Expanding Vocabulary Through Repeated Exposures

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make the case for expanding student vocabularies through repeated exposures, and to offer suggestions for implementation of such an approach. Fluency in English is not achieved without building a good vocabulary. This in turn requires time, patience and repeated exposures to aid recall. Research studies show it just does not happen overnight.

Why focus on vocabulary?

Focusing on vocabulary acquisition has many benefits for students and teachers. As students increase their vocabularies, they become better and better communicators. Students can use new words almost immediately. This generates a lot of student satisfaction and builds self-confidence, critical to language learning and motivation. Learning vocabulary also has attainable outcomes. Students are acutely aware of their expanding vocabulary, and this, in itself, is highly motivational (Lieb, 2006). Often, progress in language learning is a nebulous and immeasurable construct. However, vocabulary acquisition can be measured. We can test speaking, listening, reading and writing vocabularies. And the results are rapid. We can give students something to aim for.

Theoretical background

What does it mean to know a word? It is not enough to just know its meaning or definition. We must know its form, "the arrangement of the (word), any rules which govern it, and any special difficulties which it presents" (Analyzing language, 2006). We also need to know its function, "the purpose(s) for which (it) is to be used and the contexts in which it is used, by whom and in which situations" and its phonology, "its sounds, . . . stress, . . . intonation and rhythm, all of which help learners understand spoken English and make their own speech more natural, comprehensible and meaningful (Analyzing language, 2006).

Vocabulary Learning Hypothesis and the need for repeated exposures

The Vocabulary Learning Hypothesis (Nagy and Herman, 1985) states that "Most vocabulary is learned gradually through repeated exposure to new and known words in various contexts" (p.16). They point out that when students first meet a word, they have only a 5 – 10 % chance of

remembering it. It may take 10-12 exposures to the word, generally in a variety of contexts and over time, before a new word is finally committed to memory. For this reason, repeated encounters with new vocabulary is essential for effective vocabulary acquisition.

From passive to active vocabulary

Hinkel (2007) makes a clear distinction between passive and active vocabulary. Many language learners, especially in Japan, have large, latent stores of passive vocabulary - words they have encountered but cannot recall for active use. Active vocabulary, on the other hand, consists of words that are easily recalled and readily usable by students for speaking and writing. Hinkel (2007) points out that "a large passive vocabulary does not necessarily result in a better . . . active vocabulary" (p.6). Thus, vocabulary must transition from passive to active if it is ever to become available for productive use. Speaking and writing help activate passive vocabulary. "To increase the range of (active) vocabulary . . . explicitly and directly activating passive vocabulary is requisite" (Hinkel, 2007, p.6). This suggests that in order to foster active vocabulary acquisition, new words need to be encountered in meaningful contexts, through a variety of receptive and productive activities, and that focusing on a specific topic or theme will give students ample practice with a targeted topic-centered vocabulary. This is the value of multiple exposures.

Generative vocabulary use

Most educators would agree that new learning is successful when students can relate it with what they already know. Wittrock's (1974) Generative Learning Theory states that "Learning occurs when students create relationships". This includes relationships among external stimuli as well as relationships with what was learned before. This also applies to learning new vocabulary. Learning a word in a textbook is meaningless unless students have an opportunity to use that word for their own purposes, and thus see its value for their daily lives. Multiple exposures can help accomplish this objective by providing students with opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of different contexts. Deepened understanding takes place through comparisons and contrasts, and it helps learners to adapt to new and challenging situations.

Nation (2007) theorizes that ". . . the more generatively an item is used, the greater the strength and chance of learning." He states that vocabulary imprinting has four phases: The first is receptive retrieval, where a student hears the definition and must retrieve the word. The second is productive retrieval, where a student hears the word and must then give the definition. The

third is receptive-generative use, where the student uses the word in a specific situations. And the fourth is productive-generative use, whereby the student uses the vocabulary word in new ways and in new situations. The key is that generative use (or active use) of new vocabulary leads to better recall than retrieval alone. This should be kept in mind when designing and planning instruction.

Multiple Intelligence Theory

Howard Gardner, eminent development psychologist, writes in his book The Theory of Multiple Intelligences that everyone possesses not one, but multiple intelligence types and how we learn is influenced by our particular intelligence type. Not every tree bends the same direction. While most individuals show a tendency towards a particular intelligence type, we draw upon many different types of intelligences such as visual, musical, kinesthetic, and mathematical. Gardner suggests that taking advantage of these multiple pathways to the brain optimizes and maximizes learning. Engaging students through different intelligences can heighten sensory reception leading to a greater likelihood of memory retention. Applying this theoretical framework to vocabulary acquisition suggests that teaching new vocabulary in a multitude of different ways is preferred to one particular method, as each different type of exposure can engage a greater variety of intelligence types. In other words, multiple exposures activate multiple intelligences.

