PRACTICAL LANGUAGE TEACHING

Teaching Vocabulary

MICHAEL J. WALLACE

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Note to the Reader

At the end of this book you will find some suggestions for further reading and also for activity/discussion. Even if you are working on your own, you will probably find it useful to work through (or think about) some of the suggestions for activity/discussion near the end of the book. In the text itself, nearly all the exercises and activities can be self-corrected by using the answer keys provided. For greater convenience, a special answer key will be found at the end of the book for the example exercises given in Chapters 5 and 6.

Contents

1 *Learning a Foreign Language and Vocabulary*

It has often been remarked how strange it is that comparatively little has been written on the teaching and learning of foreign language vocabulary, because there is a sense in which learning a foreign language is basically a matter of learning the vocabulary of that language. Not being able to find the words you need to express yourself is the most frustrating experience in speaking another language.

Of course vocabulary is not the whole story: the system of language (its 'grammar' or 'structure') is also important: how the plural is formed, how past tense is signified, and so on. Nevertheless, it is possible to have a good knowledge of how the system of a language works and yet not be able to communicate in it; whereas if we have the vocabulary we need it is usually possible to communicate, after a fashion.

This book is concerned with the most effective ways of teaching this vital aspect of language. Before going on to look at some basic background issues in vocabulary learning, we perhaps ought to begin by looking at some of the things which can go wrong when someone tries to learn the vocabulary from another language.

Some of the symptoms of bad vocabulary learning and/or teaching are:

1 *Inability to retrieve vocabulary that has been taught*
This is the most basic kind of vocabulary fault. The student has been exposed to a vocabulary item at some stage, but cannot bring it to mind when he needs it. In this situation, either communication breaks down altogether or else the student has to use some 'repair strategy', such as expressing his meaning in a different way.

2 *Use of vocabulary inappropriate to the given situation*
Here the student knows *a* word which has the particular meaning required, but somehow doesn't fit into the language situation in which he is operating. To take an obvious example: normally, *right* (hand side) and *left* (hand side) are perfectly acceptable ways of indicating direction, but on board a ship, there are situations where these terms would sound strange, the terms *port* (for left) and *starboard* (for right) being more appropriate. Similarly the progress of a ship is measured in *knots* (rather than *miles* or *kilometres*), and depth below sea-level sometimes in *fathoms* (rather than *feet* or *metres*); front and back become *fore* and *aft*; a *kitchen* becomes a *galley*; and so on. These examples (where a word that is correct in one situation is not correct in another, although it has the same kind of significance) could be paralleled in many other situations.

3 *Use of vocabulary at the wrong level of formality*
This is rather similar to the previous symptom – it also has to do with inappropriate use of language. The words we choose have to relate to the formality of the situation in which we are speaking, and the relationship between the speakers. Thus we go from the very formal, 'Be seated, ladies and gentlemen!', to the command 'Sit!' (which a teacher might give to a class), to the informal 'Have a seat', to the colloquial, joking expression 'Take a pew!'. *Pew* is, strictly speaking, the type of long, wooden seat found in a church: the meaning is sometimes humorously extended to any kind of chair. The effect of the expression here depends on the formal associations of pew (a seat in a church) with its use in an informal situation.

In learning a foreign language there is a tendency to use the more formal language found in textbooks in normal conversational situations, with results that sound strange to the native speaker. The reverse can also happen where a learner picks up a slang or colloquial expression and uses it inappropriately.

4 *Possessing the wrong kind of vocabulary for one's needs*
What we have said previously leads naturally on to the problem of the kind of vocabulary that is appropriate to the needs of the learner. If the learner is going to be involved only in face-to-face

contact with native speakers, then what he needs is the conversational language for those situations: it will not be much help to him to have a large reading vocabulary of words he can hardly pronounce. On the other hand, if the learner, as far as can be known, is going to be spending the rest of his life in his own country and needs English only for reading books in his area of specialism, then an extensive reading vocabulary may be precisely what is required: hours spent on conversational practice may be time wasted.

Also, of course, the area of study is important. Someone who is studying medicine in English needs to know English medical words and expressions. If at some stage he is going to be talking to native-speaker patients, then some knowledge of colloquial terms that occur in doctor–patient discussions may also be necessary; and so on.

5 *Using vocabulary in an unidiomatic way*

Even when a student has the right kind of vocabulary, he may use it in an unidiomatic way. We could take as an actual example the following extract from a brochure advertising a sea-cruise:

> The schedules take into account the wishes of those of you who use maritime transport both as a means of communication and rest and it goes without saying that you can have such rest in no else corner of our planet.

Obvious deviations from normal English idiom are: the use of *else* for *other*; the use of the phrase *'no else corner of our planet'* which is too 'elevated' for the topic; and, generally, the uneasy mixture of formal and informal language.

