Teaching Vocabulary in L2 Situation

Umar Ahmed[1] and Abubakar Umar Jangebe[2]
[1]Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.
[2]Department of liberal studies, Abdu Gusau Polytechnic, Talata Mafara.

ABSTRACT
The paper looks at some issues in vocabulary teaching in L2 situation. Such issues include learner's vocabulary size for both productive and receptive use of L2, basic vocabulary skills, techniques and procedures for vocabulary teaching.

1.0 Introduction

Vocabulary teaching is one of the tasks posing a serious challenge to many language teachers in second language situation. This challenge arises from the little or no exposure many teachers had in vocabulary teaching. Chukueggu (2004) decries this unfortunate situation when she stated unequivocally that 'it is a neglected area of language teaching and learning'. This view has also been expressed by Williams (1990) who is quick to warn that "Vocabulary should'nt be left to be merely 'picked up' or assimilated in passing."

Consequently, many L2 learners make inappropriate use of vocabulary, possess extremely limited stock of vocabulary, make wrong use of dictionary, make poor spellings, use wrong collacations, etc.Vocabulary as a language item which provides the building blocks for both productive and receptive use of language should be placed at the centre of language teaching. Lewis *et al* (1993:2) argue 'since language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalised grammar, language learning is thus fundamentally and profoundly dependent on vocabulary knowledge'. It is because of the importance of vocabulary in L2 teaching that this paper attempts to look at some issues in vocabulary teaching. L2 in this paper, refers to second or foreign language. Emphasis is given to the teaching of English as second or foreign language.

The paper will therefore define the concept of 'vocabulary', examine learner's vocabulary size in L2 situation, identify basic vocabulary skills, and finally present some techniques and procedures for effective teaching of vocabulary.

1.1 Vocabulary defined

Vocabulary may be taken to mean total number of words in a language, or as the total number of words known to a particular individual (Williams, 1990). Total number of words in a language may include dictionary headwords, idioms and collacations . Carter (1987) contends that the term 'word' is central to an understanding of the meaning of vocabulary.

He outlines some definitions of word to include: (a) orthographic definition, (b) meaningful unit of language, (c) minimal free form and, (d) one stressed syllable.

Orthographic definition sees a word as any sequence of letters and (a limited number of other characteristics such as hypen, apostrophe) on either side by space or punctuation mark. For example, 'cannot' is one word, even though it consists of two words (can & not).

A word as a meaningful unit of language takes cognizance of the multiple meanings contained in a word. There are many English words with multiple meanings, such as run, act, step, stress, etc. One major problem with this definition is that some English words do not express units of meaning, they merely serve grammatical functions. For example, the, on, but, and, into, etc do not express meaning.

Minimal free form recognizes a word as 'a word' if it can stand on its own as an answer to a question, a statement or an exclamation. For example, words like 'yes/no', 'come', 'go', 'sorry!', 'wonderful!', etc. The implication here is that any word that cannot stand alone in the instances mentioned above cannot be regarded as a word.

Another definition is one stressed syllable asserts that, a word must not contain more than one stressed syllable. For example, FARmer, conTROL, UNder, etc. The problem here is that some words do not receive stress. For example, if, but, in, one, etc. do not recieve stress here cannot be considered words under this definition.

Obviously, defining the term 'word' as we have seen above is problematic because of the complexities associated with its definition. However, this paper recognises the definition which sees 'word' as a meaningful unit of language as its working definition as it gives more room for contextual use of a word, lexical and functional use of a vocabulary.

2.1 Learner's Vocabulary Size in L2 Situation

Studies in vocabulary size in L2 situation seem to suggest that L2 learners need to know very large number of words (Carter, 1982; Carter and McCarthy 1998; Nation, 2001). Such studies show that some words in a language are general words used in everyday conversation and in written

Tele:
E-mail address: ummaru@gmail.com

materials of non-technical nature. Others are technical words related to specialized fields of study, such as the physical sciences, biological sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, etc. It has been estimated that the average native university student in England has a vocabulary of about 60,000 English words (Williams, 1990). What should be the learner's vocabulary size in L2 situation? It is hard to give an exact answer to this question, however, any attempt to response to the above question has to look at it from both productive and receptive knowledge and use of a language.

Productive vocabulary use involves wanting to express a meaning through speaking or writing and retrieving and producing the appropriate spoken or written word form (Nation, 2001). It is sometimes referred to as the active vocabulary, active in the sense that a word can be recalled almost instantly when we need it. 'As far as English as a second language is concerned, a minimum productive vocabulary has been estimated at 3000-4000 words' (Williams (1990).

On the other hand, receptive vocabulary use involves recieving the form of a word while listening or reading and retrieving its meaning (Crow 1986). It is a *latent* vocabulary, in that, it exists but is not noticeable until some future time. According to Crow (ibid), an average person *latent* vocabulary is nearer 20, 000 word level. It should be noted that these are just rough estimates and, therefore subject to further research.

2.2 Basic Vocabulary Skills

Since the concern is basically on productive and receptive vocabulary, the emphasis will be on the teaching of basic vocabulary skills which are essential in developing the skills which can enable the learner to extend his vocabulary knowledge by building on the words he already knows.

Basic vocabulary skills are identified in terms of the learner's ability to grasp meanings of words for productive and receptive use through:
(i) understanding context clues
(ii) a knowledge of word elements; and
(iii) efficient use of the dictionary.

