ripple Effect." According to this methodology the meanings of a word often radiates from the centre along several lines by focusing on different features of the original object. Another method in teaching vocabulary involves the use of colour as colours have tremendous influence on human beings. "The Word Wall" was originally designed to develop vocabulary learning skills and to internalize new vocabulary items. These three methods yield fruitful results in vocabulary acquisition.

Key words: Ripple effect, word wall approach, using colour, vocabulary

Introduction: Current Research and Practice in Teaching Vocabulary

A *word* is defined as including the base form (e.g., *make*) and its inflections and derivatives (e.g., *makes, made, making, maker* and *makers*). Since the meanings of these different forms of the word are closely related, it is assumed that little extra effort is needed to learn them. While this may be true, a study of Japanese learners showed that they did not know many inflections and derivative suffixes for English verbs (Schmitt and Meara 1997). So, these forms should be taught with due care. Vocabulary learning is more than the study of individual words. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) have observed that a significant amount of the English language is made up of lexical phrases, which range from phrasal verbs (two or three words) to longer institutionalized expressions.

There are three approaches to vocabulary instruction and learning. These three approaches -- Incidental Learning, Explicit Instruction and Independent Strategy Development -- are presented in seven teaching principles.

The first principle deals with providing opportunities for the Incidental Learning of vocabulary. Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985) observe that learning vocabulary from contexts is a gradual process. The Incidental Learning of vocabulary through extensive reading can benefit language curricula and learners at all levels. According to Coady (1997), the role of graded readers is to build up learners' vocabulary and its related structures, until they can graduate to more authentic materials. Low proficiency learners can benefit from graded readers because they will be repeatedly exposed to high frequency vocabulary.

The second principle delves into the diagnosis of which of the 3,000 most common words learners need to study. This is discussed under the second approach Explicit Instruction. For second language learners entering university, Laufer (1992) found that knowing a minimum of about 3,000 words was required for effective reading at the university level, whereas knowing 5,000 words indicated academic success.

The third principle deals with providing opportunities for the intentional learning

of vocabulary. Intentional learning through instruction, significantly contributes to vocabulary development. Explicit Instruction is particularly essential for beginners whose lack of vocabulary limits their reading ability. Coady calls this the beginner's paradox. He wonders how beginners could learn enough words to learn vocabulary through extensive reading when they do not know enough words to read well. His solution is to have learners supplement their extensive reading with the study of the 3,000 most frequent words until the forms and meanings of words become automatically recognized, that is, "sight vocabulary" (words recognized immediately while reading).

The fourth principle deals with providing opportunities for elaborating word knowledge. Nation (1990) identifies various aspects of word knowledge such as knowing related grammatical patterns, affixes, common lexical sets and typical associations and how to use the word receptively and productively. Receptive knowledge means being able to recognize one of the aspects of word knowledge through reading and listening. Productive knowledge means being able to use words in speaking and writing.

The fifth principle focuses on providing opportunities for developing fluency with known vocabulary. Fluency partly depends on developing sight vocabulary through extensive reading and studying high frequency vocabulary. Fluency exercises include timed and paced readings. In timed readings, learners may try to increase their speed by sliding a 3x5 card or a piece of paper down the page to increase their speed while attempting to comprehend about 80% of a passage. In paced readings, the teacher determines the time and pushes learners to read faster.

The sixth principle of guessing from context comes under Independent Strategy Development. To guess successfully from context, learners need to know about 19 out of every 20 words (95%) of a text, which requires knowing the 3,000 most common words. However, even if one knows these words, Kelly (1990) concludes that unless the context is very constrained, which is a relatively rare occurrence or unless there is a relationship with a known word identifiable on the basis of form and supported by context, there is little chance of

guessing the correct meaning. As guessing from context fails to direct attention to word form and meaning, relatively little learning occurs.

The seventh principle involves examining different types of dictionaries and teaches learners how to use them. Bilingual dictionaries which provide L1 synonyms have been found to aid vocabulary learning. Due to this factor, a bilingual dictionary helps lower proficiency learners in reading comprehension more because their lack of vocabulary is a significant factor in their inability to read (Knight, 1994).

