Teaching vocabulary in EFL classrooms

Enseñanza de vocabulario en aulas de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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Abstract. Teaching vocabulary is a key factor when learning a foreign language and it includes giving instructions about the form of words, the pronunciation and the meaning they convey. At the same time, this process involves three fundamental steps such as Presenting, Practicing and Producing in order to have an effective vocabulary learning process. Teaching vocabulary has become a central part in EFL classrooms and most teachers are concerned about implementing effective ways to teach it. This article is aimed at giving a short explanation about the most important aspects that any teacher must take into account in order to have a successful vocabulary teaching process such as the amount of words that a person should know in order to communicate, what the knowledge of a word means, how the vocabulary is retrieved and which words to select in order to be taught.

Key words: Vocabulary, words, teaching, presenting, practicing, producing.

Resumen. La enseñanza de vocabulario es un factor clave en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera; incluye dar instrucciones sobre la forma de las palabras, su pronunciación y el significado que transmiten. Este proceso consta de tres pasos fundamentales: la presentación, la práctica y la producción, lo que brinda eficacia en el aprendizaje de vocabulario. La enseñanza de vocabulario se ha convertido en una parte central en las aulas de inglés como lengua extranjera y la mayoría de los profesores están preocupados por la aplicación de formas efectivas de enseñar. En este artículo se pretende dar una breve explicación acerca de los aspectos más importantes que todo maestro debe tener en cuenta para tener un proceso de enseñanza de vocabulario de éxito, como la cantidad de palabras que una persona debe saber para comunicarse, lo que el conocimiento de una palabra significa, cómo el vocabulario se recupera y qué palabras se deben seleccionar con el fin de ser enseñadas.

Palabras clave. Vocabulario, palabras, enseñanza, presentar, practicar, producir.
Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.

David Wilking

Teaching a foreign language is not only a matter of presenting grammatical structures. It also implies thinking about what vocabulary to teach and making the learners conscious of how a word or phrase should be used in order to convey meaning. Therefore, one of the most important aspects when learning a language is how to broaden vocabulary. In fact, the first aspect of language that any person learns in his or her mother tongue is related to words or set of words that help them to communicate. According to Thornbury (2000), “Language emerges first as words, both historically, and in terms of the way each of us learned our first and any subsequent language” (p. 1).

According to that, the more words the learners know, the more fluent they become when using a foreign language. As Folse (2008) states, “basic level of vocabulary will allow learners to communicate some ideas to certain degree, better communication can be accomplished when learners have acquired more vocabulary” (p. 12). Of course, this is a process that can take a whole life time in order to be expanded and exploited.

However, most teachers focus the process of learning a new language only on explaining grammatical structures and giving less importance to the development of extensive vocabulary. Only a small number of words are included in every lesson, depending on how easy they fit into the structure of the day. Such practice, does not favor the development of the communicative skills required to be an independent user of the foreign language, because they need more than a set of rules in order to communicate effectively. According to Nation (1994), a rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perform. In such a case, both teachers and learners know that the lack of vocabulary is a constraint in language use and development and most of the time, they feel frustrated about that matter. However, few strategies are implemented to enhance the number of words learners need to get through to their ideas when using English.

In order to accomplish the task of learning new words, different inquiries should be taken into account. Among them, the following ones are of great importance:

- How many words should a person know in order to communicate effectively?
- What does the knowledge of a word involve?
- How are the lexical items presented?
- How is the vocabulary retrieved?
- Which word could be selected to be taught?

With respect to the first question, related to the number of words to be known, Schmitt (2000), cited by Folse (2008), expressed that it is approximately 2,000 words to maintain conversations, 3,000 word families to read authentic texts and as many as 10,000 words to
comprehend academic texts. With such an amount of vocabulary needed, relevant importance should be given to the way in which this specific aspect of the language is taught in the English class. Furthermore, this fact has to make teachers reflect on how instructions in vocabulary tasks are given to the participants of the class. Since the vocabulary learning process involves more than just bringing a long list of words to the classroom and having the learners look up them in a dictionary or try to memorize those words in isolation.

