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THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

The present article makes a point about the critical importance of vocabulary in foreign language acquisition, as well as the necessity to revise teaching strategies with the changing times. The author considers three vocabulary-learning strategies, which can help enlarge the depth and breadth of students' vocabulary and make input comprehensible.

Key words: *language acquisition, depth and breadth of vocabulary, word list, thematic set, translation.*

Learning a language comprises quite a set of different learning activities; a learner should study numerous aspects of that language, including its pronunciation, writing system, syntax, reading and composition, culture, and spelling.

Contemporary world is awash with changes, which are quick and inevitable in all spheres. Language learning is also subject to alternations. Today, it has become critical to revise teaching strategies with the changing times. In the past the focus used to be laid on grammar, but recently there has been a shift of emphasis from presenting the language as a set of forms, such as grammatical, phonological, lexical, – and these still have to be learned and practiced – to presenting language as a functional system, the one to fulfill a whole range of communicative purposes. The importance of the language structure as a fundamental element, which allows us to generate sentences, is doubtless, as it is only correct grammar structure that can assure comprehensible communication. Besides, appropriate grammar analysis helps students acquire linguistic competence better. However, referring to McCarthy, "no matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of FL are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in FL just cannot happen in any meaningful way" [2, p. 43].

The communicative approach has also set era for reconsidering the role of vocabulary. And this work assumes that at present the most important aspect in teaching a foreign language is vocabulary, since it is a major means to express thoughts and feeling, both in spoken and written forms.

This paper focuses on the importance of vocabulary, and efficient techniques of teaching it and thus enlarging learners' lexical background. This work is an attempt to consider the most efficient ways to enrich vocabulary of the students of intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, studying ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes). So, the aim is twofold: firstly, to make a point about the importance of vocabulary in teaching a foreign language and the reasons for its significance; secondly, to outline and discuss the techniques for developing the students' vocabulary breadth and depth.

It is self-evident, that vocabulary is the prime concern of the study of any foreign language. Vocabulary acquisition is known to be the largest and most important task that any language learner encounters. Without good working knowledge of words and their meanings, the learners' language is not comprehensible and, thus, can be neither input nor applied.

Many teachers rely on the Krashen's comprehensible input, which implies that the acquisition of language takes place through processing input slightly beyond the learners' competence level and made comprehensible through visual help, mime, contextual cues and the like, thus imitating the process of little children learning their mother tongue. According to Krashen [7], if input is made comprehensible, acquisition will take place. However useful it may be, Krashen's hypothesis is not devoid of certain drawbacks. The matter is that to turn input into intake, students need not only to understand but control the attention they attach to particular items that they hear and understand. Otherwise, comprehension will not lead to acquisition. And the latter can follow on only from identifying relevant cues in the incoming information and their regular practice. Moreover, language acquisition implies not only understanding the meaning of a certain lexical unit, it also presupposes knowledge of its various connotations, the sorts of syntactic constructions into which it enters, the morphological options it offers, and an array of semantic associates such as synonyms and antonyms, the aspects which are related to the depth of word knowledge.

Until recently, vocabulary lacked the attention it deserves. And, unfortunately, the trend remains. Most textbooks are arranged by topics (though some are organized by grammar points). In both cases, explicit attention to vocabulary is rare, and specific instruction in vocabulary is scant. As becomes clear from the tasks, many class activities are not aimed at stretching the learners' language, and as a result, very little new vocabulary is introduced. Besides, in most books vocabulary is not systematically subject to coverage. When vocabulary lists do exist, they are no more than mere lists, and there is almost no follow-up practice of the new vocabulary. Even if there is any, it is not sufficient for good vocabulary retention. Consequently, the breadth and depth in students' lexical competence leave much to be desired. It is for this reason that they should have much more vocabulary practice and instruction.

