TEACHING AND LEARNING VOCABULARY

REASONS FOR TEACHING VOCABULARY

There are four major skills in learning: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is said that one of the fundamental knowledge to master all those skills is the knowledge of vocabulary, which is indispensable in order to communicate.

From the methodological point of view, vocabulary is one of the three components of language—the remaining two are pronunciation and grammar. The term vocabulary can be defined as word and phrases that are taught in the foreign language.

Despite the fact that the teaching/learning the vocabulary is consider to be very important, it was neglected for a long time. It can be said that it was because of fact that till the end of the 20th century educationalists stressed the importance of grammar and pronunciation accuracy. Virginia French Allen infers that there are a few causes of such situation. Firstly, between 1940-1970 teachers paid little attention on teaching vocabulary because it had been emphasized too much in the classroom during the years before that period. Moreover, some methodologists believed that adequate meaning could be learnt and thought only through experience. What is more, there was a theory according to which students would make mistakes in a sentence construction if too many words were learnt before mastering the grammar. Therefore, the majority of teachers concentrated on teaching grammatical structures neglecting vocabulary.

It was not until the 1960s that the role of vocabulary in acquiring the second language was appreciated and nowadays teaching/learning vocabulary is a crucial part of second language acquisition.

The main purpose of teaching/learning vocabulary is the necessity to communicate. Marianne Celce-Murcia suggests that increasement in the amount of students' vocabulary will increase students' facility in communication. Komorowska adds that limited vocabulary is the main and common cause for the interruption and misunderstanding in communication.

Therefore, the ability to transmit the message depends primary on the range of vocabulary that the speaker possesses. Hence, difficulties in language use result from an inadequate vocabulary.

Moreover, both students and teachers value the presence of vocabulary section during language lessons. Allen discerns that there is no need to delay the vocabulary until the grammar is mastered. “There is no conflict between developing a firm command of grammar and learning the most essential words.” What is more, class organization has a very important part in acquiring second language. Lewis determines that:

if students with limited time available for study are to learn high-priority lexis, this needs to be deliberately selected and incorporated into learning materials or activities. If this is not done, students will not be exposed even once to numerous important vocabulary items, and they will finish their course with serious gaps in their knowledge.

CRITERIA FOR VOCABULARY SELECTION

Redman and Gairns stipulate five factors which determine the language usefulness. The first factor is the frequency. According to Nations, one way of checking the frequency of words is done by ‘making a list of the words in the particular text or a group of

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texts and counting how often and where they occur.” In this way, it can be determined which words are valuable and should be paid attention to, and which are infrequent and can be neglected. Linguists elaborated the list of about 2000 to 5000 words of the most frequent used words. To pass the Cambridge First Certificate Exam, for instance, knowledge of 4,500 words is required. Such list can be very beneficial both to teachers as well as to students who prepare to FCE exam. However, there is a problem considering some word because some of them are unreliable. It is mainly due to the fact that students do not have to possess productive knowledge of all vocabulary items. It is said that it is sufficient enough if students recognize the word. Also it should be stressed that although some words are not listed, they are, in certain context, very often used. For instance, the word adaptable is unlisted, whereas is very useful during a foreign holiday. Therefore, teachers must be aware that infrequent word can sometimes be in a crucial importance.

The next criterion are cultural factors. It should be stressed that while teaching second language teacher should not neglect teaching culture of a given language. Those language items connected with culture are usually significant only for certain counties. Redman gives an example of word 'sleet' which expresses phenomenon common in England but very unusual in Brazil. Thus, teachers should not only teach words which appear in word-counts but also vocabulary connected with a culture of a particular country, such as 'referenda' in Switzerland, 'mango' and 'cockroach' in Scandinavia. (Gairns and Redman)

Moreover, choosing the vocabulary items and levels of students should be taken into concern while teaching second language. It is mainly because students participated in English courses have different language expectations: some require English in their business contacts, other need English for holiday. What is more, the level of students is also crucial. Students at the advanced and elementary levels will need completely various range of vocabulary. That is why placement tests enable to determine the level of a student and place him/her in an appropriate group.

Another factor in the language usefulness is the expediency. The term includes vocabulary that is used in instructions. Gairns and Redman discern that ‘without [those words] the students will fail to understand their teacher, fellow students, or the activity.” The term refers to grammatical terminology, activity instructions and vocabulary that students

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need to ask questions and obtain information. Gairns and Redman \textsuperscript{10} indicate that the lack of knowledge of these basic phrases can lead students to frustration. They stipulate that students should be introduced to these vocabulary items during the first lesson of the course.

Another crucial criteria is the amount of items that should be taught during a single session. Lewis and Hill \textsuperscript{11} classify two kind of vocabulary. The first one is called productive vocabulary ‘which the learner can recall and use appropriately in speech and writing”. The second, receptive vocabulary, means ‘language items which can be recognized and comprehended in the context of reading and listening material.” Depending on the kind of vocabulary, the amount of words change. It is contended that the average number of productive vocabulary varies between 8 items, for elementary students, to 12, for advanced level.
