

Vocabulary Development Strategies for the L2 Classroom

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Abstract

This paper presents some important considerations in word instruction and learning for the English Language Learner (ELL). Specific strategies and techniques are provided for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to assist others to apply in home and classroom situations. The two broad areas of direct, sequential instruction and incidental learning of vocabulary through contextual experiences are discussed and word list sources are presented of high utility English words. The key throughout instruction is for the ESL/EFL teacher to be *word-conscious* or word mindful of the power of vocabulary to enrich thinking and understanding. Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as one of the best predictors of reading comprehension and fluency while facilitating the learning of a second language (L2). Specific techniques such as the use of concept maps, word webs, and word sorts are presented to help students learn content-specific, academic vocabulary.

Keywords: Vocabulary development; L2; EFL/ESL instruction; academic vocabulary; word-conscious teaching; modeling

Introduction

In the EFL/ESL world, there are commonly-held assumptions among teachers that vocabulary acquisition is a challenging task for ELLs. Yet, the same challenge holds true for teachers of monolingual students. Vocabulary is the amount of words any one person can use and understand in a language. When a new meaning for a word is learned, the meaning becomes connected to a person's knowledge base, can increase the person's ability to speak or write in a more sophisticated way, and can help the person understand a new topic at a deeper level (Adams, 2009; Blackowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2008; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). For instance, the ELL student may fully understand and use the word *walk*, but when the word *saunter* is encountered in a reading and the EFL teacher demonstrates and models the meaning of *saunter*, the ELL student has become enriched in understanding and can display a deeper way to express meaning when speaking or writing. This paper presents ways for the EFL/ESL teacher to be "word-conscious," meaning a teacher who understands the importance of enhancing vocabulary acquisition and uses strategies to achieve such acquisition in both the oral and written language systems (Lane & Allen, 2010).

Vocabulary, as presented in this paper, refers to word meaning knowledge and the ability to both understand and use words appropriately in the four language systems of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Development in vocabulary understanding also includes comprehension extensions when a known word is used differently in another context, such as when the known word "nose," is associated with a human being's face, is heard in the meaning "to nose around" (i.e. to explore, investigate). Thus to communicate effectively while attending to new word meanings encountered in new topics or concepts, ELLs respond to receptive vocabulary (words understood when listening or reading) or expressive/ productive vocabulary (words used during speaking and writing). A general agreement exists among educators, especially those who monitor and teach young children, that receptive listening vocabulary is the most extensive of all vocabularies, in that one recognizes more words in the spoken language than one can produce (Kamil, 2004). However, this belief may be tempered by an older L2 student who can read in his/her native language and is learning the new language through instructional use of the printed language system. Such a learner then transfers the learning of new words, phrases, and sentences to the L2 oral language system, often resulting in mispronunciations, but allowing the L2 learner to predictably recognize advanced, sophisticated words in the receptive language system. In this paper, the L2 student refers to those whose first, home-based language was not English (Ferris, 2012).

Important Considerations for Word Instruction and Learning

For the EFL/ELL teacher, there are two important considerations to realize during L2 vocabulary acquisition instruction. The first regards the L2 learners themselves; who they are and their level of oral L1 language proficiency. Children who come from households of low socioeconomic status (SES) generally have limited oral vocabulary knowledge. Research conducted with English-speaking children has indicated that children raised in lower-SES conditions develop language skills and word understandings more slowly than children raised in high income families (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). The most essential aspect for the development of vocabulary during the early years appears to be the quality of conversation children experience as they grow up in their homes and communities and interact with family members and others. Thus, the teacher needs to realize that for some learners word understanding during L2 instruction may not connect with a word meaning in the first language.

Secondly, words themselves may be divided into two broad categories- function words and content words. Function words, generally the high-frequency words of a language, are articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and pronouns which allow sentences to be meaningfully composed in the oral and spoken languages. Facility with function words needs to occur early in language learning so that talk can occur and sentences can be composed. Different from function words are the vast amount of content words of a language, and these words are what many consider to be “vocabulary.” Content words are meaning-bearing words which name, label, or describe an action. EFL/ELL teachers would recognize these words as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and many adverbs.

