

ESL Vocabulary Development: Strategies for Learner Engagement

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Abstract

NEP 2020 calls for an equitable access to quality education in order to help learners gain foundational literacy. It reiterates the commitment to engage learners so as to make learning permanent. This article outlines, in brief, some strategies for developing vocabulary in English language learners, like story listening, developing word wall, mimes, videos and slides, and games. The article also looks at engaging learners in these strategies. Such activities will enable learners to use close to 2500 words, that is considered essential to the process of building on English.

Keywords: English language teaching, vocabulary building, word walls, mimes, stories, pictures

Introduction

Having taught English for a quarter of a century, I ruminated as I heard a Class 1 teacher translating a simple text verbatim into the mother tongue. The conundrum of engaging young learners in the English class when they do not hail from a context-rich English environment, is a challenge. Most young learners in state-run schools do not have a rich enough vocabulary in English. It is believed that being familiar with at least 2,000-2,500 words will enable them to comprehend English and communicate in it. For young learners who do not have an English environment at home or in their social circle, the teachers generally resort to using their mother tongue to explain, a phenomenon that sadly compounds the problem. The only source of exposure to this language is denied, limiting their chances of learning English.

Most state-run schools have the concept of a mother teacher responsible for transacting the three Rs— reading, writing and arithmetic, in mother tongue and English, taught every day. Each day, the teacher introduces them to something new or reinforces what was taught the previous day. The focus is on familiarizing the learners with the textbook's contents, reading aloud, and paraphrasing in the mother tongue to aid understanding, making learners write word meanings, answer questions, etc. The homework usually focuses on learning the meanings and answers. This method seems to be favouring rote memorization.

Many English teachers in India favour the bottom-up approach for teaching English, that is, teaching alphabets, isolated words and their meanings, and grammar concepts before focusing on whole text comprehension. The loud reading emphasizes word forms rather than navigating their meaning. Textbooks are considered sacrosanct, and learners and parents perceive rote memorization as enabling children to move ahead in life. Hardly any thought is given to the instrumental nature of textbooks. Most schools are unable to provide their learners with picture books. Even where they are available, they are not accessible to young learners, lest they be soiled, defaced or torn. Nevertheless, it is imperative to get young children to learn English.

NEP 2020 acknowledges the severe learning crisis with close to 5 crore learners unable to attain foundational literacy. It calls for “urgent national attention” to attain this goal in the shortest possible time. (NEP, 2020, 2.2, p. 8) It reiterates the state's commitment to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all learners regardless of social and economic background (p. 3). Aligned to this vision, the paper outlines a roadmap for primary children to learn 2,000-2,500 words in English and make it a part of their active vocabulary.

Related Research

Vocabulary research in the 1980s has brought out the significance of vocabulary learning. Notable theorists and researchers (Clarke & Nation, 1980; Coady, 1993; Krashen, 1989) have emphasized the role of context in vocabulary building. Context plays a vital role in the reception and production of second language (L2) vocabulary. Recognition of words in context and the ability to use words appropriate to a given context are both considered significant achievements for a learner.

Brown & Payne (cited in Hatch & Brown, 1995) suggested a five-step model for vocabulary learning: encountering new words, getting word forms, getting clear images, learning meanings of words, and using them. The process of acquiring vocabulary was seen linearly. In real life ESL contexts, learners may not acquire each word following this pattern; instead, they would cross each of these five milestones in internalizing new words.

While it is recognized that vocabulary learning is continually evolving, vocabulary instruction coalesces both conscious and unconscious mechanisms of catching words. Though incidental exposure to words is essential, conscious efforts to expose young learners to new words must be made consistently. Graves and Watts-Taffe (2000) attach importance to extensive reading to build vocabulary and conscious engagement with specific words crucial to comprehension of a text. They also recognize the significance of learner engagement with independent word-learning strategies. A few examples of the strategies are:

- dictionary use
- morphemic analysis (arriving at a word's meaning by analysing its root words, prefixes/suffixes)
- cognate awareness (identifying cognates in one's mother tongue)
- contextual analysis (the context of the text that helps a learner arrive at nuances of the meaning)
- developing word-consciousness in learners with the help of word-play activities.

Each of these strategies is highly relevant to ESL learners. Given the diverse Indian context, it is crucial to ensure learner engagement with ESL vocabulary building at the primary stage. Learners need to be motivated to learn new words and expressions and retain at least 2000-2500 English words to become somewhat independent in accessing and using English.

Vocabulary Building: Strategies for Learner Engagement

An effective way to improve children's vocabulary is to get them to listen to stories. Stories help learners expand their world, add to their imagination, and enrich private speech. It is a good idea to use many gestures, facial expressions, props and move children around when

narrating a story. The story may be told in their mother tongue and English alternately, on different days. Children love to revisit the same set of stories. So a set of 10 stories, to begin with, may be a good idea. Instead of translating, the entire story has to be narrated in the same language, the mother tongue or English, at a given time. Certain words will be emphasized so that the learners become comfortable with both the language versions of these stories. Therein lies the teacher's success of taking the first step towards developing the comfort level around English. Gradually, the number of stories has to double. A mother teacher, being responsible for transacting all subjects, will integrate these in several ways.

