

# Teaching English Vocabulary

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## Abstract

This article claims that teaching vocabulary is a very important field, and it is more than just presenting and introducing new vocabulary to the learners. Knowing words is not filling papers with new words and memorizing them. The article suggests that what students need to understand is the word meaning in context and how words are used. This can be achieved, according to the article, through correct vocabulary instruction which should involve vocabulary selection, word knowledge and techniques. The article presents and describes these concepts and provides examples and techniques that illustrate how teachers can handle vocabulary teaching in an effective way.

Teaching English vocabulary is an important area worthy of effort and investigation. Recently methodologists and linguists emphasize and recommend teaching vocabulary because of its importance in language teaching. Vocabulary is needed for expressing meaning and in using the receptive (listening and reading) and the productive (speaking and writing) skills. "If language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh" (Harmer ١٥٣).

Vocabulary is not a syllabus, i.e., a list of words that teachers prepare for their learners to memorize and learn by heart. Memorizing may be good and useful as a temporary technique for tests, but not for learning a foreign language. Language students need to learn vocabulary of the target language in another way. If we are really to teach students what words mean and how they are used, we need to show them being used together in context. Words do not just exist on their own; they live together and they depend upon each other. Therefore, teaching vocabulary correctly is a very important element in language learning. Correct vocabulary instruction involves vocabulary **selection**, word **knowledge** and **techniques**.

In the past, teachers used to select and present vocabulary from concrete to abstract. Words like 'door', 'window', 'desk', etc., which are concrete, used to be taught at beginning levels. However, words like 'honesty', 'beauty' etc., which are abstract words, used to be taught at advanced levels

because they are not “physically represented” in the learning/teaching environment and are very difficult to explain.

Nowadays methodologists and linguists suggest that teachers can decide and select the words to be taught on the basis of how frequently they are used by speakers of the language. That is, the most commonly used words should be taught first (Harmer ١٥٤).

We can get information about which words will be most useful for learners of English by looking at frequency counts of vocabulary. Usually a vocabulary count is done by making a list of the words in a particular text or group of texts and counting how often and where they occur. Some of the more recent counts have used computers to list the words and count their frequency (Nation ١٨).

Besides that, teachers can decide which words are useful and should be taught to their learners on the basis of semantics. This means, that the word is more useful if it covers more things than if it only has one very specific meaning. For example, the word ‘book’, which is taught at beginning levels, has wider usage than the words ‘notebook’, ‘textbook’, etc. Furthermore, Nation says that frequency and coverage are not enough to be used when teachers select and prepare a word list for learners of English. So he suggests other criteria, such as language needs, availability and familiarity, regularity and ease of learning or learning burden.

Teachers can help their learners enrich and increase their vocabulary. They can also help the learners to build a new store of words to select from when they want to express themselves. If any learner can handle grammar correctly, that does not mean that he can express himself fluently unless he has a store of words to select from. Therefore, teachers are a very important factor in selecting and teaching English vocabulary, and they have to design vocabulary syllabi according to their learners’ needs. As a result, “(Teachers’) vocabulary work can be directed toward useful words and can give learners practice in useful skills” (Nation ١).

The selection of words which are to be taught to the students is a very important procedure in the language learning process. However, the word

selection process doesn't mean that the students will be fluent in expressing themselves in English upon learning that list, i.e., what students need to know regarding vocabulary is the word **meaning**, the word **use**, the word **formation** and the word **grammar**.

When conveying the meaning to the students, teachers should teach their students that a word may have more than one meaning when used in different contexts. For example, the word "book" has at least twelve different meanings when used in context. It has eight meanings as a noun, two meanings as a verb and three different meanings when used with prepositions as phrasal verbs. One may say "I booked my ticket three days ago"; another "I booked him for speeding" and so on (Harmer ١٥٦). Teachers should make the teaching learning vocabulary process clear and easy for their students when conveying any meaning; otherwise the student may feel bored and become fed up with learning vocabulary.

