Michael Wallace, Teaching Vocabulary
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2 *The Principles of Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*

We have seen in the last chapter how learning vocabulary is a rather more complex process than it might at first sight appear. To 'know' a word in a target language as well as the native speaker knows it may mean the ability to:

(a) recognize it in its spoken or written form;
(b) recall it at will;
(c) relate it to an appropriate object or concept;
(d) use it in the appropriate grammatical form;
(e) in speech, pronounce it in a recognizable way;
(f) in writing, spell it correctly;
(g) use it with the words it correctly goes with, i.e. in the correct collocation;
(h) use it at the appropriate level of formality;
(i) be aware of its connotations and associations.

The teacher has the job of so managing the learning that the learner can do some or all of these things with the target vocabulary that is to be learnt. What are the principles on which such learning is to be based?

AIMS

First, the teacher has to be clear about his or her *aims*: how many of the things listed does the teacher expect the learner to be able to do? With which words? Unless the teacher is clear on this point, it will be difficult to assess how successful or otherwise the vocabulary learning has been.

QUANTITY

Secondly, having decided on what is involved in vocabulary learning, the teacher may have to decide on the *quantity of vocabulary* to be learnt. How many new words in a lesson can the learner learn? If we mean by 'learn' that the words become part of the student's active vocabulary, then one estimate puts the number as low as around five to seven new words. Clearly the actual number will depend on a number of factors varying from class to class and learner to learner. If there are too many new words, the learner may become confused, discouraged and frustrated. For example, the 'frustration level' above which someone reading a passage in the target language will tend to give up, unless he has recourse to a dictionary, has been estimated at 10 per cent or more unknown words. However, it must be said that any figure given without reference to a specific class or individual case will not be very reliable.

The opposite case is where the learner is not 'stretched' and so makes less progress than he or she could: some people feel that the emphasis on very strict control of vocabulary in structurally graded courses has led to this fault. If he feels that his students (or some of them) could cope with a larger vocabulary input, the teacher may decide to supplement the students' vocabulary from sources other than the course-book.

NEED

Control of the amount of vocabulary inevitably means choice as to the specific items to be taught. We have already discussed some of the criteria that can be used, such as frequency, availability and learnability. In most cases the choice will be made for the teacher by the course-book or syllabus he is using. In any case, one would hope that the choice of vocabulary will relate to the aims of the course and the objectives of individual lessons. It is also possible for the teacher, in a sense, to put the responsibility of choosing the vocabulary to be taught on to the students. In other words, the student is put in a situation where he has to communicate and gets

the words he needs, as he needs them, using the teacher as an informant. This reflects the informal language situation we find ourselves in when operating in a foreign language in the country where it is spoken. If we are fortunate enough to have a native speaker of the language nearby, we ask him or her 'How do you say ...' or 'What is the name for this?' The vocabulary is then presented in response to our own needs and interests, and we are perhaps more likely to remember it. It might, therefore, be a good thing to try to bring about this situation in our language classrooms. The student should feel that he *needs* the target word, just as he would in a situation outside the classroom.

FREQUENT EXPOSURE AND REPETITION

It is seldom, however, that we remember a new word simply by hearing it once. There has to be a certain amount of repetition until there is evidence that the student has learned the target word. The simplest way of checking that this learning has been done is by seeing whether the student can recognize the target word and identify its meaning. If the word has to be part of the learner's productive vocabulary, he must be given the opportunity to use it, as often as is necessary for him to recall it at will, with the correct stress and pronunciation. It is not enough, however, that this should happen only in one lesson: since the learner is exposed to a large number of words, the words he is meant to remember should crop up at regular intervals in later lessons.

MEANINGFUL PRESENTATION

As well as the *form* of the word, the learner must have a clear and specific understanding of what it denotes or refers to, i.e. its meaning – although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, 'meaning' involves many other things as well. This requires that the word is presented in such a way that its denotation or reference is perfectly clear and unambiguous, which is not always an easy task.

SITUATION PRESENTATION

In the previous chapter we saw that the choice of words can vary according to the situation in which we are speaking (e.g. whether on board ship or on dry land), and according to how well we know the person to whom we are speaking (from informal to very formal). It seems sensible that a student should learn words in the situation in which they are appropriate.