The teacher may wish to consult and use published word lists and word counts that would assist them in noting frequency of usage in the English language. The General Service List of English Words (West, 1953), with a corpus of roughly 2000 words, contains highly frequent words repeated throughout the oral and written languages. Dale and O’Rourke’s (1981) Living Word Vocabulary matched the grade levels at which monolingual English students knew the meanings of 44,000 words. Thus, this list would assist the EFL/ESL teacher with words that English-speaking children would predicably encounter at particular grade levels and that ELLs would face in more advanced reading materials. The Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) is a compilation of 570 word families that appear across four academic disciplines and whose familiarity would assist ELLs when reading academic texts. More recently, Lane and Allen (2010) have provided three lists of sophisticated words which can be used by teachers in classroom contexts. One list pertains to words used during daily routines, such as *dispense*, *pause*, and *elaborate*; another list with classroom performance and behavior, such as *considerate*, *rectify*, and *invalid*; and the third, with words related to specific content topics, such as *flourish*, *remote*, and *dominant*. The teacher may also wish to use Word Count (<http://www.wordcount.org/main.php>) which ranks the frequency use of words in the English language from a pool of 86,800 words. For instance, the English preposition *by* has a frequency rating of 19 while the vocabulary word *feasible* has a rating of 8,030. The teacher may find it more useful to focus students’ learning on more frequently appearing English words than those which are used and appear less frequently, such as teaching the meaning of *coax* before *cajole* (40,751).

A more recent viewpoint of how words could be categorized in the English language is by levels or tiers, based on the work of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002). Tier one words, incorporating the words of function, are those words that speakers often use in the spoken language, are frequently and necessarily found in reading materials, and whose meanings are generally known. Tier two and three words are, once again, what many consider to be “vocabulary,” but there is a distinction between the two levels. Tier two words are found in more advanced reading materials, are used by more mature speakers in the oral language, and, most important, have high utility and visibility across topics and disciplines. For instance, the words *perform*, *maintain*, and *diverse* could appear in readings of a literacy, science, or social studies text. Tier three words are generally specific to a content topic and, as such, appear less frequently in the oral and written languages. So such words such as *isotope*, *chlorophyll*, and *ecosystem* would be used and read as they are encountered during a specific topic. However, the distinctions between tier two and three words can sometimes be narrow. For instance, during the topic learning of deserts, the student might face words such as *barren*, *arid*, *unfertile*, *parched*, and *inhabitants*. While in the context of the topic instruction the words might be considered to be at the tier three level, the words meanings are quite transferable during other oral and written

language situations. The tier two and three word concepts are becoming somewhat collapsed in an even more recent notion of “Academic Vocabulary” (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). This is the vocabulary students need to increasingly build as they advance in school so that they can access and understand more and more complex texts.

Thus, when considering which vocabulary to teach, the teacher needs to recognize and evaluate the language background, range of life experiences, and written literacy levels of the students in any one instructional setting. This is not an easy task. A general rule would be to focus on words that have high meaning utility and frequency in the English language, so that when these words are used in other contexts, students are assisted with understanding and production. This concept was followed by the second author as he prepared to offer new vocabulary to hundreds of inner-city low socio-economic status students of whom 30 percent were second language learners of English. From informational books dealing with the topic of conserving earth’s resources, teachers in a summer program were asked to focus on words such as *erode*, *obligation*, *fragile*, *adjourn*, and *unique* since such words would predictably be found in readings offered in school subjects and used orally by their teachers

How Students Learn Vocabulary

There are two broad views of how children learn new vocabulary in school settings. Biemiller (2001) recommended that vocabulary should be taught and enforced at an early age followed by direct and sequential instructional approaches. He believed that most children (90 percent of them) can acquire new vocabulary to reach grade level standards if given the opportunity to use new words through adequate instruction. In his study he found evidence that suggests vocabulary is acquired in basically the same order by most children and that the majority of new word meanings, especially during the younger years, are learned through explanation and exposure by others. Therefore, he strongly recommended employing a teacher-directed and curriculum-directed approach to promote vocabulary and language growth. Such an approach may be achieved by the EFL/ESL teacher by examining the published word lists and word counts mentioned earlier in this paper and relating, these high utility, high frequency words with vocabulary that will be introduced in forthcoming readings and course topic discussions.

