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THE LEXICON: A SYMPHONY, NOT A NOTE

If one note doesn't make a symphony, for sure, a word doesn't mean communication.

Learning vocabulary is a rather more complex process than it might appear at first sight. Instruction in vocabulary involves far more than looking up words in a dictionary and using the words in a sentence. Vocabulary is acquired incidentally through indirect exposure to words and intentionally through explicit instruction in specific words and word-learning strategies. Students spend a lot of time on learning words. It is a normal thing because we have to use words in order to communicate. We need to have a store of words that we can select from when we wish to express what we think, how we feel and so on.

For many years the acquisition of grammatical knowledge about the language was seen as the most important purpose of language teaching. Thus a lot of theories focused mainly on grammar, while vocabulary was needed to give students something to hang on to when learning structures. Recently more and more methodologists and linguists have turned their attention to vocabulary, emphasizing its importance in the study of a foreign language.

> "Vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world." [1]

Vocabulary knowledge expands and deepens over the course of a lifetime, and, unfortunately can never be fully mastered. Fortunately, the music of words has a magic touch, making us want to master them.

But how do we store memories in our brain? At the beginning of the 21st century the simple overview is: nerve network patterns store memories. How do we recall memories? The findings of the last decades of the 20th century say that we recall a memory only when we activate that network of interconnected neurons. Research on human memory has pedagogical implications on vocabulary teaching. As teachers we need to take this into account and find ways of helping students to activate their networks.

R. Schank and R. Abelson believe that our experience of the world is stored in 'scripts'. People usually comprehend a small part of what is being said to them. Most of what we attempt to understand contains too many aspects (ideas, people, events, opinions) so we pay attention to what interests us. In short, their opinion is that knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences and the content of memories depends on whether and how they are told to others. Their theory should be taken into consideration for a better understanding of the reasons why vocabulary should be taught in contexts.

We also need to think of ways of making the experience of learning vocabulary more memorable. We should get students interact with words [2]. If students are asked to analyze and react personally to new information, it will help them process the language more deeply, facilitating their ability to retain it in their long term memory. This is also an argument for using (semi guided) discovery techniques that require students to find the meaning of vocabulary.

Everything we have put down so far referred to general vocabulary; does specialized vocabulary need specialized teaching? We think that the answer is no; we deny the concept of specialized teaching of specialized vocabulary. Still, we should choose the most

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appropriate techniques and activities from the already-existing wide range. It is very important to keep in mind that both general lexis and specialized lexis are better acquired if taught in contexts, and, from this point, too, there is no difference in teaching vocabulary.

Vocabulary items frequently have more than one meaning, and usually only one of them is used in a specific field. The word "manage", for example, means "to succeed in doing something, especially something that needs a lot of effort or skill" [3]. The verb has five more meanings, and only the third is the one usually used in a business text. So, meaning in context is important and students need to know this in order to understand, use, and translate the lexis appropriately.

Learners will select the words they want to learn and we expect that the specialized vocabulary they should acquire passes this first exam. If the students study business affairs or management, they are interested in acquiring words from the economic field. Thus, a crucial factor, "the relevance of a word to an individual's immediate wants, needs and interests" [4] is more easily controlled in this case.

A good idea we agree with is that extensive reading gives students repeated or multiple exposures to words and is also one of the means by which students see vocabulary in rich contexts [5]. Making them read authentic texts increases the number of opportunities of bringing the students' vocabulary into active use.

Discovery techniques used with specialized vocabulary materials provoke the kind of interaction with words which we have said is desirable and allow students to activate their previous knowledge. We will look at a discovery technique, reinforcing the point about meaning in context. Teachers should avoid dealing with words separately; the words are better to be dealt with as they arise naturally from the lesson, even if the textbook has a list of words and maybe phrases listed separately under 'vocabulary'.

The activity combines teaching vocabulary with reading as students read a text about a particular type of management. A number of words have been removed, so, they have to think of as many words as possible to fill in the blanks; they have to compare their possibilities in pairs and groups and decide which words are appropriate.

