

EFFECTIVE ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Vocabulary explanations are found in all language classrooms. While there is no lack of studies on vocabulary learning, not many have focused on vocabulary explanation. Effective vocabulary explanation requires a teacher to be able to measure students' competence level, in order to decide how elaborate the explanations need to be. The teacher must be fully aware of the existing knowledge of the students in order to relate new and old information, to highlight the essential features of the item they are required to explain and to actively involve students in processing the meaning of words. The purpose of this article is to highlight some specific aspects related to teaching English vocabulary by focusing on the qualities of a good English teacher.

Keywords: *teaching strategies, teaching qualities, English vocabulary.*

In the past, second language vocabulary learning and teaching were aspects related to language education that was pretty much neglected (Meara, 1993). Manguashca (1993) and Schmitt (1998) stated that the development of vocabulary teaching materials indicates that second language vocabulary begun to achieve a much more important place in education and research.

In research on vocabulary learning, the focus has been placed on vocabulary size, growth, and use. Some of the ways we can help students understand the meaning of new language are illustrated in the following examples given by the well-known teacher and ELT trainer, Jeremy Harmer (2001):

➤ **Example 1:** “It’s a pen” (complete beginners)

This is perhaps the easiest level at which to explain meaning. The teacher wants the students to understand the meaning of the form “pen” so she holds up a pen and says “pen.” The meaning

will be clear. She can do the same with words like “pencil,” “table,” “chair,” etc.

When she wants to expose students to the question form “What is it?” she cannot rely on objects. Instead, she asks the question using gestures (raised shoulders and open arms) and expressions (a puzzled look on her face) to indicate the meaning of the question.

Of course, the teacher can also ensure that students understand the meaning of a word by showing pictures (photographs, cards, etc.) or by drawing them on the board (even amateur stick drawings are useful for this purpose). Some of the ways of helping students to understand especially when dealing with fairly simple concepts are: objects, pictures, drawings, gesture and expression.

➤ **Example 2:** invitations (elementary)

In this example, the teacher starts by showing students a picture of Sarah and Joe. She gets students to ask their names and tells them what the names are. Then she asks them to speculate on what their relationship is (“Do you think they are friends?”) in order to establish the fact that Sarah likes Joe.

After she has played the tape of the invitation dialogue, she can ask them questions to check they have understood the situation, for example,

“What does Sarah want?”

“What language does she use?”

“Does Joe accept?”

“What are they going to do?” etc.

The use of these so-called check questions helps the teacher to see if students have understood what the language means.

➤ **Example 3:** “protection” (upper intermediate)

The teacher may not need to explain the meaning of “protection” to the students since they can either work it out for themselves (by looking at the computer printout) or check in a dictionary.

Explaining the meaning of abstract concepts is often difficult and time-consuming but it may need to be done. We can explain the meaning of “vegetable” by listing different kinds of vegetable, we can explain the meaning of “hot” through mime (burning ourselves) or by explaining what it is opposite of. “Sad” and “happy” can be explained by expression, pictures, music, etc. But words like “protection” or “charity” are more difficult.

One way of doing it is to show them enough examples of the word being used so that its meaning emerges naturally. Another possibility is to ask students to write their own dictionary definitions and then check them with a good learners’ dictionary. The teacher could ask them to explain what the word means or – in the case of “protection” – she can simply explain that the word means “safety from danger/discomfort,” etc. (Harmer 1998).

Teachers who love what they teach may show this using a facial expression, different gestures or some movements that draw the attention of their students. This is true whether or not teachers consciously perceived these behaviours in themselves. Students hate coming into class and finding a teacher who is not well-prepared and has no clue about what he or she is expected to do in that particular lesson. Competence and knowledge of the content area being taught is something that students have always mentioned about their favourite teachers and is strongly supported by the current literature. If teachers are well-prepared then students behave better and no problems are encountered during the lesson. If, on the other hand, teachers do not invest sufficient time in planning and preparation, they tend to be so focused on what they are doing that they miss the early signs of misbehaviour. This ultimately results in frequent disruption, waste of valuable instructional time, and student frustration.

Friendly teachers often smile, call students by their names and are interested in the moods and

feeling of their “customers.” Teachers who bring their lives and stories into the classroom build trust with their students. Teachers who tell stories of events in their own lives which relate to subject matter currently being taught captivate student interest and promote bonding with the students. Additionally, teachers who have got close to their students have done so by finding out as much about their students as possible. Teachers who show interest in their students have interested students.

A good teacher must be creative in his or her teaching. He can decorate the classroom to motivate the students. Something that we all appreciate in others is the willingness to admit mistakes. Unfortunately, some teachers think that their authority in the classroom can be undermined by these mistakes and they try to let them go unnoticed or cover over them quickly. Students quite obviously have a different opinion. They are fully aware of the times when teachers make mistakes, especially when they somehow suffer from them. Admitting their mistakes and apologizing for them makes students love the teacher even more.

