

Strategies in Vocabulary Teaching and Learning Estratégias no Ensino e na Aprendizagem de Vocabulário

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RESUMO:

Este artigo discute a importância do vocabulário na aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira e apresenta estratégias básicas que podem ajudar alunos e professores na difícil tarefa de ensinar e aprender vocabulário. Embora os exemplos tenham como foco a língua inglesa como língua-alvo, as estratégias podem ser facilmente aplicadas a diferentes idiomas.

Palavras Chave: vocabulário, estratégia, metodologia, ensino

ABSTRACT:

This article discusses the importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning and presents key strategies which can help students and teachers in the hard task of learning and teaching vocabulary. Although the examples focus on English as the target language, the strategies can be easily applied to different languages.

Keywords: vocabulary, strategies, methodology, teaching

Words are the basic of language, and thus the basic of communication. Without words, it is possible to know everything about the grammatical structure of a language, but yet to be unable to make a single utterance. (Bowen & Marks, 2002, p. 106)

1- Introduction

Learning a foreign language involves the development of different skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Although specific skills may be focused on separately for pedagogical reasons, two elements are crucial to the process of acquiring and using a language: vocabulary and grammar (CELCE-MURCIA, 2001). The importance of grammar has been widely recognized in ELT (English Language Teaching) methodologies (CELCE-MURCIA, 2001; NUNAN, 2001; SWAN, 2002). This situation seems to be a little different with vocabulary. In comparison to other fields of research in language learning, it is possible to state that vocabulary teaching/learning has been left to a position of secondary importance (RICHARDS & RENANDYA, 2002). According to DeCarrico (2001: 285), “vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching.”

If a teacher asks foreign language students what a language is made of, the answer would probably be grammar and vocabulary. This answer would reflect the popular view of language as a system made of rules and structures (grammar) and words (vocabulary). This hypothetical answer would be considered too simplistic, but it emphasizes the key role of vocabulary in communication.

In the context of English teaching as a foreign language, some questions are relevant: *What is the role of vocabulary in the process of English learning? ; How can vocabulary be taught? ; How can teachers develop effective vocabulary teaching strategies?.*

Foreign language teachers have the difficult task of teaching vocabulary. If we estimate that students can learn about ten new words every class, they would learn between 3200 and 3500 words in four years of study. It may be a considerable achievement but some students may need a larger vocabulary to

speak, write and read in English in several different situations and contexts. Another question arises: *Is it possible to accelerate vocabulary learning?*

This article aims at discussing some key strategies in vocabulary teaching and learning.

2- Variation in vocabulary use

How many words do we need to learn in a foreign language? This question has no easy answer. Some dictionaries present from 1000 up to 3500 words as *key*, *basic* or *defining* vocabulary. However, this defining vocabulary does not represent the basic words in a language. In general, these are the words used in the definitions of all others. Some books teach from 800 up to 3500 words as the most frequently used ones. As studies have discussed (HUNT AND BEGLAR, 2002; CARTER, 2004), these basic items will vary a lot, depending on the use of the language and on the variety of interactions and topics involved. Hunt and Beglar (2002), for example, point out that authors and researchers usually estimate up to 5000 high-frequency words for a successful academic use of the English language. It is important to highlight, however, that academic topics differ from other topics, such as politics, economy, law, and medicine. This discussion reveals the complexity of teaching vocabulary.

As discussed in the introduction, different questions may help teachers plan vocabulary teaching. One of the questions that must be taken into consideration is *What do students need English for?* Although everyone agrees that words such as *speak*, *write*, *man*, *father*, *good* are examples of basic words, it is undeniable that a larger vocabulary can make communication easier and richer. As a consequence, students should be exposed to a plethora of strategies to learn and use vocabulary, inside and outside the classroom, both for general and specific purposes.

Depending on students' age, jobs, among a large number of possible aspects, they need to learn different vocabulary in a foreign language. Lawyers, doctors, cooks and engineers, for example, need different words in their everyday life and in professional contexts and interactions. In other words, learner's needs and characteristics influence his/her learning process

(BROWN, 2001; HARMER, 2001), including vocabulary acquisition (CARTER, 2004).

