Vocabulary Teaching: Effective Methodologies

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Introduction

Vocabulary is the first and foremost important step in language acquisition. In a classroom where students are not finding themselves comfortable with L2, language learning can be made interactive and interesting with the introduction of appropriate vocabulary exercises. This paper is an attempt to study and explore the various methodologies that can be incorporated in the teaching of vocabulary items in a language classroom.

Background

Patterns of Difficulty in Vocabulary

Robert Lado (1955) talked about patterns of difficulty in vocabulary teaching. He highlighted key issues related to words, the native language factor and about patterns. He even analyzed Spanish, French and Mexican patterns of difficulty in their respective vocabulary items. He stated that while dealing with vocabulary one should take into account three important aspects of words - their form, their meaning and their distribution - and one should consider various kinds of classes of words in the function of the language. He said that the forms, meaning distribution and classification of words are different in different languages. He revealed that these differences might lead to vocabulary problems.

Vocabulary and Anatomy

Visnja Pavicic (2003) dealt with a way to improve students' abilities to explore, store and usage of vocabulary items. He determined the role of vocabulary teaching and how a teacher could help their learners. He laid emphasis on self initiated independent learning with strategies, in which formal practices, functional practices and memorizing could be included. He said that the teacher should create activities and tasks to help students to build their vocabulary and develop strategies to learn the vocabulary on their own.

Teaching Vocabulary in English Language: Effective Methodologies

It is noteworthy to mention here that vocabulary items are imparted mostly by translation: either a list of words with their translation at the beginning of the lesson or the translation of the content having new words or glossaries at the very end. This is an erroneous practice as it leads to a state of confusion for the learners. On the teaching skills of vocabulary items, Frisby (1957) commented that "While the teacher is not, himself, concerned with the actual selection of vocabulary for text book purposes since practically all the books we use are based on limited vocabularies, it is important that he/she (the teacher) should know the principles, which underlie vocabulary selection". Thus it signifies that a language teacher should be innovative and proficient in the application of methodologies pertaining to teaching vocabulary items in a classroom situation. Following are the main methodologies for teaching vocabulary items in an English language classroom.

Listening Carefully

Caeful listening to the words may be a good option in teaching vocabulary items in a heterogenic classroom. "Let the students hear the word in isolation and in a sentence. If the sounds of the word have been mastered, the students will hear it correctly with two or three repetitions." (Robert Lado: 121) Slow pronunciation without distortion will help. Breaking the word into

parts and building up to the whole word will also be helpful.

Pronouncing the Word

Pronouncing the word enables the students to remember it longer and identify it more readily when they hear or see it.

Methods of Grasping the Meaning

The teacher should try to get the meaning to the class without using translation. This is not preferable on the ground that translation may or may not provide the meaning of the word accurately and precisely. It is advocated as it enables the class to go without grasping the meaning of a word that they have learned to pronounce rather than to depend upon the translation.

Key Strategies in Teaching Vocabulary

Some of the key strategies to unfold the information and meaning of a new word to a class are as follows:

Definitions

Definitions in the target language may be very handy if they are expressed in terms that are better known or more easily guessed than the word that is defined. In this direction teachers and students can refer to authentic and reliable dictionaries.

Self-defining Context

The context makes the situation clear, and this in turn illuminates the meaning of the new word. This practice saves time and develops an intensive reading habit and better understanding.

Antonyms

When one member of a pair of opposites is understood, the meaning of the other can be easily comprehended. This helps the student to understand the different shades of meanings of a word.

Synonyms

A synonym may be used to help the student to understand the different shades of meaning if the synonym is better known than the word being taught. Synonyms help to enrich a student's vocabulary bank and provide alternative words instantly.

Dramatization

This method can be practiced at ease. It can win the favour of the students as learners like dramatizations and can easily learn through them. Many situations can be dramatized or demonstrated.

Examples

- Sing [Sing a song]
- Open [Open a book]
- Close [Close the book]

Pictures and Drawings

Pictures of many types and colours can be used successfully to show the meaning of words and sentence. Handmade pictures can also be used as there is no need to be very artistic.

Examples

- into [Raj goes into the circle.]
- in [Rahman is in the circle.]

Drawings can be used to explain the meaning of things, actions, qualities, and relations. A line drawing of a head, for example, provides many useful nouns and verbs.

Realia

Real objects or models of real objects are very effective and meaningful in showing meanings but in handling of real objects, a teacher must be practical and should not be superfluous.

Series, Scales, Systems

The meaning of words such as the months of the year, the days of the week, the parts of the day, seasons of the year, ordinal numbers, cardinal numbers, etc. that form part of well-known series can be made clear by placing them in their natural order in the series.

Parts of Words

The parts of complex and compound words may be more common than the words themselves. Separating such words into their component parts generally elaborates the meaning.

Illustrative Sentences

Most words have a variety of restrictions on their use. Systematic descriptions of these restrictions and idiomatic uses would be laborious and not very effective in teaching. It is better to give appropriate examples that elucidate the range and variation of usage.

Practice from Meaning to Expression

This is controlled practice in which the class does not create new uses or new contexts but simply recalls the ones presented. There are many types of practices for this purpose. Pictures, realia, context, and dramatization can be used. Series and systems can also be used.

Reading the Word

Reading words aloud is also very beneficial. It makes a learner familiar with the word and also improves pronunciations of the learners.

Writing the Word

It will enable the class to write the new word while the auditory memory is fresh, even if the objective is only to read. Writing or copying the word from the blackboard will give the student a chance to understand the grammatical aspect of the word such as noun, verb, adverb, adjective etc.

Shift of Attention

Under this practice, the teacher provides a context by description or through reading which elicits the use of the word. The learners should be asked to pay attention to and develop an attitude or a point of view which he defends or attacks.

Strategy for Special Types of Words

Specific techniques or special combinations of the above techniques may be applicable for particular groups of words.

Words That Are Easy to Learn

It has been seen that the words that are similar in form and meaning to the first language are easy to understand and comprehend. They should be taught for listening and reading rather than for speaking and writing.

Words of Normal Difficulty

Words of normal difficulty are best taught in contextual realms, such as food, clothing, sports, work, and so on. There are advantages to using a connected context illustrating the words that are to be taught. Additional words can be taught as alternatives to those chosen in the connected context. Practice can be controlled in varying situations by changing a key word or phrase.

Difficult Words

Some words and sets of words are especially difficult to understand. They have to be taught as special problems with the strategy determined by the particular problem in each case.

Conclusion

An efficient language teacher can use selected vocabulary activities or can use integrated activities. All this depends upon ability and level of understanding and interest of the learners. There is no sure fire remedy or method to enhance vocabulary in a day or two. A student's vocabulary bank can be enriched on a gradual basis and one should always show keen interest and enthusiasm in finding, learning and understanding new words.

References

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