

Teaching English Vocabulary: A Real Challenge to English Teachers

Dr. B. Siva Priya, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

=====

Abstract

Teaching a foreign language has always been a challenge for teachers at all levels. With the growing importance of English language in the global scenario, schools and colleges teach English and most of them have it as medium of instruction. Vocabulary is one of the most important aspects in teaching and learning a foreign language. In addition, vocabulary is the key to enriching the knowledge of a foreign/ target language. Different perspectives of teaching vocabulary shed light on the complexity of helping learners achieve success in learning vocabulary appropriately. Teaching vocabulary can be a dull and mechanical activity if not handled properly. Thus, it is a process that needs the teachers' help. It is teachers' responsibility to provide students with effective activities. Theoretically, teachers, in order to be effective in their teaching, should be provided an overview of the students' needs, characteristics and their culture. Sometimes, it can be quite challenging for English teachers to know how to teach vocabulary to students effectively, because every student has his/ her own style of learning new words. Even though the students have the same level of English language, such as beginner, intermediate or advanced, they do not use the same learning strategies in the classroom or outside it. Therefore, students need to enhance their vocabulary and they need to know how to use it in the classroom and in everyday situations. Vocabulary teaching can be made meaningful and effective by following certain techniques. This paper entitled "**Teaching English Vocabulary: A Real Challenge to English Teachers**" focuses on the challenges faced by the English Teachers in teaching vocabulary and the different techniques adopted in making vocabulary teaching more meaningful and effective.

Keywords: teaching, vocabulary, challenge, techniques, effective

Vocabulary: Key to Enriching Our Knowledge

Teaching a foreign language has always been a challenge for teachers at all levels. With the growing importance of English language in the global scenario, schools and colleges teach English and most of them have it as medium of instruction. Vocabulary is one of the most important aspects in teaching and learning a foreign language. In addition, vocabulary is the key to enriching the knowledge of a foreign/ target language. Different perspectives of teaching vocabulary shed light on the complexity of helping learners achieve success in learning vocabulary appropriately. Teaching vocabulary can be a dull and mechanical activity if not handled properly. Thus, it is a process that needs the teachers' help. It is teachers' responsibility to provide students with effective activities. Theoretically, teachers in order to be effective in their teaching should be provided an overview of the students' needs, characteristics and their culture.

Sometimes, it can be quite challenging for English teachers to know how to teach vocabulary to students effectively, because every student has his/ her own style of learning new words. Even though the students have the same level of English language, such as beginner, intermediate or advanced, they do not use the same learning strategies in the classroom or outside it. Therefore, students need to enhance their vocabulary and they need to know how to use it in the classroom and in everyday situations. Vocabulary teaching can be made meaningful and effective by following certain techniques. This paper entitled "**Teaching English Vocabulary: A Real Challenge to English Teachers**" focuses on the challenges faced by the English Teachers in teaching vocabulary and the different techniques adopted in making the vocabulary teaching more meaningful and effective.

Past Practices

In the past, vocabulary teaching was mostly incidental. Languages were taught through text. Students studied certain prescribed passages mostly from classics or scholarly essays. They were taught the words found in the passages. Teachers explained the meanings and gave

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **17:11** **November 2017**
Dr. S. Jayanthi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor: *Teaching of English Language and Literature*
Dr. B. Siva Priya, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

examples so that students could understand how to use them. The recent trend is to dedicate special efforts for teaching vocabulary. Teaching vocabulary can be a dull and mechanical activity if not handled properly. If a teacher introduces word after word in a list, explains its meaning, makes the students repeat its pronunciation and write it out until the spelling is remembered, it will be a meaningless activity for the students and they will not be interested.

Present Challenges

The challenges faced by the English teachers in teaching English vocabulary are listed below:

- The meaning of words depends upon the context. Meaning changes with the context. Example: The meaning of the word ‘interest’ is different in each of the following sentences-
 - a) Lakshmi received a good *interest* on her fixed deposits.
 - b) The students show no **interest** in studies.
- There are several verbs in English which are termed as ‘phrasal verbs’. The native British speakers make a lot of phrasal verbs in their speech. They are very handy and useful for day-to-day oral communication. The meaning of the main verb changes as per the following preposition, adjective, adverbial, etc.

To put

 - To put **on**
 - To put **off**
 - To put **across**
 - To put **out**
- Certain words and phrases are technical in nature. Their usage is typical to a particular subject or a field of knowledge. For example, the terminology constantly used by doctors will be entirely different from that used by somebody studying Literature or Geography.
- Some words in English have become stereotyped due to overuse. They are called clichés. E. g. bookworm.

- Often there are boundaries between the conceptual meaning of words – e.g. cup, bowl, mug.
- Polysemy – Sometimes, a word has several meanings. E.g. the word ‘head’.
 - **Head** of a pin
 - **Head** of a person
 - **Head** of an organization
- Homophony – Some words are pronounced alike but they have different spellings and different meanings – e.g. flour and flower
- Translation – We do not always find equivalent words for all words in all languages.
- Chunks of language – this refers to phrases or idioms that are grouped together in a special way, which have a different meaning from what the words mean otherwise, taken separately – e.g. to jump to conclusions. (This does not have anything to do with jumping physically using legs.)

