HOW TO TEACH VOCABULARY: READING TO LEARN, LEARNING TO READ

Behnoosh Tayyebi*

Abstract

Research on second language reading has provided a number of insights into reading development and instruction. Building a large vocabulary is essential when learning to read in a second language. Simply put, people with large vocabularies are more proficient readers than those with limited vocabularies (Beglar & Hunt, 1995). Not so simply put, however, is how learners can best build a large vocabulary through reading. A review of the current literature on vocabulary acquisition reveals a spectrum of theoretical positions ranging from highly cognitive approaches that stress the memorization of decontextualized lists, to highly naturalistic approaches that stress implicit, contextualized learning. This paper will review pedagogical points from various theoretical positions, and combine them in a set of suggestions for teachers of English reading courses.

Key Words:

Contextualized Vocabulary Learning; Decontextualized Vocabulary Learning; Implicit Learning; Explicit Learning

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* Islamic Azad University, Tehran North Branch

Introduction

The importance of vocabulary to reading achievement and more specifically to reading comprehension has long been established. Knowledge of word meanings and the ability to access that knowledge efficiently are recognized as important factors in reading comprehension. As Baker (1995) argues, some people believe there is a common sense relationship between vocabulary and comprehension-messages are composed of ideas and ideas are expressed in words. Most theorists and researchers in education have assumed that vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are closely related and numerous studies have shown the strong correlation between the two(Baker,1995;Nagy,1988).Richards and Renandya (2003) consider vocabulary the core component of language proficiency which provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. They believe without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them.

As a matter of fact ,research on vocabulary in recent years has done a great deal to clarify the levels of vocabulary learning learners need to achieve in order to read both simplified and unsimplified materials and to process different kinds of oral and written texts as well as the kinds of strategies

learners use in understanding ,using, and remembering words. A central debate emerging today deals with the most appropriate approach to effective vocabulary learning: learning words in context versus learning them out of context.

Contextualized versus Decontextualized Vocabulary Learning

Convictions are strong among many language professionals that contextualized vocabulary learning is more effective than learning words in lists. Oxford and Scarcella(1994),for example, observe that although decontextualized learning(word lists)may help students memorize vocabulary for tests, students are likely to rapidly forget words memorized from lists. McCarthy (1990) argues that a word learned in a meaningful context is best assimilated and remembered. However, most studies have failed to produce findings favoring context-dependent vocabulary learning (Morgen and Bailey, 1943: Wind and Davidson, 1969; Gershman1970; Tudor and Hafiz, 1989; Hulstijn, 1992) and in this regard, Nation (2003) states that the assumption of contextualized vocabulary learning is not supported by research and by what successful learners do. He argues that explicit, decontextualized study of vocabulary is an effective way of rapidly increasing learners' vocabulary size and that the learning achieved in this way can last for a very long time.

Moreover, in recent literature dealing with vocabulary acquisition, there can be seen increasing advocacy for explicitly teaching words out of context at an early stage of language acquisition, with more context-based vocabulary learning taking place at later stages of language development(Coady,1997b;Nation and Newton,1997).To justify their position, these advocates often draw attention to the paradoxical situation facing the novice L2 learner of having to learn vocabulary through extensive reading or listening when they don't know enough words to read or listen well. This suggests the logical importance of helping beginners explicitly learn the basic 3,000 word families, thought to represent the fundamental lexical competence by which learners can read independently and acquire language in a natural manner (Laufer, 1997).

Carter (2002) believes teachers help learners with vocabulary directly or 'explicitly' by means of word lists, paired translation equivalents and in variously related semantic sets. They also help learners by more indirect or 'implicit' means such as exposure to words in the context of reading real texts. He argues that we have not been taught the majority of words we know. Beyond a certain level of proficiency in learning a language-and a second or a foreign language in particular-vocabulary development is more likely to be mainly implicit or incidental. In his opinion, explicit learning may be

the best route in learning the surface forms of basic concrete words, whereas, for semantic, discoursal, and structural properties of less frequent, more abstract words, implicit learning may be better.

