UNIT 15 TEACHING VOCABULARY

Structure

15.1 Introduction
15.2 Objectives
15.3 Different Vocabularies
15.4 Selection of Vocabulary Items
15.5 Difficulties in Learning Words in English
15.6 Vocabulary Teaching and Expansion — Some Suggestions
15.7 Vocabulary Games
15.8 Let Us Sum Up
15.9 Key Words
15.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
15.11 Suggested Readings

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Few teachers will disagree that one of their basic goals of teaching a new language includes the growth of their pupils' vocabulary. They will also acknowledge that learning vocabulary is a rather more complex process than it might first appear. To know a word in a target language means the ability to:

- recognise it in its spoken and written forms,
- recall it whenever needed,
- pronounce it while speaking, in an acceptable manner,
- use it in the appropriate grammatical form,
- spell it correctly while writing and use it at the appropriate level of formality while speaking and writing.

As teachers, you must realise that the understanding of a word is not 'a once-and-for-all affair' and hence the emphasis on vocabulary development doesn't stop in the early years but continues throughout one's life.

15.2 OBJECTIVES

After you have read this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the importance of teaching/learning vocabulary in a second language;
- distinguish between active and passive vocabulary and content and structure words;
- justify the attempts for drawing basic vocabulary lists;
- enumerate some of the difficulties of the learners of English;
- use different methods of teaching vocabulary in your own classroom situations; and
- organize vocabulary games in your classroom.
Although there is a considerable agreement, there are still some differences in the way individuals interpret words. It is particularly important for teachers to appreciate the fact that the child’s understanding of a word may not be the same as that of an adult. We acquire our understanding of word meaning gradually, building all the time upon our experience.

The core vocabulary of the first language is learned quite naturally at home. Neither the child nor his/her family have much to say about the words that must be learnt - these are given by the immediate environment and the culture. The child learns words for the persons with whom (s)he lives, for the things (s)he needs, for the actions (s)he wants performed or stopped and (s)he learns functions words that enable him/her to construct the sentences (s)he utters. At school (s)he learns to write the words (s)he knows and expands the vocabulary more arbitrarily, following the school curriculum.

The vocabulary that a child acquires formally in school is quite different from that (s)he acquires in the first language at home. Although the function words necessary to express sentences are usually the same as for the native speakers, the content words for actions, things, qualities - are different since the second language serves a different purpose from the first, e.g. the child does not usually need to address his/her family in the second language, (s)he does not have to use it to fulfil basic needs and to communicate socially in it.

The vocabulary of a second language can thus be decided by the teacher, the textbook, or the school. But before we go on the discuss the selection of vocabulary for a second language we need to distinguish and differentiate between a few terms.

A distinction is often made between structure (function) words and content words as has been done in the earlier paragraph. The words bold in the following sentence are content words.

Mary went by bus to the hospital.

If someone tells you ‘Mary’, ‘went’, ‘bus’ or ‘hospital’ you will have some idea of what the person is talking about even though the speaker is not communicating in grammatical utterances. You are able to associate these words with real-life things, idea or emotions.In other words, all content words have referents and therefore have meaning (although it is difficult to indicate the referents of such abstract terms as sympathy or mysticism). All nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs formed from adjective (e.g. beautifully) are content words. The list of content words is open-ended; new nouns and verbs are often coined to name new things or processes and the same is true of adjectives and adverbs (words like helipad or micro-wave ovens are new words.)

Structure (function) words may be considered as part of the grammar of the language in that they are almost "empty" of meaning when considered in isolation. If we take words like by, to, or the from the above sentences they will have no meaning when taken separately, but in the sentence they have a grammatical function. Modal verbs (such as may, can), pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions and certain adverbs (e.g. very, rather) are known as function or structure words.

Another important distinction which is often made is between passive (receptive) and active (productive) vocabulary. Anyone who learns a new language is usually able to recognise many more words than (s)he can produce. The words the learner can recognise but do not use are the items that make his/her receptive vocabulary. It is much more difficult to produce a word correctly as one has to pronounce or spell it in the right way, use it in the correct grammatical form, use it appropriately with the correct words, coming before and after it and so on. Any item which becomes part of a learner’s active productive vocabulary must first of all be a part of his/her passive vocabulary and obviously a learner cannot use an item which (s)he doesn’t fully understand. In order to understand an item fully, a learner must read or hear it many times in realistic situations, and above all must understand its use. It is thus very important for you as a teacher to decide which words you want your students to produce correctly (i.e. use with the correct meaning, correct pronunciation and stress, spelling and in the appropriate context) and which words you want merely to be recognised and understood.
Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Write your answers in the space given below.
   b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1. Underline the content words and encircle the structure words in the following sentence.
   The Principal punished the boys of class XII when he found them beating a junior.