All teachers want and hope their students to like and appreciate them. Favourite teachers are remembered for keeping grades on papers confidential, for speaking to students privately after misbehaviour or when the teacher needed some clarification, in contrast to public rebuke. They are also remembered for showing sensitivity for feelings and for consistently avoiding situations that would unnecessarily embarrass students. Such behaviour is obviously appreciated by students, and according to those in our classes, repaid with respect and love for the teacher.

The reality of most classrooms, and in fact just about any gathering of youngsters, includes a significant amount of cruelty and hurt feelings. All insensitive, uncaring, or deliberately malicious behaviour cannot be eliminated from such situations, but a caring teacher can have a tremendous impact on its frequency. The students like the classes where they feel like home and the teachers develop a sense of family in their classroom. Classroom pets, random act of kindness awards, class picture albums, and cooperative class goals can help in building a sense of unity and companionship.

Harmer (2001) tried to explain what makes a good teacher by saying that the teachers should make their lessons interesting so you don't fall asleep in them. This was said by an adult student at a private language school in England.

A teacher must love his or her job and if this happens the lessons will become more interesting. This was said by an adult student in England. Teachers who look fed up or unhappy with what they are doing tend to have a negative effect on their students. When you observe good teachers you will notice that, even if they are feeling terrible (outside the classroom), they put on a good "teacher's face" when they enter the classroom.

"I like the teacher who has his own personality and doesn't hide it from the students so that he is not only a teacher but a person as well-and it comes through the lessons." Students tend to be interested in their teachers- at least at first. The ones who share their personality with their classes often have better results than those who don't. Successful teachers are those people who can identify with the hopes, aspirations and difficulties of their students while they are teaching them (Harmer, 1998).

Explaining to students that they have made a mistake is one of the most perilous encounters in the classroom. This activity must be approached very carefully. The teacher has to measure what is appropriate for a particular student in a particular situation.

One group of people who seem to find it fairly natural to adapt their language to their audience are parents when they talk to their young children. Studies show that they use more exaggerated tones of voice, and speak with less complex grammatical structures than they would if they were talking to adults. Their vocabulary is generally more restricted too and the attempt to make eye contact (and other forms of physical contact) is greater. This generally does these things unconsciously.

Apart from adapting their language, experienced teachers also use physical movement: gestures, expressions, mime. It becomes almost second nature to show happiness and sadness, movement and time sequences, concepts using these techniques. They become part of the language teacher's use, especially with students at lower levels.

The best activity in the world is a waste of time if students don't understand what they are supposed to do. Giving instructions is essential and they must be explained in a clear and logical manner so that all students understand what they are required to do. When teachers give instructions, it is important for them to check that the students have understood what they are being asked to do. This can be achieved either by asking a student to explain the activity after the teacher has given the instruction or by getting someone to show the other people in the class how the exercise works. There are cases when the students and their teacher share the same mother tongue. When this situation occurs, a member of the class may be asked to translate the teacher's instructions as a way of checking that they have understood them (Harmer, 1998).

Effective teaching is one of the central purposes of educational practice and research in improving learning. But behind the mastery of learning stands the mastery of teaching. Understanding teaching has presented a persistent and formidable challenge to those who have sought to improve the quality of teaching and learning over the years. Effective teaching also requires talking regularly with learners. Classroom interaction has to be directed by the teacher. St. Augustine quoted in Robert Fisher, "Teaching Children to Think" (1992) says "I learned not from those who taught me but from those who talked with me." Learners can become more equal partners in the classroom if they are given more opportunities to formulate their own questions, express their own thoughts and make their own meaning. Creating an effective learning climate is not only the duty, but also the responsibility of the teacher.

This involves maintaining order without undermining learners' self-esteem. Aristotle quoted in Stephen Covey, "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," (1989) says we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit. The significance of teacher educator learning lies primarily in the potential of establishing teaching norms. Therefore the learning process becomes a central value for the teacher. If teaching educators see themselves as learners, and reveal to their students a reflective-learning stance towards their practice, they will

engender more broadly a positive disposition towards teacher learning in the teaching profession.

Teacher educators need to be learners so that they can respond to the changing circumstances of their work and constantly learn to do it more effectively. Teachers need to be learners for the same reason that the students of those teachers need, in turn to be learners. Never before has the importance of learning been as vital to humanity as it is in these times of upheaval, uncertainty, and change. Growing beyond our imaginations in almost every dimension of human existence, we are called upon to solve questions today that will be out-dated tomorrow and absolute the day after that. And so far we have not done as well as we must, in order to preserve the well-being of all life forms on this planet (Russel&Korthagen, 1995).

As a conclusion, we will mention the following statement: "Teaching is an art in the sense that teachers, like painters, composers, actresses, and dancers, make judgments based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action. Qualitative forms of intelligence are used to select, control, and organize classroom qualities, such as tempo, tone, climate, pace of discussion, and forward movement. The teacher must 'read' the

emerging qualities and respond with qualities appropriate to the ends sought or the direction he or she wishes the students to take. In the process, qualitative judgment is exercised in the interest of achieving a qualitative end" (Eisner, 1985).

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