Teaching Vocabulary to ESL Students

By Robert McBain

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Abstract

This paper looks at the ways in which vocabulary is taught and in particular what the important learning points ESL students should know in order to understand new vocabulary words. It also discusses various ideas of how teachers could teach vocabulary. It highlights the importance of a theory that states there are 3 key stages that students’ progress through when they are learning new vocabulary. In addition it focuses on how this theory can be applied in the classroom when designing new materials, and on the types of exercises and learning experiences that ESL students could use to develop their meta-cognition and self – regulation skills as a view to long term strengthening of their vocabulary study to enhance reading and in-depth understanding. The article concludes with a suggestion on how vocabulary logs could be designed and organized from simple word associational exercises to comprehension exercises and finally through to generative style exercises.

Key words: self regulation, meta-cognition, teaching vocabulary, reading, noticing, associational learning, comprehension, generative vocabulary instruction.
Introduction

Studying new words for the first time is a difficult task. Students need to develop a conscious effort to develop their study skills in a variety of ways and this also includes their meta-cognitive skills so that they can in-turn develop self regulation to comprehend definition, to decode the words, to know its multiple contextual meanings, spelling, pronunciation, & prosody during speech. There are many theories relating to the idea of self-regulation however Svinicki quotes the work of Ryan and Deci in 2000 when they suggested their self regulation theory which is said to motivate individuals to study through three basic needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However for this article self-regulation relates to the idea of self studying of vocabulary by students guided by a teacher using a set of close exercises to focus and recycle key words from a text so that full understanding can start and occur.

This allows what Ryan and Deci state that individuals should feel the need to be in control of their world and that their (learning) actions are self-determined rather than determined by external forces. But all this, can be difficult enough for native speakers. But for ESL (English as a second language) speakers it is a far more difficult task. They have to deal with what is quite often a whole new set of circumstances relating to syntax, grammar and contextual analysis that they may not have encountered before or may be unfamiliar with. For non native speakers decoding texts using phonetic awareness is a basic skill that they must understand in order to associate meaning to cognate words in their own language.
What do ESL students need to know about new vocabulary?

For ESL students to understand a piece of text they need to have a basic understanding of the meaning of the words in-particular the syntax and context in which it is being read. Munk quotes Fisher (1994) and explains that words should be drawn from authentic experiences in reading and listening, where students encounter words in the various contexts of language. This theory suggests that students can begin to understand certain words as they read them in a story or sentence and that the phrases immediately before and after the target words are indicators to the meaning of the word. Context includes the grammar of sentences and the meanings of words; a paragraph; a whole story or other text. Context is also taken to include the reader's expectations and purposes for reading; various aspects of the location and situation in which the person is reading; and even the person's culture and times—in short, the reader's entire background of knowledge and experience (Brown, 1997).

But what exactly is fluency? Kuhn & Stahl, 2003 state that there is no single agreed upon theory which describes fluency accurately. However fluency in this study means that an ESL student can orally pronounce the word using the correct intonation and understand its meaning within the context in which it is being read. Further to this they will also need to learn it’s spelling and if there are any cultural variations like the difference between American and British spelling. Along with this is, how the word is spoken, and any intonation that is necessary for the word to be heard in its natural context.
Nation (2002) points out that teachers, should also know how to present the words in a way that will be easy for the students to best remember the word. This is probably best taught in a way that the student can relate to in their own lives. This may not be possible for all words but if it’s possible then there is more of a chance the student will personalize the word to their own lives and this makes it easier for them to understand it. They also need to categorise the word and to distinguish whether it is an verb or an adjectives, and nouns as this also helps some students to understand syntax and deeper understanding and also in what tense the writer is communicating.

An important vocabulary acquisition strategy which Nation (2002) calls “noticing” is seeing and recognizing using meta-cognitive skills a word as something to be learned. Again teachers can help students get in to the habit of noticing by making clear during classroom time which items should be learned and what item is a single word, a passive, a verb, an adjective and a phrase and so on. To do this appropriate materials are vital if students are to have some ownership of this learning and good quality learning materials also help students to study vocabulary effectively as well as growing as a self regulated learner in the following ways:

- by clearly marked vocabulary lessons
- a focus on vocabulary practice and recall of past vocabulary
- giving and studying lists of vocabulary words from context

Structured vocabulary notebook exercises which are designed to make students focus on a particular set of vocabulary words are a good way of developing the idea of noticing (Nation 2002).
Lia (2010) states that “weak vocabulary knowledge often results in poor reading comprehension and low vocabulary results in problems for many middle elementary students’ reading comprehension”. She also states that this problem has far reaching consequences especially when students who enter the intermediate grades, because the reading expectations graduate from learning to read to reading to learn. Furthermore to fully comprehend text also means to understand directions on a science test, read a word problem in math, and so on. However reading many different types of materials has benefits too because it enables students to see newly learned words in a variety of contexts. Both students with low-and high-level literacy skills benefit from time spent reading; vocabulary which is learned from context and comprehension is therefore improved if the difficulty of the material presented is appropriate to the current reading level (Squires, 1995). Another approach from research has also demonstrated that time spent reading, both inside & outside of school, is essential to developing vocabulary.

