

The Underestimated Importance of Vocabulary in the Foreign Language Classroom

By Keith S. Folse, Coordinator of TESOL Programs, University of Central Florida

[Non-copyright article reproduced here from *CLEAR News* 8:2. Fall 2004. pp. 1, 3, 6.]

In the last decade, our field has seen enthusiastic interest in the role of vocabulary in foreign language courses. This recent interest has led to research with practical classroom applications for foreign language classrooms. In order to progress in a foreign language, learners need to be able to understand what they are hearing and reading. That is, the input must be comprehensible in order for it to be useful and meaningful to the learner and help with acquisition (Krashen, 1982), but if learners do not understand a sizable portion of the vocabulary in the language that they are reading or hearing, then this language is not comprehensible and therefore cannot be useful for acquisition. Many argue that vocabulary is one of the most important-if not *the* most important components in learning a foreign language, and foreign language curricula must reflect this.

Though each language has its own vocabulary intricacies, the vocabulary needs and learning processes of the learners of foreign languages are similar. Support for this position comes from vocabulary research from a wide variety of foreign languages, including research with Dutch learners of French, English learners of Japanese, Swedish learners of Finnish, and Chinese learners of English. In fact, some of the most useful foreign language vocabulary research for classroom teachers has come out of the Netherlands (Hulstijn, 1992) and Israel (Laufer & Shmueli, 1997). What emerges from these studies are *vocabulary universals* that are not tied to anyone language; these include the importance of vocabulary, the variety of learner strategies, and the value of explicit vocabulary teaching.

For too long, we have based our ideas of the process of learning a foreign language on the myth that this process is very similar to learning our first language. Yes, there are similarities, but what a high school student in the U.S. attempts to accomplish in 36 weeks of 50 minutes a day is extremely different from what a child surrounded by, his native language every minute goes through. Our students need to learn words, phrases, and idioms, and they need a tremendous amount of explicit vocabulary instruction in a relatively (and artificially) short time. This is the reality for *foreign* language learners.

In *Vocabulary Myths* (Folse, 2004), I summarize research findings in debunking many of the myths that have restricted the role of vocabulary in foreign language curricula over the years. These eight myths are: (1) Vocabulary is not as important in learning a foreign language as grammar *or* other areas. (2). It is not good to use lists of words when learning vocabulary. (3) Vocabulary should be presented in semantic sets. (4) The use of translations is a poor way to learn new vocabulary. (5) Guessing words from context is as productive for foreign language learners as it is for first language learners.(6) The best vocabulary learners make use of one *or* two really good specific vocabulary learning styles. (7) Foreign language learners should use a monolingual dictionary. (8) Vocabulary is covered enough in *our* curricula and courses.

Whenever I conduct workshops on foreign language vocabulary pedagogy. I am invariably asked the question, "So what does research say is the best way to teach vocabulary?" There is no one answer here, but research (Hulstijn, 1992; Folse, 1999) clearly shows that learners need multiple encounters with words. Thus, the most important point in teaching and learning vocabulary is the number of times the learner has to retrieve the word, a factor which the teacher can influence through classroom activities.

What does this mean for the teacher? After you have presented a set of words, do as many activities as possible that cause the learner to have to retrieve the form, the meaning, or the usage of the word. When I taught Spanish in Japan, my students had virtually no contact with Spanish outside the classroom. As new vocabulary was introduced, I wrote the word on a large sheet of newsprint on the wall. (You could also use an overhead transparency or a section of the whiteboard.) When I finished the class, I had a numbered list of perhaps 15-20 items. Some were single words; others were idioms or expressions. At the end of class, I would stop and have everyone look at our list as I directed several rapid exercises that focused on multiple student vocabulary retrievals. I knew that all of these activities would force the students to retrieve the form, the meaning, or the usage of these new words.

Here are seven activities that can be done with any foreign language. Some of these activities focus only on form while others focus on meaning or on usage. It is important for the teacher to keep the pace of the activity brisk to maintain student interest. Again, the goal of these activities is to increase the number of target vocabulary retrievals.

Activity 1. Have the class read a list of expressions aloud in the target language. This is good for group pronunciation. (Knowing a word is not like a light switch that is either totally on or totally off; knowing a word is more like a dimmer switch with varying degrees of knowledge. Knowing a word involves knowing its pronunciation, spelling, part of speech, definitions [polysemy], usages, and collocations.)

