

Vocabulary: Considerations and Applications in EFL Teaching

語彙：EFL 教育における考察と応用

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When developing curriculum, designing syllabuses, planning courses, or preparing for a particular lesson, how much thought do you put into how you incorporate vocabulary into your teaching? Do you make vocabulary teaching a priority, do you even give it a consideration, or do you totally ignore it in the assumption that ‘word knowledge’ will somehow make its way into the ‘vocabulary knowledge’ of your students? What do you consider when you attempt to apply vocabulary teaching and learning to your classroom?

Language teachers and learners often connect an ill-conceived concept of what a ‘word’ is to their concept of what ‘vocabulary’ is. However, just teaching or learning the common belief of what constitutes a ‘word’ is not enough. If we focus too much on such incorrect conceptualizations, we could end up not fully teaching vocabulary. Knowing a word is more than just knowing its definition (of which there are often many due to polysemy) or its usage (which varies by part of speech), but also involves knowing its pronunciation, connotation, coverage, collocations, frequency, register, spelling, polysemous meanings, etc. Aitchison (1987) calls words “slippery customers” since he believes that words have “fuzzy meanings that are essentially fluid with vague boundaries and fuzzy edges” (pp. 40-50). Folse (2007) points out that “learning a word – that is to say, knowing a word – involves knowing many different kinds of things about that word” (p. 41). One example of the complexity of vocabulary regards the definition of the concept of ‘word’ and what it means to ‘know a word.’ Carter (2012) emphasized that the “definition of learning a word depends crucially on what we mean by ‘a word,’ but it also depends crucially on how a word is remembered, over what period of time and in what circumstances it can be recalled and whether learning a word also means that it is always retained” (p. 42). So, what should we consider when teaching vocabulary and how should we apply these considerations when teaching in the English language classroom?

Vocabulary is a complex issue in foreign and second language (L2) acquisition and teaching. It is much more complex than most people initially believe. While most learners understand the importance of vocabulary in

their ability to effectively communicate, many teachers and material designers have traditionally pushed vocabulary to the side and, instead, focused on grammar. This is partly due to incorrect assumptions about what vocabulary really is and how best to teach and learn it. Because, “unlike grammar, which is a system of a limited number of rules, vocabulary is an open set of many thousands of items” (Laufer & Nation, 2014). Thus, our first considerations should be the importance of vocabulary in the teaching of a language. Should grammar take precedence over vocabulary or vocabulary take precedence over grammar? The answer, of course, is that both are equally important.

Vocabulary is just as important as grammar:

While grammar has long dominated second and foreign language teaching, textbook design, and curriculum development, grammar is only one piece of the puzzle that language learners must put together in order to effectively communicate with others. Folse (2007) asserted that traditionally vocabulary has received less attention in language pedagogy than writing, reading, listening, speaking, pronunciation, culture and, especially, grammar. However, he also stated that “arguably, vocabulary is perhaps the most important component in L2 ability” and explained how students “need vocabulary knowledge to function well in a language” (pp. 22-23). An earlier researcher, Wilkins (1972) stressed that, “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (pp. 111-112). Just as grammar is important for words to have meaning in context, vocabulary is a key aspect of language learning for there to be any meaning at all. Let’s consider for a moment the language of a baby learning its native language or the language of a student who is new to learning a second or foreign language. What do these two have in common when they first try to communicate their thoughts? One commonality is their use of simple vocabulary words to express meaning. Both of these communicators start by learning the words for things by pointing at objects and asking what things are called. It is only after learning these basic building blocks of language that they start to put these vocabulary words into a specific grammatical order that matches the expected words order of the target interlocutor’s language. Thus, we can see that vocabulary has a key role in communicating meaning. Yet, despite its importance in expressing meaning, many education professionals focus primarily on grammar in their courses and place vocabulary learning in a side role.

Words have a central place in culture, and learning words is seen by many as the main task (and obstacle) in learning another language (Carter, 2012, p. 47).