The meaning of words can be communicated in many different ways. Nation suggests that teachers can convey meaning to their students by **demonstration** or **pictures** (using an object, using a cut out figure, using gesture, performing an action, photographs, blackboard drawings or diagrams and pictures from books) and by **verbal explanation** (analytical definition, putting the new word in a defining context, and translating into another language) (Nation ٥١). Besides that, teachers should involve their students in discovering the words' meanings by themselves and let them make efforts to understand words' meanings. When the students are involved in discovering meaning, they will never forget those meanings and they will be able to express themselves fluently.

When a single word has various meanings, the teacher should decide which meanings are to be taught first, i.e., the teacher must decide which meanings occur most frequently and which meanings the learners need most. As a result, the students will be motivated, and gradually they will build their own store of words which will be a basis for communication at any time.

Furthermore, students should be familiar with the words' meanings when words are used in metaphors and idioms, and they should know when to choose the right word for the right place. "We know that the word 'hiss',

for example, describes the noise that snakes make. But we stretch its meaning to describe the way people talk to each other (“Don’t move or you’re dead,” she hissed.). That is metaphorical use” (Harmer ١٥٧). Students also need to know the different forms words have and when to use them. Thus the verb ‘run’ has the participle ‘running’ and ‘run’. The present participle ‘running’ can be used as an adjective and ‘run’ can also be a noun. Therefore, word formation is a very important part in teaching vocabulary. Getting familiar with the different forms of words, the students can easily know how to use the words in writing and speaking.

Moreover, word grammar is one of the most important parts that students should be taught carefully. Teachers should give the students the opportunity to be exposed to grammatical patterns and to practice them frequently, such as nouns (countable and uncountable), verb complementation, phrasal verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Therefore, “different parts of speech should usually be taught separately because they occur in differing sentence pattern, but they need not be widely separated in a course if their meanings are very similar” (Nation ٥٧).

Teaching vocabulary is not just conveying the meaning to the students and asking them to learn those words by heart. If teachers believe that the words are worth explaining and learning, then it is important that they should do this efficiently. Teachers should use different techniques and activities in teaching English vocabulary to motivate the learners, enrich their vocabulary and enable them to speak English properly.

There are many techniques and activities that teachers can employ and use in teaching vocabulary, such as presentation, discovery techniques and practice. We will look at the “**C’s approach (conveying meaning, checking understanding, and consolidation)**, which Celce-Murcia recommends every teacher to follow when using the above mentioned techniques. “In stage ١ (conveying meaning), the items are presented to the students. In stage ٢ (checking for comprehension) exercises test how far the students have grasped the meaning of the items. In stage ٣ (consolidation), students deepen their understanding of the items through use and creative problem-solving activities” (Celce-Murcia ٣٠١).

The conveying meaning stage, to present new vocabulary to the learners, can be done in many ways, so that the learners can understand and grasp the words' meanings. At the beginning levels, teachers can convey meanings by bringing 'realia' into the classroom, i.e., teachers can bring the objects themselves to the classroom and show them to the learners, such as 'pens', 'rulers', 'balls'. However, when that is impossible (to bring the object to the classroom, such as 'cars', 'animals'), teachers can show their students pictures of those items. Besides that, teachers can use mime, action and gesture to convey meaning. Concepts like running, walking, or smoking are easy to present in this way. At the advanced levels, teachers can convey meaning by using the techniques of word relations, (synonyms or antonyms) definitions, explanations, examples, anecdotes, contexts and word roots and affixes. Here is an example which may help you understand what some of the above mentioned techniques mean. "If the teacher is explaining the item "a guided tour", s/he may ask the class to imagine a museum or an art gallery in which there is a group of people listening to a man explaining a picture. The man goes from this picture to the next picture and the people follow him. The teacher explains that the man is called a guide and the group is on a guided tour. If this is not clear, the teacher can illustrate with another example, perhaps of a guided tour of a city" (Celce-Murcia ٢٠٢). So, all of the above mentioned techniques are very useful for teaching new lexical items. They can help the teacher to make his lesson interesting and useful. Using these ways, the teacher can motivate his students and get them involved in the teaching learning process.

