

Teaching Vocabulary : Real Challenges before the Teachers

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English has become the 'International language' today, though there are many opposing the dominance of this language - all over the world. Despite the large scale opposition from many quarters English has become the language of trade and commerce, science and technology, humanities, Law and also International affairs and of many other subjects.

British ruled India for more than 200 years and though liberated in 1947, we Indians could not liberate ourselves from the clutches of the English language. Nowadays, learning English is no more a matter of a class from urban area but it has reached to the small huts at the villagers in our country. In short, learning English language has become a 'must' for us. And therefore knowing more and more words from the language is very important for any learner. Without a sufficient vocabulary it is almost impossible to have the proper knowledge of any foreign language - in our case English.

For more than 25 years i.e. the early 1950 to about 1980, Lexicologists (People who study words) and language educators failed to pay expected attention to vocabulary. For this, according to M.L. Tikko, a main reason was the widespread belief among Linguists that knowing a language was the same as being able to use its sounds and structures. The fact however, is that the true mastery of a language lies as much in knowing and appropriately using its vocabulary as in being able to use its system of sounds and its grammatical and discursal patterns.

Of late, after they realized that good language depends greatly on an adequate stock of words, Linguists started taking more interest in vocabulary studies. The findings of such studies which have found support and confirmation in computer aided Linguistic research, should be of value at most stages of

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language teaching and learning. We should also take note of the fact that most people's vocabulary keeps growing throughout their lives.

The vocabulary of language includes more than single words. It includes forms that are not full words (e.g. un, il, ment) on the one hand and compound words, fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions on the other. Learning to use the 'Less than the word elements as also the 'more than the word' important phrases and idioms often proves to be the most difficult part of mastering a language.

While developing one's vocabulary one has to understand the words from all their meaning or what it stands for. Knowing a word is just like knowing a human being. In both the cases it takes a lot of time to know his or its habitual behaviour and importantly to become fully aware of the company that he or it habitually keeps.

While knowing a word for use a learner/teacher has to see;

- 1] how often it is used where and when
- 2] how it is spelled and pronounced
- 3] what parts of speech (noun, verb etc.) it can function as
- 4] what is the core meaning(s) of the word
- 5] what it's root form is, what prefixes and suffixes it can take and what derivations can be made from it. (e.g. do. does. did. doing, undo, doable, done)
- 6] what grammatical patterns it fits into or what its syntactical behaviour is
- 7] what associations it forms (e.g. pleasant or unpleasant, positive or negative)
- 8] what limitations there are to its use and
- 9] what degree of probability there is of encountering it in speech and in writing.

Really knowing a word means being able to apply it flexibly but accurately in a range of contexts and situations. Thus it can be argued that there is no knowledge addressed in school in which application is more crucial than knowledge of word meanings. (Anderson & Nagy 1991) The teacher/learner has

to be very much aware of the fact that there are some words, simplest of the words, in most cases, they are not one, two, three but more meanings bearing units. As an example study the word 'hand' as used below in an exchange between two friends.

Situation –

Kalpana is walking towards the dining table with a covered basket in her hand.

'Hand me that basket,' said Prerana.

'No, I won't. I know you are an old hand at playing tricks,' said Kalpana.

'There is no trick in what I said. It is my birthday today that I want to have a free hand at laying the table,' retorted Prerana.

'You could give Mother a hand if you wanted to.'

We must know that as most words are multiple meaning units, learning a word truly and fully may often be a long-time operation. Of course it requires a number of different learning experiences to know a word.

There is no single, correct answer possible to a question as to how does a learner move through the stages of getting to know a word? However, some possible routes to word knowledge are : seeing the word in print or hearing it spoken.

Awareness of 'connotations' is an important aspect of word knowledge. This is because very often words that appear to carry the same (denotational) meanings do not mean the same things in actual use. An example or two should make this point clear.

Each of the three words 'thin' 'skinny' and 'svelte' denotes people with little or no fat on their bodies. In actual use, however one does not mean the same thing when one calls a young lady.

the 'skinny' daughter of a doctor

the 'thin' looking lady

the 'svelte' and handsome young lady.

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Here it is only the third sentence that may be capable of paying a compliment to the young lady. The other two generally give the impressions of her being underweight and perhaps unhealthy.

The similar trio is 'plump', 'fat' and 'obese'. Whereas being plump is all right. Few people would like to be called 'fat' or 'obese' in public. So words that appear to carry the same meanings and thus belong together, are far from being synonymous. Each differs from the other on one or more important parameter(s)

Two ways of acquiring words -

Ways to vocabulary teaching differ; so do learners' strategies for learning words, their forms and meanings. However, a few of these ways are known to work better than others.

Words are learnt both deliberately and incidentally. In one's native language (or mothertongue) a lot of words are learnt by just getting exposed to them as part of living in a society.

Incidental learning takes place in the playground, at the marketplace or in one's home. These places may be considered as the richest source of word knowledge. But the above exposure may not be available to the learners at any foreign language. Especially when the target language stays confined to the class-room, words are mainly learnt from either class-room interaction with the teacher, the course books or the interaction with other learner. Whatever it may be, deliberate teaching and conscious learning of words becomes indispensable.

Ways how to get words taught or learnt -

1) **Extensive reading** is the richest source of building a stock of words. For this to happen, a teacher must find ways to provide every learner access to appropriate reading materials at their own level. Also a learner should make deliberate efforts to read a variety of material on different subjects.

At the earliest stage of reading the proportion of new words to running words, on a printed page should not exceed 1:50 or 6 words on a page of 300 words. Of course the learner or reader is expected to make reading on one's own

an enjoyable experience. For this the teacher must a) know what reading materials are suitable for what level of learners. b) make available a sizable number of suitable books (preferably in multiple copies) for her class and c) encourage and reward regular reading.