Decarrico(2001) notes that interest in the role of vocabulary in second language learning has grown rapidly in recent years which emphasizes the need for the emergence of a systematic and principled approach by both the teacher and the learner. She believes that in the 1970s and 1980s, the communicative approach led naturally to a focus on implicit, incidental learning .Teachers encouraged students to recognize clues to word meanings in context and to use monolingual dictionaries rather than bilingual dictionaries, and text books emphasized inferring word meaning from context. Currently, however, while acknowledging that exposure to words in various contexts is extremely important to a deeper understanding of a word's meaning, she argues, most researchers recognize that providing incidental encounters with words is only one method of facilitating vocabulary acquisition, and that a well-structured vocabulary program needs a balanced approach that includes explicit teaching together with activities providing appropriate contexts for incidental learning.

Hunt and Beglar (2003) present a systematic framework

for vocabulary development by combining the three approaches of incidental learning, explicit instruction, and independent strategy development to vocabulary instruction and learning. The incidental learning of vocabulary requires that teachers provide opportunities for extensive reading and listening. Explicit instruction involves diagnosing the words learners need to know, presenting words for the first time, elaborating word knowledge, and developing fluency with known words. Finally, independent strategy development involves practicing guessing from context and training learners to use dictionaries. In their view, although all these approaches and principles have a role to play in vocabulary instruction, the learners' proficiency level and learning situation should be considered when deciding the relative emphasis to be placed on each approach. In general, they believe, emphasizing explicit instruction is probably best for beginning and intermediate students who have limited vocabularies. On the other hand, extensive reading and listening might receive more attention for more proficient intermediate and advanced students. Also because of its immediate benefits, dictionary training should begin early in the curriculum.

Teaching Principles

The new approach, as recommended by Hunt and Beglar (2003), emerging out of the three approaches of implicit

vocabulary learning, explicit vocabulary learning, and strategy training, appears in the form of seven principles, and can be regarded as the basis to fulfill the requirements for structuring an effective and efficient vocabulary program.

Incidental Learning (Indirect)

Principle 1: Provide Opportunities For The Incidental Learning Of Vocabulary

In the long run, most words in both first and second languages are probably learned incidentally, through extensive reading and listening (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985).L2 learners can be expected to require many exposures to a word in context before understanding its meaning. The incidental learning of vocabulary through extensive reading can benefit language curricula and learners at all levels (woodinsky, Nation 1988).

Explicit Instruction (Direct)

Principle 2: Diagnose Which Of The 3,000 Most Common Words Learners Need To Study

Knowing approximately 3,000 high frequency and general academic words is significant because this amount covers a high percentage of the words on an average page (Nation 1984).One way to estimate vocabulary size is to use Nation's (1990) vocabulary Levels Test or a checklist test

which requires learners to mark the words on a list that they believe they know (for more information on checklist tests, see Meara, 1992, 1996).

Principle 3: Provide Opportunities For The Intentional Learning Of Vocabulary

Explicit instruction is essential for beginning students whose lack of vocabulary limits their reading ability. Coady (1997b) believes that teachers should oblige students to supplement their extensive reading with study of the 3,000 most frequent words until the words' form and meaning become automatically recognized (i.e.," sight vocabulary ") .He states the first stage in teaching these 3,000 words commonly begins with word pairs in which an L2 word is matched with an L1 translation .

Principle 4: Provide Opportunities For Elaborating Word Knowledge

Elaboration involves expanding the connections between what the learners already know and new information. One way to do this is to choose L2 words from the surrounding context and to explain their connections to the recently learned words (Prince, 1996). In addition to presenting this new information, teachers should create opportunities to meet these useful, recently learned words in new contexts that provide new collocations and associations (Nation, 1994).Generating

derivatives, synonyms, antonyms, and completing collocations are among exercises that can deepen students' knowledge of words.

Principle 5: Provide Opportunities For Developing Fluency With Known Vocabulary

Fluency-building activities recycle already known words in familiar grammatical and organizational patterns so that students can focus on recognizing or using words without hesitation. As Hunt and Beglar (2003) note, fluency partly depends on developing sight vocabulary through extensive reading and studying high - frequency vocabulary. Fluency exercises include timed and paced readings. In timed readings, learners may try to increase their speed by sliding a card or a piece of paper down the page to increase their speed while attempting to comprehend about 80% of a passage. Teachers can ask learners to practice timed reading on passages that have already been read. In paced readings, the teacher determines the time and pushes the learners to read faster (Mikulecky& Jeffries, 1996).