The affective filter

Krashen (2003) talks about the importance of the affective domain, involving our attitudes and emotions, and its effect on learning. He suggests that an environment where students feel safe is most conducive to learning. If students feel threatened, then an affective filter which blocks incoming information, is raised. Make learning fun and the affective filter is lowered and more information reaches to the brain. If learning is tedious and boring – or worse, unpleasant – than the affective filter is also raised, information is blocked, and the ability to retain new words is greatly reduced. Do this simple test: Think back to when you were in school. Try and remember your elementary school teachers. Which do you remember? Chances are you will remember the teachers who made learning fun. And chances are you may remember the teachers who behaved like ogres. But do you remember the teachers who were tedious and boring? Chances are you won't. That is because the affective part of the brain – the emotional gatekeeper – was activated. And odds are that you only remember those teachers who made an emotional connection. Repeated exposures to new vocabulary, in a variety of simulating and interesting situations can be an effective way to lower the affective filter and expand L2 vocabulary.

Practical activities

Taking advantage of different pathways to the brain through repeated exposures would suggest that different methods for retention of words be introduced. Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling can make an abstract word become more concrete and more meaningful.

Topic-centered lessons

Vocabulary acquisition should be topic-centered. For example, the teacher supplies a topic, something such as "Hair and Beauty." Then the teacher has students generate a list of related vocabulary and classmates offer their definitions. The teacher adds noteworthy vocabulary items, if necessary. Students copy down the words and definitions (receptive-retrieval). After that they test each other (productive-retrieval). This is followed by readings and discussions incorporating the hair and beauty vocabulary (receptive-generative or productive-generative).

Paired and group readings

Paired readings, where students must read aloud while alternating sentences or paragraphs, helps students to stay on task, and is beneficial not only to improving their pronunciation but also to their understanding of new words in different contexts. This is because they are seeing and hearing the words and it is more likely that new words will be retained. Having students discuss the unknown words with their partners and then guessing at their possible meanings will further foster critical thinking skills and will increase the likelihood of retention. After the students have read and discussed the passages, the teacher can than review the readings, adding clarity – and at the same time – providing more reinforcement with multiple exposures. Students can test each other, first giving definitions, then asking their partners to produce the words. Then flip-flop, with one partner giving the word and the partner having to produce the definition. The teacher could write several questions on the board using the new vocabulary and asking the students to discuss situations they have been in while using the new vocabulary. Future reinforcement could take place through jeopardy style games. Class readings, with each student reading one word or sentence, can be utilized in much the same way, forcing students to stay focused while the teacher listens and monitors pronunciation. This has benefits in classroom management too, with peer pressure helping to keep students on task. Teachers could ask students to go back and underline any words they did not comprehend. Classmates could step in and render answers, inducing student-centered learning while the teacher acts as facilitator and monitors the learning environment.

Teacher handouts

The teacher could provide handouts which show vocabulary in different contexts. If the teacher were doing "Hair and Beauty" they could add in some body collocations. These are useful because students will encounter vocabulary in a different context (productive-retrieval). Provide the definitions and have students draw on what they know. Teachers may provide a word bank and a list of definitions that they must match. For example:

> *chin / eyes / feet / hands / nails / eyebrows / face / hair / legs / nose*
> *sharp/ polished/ incredibly long/ chewed* _____
> *The missing word is: nails.*

Having students test each other on the body collocations would be employing productive-retrieval skills. Putting students into pairs or groups and having them describe what they like or what puts them off? about hair and beauty would be productive-generative. The teacher may also give them a list of questions. A generative-retrieval technique that is fun involves having students sort out garbled sentences and put them into the correct word order. For example:

> *nose the legs check that and stubby pierced girl out with*
> The answer is: *Check out that girl with the pierced nose and the stubby legs.*

Listening and speaking activities

Pronunciation practice is receptive-retrieval. Just have students repeat. Simon Says, which is receptive-generative, takes it up a notch. Listening is receptive-generative as well, provided students have to say what they heard. The teacher can plays a CD while students listen for answers, then the students compare what they have heard with their partners; the students listen again and double-check their answers, with the teacher finally reviewing with the class. Having students read and role play transcripts of listening passages involves receptive-retrieval. Of course, the teacher needs to double-check comprehension. Another method that is productive-generative is to have students underline three of four of their favorite expressions in the listening transcripts, then giving them two minutes to memorize the expressions, then walk around mingling with fellow students and using the expressions in conversations.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, we can conclude that educators should give due consideration to repeated exposures of new vocabulary. Repeated exposures are beneficial for building and strengthening vocabulary. Students learn best when they create relationships that they can

identify with. Active vocabulary is key. Speaking and writing help activate passive vocabulary. Taking advantage of the multiple pathways to the brain optimizes and maximizes learning. An environment where students feel safe is most conducive to learning. Vocabulary acquisition should be topic-centered. Student-centered learning in pairings and groupings with the teacher monitoring would be most beneficial.

Biographical Statement

Jon Lieb has degrees in journalism and international relations and has been involved in THT since 2005. He teaches English in the Japan Ground Self Defense Forces language immersion program. Prior to teaching in Japan, he was a high school teacher, journalist and businessman.

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