6 *Using vocabulary in a meaningless way*

This is the fault which John Bright has called 'verbalism'. He wittily uses the example of the 'Giky Martables'. Bright took a biology textbook and substituted a nonsense word for every word in the text that was outside the *General Service List* (this word-list will be discussed later in the present chapter: see p. 15). Part of the passage he uses runs like this (the nonsense words are in italics):

It must be admitted, however, that there is an occasional *pum-tumfence* of a diseased condition in wild animals, and we wish to call attention to a remarkable condition which seems like a *giky martable*. Let us return to the *retites*. In the huge societies of some of them there are guests or pets, which are not merely *briscerated* but fed and *yented*, the *spintowrow* being, in most cases, a *talable* or *spiskant exboration* – a *sunury* to the hosts.

As Bright points out, it is possible to ask a learner intermediate-level questions about this passage and get answers from him or her, in this way:

What does the remarkable condition which the writer calls attention to seem like? (It seems like a *giky martable*.)
What happens to the *retites?* (They are *briscerated*, fed and *yented*.)
What is the *spintowrow*, in most cases? (It's a *talabale* or *spiskant exboration*.)

The point being made here is that the learner does not have to be able to understand the question to be able to answer it in an apparently satisfactory way. The grammatical and contextual clues in the passage are enough to give the framework for his answer. The learner does not even have to understand his own answer: he is merely lifting phrases from the text.

The effect is that the student is *using* the target language, but he or she is not *learning* it, since no connection has been made between the vocabulary and meaning. This can all too easily happen in the question-and-answer routines of a second-language or foreign-language classroom.

7 *Incorrect use of a dictionary*

Some students are not aware of the most efficient way to use a dictionary. Others go to the other extreme and are over-conscious of the importance of checking individual words. Whenever they come across a new word in a passage, they will immediately stop and not proceed until they have checked it up in a dictionary. This can

kill all interest and even interfere with comprehension because the reader is so concerned with the individual words that he is less aware of the context which gives them meaning. It also results in very slow and inefficient reading. Some learners, even in conversation, will stop to check up their bilingual dictionary for the word they need, instead of perhaps finding another way to express it or enlisting the help of the native speaker they may be talking to.

8 *Use of incorrect grammatical form, spelling, pronunciation, or stress*
These issues will be discussed below, p. 23–26.

The above is a list of some of the more obvious things that can go wrong in learning vocabulary. It will be clear that learning vocabulary is something more than memorizing lists of words. In the next chapter we shall look more closely at the positive aspects of learning and teaching vocabulary, as opposed to the things that can go wrong. But first let us look at some basic elements in considering vocabulary.

VOCABULARY: BASIC ELEMENTS

The linguistic study of vocabulary ('lexis') can lead us on to the discussion of all sorts of fascinating topics, some of which have only marginal relevance to language teaching. Nevertheless, it seems sensible to look at a few basic elements in the study of lexis which have obvious teaching implications, if only in making useful distinctions, and establishing some useful relationships.

FORM AND MEANING: WORDS AND LEXICAL ITEMS

Look at these sentences:

(1) Jack was sitting on the bank of the river, fishing.
(2) I am going to the bank to cash a cheque.

Is *bank* in sentence (1) the same word as *bank* in sentence (2)?

Obviously in one way it is the same word: it looks the same, it has the same *form*. But equally obviously, the word *bank* has a very different *meaning* in sentence (1) from the meaning of *bank* in sentence (2). Some people would make the distinction by saying that they are the same *word* because they have the same form, but they are different *lexical items* because they have different meanings. It is the context of the sentence which shows which meaning of *bank* is being used. Now look at this sentence:

I'm not going to put up with this kind of treatment any longer.

All the words in this sentence link with one another and help to make up the sense of the sentence, but three words in particular (put up with) are firmly linked together: they operate as a unit, and have one meaning (roughly, 'tolerate' or 'endure'). So here we have three *words* which form one *lexical item*. (*Put up with* is an example of a particular kind of idiom called a multi-word verb: these will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8). The concept of lexical item as one kind of unit of meaning is a useful one to the teacher, as it helps to make clear what it is that is being taught. It reveals one reason why a 'difficult' word like *helicopter* which has only one meaning may be easier to teach than a 'simple' word like *head* which may be in fact several different lexical items (a hat on my head, at the head [= top] of the page, the head [= boss] of the business, to head [= lead] an expedition, etc.).

WORD-LISTS

It is this kind of consideration which makes the matter of word-counts and word-lists sometimes ambiguous. We see for example that a certain book has been written 'within a vocabulary of 2000 words'. Does this mean 2000 *forms* or 2000 *meanings* (i.e. 2000 lexical items)? Very often the list is a list of forms (i.e. words without meanings being differentiated) which in teaching terms means that the book may give rise to more problems in understanding than one might at first think since, obviously, the student may know the meaning of a word in one context but not in another.

