

Investigating Effective Strategies For Introducing New Vocabulary In Omani EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: Teaching new vocabulary in English Foreign Language classes is among the hottest issues for any every ELF teacher anywhere in the world. Of course there are a variety of methods and strategies to do so in class, but in this paper we would like to present a minor study we have made, in order to prove what methods are more effective than others and why such methods are more effective as opposed to others. We also learnt a lot in the process of this study, and therefore decided to write this paper in order to present all the data and findings from a practical point of view, including all relevant benefits and limitations.

Index of Terms: Effective Strategies; Pre-test; EFL; Hyponyms

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of foreign language vocabulary has been the subject of much discussions and a number of research in recent years and methodology books on such topic have been on the focus of attention (Nation 2001; Schmitt 2000). For a long time grammar seemed to attract more attention, but the recent interest in vocabulary reflects the belief that the latter is a major component in knowing a language. Some scholars would believe that vocabulary is even more important than grammar itself. The aim of this study is not to enter into this debate, but rather to compare the use of different strategies for presenting vocabulary to secondary learners.

2. BACKGROUND

McCarthy (1990) has argued that vocabulary is the biggest component of any language course. It is certainly the case with Our World Through English (OWTE) curriculum in post basic education schools in Oman, which places so much great emphasis on learning new vocabulary. It suggests a number of strategies for teachers to use while presenting new words to learners and this also became the motivation for this study, in order to find out whether any of these strategies used were more effective than others, in helping learners to remember vocabulary.

3. TEACHING VOCABULARY

According to Hatch and Brown (1995), vocabulary is a list of words that speakers of a particular language use. By 'words' in this context, we mean not only items consisting of one word (e.g. cat), but also strings of words which together form a lexical item (e.g. idioms such as 'to let the cat out of the bag' or common expressions like 'once upon a time').

3.1 Knowing Vocabulary

There has been much discussion in the literature of what it means to know a word (Nation 2001; Cameron 2001; Ur 1996). Three aspects of knowing vocabulary which are commonly mentioned in such discussions are: form, meaning, and use. Form refers to spelling (written form), pronunciation (spoken form), and to word parts (i.e. prefixes and suffixes). Knowing the meaning of a word means knowing what object or idea it refers to. It also means knowing what other words are associated with it. There are several types of meaning relationships of this type:

- Synonyms - words that have the same or similar meaning (e.g. clever and smart);

- Antonyms - words that have the opposite meaning (e.g. fast and slow);
- Super-ordinates - general concepts that cover specific words (e.g. *color* is the super ordinate of black, blue, green);
- Hyponyms - words that represent the specific examples of general concepts (e.g. bananas, orange and apples are hyponyms of *fruit*).
- Knowing the use of a word means knowing the grammatical patterns it occurs in, knowing what other words it occurs (i.e. collocates) with, and knowing which contexts (e.g. topics or situations) the word is used in.

3.2 Presenting new Vocabulary

Much has also been written about the strategies teachers can use to help learners develop their knowledge of vocabulary (Gairns & Redman 1986; Schmitt & McCarthy 1997). A range of strategies for introducing new vocabulary has also been proposed. Here are some of these strategies:

- Using objects - teachers can use real objects to introduce new vocabulary. This can help learners because they not only hear the word but also receive visual reinforcement (Hunt & Beglar 1998).
- Illustrations and pictures - most concrete vocabulary can be taught using illustrations and pictures made by teachers or found in magazines and other resources.
- Mime, expression and gestures - many words (e.g. angry, happy) lend themselves to being taught through movement and gesture.
- Contrasts - this technique involves explaining a word by contrasting it with an antonym, very often an antonym which is known to the learners.
- Guessing from context - because learners will always meet words which are new to them, it is important for them to know how to work out their meaning from the context.
- Translation - in this technique, the teacher explains the meaning of the new words using the learners' mother tongue.

3.3. Teaching Vocabulary in the Omani English Language Curriculum. (English For Me)

English For Me (EFM) makes use of many of the strategies listed above in introducing new vocabulary to learners.

Teachers are advised to ask learners to guess the meaning of new words from the written context they occur in. Learners are also encouraged to learn to use a dictionary. However, given that such strategies may consume much classroom time, EFM also instructs teachers to use a range of other, often more direct, strategies for explaining new vocabulary. Those that are frequently recommended in EFM are miming, explaining using other words in English, using realia or pictures, drawing on the board, exemplification, and contrasting with an antonym.

4. METHOD

The aim of this study was to compare the effectiveness of different strategies for introducing new vocabulary to Omani learners of English in a grade 11 class.