Activity 2. Read a list of vocabulary words at random and have students identify the vocabulary you have called out by the number next to the item. While this is important for all foreign languages, it is especially important for students studying a language with a different script, such as Japanese learners of Spanish (or English learners of Arabic, etc.). What you are doing is practicing vocabulary and improving reading readiness. I studied Arabic for a year in Saudi Arabia, and what I found lacking in my own study was not the ability to decode words but rather the ability to do this rapidly enough. I knew the word, but it was frustrating not to be able to recognize the words quickly enough.

Activity 3. Since recognition usually precedes production, provide simple synonyms or definitions and have students tell you the word you're talking about.

Activity 4. Don't forget to practice form as well. Ask students questions about the word forms. For example, if the 15 words on a Spanish list include *cuchillo*, *arroz*, *cocinar*, *desayuno*, *noche*, *tomate*, *ayer*, and *habia*, you might ask these questions (in Spanish or in English, depending on the level of the students, or maybe one day in English and the next in Spanish): Which word ends in -z? Which words start with a vowel letter? Which words start with a vowel sound? Which of these is the shortest word? Which word has the most syllables?

Which word is a past tense word? What word is the most difficult for you to pronounce? (Personalized questions like this last one can generate a lot of discussion that requires learners to say the word multiple times to complete the discussion.) Students need to form mental links between a distinguishing feature of the word and the word itself. How many times can you as a native speaker remember only an aspect of the form of the word but not the word itself, e.g., “I don’t remember the word. I think it starts with a *k* and ends with a *ch*.”

Activity 5. One of the vocabulary myths is that using translations is bad. *All* learners translate at some point in their foreign language learning. Sometimes a translation is needed to understand a key sentence or passage. In this activity, give the English translations and ask for the corresponding word.

Activity 6. Learning words in a context is important. We want learners to have a brief expression or group of words that is a natural connection to the word. These natural connections are called collocations, which simply means other words that naturally occur with the target words. An example from English would be the word squander. It is not enough to say that this word means “waste, not use correctly.” Right now make up an example sentence with the word squander. (Do not go on until you do this.) The vast majority of native speakers of English naturally combine squander with expressions of money, time, a resource, or an opportunity. Thus, while you could squander sugar or the beach, we don’t say that. We almost always squander money, time, a resource, or an opportunity.

Activity 7. In a list of 15-20 items, many things can be grouped in different ways based on meaning, on spelling, or on grammar. Using again our list of 15 Spanish vocabulary words including *cuchillo, arroz, cocinar, desayuno, noche, tomate, ayer, and habia*, you might ask these questions: Which two words are time words? Which one is a verb in the infinitive form? Which of these do people eat? Which of these do people eat with? Which is a verb in the past tense? Which of these is made of metal? Which one is the name of a meal?

Finally, encourage students to keep a vocabulary notebook because a great deal of vocabulary growth ultimately depends on the learner. I never have my students copy definitions in the target language unless they choose to do so. One of the biggest vocabulary myths is that using a monolingual dictionary in Spanish or Japanese is some how better for learning. This is false. Research (Prince, 1995) shows an advantage for bilingual dictionaries. Have students who are successful vocabulary language learners share their notebook methods. For students who need help, demonstrate how to set up a vocabulary notebook that is neat and organized in a manner that will facilitate multiple retrievals of the words. If the notebook is not set up well, then learners are less likely to practice the words, which defeats the purpose of keeping the notebook in the first place.

REFERENCES

Folse, K. (1999). The effect of written practice activity on second language vocabulary retention. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Folse, K. (2004). *Vocabulary Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Hulstijn, J. (1992). Retention of inferred and given word meanings: Experiments in incidental vocabulary learning. In P Arnaud & H. Bejoint (Eds.), *Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics* (pp. 113-125). London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Limited.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Laufer, B., & Shmueli, K. (1997). Memorizing new words: Does teaching have anything to do with it? *RELCjournal* 28 (1), 89-108. Prince, P (1995). Second language vocabulary learning: The role of context versus translations as a function of proficiency. *Modern Language journal*, 80 (4), 478-493.