PRESENTATION IN CONTEXT

Words very seldom occur in isolation. We have seen how important it is for the learner to know the usual collocations that the word occurs in. So from the very beginning the word must appear in its natural environment as it were, among the words it normally collocates with.

LEARNING VOCABULARY IN THE MOTHER TONGUE AND IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

At this point perhaps we should pause and see how the principles which we have established so far relate to the learning of vocabulary in the L1 (or mother tongue) and L2 (target language). Nearly everyone in his lifetime acquires a fairly large vocabulary in his mother tongue; very large, compared to what most foreign language learners would aspire to. How is this large vocabulary achieved? First, there is felt need: in the L1 'knowing the words' is a matter of survival, or at least of social competence – this basic kind of need does not exist in most foreign language-learning programmes, and so a paler, less realistic version of it usually has to be engineered in some way.

Secondly, the L1 learner mostly controls his own rate of learning. In a protective environment, adults are tolerant of children's ignorance of language: the *child* is more likely to feel anger and frustration in this respect. So he learns what he needs as he needs it.

Thirdly, the L1 is exposed to an enormous quantity of his own language and has tremendous scope for repetition of what he learns.

Fourthly, the language is nearly always encountered in an appropriate situation and in the appropriate context. So he will probably not have too many problems with appropriateness or with collocation.

Fifthly, since words are learnt as they arise out of a felt need in a particular situation, they usually have a clear denotation. Young children do have problems with denotation, however: thus, at an early stage, a child may equate the word *dog* with any four-legged animal – only later will he narrow it down, and discover other names for other types of animal.

Of course there is no necessary reason why the vocabulary of the L2 should be learnt in the same way as the L1 vocabulary: after all, the circumstances are very different, and, since the time available for learning the L2 is almost invariably very much shorter, then short cuts will have to be taken. It is interesting to note, however, that many of the principles which we have derived from our discussion of the linguistic background in Chapter 1 apply equally well to the mother tongue.

INFERENCING ('GUESSING') PROCEDURES IN VOCABULARY LEARNING

There is one aspect of both L1 and L2 learning which demands comment. With mature L1 speakers and competent speakers of a foreign language, the observer is struck by the difference between the number of words which the speaker could have been *taught*, and the number of words which he *knows*. Estimates of the vocabulary of educated native speakers vary very widely: many estimates of recognition (i.e. passive) vocabulary come out at between 100,000 and 200,000 words, including words derived from the same root (like *glad* and *gladly*). Even very conservative estimates put the number at 40,000 words. How many of those had he/she been specifically taught the meaning of? A small percentage, one would guess. Very many language-teaching programmes aspire to only about 2000 words. Are the remaining words learnt from a dictionary? Almost certainly not. If the meanings have not been supplied by outside sources, as it were, then where have they been found?

The answer is, of course, that we guess the meanings of words by

hearing them used in a certain situation, or sometimes by reading them in a certain context and guessing their meaning from the context. Usually it is clear in a situation what particular thing someone is referring to; in a written context a bit more detective work may be called for.

As an example, we may take *A Clockwork Orange*, the famous novel by Anthony Burgess. This novel is set in some time in the future and the author imagines that the English language has changed, like everything else. He therefore freely uses words which are not part of the present English language: in the first few paragraphs the number of these 'new' words runs to almost 10 per cent of the total number of words (i.e. dangerously close to 'frustration' level, according to some). Since this is a very widely read book one must presume that the vast majority of the readers can cope with, or at least tolerate, this large number of words, the meanings of which they have to guess (there being no dictionary of Burgess's new English available!).

In many cases it is not really too difficult. Let us take the 'new' word *goloss*, for example (page references are to the Penguin edition, 1972):

(p. 7) 'The stereo was on and you got the idea that the singer's *goloss* was moving from one part of the bar to another, flying up to the ceiling then swooping down again and whizzing from wall to wall';
(p. 8) 'but he said: "Yes? What is it?" in a very loud teacher-type *goloss*, as if he was trying to show us he wasn't *poogly*' (= afraid);
(p. 19) 'so I said in a very refined manner of speech, a real gentleman's *goloss*: "Pardon, madam, most sorry to disturb you ..."'.

