

## TEACHING VOCABULARY: AN ASSESSMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*Vocabulary is an essential building block of language and it makes sense to be able to measure learners' knowledge and use of it (Schmitt, Schmitt, & Clapham, 2001). However, much less time is dedicated to the teaching and thereby testing of vocabulary than to that of the other language skills. Despite the inadequate attention paid to it in the field, assessing vocabulary should have the same priority as other skills in that the important cornerstones of testing (validity, reliability, practicality, wash back, authenticity, transparency and security) need to be considered in designing and evaluating tests of lexical knowledge and use. Vocabulary development is crucial both from a theoretical and practical standpoint. Experts in the field of vocabulary development are in agreement that vocabulary is central to the language learning process, and as such, it is generally recognized that a focus on strengthening vocabulary is necessary at every stage of a learner's language development. Folse (2003) goes on to state that without syntax, meaning is hindered; but without vocabulary meaning is impossible. From a practical standpoint, educators cite that lexical knowledge is important in the development of other language skills.*

*It can be argued that vocabulary knowledge is essential to measuring proficient reading levels in both L2 and L1. While there has been extensive discussion about the importance of teaching vocabulary in academic settings, testing vocabulary itself has received less attention. According to Chastain (1988) the lack of needed vocabulary is the most common cause of students' inability to say what they want to say during communication activities. In addition, tests of vocabulary often provide a good guide to reading ability (Heaton, 1990). In this paper, I will address certain assessment decisions that teachers need to make in the assessment of vocabulary, and then move on to issues in the assessment of lexical knowledge. Finally, a comprehensive review of testing formats will be described with recommendations on how to construct valid and reliable vocabulary assessments.*

The term vocabulary has a range of meanings. As Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1089:1962), describes "the vocabulary of a language is the total number of words in it" and "someone's vocabulary is the total number of words he or she knows". Is the vocabulary development an important aspect of student's academic life? A number of studies

have shown the importance of vocabulary in the academic enhancement of the students. As per these various studies the vocabulary size in young children is a strong predictor for the success in later grades: The larger the children's vocabulary in Primary grades, the greater their academic achievements in their upper grades. According to the scientific study by NRP (National Reading Panel) and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in the USA, readers' vocabulary is strongly related to their understanding of text. They explained that when students are taught key words before reading text, they have greater comprehension than students who do not receive such instruction. The influence of such evidence led the NRP to emphasize vocabulary instruction as an important part of teaching vocabulary. Teaching English vocabulary is an important area worthy of effort and investigation. Recently methodologists and linguists emphasize and recommend teaching vocabulary because of its importance in language teaching. Vocabulary is needed for expressing meaning and in using the receptive (listening and reading) and the productive (speaking and writing) skills.

Vocabulary is not a syllabus, i.e., a list of words that teachers prepare for their learners to memorize and learn by heart. Memorizing may be good and useful as a temporary technique for tests, but not for learning a foreign language. Language students need to learn vocabulary of the target language in another way. If we are really to teach students what words mean and how they are used, we need to show them being used together in context. Words do not just exist on their own; they live together and they depend upon each other. Therefore, teaching vocabulary correctly is a very important element in language learning. Correct vocabulary instruction involves vocabulary selection, word knowledge and teaching techniques. Learning words does not occur in a vacuum; that is, children do not acquire meanings of words in isolation. All learning—both personal and academic—occurs within the socio-cultural environment of the home, community, and classroom. Teachers know that students who are learning to read and write and those who are reading to learn—that is, learning in content areas—will benefit from a sound instructional vocabulary program. This is especially true for classrooms where children have small vocabularies and are English language learners. Knowledge of words is acquired incidentally, where vocabulary is developed through immersion in language activities. Words are also learned through direct instruction, where students learn words through a structured approach. Thus, vocabulary programs should be designed to support children's word learning through a combination of approaches to teaching, direct instruction, and incidental word learning. Michael Graves (2006) offers a framework for successful vocabulary programs that supports effective teaching and students' development of word knowledge. The foundation of his instructional program includes a four-part approach to developing robust vocabularies:

- (1) Provide rich and varied language experiences,
- (2) teach individual words,
- (3) teach word-learning strategies, and

(4) foster word consciousness (pp. 4–8).

**(1) Provide rich and varied language experiences:** Incidental word learning takes place when teachers offer and encourage students to participate in a variety of rich language experiences that occur throughout the day and across the curriculum. Examples of such experiences that promote rich and powerful vocabularies at all grade levels include

- (a) interactive read-aloud of outstanding children’s literature,
- (b) dialogic-based instructional activities,
- (c) independent reading,
- (d) interactive writing, and
- (e) creating a print-rich environment where the “walls are dripping with words.”