Story narration can be combined with word walls. Word walls can be created on charts or old newspapers, painted light and pasted on walls. Some colour coding may also make it more interesting—in terms of stories or parts of speech covered. Depending on the context of learners, the word wall can comprise new words with pictures, pronunciation and meanings written in the first language, used in a sentence in case needed (Classes 3-5). Word walls can be modified as per the linguistic level and readiness of the learners.

The teacher creates the first word wall using newspapers or chart papers, listing words, mostly nouns, and verbs and drawing pictures of these. The pronunciation of words can be added in their mother tongue (provided they can read) to repeat these aloud and as accurately as possible. The learners will soon catch on and start deciding what words they need to put on the word wall; they may contribute by drawing pictures or bringing drawings from home. As they grow, learners may take charge by identifying words, developing cues and even writing the pronunciation of difficult words. Then, the teachers can add usage-based sentences. These word walls can be the basis of grouped or paired class activities. As students use these words, they make them a part of their active vocabulary. Two or three word walls can be functional at any given point of time in a class.

Further, word walls can address the gap in learners' lives due to a print-rich material deficit. They can help them imbibe and retain new words. Learners can see these words right in front of them, along with their pictures, pronunciation and even meanings. However, merely creating the word walls is not enough. Learners have to engage with them actively

using practice, pronunciation, tracing and using these in oral speech and writing. Word games can be created where the learners need to refer to the word wall time and again. Word puzzles, crosswords, guess what/ who I am, theme-based sentence construction using pictures can be undertaken. Learners can be asked to come up with the longest possible sentence with the help of the words on the word wall. For younger learners, it would be useful if the word wall is at their eye level to help them trace the words and letters. A word wall can give way to the next one once most learners have imbibed the words on a theme. That is likely to happen if learners use the words for a period of two to three weeks. The learners must use these words and continue to add to them.

Another way of introducing words, especially verbs, nouns and adjectives, is through mimes. Mimes call upon one to act a part with miming gesture and action usually without words. Teachers and young learners need to be physically active. Sitting at a place for more than a few minutes is difficult for children. Therefore, organized physical activity can engage them better with learning. A physical drill designed around verbs will break the monotony and lead to a firming up of the verbs and an increase in their active vocabulary. Allocating 5 to 10 minutes twice a day can make a difference. Gradually, learners can be encouraged to lead the drill by turns. This will allow the teacher to monitor children's learning and maintain their interest in the drills. Modifications of games such as change the leader and change the action can work wonders, provided learners are asked a set of questions in simple English (or in their mother tongue if need be). They can identify and use action words with ease over a while. Mimes can ensure that learners understand the nuances of new vocabulary. The difference between quiet and talkative, sad and happy, crying and shouting, weeping and sobbing can be explained easily with mimes. Mimes can be used when a teacher wants to avoid a verbal clue and elicit meanings. Mimes are a great way of introducing learners to the moods of human beings and nature. Learners can be asked to work in groups, pairs or individually and mime, while others guess. At times, mimes can be combined with word walls.

Often teachers assume that children will not comprehend instructions in English, thereby taking recourse to the mother tongue. When teaching English, instructions in English will go a long way in familiarizing learners, making them comfortable and changing their perception about English. If needed, the instructions can be explained with the help of

examples/ mime or can even be combined with the mother tongue. This will help learners develop an ear for the language, which would, in the long run, help to unravel new sounds and words and facilitate the correlation between spelling and pronunciation.

Young children cannot visualize abstractions; therefore, helping them learn with real objects makes a difference. The classroom can have pictures (as in the case of the word wall), or the teacher can use real objects. Using videos and slides in the classroom can heighten their engagement and help to concretize the English words. The game *I Spy* can be modified by describing things in the mother tongue but naming it in English. Young learners can work with pictures or concepts they are familiar with. They can be asked to stick or write words under different subheads; for example, *a sunny day and a rainy day*. The learners can even be asked to bring things they want to learn in English. This way, they will stay engaged with learning English even at home. An engagement with words on the part of learners can make learning much more meaningful and lasting.

Conclusion

Young learners must be able to connect with English and perceive it as their own. This transformation is possible if and only if every teacher believes that every learner can learn and will be able to learn. Teachers have to reach out and connect with each learner in class, thereby helping them become proficient. It is essential that a learner experiences English, connects to it and uses the language as per her need. The methods adopted ought to be such that learners would not be afraid of this 'alien' language and would be able to rise above the limitations of their contexts and move forward in a 'more' equal world.

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