

On multi-dimensional vocabulary teaching mode for college English teaching*

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Abstract: This paper analyses the major approaches in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) vocabulary teaching from historical perspective and puts forward multi-dimensional vocabulary teaching mode for college English. The author stresses that multi-dimensional approaches of communicative vocabulary teaching, lexical phrase teaching method, the grammar translation approach as well as audio-lingual method should be adopted, tasks should be designed and context be constructed to improve learners' vocabulary acquiring competence and language competence.

Key words: multi-dimensional vocabulary teaching mode; lexical phrase method; communicative approach; college English

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of vocabulary have never received the same degree of concern within language teaching as grammatical competence, contrastive analysis, reading or writing. This apparent neglect reflects the effects of trends in linguistic theory, since this issue has only aroused serious interest in theorizing and model building in 1980s. This is even true with college English teaching and learning. Since students' major task is to memorize new words to pass CET-4 (College English Test Band Four), their command of vocabulary and language production are far from satisfactory. It follows that vocabulary teaching and learning have become the bottleneck in college English instruction. This paper considers the vocabulary teaching and learning in light of multi-dimensional approaches from a historical perspective with the objective of improving learners' vocabulary acquiring competence and language competence as well.

2. Literature review of major approaches in EFL vocabulary teaching

2.1 The grammar translation method

The grammar translation method was first introduced to Prussia in late 18th century to teach modern languages in public schools. Its major goal was to prepare students for reading and writing classical materials and to pass exams. This method used classical literature as its teaching materials but never used the target language. Students were provided detailed explanations of grammar in the native languages, vocabulary lists to learn and paradigms to memorize, preparing them for the regular task of translating long passages of the classics. What follows is that students under the grammar translation method studied literary language materials using obsolete

* This paper was supported by China Youth University for Political Sciences Fund as Key Scientific Research Project, 2010 (No.1890408).

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vocabulary. Even if vocabularies were dealt with, their explanations were on etymology. Vocabulary word lists were used as teaching aids and normal part of grammar rather than as reference and were organized according to semantic fields.

2.2 The audio-lingual method

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed the birth of audio-lingual method (structural approach) in the University of Michigan in the United States. It was perceived as a new approach to pedagogical grammar by its founder Charles Fries. This approach suggested that most problems experienced by foreign language learners concerning the different structural systems. With grammar or structure as its starting point and the belief that language learning is a process of habit formation, the audio-lingual method paid systematic attention to pronunciation and intensive oral drilling of basic sentence patterns. Students were taught grammatical points through examples and drills rather than through analysis and memorization of rules. Being the major objective, vocabulary was selected according to its simplicity and familiarity. New words were introduced through the drills, but only enough to make the drills possible (Larsen-Freeman, 1986), because it was thought that too much vocabulary early in the language process would give learners a false impression that the most important thing in learning a language is accumulating new words instead of determining the meaning of a word based on a combination of language segments. What follows is that there have not been any systematic ways of teaching vocabulary and students' command of vocabulary is quite limited.

2.3 Communicative language teaching approach

Chomsky's publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957 triggered a revolution in linguistic theoretic field. Chomsky (1957) held that language existed in the individual speaker and defined internalized (conscious) mental grammar of a language competence and actual use of it performance. This was a major breakthrough in linguistic world in that it reshaped the creativity of language and challenged the behaviorist's view of language as a set of habits. In response to his theory, Hymes and Widowson introduced the concept of communicative competence which stresses making the goal of language teaching and developing procedures for the teaching of the 4 interrelated language skills (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Communicative methods have the common goal of bringing language learners into closer contact with the target language and of promoting fluency over accuracy (Stern, 1981). Nevertheless, vocabulary has not been the focus of attention in either communicative language research or instruction. Even with the communicative categories (proposed by British linguist David Wilkins), which include notional (concepts, such as time, quantity, space) and functional categories (acts, such as requests, denials), with the former being determined more by semantics, little explicit attention has been given to vocabulary in both theoretical and methodological researches. In general, although advocates of communicative approach tried to address this problem by avoiding over-simplification, not to rely on translating addressing words within their cultural context there have not been systematic ways of acquiring and instructing vocabulary.

2.4 Lexical phrase method

Proposers of lexical phrase method, such as Sinclair and Lewis maintained that lexical phrases are the basis of communication. Rather than viewing language instructions as division of grammar and vocabulary teaching, they stressed that vocabularies are devoid of restrictions of grammar rules since language is not composed of traditional grammar and vocabularies but lexical phrases (lexical chunks) or prefabricated units. Lexical phrases consist of strong and weak collocation, lexical phrases or items, idioms as well as fixed and semi-fixed expressions. According to lexical chunk method, one of the reasons why native speakers produce language

fluently and accurately is that word chunks are stored in their long term memory rather than reserved one by one discretely. Since so many prefabricated units have already been stored in their memory, it is easy to produce the meaning by retrieving and organizing the already existing integrative chunks when communicating, a fact which should ease frustration and reduce the complexity and level of difficulties, and ensure fluency and accuracy of language. Thus, teaching lexical phrases seem to avoid the pitfalls Widdowson (1978) warns: too heavy a reliance on either structural models of competence or communicative models of appropriate use.

Included in the lexical chunks are:

(1) Polywords: Short phrases which function very much like individual lexical items, they can be both canonical and non-canonical. Polywords are associated with a wide range of functions, such as expressing speakers' qualification of the topic, relating one topic to another, summarizing, shifting topics, and so on. Examples include qualifier (for the most part), summarizer (in a nutshell), topic shifter (incidentally), agreement and disagreement marker (I'll say, "Hold your horses"), evaluator (strictly speaking), etc.;

(2) Institutionalized expressions: They are lexical phrases of sentence length, usually functioning as separate utterances. They cover proverbs, aphorisms, formulas for social interaction (break a leg), and all those chunks that a speaker has found efficient to store as units, used for quotation, allusion or direct use;

(3) Phrasal constraints: Short to medium length phrases which allow variation of lexical and phrasal categories and serve a wide variety of functions. For example, as far as __, the __er, the __ er;

(4) Sentence builders: Sentence builders are lexical phrases that provide the framework for whole sentences. They contain slots for parameters or arguments for expression of an entire idea. Typical examples are: My point is that __, Could you ____? and so on.

3. Multi-dimensional vocabulary teaching mode

A great deal of research has been done in recent years in the area of vocabulary teaching strategies both in China and abroad. But how to teach words in a systematic, scientific and multifarious way has not been given due attention considering its importance. The following mode tries to address this by integrating communicative vocabulary teaching approach, lexical phrase teaching method, the grammar translation approach as well as audio-lingual method, a wide range of tasks design, constructing rich context in order to motivate students' learning, increase their vocabulary and improve their vocabulary acquiring competence.

3.1 Eclectic method of vocabulary acquisition

For decades, college English learners have been received vocabulary education on the basis of individual word input and output instead of receiving prefabricated units, as a result, language fluency and accuracy were hampered. To solve this problem, college English teachers need to adopt an eclectic method of vocabulary acquisition.

In the presentation process, teachers could ask students to underline the lexical chunks, explain and summarize them in various ways, sometimes translate them in Chinese if needed, explore their respective usages in different situations, including formal and informal usages to arouse their awareness of lexical phrases. With awareness in mind, students will be ready to receive training in lexical phrase, analyze syntax in terms of lexical phrase as well as make language production. In addition, teachers should provide analysis and explanation of the high frequency words, offer Chinese equivalence, and deal with word collocation, its connotative meaning, pragmatic meaning and formality.

During the language production process, teachers should integrate grammar translation method, audio-lingual method and communicative approach based on different contents. For example, students could be asked to engage in pattern drill exercises to get acquainted with the lexical phrases. When the students are through with all the patterns, they will have communicative problem-solving activities or completing a task, etc.. Sometimes reading practice could be even engaged in without going through the vocabulary list in advance, so that students can gain a deep insight into the phrases by identifying and analyzing them.