To read outside school students need to develop their meta-cognitive skills to better enhance their understanding of text through enhanced self regulation (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986; Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985).
What are the ways in which vocabulary can be taught?

There are numerous methods of teaching vocabulary from a lexical approach, theme based, lexical phrase method, the grammar translation method, the audio lingual method and the communicative language method. This research shows that there is not only more than one way to teach vocabulary learning it also means that people should change their traditional teaching approaches and integrate all or as many different ways of teaching and of the activities of teaching vocabulary in order to optimize vocabulary acquisition. But also to respond to the ever present fact in teaching life that of differentiated instruction only in this way can people realize the goal of efficient vocabulary learning and in the end improve students’ comprehensive language skills Zhou Li-na (2010). An additional consideration is that studying word knowledge is complex multi-faceted and incremental; thus the depth of understanding unfolds over what seems to be a long period of time.

The full understanding of words at the beginning of the semester is procrastinated when students move on to new vocabulary in a new unit and sometimes a new book and the process starts all over again. This paper highlights the value of retaining lists of vocabulary words throughout the year to constantly turn over and review with students what they have learned.

This also gives the teacher an ideal opportunity to use the words in different contexts throughout the year. Further to this, different words in a text require varying degrees of instructional focus in the classroom: some words warrant in-depth teaching, whereas others can be adequately addressed with a brief demonstration and/or explanation (Nisbet 2010)
What are the applications for teaching vocabulary?

This paper highlights the ideas of Stahl and Fairbanks who in 1986 suggested the idea of a model for teaching vocabulary, entitled the gradual release of responsibility. This model suggests the idea that students progress through three distinct stages of vocabulary learning. These three stages seem to be appropriate for ESL students because they are progressive in nature starting at a low level and continue on through to two higher levels in succession where the teacher gradually hands over the responsibility of learning to the student thus strengthening confidence over time starting from a low level working up to higher levels and at the same time deepening their knowledge of words and their meanings.

This idea promotes the self-regulation model and motivates students to use their meta-cognitive skills that are vital for middle to high school grade students and adults. The three phases of the model begin with an initial knowledge phase called the associational level. Students progress through the second phase the comprehension level and finally through to the generative level. This paper takes this model along a more practical route and suggests the idea of a specially designed vocabulary log. Although vocabulary logs are not a new idea in vocabulary learning applying them as a more important tool of integrated study in a content rich classroom to involve students more in their study is the focus of this paper.
The special vocabulary log is a compilation of specially selected close exercises that progresses students understanding of a pre-selected set of words from a piece of text so that they can learn them by recycling them through various carefully chosen cloze exercises. The style of each cloze exercise is particular to the stages of learning suggested by Stahl and Fairbanks in their model the gradual release of responsibility. The log is further designed to promote self-regulation among students as they progress through reading and learning using the three phases. First the teacher and or the students together decide which words are to be studied. These words should be selected carefully as they form a group of words that are the most important words in the text and should be sufficient enough so that students can comprehend as much meaning of the text as possible. The teacher must also consider the time allowed for study and the levels of the students. In this initial associational phase, students build a superficial, relationship with words mostly through using a dictionary, but more importantly completing exercises that are associational in nature, like matching definitions to terms recognizing synonyms and antonyms that are connected to each word in the list. This may also include the various forms of the words inflections, if it is a verb and by the use of simple conjugation tables and a declension tables to show the study of the changes in noun and adjective forms.
The second phase is characterised by a deeper understanding of the same words and is called the comprehension level. The cloze exercises at this level are again carefully chosen to guide students through their understanding of the meaning of the vocabulary words in the context to how it is used in the story. Also at this phase students could complete simple questions relating to the list words and text, so that they can demonstrate their reading comprehension & understanding of the correct words in context.

At the highest level of word learning, called the generative level, they apply what they have previously learned about the new words on the list and apply them to new and original situations, especially using it in their writing (Stahl & Fairbanks 1986). Generative vocabulary learning is mainly concerned with roots, and affixes and this subject helps to deepen students understanding of the same list words but also allows for a more academic style of learning and enhances study skills as the nature of this level of study demands a more focused effort from the student and it also offers opportunities to learn the basic structure of words so that they can apply these new found ideas to other words in the future.
References


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