Independent Strategy Development

Principle 6: Experiment With Guessing From Context

One of the strategies most often discussed in the literature is guessing from context. Making the transition to independent learning can be easier and more efficient if

teachers help students learn to recognize clues to guessing word meaning from context. This strategy is a key vocabulary learning skill for dealing with low-frequency vocabulary, particularly in reading authentic texts (Decarrico, 2003).

According to Nation and Coady (1988), once learners decide that a word is worth guessing, they might follow a five-step procedure:

1. Determine the part of speech of the unknown word.
2. Look at the immediate context and simplify it if necessary.
3. Look at the wider context (surrounding clauses and sentences).
4. Guess the meaning of the unknown word.
5. Check that the guess is correct.

Principle 7: Examine Different Types Of Dictionaries And Teach Students How To Use Them

Types of dictionaries fall into the categories of traditional monolingual, traditional bilingual, bilingualized, and electronic.Among all these types, bilingualized dictionaries may have some advantages over the other mentioned types because they essentially do the job of both a bilingual and a monolingual dictionary. Whereas bilingual dictionaries usually provide just an L1 synonym, bilingualized dictionaries include L2 definitions, L2 sentence examples, as well as L1 synonyms (Laufer and Heder, 1997).

As for the issue of dictionary use, teachers should teach

students how to use all the information in an entry before making conclusions about the meaning of a word (Laufer and Hader, 1997), direct learners' attention toward the value of good sentence examples which provide collocational, grammatical, and pragmatic information, and finally, emphasize the importance of checking a word's original context carefully because context determines which sense of a word is being used.

Based on these seven principles, a portion of the next part of this paper will review further points regarding decontextualized vocabulary learning (word lists), contextualized vocabulary learning (extensive graded reading), as well as issues relevant to the contextual guessing versus dictionary use and memorization strategies.

Word Lists

Presenting vocabulary in list form is an efficient study method in which students can learn large numbers of words in a short time (Meara, 1995). The difficulty with such lists, however, is that they present words that have been stripped of all context-based meaning. To remedy this, lists are now generally tied to a reading passage to provide context. These lists provide a format which is easy to memorize, and subsequent exposure to meaning in context which allows students to fine-tune the approximate meanings learned from

the list.

However, here emerges the question of how these approximate meanings should be presented. Izumi (1995) argues in favor of translation for initial, pre-contextual word presentation, and cites several studies showing the superiority of the use of translation equivalents to an inductive approach in vocabulary learning. Prince (1996) found that both "advanced" and "weaker" learners could recall more newly learned words using L1 translations than using L2 context. Furthermore, Hunt and Beglar (2003) believe translation has a necessary and useful role in L2 learning, but it can hinder learners' progress if it is used to the exclusion of L2 techniques. To discourage the learners from overrelying on translation, Prince advises that teachers talk with them about their expectations of language learning and "the pitfalls of low-effort strategies like translation".

There are other drawbacks, however, to using word lists. As Stevick once observed, "If you want to forget something, put it in a list" (cited in Lewis, 1993, p. 118). Stevick's criticism was no doubt aimed at the inherently inflexible, linear nature of lists: Although they help learners organize words, lists do become tedious as they grow in length. Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) suggest that students write new words on index cards. Thus, whereas the compilation of a word list for the

class may be the responsibility of the teacher, it falls on the students to create flashcards or some other organizational device to use the list more effectively for their own purposes.

Extensive Graded Reading and Vocabulary Acquisition

As mentioned earlier, studies of implicit vocabulary acquisition have shown that learning through extensive reading is not only possible, but is almost certainly the means by which native speakers acquire the majority of their vocabulary (Saragi, Nation, and Meister, 1978). For such learning to occur, however, the reader must understand approximately 95% of the running words in the text (Nation, 1990) in order to infer meaning.

While such high levels of comprehension pose no problems for native speakers, they are clearly out of reach for most foreign-language learners who are using authentic materials. Linguistically graded versions of authentic texts have therefore been created to artificially raise the level of reading comprehension for students of English. As a result, students can make vocabulary gains with each reader they complete (Davis, 1995).