In their book, *Teaching Word Meanings* (Stahl & Nagy, 2006) numerous teaching ideas and research findings about vocabulary instruction are offered. The book brings to the forefront how critical vocabulary attention and instruction is for students. They found that vocabulary size is related to comprehension and conceptual understanding and confirmed that vocabulary understanding is the main predictor of reading ability as well as overall academic achievement. Additionally, they found that students can add approximately 2,000 to 3,000 words a year to their vocabulary understandings. Students who read more, have the opportunity to learn more words; and those who know more words can predictably understand text better. If a textual reading is enjoyed, then they continue reading more. Stahl and Nagy (2006) named it the circular relationship between reading, comprehension, and vocabulary. Reading will increase vocabulary; and growth in vocabulary will increase comprehension and reading amount. Therefore, incidental learning of vocabulary from context can contribute a large amount of a student’s vocabulary growth.

Not only has vocabulary knowledge been identified as one of the best predictors of reading comprehension and of reading fluency, but also as a means of enhancing second language acquisition. Hence many vocabulary practices have been recommended for teachers to

apply in their classrooms: such as modeling sophisticated vocabulary use, avoiding temptation to “Dumb Down” their language of instruction, and to be a word-conscious teacher (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Scott & Nagy, 2004). In addition, there are five other practices recommended such as identifying words for instruction, considering the type of word learning required, identifying appropriate strategies, having a plan, and infusing words into the classroom.

Strategies for the L2 learner

Many strategies can be used to foster the acquisition of new vocabulary words. The majority of these strategies call for a rich classroom environment in which words are visually displayed. One of these strategies is “modeling sophisticated word use” during class instruction. This concept was introduced by Mrs. Baker (pseudonym for Kindergarten teacher), who tended to follow certain routines during classroom instruction. At the end her kindergarten children were all able to comfortably use words that were beyond their grade levels. Consequently, their advanced vocabulary will serve them well as they begin to read (Lane & Allen, 2010).

Sinatra (2008) called this natural word building activity “talking up vocabulary.” Talk takes place between adults and children/students in natural ways and in natural contexts as young people are engaged in activities. “Talking up vocabulary” means replacing a more sophisticated word with a known word during instruction and then modeling and having learners practice with the new word in some meaningful way. For instance, with his young grandson instead of saying “Let’s *play* with your toys” on subsequent days he said, “Let’s make a *display* with your toys” and then, “Let’s make an *arrangement* with your toys.” As the toy arranging was proceeding he said “I like the way you *connected* ‘this to that’ and ‘why did you *arrange*’ this to that. Finally over days of conversation and toy arranging comes the child utterance, “Look grandpa! Look at my *display*! Look at how I *arranged* my toys.”

In the same way, but in the setting of a university campus, Sinatra (2008) asked his staff of literacy teachers, coaches, counselors, student athletes, science and computer lab teachers to be vocabulary conscious and use sophisticated words as they engaged hundreds of low-income 7-12- year old children in learning activities during a summer program. Staff members introduced relevant topic vocabulary during book readings, science experiments, computer projects, and sports activities; had children verbalize these words as they engaged in the activity; wrote the words on large cards to be displayed for reading purposes; and some had children write the words and their meanings in their project notebooks.