Bilingualized dictionaries essentially do the job of both a bilingual and a monolingual dictionary. Whereas bilingual dictionaries usually provide just an L1 synonym, bilingualized dictionaries include L2 definitions, L2 sentence examples as well as L1 synonyms. A further advantage is that, they can be used by all levels of learners. Advanced learners can concentrate on the English part of the entry and beginners can use the translation. Electronic dictionaries with multimedia annotations offer a further option for teachers and learners. Unfamiliar words are most efficiently learned when both pictures and text are available for learners.

Learning vocabulary through Incidental, Intentional and Independent Approaches requires teachers to plan a wide variety of activities and exercises. As learners' vocabulary expands in size and depth, extensive reading and the use of independent strategies may be increasingly emphasized. Extensive Reading and Listening, Translation, Elaboration and Fluency Activities, Guessing from Context and Using Dictionaries, all have their own roles to play in systematically developing vocabulary of learners.

Strategies for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

The first innovative strategy to be discussed is called "The Ripple Effect." This method has been successfully implemented after considerable research done by Mu Fengying of China. My paper is based on the article published by her in the online journal named "Forum." (Volume 34, January- March 1996 page 8) This is analysed in detail.

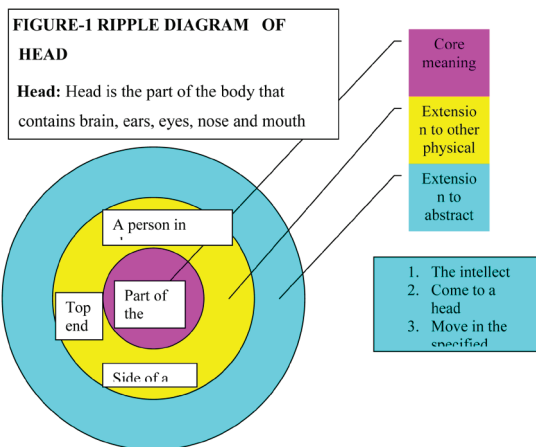
The Ripple Effect

According to Sweetser (1990), a polysemous word usually has a core meaning and all the other meanings come from it by means of a metaphor. The word-meaning expansion works like a ripple, which starts from a centre and extends outward. The centre or the core may denote a physical entity in the material world with a clear focus. This is extended to refer to other physical entities which it resembles. Finally, its meaning may be broadened to abstract ideas by a metaphor.

Application in teaching

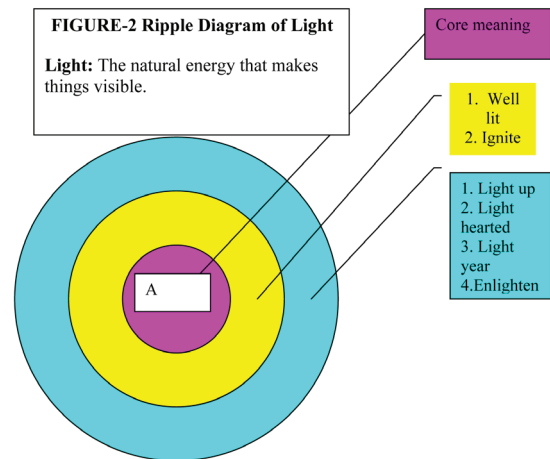
The Ripple Effect can be tried very well with the tertiary level learners. The teacher can help learners understand that the majority of English words have more than one meaning. These meanings of a word are often related. There is almost always a core meaning with all the other meanings coming from it and with the help of imagination and association the meanings can be linked together. To make the concept very clear, three examples have been worked out based on the ripple diagram given by Mu Fengying.

Figure 1 shows the core meaning of “head.” Head



is the part of the body containing the brain, the eyes, the ears, the nose and the mouth. From that comes the next layer of meanings such as a person in charge, side of a coin and the top end of something. It is then extended to abstract ideas like those of the “intellect,” “moving in specific direction,” “going in front of someone,” etc.

Figure 2 shows the core meaning of “light” which



is the natural energy that makes things visible. The inner layer consists of meanings like “well lit,” “not dark,” “ignite” and “a way of regarding something.” This is then expanded to abstract ideas like “light-hearted,” “light-up,” “light year,” “enlightenment,” etc.

