

TEACHING TECHNIQUES IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Series Editors: Russell N. Campbell and William E. Rutherford

TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING VOCABULARY

• Virginia French Allen •



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· EDITORS' PREFACE ·

It has been apparent for some time that little attention has been given to the needs of practicing and student teachers of English as a Second Language.* Although numerous inservice and preservice teacher-training programs are offered throughout the world, these often suffer from lack of appropriate instructional materials. Seldom are books written that present practical information that relates directly to daily classroom instruction. What teachers want are useful ideas, suggestions, demonstrations, and examples of teaching techniques that have proven successful in the classroom—techniques that are consistent with established theoretical principles and that others in our profession have found to be expedient, practical, and relevant to real-life circumstances in which most teachers work.

It was in recognition of this need that we began our search for scholars in our field who had distinguished themselves in particular instructional aspects of second language teaching. We sought out those who had been especially successful in communicating to their colleagues the characteristics of language teaching and testing techniques that have been found to be appropriate for students from elementary school through college and adult education programs. We also sought in those same scholars evidence of

*In this volume, and in others in the series, we have chosen to use *English as a Second Language (ESL)* to refer to English teaching in the United States (as a second language) *as well as* English teaching in other countries (as a foreign language).

an awareness and understanding of current theories of language learning together with the ability to translate the essence of a theory into practical applications for the classroom.

Our search has been successful. For this volume, as well as for others in this series, we have chosen a colleague who is extraordinarily competent and exceedingly willing to share with practicing teachers the considerable knowledge that she has gained from many years of experience in many parts of the world.

Professor Allen's book is devoted entirely to the presentation and exemplification of practical techniques in the teaching of vocabulary. Each chapter of her book contains, in addition to detailed consideration of a wide variety of techniques, a number of activities that teachers can perform that tie the content of the book directly to the teachers' responsibilities in their classes. With this volume then, a critical need in the language teaching field has been met.

We are extremely pleased to join with the authors in this series and with Oxford University Press in making these books available to our fellow teachers. We are confident that the books will enable language teachers around the world to increase their effectiveness while at the same time making their task an easier and more enjoyable one.

Russell N. Campbell
William E. Rutherford

Editors' Note: Apologies are made for the generalized use of the masculine pronoun. It is meant to be used for simplicity's sake, rather than to indicate a philosophical viewpoint. We feel that the *s/he*, *her/him*, *his/her* forms, while they may be philosophically appealing, are confusing.

· CHAPTER ONE ·

INTRODUCTION

Experienced teachers of English as a Second Language know very well how important vocabulary is. They know students must learn thousands of words that speakers and writers of English use. Fortunately, the need for vocabulary is one point on which teachers and students agree!

For many years, however, programs that prepared language teachers gave little attention to techniques for helping students learn vocabulary. Some books appeared to be telling teachers that students could learn all the words they needed without help. In fact, teachers were sometimes told that they ought *not* to teach many words before their students had mastered the grammar and the sound system of the language. In journal articles for teachers, vocabulary was seldom mentioned. Pronunciation and grammar were emphasized, but there was little or no emphasis on vocabulary. In short, vocabulary has been neglected in programs for teachers during much of the twentieth century. Perhaps we should try to understand why this is so.

REASONS FOR NEGLECTING VOCABULARY IN THE PAST

One reason why vocabulary was neglected in teacher-preparation programs during the period 1940–1970 was that it had been emphasized too much in language classrooms during the years before that time. Indeed, some people had believed it was the only key to

language learning. Learners often believed that all they needed was a large number of words. They thought they could master the language by learning a certain number of English words, along with the meanings of those words in their own language. Of course this belief was wrong. In addition to knowing English words and their meanings, one must know also how the words work together in English sentences. That is one reason for the emphasis upon grammar in teacher-preparation programs during the past few decades. During those years, teachers were told a great deal about new discoveries in English grammar. They heard much less about ways to help students learn words.

There is a second reason why so little was said in methodology courses about teaching words and their meanings. Some specialists in methodology seemed to believe that the meanings of words could not be adequately taught, so it was better not to try to teach them. In the 1950s, many people began to notice that vocabulary learning is not a simple matter. It is not simply a matter of learning that a certain word in one language means the same as a word in another language. Much more needs to be learned; and there were those who felt the complexities were too great to be dealt with in class.

According to an English/Spanish dictionary, for example, the words **garden** and **jardín** seem to have the same meaning. Each means a place where flowers are grown. But there are meanings of **garden** that do not correspond to the meanings of **jardín**. A garden is a place that may grow vegetables as well as flowers; whereas vegetables are grown in a **huerta** in Spanish, not in a **jardín**. This is just one of countless possible examples to show that vocabulary learning is not simply a matter of matching up words in the native language and the target language. Often those who prepared teachers gave the impression that vocabulary learning was so complex that one might better devote most of the class time to teaching the grammatical structures, with just a few vocabulary words, since students could not be given full and accurate understanding of word meanings in class. Indeed in some books and articles about language teaching, writers gave the impression that it was better not to teach vocabulary at all.

