



The Importance of Teaching ESL Vocabulary in Primary School

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Abstract: This article seeks to emphasize the importance of teaching vocabulary in primary school. Vocabulary development occurs as students interact repeatedly with new words, enriching their personal vocabulary. This growth is stimulated through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. Language acquisition naturally progresses from simple words to complex sentences, with listening and speaking skills typically developing before reading and writing. Therefore, classroom instruction should reflect this sequence; prioritizing reading and writing skills over speaking can obstruct language learning. A solid vocabulary base is vital for effective communication and serves as the foundation for essential language skills, including reading, listening, speaking, writing, spelling, and pronunciation. A strong vocabulary allows students to engage meaningfully with English, whether through conversation, enjoying media, or composing messages, making vocabulary enhancement critical for second language proficiency.

Keywords: vocabulary teaching; communication skills; primary education; ESL; language development.

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1. Introduction

Children learning English need exposure to words before they can use them independently. While it would be convenient to simply purchase words, gaining familiarity is complex. Research indicates that hearing a word at least twelve times is necessary for meaningful comprehension. Students enhance their vocabulary through repeated interactions with words, which are then added to their personal vocabulary bank. Engaging in listening, speaking, reading, and writing helps improve vocabulary. Oral language development progresses logically from single words to complex sentences, with listening and speaking skills acquired long before reading and writing. Therefore, classroom instruction should mirror this order, as developing English reading and writing skills before basic speaking can hinder progress. Mastering foundational vocabulary is crucial for effective language use.

Vocabulary is essential for teaching and learning a foreign language, serving as the foundation for key skills such as reading, listening, speaking, writing, spelling, and pronunciation. A strong vocabulary enables students to effectively communicate in English, whether interacting with native speakers, enjoying movies or music, or composing messages. Limited vocabulary hinders successful communication, highlighting the importance of vocabulary knowledge for second language learners. Thus, enhancing vocabulary is crucial for overall language proficiency.

Vocabulary is essential for reading success because it enhances comprehension, which is the main goal of reading. A strong vocabulary also improves communication skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while boosting academic and social confidence in children and teenagers.

A lack of vocabulary knowledge can hinder comprehension, making it challenging for individuals to enhance their vocabulary independently. Intensive vocabulary education is crucial, focusing on creating meaningful contexts and connecting new words to existing knowledge. Schmitt (2000:55) emphasizes that vocabulary acquisition is vital for communicative competence and second language learning. A student's vocabulary significantly impacts their academic success, highlighting the importance of integrating vocabulary instruction into language education.

2. Age features of primary school pupils

Teaching children is an adventure that demands creativity, patience, and ingenuity. Educators must understand their students, including how they think and behave, to effectively engage them. Recognizing the unique ways children's brains function enables teachers to stimulate interest and enthusiasm, making the process of learning a foreign language enjoyable and effective.

A teacher's instructional choices are heavily influenced by students' ages, as different age groups possess varying needs and cognitive skills. Young children learn foreign languages primarily through play, while adults engage more in abstract thinking during the learning process (Harmer, 2005:37).

Young children, adolescents, and adults differ in their learning experimentation styles, influenced by developmental stages and cognitive abilities. Some of these differences are:

- they respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words;
- they frequently learn indirectly rather than directly – that is they take in information from all sides, learning from everything around them rather than only focusing on the precise topic they are being taught;
- their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see, hear and have a chance to touch and interact with;
- they generally show an enthusiasm for learning and curiosity about the world that surrounds them;
- they take great pleasure in finding and creating fun in what they do;
- they have a ready imagination (Halliwell, 1992);
- their need for individual attention and approval from the teacher is great;
- they like to talk about themselves and enjoy learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topic in the classroom;
- their attention is limited; if the activities are not extremely engaging, they can easily get bored and lose interest after 10 minutes or so;
- young children have fewer inhibitions about learning a foreign language and they have a positive attitude towards foreign language study.

3. Teaching vocabulary in primary school

When choosing vocabulary to teach, Thornbury (2002:75,76) offers five key suggestions, highlighting the importance of various factors in vocabulary selection:

1. learner's level (whether beginners, intermediate or advanced);
2. learner's level of familiarity with the words (learners may have met the words before even though they are not part of their active vocabulary);
3. difficulty of the words (whether they express abstract rather than concrete meanings or whether they are difficult to pronounce);
4. teachability – they can be easily explained or demonstrated;
5. words to be used for production (in speaking and writing) or for

recognition only (as in listening and reading).

