



Teaching Vocabulary: A Research-Based Approach

By

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Abstract

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in language learning, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. It is difficult to get the exact number of words the language contains. Due to multilingualism and globalization of English language, consistently new words are emerging and being added in the language. It is crucial to get updated in the digital era and keep up with the digital natives. It is paramount for the teachers to make students learn about the vocabulary of the global language. This paper explores the methodologies proposed by Jeanne McCarten in "Teaching Vocabulary", emphasizing corpus-based and classroom-based approaches. The study of this book and teaching approaches explores the practicality of the mentioned pedagogy of the language and vocabulary. The study highlights various teaching strategies, effective learning activities, and their implications for vocabulary acquisition.

Key Words: Vocabulary acquisition, learning strategies, corpus-based teaching, discourse markers, interactive teaching-learning

Introduction

In language learning, vocabulary acquisition is foundational for communication and comprehension. Vocabulary extends across disciplines, with specialized terminologies in fields such as medicine, commerce, and literature. Effective vocabulary instruction involves structured lessons and targeted activities to enhance learners' word knowledge. Word-learning strategies involve using dictionaries, analyzing morphemes, and understanding context. For English Language Learners (ELLs) whose language has cognates in English, recognizing cognates is also a key strategy. (Mokhtar) Using a dictionary helps students learn about the various meanings of words and the importance of selecting the correct definition based on the context. (Diamond et al.) Vocabulary encompasses both the knowledge of words and their meanings. As Steven Stahl (Stahl) explains, understanding a word goes beyond just knowing its definition; it also involves comprehending how the word functions within different contexts.

According to McCarten, vocabulary teaching can be divided into two primary approaches:

- (1) lessons derived from corpus studies and
- (2) lessons conducted within the classroom environment.

Lessons from the Corpus:

Corpus linguistics provides a data-driven approach to vocabulary instruction. A corpus—a large collection of texts—offers insights into word frequency, contextual usage, and lexical patterns. By



analyzing corpora, educators can determine which words to prioritize and how to present them effectively. (McCarten)

Key Questions in Corpus-Based Teaching:

- How many words exist in English, and how many should be taught?
- What corpus sources should be utilized to enhance vocabulary learning?

Research shows that most vocabulary is learned indirectly by being exposed to words in everyday situations. Students can pick up new words by having conversations at home and school, listening to books being read to them, and reading a lot on their own. The more they read, the better their vocabulary will grow over time. (Cunningham and Stanovich) Research indicates that university graduates should have knowledge of approximately 20,000 word families, whereas ESL learners require 2,000–5,000 words for basic communication. To facilitate vocabulary acquisition, instructors can implement the following activities:

1. One Word, Multiple Contexts: Learners explore different meanings of a word through varied sentence structures.
 - "I am running." (Physical activity)
 - "I am running a company." (Management)
 - "Sachin has made 100 runs." (Cricket terminology)
2. Word Associations: Students generate a list of related words to strengthen semantic networks.
 - "Novel" → author, book, literature, narration, theme, library.
3. Contextual Paragraphs: Learners analyze texts containing unfamiliar vocabulary to infer meanings and improve comprehension.

Key Aspects of Corpus-Based Vocabulary Teaching:

1. Frequency Analysis: Teachers focus on commonly used words and expressions.
2. Differences in Spoken vs. Written Language: Students learn variations in pronunciation, spelling, and formal vs. informal usage.
 - "Probably" is frequent in conversation but rare in academic texts.
 - "However" is common in academic writing but infrequent in speech.
3. Contextual Usage: Learners develop situational vocabulary awareness (e.g., formal vs. informal expressions).
4. Collocation Awareness: Understanding word pairings enhances fluency (e.g., "heavy rain," "soft corner").
5. Grammatical Patterns: Students apply vocabulary within grammatical frameworks.
 - "Do you mind?" (Request)
 - "Would you mind?" (Polite inquiry)
6. Strategic Use of Vocabulary: Learners use discourse markers, response phrases, monitoring expressions, vague expressions, hedging, and stance expressions to enhance communication.



Effective vocabulary acquisition is essential for language proficiency, whether for academic success or everyday communication. (Hiebert and Kamil) By employing strategies such as exploring word meanings in different contexts, utilizing word associations, and analyzing vocabulary in texts, learners can expand their lexical knowledge. Learners need to see the word, hear how it's pronounced, and practice saying it out loud. The way the word is broken into syllables and where the stress falls are important for how we remember it. (Hunt and Beglar) Corpus-based approaches further refine this process by emphasizing word frequency, contextual usage, collocations, and grammatical patterns. (Nagy et al.) The best vocabulary instruction is the one that helps students understand better. (Dole and Trathen) Additionally, the strategic use of vocabulary, including discourse markers and hedging, enhances fluency and communicative competence. By integrating these techniques, instructors can help learners develop a strong and adaptable vocabulary, improving both their spoken and written language skills.

Lessons for the Classroom

Classroom-based vocabulary instruction involves structured activities that reinforce learning. Teachers can employ the following strategies:

1. Focus on Vocabulary: Emphasize both word meanings and grammatical usage.
2. Offer Variety: Use diverse instructional tools, such as audiovisuals, news reports, and interactive exercises.
3. Repeat and Recycle: Encourage consistent practice through writing and speaking tasks.
4. Organize Vocabulary Learning: Group words into categories such as real-world themes, linguistic structures, and personal relevance.
5. Personalized Learning: Encourage students to connect vocabulary to their interests and experiences.
6. Avoid Overloading: Gradually introduce new words to prevent cognitive overload.

