VOCABULARY TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper stresses the need for empirical research in the area of second language vocabulary teaching. Three issues for research have been discussed: vocabulary teaching strategies, teaching of word meaning, and teaching of word-form. Future research on vocabulary teaching strategies is advised to investigate strategy use and perception by language teachers as well as effectiveness of various teaching strategies. Research on teaching word meaning might test for the effect of using multiple positive examples and negative examples of a concept; the best way to teach polysemous words (i.e. words with multiple meanings), the strength of cross-association among semantically and formally-related words, and learning outcomes from quick teaching. Finally, the main issue for research on form teaching is offered to be the timing of form teaching relative to teaching of meaning.

Key words: second language, vocabulary teaching, teaching strategies, word-meaning, word-form

SÖZCÜK ÖĞRETİMİ

Özet

Bu makalede, yabancı dilde sözcük öğretimi alanında bilimsel araştırmalara gereksinim olduğu vurgulanmakta ve şu üç araştırma konusu tartışılmaktadır: sözcük öğretim stratejileri, sözcük anlamlarının öğretimi ve sözcük biçimlerinin öğretimi. Sözcük öğretim stratejileri konusunda yapılacak araştrmalar için, yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin öğretim stratejilerini kullanımları ve stratejilerle ilgili görüşlerinin yanısıra strateji etkinliği de araştırma konusu olarak önerilmektedir. Anlam öğretiminde ise olumlu ve olumsuz örnek kullanımının sözcüklerin anlamlarını öğrenmeye olan etkisi, çok anlamlı sözcükleri öğretme stratejileri, anlamsal ve biçimsel olarak ilişkili olan sözcüklerin öğretiminde "çaprazlama" probleminin boyutları ve "hızlı" öğretimin öğrenmeye olan etkisi gibi konuların araştırılması önerilmektedir. Son olarak, sözcük biçimlerinin öğretiminde, biçim öğretiminin anlam öğretimiyle eş zamanlı olup olmaması temel soru olarak sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: yabancı dil, sözcük öğretimi, öğretim stratejileri, sözcük anlamları, sözcük biçimleri

There has been a revival of interest in issues of vocabulary learning in a second language in the last decade or so and a significant amount of empirical research has been carried out on the subject. The area of vocabulary teaching, however, has not entertained a similar attention from researchers. Read's review of the field in 2004 has revealed a lack of research on issues concerning classroom-teaching of vocabulary. What we have is nothing more than "good advice" on how to teach words offered in the volumes by Nation (1990, 2001), Gairns and Redman (1986), Lewis (1993), and Allen (1983), and this is yet to be shown empirically to be "good". Vocabulary teaching, which is understood here to be teacher and classroom-oriented, needs to be established as an area of research which would ultimately lead to a theory of vocabulary teaching. In what follows, some of the issues for research will be outlined and discussed.

Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Research is abundant in the area of vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 1997; Stoffer, 1995; Ahmed, 1989; Fan, 2003; Gu, 2003; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Lawson and Hogben, 1996; Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown, 1999; Sanaoui, 1995; Kudo, 1999). Among issues of major interest are the development of taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies, the frequency with which these strategies are used by second language learners, learners' perceptions regarding the usefulness of these strategies, major styles in strategy use and the relation between strategy use and L2 vocabulary size and proficiency. In this literature, the distinction between vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary teaching strategies is not clearly drawn as commented by O'Malley et.al. (1985, p.22): "Learning, teaching, and communication strategies are often interlaced in discussions of language learning and often applied to the same behaviour".

According to Schmitt (1997), a vocabulary learning strategy is any strategy that results in the learning of vocabulary. Notably, this covers vocabulary teaching strategies as well since they also lead, or are meant to lead, to vocabulary learning. It will be argued here that vocabulary learning and teaching strategies should be defined in a mutually exclusive manner, and I suggest *vocabulary learning strategies* be defined, following (Sanaoui, 1995), as learners' study habits of second language vocabulary and *vocabulary teaching strategies* as actions taken by the teacher to teach or practice target vocabulary. Thus, a learning strategy is self-initiated by the learner whereas a teaching strategy is teacher-initiated.