In addition to quantitative gains, extensive reading offers qualitative gains with respect to newly learned lexis. To begin with, readers provide a textual environment from which

students can infer context-based meanings which are generally not found in dictionaries, such as connotations, collocations, or referential meanings. Moreover, every time a word is repeated in the text, it is in a slightly different context. This helps the learner develop a deeper and more accurate understanding of word meaning, and fosters vocabulary acquisition (Ellis, 1995).

The use of extensive graded reading for implicit vocabulary learning does, however, have limitations. First, implicit acquisition can be time consuming. For adults with limited study time, this may cause some frustration. Second, as stated above, the high rate of comprehension necessary for implicit vocabulary acquisition makes the use of authentic materials such as books, magazines, and newspapers difficult, if not impossible to use without the aid of a dictionary. Finally, while graded readers are an excellent means to learn high-frequency lexis, they are not likely to include much of the low-frequency lexis that is typically present in authentic readings.

Contextual Guessing versus Dictionary Use

It has been shown that students who use a bilingual dictionary

learn more vocabulary than students who read without a dictionary (Luppescu & Day, 1993). However, when students turn to a dictionary for every word they do not understand, they lose sight of the meanings within the text as a whole. Teachers and textbook designers have come to understand this, and the result has been a movement toward the explicit instruction of fluency-oriented learning strategies such as guessing from context. Researchers such as David Nunan (1991) have commented that this movement may have gone too far, and the implication in much of the literature today is that good language learners rely on dictionaries less than poor language learners, and are more successful at employing contextual guessing strategies. This implication may not be accurate, however, according to a recent large-scale study on strategy use carried out in China by Wen & Johnson (1997).

These researchers found that dictionaries were used equally by both high and low English achievers. There was, however, a notable difference in how the students used their dictionaries: Dictionary use by high achievers involved a series of questions: "Was it necessary to consult the dictionary? What information in the dictionary was relevant? Was the information worth copying down, and if so, in Chinese or in English?" (Wen and Johnson, 1997, p. 36). Low achievers, on the other hand, followed "a relatively inflexible set of procedures for dictionary use rather than a decision-making

process" (p. 36).

It was also found that while all learners consistently used guessing as a strategy, it was the high achievers who tended to guess according to the reading context. When reading for pleasure, high achievers often guessed word meaning without consulting a dictionary. During intensive reading, guesses "were consistently checked against the dictionary" (Wen and Johnson, 1997). In contrast, lower level readers tended to rely more heavily on guessing from context in all situations. These findings were supported by qualitative results which showed that the highest achievers were those most skeptical of guessing strategies, as opposed to low achievers, who approved strongly to guessing in all contexts.

The results of this study demonstrate that the issue of dictionary use versus contextual guessing is not really an issue at all: Good language learners do, in fact, rely quite heavily on dictionaries, but they use their dictionaries in ways which are significantly different than less successful learners. The answer, then, is to help less successful students develop a greater metacognitive awareness of the reading and learning process. Students can be taught, for example, to employ dictionaries differentially according to whether they are reading for pleasure, or whether they are reading intensively, with the intention of focusing on specific grammar points and

vocabulary within the text. At the same time, students can benefit from specific instruction in recognizing which words are most fundamental to understanding the overall meaning of the text. Students can be taught to look up content words "that are introduced in a leading sentence and then thematized by repetition," (Parry, 1991) or words which are printed in bold-face or italics.

Memorization Strategies in the Reading Class

In the earlier sections of this paper it was stated that linking new meanings to language that is already known can positively affect vocabulary teaching (Prince, 1996). These links are now more commonly known as cognitive strategies, and are widely reported in vocabulary-acquisition research. For the most part, these cognitive strategies take the learner beyond meaningless repetition, and provide mnemonic devices that produce a deep level of semantic processing of the word in question (Craik, 1979).

One cognitive strategy that has proved to be effective in the memorization of vocabulary is the keyword technique in which students connect the sound of a word they are learning to one they already know in either their first language or the target language. They then create an image to help remember the association (Hulstijn 1997).

