



## Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary in the Language Classroom

Dr.G.Chenna Reddy, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University,  
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

Shiny K.P. Department of English, JMJ College for Women (A), Tenali,  
Andhra Pradesh

### **Abstract**

*Learning vocabulary is a very important part of learning a language because it is the words that help the learners to communicate successfully with people within and outside his/her circle. Vocabulary not only supports the four language skills Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, but also mediates between second language learners and content-area classes to understand the text. Therefore, vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides the basis for understanding a text or a talk. This article enlightens the readers and the language teachers and learners to focus on different strategies to teach and learn vocabulary interestingly in the classroom.*

**Key Words:** *Vocabulary learning, Teaching strategies, Language proficiency, academic success*

### **Introduction**

Vocabulary plays a major role in developing the language skills. Research on vocabulary in recent years has focused on the levels of vocabulary learning which learners need to achieve in order to communicate orally and written without any difficulty in their second language. Learning words in any language other than one's mother tongue is a not a day work but lifelong learning and practicing to master the focused language. A number of researchers in second language acquisition are of the opinion that words are gradually learned over a period of time from numerous sources of exposure. This suggests that there are different

aspects and degrees of knowing a word. Nation (1990) proposes a list of different kinds of word knowledge that a person needs to acquire in order to master a word such as the meaning of the word, the written form of the word, the spoken form of the word, the grammatical behaviour of the word, the collocations of the word, the register of the word, the associations of the word, and the frequency of the word. All these aspects of word knowledge are related and essential for a person to communicate with others accurately, fluently and confidently.

Considerable research has recently been conducted into the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching and learning through various activities or tasks.



Lee and Muncie (2006) showed that a post-reading composition task helped the learners to improve the productive use of vocabulary. In order to learn unknown words while reading a text, students can access a dictionary with various look-up options such as pictorial and verbal cues (Laufer & Hill, 2000). With regard to vocabulary retention, Hulstijn (1992) demonstrated that target vocabulary items were retained significantly longer when their meanings were correctly inferred than when explained by their synonyms. Joe (1995) argued that the retention of unfamiliar words was significantly facilitated when students engaged in a text-based task that demanded a higher level of generativity. Newton (1995) pointed out that students made more vocabulary gains when engaging in communicative tasks that demanded interactions than when negotiating word meanings explicitly. Wesche and Paribakht (2000) demonstrated that students learned vocabulary more effectively when they engaged in text-based vocabulary exercises in addition to reading a text than when they read multiple texts without exercises, because in the latter case, they could learn not only target words, but also their lexical features.

The following are some of the vocabulary teaching strategies which can be used by the teachers and learners to acquire vocabulary to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

### **Vocabulary through Reading**

Reading is used as a strategy to promote vocabulary learning. For this purpose, the learners can be given reading materials like stories or a paragraph or news in the News paper and the learners can underline the difficult words and the teacher can help the learners to get the meaning of the words and enable them to use it in real context.

### **Vocabulary through Classroom Interaction**

The language teacher while teaching can interact with the learners posing some questions or asking for the meaning of a particular word. The teacher also can divide the class into groups and interact with one another regarding what they have learned in that particular class. Besides these the teacher can encourage the learners to speak about their interest, likes and dislikes etc. This would help them to increase their vocabulary.

### **Vocabulary through Authentic Materials and Classroom Tasks**

Authentic materials such as advertisement, train time schedule, information on movies, news paper cuttings on weather forecast, paper cuttings based on general knowledge and so on can be used in the classroom to teach vocabulary. Some of the tasks that teachers could exercise in the classroom are;

- ❖ Spelling tasks
- ❖ Word dictation
- ❖ Word completion tasks
- ❖ Word recognition tasks



- ❖ Word quiz
- ❖ Word association tasks
- ❖ Writing five sentences about oneself
- ❖ Narrating a small story or an incident

Apart from these, the language teachers can teach in detail and enable the learner to acquire collocations, idioms, synonyms and antonyms, Word Building processes, Word Association processes, Connotations, Polysemy and Homonymy and developing their skills of Reading, Contextual Guess Work, Drawing Pictures and using Dictionaries.

### **Collocations**

The lexical approach, proposed by Michael Lewis (1993), has emerged as an alternative to grammar based approaches to second language teaching. Its focus is on developing learners' proficiency. This approach gives a special attention to collocations which helps the individual's communicative needs in a particular context.

