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ESSENTIAL PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ENGLISH LEXICOLOGY

Azimbayeva Ranohon Yuldashevna*

*Associate Professor of Foreign Languages,
 Tashkent Financial Institute,
 UZBEKISTAN

ABSTRACT

This article highlights essential problems of teaching English lexicology as well as its specific aspects. Traditionally, the teaching of vocabulary above elementary levels was mostly incidental, limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading or sometimes listening texts. We do not control this process consciously but there seems to be some important clues to consider. First, retention in short-term memory is not effective if the number of chunks of information exceeds seven. We could not talk about vocabulary teaching nowadays without mentioning Lewis, whose controversial, thought-provoking ideas have been shaking the ELT world since its publication.

KEYWORDS: *Oxford Dictionary, Language, Verb, Adjective, And Noun, Concrete, Abstract, And Structural, Lexicalized Grammar, Topic, The Teacher, Multi-Word Verbs, Idioms, Strong And Weak Collocations.*

INTRODUCTION

Learning the words of a foreign language is not an easy business since every word has its form, meaning, and usage and each of these aspects of the word may have its difficulties. Indeed, some words are difficult in form (daughter, busy, bury, woman, women) and easy in usage; other words are easy in form (enter, get, happen) and difficult in usage. Consequently, words may be classified according to the difficulties pupils find in assimilation. In methodology some attempts have been made to approach the problem. The analysis of the words within the foreign language allows us to distinguish the following groups of words: concrete, abstract, and structural.

Words denoting concrete things (book, street, sky), actions (walk, dance, read), and qualities (long, big, good) are easier to learn than words denoting abstract notions (world, home, believe, promise, honest). Structural words are the most difficult for Russian-speaking pupils.

In teaching pupils a foreign language the teacher should bear this in mind when preparing for the vocabulary work during the lesson.

Advanced learners can generally communicate well, having learnt all the basic structures of the language. However, they need to broaden their vocabulary to express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wide range of situations. Students might even have a receptive knowledge of a wider range of vocabulary, which means they can recognize the item and recognize its meaning. Nevertheless, their productive use of a wide range of vocabulary is normally limited, and this is one of the areas that need greater attention. At this stage we are concerned not only with students understanding the meaning of words, but also being able to use them appropriately, taking into account factors such as oral / written use of the language; degree of formality, style and others. Traditionally, the teaching of vocabulary above elementary levels was mostly incidental, limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading or sometimes listening texts. This indirect teaching of vocabulary assumes that vocabulary expansion will happen through the practice of other language skills, which has been proved not enough to ensure vocabulary expansion. Nowadays it is widely accepted that vocabulary teaching should be part of the syllabus, and taught in a well-planned and regular basis. Some authors, led by Lewis (1993) argue that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching, because 'language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalized grammar.' There are several aspects of lexis that need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary.¹

Boundaries between conceptual meanings: knowing not only what lexis refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (e.g. cup, mug, and bowl).

- Polysemy: distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form with several and closely related meanings (head: of a person, of a pin, of an organization).
- Homonymy: distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form which has several meanings which are NOT closely related (e.g. a file: used to put papers in or a tool).
- Homophony: understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g. flour, flower).
- Synonymy: distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g. extends, increase, expand).
- Affective meaning: distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors (denotation and connotation), which depend on the speakers attitude or the situation. Socio-cultural associations of lexical items is another important factor.
- Style, register, dialect: Being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.
- Translation: awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g. false cognates).
- Chunks of language: multi-word verbs, idioms, strong and weak collocations, lexical phrases.

- Grammar of vocabulary: learning the rules that enable students to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word (e.g. sleep, slept, sleeping; able, unable; disability).
- Pronunciation: ability to recognize and reproduce items in speech.

The implication of the aspects just mentioned in teaching is that the goals of vocabulary teaching must be more than simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. We must use teaching techniques that can help realize this global concept of what it means to know a lexical item. And we must also go beyond that, giving learner opportunities to use the items learnt and also helping them to use effective written storage systems. Understanding how our memory works might help us create more effective ways to teach vocabulary. Research in the area, cited by Gairn's offers us some insights into this process. It seems that learning new items involve storing them first in our short-term memory, and afterwards in long-term memory. We do not control this process consciously but there seems to be some important clues to consider. First, retention in short-term memory is not effective if the number of chunks of information exceeds seven. Therefore, this suggests that in a given class we should not aim at teaching more than this number. However, our long-term memory can hold any amount of information. Research also suggests that our 'mental lexicon' is highly organized and efficient, and that semantic related items are stored together. Word frequency is another factor that affects storage, as the most frequently used items are easier to retrieve. We can use this information to attempt to facilitate the learning process, by grouping items of vocabulary in semantic fields, such as topics (e.g. types of fruit).

Oxford dictionary suggests memory strategies to aid learning, and these can be divided into:

- creating mental linkages: grouping, associating, placing new words into a context;
- applying images and sounds: using imagery, semantic mapping, using keywords and representing sounds in memory;
- reviewing well, in a structured way;
- employing action: physical response or sensation, using mechanical techniques.