Although not every word lends itself so easily to this method, it does provide a powerful tool with respect to words which have a high degree of "imageability" (Richardson, 1980) or to word pairs between which the learner can form some kind of semantic link (Ellis, 1995). And while not all students will be disposed to using keywords on a regular basis, most will find some use for the technique with words that are particularly difficult to remember.

Classroom Applications

I. Incidental learning of vocabulary

At least a portion of class time or homework time should be dedicated to this type of fluency-oriented reading. According to Coady (1997b), the role of graded (i.e., simplified) readers is to build up the students' vocabulary and structures until they can graduate to more authentic materials. Low-proficiency learners can benefit from graded readers because they will be repeatedly exposed to high frequency 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 (SSR).Once students develop the ability to read in a sustained fashion, then most of the reading should be done outside of class (Pilgreen and Krashen, 1993).

2. Vocabulary acquisition through semi-extensive reading

Teachers should train students in semi-extensive reading in order to help them balance guessing strategies with dictionary use when reading non-graded materials. With this technique, students read for fluency, but are allowed to circle the words that they feel are the most troublesome in terms of understanding the text. The reading is timed to discourage them from getting bogged down in difficult areas, and dictionaries are not allowed. Although some students may not understand much of what they are reading, by the time they finish, most will have some understanding of the global context.

Next, students analyze the vocabulary that they circled. While learners can guess the meaning of some words based on contextual clues, they generally need to use a dictionary for most. Since students have read the entire text, and have some understanding of global and local context, they are able to "fine-tune" and build on the dictionary denotations to include context-based meanings. Thus, their analysis involves both bottom-up (understanding a text mainly by analyzing the words and sentences in the text itself) and top-down (making use of the reader's previous knowledge in reading the text) approaches.

A final stage in semi-extensive reading involves post-

reading activities such as writing down main ideas or giving simple opinions or explanations to activate new vocabulary (Helgesen, 1997). This indicates to the teacher whether students have understood the keywords in the text, and provides students with an opportunity to transfer their passive vocabulary knowledge to productive use.

3. Recycling vocabulary

Research reported by Stevick (1976) has demonstrated that learning and revision of vocabulary is much more effective when distributed over a period of time. Thus, teachers should provide periodic review of words. Such review may take the form of informal vocabulary quizzes or readings that mirror earlier topics.

4. Testing

Teachers should avoid tests or quizzes which are based on dictionary definitions alone. Giving such tests sends the message that students do not need to consider context. Tests that provide and require context, on the other hand, result in a "washback" effect. That is, if students know that contextualized meanings will be a part of a test, they will study words in context. An example of such a test is gap-filling. In addition to denotative meaning, gap-filling tests can check understanding of grammar, word-group associations and collocations (Ur, 1996). Although these kinds of tests need not be used all the

time, they should be the rule rather than the exception.

Pedagogical Implications

The primary pedagogical implications based on the preceding discussion are:

- Present all vocabulary in context.
- Plan to integrate newly learned vocabulary items into future lessons through readings on related topics, or through informal quizzes.
- Maintain a running list of new vocabulary items and distribute it at regular intervals. The list should be a combination of the formally presented vocabulary and the unplanned vocabulary generated throughout the course.
- Teach and encourage the explicit use of memorization strategies such as keyword method to encourage deep processing.
- Practice timed and paced reading in your classroom.
- Through the introduction of semi-extensive reading, encourage students to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches: Have students read for meaning and fluency while circling unknown key content words, which can later be checked during a more intensive reading.

- Teach the correct form of using dictionary.
- Test by instruments that include collocations, grammatical meaning, appropriateness, etc. The resulting washback effect will encourage students to consider context when studying vocabulary.

Conclusion

Learning vocabulary through incidental, intentional, and independent approaches requires teachers to plan a wide variety of activities and exercises. The amount of emphasis that teachers and programs decide to place on any given activity will depend on learners' level and educational goals of the teacher and the program. In general, it makes most sense to emphasis the direct teaching of vocabulary for learners who still need to learn the first 3,000 most common words. As learners' vocabulary expands in size and depth, extensive reading and independent strategies may be increasingly emphasized. Extensive reading and listening, translation, elaboration, fluency activities, guessing from context, and using dictionaries all have a role to play in systematically developing the learners' vocabulary knowledge.

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