Learning and acquisition of collocations does not happen to the second language learners without explicit instruction. In the Indian education set up, even at the higher education, little attention is paid to teaching and learning collocations. Hence, teachers should make learners aware of the phenomenon that collocations are an integral part of learning a language. It should be kept in mind that most of the collocations

must be taught or learnt explicitly on the basis of natural and informal conversations. And as it is not impossible to teach all the collocations in a classroom, criteria have to be set up to determine which collocations should be included in the syllabus (for example, acceptable, frequent and useful collocations to the learners). It is suggested that collocations which are non-congruent (which are not similar in meaning or form) should be given particular attention in language teaching. It is also said that less restricted collocations are problematic for the learners.

Classroom procedures should comprise activities that draw learners' concentration to lexical collocations and seek to increase their retention and use of collocations. According to Nadja (2003), it is not enough merely to teach the lexical elements that go together, but it is better to teach entire combinations including prepositions, articles, etc.

In the opinion of Hill (2000), the following procedures are important:

- a) Teaching individual collocations,
- b) Making students aware of collocations,
- c) Extending what students already know by adding knowledge of collocation restrictions to known vocabulary,
- d) And storing collocations through encouraging students to keep a lexical notebook.



Some of the activities to expand learners' acquaintance of collocations include the following:

- ✚ Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the second language.
- ✚ First and second language comparisons and translation carried out chunk-for chunk rather than word-for-word aimed at raising language awareness.
- ✚ Repetition and recycling of activities, such as summarizing a text orally one day and again a few days later to keep words and collocations that have been learned in the classroom.
- ✚ Guessing the meanings of vocabulary from the context.
- ✚ Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations.
- ✚ Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.

### Idioms

A set expression of two or more words that means something other than the literal meanings of its constituent words is called idiom. For example, in

a. She is pulling my leg.

There is an idiom: *to pull someone's leg* means to tease them by telling them something fictitious.

Similarly, in

b. He took me to the cleaners.

the idiom is *to take someone to the cleaners* which means to cause them to lose a lot of money.

In

c. When will you drop them a line?

the idiom *to drop someone a line* means to send a letter.

In

d. You should keep an eye out for that.

*to keep an eye out for something* means to watch for it.

In

a. I can't keep my head above water.

*to keep one's head above water* means to manage a situation.

People use idioms to express subtle shades of meaning or intention. Idioms are used often to replace a literal word or expression. Idioms and idiomatic expressions can be more precise than the literal words, often using less word but saying more. For example, the expression it runs in the family is shorter and more concise than saying that a physical or personality trait is fairly common throughout one's extended family and over a number of generations. (Brenner Gail, 2003).

The study of fixed phrases has a fairly long practice but they are usually seen as outside the normal organizing code of language. Sinclair extends the notion of phraseology to cover a great deal more of language than it is commonly considered to encompass. One might say that all senses of all words exist in and are identified by the sequences of words in which they



typically occur. (Hunston Susan and Francis Gill, 2000)

Idioms are an important cultural element of the language for effective communication and flow of language. Hence, idioms should be taught to the learners to acquire fluency and proficiency in English language. Today a few of the ESL teachers merely go over a list of English idioms and their definitions and explanations. However, to make sure that learners not only understand them, but also learn to use them effectively, the idioms should be presented in simple conversations where their meanings are clear. The teacher can show the learners how some of the idioms are used in the authentic materials like Media, Newspaper and Magazine articles, and in Songs, Cartoons, videos, Advertisements and so on. To develop idioms one can follow some of the activities as given below;

- Select five to eight idioms which may be easily grouped, for example, idioms with time
- Introduce idioms in context, never in isolation
- Students create conversations using idioms
- Practice with games and activities

- Use real life, authentic material

### **Synonyms and antonyms**

Learning synonyms and antonyms helps build vocabulary. Synonym is a word having the same or almost the same meaning as another word in the language. For example, joyful – glad.

Antonym is a word opposite in meaning to another word in the language. For example, fast – slow.

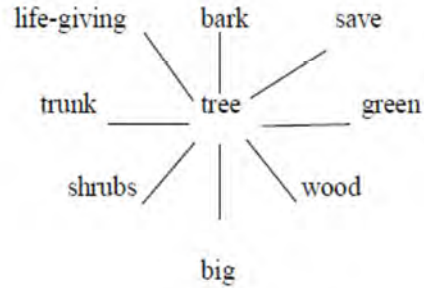
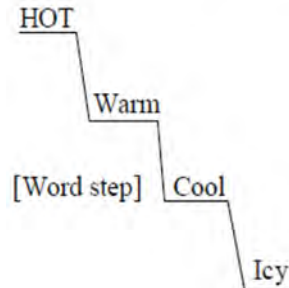
Even beginners learn antonyms when they study adjectives like fast, slow, big, and small at which point they will also probably learn that small and little are similar. One of the important techniques of enhancing vocabulary is to learn synonyms and antonyms together. Synonyms and antonyms could be learned in groups such as Adjectives, Adverbs, and Verbs. The best tools are dictionaries and thesaurus and learning is ensured when natural context is used to teach an item.