The National Reading Panel (2000) highlights that effective vocabulary learning enhances comprehension, emphasizing the necessity of age-appropriate teaching methods. A well-rounded reading curriculum integrates both direct and indirect strategies to build students' spoken and reading vocabularies. Indirect methods include read-alouds and group activities, while vocabulary instruction should be customized to meet individual student needs, fostering active participation in learning. Mastering essential functional vocabulary is crucial for language proficiency; thus, new words should be thoughtfully chosen, introduced gradually, and structured to facilitate smooth language acquisition.

Basic vocabulary begins with nouns, encompassing names of people, body parts, and clothing. Essential school items include desk, cupboard, book, and blackboard. Everyday objects like pot, saucepan, stool, basket, and bed further illustrate this foundational vocabulary. Students should also learn environmental terms, such as church, shop, and market, along with garden tools like hoe and spade. In addition to nouns, action words (verbs and verbal phrases) are also taught.

Children are energetic and need frequent movement, so they must express their activities in English. Selected verbs align with their home and school activities. Classes also cover pronouns, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions. Importantly, these concepts should be taught in an integrated manner rather than in isolation. Content words are essential vocabulary that helps create intelligible sentences. For example, using a structure like "This is a . . ." allows children to effectively communicate their thoughts and engage in meaningful language learning.

Word learning varies in complexity; a child might grasp a word's meaning without knowing the term. For instance, children know "cease" in context but may not recognize it means "stop." Learning familiar concepts through new terms is easier than acquiring new words for unfamiliar ideas.

When teaching vocabulary, it is crucial to contextualize words within the material being studied, allowing students to gain a deeper understanding through discussion and definition. Exposure to words in various contexts and opportunities for speaking and writing are essential for effective learning. However, speaking can be particularly challenging, as children often expect to express themselves in a foreign language as easily as in their native tongue. The authors of *Teaching English to Children* highlight that while young learners perceive a foreign language as merely another means of expression, their limited language skills impose certain constraints.

When children begin learning English, it is crucial to provide them with the language input before expecting them to produce it. Some games support learners with specific language needed, while others offer context without direct language

focus, which may lead to mistakes. Generally, it is better not to interrupt learners while they speak; instead, wait until they finish to address content and note any errors. Focused practice on mistakes may be more effective when addressed at a later time.

Using true sentences along with appropriate actions and sounds is crucial for teaching language to young children. One effective method is incorporating puppets or a class mascot. Authors emphasize that having a familiar figure, like a Teddy bear, fosters conversations and introduces new subjects and vocabulary. Students can engage with the mascot by asking questions such as, "Teddy wants to know...", creating a lively dialogue. This interaction allows students to ask varied questions and receive answers, enhancing their learning experience.

For young children, using truthful sentences paired with appropriate actions and sounds is essential. Engaging learners through puppets or a class mascot can be effective. The authors highlight that having a familiar figure, such as a Teddy bear, facilitates conversations and introduces new subjects and language. For instance, teachers can help students ask questions like, "Teddy wants to know..." This approach encourages dialogue; after the teacher models interactions, students can freely inquire and receive answers through the mascot, fostering learning in a fun way.

Effective communication relies more on vocabulary than on grammar, making it essential to expand learners' vocabulary early on. Developing vocabulary should focus on understanding meanings rather than mere memorization. While translation can aid comprehension, the goal is to immerse learners in contextual usage that resonates with their interests and needs.

Teaching vocabulary is closely linked to pronunciation since effective communication requires correct intonation and rhythm. Early language learners should prioritize speaking over memorizing pronunciation rules. Emphasis should be on words, sentences, and structures rather than sounds. Teachers play a crucial role by motivating students and providing good models, as practice is essential for acquiring proper pronunciation.

4. Strategies for teaching vocabulary

Teaching strategies include methods used by teachers to facilitate student learning and help achieve academic goals. Factors like age, intellectual development, classroom setting, and content impact how instruction is delivered. To accommodate diverse learning styles, teachers may use various tools. Vocabulary research suggests introducing it through three distinct approaches:

1. during the lead-in stage

Before students engage with texts, they are introduced to new vocabulary crucial for comprehension. Young learners start with single words presented in a

familiar context, requiring clear, simple structures and natural intonation from teachers. Emphasis is placed on the meaning and form of the words. Various techniques—visual, verbal, and nonverbal—can be employed by teachers to facilitate vocabulary acquisition, ensuring that the learning experience is effective and engaging for young students.