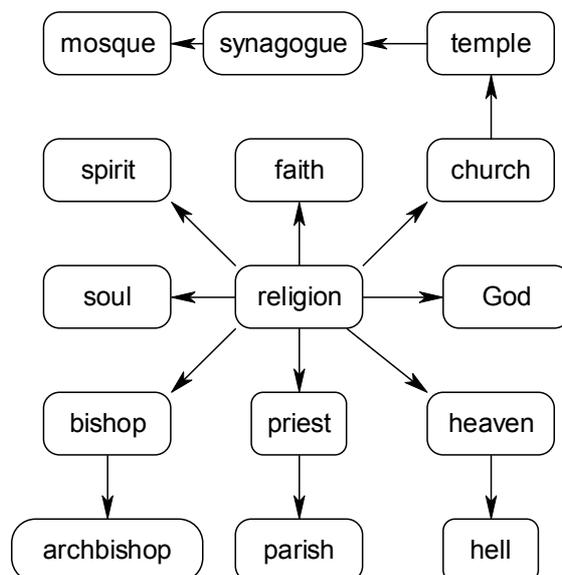
3- Strategies in vocabulary teaching

The teaching of learning strategies has been extensively discussed in different aspects in foreign and second language teaching (COHEN, 1998; ELLIS, 2001; OXFORD, 2002; VILAÇA, 2008). Researchers have pointed out that strategies may help students *learn to learn* (OXFORD, 2002; COHEN, 2003; MARIANI, 2004; CHAMOT, 2004; VILAÇA, 2008), contributing to a better development of linguistic, communicative and pedagogical skill, including autonomy and the management of the learning process. In this section of the article, key strategies in vocabulary teaching will be discussed.

3.1 – Thematic grouping

One basic strategy in vocabulary learning is *thematic grouping*, or just *grouping*. This strategy involves the selection and grouping of vocabulary in topics or themes. The topics or themes may be situations, places, feelings, subjects, jobs, among many other possibilities. The primary purpose of this strategy is to provide students with basic contextualization and memorization techniques. Thematic grouping has been widely used in coursebooks, dictionaries (monolingual and bilingual) and picture/photo dictionaries, explicitly or implicitly, in a range of teaching methods and approaches. This strategy may be put into practice in a number of techniques, which include monolingual or bilingual lists and theme-based syllabuses.

The next figure illustrates a possible visual approach to thematic grouping:

Figure 1- A visual approach to thematic grouping

The words above could be followed by their definitions, possible translations or any other relevant information, which would help students learn or use them. It is necessary to highlight that the selection of topic(theme)-based vocabulary may be implicit. When a book introduces a unit about weather or sport, for example, the author needs to select vocabulary related to these topics. This selection, however, is not as evident as in the figure above.

Although just two words above present morphological similarities (bishop and archbishop), what makes the learning process easier is the close semantic relationship among them. This strategy is usually very helpful to keep words fresh and active in memory. Little use of varied vocabulary may turn known words inactive and hard to be used(RODRIGUES, 2004). In other words, the overuse of basic vocabulary, mainly in oral language, may contribute to the excessive repetition of it. Evans(2002) points out that the use of simplistic adjectives and adverbs(e.g. good, bad, well, etc) can make a composition sound uninteresting. She stresses the importance of using sophisticated vocabulary.

3.2 – Word formation

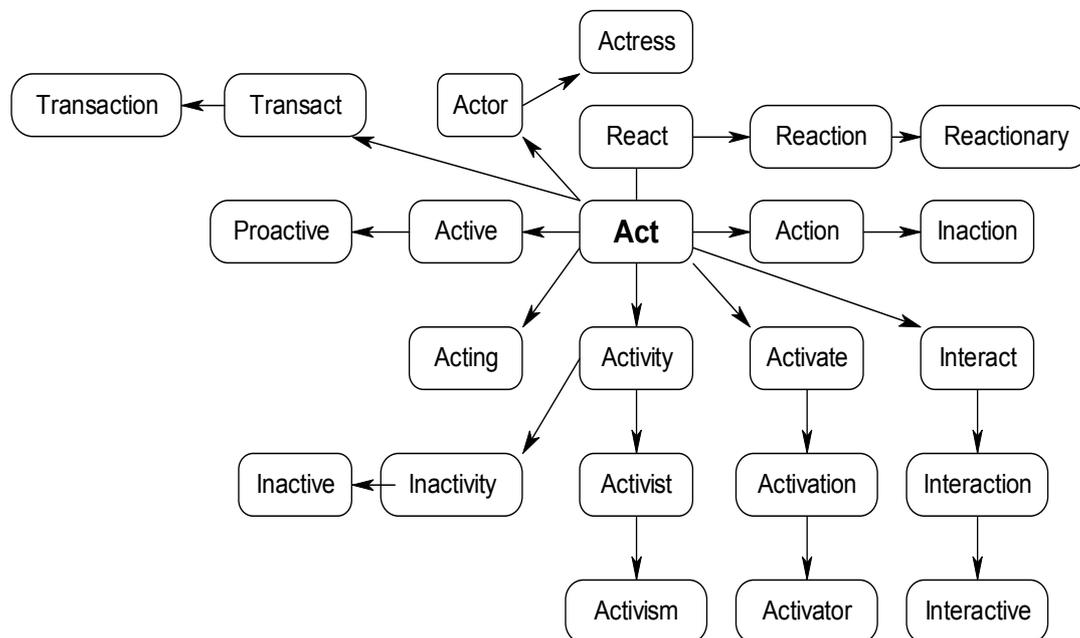
Most words are made of other words. Unfortunately, the importance of word-formation processes (CARTER & McCARTHY, 2006) seems to be underestimated in foreign languages teaching. This kind of knowledge could help students develop strategies to learn vocabulary and to infer possible meanings of unknown words. Understanding the meanings and use of some prefixes and suffixes can make the vocabulary learning process easier and faster. Students should know that the suffix **er** basically means the agent (person or tool) which performs the action expressed by the verb: teacher – the person who teaches; learner – the person who learns. This linguistic knowledge provides students with better tools which can accelerate vocabulary learning and develop learning strategies for reading in a foreign language(DIAS, 2002).