2. Explain how ‘judge’ is a different sort of word from ‘to’.

3. Your learners have come across the word compassion in their reading text today for the first time. Should you ask them to find out the meaning and write a sentence with that word? Why?

15.4 SELECTION OF VOCABULARY ITEMS

Selection is the process of deciding which items to teach. Although selection is predeterminated by the learning material which is used in the classroom, yet as a teacher you have to make a choice for the student's passive and active vocabulary.

The beginnings of vocabulary selection and control was made by Thorndike way back in 1921 when he counted the occurrence of words in 4 1/2 million words to establish the frequency of the commonest 5,000 words - the idea being that the more common words are useful and hence should be learnt before the rare ones.

A number of interesting and useful facts emerged from this and additional criteria of selection in addition to frequency were involved. It was observed that in frequency lists based on any material, structural words were extremely common and thus their importance in teaching English was well-established. Another important fact was the emergence of about 1500-2000 words as a common core which enabled a learner to write or speak fluently and comfortably on non-specialised subjects.

Besides frequency some other criteria like availability, teachability and coverage were also considered while selecting an item. By availability, we mean that an item is particularly frequent in a particular situation. For example, the item test-tube is not generally frequent but is much used in science laboratories. We have already mentioned that content words like 'briefcase' is much easier to teach than an abstract word like 'compassion'. Thus the word briefcase is much easier to teach (more teachable) than compassion. Concrete words like 'door', 'window', 'flower', 'vase', can be shown or drawn but abstract words need a lot of explanations e.g., 'dishonesty', or virtue can only be taught to students through
examples of different situations. By coverage we mean the capacity of an item to take the place of another item. For example, ‘immediately’ can cover *at once*, *instantly*, *now*, *rightaway*, *without delay*, etc. Although the meaning may not be exactly the same as the other items, yet in most of the contexts it can be substituted without much loss of meaning.

**Check Your Progress**

**Notes:**
1. Write your answers in the space given below.
2. Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.
3. In what context are vocabulary items selected for teaching a language?

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### 15.5 DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING WORDS IN ENGLISH

In English lexical ambiguity can result from homonymy - when two words have identical sound and spelling associated with two unrelated meanings. Take, for example, the word *ground*. You know that the word *ground* can mean two separate things - *i.e.* soil or land *surface* as in ‘How many acres of ground?’ It can also mean the past tense of *grind* as in ‘The spices were ground’. Homonymous relation like this can confuse many learners. Students are also faced with some problems when they come across words like *flower/flour* or *tale/tail* or *vain/vane* or *one/own* - words that sound the same (homophone) but the spellings are very different and so are the meanings. Another confusing situation arises when two or more words unrelated in meaning have indentical sound (homograph). Examples of these kinds of words are *lead* (the metal) and *lead* (a dog’s leash); minute (60 seconds) and minute (very small).

Another kind of lexical ambiguity in caused by polysemy. This occurs when one word carries several different senses or related meaning e.g. *club* may mean a society of people who join together for a certain purpose; a heavy wooden stick; a specially shaped stick for striking a ball (as in golf) or a playing card.

Frozen idiomatic expressions can also be a hurdle in the way of a new learner. By frozen expressions we mean those idioms the meaning of which does not come from its different parts e.g. to pull someone’s leg or the apple of someone’s eye is not the sum total of the different words. Idioms have to be learnt as complete expressions and often cause particular problems.