These, then, were some of the reasons for the general neglect

of vocabulary in programs that prepared teachers—during a time when teachers were getting a good deal of help with other aspects of language instruction. We will summarize the reasons here:

1. Many who prepared teachers felt that grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary, because vocabulary was already being given too much time in language classrooms.
2. Specialists in methodology feared students would make mistakes in sentence construction if too many words were learned before the basic grammar had been mastered. Consequently, teachers were led to believe it was best *not* to teach much vocabulary.
3. Some who gave advice to teachers seemed to be saying that word meanings can be learned *only* through experience, that they cannot be adequately taught in a classroom. As a result, little attention was directed to techniques for vocabulary teaching.

Each of those beliefs about vocabulary is true to a certain extent. It is true that too much time has been devoted to vocabulary in many classrooms. Often so much time goes into explaining the new words that there seems to be no time for anything else. That, of course, is unfortunate. Students who do not learn grammar along with vocabulary will not be able to use the language for communication. Even material in which all the words look familiar may be impossible to understand if the grammatical constructions have not been learned. The following paragraphs, for instance, contain very easy vocabulary; yet the meanings of the sentences cannot be grasped without a substantial knowledge of grammar:

Things always know when a person isn't well. They know, but they just don't care. Many times, in little ways, things make life hard for people. They have special ways of doing this.

When I'm not well, I can never find the things I need. The things I need have gone away from all the places where I look. That is one of the facts I have learned about people and things.

In classes where too little time is spent on grammar, students fail to learn how words are used in sentences; only the *general meaning* of a word is learned. Students learning the words **emphasize** and **emphasis**, for example, need more than an understanding of the area of meaning which those words represent. They should learn that **emphasis** is a noun, used like this, "We put **emphasis** on it." They should learn that **emphasize** is a verb, used like this, "We **emphasize** it." The noun use should be contrasted with the verb use, as follows:

There was not much **emphasis** on it. (Note the use of **on**.)
Few people **emphasized** it. (Note that **on** is not used.)

It is true, then, that students must learn grammar, which involves *uses* of words. It is never enough to learn only the words and their meanings. It is true that in some classrooms sentence construction has been given too little attention. It is also true that students will make mistakes if they learn the meanings of many words without learning how to put words together in sentences.

Furthermore, there is truth in the belief that experience is the best vocabulary teacher. Through experience with situations in which a language is used by speakers or writers, we learn that many of the meanings of a word do not correspond to the meanings of its so-called equivalent in another language. Since full understanding of a word often requires knowing how native speakers feel about what the word represents, some meanings cannot be found in a dictionary. It is necessary to know something about the customs and attitudes of native speakers if we are to know what words really mean to them.

Take the word **wall**, for instance. Every language has a word for the thing that English calls a wall. But how people feel about walls can be very different in different parts of the world, and those feelings are part of the meaning of the word. Suppose someone says, "Our new neighbors have built a wall around their property." In many countries, that statement would not surprise anyone. In those countries, it is customary to build a wall around one's property; most people do so. In most English-speaking com-

munities, however, houses and gardens are usually visible from the street. To the native speaker of English, the building of the wall might suggest unfriendliness.

As we have seen, then, the learning of word meanings requires more than the use of a dictionary, and vocabulary acquisition is a complex process. Fortunately, however, teachers are being given more help with vocabulary teaching today.

REASONS FOR THE PRESENT EMPHASIS ON VOCABULARY

In teacher-preparation programs today, there is more attention to techniques for teaching vocabulary. One reason is this: In many ESL classes, even where teachers have devoted much time to vocabulary teaching, the results have been disappointing. Sometimes—after months or even years of English—many of the words most needed have never been learned. Especially in countries where English is not the main language of communication, many teachers want more help with vocabulary instruction than they used to receive.

Something else also accounts for today's concern with the learning of vocabulary. That is the fact that scholars are taking a new interest in the study of word meanings. A number of research studies have recently dealt with lexical problems (problems related to words). Through research the scholars are finding that lexical problems frequently interfere with communication; communication breaks down when people do not use the right words.

Such discoveries by scholars do not surprise classroom teachers. Teachers have never doubted the value of learning vocabulary. They know how communication stops when learners lack the necessary words. They do not believe that the teaching of vocabulary should be delayed until the grammar is mastered. In the best classes, neither grammar nor vocabulary is neglected. There is thus no conflict between developing a firm command of grammar and learning the most essential words.