As discussed in Nation(2002:271), many English prefixes and suffixes come from Latin and Greek. It makes them similar both in meaning and form to Portuguese suffixes and prefixes (VILAÇA, 2004). They can be taught little by little, as new words are taught or presented in texts, dialogs and conversations, or in special learning contexts like workshops.

In **ESP (English for Specific Purposes)** courses, in which needs analysis is fundamental(HAMP-LYONS, 2001; DUDLEY-EVANS, 2001), the teaching of some suffixes and prefixes plays a central role in vocabulary teaching and learning, mainly in reading courses. The reason for this approach to developing basic metalinguistic knowledge of word formation is very straightforward: students must learn reading strategies that will enable them to read in their academic or professional contexts. As ESP courses usually take little time(VILAÇA, 2004), teachers have little or no time to present/teach vocabulary. The meaning of unknown words must be inferred from the context and the morphological characteristics.

The next figure emphasizes how important and useful these processes are. All the vocabulary bellow has the same base: the word **act**.

Figure 2 – Word formation



It is easy to notice in the figure above that many prefixes and suffixes in English are similar to Portuguese ones. This will lead to another important point in vocabulary teaching/learning: the **cognates**.

3.3 – Cognates and false friends

Cognates can be defined as words which are similar or identical both in form and meaning in different languages. The English word *music*, for example, has cognates in many languages: *Música* (Portuguese), *Musik* (German), *Musique* (French) and *Música* (Spanish). Some cognates are completely identical like *Chocolate* (English), *Chocolate* (Portuguese) and *Chocolate* (Spanish). Vilaça(2004) stresses the role of cognates in the development of an extensive vocabulary. The book *Vocabulário Rápido em Inglês*(VILAÇA, 2004) presents thousands of cognates in English and Portuguese.

It is necessary, therefore, to warn students about two aspects related to word-formation processes and cognates. Firstly, students cannot create words in English just by adding suffixes or prefixes to the words they know. Teachers must show their students that the study of word-formation processes must be

used to help them learn, understand and memorize new words and not to create new words (VILAÇA, 2004).

Secondly, not all words are what they seem to be. Spite of some morphological similarities, the words **parents** (English) and **parentes** (Portuguese) have completely different meanings. This kind of word is called **false-friends or false-cognates**. They are very dangerous in foreign language learning. *Caxton Dictionary of English Grammar* (2000: 89) defines false-friends as “words that have the same or similar forms in different languages but have different meanings in each.”

4- Final Considerations

Nunan(1995) argues that an adequate acquisition of vocabulary is necessary for a successful language learning. Little vocabulary learning may seem in our student’s mind a sign of unsuccessful learning or poor communication skills.

Grammar teaching has been a special concern for language teachers. On the other hand, vocabulary teaching/learning is generally neglected (NUNAN,1995; BOWEN & MARKS, 2002). Richards & Renandya (2002:255) discuss that vocabulary is a key aspect in order to become a proficient speaker. The authors argue that vocabulary “provides how well learners speak, listen, read and write” (RICHARDS & RENANDYA, 2002: 255).

In conclusion, the strategies discussed in this article may be used in different languages in order to help students learn and keep a larger vocabulary. As a consequence, higher levels of lexical skills can be achieved.

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