A failure to distinguish between the two types of strategies might result in the confounding of research results since the same behaviour on the part of the learner could be either a learning strategy or a teaching strategy depending on who is controlling it. One such strategy is *written repetition* which is "repeated writing of

L2 words". This would be a learning strategy if the learner decides that he/she has a problem with the spelling of an L2 word and that writing it several times will help. On the other hand, it will be a teaching strategy if the teacher assigns students homework that involves writing the new words introduced in class, say, five times until next time. Schmitt's survey (1997) on the use of vocabulary learning strategies by Japanese EFL learners has shown the use of written repetition surprisingly popular among these learners: it was the second most frequent strategy, although several research studies suggested it to be an ineffective strategy preferred mostly by lower proficiency learners (Gu & Johnson, 1986; Fan, 2003). Given the rather broad definition of a vocabulary learning strategy Schmitt adopts, it is likely that this result is a reflection of the teachers' rather than the learners' preference for the strategy.

The distinction between vocabulary learning and teaching strategies is not a superficial one, though. It might have important implications in terms of learning outcomes. A self-employed strategy has the advantage of being more meaningful to the learner and therefore, will induce higher motivation in and greater attention to the task of word learning. Thus, written repetition imposed by the teacher might turn mechanical in learners' hurry to complete the task whereas written repetition self-selected by the learner would be geared more towards learning. It is possible, of course, to reverse the argument in favour of teaching strategies and say that a strategy will be designed and implemented more skilfully by the teacher, such as word analysis (i.e. analysis of roots and affixes), and thus will produce more positive learning outcomes. It follows from this that some teaching strategies might be more conducive to word learning than the corresponding learning strategies and vice-versa. Also, many teaching strategies would not normally appear in a vocabulary learning strategies taxonomy, e.g. relia, cut-out figures, pictures, charts, games, etc.

A number of authors have described techniques of vocabulary teaching (Cross, 1991; Nation, 1990, 2001; Gairns and Redman, 1986; Allen, 1983). There has been no attempt, however, to collect this in a taxonomy. In a taxonomy of this kind, it might be useful to draw a three-way distinction between presentation strategies, practice strategies and strategy training strategies. *Presentation strategies* (Cross, 1991; Nation, 1990) are those that introduce the target vocabulary for the first time. These will involve either presentation of the meaning (i.e. concept) or the form. Among the meaning strategies are *visual strategies* like the use of pictures, body actions, real objects or video, *verbal presentation strategies* like definition, translation, or exemplification and *audio strategies* like imitation of sound or having learners listen to a tape-recording (Cross, 1991). Form presentation focuses on the pronunciation or spelling of the word and includes strategies like the teacher's modelling of the target word, chorus repetition, or the what-is-it

technique proposed in Nation (1990, p. 66-67). The second group of strategies, *practice strategies,* involves classroom review of the previously introduced vocabulary as well as homework (e.g. classroom tests, games, semantic maps, written repetition). The third strategy group includes strategies for strategy training. The purpose of *strategy training* is to teach learners strategies for independent vocabulary learning like guessing from context, word-building, dictionary use and keeping vocabulary notes. To teach strategies, however, the teacher also needs a strategy, a kind of teaching plan. Pittman (2003), for instance, describes a strategy for teaching word analysis skills in English and Schmitt and Schmitt (1999) offer a method to teach learners how to organise a vocabulary notebook.

