NEW TRENDS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING VOCABULARY

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*So the Lord dispersed them from there all over
the earth, and they left off the building city.
That is why it is called Babel, because the Lord
there made a babble of the language of all the world.* Genesis 11:8-9

ÖZET

Bu çalışmadaki temel amacımız dünya çapındaki İngiliz Dili Eğitimi uzmanlarının kullandıkları ve tercih ettikleri kelime öğrenimi ve öğretimiyle ilgili son tekniklerin bazılarını Türk öğrencilerine ve öğretmenlerine tanıtmaktır. Kelime bilgisi, dil öğrenimin asli unsurlarından biri olduğu için her dil öğrencisinin kelime öğrenimi ile ilgilenmesi gerekir. Bu çalışma başlıca iki kısımdan meydana gelmektedir: Yabancı dil öğreniminde kelime bilgisinin önemi ve öğrenilecek kelimelerin derecelendirilmesi, ve kelime öğrenimi ve öğretimiyle ilgili teknikler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı dil, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi, kelime bilgisi, kelime yeteneği, hatırlatıcılar.

ABSTRACT

In this study, our basic aim is to introduce the Turkish students and teachers some of the recent vocabulary learning and teaching techniques used and favored by the worldwide experts in ELT. Since vocabulary development is one of the essential components of language learning every student of a foreign language need to dwell on vocabulary learning. This study has mainly two parts: an introduction on the importance and gradation of vocabulary in foreign language and techniques pertaining to vocabulary teaching and learning.

Key Words: Foreign Language, ELT, vocabulary, lexical competence, mnemonics.

Vocabulary learning has often had a pivotal role in native language learning or foreign language learning. It is believed that the number of vocabulary items an author uses in his/her works is the clear indicator of his/her genius; this is why, Shakespeare, who used more than forty thousand different lexical items in his works, besides other factors, is accepted a genius in literature.

One of the reasons why foreign language learners should pay special attention to the learning of vocabulary is that in any language the written form of the language uses much more vocabulary than that of the spoken version. Undoubtedly, books

written by scholars exhibit thousands of vocabulary, which will make it difficult for the learner to understand the text. One of the first things waiting for the foreign language learner is to come over the vocabulary hurdles s/he is to encounter in the books.

Besides, lexical competence is also of major importance in communicative competence, which is a term which gained popularity with the advent of communicative language learning. Before the eighties teaching vocabulary was not one of the primary goals of the textbooks having structural syllabus. Since mastery of the structures was the primary goal, the textbooks before the eighties contained very limited vocabulary items (Haskell, 1980; Nunan, 1998). During the recent years, however thanks to the myriads of research in EFL, ESL, and language acquisition; teaching of vocabulary has gained importance and "the prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in EFL learning has been increasingly recognized" (Amer, 2002).

Although John Haskell (1980) suggested we drop the term teaching vocabulary in favor presenting vocabulary, and present vocabulary in context, he did not elaborate on his idea in detail; he sufficed to advise not to put the words on board by definition, either in the first or the target language and to skip or guess or seldom look up a new word just as the native speakers do. Compared with the sophisticated ideas of our age Haskell's ideas were really naive. Nowadays, researchers and experts in ELT offer a wide range of techniques and strategies to acquire new vocabulary.

The importance of teaching or learning new vocabulary has often been emphasized in the context of reading. F. Özden Ekmekçi (2001) in the introduction to her *Vocabuilder* highlights that the ability of reading comprehension could be improved if students have adequate help with their vocabulary study. It often happens that when learners are reading a passage they come across several unfamiliar words. Therefore, one of the objectives of second or foreign language teaching becomes the teaching of word formation processes.

Actually, despite our concern in teaching vocabulary after the eighties, the studies on vocabulary teaching and vocabulary selection goes as far as to Michael Philip West (1888-1973), who was a pioneer in work on vocabulary selection. As early as in the 1920s West offered two ways of improving reading texts in order to help the children to learn more easily. Firstly, West advocated using common words instead of old-fashioned literary words to make reading easier for children in Bengal, where he was carrying on a project which was written up in a short report titled *Bilingualism* (*with special reference to Bengal*). Actually, while carrying on researches on vocabulary teaching, West specified a "Minimum Adequate Vocabulary" for basic courses in English. His second principle, the principle of readability, could be called a lexical distribution principle. According to this principle the overall number of words in a text should be decreased. When too many new words are packed closely together and every sentence contains a new item it becomes very difficult and therefore frustrating for teachers and students to teach and to learn (Howatt, 1984). In 1960 West published a list of 1,200 words which, he thought, was the minimum adequate speech vocabulary. He thought using the words appeared in the list, learners of English could express practically any idea they wanted to (Nunan, 1988).