2.3 Word in Context

There are many different kinds of context clues. The three important ones are considered here.
(a) **Defination**: A vocabulary item may be formally defined in a sentence, or may be sufficiently explained for the meaning to be readily grasped. Definition can enable a learner to easily derive meanings of a word.
(b) **Contrast**: Two words can be contrasted in such a way that one of them will help to clarify the other.
Eg. Vocabulary item: obligatory
Context: You don't have to have this radio in your car; it is optional,unlike an engine which is obligatory (Williams, 1990).

'Obligatory' could be understood by contrast to the word 'optional', which itself is clearly explained in the sentence.
(c) **Inference**: Ability to infer meaning from contextual clues can enable L2 learner to make an educated guess at meaning.

2.4 Word Elements

Literal meanings of words can be derived by recognizing the way in which the various elements are combined. Williams (ibid) argues that one purpose of vocabulary teaching should be to sharpen the learner's skill in identifying the basic parts of words in order to arrive at their precise meanings. A knowledge of prefix, root and suffix can enable the learner to know the way English words are built up, the meanings of certains common noun and verb affixes.

2.5 Using the Dictionary

A knowledge of dictionary work is essential to the vocabulary development of L2 learner. To effectively use a dictionary, it is important to know how the information in a dictionary is arranged. Teachers should not assume that their students know how to locate words in a dictionary. This is because, it has been observed that for many students this task is not as simple as it may seem. Although, it has been acknowledged that dictionary work is useful to learners, students should be discouraged from reaching indiscriminately for the dictionary where context clues are clear enough indicators of meaning.

3.1 Techniques for vocabulary teaching

Effective vocabulary teaching entails the use of a variety of techniques both for presenting new items and for practicing previous ones. Williams (1990) recommends the following techniques:
1. Glosses of words and phrases from a passage: This activity involves definitions of words and phrases as they are used in a passage.
2. Collocational clusters: phrases and sentences provide the linguistic context for vocabulary work with collocational clusters.
3. First-language associations: First-language forms acquired by the learner are also part of the 'linguistic context' in which vocabulary knowledge is developed. Here, translation is a useful strategy for teaching as well as learning. It should be noted that phrases rather than individual words should be used, in order to avoid the pitfalls of trying to make word-for-word equivalents.
4. Situational contexts: These include the physical and socio-cultural environment in which words are used. Vocabulary exercises are thus based on centres of interest related to the home, social life, and relevant fields of human activity such as commerce, sports, politics, etc. Also included are contrived situations presented through realia or pictures in the classroom. Students can be asked to identify objects, actions, or relationships from charts or pictures in the course book, or displayed on the chalkboard or the classroom walls.

Central to all these techniques for effective vocabulary teaching is repetition drill which this paper believes is essential for vocabulary learning because there is so much to know about each word that one meeting with it is not sufficient, and because vocabulary items must not only be known, they must be known well so that they can be fluently accessed. Repetition thus adds to the quality of knowledge and also to the quantity or strength of this knowledge. This lead us to look at some vocabulary teaching procedures.

3.2 Procedures of Teaching Vocabulary

A procedure is a series of clearly defined steps leading to a learning goal. 'From a vocabulary learning perspectives', states Nation (2001:107), 'procedures can be used to ensure that words are repeated and that various aspects of what is involved in knowing a word are covered'. Blake and Majors (1995) in Nation (ibid), describe a five step procedure involving (1) preteaching of vocabulary, (2) oral reading of a text containing the vocabulary with discussion of the meaning of the text, (3) deliberate word study, (4) vocabulary puzzles, quizzes, or tests, and finally (5) writing making use of the vocabulary.

Another recognized procedure is second-hand cloze (Nation (ibid). It involves three steps: (1) The learners read texts containing the target vocabulary, (2) they deliberately study the vocabulary, (3) learners are then given cloze passages which are summaries of the ones they originally

read. In this step, the learners are helped to recall the target words by being given a list of L1 equivalents of the target words that they have to translate into L2, and then use to fill the gaps in the cloze text. Nation (ibid) reports that Laufer and Osimo (1991) tested the procedure experimentally and found superior learning for the words practised using this procedure.

It should be noted that the above mentioned techniques and procedures for vocabulary teaching should be seen as a source of well-used approaches, which language teachers can adapt or implement base on their own needs. Also experience in using the techniques and procedures can provide teachers with basic vocabulary teaching skills that they can later add to or supplement as they develop vocabulary teaching experience.

4.0 Conclusion

This paper has made an attempt to examine some issues in vocabulary teaching in L2 situation, an area of second or foreign language teaching in which many teachers have little or no exposure to.Learner's vocabulary size for both productive and receptive use of another language,basic vocabulary skills, techniques and procedures for vocabulary teaching are some of the issues which, the paper considers as key to effective vocabulary teaching in L2 situation.

References:
Carter,R (1987) *Vocabulary:Applied Lingusitics Perspectives*, London: Allen and Unwin Publishers
Carter, R (1982) 'A note on Core Vocabulary', Nottingham Linguistic circular 11, 39-51
Carter, R and McCarthy, M (1988) *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*, London: Longman
Chukuegga, C.O.C (2004) *Teaching English Vocabulary and Grammatical Structure*, PortHarcourt: Amethyst and Colleagues Publishers
Crow, J.T (1986)'Receptive Vocabulary Acquisition for Reading Comprehension', Modern Language Journal, 70, 242-250
Lewis, M. (1993) *The lexical approach*, New York: LTP.
Nation, I.S.P. (2001) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Williams, D. (1990) *English Language Teaching*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited