

Some practical Tips to Teach Vocabulary in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching is becoming a necessity for everyone. The attention has moved on ways how learners study a foreign language. English is an important part of the whole system of education in the Albanian context and has been given a priority. Based on the Curriculum of Foreign Language Teaching, teachers should use Communicative Language Teaching to teach language to their own students. Communicative Language Teaching in itself requires the learner to have enough skills to use the language. To be fluent in English means to have and to use all the necessary competences that are needed to use the language communicatively. The issue means to understand the meaning of the new words, and use them appropriately.

We teach our students to learn the meaning of the new words in the context, because if is learned in another way there may be a misunderstanding of the meaning of the new vocabulary, as many words are poly- semantic. These are some of the research questions that this paper brings in focus. What difficulties do our students encounter with the new words? How should vocabulary be taught in the language classroom? What techniques should be used? How much do our students know? How much time should I spend in the class to teach vocabulary? What kind of practical activities should be used in the language classroom? Foreign language teachers need to use effective techniques to teach vocabulary. Some useful activities to enhance effective teaching and learning of vocabulary will be suggested at the end of this paper.

Keywords: *enhancing vocabulary, effective teaching, practical activities, learning in the context.*

Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a long process for everyone even if you may have different capacities and learning styles. Every foreign language provides new challenges of authentic language use and culture. There is a distinction between the terms acquiring a language and learning a language. The first has to do with the ability of someone to learn in a natural way, while the second has to do with the process involving the setting of language learning, thus the classroom. We learn and we study to acquire a language, like the way that we learn and study to do something in our life.

The process itself depends on many factors such as the age, motivation of students, classroom environment and styles of learning. Therefore, the teacher is the first instructor of teaching a foreign language. A good teacher is the result of effective learning in spite of the other factors mentioned above. Learning to acquire and use a language means to be able to use the language communicatively in different contexts of learning using a variety of words to convey meaning and thoughts.

Language teaching and learning theories

Foreign language teaching has undergone through the years different significant developments moving from one theory to another. Linguists and psychologists studied the behavior of language learning in the classroom to base their researches and draw conclusions on new methods and theories of teaching and learning. Each method has its own characteristics including principles, techniques, and other characteristics such as student-centered or teacher-centered, deductive or inductive application of rules.

In other words, teachers experimented in the language classroom different teaching methods and techniques drawing conclusions as to which one was the best. The aim of studying shifted from learning a language for cultural knowledge to learning to communicate. From memorization learners passed to using the language in context. Based on the *Curriculum of Foreign Language Teaching or Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* language teaching should be based on Communicative Language Teaching. “Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competence.” (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, p. 9) Therefore, foreign language classes are student-centered; students are given the possibility to use the language in

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meaningful contexts from real life like situations. According to Nation (2001) “Word knowledge is complex and multifaceted, as it involves the knowledge of word form, meaning and usage.” Discourse competence requires learners to have enough knowledge of lexicon. *How can our learners build their own bank of words?* This question attracts attention of different teachers and learners. I suppose that teachers may use different techniques in the language classroom to help learners with new words. In the same ways, even learners have and use their strategies of learning new words.

The importance of vocabulary in communicative competence

As we mentioned above to learn to use a language communicatively, learners have to gain different competences beginning from grammatical competence. However, learning does not mean just learning or teaching the grammar rules. Teachers in student-centered classes should give the possibility to students to use words correctly, for this reason; the meaning of the new words should be conveyed clearly. Thus, the most important aspect of learning a foreign language is to broaden the vocabulary.

We can relate foreign language learning to mother tongue learning. The babies listen to the voice of the parents and then begin to utter things first by short sounds, then utter words and at last relate words in sentences. Audio-lingual method is based on such concept, learning a foreign language like the mother tongue. Memorization is the base of Audio Lingual Method, but just by memorizing does not mean that you can convey meanings properly, or know how to use many words in a variety of contexts.