So what happened so that the high status of vocabulary study and vocabulary teaching lost its prominence after West? Decarrico (2001) attributes this status loss of vocabulary to American linguistic theories that were dominant throughout the 1940s,

1950s, and 1960s. According to Decarrico, Charles Fries, who believed that grammar should be the starting point of language learning and learning was a matter of habit formation, caused the decrease in vocabulary study with his influential book *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*. It is always to be remembered that the teaching of vocabulary was neglected during the 1950s and 1960s because audio-lingualism, the method of Charles Fries, with its emphasis on grammar and habit formation process, had a dominant influence on methodology.

The need to acquire a large vocabulary affected even grammarians. So much so that unlike the grammar text books of the past, new books focusing on both grammar and vocabulary have gained popularity. Richard Side's and Guy Wellman's (1999) *Grammar and Vocabulary for Cambridge Advanced and Proficiency*, for example, provides ample of vocabulary exercises to the students. Actually in each unit of the book- there are six or seven sections in each unit-two sections are dedicated to vocabulary. The book "focuses on areas of vocabulary that are useful in a wide range of situations, e.g. agreeing and disagreeing, frequency, problems and solutions, starting and ending, etc," (Side and Wellman, 1999). Another vocabulary focus of the book is collocations; since vocabulary knowledge involves not only knowing the meaning of a word but also knowing the words that mostly co-occur with it. The lack of L2 collocational knowledge leads to irregularities, which will immediately mark the learner's speech or writing as deviant or cause others make laugh at the learner. Native speakers, for example, talk about "fading hopes" (disappearing hopes) or "growing fears" (not increasing fears).

Yet, still in our age principles like West's are applied to selection and grading of vocabulary items in language teaching. Now, we will continue explaining some of these principles.

A- SELECTION AND GRADATION OF VOCABULARY

Although it is suggested that the thought of a close correspondence between frequency and learnability is a naive idea, the main criterion in selection and grading of vocabulary is the frequency of lexical items in corpora derived from native speakers (Nunan, 1998). White (1989) and Richards (2001) offered some criteria to be followed before going on teaching vocabulary. Yet, although agreeing with Nunan, Richards (2001) does not believe in that frequency of a word means its usefulness because the most frequent words appearing in one type of writing (e.g. poem, essay, journal, scientific articles, etc.) will not be the same as those occurring in fiction. He argued that the experts working on the selection of vocabulary prepared their word lists through empirical means starting with word frequency lists. Some of the principles of vocabulary selection offered by White (1989) and Richards (2001) are as follows:

a) Frequency: the total number of occurrences of an item in a given corpus of language. Some of the earliest approaches to vocabulary selection involved counting large collection of texts to determine the frequency with which words occurred. Lists such as West's mentioned above are based on frequency counts and it is assumed that the most effective way of building a functional

vocabulary is teaching the learners the words that they are most likely to encounter (Nunan, 1998).

b) Coverage: words that cover or include the meaning of other words may also be useful. If there are two more possible words of similar frequency, the one which covers the greatest number of uses is preferable. It is this principle which is behind Ogden and Richard's *Basic English.*

c) Range: a third criterion is also complementary to that of frequency. Words found in a large number of texts within a given corpus have high range. In order to ensure that the frequency of occurrence of words in a corpus corresponds to their relative importance for language learners, the texts or language samples chosen as the basis for corpus must be relevant to the needs of target learner. For example, the most frequent word occurring in samples of sports writing will not be the same as those occurring in fiction.

d) Availability (disponibilite): this term refers to the readiness with which a word is remembered and used by native speakers. For example *geography* calls to mind *river, mountain, map, scale, plain*.

e) Defining Power: some words could be selected because they are useful in defining other words, even though they are not among the most frequent words in the language. For example, *container* might be useful because it can help define *bucket, jar,* and *carton.*

f) Learnability: five factors are taken into account when considering the learnability of a word. These are:

1. similarity of the L2 word to its L1 equivalent, e.g. French *classe* and English *class* or Turkish *yogurt* and English *yoghurt*.

2. demonstrability (teachability) of a word: in general, concrete terms are easier to demonstrate (and easier to understand) than abstract ones. For instance, a concrete noun like *car* is easier to learn than abstract ones. In a course taught following the Direct Method or a method such as Total Physical Response, concrete vocabulary is taught early on because it can easily be illustrated through pictures or by demonstration.

3. brevity: short words are easier to learn than long ones.

4. regularity of form: a new verb with a regular past tense will be easier to learn than a new verb with an irregular form.

5. the learning load represented by a new word: some items will be easy to learn because one or more components are known already, e.g. *handbag*. If both elements are already known the effort required to learn the new word will be low.