After the stage of conveying meaning, the teacher should check the learners' understanding, i.e., the teacher can prepare different kinds of exercises to check the students' vocabulary comprehension. Celce-Murcia suggests different kinds of activities for checking the students' understanding, such as fill-in-the-blank, making pairs and sorting exercises. In the fill-in-the-blank activity, the teacher gives the students either sentences or short passages with missing words, then the students have to consider the context of the sentences to work out the probable missing words. In the matching pairs activities, the students may be asked to pair up verbs with appropriate nouns, mini dialogues, definitions, idioms or funny

definitions. Let's take the following activity of matching up a verb (A words) with an appropriate noun (B words) as an example:

**A words (verbs)**

- ١- answer
- ٢- blow
- ٣- build
- ٤- cook
- ٥- draw
- ٦- drive
- ٧- faster
- ٨- read
- ٩- sing
- ١٠- switch on

**B words (nouns)**

- a- a house
- b- a picture
- c- the phone
- d- a meal
- e- a song
- f- the television
- g- a seatbelt
- h- a car
- i- your nose
- j- a magazine

In the above activity the students are asked to match up verb with an appropriate noun. While the students are working individually or in groups, the teacher can check their understanding by going round the class from group or group.

If teachers want to make sure that their students can use the word properly and can express themselves fluently, they should go to the last stage, which is consolidation. Implementing this stage, the teachers can ask their pupils to handle problem-solving tasks, values clarification, writing a story or dialogue, discussions and role-play.

Finally, I would like to say that teaching vocabulary is one of the most important and difficult fields in the teaching process. Teachers should learn how to handle this field properly and let their learners handle words and be involved with them. When teachers select the words to be taught to their learners, they should be aware of the vocabulary their learners need. In this way, students can use words effectively. If we, the English teachers, let our students be exposed to the vocabulary they need, and if we give them the chance to practice them, then they will remember some or all of them. Furthermore, when teachers decide to teach any meaning of any word, they should touch on word use, word formation and word grammar. Teachers should also know that teaching vocabulary is not just conveying the

meaning to the students and asking them to learn those words by heart. Teachers should check their students' understanding by giving them encouraging exercises, such as the one mentioned in this essay. As a result, teachers will be satisfied by employing the above mentioned techniques, and their students will be as well. Those techniques will give the students the opportunity to become independent and will allow them to activate their previous knowledge in working with words by themselves. In addition, they will feel more confident when trying to express themselves in English, because they have already grasped a lot of vocabulary as a result of being taught by the above mentioned techniques and ways. All of the discussion above can be summed up by Underhill's words "... engaging the learner ... is essential to any activity that is to have a high learning yield" (Underhill in Harmer ١٦٠).

#### تعليم المفردات الإنجليزية

يرى المقال أن تعليم المفردات يعتبر مجالاً هاماً جداً وأنه أكثر من مجرد عرض وتقديم مفردات جديدة للمتعلم، كما أن معرفة الكلمات لا يعني تعبئة الأوراق بكلمات جديدة وحفظها. وما يحتاج الطلاب فهمه هو فهم الكلمة من خلال النص وكيفية استعمالها. حسب المقال فإنه بالإمكان الحصول على ذلك من خلال تعليم صحيح للمفردات والذي يجب أن يشمل اختبار المفردات، معرفة الكلمات والمهارات. إن المقال يعرض ويصف هذه المفاهيم ويزود الأمثلة والمهارات التي تبين كيف يمكن للمعلم أن يتعامل مع المفردات ويعلمها بشكل ناجح.

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