This is the text:

> *Crisis … is a relatively new field of management. Typically, proactive crisis management … include forecasting potential crises and planning how to … with them, for example, how to recover if your computer … completely fails. Hopefully, organizations have time and … to complete a crisis management plan before they experience a …. Crisis management in the face of a current, … crisis includes identifying the real … of a current crisis, intervening to minimize … and recovering from the crisis. Crisis management often ... strong focus on public relations to recover … damage to public image and … stakeholders that recovery is underway. In contrast … risk management, which involves assessing potential … and finding the best ways to … those threats, crisis management involves dealing with threats … they have occurred.*

The activity gains a lot through the discussion part. Students talk about what the words should be, interact with terms, and allow passive vocabulary to become active again. A word that has been 'active' may slip back into the passive store if it is not used. A word that learners have in their passive store may suddenly become active if the situation or the context provokes its use. And this is what we are looking for: an activity which forces the students to activate their lexis. By provoking this involvement with words, students will remember them – at least for a short time. The reading activity is followed by several other activities [6] based on the text in order to get the new lexis into students' long term memory:

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a. Read the several meanings for the word management given by a monolingual dictionary. Which of the meanings is the one used in the first sentence of the text?

As J. Harmer has already noticed the above type of activity helps to train students to work with a monolingual dictionary. It is important to make the dictionary a normal and comfortable part of language study and practice, teaching our students how to master the learning process.

b. Nouns in English can be divided into countable and uncountable. Management is an uncountable noun; crisis is a countable noun. Find examples of countable and uncountable nouns in the text. Work with a monolingual dictionary.

We think that the greatest resource of specialized vocabulary is a good monolingual dictionary, with example sentences showing students how and when the word is used. Students acquiring vocabulary specific to a certain domain should use it as their chief source of information about meaning, pronunciation, grammar and, last but not least, collocation.

Improving vocabulary skills requires constant attention, no matter if we are talking about general or specialized vocabulary. Since meaning includes sense relations and context, we have to teach our students not only words, but word families, idioms, expressions. Learners should not only recognize notes, but also sing songs or play symphonies, whenever necessary.

NOTES

[1] Stahl, S. A., *Four problems with teaching word meanings (and what to do to make vocabulary an integral part of instruction)* in Hiebert, E. H. and Kamil, M. L. (eds.), *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice,* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005, p. 55.

[2] Harmer, J., *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Longman, 1997, p. 160.

[3] *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2006, p. 868.

[4] Rossner, R., *Review of 'Working with Words'*, ELT Journal 41/4, 1987, p. 302.

[5] Calderón, M., D. August, R. Slavin, D. Duran, N. Madden, and A. Cheung. *Bring words to life in classrooms with English-language learners*. in E. H. Hiebert and M. L. Kamil (eds.), *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbraum, 2005.

[6] See Harmer, J., *The Practice of English Language Teaching,* Longman, 1997, p. 169 – 178.

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RÉSUMÉ

LE LEXICON : UNE SYMPHONIE, PAS UNE NOTE

Tout comme une note musicale est insuffisante pour créer une symphonie, un seul mot ne signifie pas communication. Pour communiquer on emploie les mots en contexte et non pas d'une manière isolée ; c'est ce qu'il ne faut pas oublier lorsqu'on

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enseigne le vocabulaire d'une langue étrangère. Les recherches des dernières trois décennies ont facilité la compréhension plus profonde du rôle de l'enseignement et de l'acquisition du vocabulaire. Le présent article porte sur quelques problèmes, des plus importants, analysés par les scientifiques au sujet de la mémorisation, du stockage et du rappel des mots et au sujet des difficultés parus à la suite de l'enseignement/apprentissage du vocabulaire. En conclusion, le vocabulaire de spécialité ne nécessite pas un enseignement particulier, mais les enseignants doivent choisir, chaque fois, les plus appropriées techniques et tâches didactiques. Il est important de ne pas oublier le fait que tant le lexique de spécialité que le lexique spécialisé s'acquièrent mieux s'ils sont étudiés en contexte. La dernière partie de l'article est destinée à quelques exemples d'activités didactiques pour l'enseignement du vocabulaire spécialisé à partir des théories et recherches actuelles d'enseignement du vocabulaire général.
Key words: *general vocabulary, specialized vocabulary, context, discovery technique.*

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