6. opportunism: some things are available within the immediate situation or are felt by the teacher to be useful to the students. Opportunist items include such pieces of classroom vocabulary such as *blackboard, pen, book, paper, cassette recorder, video,* etc.

7. centers of interest: these can range over a wide variety of areas, including such categories as transport, food, clothing, work, leisure, traveling and entertainment.

B- VOCABULARY TEACHING TECHNIQUES

In this section we will focus on some vocabulary teaching techniques recommended and applied by the experts. In this and the following sections, having surveyed a large literature on teaching and learning vocabulary we have tried to exhibit major methods and techniques. We, however, could not have included all the techniques found in the literature, so our list is far from being complete due to deliberate negligence of some minor techniques. The techniques to be analyzed fall under two different categories: a) explicit teaching techniques and b) implicit teaching techniques. Before carrying on with the techniques we should remind our audience what the criterion of knowing a vocabulary item is. According to J. Channel, learning a new language means the result of acquisition of vocabulary development; if the learner can identify the meaning of a new vocabulary item in and out of context, if it can be used without hesitation appropriately, or if the learners have both productive and receptive control of the new item, only then the new vocabulary item is acquired (Nunan, 1998).

We, however, should remind our audience that even though there are a number of techniques advised by either the experts or amateurs, there is no empirical evidence to prove the possible relationship between explicit vocabulary teaching and improvement in the lexical quality. Second, while the role of systematic vocabulary instruction has been emphasized by the experts, what systematic vocabulary instruction means has not been clearly defined. Various teaching techniques, such as the key word technique, listening, repeating aloud of new words, mnemonics, learning stems and affixes, and semantic fields, have been proposed in isolation, without clear indication of how these techniques may be used (Lee, 2003).

a) Explicit Teaching Techniques

William Grabe and Fredricka L. Stoller (2001) provide a list of explicit learning techniques in their article. These techniques are:

- analysis of word parts (prefix, root, suffix)
- associations (other words which would give clues of the meaning of the unknown word)
- cognate awareness (telling students some other words having the same etymology of the unknown word)
- dictionary activities
- discussion of word meanings
- flashcard
- games
- illustrations, drawings, realia
- matching meaning and collocations
- mnemonic devices
- parts of speech tables (noun, verb, adjective, etc)
- semantic mapping and semantic grids
- synonyms and antonyms
- word family exercises

In fact some of the techniques found (especially synonyms and antonyms, definitions, associations, dictionary activities) in the list have often been used in many of the grammar and reading books. Yet with the increased interest in teaching and learning of vocabulary books focused only teaching vocabulary have appeared in the market. *Vocabuilder* by Ekmekçi is a good example, which with its focus on vocabulary provides us some of the new techniques. Ekmekçi (2001), focusing primarily on the prefixes and suffixes, supplies a number of vocabulary exercises using the word family exercises, parts of speech tables, semantic mapping and semantic grids techniques. The study of prefixes and suffixes is also recommended by William Pittnam (2003). According to Pittnam 50% of the vocabulary in English are the words formed with the combinations of prefixes or suffixes. And this is why Ekmekçi, as she herself stated in the introduction of her *Vocabuilder*, put the emphasis on the use of prefixes and suffixes. Pittnam, in order to support his claim that the half of the vocabulary in English is words formed with the combinations of prefixes and suffixes, highlighting the global aspect of English language argues:

> English vocabulary is enormous and grows steadily with technological and cultural assimilations. The vast majority of the new words introduced, and a great percentage of the words used to express abstract ideas, are complex words that are made up of simple word parts (prefixes, roots, and suffixes) that have their own definitions and, when familiar to the student of English, can be understood in context without an exact definition.

In order to employ semantic mapping technique, you could arrange the words into a diagram with the key word at the top and related words as branches linked to the key word and to each other. This technique can be practiced either with individuals or with a group.

b) Implicit Teaching (Learning)

Implicit (incidental) learning was the technique of the communicative approach of the 1970s and 1980s. Students were advised to recognize clues to word meanings in context and to use monolingual dictionaries rather than bilingual dictionaries and textbooks aimed to develop the ability of inferring word from the context (Decarrico, 2001).

Like content based instruction which "does not clearly distinguish form and function in teaching language but makes the new language available in the contexts of its functions and meanings," (Krahnke, 1987: 68), when using implicit learning technique the learners are not required to do vocabulary exercises or other explicit learning techniques. They just read as much as possible so that they are exposed to a word many times. Decarrico (2001) diagnoses lack of exposure as the common problem facing language learners and she advises students to keep on extensive reading, which is sometimes referred to as a "book flood" approach, in which reading is done consistently over a period of time.