The devised taxonomies can further be used in studies that survey teachers' use and perception of the strategies or in experimental studies that test relative effectiveness of strategies for a given purpose (i.e. concept teaching) or for a given type of target words (e.g. nouns vs. verbs). The research by Chun and Plass (1996) is an example of experimental work on strategy effectiveness. In this study, Chun and Plass compared vocabulary learning in three different presentation modes as learners read a computerised text in a multi-media environment. The three modes available to the learners for look-up by a simple clicking were verbal definition, pictures and video and were provided only for a set of nouns. The modes of presentation used in the experiment are parallel to verbal (i.e. definition) and visual teaching strategies (i.e. picture and video) mentioned above. Although the study was conducted under laboratory conditions, the results can also be generalised to the language classroom since a language teacher may also use definition, picture or video to teach words. The study indicated that pictures and video were more effective than verbal definition and pictures were, in turn, more effective than the video. This result might be explained by the nature of the target words used, which uniformly belonged to the noun category. Nouns typically encode entities and states and less typically processes or actions. Thus, noun meaning is basically static, and this may be the reason why still pictures were more effective than motion pictures (i.e. video). Alternatively, video might turn out to be more effective in teaching verbs, as verb meaning is typically dynamic. This is a matter for empirical research.

Teaching of Word Meaning

Words are labels for concepts and teaching word meaning is essentially teaching concepts for given words. There are several suggestions for teaching concepts in Nation (1990, chapter 4). One of these concerns the presentation of *multiple positive examples* of the concept. Positive examples are instances to which a given word truly applies. Among the positive examples of *vehicle*, for example,

are cars, trucks, vans, buses, trains, etc. Giving multiple positive examples is necessary because concept learning requires the abstraction of the important features of the concept and ignoring the unimportant ones, and to do this the learner has to see several examples and needs to identify what is common to them all and what is different. The important (i.e. criterial) features of being a *person*, for example, is to be a human being and usually to be an adult. On the other hand, "color of skin, color of hair, and age are not criterial features of *person*" (Nation, 1990, p.53). If multiple examples of person (e.g. pictures of individual persons with different skin and hair colour and from different age groups) are provided, learners will be able to work out the criterial features and learn to ignore the non-criterial ones in the concept of *person* they formed (ibid, p.53-54). This sounds intuitively appealing. However, it needs to be shown empirically that two or more examples are better than just one. It is quite possible that for some concepts there will be no difference between giving one example and giving several examples. Some concepts have constant reference (i.e. refer to a single entity) like earth, sun, etc. while others do not show much variance among their referents (e.g. water, orange, snow, etc.). All the examples that would be given for these concepts will be inevitably very similar to one another. It should be tested, therefore, if multiple examples are still better than one example for these words simply because they increase the exposure time. It should be useful, though, to give multiple examples in the case of words with abstract or general meanings (e.g. person, adult, vehicle, furniture, building, etc.).

Nation's (1990) another recommendation is to use *negative examples* of a concept in addition to the positive examples. Negative examples are instances to which the word does not apply. The negative examples of *person*, for example, will include "things that are not persons" (p.54). However, for the negative examples to be meaningful, they need to be sufficiently similar to the positive examples. While *skateboards* and *wheelbarrows* are meaningful negative examples for *vehicle*, as they share the feature of "locomotion" with the positive examples; a *kettle*, *smoke*, or *clouds* are not meaningful even though they, too, are not vehicles. Negative examples will be useful in showing the boundaries of a concept and thus, helping learners to distinguish the word from other similar concepts. For example, the word *desk* and *table* are semantically related in English. Both concepts involve a flat surface resting horizontally on vertical (usually four) axes. The two words are distinguished in English with respect to the use to which they are put. A table is used for eating from and a desk is used for study. Thus, an office desk or a home desk might be used as negative examples for the word table to help learners limit the meaning of table and to prevent overgeneralisation to desks (e.g. referring to a home desk as a table). However, some caution is necessary in claming that

negative examples are good since negative examples might be confusing when the learner is still wrestling with basic understanding of the core concept and has yet a shaky understanding of it. Thus, negative examples are yet to be shown to be effective.