To be a quasi-native speaker in English or in any other foreign language, students should develop the communicative competence by using more and more words. “Vocabulary, as one of the knowledge areas in language, plays a great role for learners in acquiring a language.” (Cameron, 2001)

Teaching Strategies to extend learner’s vocabulary

In the language classroom especially with Grammar Translation Method, vocabulary was taught at the end of the class. It means that the teacher explained the new words by writing on the blackboard the new words with phonetic transcription and translation in mother tongue. Today it has been given a prominent place in language learning. Vocabulary is an essential component of foreign language acquisition and proficiency. The more words a learner knows, the

more usage these words will have in different reading, speaking, listening and writing activities.

If in the past the English or any other foreign language was used just in classroom and listened to just in classroom, nowadays we and our learners listen to English everywhere, on the radio, TV, internet, at the work place, outside in the social environment. A simple example is the case of children or teenagers who listen to or watch music on YouTube. They have the possibility to listen to a song, even watch the lyrics. This helps them acquire and learn new words. They will use the new words while you ask them about something, or even when they ask each other for simple things. It is very important for them to be exposed to materials that have a large number of words, known and unknown, to clarify meanings and to interact in different meaningful oral context.

EXTENSIVE READING AND VOCABULARY

Since we were children, parents have told us to read many books, novels and other reading materials, because the more we read, the more new words we learn. It is true that although we are native speakers it is not said that we know the meaning of all the words in the Albanian dictionary. As we know, words are poly-semantic, which means that a word may be used with its first meaning in a sentence and another meaning in another sentence. However, it is also true that we have even words that are technical terms, or specific terms for a branch of study, and only someone that is a specialist knows the meaning of it.

A simple example are the words related to the parts of a car, which only a mechanic may know, words related to medicine, which nurses and doctors know and so on. Anyway, the best way to learn new things is to read different materials such as brochures, manuals and other reading parts, rather than just novels or textbooks. Then the question is: *What about foreign language, how can we learn new words?* The answer is very simple: in the same way we learn new words in our native language. Extensive reading is a very good opportunity for the English learner, be it a child or an adult, to learn new words. In the same way magazines, journals, pamphlets, brochures, novels and any other reading printed or online material will help our students learn new words. Autonomous learners have the opportunity to choose what to read and to be eager to learn new things through reading, thus extending vocabulary.

If we have students that did not read extensively, than we can help them in the class favoring and using extensive reading, motivating them that reading will help them not only to improve their reading skills, but grammar, vocabulary and speaking skills will be improved as well. A simple example is having the book

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club in the class. They will be exposed to new language items so they will learn new vocabulary. “Many students may never have done extensive reading for pleasure, so it may be initially useful to devote some class time to Sustained Silent Reading.” (Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993)

LEARNING THROUGH INSTRUCTION

Explicit vocabulary teaching is very important in the language classroom. Usually it happens at the end of explaining a new lesson or a new reading part. It is a good way to help especially low proficiency learners. There are different ways to explain it, but usually the new words are written on the blackboard, while with advanced students usually the meaning of the new word is learned in the context with an English explanation.

In the Albanian context in many cases, the words are translated because the teacher thinks that, through translation in the mother tongue, the student comprehends better. Anyway, this is not a solution because we may translate words that have abstract concept, but we can use pictures for children to explain new words, or we can bring *realia*. According to Prince (1996), “Both «advanced» and «weaker» learners could recall more newly learned words using L1 translations than using L2 context.” However, this does not mean that learners process the language in the same way. Weaker learners will have more difficulties to understand new words and use them in the context than advanced learners.

USING SKILL ACTIVITIES TO ELABORATE MEANING

As we mentioned previously, we learn our own native language through listening, in the same way our students learn English language through listening. The more they listen, the more they will learn new concepts. Using activities to develop reading, speaking, listening and writing skills will help our students acquire new words. What is of great importance for our learners is to state the aim of each activity, what should they do, where to concentrate and so on. Both receptive and productive skills and their activities help learners elaborate meaning. For this reason, teachers should give opportunity to learners to use what they know and to learn new things. “A rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perform” (Nation, 1994). If we were interested that our students should learn different types of food, we can provide to them, apart from reading, a listening activity when they concentrate on terms related to food. An information-gap exercise related to what they listen and working in pairs will help them identify new words.