One of the most famous word-lists in English is *Basic English*, devised by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards. These writers showed that almost anything in English could be expressed by using only 850 words. This would seem to simplify the learning of English considerably, but is it really as helpful as it seems? Among the 850 words are such words as *go*, *get*, *of*, *to*, etc., each of which has literally dozens of meanings, so that in terms of *lexical items* the learning task is much more formidable than the number 850 might suggest.

Furthermore, the use of 'simple' words (i.e. forms) may cause more problems for the learner than they prevent. The words *put*, *up*, and *with* are all in the Basic English list. If we take a sentence like:

I shall not tolerate this!

we have to consider whether it is really making it easier for the learner to express it as:

I shall not put up with this!

As we have seen above, the meaning of *put up with* as a unit has little in common with the meaning of these words in their most common senses. It may therefore be that the longer, more 'difficult' word is easier for the learner to understand!

GENERAL SERVICE LIST

One of the best known lists is *The General Service List of English Words* edited and compiled by Michael West and published by Longman. This list is based on a very large sample of some five million words, from which the 2000 most common words were extracted. One of the strengths of this list is that it takes into account not only words, but also lexical items, since different meanings of the same word are listed, and also idiomatic phrases containing the word in question. So we discover from this list that, in the count of 5 million words, the word *body* appeared an estimated 1699 times; 40

per cent of the times it appeared was in the sense of 'physical organism' (e.g. 'body and soul'); 26 per cent in the sense of 'a group' (e.g. 'Went in a body to the Town Hall'); 10 per cent in the sense of 'corpse'; 8 per cent in the sense of 'mass' (e.g. 'A falling body moves at the rate of ...'); 7 per cent in the sense of 'trunk' or 'main part' (e.g. 'Draw a body and add head, arms and legs'); some less frequent meanings are also listed. The frequency of idioms and phrases are also listed where they have occurred in the sample and are related to the 2000 words chosen for the list.

Other, much more up-to-date word-lists have been drawn up, one of the most famous being based on a sample of over one million words assembled at Brown University in the United States during the years 1963-4 (for details, see Further Reading). This list contains over 50,000 words arranged in order of frequency. It also shows how they are spread over 15 categories, which include religion, general fiction, etc. However, the main concern of all the lists we have been discussing is *how frequently* words occur. Is frequency the best criterion for choosing vocabulary to be taught?

There is a common-sense argument which tells us that it is sensible to teach very common words (like *big* and *small*) before we teach more unusual words like *gigantic* or *microscopic*. Yet frequency need not be the only criterion for vocabulary selection.

AVAILABILITY

There is also the criterion of availability (sometimes the French term *disponibilité* is used). In certain learning situations, rather unusual words may be of the greatest usefulness. For example, in the General Service List the word *chalk* has a very low frequency (only 78 occurrences in 5 million words) and *blackboard* is not listed at all. In a classroom situation, however, both these words may be very useful indeed because they name things which the learner can see and touch, and which the teacher can use in his or her teaching. They have high *availability* in that particular situation. So words may be learned or taught because they are seen to be of special relevance to particular situations in which the learner finds himself, or might find himself.

ESP VOCABULARY

This is an especially important consideration in the matter of English for Special Purposes (ESP). A word may be of relatively rare occurrence in the total use of English, but absolutely essential for, say, a biochemist who wishes to read learned articles on his specialism which happens to be written in English. So we come to the idea of special kinds of vocabulary (words or expressions) which are relevant to special interests or fields of knowledge. There is another aspect to this, however, and it is the question of *learnability*. Let us take the example of a Spanish-speaking scientist (male) who is doing a course in ESP for (perhaps) chemistry. One of the words that he will probably have to know is *carbon*. However, he should find this very easy to learn since, as a scientist, he will already be very familiar with the concept being referred to (in this case one of the common elements). All he has to learn therefore is the label to attach to a concept that he is already familiar with. Moreover (and this is especially true of the physical sciences) the English word may be a *cognate* of the word which the scientist already knows (i.e. derived from the same root: in the example we have given, the Spanish word is *carbono*, the French *carbone* and so on). It may be also a loan-word from English perhaps, or an English loan-word from the learner's language.

In situations where English is taught as a *second* language, the learner has a more difficult task. In the case, for example, of a Kenyan schoolgirl studying chemistry at secondary level, she has the problem of not only learning the label *carbon*, but also understanding the concept which goes with it: and in that case her situation is somewhat similar to a British or American schoolgirl at the same level.