Some Effective Ways of Teaching Vocabulary

Vocabulary teaching can be made meaningful and effective by following certain techniques. Some ways of teaching vocabulary are discussed below:

- In the initial stage, when almost every word is new for the learner, primary words can be taught using the direct method. Language teaching cannot begin until students learn some basic common words. In the direct method, the use of mother tongue is avoided. The teacher shows an object to the students and names it. The students repeat the word. This is done 3 to 4 times. Students cannot be expected to remember the names of the objects in a single session. The same objects are shown for 4 to 5 days repeatedly and then after a few days’ gap, the teacher shows the objects and the students name them. Words like pen, pencil, book, table, boy, girl, bat, ball, etc., can be taught in this manner. All objects cannot be brought to the classroom. Teacher can use models or pictures to teach words like car, aeroplane, tiger, lion, etc. Nouns and adjectives can be taught in this way.
- Words like up, down, round, slow, fast etc. can be taught through actions. There are plenty of nursery rhymes in English which contain such words. Students enjoy learning

songs and rhymes although they do not understand the meaning. If the teachers perform actions while reciting rhymes, a number of concepts can be made clear.

- Action verbs can also be taught using the Direct Method. The teacher can pronounce a word and perform the action simultaneously. E.g. run, swim, jump, read, eat, drink, wash, go, come, etc.
- Concrete words are easier to teach compared to abstract concepts. E.g. concepts like hot, cold, beautiful, sad, happy etc. it is necessary to put such words in a context so that gradually, students understand the meaning. We cannot allow a child to burn his hand so that he can understand what is meant by 'hot'. But warning a child by fine tuning the voice and insisting that he should keep away from it is useful.

Let us take an example of creating a context in order to teach the word "happy".

- a. Brinda likes chocolates.
Brinda's mother gave her a chocolate. Brinda is happy.
- b. Sheela has got a big balloon. Sheela is happy. Leela did not get a balloon.
Leela is not happy.
- c. Today is Rita's birthday. She is very happy.

- Certain concepts can be taught by contrasting them with their opposites. E.g. clean x dirty, sad x happy, here x there, come x go, good x bad
- Associating a word with something that is familiar to the students is very helpful.
Teachers can make use of this technique to a large extent.
- Verbal situations can be created so that the meaning of the word is clear. Let us take an example of the word 'negotiate'. The word can be put in the following verbal situation-
The workers in a company went on strike because they wanted Diwali bonus amounting to their monthly salary while the company was against giving bonus. The strike continued for several days. The company officials met the representatives of the workers. They NEGOTIATED the matter and arrived at a solution. Finally, it was decided that the company would pay 75% of the monthly salary amount as bonus to each worker.

The teacher can create 2 to 3 verbal situations to make the meaning clear.

- Grouping words is the most widely used technique for teaching vocabulary. Words can be grouped in several ways.
 - a) Words can be grouped according to their function e.g. all adjectives that can be used to describe a person like tall, short, fat, plump, strong, hefty etc. or all verbs that describe the action of walking in different ways e.g. trampling, striding, jogging, skipping, hopping, bouncing, pacing etc.
 - b) Technical jargon related to a particular subject e. g. medicines, dose, thermometer, stethoscope, saline etc
 - c) Words related to a particular topic e.g. thing used in a kitchen like pots, pans, spoons, dishes, knives, forks, plants, cups, bowls, tongs etc.
 - d) A root word followed by all related derivatives e.g. happy, happiness, happier, happily, happiest, unhappy, unhappily, unhappiest, unhappily.
- Teacher can give a list of antonyms and synonyms which help in association as well as understanding the meaning better.

Sometimes, it can be quite challenging for teachers to know how to effectively teach vocabulary to students, because every student has his/her own style of learning new words. Even though the students have the same level of English language, such as beginner, intermediate or advanced, they do not use the same learning strategies in the classroom or outside it. Therefore, students need to enhance their vocabulary and they need to know how to use it in the classroom and in everyday situations. These techniques will help to promote the learners' understanding and communication in English language.

- Communicative approach is emphasized as an appropriate method in learning new vocabulary. It is to be made sure that students are motivated and interested to get involved in communicative situations.
- Using different kinds of activities in presenting new vocabulary will help learners to improve their vocabulary in English language. That is, during activities the students will

learn from each other. The teachers should create an environment where the students will enjoy the learning.

- Brainstorming new words is a technique that encourages students to focus on a topic or situation. This gives them the opportunity to share their knowledge. Students can be given a specific topic that is in accordance to their level and interest, and they are allowed to discuss about it.
- Class games help students build on their experiences and allow them to improve their vocabulary. There are a lot of games that teachers can use in the classroom by taking into consideration the student's level of English. Sometimes students get bored by listening to the teacher all the time. Therefore, games encourage learners to learn the language and also enjoy at the same time.
- Framing the sentences using the new vocabulary that students have learnt will also improve their writing. Let them choose the topic for what they will be more interested to write about.

To Conclude

To conclude, vocabulary is the key to enriching the knowledge of a foreign language. Teaching vocabulary is not just conveying the meaning to the students and asking them to learn those words by heart. If teachers believe that the words are worth explaining and learning, then it is important that they should do this efficiently. Teachers should use different techniques and activities in teaching English vocabulary to motivate the learners, enrich their vocabulary and enable them to speak English properly.

Works Cited

- Celce-Murcia, M. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Los Angeles: Heinle & Heinle. 1991. Print.
- Harmer, J. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. New York: Longman. 1991. Print.
- Nation, I. S. P. *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Harper & Row. 1990. Print.

Dr. B. Siva Priya M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women
Sivakasi- 626 123
Tamilnadu
India
sivapriyabaskaran@yahoo.co.in