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Methods of Teaching Vocabulary in English Language Teaching

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the need to develop appropriate methods to teach vocabulary items in English to the students of professional courses who wish to build careers in this globalised scenario. Research in English Language Teaching so far has focused primarily on how to teach English. Most of these methods considered structure as the prime component to be imparted. Whereas the role of vocabulary is either relegated to secondary positions or ignored completely. This article besides laying emphasis on the relevance of developing strategies to impart vocabulary to the learner also focuses on how and when to impart vocabulary.

Keywords: Vocabulary

1. Introduction

The role of English as a unifying language in the dynamic trade environment powered by globalization, beyond any perceptible doubt is very crucial for the successful transaction of any business. English has so far played the role of a Lingua Franca, a bridge language, an auxiliary language etc and it has graduated to an international language. Now it has attained the status of a Universal language. Acquiring English language has now become synonymous to success. A good deal of research has been taking place in the field of English Language Teaching in India too. As a result of the research inside and outside India a number of changes in the past decades took place in the methods of teaching, materials to be used for teaching and curriculum planning.

But most of the changes suggested have been taking place in the field of methods and strategies of teaching rather than teaching vocabulary, the most important content. Over the years a great diversity has developed in the methods of teaching as opposed to stability in the principles underlying the choice of the content to be used for teaching. Syllabus is centered on grammatical and pedagogical considerations. The perception that vocabulary is not as important as grammar or other areas still becomes the basis for many research endeavours. The emergence of researchers like Keith S Folse, Rod Ellis, Paul Nation in the field of research in English Language Teaching brought a revolutionary change in the perception of researchers towards

vocabulary. Now second language vocabulary has become an interesting topic of discussion for researchers, teachers, curriculum designers and theorists involved in second language learning. When English enjoys the position of a global language the need to develop ways to teach vocabulary also attains importance. This paper makes an attempt to develop a method of imparting vocabulary.

2. Historical Background of Language Teaching

Though a comprehensive history of language teaching is not available all the existing material helps one to track the progression in the research. A detailed study of the Language Teaching makes it clear that there were two distinct aspects in the research. The first aspect of research was about the ideas of language teaching and the second was about the practices of language teaching. The IPA articles was an epoch making deliberation which declared the principles of Second Language teaching. In this century the science of language teaching that evolved paved way for the research in the language pedagogy. Researchers began taking linguistics into account as an integral part of language pedagogy from the later part of the 19th century. Gouin discussed the problem of linguistics in language teaching in his book “The Art of Teaching and Studying Languages”. The development of Chomskan transformational generative grammar is another mile stone in the history language teaching. In twentieth century lot of work was done in the filed of developing new practices, materials for teaching and designing curriculums. It can be observed that majority of the theories were based on the belief that language learning is determined by the acquisition of a mastery of the grammatical system.

Wilkins “Notional Syllabus” discusses that language items to be taught should be broken down to grammatical structures and lexical items. These grammatical structures are taught to the learner carefully and a step-by-step. But little attention was given to vocabulary in syllabus discussed by Wilkins. Such approaches accentuate what Chomsky calls competence as opposed to performance as we will see later on in the development of the communicative syllabuses. (Canal and Swain 1980, Quoted in Brown, 1987: 199). It is very clear that until recently there has been very little emphasis on the acquisition of vocabulary.

3. Historical Background of Vocabulary in Language Teaching

It is believed that comprehensible input given to the learner results in language learning. A strong belief in this adage made the researchers to focus on syntax, learning styles, effective teaching materials, curriculum design, methodologies etc. It can be understood from the works of the researchers in ELT that vocabulary shall be acquired through the method of “Guessing from the context”. Wilkins in his 1974 work, “Second Language Learning and Teaching” suggested that the only way to master the lexical system is the same as that recommended to master the syntactic system. But Krashen stated that acquisition of language will not take place without comprehension of vocabulary. Rivers asked language teachers to pay more attention to words, considering carefully how to help learners communicate meaning even before they can use grammatically correct sentences. Batia Laufer in the 1991 work started that “no text comprehension is possible without understanding the vocabulary.

This kind of a reorientation has led many to think about the role of Vocabulary in Language teaching. Nation in his review of literature (1982) focused on the need to teach vocabulary, guidelines for instruction and the relative efficacy of techniques depending on whether the goal

was receptive or productive learning. But there were still theorists who stuck to conviction that vocabulary to be taught through the guessing from the text method. The method of explicit teaching of vocabulary slowly is gaining ascendancy. Nation and Waring show that some words make more sensible items for explicit teaching. This worked attempts to focus on those items which can be imparted through explicit teaching methods.

4. Vocabulary in Syllabus

The vocabulary content for all the traditional curriculums is chosen according to certain criteria. The criteria for choosing words are formed in relation to their usefulness, frequency, range, availability, familiarity, and coverage. Syllabus constructors commonly choose vocabulary items that mainly “operate” the basic patterns of the language. The term frequency, however, refers to the words that are thought to have an immediate use in the classroom. Range refers to the distribution of lexical items over a number of different types of text; whilst availability refers to the lexical items which may not be frequent, but are available to the speaker when he needs them. Familiarity is commonly measured by means of the speaker’s responses rather than by the statistical analysis of texts. The term coverage refers to the lexical items which have a wide range of meaning and which could replace other items in a particular context.

5. Why explicit teaching

Words like pusillanimous, cantankerous, contrite, belligerent etc found on Graduate Record Examination conducted by ETS, United States of America, to screen students for admission in American universities provides an opportunity to think about the selection of the vocabulary for our curriculum and also about the teaching methods to be adopted to impart this kind of vocabulary. This kind of a problem emerges because of the lack of proper understanding about the size of the vocabulary to be acquired by the students by the time they complete their graduation. Guessing meaning while reading and extensive reading are always suggested as the best means to acquire new vocabulary. But when it comes to retaining the words exposed to a student has to purely on his memory rather than on his ability to recognize a word on the basis of its function. This is the place where explicit teaching can help in finding a workable solution. The explicit method of teaching can be successful only if a set of words that can not be guessed through a text be located and listed. So the emphasis is on the identification of those set of words which require explicit teaching.

6. Developing Vocabulary Instruction

There are four steps in the proposed Explicit method of teaching Vocabulary items. The first step is developing a method to identify the set of words students feel difficult to be guessed through a text. The second step is to categorize them in order to find out a suitable method of instruction. The third step is to devise the plan to teach words of each category through an appropriate method. In the fourth step the acquisition is evaluated using standard tests.

- i) First step: compiling a set of words should be done in a systematic manner.
 - a) Selecting word groups from word lists
 - b) Asking learners to compile their own words which is further consolidated
 - c) Teacher preparing a suggestive list by conducting a survey of sample texts

- ii) The words thus accumulated should be categorized on the basis of the strategy used to impart them to the learners.
- iii) Appropriate methods, materials, teaching aids have to be devised
- iv) The test should be administered to study the working of the strategies and methods developed

7. Conclusion

In the globalization scenario classroom teachers are the ones who have a feel for their students' needs and they are the ones who can decide whether to go one way or the other. But a balance is necessary to be found in developing one and ignoring the other.

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