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## UNIT 14 TEACHING VOCABULARY

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### 14.0 OBJECTIVES

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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
- organize vocabulary games in your classroom.

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### 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Few teachers will disagree that one of their basic goals of teaching a new language include 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 or written form,
- 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.

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### 14.2 DIFFERENT VOCABULARIES

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Although there is considerable agreement, there are still some differences in the way individual 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 - those 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 function words that enable him/her to construct the sentences s/he utters. In 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 fulfill basic needs and to communicate socially in it.

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

A distinction is often made between **structure** (function) words and **content** words as has been done in the earlier paragraph. The words underlined 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 it 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 1**

- 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.

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

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**14.3 SELECTION OF VOCABULARY ITEMS**

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Selection is the process of deciding which items to teach. Although selection is predetermined 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 occurrences 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 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 than **compassion**. 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.

1. How are vocabulary items selected for teaching a language?

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## 14.4 DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING WORDS IN ENGLISH

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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/won** — 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 identical spellings but different pronunciation (**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 is caused by **polysemy**. This occurs when one word carries several different senses or related meanings 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 3

1. Explain with examples the difference between **homophones** and **homographs**.

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2. How do **homonymy** and **polysemy** confuse students?

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

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

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### 14.5 VOCABULARY TEACHING AND EXPANSION - SOME SUGGESTIONS

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All lexical items have referents (i.e. they are either written or spoken symbols of real life things). But not all lexical items have referents which can be seen and touched (compare our earlier examples of **brief case** and **compassion**).

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.

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 **foot**.
- 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 chose 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/ cool/ 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. arm-chair, headmaster or rainfall. Sometimes words which have been joined together for a long time and are in 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). You have studied this in detail in Course 2, Block 4.

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.

**Check Your Progress 4**

- 1. Use the word 'spring' in as many different contexts as possible.

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- 2. Can words like limp, hobble, stroll, saunter, march, stride, trudge and trek be used as synonyms of walk? Consult a dictionary and give reasons for your answer.

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3. What do prefixes like **mis-**, **pre-** and **sub-**mean? Use them with words to bring out their meaning.

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4. How are compounds like **gate-crasher** or **blue-collar** different from compounds like **film-director** or **tax-payer**?

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### 14.6 VOCABULARY GAMES

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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 classrooms are given below:

**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 is listed down.

garden — gardener — plants — seedlings — etc.

**Semantic Mapping :-** 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 topic
2. Write the word on chalkboard/chartpaper
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 *Effective Strategies for Teaching Reading*.

Parts	Things it Does
Cord	Rings
Wires	Gives Busy Signal

Dial		Records Messages
Mouthpiece	Telephones	Dials automatically
Receiver		Redials last number
Push Buttons		
Answering Machines		
Kinds	Uses	Workers
Pay Phone	Talk to others	Telephone Operator
Cordless	Listen to Others	Secretary
Car Phone	Get Phone Numbers	Installer
Dial (Rotary)	Long distance calls	Repair man
Push Button		Pole man
Cellular		

**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, myself, 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.

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|-------------------|--|------------------|
| A : d             | A : c                                      | (* word in mind) |
| B : o (*- dog)    | B : h (- change)                           |                  |
| C : l (- dole)    | C : r (- christ)                           |                  |
| D : l (- dollar)  | D : o (- chromium)                         |                  |
| E : That's a word | E : That's not possible: What's your word? |                  |
| D : Loses a life  | D : CHROMIUM                               |                  |
|                   | 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 5**

1. Choose a topic/word. Make a Semantic Map.

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

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3. Are vocabulary games a waste of class-time? Give reasons for your answer.

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### 14.7 LET US SUM UP

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1. Vocabulary teaching does not end in primary classes; it continues well into our adult life.
2. All of us have a much wider passive vocabulary and a person's active vocabulary increases constantly.
3. Teaching of content and structure words are equally important.
4. Words are selected for teaching on principles of frequency, availability, teachability and coverage.
5. Homonymy, polysemy and connotations of words make learning of words in English difficult.
6. 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.
7. Dictionary and Thesaurus work can increase the students word power.
8. Vocabulary games make learning/revising of known words enjoyable.

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### 14.8 KEY WORDS

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- active - passive vocabulary** : active vocabulary refers to the words used, while passive vocabulary refers to words that are understood.
- content words- structure words** : 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.
- homographs** : 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.

<b>homonyms</b>	:	words which are written in the same way and sound alike but which have different meanings. Examples : Lie down. Don't lie, tell the truth.
<b>homophones</b>	:	words which sound alike but are written differently and often have different meanings. Example, no and know.
<b>polysemy</b>	:	refers to a single word with more than one meaning Example : Foot of the stairs. I've hurt my foot.

## 14.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Bright J.A. and Mc Gregor G.P. 1981. *Teaching English as a Second Language*. ELBS; Longman.

Doff A, 1988. *Teach English*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Ellis R and Tomlinson B, 1982. *Teaching Secondary English*. London : Longman.

Hayes B.L., (ed),1991. *Effective Strategies for Teaching Reading*. Allyn and Bacon.

Morgan J and Rinvolueri M.1986. *Vocabulary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wallace. MJ 1987. *Teaching Vocabulary*. ELBS, Heinemann Educational Books.

*Words and Their Meanings*. 1980: Open University: Milton Keynes, U.K.

## 14.10 ANSWERS

### Check Your Progress 1

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

### Check Your Progress 2

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

### Check Your Progress 3

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

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

**Check Your Progress 4**

1. Open ended
2. The meanings are not identical although some of them are listed as synonyms of **walk**. Consult a dictionary to find the exact differences.
3. **mis** - wrongly/bad or lack of: (**misprint, misunderstood, mistrust**)  
**pre** - before - **pretest, preface**.  
**sub** - under - **submarine, subordinate, subsoil, subcutaneous**
4. Words like **gate crasher** or **blue collar** are best learned as individual items in contexts, and a short discussion of how they might have come to possess their current meaning is useful in remembering the words. (But they have a meaning which is not the sum total of base words). On the other hand, words like **film-director** or **tax payer** are opaque, their meanings can be guessed from the two base words.

**Check Your Progress 5**

1. Open ended
2. Open ended
3. 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.