### **Word building**

Some of the word building activities are word caterpillar, word webs, word steps, word spikes and so on which can be used in the class. These can be used as warming-up sessions or even winding up sessions of particular lessons.



APPLENTEROTUNDOENGLISHHAPPY...[Word Caterpillar]



[Word-Spike]

### Word association

Word association means "stimulation of an associative pattern by a word" or "the connection and production of other words in answer to a given word. One acquires one's language through word associations. That is, getting mental pictures of concrete and abstract words through senses which are connected with new words. For example, when one hears and see the word "sweet," the words that comes to one's mind is that badam halwa, dudh peda, candy, cake, ice cream and jilabi entirely getting the understanding of the meaning of the word "sweet." Word association is a language game used to learn / expand the students' vocabulary.

The following methods can be followed;

- ❖ The teacher initiates by reading out a key word and selects a student to begin the word association by responding to the word with another key word from the topic which is associated to it.

- ❖ Encouraging the learners to get ready a list of twenty key words/terms relating to the subject being studied.

**Connotations:** A connotation is a subjective cultural or emotional connection that some word or phrase carries, in accumulation to the word's or phrase's explicit or literal meaning, which is its denotation. The minimal unit of denotational meaning is called *sememe* and the minimal unit of connotational meaning is called *pragmeme* and the cover term for these two is *seme* (Prakasam 2004). Pragmeme thus subsumes connotation. *A possible connotation of home is a place of warmth, comfort, and affection.* A connotation is often illustrated as either positive or negative, with regards to its pleasant or unpleasant emotional association. Teaching and learning vocabulary also involves teaching the connotations of a word and its appropriate usage in a real context.

### Polysemy and Homonymy





While teaching vocabulary, the teacher has to bring in the concepts of polysemy and homonymy. Polysemy relates to the multiple meanings of a lexeme. Homographs are commonly spelt different words (lead -Noun, lead -Verb) and Homophones are words that sound alike (see, sea) and Homonyms are words characterized by homographs and homophones (Bill = beak of a bird, bill = statement of charges).

Teaching polysemy facilitates the learners to differentiate between the different meanings of a word with closely related meanings; teaching homonymy make a distinction between the different meanings of a word with dissimilar meanings.

A few more examples for homonyms are given below:

- *bat* (an animal), bat (baseball equipment)
- *bank* (river bank), bank (financial institutions)

A *polyseme* is a word or phrase with multiple meanings.

*For example, man* has four uses while referring to humans

1. The human species (i.e., *man* vs. *animal*)
2. Males of the human species (i.e., *man* vs. *woman*)
3. Adult males of the human species (i.e., *man* vs. *boy*)
4. (Verb) Provide the workers (*manning a factory*)

This example shows the specific polysemy where the same word is used at different levels of a taxonomy. Better examples of polysemy are; eye of a needle, eye of animals; hand of an animal, hand of a clock

It is important to note that many dictionaries find it difficult to set apart homonyms and polysemes and so give them all as separate entries because the cline of related and unrelated meanings is always hazy.

### Drawing Pictures

This is an effective method to build vocabulary. The teacher can divide the class into groups and give each one a list of words. The teacher asks one group to draw the picture on the blackboard with the help of the given words so that the learners in the other groups can guess the words or expressions they are trying to present. This type of method can make the learning interesting.

**Picture Description:** The picture description is an ideal way of practicing English vocabulary in all sorts of fields. And there's also a benefit for everyday life as they are authentic materials taken from real life. The learners can easily learn many new words through describing pictures. For example, looking at a picture of a person, the learner can describe like he is skinny, underweight, slim, fat, plumb, bonny etc... If the learners are finding it difficult to describe the pictures the teachers can help.



**Conclusion :** This article presents various strategies for vocabulary teaching that can be used in the second language classroom according to the learners' proficiency levels. The use of visual representations such as Drawing pictures and Picture descriptions can promote vocabulary retention. Thus, different strategies like Vocabulary through reading, Vocabulary through classroom interaction, Vocabulary through authentic materials and classroom tasks, Collocations, Idioms, Synonyms and antonyms, Word building, Polysemy and homonymy, Connotations and many other authentic materials promote vocabulary learning and make the classroom lively and interesting.

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