USING THE KNOWN VOCABULARY

When teachers explain something new, they always make a revision of what students already know. Using what one knows is a good way of revising. Teachers may use two types of activities to enhance fluency: *speaking and writing*. We can choose a topic and encourage our students to speak about that. While they read a part, students may underline with *blue* words they know and with *red*, what they do not know. They should be encouraged to use what they know in speaking. In the same way they may use words they know in writing.

Writing is a productive skill. It is very important that writing activities should not be neglected. Although students may have a limited vocabulary, they should be encouraged to write. It is also important that teachers give clear instructions on how to write. Even if they have difficulties, they will try to express and construct something with what they know. Usually the simplest things are writing a postcard, writing an email, writing a letter to a pen friend, this with low-level students, while with high proficiency students we can encourage them to write an essay, a critical opinion and so on.

LEARNING THE MEANING IN THE CONTEXT

If 20 years ago *Grammar Translation Method* gained popularity, today it is being used less. We understand from its title the importance of translating. New words were translated at every reading part, and the strategy that the learners used was a wrong one. Using dictionary to translate the new word after you wrote them, made you confused about which meaning to choose. Usually it was chosen the first one. This did not leave to a good understanding of the meaning of the word, and a wrong perception of it was created.

Using *Communicative Language Teaching* in English language classes, students practice language and learn new words through different techniques. Students are encouraged to extract and understand the meaning of the word in the context. Reading a part three times, two times in silence and one time aloud helps the learner understand better the reading part. Thus, through processing and elaborating reading, the student begins to guess from the context the meaning of the new word. This may not be always possible, but we can help our learners elaborate the meaning by explaining in other words using English language.

According to Nation and Coady (1988, pp. 104-150, as cited in Hunt & Beglar, 2002, pp. 262-263) “*students should follow some steps in order to understand the meaning of a new word in the context:*”

Determine the part of speech of the unknown word.

Look at the immediate context and simplify it if necessary.

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Look at the wider context. This entails examining the clause with the unknown word and its relationship to the surrounding clauses and sentences.

Guess the meaning of the unknown word.

Check that the guess is correct.

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Learners have different learning styles, for this reason they learn vocabulary in different ways. Visual learners learn through maps or charts, in such a way they can connect the meaning of a word to other words, memorizing it very well. At the beginning level, children memorize by writing two lines with the new word. Teachers may help their learners by giving some useful strategies of how to memorize a new word.

According to Oxford (1990) some memory strategies to aid learning are:

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.

Practical activities and games to teach vocabulary

Foreign language teaching and learning are processes that involve different ages starting with children, continuing with teenagers and then adults. The way such groups acquire and learn is different. Learning a language requires different competences such as grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competence. If the learner is able to acquire very well all this competences, then the learner knows and uses the language.

Usually there is not a strict and given formula as to what kind of activities to use for teaching vocabulary. Teachers use different interactive language activities depending on the goal of teaching, age, language level, needs and age of learners. Using technology in the language classroom, forums and blogs of English teachers helps every foreign language teacher to use new techniques in their language classroom. The aim of every teacher is to help learners acquire and use the language in communication. Learning new words is an essential component of effective communication. For this reason, we have tried to introduce some practical activities that may be used with different levels.

SOME ACTIVITIES AND GAMES

In English language classrooms, there are different language levels, for this reason even the way that teachers present the new words is different. Below are given some techniques.

Elementary learners

With the age 7-10, we can use posters, pictures, drawings, photographs or realia to present new words. We can also use gestures, mime to present feelings, and we can use illustrations as well. When we have to present words that are abstract in meaning, we can explain them in simple words; in some cases, we may use translation.

Intermediate or advanced learners

With intermediate level of language, teachers should explain the meaning of the new words in the context, or through paraphrasing, giving pantomimes and synonyms or description.

