

The What and the How of Acquiring Vocabulary

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Key words: Vocabulary acquisition, collocations, frequency

Abstract

This paper describes several principles for effectively targeting and acquiring vocabulary in a second language. Teachers and learners are encouraged to consider chunking, vocabulary depth, repetition and use in addition to frequency, lesson content and student interest when choosing vocabulary and deciding how to best acquire it.

Appropriately choosing which vocabulary items to target is important; however, this selection must dovetail with how these items are dealt with in the classroom. Overall, it is important for learners and teachers to be aware of the following concepts:

- 1 Chunks of language
- 2 Familiar words
- 3 Repetition
- 4 Use

Chunks of language

Native speakers can produce and comprehend quickly spoken discourse largely due to their competence with multi-word units of the language. In contrast, within a listening or reading text, learners often focus on individual words. Therefore, learners should also account for the other words that are used with the unknown item and chunks of language which can be used as a unit of speech. Lewis (2002) states

It is essential to heighten students' awareness of the bits of which coherent discourse or written text is composed. Students' storage and retrieval will be aided, and a valuable resource provided for their long-term acquisition of the underlying patterns, by a process which could be called pedagogical chunking. (pp. 121-122)

Familiar words

Similar to chunking, words with which students are already familiar are a worthwhile avenue to improve vocabulary knowledge. Students and teachers should look for struc-

tures whose individual words might be known, but the overall meaning is likely unknown. To illustrate, the structure 'on the go' has a meaning which is difficult to ascertain from the individual words. Nation (2008) states "some multi-word units cannot be understood even though all the individual words that make them up are known" (p. 118). Furthermore, students should be taught to notice the word combinations within the input to which they are exposed. This will improve their ability to use these words productively. Wollard (2000) explains that "learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words, it is often learning familiar words in new combinations" (p. 31).

Repetition

Expecting language learners to acquire knowledge of a new vocabulary item after one exposure is not practical. Nation (2008) believes "We need to see the learning of any particular word as being a cumulative process where knowledge is built up over a series of varied meetings with the word" (p. 97). Classroom activities should recycle previously taught items and/or create opportunities for this vocabulary to be used again (Antle, 2018).

Use

As part of repetition, learners should be encouraged to use the words productively (Antle, 2018). Classroom activities which require students to use the targeted item within spoken discourse are especially effective. Incorporating collocational awareness can aid in this process because "From a speaking and writing viewpoint, knowing multi-word units allows us to say and write things like a native

speaker" (Nation, 2008, p. 117). It is easier to produce a fluent utterance by using a multi-word unit than by creating it from individual words.

Which items should be targeted?

Each criterion for selecting appropriate vocabulary will be briefly described. These descriptions will be followed with practical classroom activities which incorporate at least one of the principles. Words which should be prioritized by both teachers and learners have the following characteristics:

- 1 Self-selected from lesson content
- 2 Frequent
- 3 Interesting for the learner / easy to learn

Self-selected from lesson content

Language learners can have a role in targeting vocabulary. Nation (2013) endorses the notion that students should be autonomous learners and decide for themselves what should be given the greatest attention and effort (p. 583). This self-selection can be accomplished using the activity described in the following section. The activity has the students prepare definitions for the difficult words before they are introduced to the rest of the class, and this "Preteaching can have positive effects on vocabulary learning and text comprehension" (Nation, 2008, p. 60). If the teacher is helping the student choose appropriate vocabulary, it is recommended to use authentic examples to avoid problems which occur by simply relying on intuition (Wollard, 2000). For example, teachers may overestimate how often a given word is used within a certain context.

Frequent

Frequency is not the only criterion for targeting vocabulary items, but it perhaps the most tangible. Frequency can be considered from the perspective of individual words, collocations and idioms.

Individual words

The New General Service List (NGSL) is comprised of 2818 lemmas (similar to headwords) which offer more than 92% coverage of general English (Browne, Culligan & Phillips, 2013). The NGSL-Spoken contains 721 lemmas and offers 90% coverage of unscripted spoken English. The words on these lists should be acquired as soon as possible as they are the foundation for further language learning.