4.1. Participants

The participants in this study were boys in their eighth year of learning English and were 15-16 years of age. Twenty learners were chosen from different grade 11 classes on the basis of their mid-term exam marks in English. The maximum score on this exam was 15 and for the current study the learners who scored 14 or more were chosen.

4.2 Data Collection

The learners were divided into four groups of five boys each. Each group was taught five lexical items using a different technique. The vocabulary taught in each case was *wheat*, *fig*, *cherry*, *eggplant* and *pomegranate*. These were new words for the learners. Each group also completed a test (the same test for all groups) the day after they had been taught the new words. A summary of the groups and techniques used is given in Table 1. The coming section will explain the procedures followed in each case.

Table 1: Techniques used in the study

Group	Technique
A	Pictures
B	Explaining in English
C	Explaining in Arabic
D	Realia

4.2.1 Group 1 – Pictures

Teacher placed pictures of the words on the board. Then he wrote the words under the pictures and practiced the pronunciation of the words. Then he read the words under the pictures in turn and asked the learners to say each word, while he was pointing to the picture.

4.2.2 Group 2 – Explaining in English

For this group, teacher first wrote the target vocabulary on the board and then he practiced the pronunciation around the group. Then he explained the meaning of each word using English.

4.2.3 Group 3 – Explanation in Arabic

With this group, the teacher again started by writing the target vocabulary on the board and practicing the pronunciation around the group. After that, he explained the meanings of the words in Arabic.

4.2.4 Group 4 - Realia

To introduce the meanings of the new vocabulary with this group, teacher brought real examples of the words into the classroom and placed them on his table. Then he wrote the vocabulary on the board and practiced the pronunciation. After that, he held the realia up one at a time and said the word in English while pointing to the object.

4.2.5 The Test

All four groups did the same written test the day after the vocabulary had been introduced. The test was a gap filling activity using five sentences with definitions of the target vocabulary. The five words were provided in a box and learners had to write the correct word in the space in each sentence. For example, sentence 1 was '_____ is a large vegetable with smooth purple skin. It is grown a lot here in Oman' (i.e. eggplant).

5. FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the results for all four groups. S1-S5, are the five learners in each group.

Table 2: Results on vocabulary test:

Group		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	Average
1	Pictures	6	6	4	4	2	4.4
2	English	8	8	10	8	10	8.8
3	Arabic	4	2	4	2	0	2.4
4	Realia	4	2	2	4	4	3.2

The test was out of 10 marks and the score for each individual learner and the average for each group is given above. These figures show that Group 4 did much better than the other groups, with an average of 8.8. In contrast, the learners who were taught through Arabic achieved only an average of only 2.4. The pictures group did better than the realia group but still averaged less than 5.

6. DISCUSSION

The results here suggest that the use of English to introduce new vocabulary was more effective than the other methods used. There are numbers of reasons why this may have happened. First, it may be that explaining the words in English did help learners to remember them more effectively and then recall them as well during the test. However, other factors may have influenced this result. For example, explaining the vocabulary in English was the teaching strategy most similar to the form of the test. That is, in explaining the vocabulary to Group 2, a kind of definition was given in English, and then the test asked learners to complete gapped definitions. This group may therefore have had an advantage over the others. In particular, the learners who were presented with the words through explanations in Arabic seemed unable to recall them in English during the test. That is perhaps not surprising. The performance of Groups 1 and 4 may have also been affected by the extent to which, what they were asked to do in the test matched the way the vocabulary was presented.

7. LIMITATIONS

In addition, to the effect of the test on the results for each group, there are some other limitations to mention here. Firstly, although learners were chosen on the basis of similar mid-term exam scores, these learners may still have had different levels

of vocabulary knowledge. A pre-test focusing specifically on learners' lexical knowledge may have thus been helpful. Second, the range and type of vocabulary tested here was limited to five words, all nouns from the same lexical group. With different items the results may have been different. Finally, researcher may have unconsciously influenced the results, because of his personal preference for one of the techniques used. For example, researcher may have been more enthusiastic in his presentation when English was used.

CONCLUSION

Conducting this study has been a good learning experience for the researchers. It has allowed them to further their understanding of teaching vocabulary, but above all, it has given them practical experience of designing and conducting a small scale study. In fact, although the findings of the study are to some moderate interest, researchers have benefited mostly from becoming aware of key issues such as the ones below:

- the importance of pre-tests; the influence of the teacher; and the influence of testing procedures themselves.
- what they found out must be further considered in other researches, in order to compare the effectiveness of different instructional methods.

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