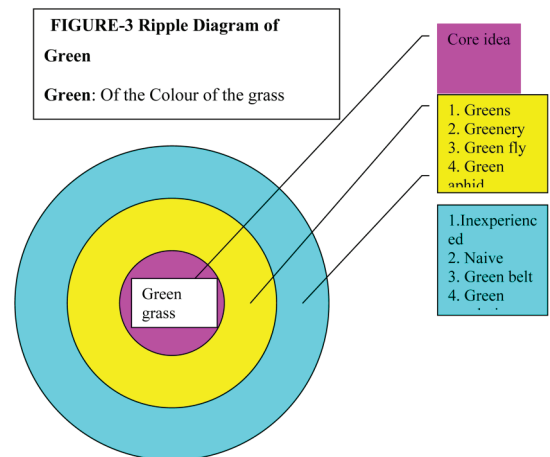


Figure 3 shows the core meaning of “green” which is the colour of growing grass. This meaning expands to describe anything which has that colour such as “greens,” “greenery,” “greenfly,” “green signal” etc. It further expands to abstract ideas like the ones associated with “greenhouse,” “green revolution,” “greenbelt,” etc.

Benefits of Ripple Effect

Teachers find the Ripple Effect strategy a powerful one in vocabulary comprehension, retention and production. Learners learn how to make associations and use their imagination in the

learning process. It enables learners to understand a word better. The diagramming can illustrate not only many meanings of a word, but also the links between those meanings. When selected carefully, it can also demonstrate collocations and idiomatic usages. Through the links provided in a diagram, learners will more easily understand an abstract or alien concept. It is also helpful in fostering the target-culture awareness. Metaphorical thinking and language use are universal, but the actual associations are culture-specific. The method makes this very clear.

In the classroom application of this method, diagramming can be made simpler. When the students once get familiarised with the concept, what is needed is that just activating the imagination.

Teaching Vocabulary in Colour

Another useful method in teaching vocabulary involves the use of colour. This methodology has been tested by Gnoinska (1998), an English teacher working at the Teacher Training College in Sosnowiec, Poland. The classroom research conducted by her using colour to teach vocabulary gave fruitful results. The article published by her in the online journal "Forum" (Volume 36 No: 3, July-September 1998, page 12) focuses on this concept.

According to her, colours have a tremendous influence on human health and psyche. Lack or overabundance of certain colours can cause physical or emotional disorders. Exposure to colour vibrations is used in the treatment of a number of diseases and mental problems. The colour of the classroom walls, curtains or even the colour of the teacher's clothes can either soothe or irritate learners. Colour is also an important tool in visual thinking. It separates ideas so that they can be seen more clearly. It stimulates creativity. Colour captures and directs attention. Even conventionally outlined notes can benefit from colour coding; maps, cluster maps, mandalas and most expressive drawings are considerably more effective in colour (Williams, 1983).

Using colour to teach vocabulary

It is a well known fact, "Tracing a picture of the definition produces better recall than writing the

definition and creating one's own visual image is more effective than tracing" (Wittrock, 1977 p. 171). Using colour in a number of ways produces similar results. Learners concentrate better, spending more time processing a word and find learning more interesting and pleasant. Colour is useful in learning and revising, as well as making learners and teachers become aware of the ways in which they should approach certain tasks.

Coloured chalk or pencils can be used for learning spelling and pronunciation, for remembering the word's grammar, for teaching semantic categories and word differences, for learning morphology and for drawing learners' attention to words and for stimulating discussions.

Benefits of Teaching Vocabulary in Colour

Colouring words helps learners to concentrate on the task and extends the time and attention learners give to each word to be learnt. Underlining words or decorating them with coloured pencils is an activity no student can get wrong and the feeling of success is extremely encouraging for all learners. Texts and exercises coloured with pencils look more familiar or personal to learners and are much easier to work with, than clean texts while revising the material.

Classroom Practices

We could use coloured chalk or pencils to practise pronunciation.

Example:

1. /p/ - put, cap, price
2. /t/ - take, water, great
3. /k/ - cat, maker, back
4. /b/ - bat, cabin, tub
5. /d/ - dog, bird, dry
6. /g/ - gun, begin, bag
7. /tʃ/ - Chair, teacher, church
8. /dʒ/ - jug, geometry, bridge
9. /m/ - man, famous, game
10. /n/ - nose, manner, fan

We could mark stressed syllables in words.