Collocations

Collocations are multi-word units which native speakers store as individual items in their mental lexicon. Lewis (2008) states “Collocation is the readily observable phenomenon whereby certain words co-occur in natural text with greater than random frequency” (p. 8). The advantage of learning these combinations of words is that “Collocation allows us to think more quickly and communicate more efficiently” (Hill, 2009, p. 54). When learning a new word, it is important to also note the company the word keeps (the words with which it is used). This knowledge will aid the language learner when they wish to make productive use of the given word. Furthermore, receptive knowledge of a vocabulary item is not enough. It is important to acquire the most frequent collocates for the most frequent words. Jiang (2009) explains that “col-

locations are often not difficult words, but very frequent ones. Accordingly, vocabulary learning per se should not be taken as remembering as many difficult words as possible, but rather learning how to combine the more frequent ones” (p. 102). Common collocates for both known and unknown words can be found using the following website:

<http://phrasesinenglish.org/explore.html>

Idioms

Many English language textbooks contain lists of ‘useful’ idioms. However, if these lists were not compiled using frequency as the main criterion, they are of dubious value. Liu (2003) states “Most teaching and reference materials on English idioms are primarily intuition based. As such, they often include seldom-used idioms and incorrect descriptions of the meaning and use of some idioms, hence limiting their usefulness to ESOL students” (p. 671). Consequently, Liu compiled a list of the most common idioms in spoken English. These idioms include phrasal verbs and three additional categories of idioms: pure (nonliteral), semiliteral, and literal. Similar to the words on the NGSL, these idioms should be deemed essential and taught/acquired as soon as possible.

Interesting for the learner / easy to learn

In addition to frequency, it is important to consider the learners’ interests. Liu (2003) believes “L2 professionals cannot ignore the importance of teaching—even to low-level students—some of the items that fail to make the list because pure frequency often leaves out some important and useful items in lexi-

cal lists” (p. 676). Nation (2013) concurs by stating “Learners should use word frequency and personal need to determine what vocabulary should be learned” (p. 584). He further explains that personal need and interest are more important criteria than frequency. Similarly, Nation encourages learners to acquire words which are easy to learn “Sometimes a new word will be easy to learn because it contains word parts that the learner already knows. If the learning burden is light, then for only a little effort a new word can be learned” (p. 40). He explains that certain words might require less effort because of factors such as the word parts, if it is a loan word, if it is easy to spell/pronounce, and/or if it was memorable when first encountered. This criterion overlaps with self-selection as students should be encouraged to target these types of words in the input they receive.

Activities which incorporate these principles and criteria

The following activities will be briefly explained. I have successfully used each activity in university English classes for students at a high-elementary level and above.

Retell a listening or reading text

Prepare a listening or reading text which is level appropriate. After initially reading the text, the students write down any words or collocations they would like to acquire. The students then retell the story using these structures as a guide. Longer texts can be broken down into shorter sections. For longer or more challenging texts, students can choose the vocabulary items and practice their retells as homework to save class time. This activity involves chunking, repetition,

use and self-selection.

Preparing a lesson

For this exercise, I have used the Lonely Planet City Guide videos found on Youtube though it can be adapted for almost any form of input. The students choose a video and prepare a worksheet for their classmates. In addition to the vocabulary task, they prepare a warm-up question, comprehension questions and a post-video discussion question. As part of the task, they must submit an initial list of vocabulary items to me before they finalize their worksheet. They are encouraged to choose words and collocations which are useful for the future, contain known words, and are of interest to them. I also include the stipulation that at least half of their vocabulary items must be multi-word units. I will then reject any low-frequency items which are also not crucial for comprehension of the video. The students then prepare a matching exercise with English definitions for the words and collocations. I then compile all these vocabulary structures from all the students and assess their productive and receptive ability at the end of the term. This activity includes chunking, familiar words, repetition, self-selection and interest for the learner.

Word cards/notebooks

Have students create word cards for unknown or partially known words from the NGSL. Students should focus on their depth of knowledge of the vocabulary words by including information about a word’s pronunciation, meaning, form, family, common collocates and use. Classmates can quiz each other by exchanging cards, and students can review these words as often as needed. This activity

mainly focuses on word frequency and repetition.

Explicitly teaching idioms

Idioms can be problematic for learners, so I feel the best method for dealing with these structures is to provide lists which include a definition, a translation, and an example sentence. I use the idioms from Liu's (2003) list starting with the most frequent and systematically work my way through the entire list. Students can create a similar example sentence on their own, and knowledge of these idioms can be assessed periodically. This activity incorporates frequency.

Selecting appropriate vocabulary is a crucial aspect of language learning. The amount of time available for classes and individual study is limited, and it is therefore important to use this time efficiently by incorporating the concepts and criteria described above and by using activities which effectively aid in vocabulary retention.

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