Use of vocabulary at the wrong level of formality and the connotations of some words also pose practical problems for the learners. In learning a new language there is a tendency to use the more formal language in normal conversational situations or vice versa i.e. use a slang or colloquial expression inappropriately. Similarly the positive or negative connotations of some words might be found difficult by the learners. We all know how we applaud the firmness, determination or resoluteness of people we like whereas we deplore the stubbornness, obstinacy and pigheadedness of those whom we don’t like in exactly similar situations. Similarly the same person can be fat or plump to different persons. It takes a long time for the learners to catch such nuances of the language.
Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Write your answers in the space given below.
      b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

5. Explain with examples the difference between homophones and homographs.

6. How do homonymy and polysemy confuse students?

7. How many meanings can the following words have - table, tube, light, bank?

8. Give examples of two idiomatic expressions which you think your students may find difficult to learn.

15.6 VOCABULARY TEACHING AND EXPANSION — SOME SUGGESTIONS

In the past vocabulary was taught mostly be translation. It was also assumed that vocabulary teaching was nothing more than putting across the meaning either in the mother tongue or in the target language. But even a learner needs to be exposed to a new word a number of times in a variety of ways - like hearing the word in isolation and in a sentence, pronouncing the word, understanding the meaning and ultimately using it in a situation.
The meaning of a word can be grasped by the pupils when put across by several methods and techniques. Some are given below:

Definition: *Dusk* - The period of time when daylight fades and night sets in.

Enumeration: Dogs, cats, horses are all *domestic* animals.

Context: The class begins at 9.00 a.m. you should be here at 9.00 a.m. You should be punctual.

A very effective method of teaching the meaning of new lexical items is to present them together with their referents either by *presenting the object*, the *drawing* or *photographs*, or by *demonstrating* or *miming* if possible. Sometimes giving a translation of a particular word (if available in mother tongue) can also be helpful. This technique is easily used while teaching context words.

The meaning of a word depends on the context or the real-life situation in which the word is used e.g. the word *foot* can be used with different meanings in different situations or contexts. Here are a few examples.

- I have hurt my *food*.
- I want a piece of wood - one foot broad and three feet long.
- I have enough money to *foot* the bill.
- A project is on *foot* to build a bridge over the railway crossing.

But as a teacher, it is important to exemplify the *same* meaning of a word in as many similar situations as possible. Students should also be encouraged to guess (deduce) the meaning of words from other words in a sentence or paragraph. For example students may not know the meaning of the word *scarecrow* but in the following conversation the meaning is well brought out.

- The other day Deepak and I were walking through the fields when Deepak jumped when he saw a scarecrow.

  I laughed and said, "Are you a bird to be scared of a scarecrow?"

  "No," he said.

  "Then why are you scared of a scarecrow?"

  'Oh, it looked like a real man, fully-dressed and with outstretched arms'.

  "A scarecrow is like that, isn’t it?"

  "Yes I know, still it made me jump".

(Source: *English Secondary Course Despatch 2*, National Open School.)

Every language has groups of lexical items which are very similar in meaning (synonym) but are never identical. For example *angry, annoyed, upset, and irritated* may be synonyms but each word differs slightly from the others. As a teacher, you have to pay attention to synonyms if you wish to encourage your students to choose appropriate words in different types of writing.

A new lexical item can often be effectively taught by contrasting it with another item which is opposite in meaning. However, the item ‘antonym’ is used to refer to pairs of meanings which are *gradable* e.g. hot/cold; tall/short. In other words gradables can be modified e.g. very short/short/quite short/not very short/fairly tall/very tall or hot/quite hot/warm/fairly warm/ tepid or luke warm/not warm/quite cool/cold/quite cold/cold. On the other hand, nongradable opposites such as true/false; alive/dead; married/unmarried have no neutral ground between one term and the other.

A knowledge of the structure of words is one of the most effective ways of expanding vocabulary and helps in inferring word meaning. Teaching students to guess the meaning of words by explaining the prefix/suffix may be one strategy. We all know that prefixes can be categorised by their meaning e.g. prefixes indicate negation (un-, nor-, in-, dis-, a-); indicate number (uni-, mono-,bi/di, tri-, multi/poly-) or distance (tele). Similarly suffixes...
are related to a part of speech and are often used to change one part of speech into another. For example, the suffix -ance usually indicates that the word is a noun, whereas the suffix -ant usually indicates the word is an adjective.

Sometimes new words are formed by putting two or more words together. e.g. armchair, headmaster or rainfall. Sometimes words which have been joined together for a long time and are in the frequent use are written together (headache) whereas newer or less common compounds are hyphenated or printed as separate words. (e.g. tennis-player, crime reporter).

Dictionaries and Thesaurus can be used for a variety of purposes - to increase one's vocabulary, to track down a term that has been temporarily forgotten or just for fun.