Learners are in need of vocabulary, and many consider acquisition of vocabulary as the greatest challenge [3; 6]. Learners can express themselves with poor grammar, and, in fact, they do this regularly; in most cases it does not prevent either communication or understanding. Opposite to poor grammar, poor vocabulary considerably constrains

communication. While it is possible to get by without grammar; it is absolutely impossible to get by without vocabulary.

It is also worth mentioning here, that two of the most important skills for academic-bound learners are reading and writing.

While reading, students rely heavily on lexical resource, and lack of vocabulary knowledge is regarded as the greatest obstacle to deal with. Interestingly, learners themselves consider not a lack of reading strategies, but insufficient vocabulary background as the main factor that hinders reading comprehension.

It is obvious, that vocabulary base also has a significant impact on learners' writing skills, as well as on listening and speaking tasks. Numerous researches show that students, good at reading, writing, speaking and listening have much more lexical resources at their disposal and have a better command of those.

There is a series of resources to enlarge the depth and breadth of students' vocabulary and to make input comprehensible.

In this paper, three techniques of teaching vocabulary are considered:
– deriving word meaning(s) from context;
– compiling vocabulary word lists presented in thematic, rather than semantic sets;
– using translation.
Let us consider each point in more detail.

Deriving word meaning(s) from context

This technique may be a productive means of practicing comprehension for foreign language learners, but it is doubtful that this practice will somehow facilitate vocabulary acquisition.

The faulty supposition that guessing words from contexts fosters vocabulary acquisition and retention is grounded in the false assumption that the process of learning a foreign language is very similar to learning the native one. In reality, these two processes are quite different, and there seems to be more dissimilar features than similar ones.

Most of the vocabulary is not learned explicitly; native speakers acquire vocabulary through seeing and hearing one and the same word numerous times in many contexts, the advantage that most of FL learners do not have.

Besides, much depends on the text. A native speaker may come across only one or two unknown words in a passage, while an FL learner is usually exposed to an array of unknown words in the same text; and in most cases these words themselves will either serve as misleading clues, or else, as no clues whatever. Thus, FL learners are much more likely to infer an incorrect meaning of an unknown word. This can be accounted for by the simple fact that helpful context clues are rather rare in real language excerpts.

Strange as it may seem, a student has to have quite a large vocabulary to be able to guess the meaning of unknown words from surrounding context clues. This fact definitely puts students with lower vocabulary background at a disadvantage. Moreover, despite their seemingly profound lexical background, students are rarely successful at guessing word meanings from real contexts. Therefore, for such a technique to be efficient, a student has to come upon certain words in different contexts more than once.

This technique can be applied only in cases when the environment, in which a word occurs with other words, explicitly helps to decide which meaning of the word is intended. Thus, the words should be presented in clear and meaningful contexts so that students can easily detect which meaning of the word concerned is used.

It is a necessity that students are *not* just exposed to reading materials; they need reading materials with explicit, planned vocabulary work.

Lists of Words

Using vocabulary word lists, however boring it may seem for some learners, can be fairly useful in vocabulary acquisition.

It does not mean, however, that because a word list can be an effective technique to enriching the breadth and depth of vocabulary, students must be handed in the lists with the assignment to learn them. (Though there is some evidence that a number of learners prefer rote learning to communicative methods). The content of the list is just the target, and it is necessary to come up with the ways to present sections of the list and then provide relevant oral and written practice activities to foster vocabulary acquisition and retention.

One of the advantages of word lists is that they can present not only words themselves, but also their derivatives, semantic associates, collocations and example sentences. In other words, they can develop both breadth and depth of vocabulary, with due follow-up practices. Let us consider an example:

Cultural Values

*A <u>culture's</u> **values** are its ideas about what is good, right, fair, and just. Sociologists disagree, however, on how to <u>conceptualize values</u>. Conflict theory focuses on how values <u>differ between groups within a culture</u>, while functionalism focuses on the <u>shared values within a culture</u>. For example, American sociologist Robert K. Merton suggested that the most <u>important values</u> in American society are wealth, success, power, and prestige, but that not everyone has an equal opportunity <u>to attain these values</u>. **Functional sociologist** Talcott Parsons noted that Americans <u>share the common value</u> of the "American work ethic," which encourages hard work. Other sociologists have **proposed** <u>a common core of American values</u>, including accomplishment, material success, problem-solving, reliance on science and technology, democracy, patriotism, charity, freedom, **equality** and justice, individualism, responsibility, and accountability.*