The justification of learning new vocabulary items through extensive reading is that "we have not been explicitly taught the majority of the words that we know" and "beyond a certain level of proficiency in a second language, vocabulary learning is more likely to be mainly implicit (incidental)," (Decarrico, 2001: 289).

C- VOCABULARY LEARNING TECHNIQUES
a) Guessing meaning from the context

Most of the books aimed to teach or help learn vocabulary try to enable the learners to recognize clues to guessing the meaning of the word from the context. Forming the habit of "educated guessing", as Ekmekçi (2001) called it; will certainly help students with their vocabulary problems. Decarrico (2001) explains the basic steps of the educated guessing as follows:

> 1. Deciding the part of the speech of the unknown word, that is, if it is a noun, verb, adverb, adjective, preposition, etc.
> 2. Examining the context of the clause or the sentence in which employs the word and then recognizing the other words accompanying the unknown words.
> 3. Looking for the transition signals within and between the paragraphs so that the meaning of the clause or the sentence containing the unknown word might become clearer. If there is no clear signal punctuations may be helpful.
> 4. Finally, if you have not still found any clear signal conducive to guess the meaning of the word, break the word into prefix, root, and suffix. Breaking the word into affixes and stem should be your last strategy since using affixes and roots may mislead you if you neglect to take the context into consideration.

b) Mnemonic Techniques

Mnemonic is described as something that you use to help you remember a name, a word, a rule, etc. in dictionaries. Since mnemonics aid the integration of new material into existing cognitive structures, they are useful for learners. There are various different techniques used to teach mnemonics. We have adapted the list of mnemonic techniques provided by Irene Thompson (2003):

1. The Linguistic Mnemonics

1.1 The Peg Technique:

This technique allows unrelated items, such as words in a word list, to be recalled by linking them with a set of memorized "pegs" or "hooks". Learners associate words to be memorized with these "pegs" to form composite images. The peg or the hook is the word which is acquired by the learner. It has the least impossibility to be forgotten because of its high frequency in everyday texts and the sound foundation it has in the memory of the learner. A newly met word is associated in some aspects with another

word which has already been acquired by the learner so that the fossilization of the newly met word is minimized.

1.2 The Key Word Technique:

This technique involves the establishment of an acoustic and image link between an L2 word to be learned and a word in L2 that sounds similar. For instance, the German word Ei "egg" can be learned by first establishing an acoustic link with the English word eye and then conjuring up an interactive image of an egg with an eye in the middle of it.

2. Spatial Mnemonics

2.1 The Loci Technique:

This is an ancient technique. To use this technique one imagines a familiar location, such as a room. Then one mentally places the first item to be remembered in the first location, the second item in the second location, and so forth. To recall the items, one takes an imaginary walk along the landmarks in the room and retrieves the items that were "put" there.

2.2 Spatial Grouping

Spatial grouping entails rearranging words on a page to form different kinds of geometric figure such as triangles, squares, columns, and so on.

2.3 Finger Technique:

You simply associate each item to be learned with a finger.

3. Visual Mnemonics

3. 1 Pictures

Pictures are paired with words you need to learn. Studies have shown that this is an effective and efficient way to memorize vocabulary.

3.2 Visualization

Instead of using real pictures, visualize a word you need to remember. This is much more
effective than merely repeating the word.

4. Physical Mnemonics

Physically enacting the information in a word or a sentence results in better recall than simple repetition. Some foreign language teaching techniques are based on physical reenactment, e.g. Total Physical Response and the Silent Way.

CONCLUSION

Words are one of the indispensable parts in foreign language learning because every single unit in a language consists of words. In the process of acquiring a foreign language one should acquire a number of words. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to

express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 cannot take place in any meaningful way. And yet vocabulary seems to be least systematized of all the aspects of learning of a foreign language. In the history of English Language Teaching, teaching of grammar has dominated the language courses but we should not forget that it is possible to communicate without the knowledge of grammar but it becomes unthinkable to do it without the cognizance of vocabulary.

The teachers of a foreign language are inevitably engaged in teaching vocabulary. Syllabuses and textbooks mostly state their goals in terms of skills, topics, etc. but teachers are still trying to get their students acquainted with vocabulary. This is because they must enable the students to function accurately, appropriately and fluently in situations they will find themselves in. One of the tools that permits students to do this is the ability to recognize and produce a wide range of vocabulary items.

In order to make students more aware and interested in vocabulary development, teachers should a) try out different vocabulary teaching techniques b) extend the range of activities and games made use of in vocabulary teaching and c) show special care in the preparation and presentation of the lessons so that vocabulary learning does not seem ambiguous.

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