Teachers have to use different types of activities to reinforce vocabulary. Below there is a list of activities and games with some descriptions and the suggested language level. “Many different kinds of tasks could be implemented in order to move the words into long term memory, the one a learner has to activate in order to retrieve the word when necessary.” (Thornbury, 2000)

Practical activities and games

Time given to the activities 10-15 min, anyway it depends even on the type of activity if it is long or short, if there is a large number of words, if the concepts are difficult and so on.

Warming up / all levels

Charts / all levels

Quizzes / all levels vocabulary quizzes begin with the letters of alphabet

Example: *teachers can create a quiz upon language differences if it is British English or American English, choose the opposite word or asking about nationalities*

Pantomimes

Example: *describing something and students have to find the word*

Guessing games / all levels

Example: *associate word with its own definition*

Brainstorming / all levels

Clustering / all levels

Example: *grouping new words according to their characteristics within the cluster.*

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Crosswords/intermediate and advanced, used to check whether students has learned the new words

Hangman / elementary level

Jeopardy game/intermediate, upper and advanced

Ball game / teachers may use it for different purposes like checking grammar but even new words

A to Z game / all levels

Word match/match the words to their definitions

Here is a list of language games that are used mostly by English Foreign Language teachers for vocabulary teaching¹

Board race game

Two truths and a lie

Simon says

Word Jumble race

Hangman

Pictionary

The mime

Hot seat

Where shall I go?

What is my problem?

Examples of the above activities used in an English class to practice vocabulary

Course: English Language

*Degree programme: Bachelor in Business Management *first year*

No. of students: 20

Language level: B1+

The English course aims to provide a wide variety of practice activities to enhance communication in the English-speaking business world. The types of activities enable English language learning concerning grammar, vocabulary, linguistic and communicative activities. For this reason, different interactive activities are used in the language class. Below are described two kinds of activities used in the English class to reinforce and practice specific vocabulary concerning learner's field of study.

Below there are given two examples practiced in this course.

The first Practical activity

¹ Note: list of games taken from <https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/10-best-games-esl-teachers#boardrace>.

Students are required to participate in A to Z language game. Students are divided in teams of five students. The letters of alphabet are divided into five columns corresponding to five teams. Each group has to choose a participant to write in the white board, up to four business words according to the letters given. If the member chosen was not able to write four business words, than another member would write new words, and so on, up to the moment when the task was accomplished. The winning team is that one that writes as quickly as possible the correct form of the words. After that, students are required to create sentences from each word provided in the white board. Time given to this exercise was 10 minutes. Level of Business English language was B1+.

After performing, students were required to tell their feelings about this exercise. They were satisfied; all the students participated, so the aim of this task was accomplished. The aim of this exercise was to practice business vocabulary.

The second practical activity

Students have different parts of flash cards entitled English Word Search Puzzle² and Business Word search.³ Students are divided in 5 groups of 4 members each. Working for 10 to 15 minutes, they are required to find the words given at the end of the puzzle in the chart. After that, they would read them aloud and would give the definition of each word. The winning group is that one that finishes the first. In the same way as the previous activity, even in this activity students practice vocabulary.

Teachers using pair or group work may use all the above-mentioned activities. It always depends on what type of vocabulary the teacher wants his/her students to learn, revise and reinforce in order to use them correctly giving the proper attention and time to them.

Conclusions

Students gain information about language and culture. Students learn to acquire the language and to use words properly. This means to know the function and the form of language, to have enough grammar knowledge to use it correctly, to have enough knowledge of words and to use the words correctly, to convey properly their thoughts and feelings. Vocabulary teaching and learning in English language classes were often given little attention, but recently, as we are concerned with using the language for communication, the interest in learning a foreign language is increased. Teachers should provide students with interactive class

² www.funenglishgames.com/work

³ <https://www.learn-english-today.com/>

activities to extend and reinforce vocabulary. Language games and activities are very good because students take part actively. Other uses of vocabulary learning are related to the concept of asking if the word is formal or informal, whether we use it more in written form or orally. For this reason, the role of vocabulary is indispensable in language learning.

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