Regarding the second question about what the knowledge of a word involves, Thornbury (2000) states that in the most basic levels knowing a word implies the following actions: recognizing its form and meaning, knowing how to pronounce it, the literal and figurative sense as well as its semantic properties. Aside from its relevancy to application, grammatical behavior, possible derivations, collocations, connotations and the frequency with which that word can be used. As it is presented, knowing a word requires time and constant exposure to it in different contexts and situations.

The third inquiry is related to the presentation of lexical items, which for Lewis (1993) are of different kinds such as words, multiword forms, polywords, collocations, and institutionalized expressions. Teaching vocabulary involves three stages: Presenting, Practicing and Producing. Presenting vocabulary refers to pre-planned lessons stages in which learners are taught pre-selected vocabulary items (Thornbury, 2000). To present new items it is important to show the meaning of the word as well as the form in which it is used. There are several ways to present new items, such as using translation, which is the most direct route to a word’s meaning, illustrate meaning using pictures, mime or realia, appropriate to teach beginners; contextualizing, defining, giving synonyms, opposites and giving detailed descriptions which are suitable for advance learners.

After presenting the word, practice and consolidation of the word are necessary. To do that, 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). Among these classroom activities teachers can use some decision making ones like identifying, selecting, matching, sorting, ranking and sequencing. And also some production tasks, for instance, completion of sentences and texts and creation of sentences and texts.

The last stage is related to the production stage with the aim of helping students to incorporate the new item into the lexicon. This can be done using communicative activities in which the learners have to retrieve the vocabulary already learnt and practiced.

In relation to the retrieval of words, which is directly related to memory in the process of learning new vocabulary, it is relevant to say that it is not only important to learn a lot of words, but to remember them (Thornbury, 2000). To our concern long-term memory is the one a learner has to activate in order to retrieve the word...
when necessary. For that to happen some principles should be followed: repetition, retrieval practice effect, spacing, pacing, personal organizing, imaging, mnemonics, attention and effective depth. If teachers put these principles into practice it is more likely that learners incorporate new vocabulary into their long-term memory. According to McCarthy (1990) words may be stored mentally in terms of phonological or graphological form as in “terms of meaning” (p. 110). That is why it is important to teach the learners how to write, pronounce and the concept that the word represents to ensure a good meaning and “form fit” in the students’ mental lexicon.

Bearing in mind the three stages that the process of teaching vocabulary involves, the fourth question emerges making the teachers reflect about which words could be selected to be taught. According to Boyd Zimmerman (2008, pp. 7-9), it is important to be selective with the words that the students will need and the word selection should be based on the following criteria:

a. Frequency: words that will naturally occur inside and outside the classroom.

b. Salience: central to a given context.

c. A word learning burden: The amount of effort needed to master it and how easy is to illustrate and demonstrate it to the participants (learnability and teachability).

Taking all that has been said into account, along with the implications that teaching vocabulary involves, the research group at Centro de Idiomas at Universidad Simon Bolívar in Barranquilla has considered the study of the processes of teaching vocabulary in the institution a paramount importance, since it constitutes a key factor in the development of productive skills such speaking and writing as well as in the receptive students’ abilities such as reading and listening. Identifying the different approaches the teachers should apply to successfully teach vocabulary with effectiveness has become and will continue to be, a great concern for the Language Research Group.

In conclusion, teaching vocabulary is a key factor in the learning of a foreign language and it includes teaching and conveying the meaning and the form of words. At the same time, this process involves three fundamental steps such as Presenting, Practicing and Producing in order to have an effective vocabulary learning process. Teaching vocabulary has gotten a lot of attention in EFL classrooms and most teachers are concerned about implementing effective ways to teach it. For that reason the research group at Centro de Idiomas has considered of paramount importance the study of the processes of teaching vocabulary in the institution.

References