2) **Experiencing words in contexts** - Although words can be learnt in different ways, they are best introduced as parts of larger, more meaningful units. This is not only because words gain different meanings in different contexts of use but because contexts grammatical as well as semantic (meaning based), make it easier for learners to grasp word behaviour. However, to say that words should never be learned in isolation would also be wrong. It has been noticed that successful learners often make their own word-books or even regularly memorise individual words for later use. Two of the commonly used practices among such learners are : keeping a record of new words whenever or wherever they meet them and doing systematic 'dictionary work'. A word on each should help. Alternatively learners can make use of one or more notebooks to enter new words heard or read under different topics. (e.g. family, school, hobbies, transport, plants...)

3) **Learning about and experiencing words as a series of interrelating systems** : Most words in a language belong to lexical sets or semantic fields. These fields or sets can vary from broad and inclusive categories such as 'living things' to narrower sets such as 'kinship terms' (father, cousin, niece) Lexical sets can belong to processes (e.g. words used in making a cup of coffee or fixing a bicycle tube) to topics (e.g. articles or clothing, classical music) scales or clines and a lot of other meaning, style or function based categories. What makes for efficient learning are opportunities for experiencing words as parts of different system.

4) **Inferring word meanings** - Good readers guess or infer word meanings; they do so by taking help from the contexts of the word and also by looking at the affixer (prefixes, suffixes, infixes) or parts of words.

5) **Building good dictionary** using habits is the richest (but not always well-used) source of word knowledge. Such a dictionary, be it bilingual or

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monolingual, can be a reliable repository of word meanings. However, since all dictionaries are not all equally good, being able to first select and then competently use the best, requires effective training. Of course learner should not allow the dictionary to become a constant crutch which works against learner autonomy.

6] Creating associations between the word to be learned and something that can make it a part of long-term memory is a useful approach for acquiring words. Several different associations have proved their value with teachers and learners. e.g. to make the student understand the meaning of the word 'decoration' the teacher shows him a picture with a room decorated for Christmas. Then she asks him to use making the word part of his memory. It works. Although the Hindi expression does not mean the same as the English word, but student can recall 'dekho ray shan' when he thinks of 'decoration'.

The devices that are used as aids to memory vary from one another. A highly common device is to use the rhyming of poetry or song to enhance memory.

A device that has proved its value with many teachers and learners is the use of flash cards. The card may have the word and its parts on one side and the definition (in the mothertongue), a picture or an illustrative sentence on the other.

7] Techniques as aids - Translation is the best source of word knowledge but at the same time it is the most controversial. Because many knowledgable language educators are against the use of translation to get the word meanings. The first reason is that it brings another language and so deflects learner's attention from the language being learnt. Secondly, not all words have exact equivalents across languages, many have only false equivalents.

A good way to teach words that name objects may often be the use of the objects themselves. The teacher brings one or more into the class and passes it or them round. The objects can, for example, include those found in kitchen, a tool shed, the garden, a science laboratory or different items of clothing. Where pupils

come from homes that differ in their possessions, the teachers can add variety and colour to the lesson.

A skillful teacher can teach lots of words, by drawing them on the board. e.g. names of countries, cities, rivers, body parts, animals, action words etc. The words referring various activities can be taught through mime.

Paraphrasing is also a very good means to teach the meaning of words. The meaning of a word can be explained by using a different word or words or by providing a definition. For this the teacher is surely expected to have sufficient experience. What works best is using known or more common words. Many words can be taught as parts of word families or semantic fields. Some examples are parts of the body, musical instruments, animals, members of sports team. Words can also be placed together as synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and so on. (start-begin-commence, good-bad, see-sea) However, although there is good logic in bringing words together into such relationships, classroom experience proves it as problematic.

Word games have proven value in learning to know the meaning of words. They vary with age, with the stage of learning and also the learning purpose (e.g. games for building receptive vocabulary, learning how to spell, learning pronunciation, word building and so on. Experienced teachers use games to good effect.

Learners and Learning Strategies - Learners differ on how best they add to the stock of their recognition and production vocabulary. They differ too on how they enrich and extend their hold on the words they have already learnt for use. While some learn best in seeing the word repeated in print others find listening to it or seeing it used in, say radio or television serials, a far better way to word mastery. Some learn by putting words to work in meaningful context, others by watching other users producing new meanings by using words in creative ways.

If it is true then that each learner will continue to rely on what serves him best, is there a role for the teacher in contributing to learning strategies ? A

89 possible answer is that recognition of each one's style of learning is a step towards the teacher's use of the best means available. What a teacher must therefore do is to help learners recognise or discover what works for them, to the extent possible, accommodate each person's learning styles and strategies in setting group, or individual tasks.

The first step at the intermediate or advanced stage may be the use of a questionnaire both to understand the differing learning styles or strategies as well as to make learners aware of what works in each individual case. The questions may include - 'Do I learn vocabulary best in all class or group/pair oral activities? Do games help me to learn vocabulary? Does it help if I analyse word parts? Do I find learning of word roots useful? Having made learners conscious at what helps each of them best, the teacher must adopt the best means available to make that strategy or style work for each individual learner.

Thus one of the main challenges for the teacher who seeks to help build the learners word stock is to discover and put to good use the many different ideas and devices to help build a 'web of associations' at different kinds which give every new word, word form and word meaning a strong base in the learner's mind. Learning a word in all its meanings and associations takes time and happens best in rich and varied encounters and experiences.

An important step however is to make learner aware of the need of becoming fully self-reliant as resourceful builders of words, their forms, their multiple meanings and the relationships they form or are capable of forming.

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