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Do you teach enough vocabulary? Vocabulary Practice vs Grammar Overload

by Domenico Locatelli

We all know grammar is very important in English language teaching and learning, but what about vocabulary? How can you students benefit from studying more vocabulary on a regular basis and why should they? Answers to all the aforementioned questions will be given in this article.

This article will, firstly, analyse **the context** in which my idea was developed, which is the Irish ELT sector, and highlight a few **hurdles** that students and teachers face that could be overcome by means of teaching more vocabulary. Then, the focus will shift to **my idea in theory and in practice**, with some useful tips on how to include more vocabulary in your ELT lessons and some examples of classroom activities. Finally, **student feedback and benefits inside and outside the classroom** will be brought to your attention.

> **" When we try to learn a new language, we are putting together a puzzle; the technique used to put the pieces together is the grammar and the pieces themselves are the vocabulary. "**

The context. The Irish ELT sector is dominated by visa students mainly from South America and Asia; Brazil is the country where most students are from followed by South American Spanish speaking countries. Some English Language schools, especially the upmarket ones, have a balanced nationality mix in their students' pool, but many do not, resulting in many classes being (almost) monolingual. As a result, it is not uncommon to see students using their native language a lot in the classroom, especially among lower-level students. In addition to that, Spanish and Portuguese share a lot of vocabulary, 89% to be precise (1), so they are mutually intelligible in most cases, making it easier for lower-level students to use their L1 as lingua franca instead of English.

The hurdles. Both English language students and English language teachers face some hurdles in the context previously laid out.

The learners are sometimes taught in (almost) monolingual classes. Lower level students struggle to understand basic instructions and commands so they might find it easier to revert to L1 to ask a fellow student rather than trying to formulate a sentence using the vocabulary and grammar they know. This could cause a strong L1 reliance and hinder their progress in the long term. Also, in my career as an ELT teacher Ihave found that, oftentimes, the teaching is very traditional and textbook oriented, and textbooks tend to focus on grammar very heavily. This type of teaching finds its roots in the poor design of the syllabus, the units are just a copy of the textbook, and based on the conception that grammar trumps vocabulary.

The teachers are equally faced with hurdles. They must follow the sometimes poorly designed syllabi, which are heavy on grammar and light on vocabulary as they often follow the index of a random textbook word by word. In addition, some students are used to a very traditional and grammar-oriented type of teaching, which they might have experienced in their country of origin or in Ireland, and they will expect it.

After having said all of this, however, I must clarify my point. I am a student in Applied Linguistics, and I am, therefore, tackling this issue from a linguistic point of view. By no means am I criticising the operations of the administrators, managers, and directors of Irish ELT schools. They are doing a great job in dealing with difficult internal and external stakeholders and they have all my respect and admiration. Last but not least, visa students must take an exit exam at the end of their visas to show their progression and to ascertain that they have learned something valuable during their lessons. These exams test students using a lot of grammar questions, and they follow the grammar topics contained in traditional textbooks. Therefore, overcoming the hurdles previously mentioned is not quite as straightforward as it seems, and I intend not to criticise nor to belittle the efforts of my former Irish ELT colleagues whose hard work and dedication are exemplary.

My idea in theory. The importance of vocabulary in ELT is present in many studies. However, the study I got my idea from was made by University of Nottingham Professor Norbert Schmitt, who found a linear relationship between vocabulary and comprehension.

I thought that, as well as comprehension, vocabulary could also influence production and therefore fluency.

The metaphor I often use to describe a new language is "the puzzle". When we try to learn a new language, we are putting together a puzzle; the technique used to put the pieces together is the grammar and the pieces themselves are the vocabulary. Therefore, if your technique is good but you don't have the pieces, the puzzle can't be done.

My idea in practice. Now, after having read all of the above, you are probably starting to wonder how to approach this from a practical point of view. This can be done by approaching syllabi and textbooks in a different way. They should help us with the structure of the course yet not dictate what we should be teaching at any given moment.

What I used to do in my day-to-day teaching was to follow the topic suggested by the syllabus and supplement the topic of the day with some relevant vocabulary. I would either expand the vocabulary given by the book or find some new vocabulary, which changed the angle on the topic suggested by the book.

There are many good vocabulary resources out there, my favourite being "Oxford Vocabulary".

In addition to supplementing existing vocabulary with new one, there are two activities that my students used to enjoy and that I am going to share below.

The first one is called 'stop'. It is a category-based vocabulary game which can be tailored to the TL. Firstly, the teacher draws a table on the whiteboard containing five-six columns and several rows and divides the class into small groups and sets five-six categories, for example animals, cities, countries, etc. Then, the teacher shouts a letter of the alphabet and the learners must find a word beginning with the chosen letter to fit each box in a single row. When a team finishes, they shout 'stop!' and tell their words to the teacher who writes them on the whiteboard. If they are correct they get the point. This activity is perfect as a warmer or a cooler and for vocabulary consolidation at either the beginning or the end of a lesson.

The second one is called 'scattergories'. It is a variation of the first one which is suitable to higher levels, unlike the first. Firstly, the teacher draws a table on the whiteboard containing 3 columns and several rows and divides the class into small groups and sets 3 categories, for example animals, cities, countries, etc. Then, the teacher set the time of the activity and shouts a letter of the alphabet and the learners must find as many words as possible beginning with the chosen letter in each category, at least one per category. When the time is up, one student per team writes their words on the board. The team with the most correct words gets the point.

"Scattergories"
Pic by Author

Student feedback and benefits inside the classroom. Although I have never done any scientific research on my students, so I don't have any hard data to support my statement, the benefits of helping my students expand their vocabulary were great.

First of all, my students increased their fluency and their comprehension within months. Their motivation and engagement increased significantly in a matter of weeks. I could really see the difference in the way they spoke to each other and performed certain tasks. Having taught for some years before that, I could really notice and appreciate the difference.

Also, my learners tended to level up quite quickly compared to other students in the same level. Thus, expanding their vocabulary helped them pass their level tests as well as boost their comprehension skills, production skills, and confidence.

Benefits outside the classroom. In addition to having the aforementioned benefits in the classroom, there are also two benefits outside the classroom I would like to mention.

The first benefit is, by boosting their confidence, learners feel less social "awkwardness" when interacting with speakers of other languages. This exponentially increases their chances of speaking English outside the classroom and practicing the language they study in the classroom.

The second and last benefit is, by improving their comprehension skills and expanding their vocabulary, students lapse back to their L1 less and less and they rely on their L1 less and less. This creates a virtuous cycle that could benefit L2 acquisition exponentially.

Conclusion. This article focused on the importance of teaching vocabulary in general and in particular in the Irish ELT context. Its aim was to present the reader with the hurdles that both students and teachers face in the aforementioned context and suggest some ideas on how to overcome these hurdles by increasing the teaching of vocabulary. Both theoretical and practical ideas were discussed and two examples of classroom activities were given. Finally, some benefits from the increased vocabulary teaching were presented.

References:
John A. Rea, *"Concerning the validity of lexicostatistics"*, IZAL, XXIV (1958), 145-150.

Norbert Schmitt, Xiangying Jiang, William Grabe, *"The Percentage of Words Known in a Text and Reading Comprehension"*, The Modern Language Journal, 95 (2011), pp. 26-43.

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Domenico has been studying languages and teaching English for the last 6 years. He is about to finish his MA in Applied Linguistics with a dissertation focusing on teaching methods. He is the Quality Assurance Lead and Examination Officer in Dorset College in Dublin. Domenico became a qualified English teacher over 6 years ago and he is very interested in teaching, curriculum design and college operations.