**(2) Teach individual words:** Although many words may be learned incidentally and vocabularies do become stronger when they are supported with a language-rich environment, children benefit from systematic and direct instruction of words. The research is clear with respect to effective teaching of words (Graves, 2006). Vocabulary instruction should

- (1) provide students with information that contains the context as well as the meaning of the word,
- (2) design instruction that engages students and allows sufficient time for word learning,
- (3) Make sure students have multiple exposures to the words with review and practice, and (4) create a dialogue around the words.

**(3) Teach word-learning strategies:** An important aspect of developing students’ robust vocabularies is teaching them tools to unlock the meaning of unknown words. The most effective tools use the context of the surrounding words or sentences to infer the meaning of a word, using meaningful word parts to make sense out of the unknown word and using a dictionary effectively to help define an unknown word.

**(4) Foster word consciousness:** An important aspect of a strong vocabulary program is to engage students in learning new words. As teachers, we need to develop word consciousness within our students and maintain their interest in words. Graves and Watts-Taffe (2008) suggest that teachers “

- (1) create a word-rich environment,
- (2) recognize and promote adept diction,
- (3) promote word play,
- (4) foster word consciousness through writing,
- (5) involve students in original investigations, and

(6) teach students about words” (p. 186).

In the past, teachers used to select and present vocabulary from concrete to abstract. Words like ‘door’, ‘window’, ‘desk’, etc., which are concrete, used to be taught at beginning levels. However, words like ‘honesty’, ‘beauty’ etc., which are abstract words, used to be taught at advanced levels because they are not “physically represented” in the learning/teaching environment and are very difficult to explain. Nowadays methodologists and linguists suggest that teachers can decide and select the words to be taught on the basis of how frequently they are used by speakers of the language. Besides that, teachers can decide which words are useful and should be taught to their learners on the basis of semantics. This means, that the word is more useful if it covers more things than if it only has one very specific meaning. For example, the word ‘book’, which is taught at beginning levels, has wider usage than the words ‘notebook’, ‘textbook’, etc. Furthermore, Nation says that frequency and coverage are not enough to be used when teachers select and prepare a word list for learners of English. So he suggests other criteria, such as language needs, availability and familiarity, regularity and ease of learning or learning burden.

Teachers can help their learners enrich and increase their vocabulary. They can also help the learners to build a new store of words to select from when they want to express themselves. If any learner can handle grammar correctly, that does not mean that he can express himself fluently unless he has a store of words to select from. Therefore, teachers are a very important factor in selecting and teaching English vocabulary, and they have to design vocabulary syllabi according to their learners’ needs. The selection of words which are to be taught to the students is a very important procedure in the language learning process. However, the word selection process doesn’t mean that the students will be fluent in expressing themselves in English upon learning that list, i.e., what students need to know regarding vocabulary is the word meaning, the word use, the word formation and the word grammar. When conveying the meaning to the students, teachers should teach their students that a word may have more than one meaning when used in different contexts. For example, the word “book” has at least twelve different meanings when used in context. It has eight meanings as a noun, two meanings as a verb and three different meanings when used with prepositions as phrasal verbs. One may say “I booked my ticket three days ago”; another “I booked him for speeding” and so on. Teachers should make the teaching learning vocabulary process clear and easy for their students when conveying any meaning; otherwise the student may feel bored and become fed up with learning vocabulary.

The meaning of words can be communicated in many different ways. Nation suggests that teachers can convey meaning to their students by demonstration or pictures (using an object, using a cut out figure, using gesture, performing and action, photographs, blackboard drawings or diagrams and pictures from books) and by verbal explanation (analytical definition, putting the new word in a defining context, and translating into another language).

Besides that, teachers should involve their students in discovering the words' meanings by themselves and let them make efforts to understand words' meanings. When the students are involved in discovering meaning, they will never forget those meanings and they will be able to express themselves fluently. When a single word has various meanings, the teacher should decide which meanings are to be taught first, i.e., the teacher must decide which meanings occur most frequently and which meanings the learners need most. As a result, the students will be motivated, and gradually they will build their own store of words which will be a basis for communication at any time.

Furthermore, students should be familiar with the words' meanings when words are used in metaphors and idioms, and they should know when to choose the right word for the right place. "We know that the word 'hiss', for example, describes the noise that snakes make. But we stretch its meaning to describe the way people talk to each other ("Don't move or you're dead," she hissed.). That is metaphorical use" (Harmer). Students also need to know the different forms words have and when to use them. Thus the verb 'run' has the participle 'running' and 'run'. The present participle 'running' can be used as an adjective and 'run' can also be a noun. Therefore, word formation is a very important part in teaching vocabulary. Getting familiar with the different forms of words, the students can easily know how to use the words in writing and speaking. Moreover, word grammar is one of the most important parts that students should be taught carefully. Teachers should give the students the opportunity to be exposed to grammatical patterns and to practice them frequently, such as nouns (countable and uncountable), verb complementation, phrasal verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Therefore, "different parts of speech should usually be taught separately because they occur in differing sentence pattern, but they need not be widely separated in a course if their meanings are very similar" (Nation).