Vocabulary learning often comes before grammar learning and, while not *more* important, holds an equal level of importance in transmitting meaning. Even if you have perfect grammar and go to the restaurant to buy something, unless you know the name of what it is that you want to eat (or, at least, know the names of the nouns and adjectives needed to paraphrase what it is that you want), you won’t be able to make your food order understood verbally without knowing the sounds of the words you want to say or the spelling of the words you want to write. Of course, one can point at a picture of a food item on a menu and make grunting

sounds to imply the meaning of “I want a large hamburger with no pickles and a medium sized coffee, please.” However, would this be possible without pictures on a menu and mutually understood gestures? As teachers, we want our students to go beyond simple grunts and gestures and onto a higher level of communication. Therefore, no level of advanced grammatical knowledge will help a student to accomplish their task without first knowing the vocabulary words necessary to accomplish that particular task. However, given the importance of vocabulary knowledge in communication, why is that grammar takes a priority in our language teaching lessons?

Since many language teachers believe that learning vocabulary is simply a matter of memorizing word lists and since “vocabulary is seen as something that learners can pick up on their own as they continue to focus on grammar and sentence patterns,” it is not surprising that vocabulary has such an inferior status (Folse, 2007, p. 26). So, what should we do? How can we raise the status of vocabulary in our lessons and bring our students to a higher level of fluency through an increased awareness of the importance of vocabulary?

First of all, we should incorporate vocabulary teaching and learning into our lessons, curriculum, and even syllabuses. We should lay out minimum vocabulary requirements for our students. We should test our students regularly on their vocabulary knowledge. We should conduct this testing in as many varied ways as possible so that the students can develop a *depth* of vocabulary knowledge in the second/foreign language. Depth is important so that the students do not just assume that one word in one language means the exact same things in another language because, after all, vocabulary words are “slippery customers” with an interesting means of camouflaging themselves if we don’t take the time to notice their true meanings and/or usages (Aitchison, 1987, pp. 40-50). We should approach vocabulary learning from a variety of aspects in order to encourage a deeper level of acquisition, while not forgetting to consider why we are learning these particular words.

Next, we should provide a rationale for why we include the particularly chosen vocabulary words in our lessons. We should make a point in our classes to explain our rationale to the students and to encourage them to also ask themselves why they want to know particular vocabulary and how they are going to go about acquiring that vocabulary. We should show example layouts for creating original word lists and we should incorporate these word lists into our lessons and testing. However, possibly most importantly as language teachers, we should take the time to talk with our students about the importance of vocabulary and arm them with a variety of strategies for learning vocabulary.

Take the time to teach, practice, and use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies:

From the perspective of many language learners, vocabulary is a vast, endless vortex of words that have to be memorized, practiced, and then regurgitated on testing for ‘acquisition’ to actually take place. However, there is more to learning a word than just this. It is our job as teachers to help our students to not only understand this but to, also, discover the particular learning strategies that work best for them. After all, researchers such

as Craik and Lockart found that “the more processes involved in the learning of a word the superior the retention and recall” (cited in Carter, 2012, p. 45). Meaningful vocabulary acquisition is a grueling task for many learners that takes time, effort, and ample amounts of practice in a purposeful and communicative setting. It does not always ‘just happen,’ as many educators assume. For language learners, especially adults, it takes conscious effort to acquire enough vocabulary to be confidently fluent in a language different from your native language. However, actually acquiring as much vocabulary as possible is extremely important for any language learner to be successful at becoming fluent enough to communicate their thoughts to others and to understand what others are trying to communicate to them. Yet, what are the best strategies for acquiring this ‘vocabulary?’

What constitutes a ‘vocabulary learning strategy?’ Gu (2003) defines the term learning strategy as “A series of actions a learner takes to facilitate the completion of a learning task” (p. 3). Strategies are essential in the effective completion of a task. However, what many learners would like to know is which learning strategies are the most effective, and why. Good learners of language actually use several strategies, but the exact combination of these strategies varies from learner to learner. What works best for one language learner, may not work best for the next learner.