*A **culture**, though, may harbor <u>conflicting values</u>. For instance, the <u>value of material success</u> may conflict with the <u>value of charity</u>. Or the <u>value of equality</u> may <u>conflict with the value of individualism</u>. Such **contradictions** may exist due to an **inconsistency between** people's actions and their <u>professed values</u>, which explains why*

*sociologists must carefully **distinguish between** what people do and what they say. <u>**Real culture** **refers to**</u> the <u>values and norms</u> that a society actually <u>follows</u>, while <u>**ideal culture**</u> refers to the values and norms that a society professes to believe"* [10, p. 31].

We can compile a list of 12 points (marked in bold), nine of which (***value; culture; equality; propose; equality; contradiction; inconsistency /between/; to distinguish /between/; to refer to***) would relate to academic vocabulary, the other 3 – to specialism vocabulary (***Conflict theory; Functionalism / functional sociologist; real culture / ideal culture***). By these 12 lexical items we develop the breadth of learners' vocabulary.

But we can also proceed to develop the depth of it; we enlarge it with lexical bundles and collocations from the text. For instance, it can be arranged in the following manner:

Value

<u>*Derivatives*</u>*: to value, valuable, valueless*

<u>*Collocations* </u>(underlined in the text):

<u>***Adj+Noun***</u>*: cultural values, a culture's values, shared values, the common value; important values; conflicting values; professed values*

<u>***Verb***</u>***+Noun***: *to conceptualize values; to attain values; to share the common value; to conflict with the value; to harbor conflicting values; to follow values and norms*

<u>***Noun +(of)+Noun***</u>: *a common core of values; value of material success; value of charity; value of equality; the value of individualism*

This brief passage can and should have follow-up questions that would also promote the frequency of vocabulary retrieval for the learners.

Sometimes students can perform better when they are given only a list of words with their translations. And here we come to the next point, namely, the usefulness of translations in teaching a foreign language.

The Usefulness of Translations

Needless to say, that students are to be encouraged to use the target language during classes and classroom activities. However, when students first come upon a new word, there is nothing abnormal for them to turn to translation of it into his/her native language. In vocabulary-learning activities, translations do and should occupy a certain niche. Translation is not only what learners prefer, but also it proved a more effective means than English interpretations. A translation can be especially useful, while dealing with abstract concepts or terminology; when students should not only comprehend the meaning, but also know the correct equivalent of a specialism in the native language.

Paul Nation, a vocabulary expert, in his work "Beginning to learn foreign vocabulary" concludes that learning vocabulary is faster for many learners if the meaning of the word is given through the native language translation first. Another research (by C. Grace) [5] also confirms the fact that students who had access to a glossary in their native language were more successful at retaining new vocabulary, probably because they had an opportunity to confirm the correct meanings.

Returning to the case of the above placed passage, the proposed words could also include the translation for each point in the list. Besides, translations are of much help, because modern students tend to be unable to state something in their native language clearly (though this hits beyond the point of this paper).

So, translations prove to be quite a helpful means of learning new foreign language vocabulary and retaining it. The focus should be not on *whether*, but rather on *when* (at what stage, or level) translations are most effective. This needs thorough research, and the present paper only makes a point about its necessity.

The next point to consider is whether to present vocabulary in certain sets.

Vocabulary Presented in Sets

The prevailing tendency in many textbooks is to arrange vocabulary in semantic sets. This technique seems to be rather outdated. Moreover, it may even turn out harmful, because instead of giving clarity, in fact, it both confuses students and hinders vocabulary retention. The assumption here is that a much better way for learners to memorize and remember vocabulary and to do it more easily is to arrange and present it in thematic, rather than semantic sets. Besides, it is sometimes more useful to present vocabulary not as separate units, but as lexical bundles.