A dictionary usually helps the learner with pronunciation, spelling, the context in which a word is found and used. Many dictionaries also describe idioms, special phrases, phrasal verbs and compound words - thus providing a lot of help. Some dictionaries also provide cross references - thereby allowing the user to look for synonyms and related words which might be useful. (e.g. carpet sweeper - a hand machine for sweeping carpets - compare vacuum cleaner - see picture at HOUSEHOLD.)

(Source: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Longman)

A Thesaurus, on the other hand helps a learner with a near synonym and is specially helpful when one is groping for a word to use instead of using what has already been used. However, a Thesaurus should always be used along with a dictionary as the words given for an entry always differ in shades of meaning. For example, let us look at the following given for “walk” in the Collins the Thesaurus.

Walk: advance, amble, hike, march, move, pace perambulate, promenade, saunter, step, stride, stroll, trek, trudge.

Now consult a dictionary to find out how some of the words have different meanings.

Nevertheless, using a Thesaurus definitely increases one's vocabulary.

Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Write your answers in the space given below.
       b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

9. Mention the technique(s) would use to teach the following words in class VII. beehive, envy, lazy, magnify.

10. Think and write as many words ajon can by adding prefixes and suffixes to the word USE.

11. Substitute the word nice in the following sentences.

   a) It is a nice day. ..................................

   b) My friend is very nice. ..............................

   c) The soup is nice. I would like some more. ............

   d) Monisha Koiral looked very nice in the film – 1942 A Love Story. ..........

15.7 VOCABULARY GAMES

The basic aim of vocabulary games is to increase the students repertoire of words - perhaps by extending his/her vocabulary or perhaps by giving him/her practice in using what (s)he already knows. Some examples of vocabulary games which can be easily arranged in classroom are given below:

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[...]
Word chains: A word is written on the board. The next word has to begin with last letter of the preceding word.

Class — Soldier — Rucksack — Kangaroo, etc.

Associated Words: Words related to a particular situation are listed down.

garden — gardener — plants — seedlings etc.

Semantic Mapping: This game is simple to implement and can be adapted to meet a variety of objectives. You can use the following procedure:

1. Choose a word or a topic.
2. Write the word on chalkboard/chart paper.
3. Ask students what kind of information they would like to include.
4. Encourage students to think of and write as many related words as possible.
5. Write the words under appropriate heading.
6. Have a class discussion, using the map as a guide.

The following semantic map for telephones has been taken from Hayes (1991): Effective Strategies for Teaching—Reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parts</th>
<th>Things it does</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cord</td>
<td>Rings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wires</td>
<td>Gives Busy Signal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dial</td>
<td>Records Messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouthpiece</td>
<td>Dials automatically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephones</td>
<td>Dials automatically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiver</td>
<td>Redials last number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push Buttons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering Machines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kids</th>
<th>Uses</th>
<th>Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pay Phone</td>
<td>Talk to others</td>
<td>Telephone Operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cordless</td>
<td>Listen to others</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car Phone</td>
<td>Get Phone numbers</td>
<td>Installer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dial (Rotary)</td>
<td>Long distance calls</td>
<td>Repair man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push Button</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pole man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Simple and Compound Game: Choose a base word. Ask students to produce as many words as they can which contain the base word. e.g. if the word chosen is self, then the words selfless, yourself, self made, self pity and many more.

In “Wordfinder” the students are given a word and they have to make as many words as they can from the letters in it. How many words do you think you can yourself make from the word grandmother? You can also allow your students to use their dictionaries to check possible answers.

Circle Games can be played in circles of 3 to 7 students. Student A says a letter. Player B thinks of a word beginning with A’s letter and says its second letter. C tries to guess the
word and gives a third letter. The player/student who in saying a letter completes a word loses and drops out. If a player on his/her turn thinks that the combination offered so far, cannot make a word (s)he may challenge the previous player. If there is no such word, that student has to drop out, otherwise the challenger is penalised.

A : d
B : o (* dog)
C : l (- dole)
D : 1 (- dollar)
E : That's a word

A : c
B : h (- change)
C : r (- christ)
D : o (- chromium)
E : That's not possible: What’s your word?

D : Loses a life
E : Loses a life

These are a few examples. There are many more games that you can choose from, depending on the level that you teach.

Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Write your answers in the space given below.
   b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

12. Choose a topic/word. Describe how you’ll organise a Semantic Map on the chosen word/topic with your students.

13. Choose any vocabulary game of your choice. Explain to your students how it is played and how it would be scored.

15.8 LET US SUM UP

- Vocabulary teaching does not end in school classes; it continues well into our adult life.
- All of us have a much wider passive vocabulary and a person's active vocabulary increases constantly.
- Teaching of content and structure words is equally important.
- Words are selected for teaching on principles of frequency, availability, teachability and coverage.
- Homonymy, polysemy and connotations of words make learning of words in English difficult.
- Several strategies like demonstration, real objects, audio-visual aids, teaching of word structures, guessing the meaning of a new word from the context can be effectively used for teaching and expanding student's vocabulary.
- Dictionary and Thesaurus work can increase the students word power.
- Vocabulary games make learning/revising of known words enjoyable.

15.9 KEY WORDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core vocabulary</th>
<th>A range of about 800 words with which the learner can function.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Deciding on word lists to be taught to learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachability</td>
<td>How easily a word can be taught. (For e.g. the word camera can be taught easily than the word religion.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>The frequency of a word in a particular situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage</td>
<td>The quality of a word to substitute other words and phrases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradable opposites</td>
<td>Some words can be graded as if in a continuum e.g.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hot warm tepid lukewarm cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-gradable opposites</td>
<td>The words are exact opposites - there is no word in between e.g. alive - dead (there is no word which can come between these two words).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active-passive vocabulary</td>
<td>Active vocabulary refers to the words used, while passive vocabulary refers to words that are understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content words-structure words</td>
<td>Contents words are words which refer to a thing, quality, state or action and which have meaning when words are used alone. Content words are mainly nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Structure words are words which have little meaning on their own, but which show grammatical relationships in and between sentences. Conjunctions, prepositions, articles are structure or function words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homographs</td>
<td>Words which are written in the same way but which are pronounced differently and which may have different meanings. Examples: Lead is a metal. Does this road lead to the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homonyms</td>
<td>Words which are written in the same way and sound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
alike but which have different meanings. Examples: Lie down. Don’t lie, tell the truth.

Homophones: Words which sound alike but are written differently and often have different meanings. Example: No and know.

Polysemy: Refers to a single word with more than one meaning. Example: Foot of the stairs. I’ve hurt my foot.

15.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Content words - Principal, punished, boys, class XII, found, beating, junior.
   Structure words - the, when, he, them, a.

2. Judge is a content word and has a meaning of its own even in isolation, whereas the word to which is a structure word would be important in indicating meaning in a particular sentence.

3. One shouldn’t ask students to make their own sentence with a word they have come across for the first time, because the incubation period in learning new words is quite long and is never mastered in the first time.

4. On principles of frequency, availability, teachability and coverage.

5. ‘Homo’ means similar, ‘phone’ means sound and ‘graph’ means writing. So homophones are words with similar pronunciation/sound (like vale/veil; sun/son) but with different spelling and different meanings. Homographs are words with similar spellings but different pronunciation and meaning e.g. Tie a bow. Bow before a queen. Wind the watch. The wind is blowing hard.

6. Homonyms include both homophones and homographs which are found difficult by new learners. Similarly, polysemy - the different meaning of the same words in different contexts can be very confusing for students. (e.g. the word ‘head’ or ‘mouth’ have different meanings in different contexts.)

7. Open ended (in case of difficulty consult a dictionary).

8. Open ended.

9. • beehive - pictures can be shown, a beehive can be drawn on the board; a small portion of a hive can be brought to the class and shown; students can be taken to see a beehive if there is one in the nearby trees.
   • envy - explanation is situation; synonyms.
   • lazy - explanation in situation; synonyms, opposites.
   • magnify - demonstrate with a magnifying glass; draw on the board; show pictures of the same object in 2 sizes.

10. Open ended. Some examples are given below:

   use - useful, usefulness, usefully
   - useless, uselessness
   - usable
   - used, unused, misused, disuse
   - user, using

11. Open ended: Some examples are given below:

   - lovely, bright, sunny day
   - pleasant, agreeable, good, amiable, friend
Reading Comprehension
- delicious, mouthwatering soup
- charming, appealing, captivating, bewitching

12. Open ended.
13. Open ended.
14. No. It makes learning/revising of new words enjoyable. The last few minutes of a class can be used for small games which make language learning more meaningful.

15.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


*Words and Their Meanings*; Open University, Milton Keynes, U.K.