How can we best support each and every one of our students in their thirst for learning new vocabulary? Well, research has found that the best vocabulary learners are those who have a plan of study and who apply this plan consistently (Folse, 2007, p. 87-99). Folse recommends the ‘keyword method’ because it appears to work for long-term retention. It is a “two-stage process that uses mnemonic devices and interactive imagery to facilitate vocabulary acquisition in L2” (p. 93). While some criticize this method (Sternberb for example) due to amount of effort that it takes, Folse argues that it is supported by solid SLA research. However, Folse (2007) also states that no strategy is better than another. Instead, he advocates that learners should use a variety of vocabulary learning strategies and they should use these strategies consistently. He says, “it does not seem to matter so much what students do with new vocabulary provided they do something and that they do it consistently” (p. 91). So, from this perspective, what should we as teachers do to support our students in their quest to acquire not only vocabulary but the proper effective strategies for acquiring that vocabulary?

To begin, perhaps the most important thing that we as teachers can do is to teach a variety of strategies so that students can pick up on the strategies that work best for them. We should make the time to explain various vocabulary learning strategies and allow the students the opportunity to practice these strategies in (and out of) the classroom. We should not just talk about the strategies in an ambiguous way, but actually give the students time to try out what we have explained in order for the students to notice and discover what works best for them. Afterall, our students are each unique and different in their own ways and, thus, we as teachers must recognize this and not just dictate what is best for our students. Instead, we should introduce our students to many possibilities and allow them to choose the learning path that works best for them. Therefore, what matters is that the students are educated about what vocabulary learning strategies there are out there and given

the opportunity to consciously try each out in an appropriate environment that allows them enough feedback to make a good choice on which strategies they will incorporate into their repertoire.

We need to all become aware of various learning styles through proper learning strategy training. If teachers want to empower students to become more independent language learners, we need to first learn these strategies ourselves. Only then can we show our students a variety of strategies for learning. Thus, this process begins with us, the teachers. It begins with how we consider vocabulary and how we apply that consideration to our lessons. We must ask ourselves how we take each of our student's unique learning styles into consideration while making vocabulary learning strategy teaching a priority in our lessons. How will you approach the teaching of strategies?

In your lessons, how will you consider learner inclusion strategies and integrate the aspects of learner agency that best empowers your students? How will you incorporate a large variety of vocabulary learning strategies (not just guessing meaning in context) into your lessons and activities? How will you encourage your students to find their favorite specific vocabulary learning strategies and to use their favorites consistently with effort and focus? How will you apply all of the above important considerations to your classroom in a way that encourages vocabulary learning in a meaningful and productive way?

The textbooks, resource books and curricular that we use matter:

One possible way to apply the various aspects of vocabulary teaching and learning that we must consider is through the textbooks, resource books and curricular that we chose to use. Many teachers, textbooks, and curriculums do not cover L2 vocabulary adequately. Folse (2007) stressed, "most of us do not have to look very far to find that vocabulary is not covered enough in our curricular, materials and courses; vocabulary is not covered well enough" (p. 130). To put it simply, vocabulary is not covered adequately in many textbooks. Therefore, we as professionals, need to make the conscious effort to apply the various considerations brought forth in this paper to the choices we make before, during, and after each lesson. How we choose to integrate vocabulary into our lessons, syllabuses, curriculum, and other tools that we use to teach is essential to the success of our students. Yet, how should we go about choosing the materials that we will use to support our vocabulary teaching?

There are many possible solutions to the question above. One possible solution is to use resource books or original materials to supplement our textbooks and lessons. These books, coupled with an imaginative and aware teacher could produce a classroom that has an adequate focus on vocabulary. In a previously published paper titled *Incorrect Assumptions about Vocabulary Acquisition: Impact on Textbooks and English Language Teaching* by Christopher Hollis and Shirley Leane (2018), the authors lay out a checklist for choosing L2 textbooks based on how vocabulary is covered (p. 16). They recommend this resource as a possible starting point in your quest to find the best textbooks, resource books, and curricular that can help you to apply the

considerations put forth in this paper. They hope this resource can assist you in your mission to properly teach vocabulary to your students in a way that empowers them to develop their skills to the next level. The checklist in this paper is a good resource for anyone who wants to be more conscious, analytical, and constructive in how they go about choosing textbooks, resource books, and curricular in terms of how vocabulary is covered. However, what are some basic concepts that we need to look for in educational material design?