Let us consider the part of the above given text again, only this time we will concentrate on other lexical items:

"For example, American sociologist Robert K. Merton suggested that the most important values in American society are <u>wealth, success, power</u>, and <u>prestige</u>, but that everyone does not have an equal opportunity to attain these values. Functional sociologist Talcott Parsons noted that Americans share the common value of the "American <u>work ethic</u>," which encourages hard work. Other sociologists have proposed a common core of American values, including <u>accomplishment, material success, problem-solving</u>, reliance on <u>science and technology</u>, <u>democracy, patriotism, charity, freedom, equality and justice, individualism, responsibility, and accountability</u>" [10, p. 31].

Here we come upon the words that can concern ***values*** (*democracy, patriotism, freedom, equality and justice*), ***work and career*** (*success, prestige, accomplishment, problem-solving, responsibility, accountability, individualism, <u>work ethic</u>*) ***social issues*** (*wealth, charity, prestige, individualism*), ***political and economic spheres*** (*wealth, success, power, prestige, <u>justice</u>*), ***scientific sphere*** (*science and technology*), some of which coincide and intervene.

The conclusion is quite clear: it is easier for students to learn the new vocabulary presented in a context and in a thematic text, than it would be in case these were given as nothing more than a semantic list.

Moving to the end of the work, it is necessary to point out that, contrary to a widely held opinion, there exists no unique and specific strategy for learning vocabulary. Techniques and strategies of developing the vocabulary

breadth and depth vary depending on quite a number of factors (among which): the age group of learners, their background knowledge (both grammatical and lexical), the level of language proficiency, to name just a few. There are various vocabulary learning strategies, and both teachers and students should use this wide variety of vocabulary learning techniques. It is also worth stressing upon, that students should be encouraged to choose and even develop an individualized set of strategies, so that they suit their individual and peculiar needs and personalities, since individual approach is a good means of learning. Nobody would dare to argue, that there is one single strategy, which is better than another one. So, one can have as many techniques at their disposal as s/he needs and as long as they prove useful and are used in an extensive and consistent way. Referring to P. Nation, "it does not seem to matter so much what students do with new vocabulary *provided that they do something and that they do this consistently"* [9, p. 26].

Vocabulary acquisition is an important part of the English teaching process. It is supposed to be a very effective communicative device as it promotes interaction across nations. Vocabulary is fundamental for expressing meaning and in using the receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills. It is a principle contributor to comprehension, fluency, and achievement. And thus, it should be considered as an internal part of learning a foreign language since it leads the way to communication.

Though vocabulary is one of the basic building blocks and words are powerful tools, learning a language cannot be reduced to only learning vocabulary. Still, there is hope that contemporary debates about teaching techniques and strategies will result in effectiveness and optimization of the teaching process.

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РОЛЬ СЛОВНИКОВОГО ЗАПАСУ У ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ ТА СТРАТЕГІЇ НАВЧАННЯ ЛЕКСИКИ

Стаття присвячена дослідженню ролі лексики у вивченні іноземної мови. Автор розглядає три техніки, які можуть бути найефективнішими як для розширення словникового запасу учня, так і для його поглиблення.

Ключові слова: *словниковий запас, розширення та поглиблення словникового запасу, стратегії навчання лексики.*

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РОЛЬ СЛОВАРНОГО ЗАПАСА В ИЗУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА И СТРАТЕГИИ ОБУЧЕНИЯ ЛЕКСИКЕ

Данная статья посвящена исследованию роли лексики в изучении иностранного языка. Автор рассматривает три техники, которые представляются наиболее эффективными как для расширения словарного запаса обучающегося, так и для его углубления.

Ключевые слова: *словарный запас, расширение и углубление словарного запаса, стратегии обучения лексике.*