The serious problem for the EFL learner, therefore, is probably not technical language as such, but the language framework in which the technical expressions are placed. Apart from certain typical grammatical and rhetorical features which needn't concern us here, this non-technical framework will probably consist of two kinds of language: first, basic lexical items such as those listed in the General Service List (see above, p. 15), and secondly other sub-

technical words and expressions typical of academic discourse (that is, words such as *ratio*, *approximate*, *hence*, etc.) which the subject specialist may assume that the student should already know.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

A more basic kind of distinction that is often made is between *structure* words and *content* words. Structure words may be considered as part of the grammar of the language; they are almost 'empty' of meaning when considered in isolation. If we take a word like *do* in the sentence *Do you often go for a walk at this time?* we can see that its main functions are grammatical: as a marker of the question form and as a marker of tense. Modal verbs (such as *do*, *may*, *can*, etc.), pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, and certain adverbs (e.g. *very*, *rather*, etc.) are often put in this category. Content words are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs formed from adjectives (e.g. *beautifully*). The list of content words is open-ended: new nouns and verbs are often coined to name new things or processes, and the same is true of adjectives and adverbs.

MEANING

Until now, we have been assuming that it is important to 'teach the meaning' of a word, without specifying very closely what 'teach the meaning' implies. We have just seen that some words like *do* can only, in some of their uses, be given a meaning with certainty when they are used in a context: and the more common a word is, the more likely this is to be true. In this way, we have seen above (P. 14) how the word *head* can *denote* ('mean') several things. Usually, in elementary classes, we try to teach words which have a clear, *concrete denotation*: something that can be seen or touched. So we often present nouns like *desk*, *blackboard*, *chair*, *table*, *teacher*, *student*; verbs like *sit*, *stand*, *walk*, *write*, *read*; adjectives like *big*, *small*, *round*, *square*, *red*, *green*; and so on.

As the student's command of the language improves, he will discover that even these 'straightforward' words can have a wide *range of denotations* according to the context. The word *table* for

example may be discovered in contexts like these (the examples and quotation are from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*):

(1) *The waiter told us that, if we wished, we could choose something from the cold table.* (i.e. a display of cold food, such as salads etc.);
(2) *John's stories kept the whole table amused.* (i.e. everyone sitting at the table);
(3) *There is a table of contents at the front of this dictionary.* (i.e. list);
(4) *The children were learning their tables.* ('list which young children repeat to learn what number results when a number from 1 to 12 is multiplied by any of the numbers from 1 to 12')
(5) *The President is at table now but he'll see you when he's finished eating.* (i.e. *at table* = having a meal).

These are only some of the possible meanings of the noun *table*; there is also a verb *to table* with several meanings.

Most common words have a wide denotative range; technical words tend to have a narrower denotative range, i.e. they usually have one very specific meaning, and this is another thing which makes them easier to learn. Some words, of course, have a common meaning and also a technical meaning: an example is the common word *shock* (a favourite word with journalists!) which has several popular meanings, but also a technical meaning (in medicine: 'a state of bodily collapse or near collapse caused by circulatory failure or sudden lowering of the blood pressure, as from severe bleeding, burns, fright etc.', *Collins English Dictionary* [CED]).

CONNOTATION

What is the difference between being *slim* and *thin*, or even *skinny*? What is the difference between a *fat* baby and a *plump* one? Denotatively, that is, in terms of who they are referring to, there may be no difference at all: the slim person, the thin person and the

skinny person may all be the same weight (or even the same person!). The choice of one phrase rather than the other will probably indicate how the speaker *feels* about the person in question.

Certain words are chosen because they convey some kind of feeling or judgement. If you approve of the way in which someone sticks to his opinions you may applaud the fact that he is *resolute* or *determined*; to someone for whom this kind of behaviour is awkward or a nuisance, the same person may be *stubborn*, *obstinate* or even *pig-headed*. We say therefore that words like *skinny*, *fat*, *stubborn*, *obstinate* and *pig-headed* tend to have unfavourable connotations; whereas words like *slim*, *resolute* or *determined* tend to be used with intended favourable connotations.

Rather similar to the connotations of a word are its *associations*, but whereas connotations relate to the system of the language, associations relate more to the individual or the culture. So, for example, while words like *father* or *home* generally have favourable associations for most people, they may have unfavourable associations for someone who had a very unhappy homelife. A word like *market* may have very different associations for someone coming from (perhaps) a rural area in a tropical country, as opposed to a city dweller in Britain. Similarly it may be very difficult to convey the associations that *countryside* had for a nature poet like Wordsworth to a child to whom wild, uncultivated areas are more dangerous and threatening than otherwise.

Clearly there is not much to be done about the private associations which words have for individuals, but the teacher may well feel that associations which relate the culture of the target language, and certainly the connotations of a particular word are part of the 'meaning' which has to be learned.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WORDS

The meanings of certain words are so closely related that they are often confused by the learner. This is especially true of words with *reciprocal meanings* such as words like *borrow/lend*, *bring/take*