First of all, the included word lists in textbooks, resource books, and curricula should have a rationale for the lists provided. The materials should organize vocabulary items in the word lists in a way that relates to the topics or tasks being presented. Furthermore, when creating such word lists, the authors of these materials (and the teachers who use them) should consider such things as vocabulary frequency, coverage, context, collocations, the students' purposes for learning, follow-up activities, and how to recycle the words. This is so because we need to remember that word lists are simply a solid 'first step' in the vocabulary learning process that still needs to be incorporated into other activities for real acquisition to take place (Folse, 2007, p 45). We must remember that the learning of a second or foreign language is a process and that it is our job as educators to get that process started. We must give our students the resources they require in order to start the chain reaction of learning that will come from the efforts that we put forth on their behalf before, during, and after each lesson.

Next, we need to choose textbooks, resource books, and curricular that do not over simplify the means of listing words and assume that grouping the vocabulary by 'kind,' that is, in semantic sets is the best means of listing vocabulary (Folse, 2007, p. 47). Semantic sets are a common way of listing words probably because they are easy to write and have long been believed to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Students are often told to rehearse vocabulary using such semantic sets. However, research has shown that semantic sets hinder and impede learning (ibid, p. 47). Tinkham (cited in Folse, 2007, p. 52) found that students have more difficulty learning new words presented in semantic clusters than they do learning semantically unrelated words. Also, Waring (cited in Folse, 2007, pp. 53-54) found that it took learners about 50% more time to learn related word pairs than unrelated pairs. Lastly, Olsen (cited in Folse, 2007, pp. 53-54) found that similar vocabulary taught together (e.g., sea-see) may have caused learners errors. This semantic organization of word lists is problematic and needs to be addressed by material designers and teachers. We should be aware of recent SLA research when we go about choosing and/or designing our materials. What do the researchers recommend?

There are many answers to this question. However, one possible answer to this question is using "thematic presentations of new words" because research indicates that this type of presentation aids retention of new vocabulary (Folse, 2007, p. 56). While it is certainly hard to plan a thematic list of vocabulary words, such a list allows the students the opportunity to learn new words more efficiently and effectively. However, we must not completely ignore semantic sets as a way of listing words because semantic sets can be useful for reviewing words. The problem is when semantic sets are used to learn new vocabulary (p. 56-58).

We have to keep in mind that “vocabulary learning occurs because certain mental conditions are created which encourage learning. Essentially, vocabulary learning depends on the number of meetings with each word and the quality of attention at each meeting. The more meetings, the more likely learning is to occur. The deeper the quality of the meetings, the more likely learning is to occur” (Nation, 2015, p. 136). Let’s create and choose materials that support productive vocabulary learning.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

In conclusion, what we consider when teaching vocabulary and how we go about applying these considerations when teaching in the English language classroom is essential to the success of our students at learning vocabulary. We need to systematically apply vocabulary teaching principles when developing curriculum, designing syllabuses, planning courses, and preparing for a particular lesson. We must put thought into how we incorporate vocabulary into your teaching and learning. The importance that we place on vocabulary, the strategies that we use when teaching it, and the materials we use to teach it are all key factors in the success that our students will achieve in acquiring adequate vocabulary.

In terms of implications for further research, we would like to see ongoing research conducted on vocabulary teaching and learning here in Japan in order to encourage educators to make vocabulary a priority in their lesson goals. Vocabulary teaching is important and perhaps even more so here in Tottori Prefecture where English is not immediately available in the surrounding environment. We have a responsibility to our students to provide them with the tools necessary to succeed in their thirst for vocabulary knowledge and skill. We look forward to conducting more research on this subject and publishing such findings in English in international journals.

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