Today, therefore, professional journals and teachers' meetings often reflect the current concern for more effective vocabulary

teaching. When teachers come together for professional discussions, they raise such questions as these:

- Which English words do students need most to learn?
- How can we make those words seem important to students?
- How can so many needed words be taught during the short time our students have for English?
- What can we do when a few members of the class already know words that the others need to learn?
- Why are some words easier than others to learn?
- Which aids to vocabulary teaching are available?
- How can we encourage students to take more responsibility for their own vocabulary learning?
- What are some good ways to find out how much vocabulary the students have actually learned?

Answers to these and other questions will be found in the chapters that follow. The answers are based on the experience of teachers—teachers working in classrooms in many parts of the world.

If you and other teachers are using the book together, you will want to discuss the suggestions that the chapters offer. A major aim is to help experienced teachers recall successful techniques which they can share with colleagues newer to the field of ESL.

Whether or not you have had much teaching experience, you know a great deal about vocabulary learning. In your own study of other languages, you have discovered much about the learning of words. As you work through the activities proposed in each chapter, you will build on what you already know.

· CHAPTER TWO ·

VOCABULARY LESSONS FOR THE FIRST STAGE

It has been said, "There is one English word that is known everywhere. The word is **cowboy**." This remark has a certain amount of truth. Such words as **rock star** and **cowboy** seem to be known by almost everyone (by almost every young person, at least). Indeed, such English words are usually learned without being taught, without being explained or drilled in class. All too often, however, a student who has easily acquired **cowboy** and **rock star** seems unable to master the words in the textbook, even after the teacher's explanations and drills. This is unfortunate, as experienced teachers know. Much of the vocabulary in English textbooks *must* be learned. Without it, no one can speak or understand the language. The question is what can teachers do while presenting the textbook words, so that students will learn them as well as **rock star** and **cowboy**.

In books that are intended for the first stage of English, the vocabulary lessons usually contain words for persons and things *in the classroom*, words like **boy**, **girl**, **book**, **pencil**, **window**, **door**. For teachers, and for authors of textbooks, it is easy to see why the beginning lessons should introduce such words. One reason is that the meanings can easily be made clear. Windows, walls, desks, and doors are things that the students can *see* while they are hearing the foreign names for them. Furthermore, things in the classroom can also be *touched*. This is important, because success in learning often depends on the number of senses which are used in the learning process. When students can touch something, in ad-

dition to hearing and seeing the word that names it, there is a stronger chance that the word will be learned. Even if there are practical reasons why each learner cannot touch the object, just seeing it while hearing its name is helpful. At least those two senses (sight and hearing) are working together to focus the learner's attention.

Teachers and textbook writers understand the value of lessons that introduce basic words, like the names of things found in classrooms and in the local community. They know that much of this vocabulary will be needed for defining more difficult words in later stages of the program. Moreover, much of the vocabulary found in lessons for beginners will be needed for writing and speaking English in future months and years. It is good to make an early start on such important words. Why, then, aren't they learned more easily?

WHY BASIC VOCABULARY MAY BE HARD TO LEARN

Why are students often slow to learn foreign words for familiar objects? To answer that question, we must look at vocabulary from the students' point of view. The students *already* have satisfactory words—in their own language—for everything in the classroom that they might want to name. They have been able to talk about such familiar objects for many years. Therefore, most members of the class feel no real need to learn other words for such things now. This is a problem that does not arise when words like **rock star** and **cowboy** are being acquired outside the classroom. (Those are words for new experiences that are not already named by words in the students' mother tongue.) But it is a problem to be solved when we teach the basic words that textbooks introduce. From the students' point of view, such words do not seem really necessary because words in the mother tongue serve all practical purposes.

There is something else to be noticed about vocabulary learning in and out of class. Let's imagine what happened years ago, when each of our students was learning words for familiar ob-

jects—words in the mother tongue. Quite probably, each word came to the child's attention as part of an experience that had special importance for him. Perhaps the words for **window** and **door** were learned when he heard an adult say (in the home language), "Grandma's gone, but we'll go to the **window** and wave goodbye," and "Daddy's here! Let's go to the **door** and let him in." Of course we don't know what really occurred on the day when the child learned those words in his own language, but one thing is sure. We do know that he was not told, for example, "Here are some words to learn. You will need them someday. The first word is **window**. **Window** means. . . ." Yet that is how vocabulary is often presented in the language class.

When we think about vocabulary lessons in this way, we become aware of five facts:

1. Foreign words for familiar objects and persons are important to teach, but we cannot expect most members of the class to learn them easily.
2. Teaching such words will require special skills because students often feel their native-language words for familiar objects and persons are all they *really need*.
3. Students are *very* likely to feel that foreign words for familiar objects are not really needed when the foreign language is not used for communication outside the language class.
4. When a student feels no real need to learn something, a feeling of need must be *created*—by the teacher.
5. To create in students' minds a sense of personal need for a foreign word, it is not enough to say, "Here is a word to learn." "Here is what the word means." "The word will be useful to you someday."

CREATING A SENSE OF NEED FOR A WORD

What is real need or personal need in relation to vocabulary learning? If a student feels he must learn certain words in order to please the teacher or to pass an examination, how real is that feeling of need? The need may indeed produce learning, especially among certain individuals and in certain cultures, but more often

than not students who learn for such reasons—and for no other reasons—will gain little of permanent value. Among those who still cannot speak, write, or even read English after years of instruction, there are many with fine school records. They studied vocabulary in preparation for each examination during those years, and they answered the exam questions well; but their efforts did not produce the ability to communicate. There is more practical *command* of vocabulary among those who have needed English words for their own purposes (for communication in business or travel, or in friendships with speakers of English).

Of course it is usually not possible to create in a classroom the same conditions that produce successful vocabulary learning outside of school. It is especially impossible to create again the conditions that once helped our students learn fundamental vocabulary in their mother tongue. Nevertheless, it is useful to think about those conditions. When we have noticed certain facts about vocabulary learning outside of class, we can make some use of those facts while developing techniques for the classroom.

To see how this can be done, let's look at several words that are introduced in first-year textbooks, words representing nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Other kinds of words (such as prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and auxiliaries) are generally taught in the grammar lesson.

A LOOK AT A TEXTBOOK LESSON

Suppose we are about to teach from one of many textbooks where a vocabulary lesson looks more or less like this:

VOCABULARY

boy	door	girl	picture	wall
clock	floor	person	room	window

To the right of each listed word, we may find a corresponding word in the students' language. Somewhere on the page there may be a picture showing a boy and a girl in a room with a clock

on one wall. With those aids to learning, the students will be expected to read (and perhaps to translate) the following sentences, which appear next in the textbook:

This is a picture of a room. The room has a door and two windows. There is a clock on the wall. There are two persons in this room. The boy is sitting near the clock. The girl is sitting near the door.

That is how a page may look in a fairly typical textbook. As we consider techniques for teaching such a lesson—and as we compare it to vocabulary learning outside the school—we look first at the alphabetized list. What kind of help should we give students here? When words are learned *in the real world*, they are not met in alphabetical order. Early in the lesson, we must be prepared to take these words out of the list and to group together words that belong together in real life. This is not to say, of course, that alphabetical order can't serve other purposes. Without alphabetical order, for example, dictionaries and telephone directories would be useless. Even for a list of new words (as on our sample textbook page) alphabetizing may be appropriate in helping students to find a word during periods of study at home. At any rate, the alphabetized list is there, on the page. And if we consider it only one part of the lesson—if we are ready to move on quickly to other activities—the list does no harm. Let's consider techniques for dealing quickly with such a list.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE LIST ON THE TEXTBOOK PAGE

Some teachers read aloud each word from the list while the students' books are closed. Other programs permit students to look at each word while the teacher is pronouncing it. Each procedure has advantages and disadvantages. Many times the sight of a word has a bad effect on students' pronunciation, as English spelling sometimes has little relation to the way the word sounds. Sometimes, however, pronunciation is considered less important than the

rapid growth of vocabulary. At such times, students are encouraged to look at the word while hearing it pronounced, since learners tend to remember a word more easily if they see *and* hear it.

There is no harm in having students say each word after the teacher says it. Some students find it helpful; many enjoy saying the word as soon as they hear it. Hearing the word, seeing it, and saying it—all of these may be aids to learning. But they are only *part* of the learning process. More is needed, and the harm comes when there is no time for anything more. There are classes in which every student is asked to say every new word before anyone knows (or cares) how the word is used for communication. In such classes, too much time goes into this repeating of words *as words*.

When too much time is given to seeing and saying words (without relation to their normal use), too little time remains for more helpful activities. And as such, the alphabetized list of words at the top of our sample vocabulary page is not very conducive to that activity. Yet before leaving that list of words, let's think about ways of showing their meanings.

SHOWING THE MEANINGS OF WORDS

Everyone has seen English textbooks where meanings are shown in the students' mother tongue. In such books, the English word appears first, then the word in the students' language. In books without translations, the teacher is expected to provide a definition after reading aloud each English word. In classes where no one language is known by all the students, the teacher needs particular skill. The teacher must provide definitions in English, using words the class can understand. Vocabulary lessons for the first stage of English instruction (like the one we are describing now) use pictures for showing many meanings. In some classes for beginners, teachers use all three ways to show the meanings of vocabulary words:

1. pictures
2. explanations in the students' own language
3. definitions in simple English, using vocabulary that the students already know