The techniques just mentioned can be used to greater advantage if we can diagnose learning style preferences (visual, aural, kinesthetic, tactile) and make students aware of different memory strategies. Meaningful tasks however seem to offer the best answer to vocabulary learning, as they rely on students' experiences and reality to facilitate learning. More meaningful tasks also require learners to analyze and process language more deeply, which should help them retain information in long-term memory. Forgetting seems to be an inevitable process, unless learners regularly use items they have learnt. Therefore, recycling is vital, and ideally it should happen one or two days after the initial input. After that, weekly or monthly tests can check on previously taught items. The way students store the items learned can also contribute to their success or failure in retrieving them when needed. Most learners simply list the items learnt in chronological order, indicating meaning with translation. This system is far from helpful, as items are de-contextualized, encouraging students to over generalize usage of them. It does not allow for additions and refinements nor indicates pronunciation. Teachers can encourage

learners to use other methods, using topics and categories to organize a notebook, binder or index cards. Meaning should be stored using English as much as possible, and also giving indication for pronunciation. Diagrams and word trees can also be used within this topic/categories organization. The class as a whole can keep a vocabulary box with cards, which can be used for revision/recycling regularly. Organizing this kind of storage system is time-consuming and might not appeal to every learner. Therefore adapting their chronological lists to include headings for topics and a more complete definition of meaning would already be a step forward. In my opinion the most important aspect of vocabulary teaching for advanced learners is to foster learner independence so that learners will be able to deal with new lexis and expand their vocabulary beyond the end of the course. Therefore guided discovery, contextual guesswork and using dictionaries should be the main ways to deal with discovering meaning. Guided discovery involve asking questions or offering examples that guide students to guess meanings correctly. In this way learners get involved in a process of semantic processing that helps learning and retention. Contextual guesswork means making use of the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning, or in some cases, guess from the word itself, as in words of Latin origin. Knowledge of word formation, e.g. prefixes and suffixes, can also help guide students to discover meaning. Teachers can help students with specific techniques and practice in contextual guesswork, for example, the understanding of discourse markers and identifying the function of the word in the sentence (e.g. verb, adjective, and noun). The latter is also very useful when using dictionaries.

Students should start using EFL dictionaries as early as possible, from Intermediate upwards. With adequate training, dictionaries are an invaluable tool for learners, giving them independence from the teacher. As well as understanding meaning, students are able to check pronunciation, the grammar of the word (e.g. verb patterns, verb forms, plurality, comparatives, etc.), different spelling (American versus British), style and register, as well as examples that illustrate usage.

Another strategy for advanced learners is to turn their receptive vocabulary items into productive ones. In order to do that, we need to refine their understanding of the item, exploring boundaries between conceptual meaning, polysemy, synonymy, style, register, possible collocations, etc., so that students are able to use the item accurately. We must take into account that a lexical item is most likely to be learned when a learner feels a personal need to know it, or when there is a need to express something to accomplish the learner's own purposes. Therefore, it means that the decision to incorporate a word in ones productive vocabulary is entirely personal and varies according to each student's motivation and needs. Logically, production will depend on motivation, and this is what teachers should aim at promoting, based on their awareness of students needs and preferences. Task-based learning should help teachers to provide authentic, meaningful tasks in which students engage to achieve a concrete output, using appropriate language for the context. We could not talk about vocabulary teaching nowadays without mentioning Lewis, whose controversial, thought-provoking ideas have been shaking the ELT world since its publication. We do not intend to offer a complete review of his work, but rather mention some of his contributions that in our opinion can be readily used in the classroom.

His most important contribution was to highlight the importance of vocabulary as being basic to communication. We do agree that if learners do not recognize the meaning of keywords they will

be unable to participate in the conversation, even if they know the morphology and syntax. On the other hand, we believe that grammar is equally important in teaching, and therefore in our opinion, it is not the case to substitute grammar teaching with vocabulary teaching, but that both should be present in teaching a foreign language.

Lewis himself insists that his lexical approach is not simply a shift of emphasis from grammar to vocabulary teaching, as 'language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks'. Chunks include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and according to him, occupy a crucial role in facilitating language production, being the key to fluency.

An explanation for native speakers' fluency is that vocabulary is not stored only as individual words, but also as parts of phrases and larger chunks, which can be retrieved from memory as a whole, reducing processing difficulties. On the other hand, learners who only learn individual words will need a lot more time and effort to express themselves.

Consequently, it is essential to make students aware of chunks, giving them opportunities to identify, organize and record these. Identifying chunks is not always easy, and at least in the beginning, students need a lot of guidance.

Hill explains that most learners with 'good vocabularies' have problems with fluency because their 'collocational competence' is very limited, and that, especially from Intermediate level, we should aim at increasing their collocational competence with the vocabulary they have already got. For Advance learners he also suggests building on what they already know, using better strategies and increasing the number of items they meet outside the classroom.

The idea of what it is to 'know' a word is also enriched with the collocational component. According to Lewis 'being able to use a word involves mastering its collocational range and restrictions on that range'. I can say that using all the opportunities to teach chunks rather than isolated words is a feasible idea that has been working well in my classes, and which is fortunately coming up in new course books we are using. However, both teachers and learners need awareness raising activities to be able to identify multi-word chunks.

Apart from identifying chunks, it is important to establish clear ways of organizing and recording vocabulary. According to Lewis, 'language should be recorded together which characteristically occurs together', which means not in a linear, alphabetical order, but in collocation tables, mind-maps, word trees, for example. He also suggests the recording of whole sentences, to help contextualization, and that storage of items is highly personal, depending on each student's needs.

We have already mentioned the use of dictionaries as a way to discover meaning and foster learner independence. Lewis extends the use of dictionaries to focus on word grammar and collocation range, although most dictionaries are rather limited in these.

Lewis also defends the use of 'real' or 'authentic' material from the early stages of learning, because 'acquisition is facilitated by material which is only partly understood'. Although he does not supply evidence for this, I agree that students need to be given tasks they can accomplish without understanding everything from a given text, because this is what they will need as users

of the language. He also suggests that it is better to work intensively with short extracts of authentic material, so they are not too daunting for students and can be explored for collocations.

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