Strategic Vocabulary in Speaking and Writing

Strategic vocabulary plays a crucial role in organizing both written and spoken discourse. In writing, conjunctions like *and* and *however* help structure ideas, while adverbs such as *first* and *secondly* list points logically. Phrases like *in conclusion* signal the end of a text, making written organization explicit and easy to model from sources like books and online articles. However, spoken language requires a different set of strategic vocabulary items that help manage interactions in real-time.

Corpus-based research, as highlighted by McCarten-, shows that conversation heavily relies on frequent multi-word expressions, or "chunks," such as *you know*, *I mean*, and *or something*, which occur even more frequently than basic vocabulary words like *woman* or *black*. These expressions function as discourse markers, helping speakers clarify, emphasize, or transition between ideas. For example, *anyway* is commonly used to return to the main point after a digression, as in: *And so*



anyway, the prize was ten dollars. Similarly, *I mean* allows speakers to restate or clarify their thoughts: *They're pretty much grown. I mean, they're nineteen and seventeen.*

In addition to discourse markers, speakers also highlight key points with expressions like *the thing is* or *the point is*, emphasizing important information. These elements make conversation more fluid and interactive, distinguishing spoken from written language. By analyzing corpora, teachers can identify and teach these essential conversational phrases, ensuring that learners develop natural and effective communication skills in both spoken and written contexts.

Some examples of strategic vocabulary in spoken language are,

- **Discourse Markers:**

Anyway – Used to return to the main point after a digression:

- *"And so anyway, the prize was ten dollars."*

I mean – Used to clarify, restate, or elaborate on something:

- *"They're pretty much grown. I mean, they're nineteen and seventeen."*

The thing is – Used to emphasize the main point:

- *"The thing is, they want the completed manuscript in a month."*

- **Interactive Phrases:**

You know – Used to confirm understanding or make a point relatable:

- *"It's like, you know, when you're just too tired to do anything."*

I don't know – Used to express uncertainty or hesitation:

- *"I don't know, maybe we should ask someone."*

Or something – Used to suggest an approximation or alternative:

- *"We could go for a walk or something."*

- **Emphasizing or Highlighting:**

The point is – Used to emphasize the core message:

- *"The point is, we need to finish this project by Friday."*

The thing is – Used to highlight a key issue:



■ *"The thing is, I have no idea how to fix it."*

Teaching Strategic Vocabulary: Fundamentals for a Syllabus

Strategic vocabulary plays a vital role in helping learners manage and navigate successful conversations. To teach this type of vocabulary, it is most effective when integrated into a conversation syllabus. The syllabus can be built around four key functional areas that facilitate fluent conversation:

1. **Organizing Your Own Talk:** This aspect involves strategies that help speakers present and clarify their ideas. Key strategies include giving opinions, highlighting important points, taking pauses to think, and correcting oneself. For example, speakers often repeat their ideas using synonyms or intensify their points for emphasis, such as in the conversation extract from *Touchstone*, where Nicole repeats and intensifies the idea of her "strange" and "weird" dreams. Practicing these strategies helps students sound more natural and fluent, while also developing their skills in using synonyms, opposites, and intensifiers.
2. **Taking Account of Another Speaker:** This area addresses strategies for being polite, softening responses, or avoiding directness to maintain conversational harmony. For example, rather than simply saying "no," speakers might say "not really," which softens the negation. Expressions like *you know*, *you know what I mean*, *I don't know if (you...)*, or *or something* projects a sense of shared understanding or common ground between speakers. These expressions help students practice indirectness and vagueness, key aspects of conversational politeness and mutual comprehension.
3. **Showing Listenership:** Being an active listener is crucial in conversations. Responding with acknowledgments such as *uh-huh*, *that's right*, or *wonderful* shows engagement. These responses display an active role in the conversation, indicating the listener is processing and reacting to the speaker's message. Even at the elementary level, students can practice using phrases like *that's nice* or *that's great* to respond to positive or negative news. Encouraging students to engage in good "listenership" helps develop their interaction skills in a supportive manner.
4. **Managing the Conversation as a Whole:** This area includes the use of expressions that help guide the flow of conversation. This includes starting new topics (e.g., *so*, *now*), returning to previous discussions (e.g., *as you were saying*), interrupting and reorienting (e.g., *hold on a sec*), and closing the conversation (e.g., *anyway*, *all right*). These expressions provide students with tools to manage transitions, ensuring smooth conversational flow, even when topics change or when conversations come to an end.

By focusing on these four broad functional areas, instructors can teach strategic vocabulary in a way that directly supports learners' ability to participate in and manage successful, fluent conversations. This structured approach helps students become more confident in both organizing their thoughts and responding to others in interactive, real-world situations.



Conclusion

Effective vocabulary acquisition is essential for language learners, particularly in mastering English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By incorporating both corpus-based and classroom-based approaches, teachers can enhance students' understanding of vocabulary and help them navigate the complexities of communication. The study of strategic vocabulary, as outlined by Jeanne McCarten, highlights the importance of focusing on both spoken and written language, with an emphasis on teaching functional phrases and discourse markers. The integration of strategic vocabulary in teaching can significantly improve learners' conversational skills, ensuring they can manage and participate in fluid, natural interactions. Moreover, by focusing on organizing one's speech, responding to others, demonstrating active listening, and managing conversations, educators can provide students with the tools they need to communicate confidently in a variety of contexts. Ultimately, vocabulary instruction that incorporates these strategies will not only expand students' lexicons but also empower them to engage effectively in both personal and academic communication.

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