A. Visual techniques include:

- using pictures, photographs, blackboard drawings, illustrations from magazines or newspapers;
- using pictograms – the teacher draws on the blackboard; the meaning is conveyed through drawing;
- using flash-cards or handouts;
- using diagrams or word trees;
- using wall charts;
- using picture story (comic strips);
- demonstration – by showing an object or a cutout figure;
- using realia – a variety of real objects brought by the students or the teacher into the classroom.

Before engaging with texts, students are introduced to new vocabulary to facilitate comprehension. Young learners start with individual words presented by the teacher within a familiar context. It is crucial that these words are taught simply and naturally, emphasizing correct intonation. The teaching focus is on both the meaning and form of the words. Teachers can employ various techniques, including visual, verbal, and nonverbal methods, to effectively introduce new vocabulary, making the language learning process more accessible for young students.

B. Verbal techniques refer to:

- explanations, descriptions;
- paraphrasing;
- definitions;
- synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, hyponyms;
- translation;
- vocabulary games;
- word-building;
- matching;
- using songs;

The verbal technique involves teachers using illustrative situations, either written or oral, to exemplify concepts, allowing students to deduce word meanings through short stories, dialogues, or anecdotes. It is crucial for teachers to provide

clear contexts for new language items, as unclear contexts can hinder understanding. Additionally, synonyms and antonyms are often employed, especially with lower-level students, to enhance vocabulary comprehension. Another effective presentation method is providing definitions, which help students grasp the precise meaning and usage of words. However, relying on definitions and contextual situations necessitates a certain level of language proficiency and general knowledge. Learners must possess an adequate vocabulary to successfully identify and comprehend the words being presented.

C. The nonverbal techniques include gesturing and miming. They are very useful when it is impossible to explain the meaning of a word using realia or pictures. Mime and gestures can help teachers to explain actions, for example.

2. during the work with the text – students read a text and then they are asked to relate what they have understood. The new words can be introduced using different techniques:

- guessing from the context;
- defining new words on the basis of already known words in the foreign language;
- word analysis (root, stems, affixes);
- the use of synonyms, antonyms;
- substitution;
- matching words with their definitions;
- word lists/ charts/ webs;
- making connections (students connect the words in column A and B to make sentences related with a specific topic);
- the use of prefixes or suffixes to construct new words;
- the use of translation.

Understanding vocabulary words is essential for reading comprehension. The more words a child understands, the better he or she comprehends the text. Using a variety of effective teaching approaches will improve the student's capacity to acquire new terms.

3. during the students' work with the dictionary - using a dictionary can help pupils in learning the meaning of a word they are unfamiliar with. They look the word up in the dictionary and find the meaning that is most suitable to the respective context. The teacher's role is required to assist young learners in the learning process. That is, the teacher plays an important role in developing the vocabulary of young students.

Translation is often seen as a dull approach to teaching vocabulary, yet it has clear benefits when used appropriately. It is vital for explaining technical terms, where translation may be necessary. This method can also save time and help learners recognize similarities and differences between languages. However, excessive use can hinder engagement in the language learning process. Experts emphasize the importance of mastering high-frequency words for effective vocabulary acquisition. Schmitt (2000:135,136) outlines various vocabulary learning strategies, noting that low motivation can impede students' progress.

Methodologists advocate that mastering high-frequency words—those commonly found in texts—is crucial for vocabulary learning. Schmitt (2000:135,136) categorizes vocabulary learning strategies into two main types, highlighting their importance in effective language acquisition for students:

1. strategies that are useful for the initial discovery of a word's meaning;
2. strategies that are useful for remembering that word once it has been introduced.

He even further classified the strategies into some other large groups:

- determination strategies – students' individual strategies for discovering the meaning of words without the assistance of others;
- social strategies – students use interaction with others to improve their language acquisition (vocabulary, implicitly);
- memory strategies (mnemonics) – students connect the new word(s) with previously learned knowledge, using some type of imagery or grouping (e.g. semantic/concept mapping);
- cognitive strategies – pupils study language through repetition or other mechanical ways (such as making vocabulary notes);
- metacognitive strategies – involve a conscious look at the learning process and making decisions about how to study best by planning, monitoring or assessing it.

Some memory strategies that help learning are suggested by Oxford (1990), and they can be divided into:

- creating mental linkages: grouping, associating, placing new words into a context;
- using images and sounds: using imagery, semantic mapping, using keywords and representing sounds in memory;
- reviewing thoroughly, in an organized manner;
- using action: physical response or sensation, using mechanical techniques.