Example: De-mand pre-tend a-llow im-
por-tant pro-mo-tion in-sin-cere

We could mark concrete nouns in one colour and abstract ones in another.

Example: Agent freedom candidate liberty
reporter joy informer death

We could use different colours to identify countable and uncountable nouns, transitive and intransitive verbs and mark different parts of speech.

Countable and Uncountable nouns:

Example: Student, milk, book, rice, table, ice, pen, coffee, man, ink, camera, money.

Transitive and intransitive verbs:

Example:

- He sold his bike.
- He sat in the chair
- They booked a ticket.
- The ship sank suddenly
- Vijay cooked a nice meal.
- I slept very well

Different parts of speech:

Example:

- Delhi is the capital of India.
- He is the principal of the college.
- They wait for the bus daily.
- I can speak the regional language of the place.
- They lived happily.

We also teach semantic categories and word differences by underlining all words in a text connected with a given topic with a coloured pencil. We could mark adjectives, with positive and negative meanings, with different colours and underline synonyms or antonyms of certain words. We could also practise morphology by means of colouring all prefixes and suffixes in a passage and underlining the stems of given words.

The Word Wall Approach

The research work that has been done on vocabulary learning so far has focused on three findings. According to Grabe and Stoller (1997),

vocabulary learning requires multiple exposures to new lexical items in various discourse contexts. Multiple exposures, of varying intensities and in contexts different in nature are said to gradually lead to a large recognition vocabulary. According to the second research, elaborate vocabulary learning occurs when learners make meaningful connections between new and already familiar words. Consequently, students use known words in new contexts and use new words with practical associations. This in turn allows for faster processing of words which are related semantically. According to Stahl, context can be a powerful influence on learners' vocabulary growth. But learning words from context is a long term process. By means of explicit instruction, language teachers can "compress that process so that students can learn more words in a shorter period of time" (Stahl, 1999 p.14).

The Word Wall Approach accommodates the three principles of vocabulary learning mentioned above. The Word Wall provides opportunities for multiple exposures to lexical items. It encourages learners to make connections between new and known words. It can be used in response to meaningful contexts or to build relevant contexts around new words. Equally important, the Word Wall promotes active learner involvement, a key to effective learning in general.

The Word Wall Approach (Green 1993) was originally designed to develop vocabulary learning skills and to internalize new vocabulary items. Green literally surrounded his learners with words using a set of word-filled wall panels, each with a different background colour corresponding to a different curricular objective such as phonic elements, word form classes and grammatical forms and spelling patterns. The ever-present "walls of words" became an integral part of his (Green) classroom.

Benefits of Word-Wall Approach

The walls of words were not used as the only instructional tool for vocabulary development in his classroom. Learners consulted the Word Wall as a Thesaurus and spell-check during writing assignments. They used it as a resource during language development lessons. Specific lessons and competitive games were devised around the Word

Wall to encourage the development of vocabulary learning strategies. They build learners' word power through explicit instruction, implicit learning, multiple exposures and opportunities for making meaningful connections among words. Repetition and recycling are made possible by using the Word Wall approach. The possibility for learners to see, touch, hear, say and write the words, resulted in greater vocabulary retention and an enthusiasm for learning vocabulary.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some of the innovative strategies that can be employed in teaching vocabulary. We understand from the discussion of the Ripple effect method that the meanings of a word are often related. There is always a core meaning with all the other meanings extending from it. Imagination and association are techniques to link the meanings together. Many learners consider learning vocabulary as a tedious job. They come to rely on incidental learning, finding intentional studying boring and inefficient. Teachers develop various mnemonic (aiding the memory) strategies employing action, music, drawing and fantasy. One such strategy is developing vocabulary with the help of colour. The Word Wall approach helps learners build their vocabulary and vocabulary-learning strategies. The versatility of the approach makes it attractive for teachers in a range of instructional settings. In all cases, the Word Wall can assist learners in building their vocabulary, thereby improving their language proficiency and ability to function in the target language.

Dr. B. Anuthama is an Assistant Professor, Department of English, University College of Engineering (A constituent college of Anna University of Technology Chennai), Melpakkam, Tindivanam, Villupuram District, Tamilnadu.

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