Nevertheless, keeping in mind all the words does not ensure accurate usage. Therefore, teachers should design a wide range of activities to encourage students to express in lexical chunks, and make them internalized. Such tasks might involve cloze, sentence make up, discussion, dialogue, story-telling, etc.. In the long run, students' language accuracy and fluency, and cross-cultural communication awareness will be enhanced and language sense will be improved.

3.2 Designing various tasks to acquire vocabulary

Language not only derives from communication, but also develops on communication. Since the main objective of vocabulary teaching is to cultivate students to communicate, teachers should design a wide range of tasks for students to fulfill the using of the phrases they have been exposed to.

Transformation of text materials can require attention, pressure and push learners to deeper processing of the phrases and more complex language. Transformation includes change of key, genre and norms of interaction, etc.. For example, when learning "Why is the turtle's shell not smooth", it can be redesigned in the following ways. Students can be given instructions as to vary the interaction parameters of pair work and group work based on role play, simulation, opinion exchange, problem solving and decision making about different endings for the story. They also can deal with it as a monologue (by the birds, the turtle and the turtle's wife), interrupted by the listener's feedback or an interview between the turtle and the correspondent, or a trial in the court.

In real life context, social problems, hot topics, current news, problem solving and case analysis, etc., are all interest provoking which can appeal to students' ultimate goals and interest, to their need for knowledge for achievement, competence and autonomy for their best selves.

Questionnaire and classroom observation show that such activities as how to turn on the microwave oven (TV, computer, etc.), how to get to a shopping mall or a tourist resort, comparing Beijing and learners' hometown, planning a short trip to Southeast Asia, interview between a journalist and a famous star, problem solving about gifts to take to a foreign friend when being a guest at his/her home are all to the students' liking.

In light of this, students should be encouraged to communicate with the key words they have learned and engage in a variety of activities, such as pattern drills, discussing hot topics, situational dialogues, expressing personal views on campus life, problem solving and word games by means of role play, group work, pair work and discussion.

3.3 Constructing context

Meanwhile, teachers should construct and provide interest provoking context for students to learn the new words. The following factors should be taken into consideration when constructing the context: participants, identity of the participants, scenario during the discourse. For example, during a conversation between a client and a salesclerk, both of them should be aware of their identity and situation in order to carry on the conversation. Based on this principle, teachers should construct context for students to make situational dialogue using the key words and lexical phrases. For example, when learning "marriage and love", teachers should first make an introduction of speed date in the West including its origin, the number of people and the process, etc., then play a

short film clips on speed date. After this, students are asked to make a situational dialogue “3 minutes’ dating”, using the phrases, such as “That’s cool”, “approve of”, “considering”, “feel like doing something” and “what embarrassed me most is that”.

One word to mention is that students could also be encouraged to design their own context and make a situational dialogue in the classroom.

3.4 Theme-based vocabulary instruction

Theme-based vocabulary instruction involves comprehensive language skill training centering on one theme, with the objective of making students to make use of thematic vocabularies to engage in different activities. For example, students can retell the main idea of the text, write a paper using the theme words learned. Apart from the words learned, teachers should also extend more by providing other words related to the theme. In addition, more information on the theme should be given to the students to enlarge their knowledge of the theme. For example, when learning “sports”, teachers should not only summarize more words about sports, but also show films on sports, which can widen their knowledge of sports, increase their vocabulary and motivate them to study at the same time.

4. Conclusion

All in all, it can be said that vocabulary teaching and learning must be more simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. People must observe how teaching techniques can help realize the concept of what it means to know a word. This means that people should change traditional teaching concept and mode, integrate communicative approach, lexical phrase method, grammar translation approach, audio-lingual approach, etc. into teaching process and adopt a wide range of ways and activities of teaching vocabulary in order to optimize vocabulary acquisition. Only in this way can people realize the goal of efficient vocabulary learning and in the end improve students’ comprehensive language skills.

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(Edited by Chris and Suky)