

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING CONTENT AREA VOCABULARY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper attempts to provide instructional strategies for teaching content area vocabulary in the language classroom. In order to arrive at the instructional strategies, a library-based research was conducted. Thus, vocabulary was identified as the inventory of words in a language as such it need to be taught to groom the learner to contend with the challenges the academic environment could provide. Thence, having provided vocabulary teaching methods like word definition, demonstration, antonym, synonym, translation and their likes, the paper underscores the need for the teacher to utilize storytelling, vocabulary pack, cued spelling, contextual redefinition, typically to technical meaning approach and coding polysemous words as instructional strategies for teaching content area vocabulary in the language classroom.*

### Introduction

Words as substances contain ideas and depict objects that appeal to people's imaginations. As such, the summation of the words found in a particular language could be regarded as the vocabulary of that language. Vocabulary plays vital roles in making teaching and learning effective. This is so given the fact that vocabularies are the vehicles with which the substances of skills, norms and notions are transmitted in any classroom (Crystal, 1987). In the light of this, it is expected that the learners master the vocabulary of the language that serves as medium of instruction for them to be able to decipher the learning experiences inherent in a particular content area.

There is no doubt that classroom situations are formal and goal-oriented. In consequence, instructional strategies need to be deployed so as to equip the learners with the ability to grasp the message content areas want to deliver. Suffice it to say that despite the fact that vocabulary teaching is more prominent and glaring in the field of language teaching, it is as well readily obtainable across all the content areas in the curriculum. In the light of this, the teacher of language

as well as that of content area need to be sensitized on instructional strategies for teaching content area vocabulary in the language classroom. Thus, this article attempts to provide an overview of vocabulary teaching as well as present some strategies that could be applied in ensuring that content area vocabulary is taught effectively in the language classroom.

### **Vocabulary and vocabulary teaching**

Language is invaluable in education. It is the chief instrument for transmitting content and testing the level at which the content have been internalized. However, language does not occur in a vacuum. It is given substance by the words that make it up. These words are regarded as vocabulary. The vocabulary of a language could be realized verbally and non-verbally. But then, vocabulary would be said to be complete when it has a mode of pronunciation, grammatical status and semantic value.

Vocabulary in its simple or compound form must have a way of being pronounced. As a result, an attempt at pronouncing it inappropriately may affect its meaning and the grammatical class it belongs to. Furthermore, each of the lexical items that are found in the vocabulary of a language must have a particular part of speech it belongs to. Sometime, a word may have more than one entry in lexicography and also have more than one grammatical category. In addition, a word must have meaning.

Vocabulary teaching entails the process of providing the learner with the opportunity of internalizing how a particular word should be pronounced in addition to what it means and the part of speech it belongs to. While it is obvious that learners are exposed to the semantic values of words in a way that is explicit in vocabulary teaching, sometimes the pronunciation and grammatical categories of such words are also projected explicitly in vocabulary teaching.

Teachers have been adopting several techniques when it comes to teaching vocabulary to learners. It would be of interest to state that some words are extremely arcane to some particular fields of study. As such, an approach at mastering the meaning of such words could best be achieved when viewed from the register of those fields of discourse (Barton & Calfee, 1989). Such vocabularies are regarded as argots. In the light of this, it is obvious that the sense a word would make in an everyday language context would be different from what it would depict in its technical context. This implies that a word could have multiple meanings.



Teaching vocabulary entails raising learners' consciousness as to the structure, form and function of words. As such, the teacher needs to consider the learners' previous experience in the language in question before building on what the learners possess in a second language context. For this reason, a teacher could adopt or adapt definition method, demonstration method, pictorial method, antonym method, synonym method, translation method, realia method, contextual method among other relevant methods to guide learners towards mastering the vocabulary of a language in a language classroom.

Through using word definition, a teacher could expose the learners to vocabulary and its use. Furthermore, the teacher may decide to demonstrate action vocabularies for the learners to realize what it implies. In addition, using a picture could facilitate the act of making the learner have a clear image of a vocabulary. A learner could also be exposed to the vocabulary of a language by the means of making the opposite of the word known to him or her. In a situation like this, the learner would relate the meaning of the opposite to what the new word should entail.

By using a word that is nearly similar in meaning to the vocabulary in question, a teacher can enable the learner to establish what a vocabulary means and how it should be used. Another way through which a learner could be made to realize the nature and function of vocabulary is via translation. The learner already has a language. In this vein, it is expected that the teacher should use the learners' language equivalent of the vocabulary in question in order to lead the learner towards grasping the meaning of the vocabulary. Real objects can also be used in order to concretized what a word means. Here, the referent value of the word could be substantiated. This means that by exposing the real object the word refers to, to the learner, the learner is made to retain what it stands for.

Having identified that a word could make more than one sense depending on the context it is used, it becomes very pertinent to utilize contextualized approach in teaching vocabulary in language classroom. Here, the learner would be guided towards deciphering the meaning of words based on the context it appears.

It would be of interest to state that vocabulary teaching is very important in the educational system. This is because one cannot establish the meaning of a particular text or oral discourse without having an understanding of most of the words that make up the text or discourse (Nagy, 1985). As a result, vocabulary development need to be underscored in the academic process because one's success in the demands and challenges of the academic circle is dependent upon one's vocabulary capacity in the vocabulary of the medium of instruction. It therefore becomes paramount that the teacher utilizes appropriate strategies that

would enhance and facilitate vocabulary teaching in the language classroom. This will enable the learner to be equipped to cope with the demands of formal schooling and the society at large.