Researchers had come to the conclusion that, as people do not store words in their brain in alphabetical order, and as words that are somehow related, join together in groups (lexical sets), it is better to teach students lexical sets, in which words are related in several ways:

1. by topic: *animals, plants, family relationships, jobs, food, means of transport, musical instruments, etc.*
2. by similarity of meaning: *monkey, ape, gorilla, chimp;*
3. in pairs – synonyms: *brave, courageous, bold, fearless;*
4. in pairs – opposites: *old/new, night/day, here/there;*
5. in a series or a scale: *boiling, hot, warm, cool, cold, freezing;*
6. by super-ordinates and hyponyms: *jobs: doctor, engineer, pilot, mechanic, teacher;*
7. by activity or process: steps in making a cake, repairing a thing, or building a house;
8. word families: *perform, performer, performance.*

There are a few strategies that Thornbury (Bonta, 2013:105,106) suggests in order to pass words from short-term memory to the long-term one, and these are:

- Repetition – of the words that students hear or read; it plays a very important role (2001)²⁶ as vocabulary knowledge cannot be gained from one single encounter with a word, even if this encounter involves a lot of direct teaching efforts.’
- Retrieval – this is an example of another type of repetition; students use the new terms in written projects, which helps them remember them later.
- Spacing – splitting memory work throughout time is more beneficial than massing it all together in a single block.
- Pacing – the concept relates to allowing each student to work (learn vocabulary items) at their own pace and learning style.
- Use – students must be given a variety of opportunities to utilize the new language; otherwise, they will forget it.
- Cognitive depth – students must make cognitive decisions/certain associations regarding the term in order to recall it when it is needed.
- Personal organizing – the teacher facilitates conversations and role-play activities in which students can practice new vocabulary in individualized contexts.
- Imaging – new words are presented in the form of visual images so

that pupils can readily memorize them; abstract notions are correlated with mental images.

- Mnemonics –visuals and keywords are useful tools for assisting students in retrieving material from their memories.
- Motivation – the teacher's role is to urge students to acquire new terminology while also providing tasks with the same purpose.
- Attention – the teacher must ensure that pupils are paying close attention to the presentation and practice of vocabulary items.

Since learning vocabulary is closely related to learning pronunciation of words, students, especially at the beginning level, can improve their pronunciation by:

- imitation is said to be the most commonly employed approach. Students are asked to pay close attention to the model (sound(s), word(s), and sentences) set by the teacher or by the recorded voice and to reproduce it as exactly as possible. Certain strategies, such as: recordings of learner speech compared to the teacher's and native model's, imitation drills, choral repetition drills, or learning by heart, are quite beneficial.
- articulatory description is used mostly when pupils struggle to pronounce a sound, usually because it does not exist in their mother tongue; methodical explanation and instruction can be quite beneficial.
- comparison is especially useful when students confuse two similar sounds.

There are several principles for successful teaching of vocabulary, which are valid for any method. According to Wallace (1992) the principles are:

- *Aim*: a teacher has to decide which word should be mastered by his/her students. A teacher should select high- frequency words or sentences.
- *Quantity*: teacher may have to decide the number of vocabulary items to be learnt, how many words in the lesson can be achieved by the learners. Students would be confused, discouraged and frustrated if they found too many words.
- *Need*: in teaching vocabulary, a teacher has to choose high-frequency words. Students should be put in a situation where they have to communicate and get the words they need.
- *Frequent exposure and repetitions*: in teaching vocabulary of a

foreign language teachers should teach new words. They have to repeat them to make sure the students have already remembered and understood them. There must be a certain amount of repetition until the students know for sure the meaning of the words or sentences that they learn.

- *Meaningful presentation*: the learner must have a clear picture and understand what they learn. So, a teacher should know for sure the words or sentences clearly and perfectly presented to students.
- *Situation presentation*: the choice of words can be various to the situation in which we are speaking and according to how well we know the person whom we are talking to (from formal to informal). Therefore, students should learn words that are appropriate to the situation.

5. Conclusion

In summary, young learners exhibit a strong capacity to grasp meanings even when they don't know every word. They rely on intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and actions to infer messages. This understanding aids them in learning new words and concepts, facilitating their language acquisition. Employing diverse and engaging methods to introduce vocabulary can enhance students' interest in learning a foreign language. Presenting vocabulary in appealing ways makes it easier for learners to acquire and retain these words over time.

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