Nation (1990, p.53) also recommends teaching *the underlying concept* in the case of words with several uses. He illustrates this with the word *fork* in English. This word has a number of uses and can be used to refer alternatively to a utensil for eating, a part of a bicycle, a part of a road, and a part of a branch. Nation offers using a simple shape like this $\subset$ to teach the word as "it fits most of the uses of *fork* in English" (p.53). This has the advantage of reducing the learning burden as only one concept will be taught for the value of four. However, research on polysemous words (i.e. words with multiple meanings) suggests a better alternative to teaching the underlying concept. In most dictionaries, the word *fork* is treated as polysemous and the several uses referred to by Nation are presented as separate meaning senses of the word. Several studies (Ozturk, 1998; Schmitt, 1998; Verspoor and Lowie, 2003) have shown that L2 learners have superior knowledge of one of the several senses a polysemous word has. This sense, called *the core meaning sense* or *the basic sense*, is the most concrete, frequent and literal of all the meanings of the word and therefore conceptually easier to understand. The core meaning is also central to the understanding of other meanings because the latter are often figurative extensions from the core meaning. In the case of fork, 'the eating instrument sense' is the core sense and the other meanings are metaphoric extensions where the shape of an eating instrument is abstracted and applied to other domains (i.e. that of a bicycle, a road and a tree respectively). This suggests that teaching the core meaning sense (i.e. eating instrument sense) might be easier than teaching the underlying meaning and also might obviate the need to teach extended meanings since they will be predictable receptively (e.g. in reading) on the basis of the core sense. A matter for research, therefore, will be to compare the effectiveness of the two ways of teaching polysemous words: through abstract underlying meanings or through the core sense.

Cross-association is a common problem in teaching word meaning and it occurs when semantically related words are taught together. Cross-association involves confusion of form-meaning relationships whereby word forms are matched to wrong meanings. Synonyms and antonyms are particularly amenable to such confusion (Nation, 1990, p. 45). When *tall* and *short*, for example, are taught together, learners will have difficulty in remembering which word form (i.e. tall vs. short) referred to which concept (i.e. "above average height" vs. "below average height" respectively), and they might associate *tall* with "below average height" and *short* with "above average height". Cross-association is argued to occur

because the meanings of *tall* and *short* are too similar (i.e. they represent extreme values on the same scale of length) for the learners to keep them separate. It needs to be empirically shown, however, that cross-association occurs between semantically related words and not semantically unrelated ones. A counter-argument can be forwarded such that a word will be cross-associated with any other word taught together since word-form is arbitrary. It could also be investigated if form similarity (i.e. "synforms" in Laufer, 1989) also leads to cross-association and which type is stronger.

Another issue involves *quick teaching* of a word's meaning, which teachers are sometimes engaged in when learners did not understand a word in another activity such as reading. Such words are not preplanned for teaching, they appear spontaneously, are usually not very important to learn and have to be dealt with quickly so that they should not interfere with the task. The most common ways of quick teaching are giving a translation or a synonym. It is a matter for investigation if learners do learn words from such quick teaching and how this compares to lengthy presentation of preplanned words.

Form Teaching

Form teaching should be more challenging to a teacher than concept teaching. Second language learners come to the language classroom with concepts already formed through first language acquisition. Thus, concept teaching in the L2 basically involves activation of these concepts and occasionally modifying these on the boundaries to fit L2 concepts. The more challenging task is to get the learner establish a link between the concept and an L2 form, challenging because forms are arbitrary and because concepts are already linked to L1 forms.

Nation (1990, p.67) suggests that form teaching should precede presentation of meaning. He offers techniques (e.g. the what-is-it technique) to delay presentation of meaning until form has been presented several times. Barcroft (2003) also suggests form and concept teaching to be separated. He claims that our mental processing capacity is limited and when focus is on form, meaning will not be attended to and vice-versa. The Spanish L2 learners in his study studied word-picture pairs. For half of the pairs, they were asked to think of questions related to the meaning of the target and for the other half they concentrated on learning the words. The results indicated that learners remembered words better in the no-questions condition, which "provided evidence for a potentially inhibitory effect of semantic elaboration during L2 word learning" (p. 546). The inhibition occurred because semantic elaboration reduced learners' attention to form and the link between meaning and form could not be established. Further experimental data are

required involving teaching situations comparing conditions where form and meaning are taught together and separately.

Conclusion

This paper has considered some issues for research in the area of second language vocabulary teaching, which is in urgent need of scientific research. This should not be seen as the responsibility of language teachers since their main job is to teach not to do research per se although there is no reason why they should not. The area deserves serious scholarly interest.

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