### **Instructional Strategies for Teaching Content Area vocabulary in the Language Classroom.**

This article has presented some methods that the language teacher can utilize for the purpose of teaching content area vocabulary. However, it would be of interest to emphasize that the language teacher should utilize appropriate strategies that would match the learners' learning styles when it comes to teaching content area vocabulary. Strategies are specific skills that are deployed by a teacher for the purpose of teaching (Chang, 2005). Thus, the choice of relevant strategies is very important.

In the choice of a strategy, the teacher should consider the fact that learners need to be involved in the learning process (Nunan and Lamb, 2000). This is because learners grasp vocabulary with high degree of performance on their part in a situation whereby they are directly involved in constructing meaning. This means that memorization of definitions and synonyms and antonyms must be de-emphasized. It is in view of this that the teacher should consider utilizing vocabulary webbing and mapping as strategies. Here, the teacher could use the learners' experiences to develop vocabulary in the classroom.

In a situation whereby the teacher decides to use any of synonym, antonym or definition methods, the teacher should use a strategy that could prompt the learners to list synonyms, antonyms or definitional phrases that they already associate with the topic via the process of a simple T-bar chart. This can only be achieved where what the learners already possess are concatenated with the new meaning they would be accessing (Christien and Murphy, 1991). For this reason more strategies like the use of vocabulary pack, cued spelling and story telling were suggested as intervention strategies in vocabulary lessons (Cooter, 1991, Godapp and Hodapp, 1996).

In adopting any strategy, the teacher should consciously ensure that learners are made to describe vocabulary and not define. The description should be based on the learners' experience. This is given the fact that the learners should be led-in towards the description by the means of the teacher engaging them in activities that could stir them to make the description. The teacher can create an atmosphere that would present the learners with a mental image of the new word. Such would make the learners to suggest possible descriptions of the new word until the actual meaning is arrived at. Furthermore, learners could be made to compare related



words through hierarchical arrays and linear arrays in such a way that their sensitivity toward meaning could be developed. Eguare (2008: 34) is of the opinion that what a student produces depends on how deep and intense what he receive or internalized is.

The activities above however, may not provide the desired result as far as arriving at a satisfactory meaning is concerned. As such, meaning clarification and consolidation strategies should be employed. This is because most of the words readily available in specific content areas have multiple meanings. For this reason, such words could cause confusion in the minds of the learners and also generate argument during classroom discourse. This is because “the meaning a learner has internalized prior to the lesson may not be in consonance with the one another learner is providing. For instance, a learner may understand “mouse” to mean an animal while another may have a knowledge of what it means to be one of the basic components in a computer.

Given the multiple meaning nature of some words, the teacher’s meaning clarification and consolidation strategies should consider utilizing “contextual redefinition, preview in context, typically to mechanical meaning approach, finding common roots and coding polysemous words” (Nunam & Lamb : 2000; 45).

By the demands of contextual redefinition strategy, it is expected that the teacher guides the learners to use context and prior knowledge to arrive at the meaning of a word as used in a context. It is pertinent for the language teacher to caution learners that wild guessing is never effective in figuring out the meaning of words. In order to minimize wild guessing, the teacher should provide context clues that would raise the learners’ consciousness towards unveiling the meaning of the word.

Preview in context strategy for teaching content area vocabulary in language classes entails the act of introducing new words to students, by the teacher, by the means of using such language items in the actual contexts in which the learners will encounter the words. Here, the field of discourse is clear to the learner. Meaning that if “mouse” is the word, it would be used in a context like “I clicked the mouse to minimize the screen of my computer monitor”. Here, the learner knows that the mouse in question is related to computer. As such, the teacher will guide the learner via productive interaction to suggest probable meaning for the target language item.

The teacher can also clarify meaning by using the typically to technical meaning approach. This approach guides learners to brainstorm on the multiple meanings of a concept. Emphasis is placed on the relationships between the meaning

provided. As such, the teacher should first of all present the word visually to the learners. Then, the teacher should elicit the learners to provide definitions to the word as it appeal to their mind in the first instance. Here , “battery” could be used as the target language item. After they provide common or typical meaning of the words, the teacher should provide the technical meaning of “battery” as it relates to legal English. The teacher should go further to ask the learners to compare the technical meaning and common meaning of the word. Then the teacher should help learners consolidate what they have learned in common meaning and technical meaning contexts.

Coding polysemous words is another strategy that can be used by the teacher to clarify meaning. Polysemous words are words that represent meaning depending on the discipline it is used. In this strategy, the teacher should provide learners with a passage. After they read it, the teacher should highlight the polysemous words found in it. Then the teacher should discuss its common meaning and then provide how it can be used technically in other contexts. Furthermore, students should be directed towards forming relevant chart that will highlight polysemous words. Codes like visual, kinesthetic social and linguistic should be used as guides.

### **Conclusion**

Vocabulary entails the entire words in a language as well as the summation of the words an individual has understanding of. As a result, it is one’s level of vocabulary that is the key determiner of one’s success in the academic setting. As such, the need to teach vocabulary becomes invaluable. But then, as the teacher sets to teach the vocabulary of content areas in language classroom, he or she must consider the fact that the learners must be exposed to the pronunciation, grammatical status and semantic value of the target vocabulary. This therefore requires that the teacher utilizes some strategies. These strategies must be suitable to the needs of the learners a well as learning situation. It is for this reason that after highlighting definition, demonstration, realia, antonym, synonym, translation and other relevant methods that this article describe vocabulary pack, cued spelling and story telling as good strategies to be used in this respect. Furthermore, contextual redefinition, typically to technical meaning approach and coding polysemous words as meaning clarifying vocabulary teaching strategies.

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