In order for these strategies to be correctly applied, teachers should carefully plan which words they will introduce and spend time thinking about how these words will be used throughout the school day. Making a list of words with their synonyms and antonyms is always a good idea. For each word on each synonym list, teachers would search for more sophisticated substitutes and provide the words they believe to be manageable for their students. Accordingly they would introduce more sophisticated words of similar usage, such as moving from *glad*, to *cheerful*, to *delighted* (Lane & Allen 2010). Teachers would start from simple to more difficult words and provide multiple examples for each.

In the EFL/ESL classrooms, students are in great need for explicit instruction especially during content instruction where uncommon tier three, content-specific words do appear. Therefore, avoiding simplistic and oversimplification of language use during class instruction may not benefit English language learners as teachers may end up using words that students already know. Hence, exposing students to more mature terminology as suggested by Lane and

Allen (2010) will help them to be more confident as they progress to more complex and more multifaceted words during content reading.

Promoting incidental learning and word consciousness through frequent and deliberate modeling of sophisticated vocabulary can add a significant amount to an ESL/EFL learner's vocabulary acquisition. To successfully use such a strategy, students need to be given an ample amount of time to practice new words in different forms, such as linking new words to familiar concepts, introducing words clearly during classroom routines, and having students say the words repeatedly while continuing to use the words particularly during writing activities.

A good way to display new content-specific and academic vocabulary is by creating a concept map with the assistance of your students. With a concept map, the teacher plans ahead to help students arrange new concept vocabulary in a logical way so that they can see the connections among topic ideas. For instance, suppose students were studying another of earth's land regions, that of the arctic. Instead of randomly arranging known and read words about the central idea of Arctic Life, displayed in a figure such as a circle or box on a screen, a poster, or chalkboard, the teacher would plan to arrange new words in a conceptual way. Thus from the central figure, the teacher or a student would add a figure for "Animals of the North," for "Land Conditions," and for "People's Lifestyle." New word such as *caribou*, *arctic fox*, *glacier*, *tundra*, *permafrost*, *igloo*, *harpoon*, and *kayak* would be connected by lines or arrows to the appropriate descriptive figure.

Other strategies, such as teaching vocabulary as a pre-reading step with the aim of activating students' prior knowledge to link to new words, are highly useful. Here a "word web" could be used to organize details about one word. The teacher would write the target word in the center of the board in a circle, and then draw lines outside of the circle to write meanings and characteristics of the word. The teacher should elicit what students know about the word so that their prior understandings are recognized and that new insights about the word are offered by students. Students can follow up by creating illustrations for words and then writing sentences or a short paragraph linking the words' meanings. Excellent activities like "word sorts" and "word walls" have been successfully used in the classroom. For instance, words printed on paper or cards and amassed on a "word wall" can come from any number of sources, such as from content topics, literary readings, visitors telling or sharing life experiences, or from words learned during field trips or excursions. Words can then be arranged under topic headings to make a "word sort" (such as with the concept map discussed earlier) on designated wall space in the classroom. During writing activities such as stories, personal narratives, or reports, students may be allowed to borrow words from the wall if they plan to use them in their writing. A pocket envelope could be hanging near the word wall for children to return the words they borrowed

The practices and specific strategies noted in this paper have been successfully used with monolingual English students across the grade levels (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Yet, as argued by Biemiller (2001) since limitations in vocabulary knowledge affect the educational success of second-language learners and less advantaged children, we have suggested that the same practices and strategies can be successfully used by the EFL/ESL teacher to expand the knowledge and concept horizons of the L2 student.

Conclusion

Considering what educators know about word learning for all levels of students, successful vocabulary instruction has an immense effect on learning progress. Since vocabulary

development is crucial in promoting a student's comprehension and learning, the vocabulary instructional strategies and activities we provided in this paper, will assist the L2 learner in enriching language usage and understanding. For the EFL/ESL teacher, we have provided examples of ways to create a word-rich environment and have suggested that deep and rich vocabulary learning will occur if it is maintained by multiple practice and exposure. It is also essential for the EFL/ESL teacher to be word conscious and creative in fostering vocabulary development for their range of learners and be responsive to what research reveals regarding successful vocabulary practices for the L2 learner.

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