It is easy to deduce that *goloss* must mean 'voice'. It may be interesting for the reader to work out precisely what clues he or she used to infer the meaning. Obviously the general sense of the contexts help; some readers may also have made a connection with the form of the word *goloss* and other words such as *glossary* (= list of definitions), which show that the meaning has probably some connection with language or speech.

These clues, that is, both from the general sense of the context and also the form or structure of the word itself, are probably the kind of clues that most readers use to guess the meanings of unknown words without recourse to a dictionary.

Another aspect of L1 vocabulary learning is that the mother-tongue speaker learns to be content with *approximate meaning*: in other words, he is satisfied with a meaning which makes sense of the context. Thus someone reading a historical novel set in the nineteenth century and coming across a reference to 'the aristocrats riding along the country roads in their magnificent broughams, barouches and clarences' will probably guess that these are all names of horse-drawn carriages of some kind, and be content with that: only if he is curious will he check up a dictionary to discover the exact differences between them – the brougham was a closed carriage; the clarence also closed but with a glass front; the barouche had a retractable hood over the rear half of the passenger's compartment. It is unlikely that knowing the precise differences between these old-fashioned carriages would add anything to the reader's understanding or enjoyment of the story. Similarly, one has seen overseas editions of R. L. Stevenson's adventure story *Treasure Island* containing diagrams of sailing ships with every part meticulously labelled. Is it necessary to know more about the *mizzenmast* than that it is one of the masts on a sailing ship, or the *topgallant sail* that it is a kind of sail? Most young readers who are reading the story properly, that is with enjoyment, will be too caught up in the story to bother about such details. In the secret service there is a principle called the 'need-to-know' principle – in other words agents are not told more than they need to know in case they get caught and betray their comrades. Perhaps in vocabulary learning the 'need-to-know' principle could also be applied: students should not be told more about the meanings of words than they need to know to understand the context.

In a way, what we have been saying about how vocabulary is acquired should be encouraging, since it shows us that learners can be their own best teachers, if they are exposed to the target language in an appropriate way. It is unfortunate that most learners

of a foreign language are not exposed to it in situations outside the classroom as native speakers are. They can, however, be exposed to the target language in the form of *appropriate* reading matter. The word *appropriate* has been stressed, because we have already made the point that if the material is too difficult, with too many new words, then the reader becomes 'frustrated' and gives up.

Anyone who has been in charge of a library where intermediate-level learners have the run of the shelves, will have come across the sad case of the overambitious student who takes down an unsimplified classic – often by Dickens. When the student returns the book, the first page will have perhaps twenty new words underlined (another bad habit!); the second page, fifteen words; the third, ten. Is the student's command of English vocabulary improving dramatically – or is he just getting tired and disheartened? Alas, the latter answer is more probably the right one!

Students should be given access to books *which are within their vocabulary range*. This probably means that a *class* library is preferable to a *school* library, as far as English readers are concerned. Also, in any class, there is probably a fairly wide range in the vocabulary levels of different students – so each class library should have a range of readers: some easy enough for the weakest student, others advanced enough for the better students. This means that, as a working rule, the number of readers available should be at least the number of students in the class, plus 50 per cent.

Fortunately for the modern EFL teacher there is available on the market, a wide range of cheap, attractively produced and carefully graded readers. At one time the only kind of graded readers available were simplified versions of the classics: the first such book I had to use was *Lorna Doone* simplified down to a vocabulary of 500 words! Many of the titles now available have been written specially for learners; others are slightly simplified versions of thrillers and adventure stories, where the quality of the language is often less important than the interest of the plot.

If at all possible, the EFL teachers should make a selection of such books available to their students. They can be allowed to start

reading them silently in class, and encouraged to continue reading them at home. If the reading programme catches on, the teacher can keep a record of how many books each student is reading, and which titles. This can be simply done by the student filling up a card for each book read, with the author, title, and a few comments. Only brief comments should be required: one does not want to punish the keen reader by forcing him to write an essay for his pains!

Graded magazines, appropriate to different stages of learner, are also available, almost always presented in a lively and entertaining format: another invaluable way of painlessly expanding vocabulary. (For more information about graded readers and graded magazines, see Further Reading.)