Teaching vocabulary is not just conveying the meaning to the students and asking them to learn those words by heart. If teachers believe that the words are worth explaining and learning, then it is important that they should do this efficiently. Teachers should use different techniques and activities in teaching English vocabulary to motivate the learners, enrich their vocabulary and enable them to speak English properly. There are many techniques and activities that teachers can employ and use in teaching vocabulary, such as presentation, discovery techniques and practice. We will look at the "C's approach (conveying meaning, checking understanding, and consolidation), which Celce-Murcia recommends every teacher to follow when using the above mentioned techniques. "In stage one (conveying meaning), the items are presented to the students. In stage two (checking for comprehension) exercises test how far the students have grasped the meaning of the items. In stage three (consolidation), students deepen their understanding of the items through use and creative problem-solving activities" (Celce-Murcia).

The conveying meaning stage, to present new vocabulary to the learners, can be done in many ways, so that the learners can understand and grasp the words' meanings. At the beginning levels, teachers can convey meanings by bringing 'realia' into the classroom, i.e., teachers can bring the objects themselves to the classroom and show them to the learners, such as 'pens', 'rulers', 'balls'. However, when that is impossible (to bring the object to the classroom, such as 'cars', 'animals'), teachers can show their students pictures of those items. Besides that, teachers can use mime, action and gesture to convey meaning. Concepts like running, walking, or smoking are easy to present in this way. At the advanced levels, teachers can convey meaning by using the techniques of word relations, (synonyms or antonyms) definitions, explanations, examples, anecdotes, contexts and word roots and affixes. Here is an example which may help you understand what some of the above mentioned techniques mean. "If the teacher is explaining the item "a guided tour", s/he may ask the class to imagine a museum or an art gallery in which there is a group of people listening to a man explaining a picture. The man goes from this picture to the next picture and the people follow him. The teacher explains that the man is called a guide and the group is on a guided tour. If this is not clear, the teacher can illustrate with another example, perhaps of a guided tour of a city" (Celce-Murcia). So, all of the above mentioned techniques are very useful for teaching new lexical items. They can help the teacher to make his lesson interesting and useful. Using these ways, the teacher can motivate his students and get them involved in the teaching learning process.

After the stage of conveying meaning, the teacher should check the learners' understanding, i.e., the teacher can prepare different kinds of exercises to check the students' vocabulary comprehension. Celce-Murcia suggests different kinds of activities for checking the students' understanding, such as fill-in-the-blank, making pairs and sorting exercises. In the fill-in-the-blank activity, the teacher gives the students either sentences or short passages with missing words, and then the students have to consider the context of the sentences to work out the probable missing words. In the matching pairs activities, the students may be asked to pair up verbs with appropriate nouns, mini dialogues, definitions, idioms or funny definitions. Let's take the following activity of matching up a verb (A words) with an appropriate noun (B words) as an example:

A words (verbs)	B words (nouns)
1- answer	a- a house
2- blow	b- a picture
3- build	c- the phone
4- cook	d- a meal
5- draw	e- a song
6- drive	f- television
7- faster	g- a seatbelt
8- read	h- a car

- 9- sing i- your nose  
10- switch on j- a magazine

In the above activity the students are asked to match up verb with an appropriate noun. While the students are working individually or in groups, the teacher can check their understanding by going round the class from group to group.

If teachers want to make sure that their students can use the word properly and can express themselves fluently, they should go to the last stage, which is consolidation. Implementing this stage, the teachers can ask their pupils to handle problem-solving tasks, values clarification, writing a story or dialogue, discussions and role-play. Finally, I would like to say that teaching vocabulary is one of the most important and difficult fields in the teaching process. Teachers should learn how to handle this field properly and let their learners handle words and be involved with them. When teachers select the words to be taught to their learners, they should be aware of the vocabulary their learners need. In this way, students can use words effectively. If we, the English teachers, let our students be exposed to the vocabulary they need, and if we give them the chance to practice them, then they will remember some or all of them. Furthermore, when teachers decide to teach any meaning of any word, they should touch on word use, word formation and word grammar. Teachers should also know that teaching vocabulary is not just conveying the meaning to the students and asking them to learn those words by heart. Teachers should check their students' understanding by giving them encouraging exercises, such as the one mentioned in this essay. As a result, teachers will be satisfied by employing the above mentioned techniques, and their students will be as well. Those techniques will give the students the opportunity to become independent and will allow them to activate their previous knowledge in working with words by themselves. In addition, they will feel more confident when trying to express themselves in English, because they have already grasped a lot of vocabulary as a result of being taught by the above mentioned techniques and ways. All of the discussion above can be summed up by Underhill's words "... engaging the learner ... is essential to any activity that is to have a high learning yield".

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