



Activating Vocabulary and using it with Increased Fluency

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Abstract: Learning vocabulary is a cornerstone of studying another language. But lexical items language learners have been exposed to or attempted to memorize are of no help if they cannot be recalled and used when they are called upon to actually use the language they are studying. After reviewing differing pedagogical approaches towards language learning and teaching and what it means to know a word, this paper will suggest ways in which learners can use words they have endeavored to learn when the time comes for them to engage in real communication. Research suggests that two of the most effective ways learners can activate passive vocabulary are associating lexical items with memorable images and generating original utterances using the target items. This paper will elaborate on both the pedagogical value and the classroom practicality of these two methods. Finally, it will suggest how learners can use acquired lexical items with greater fluency when communicating in the target language.

Keywords: Vocabulary Acquisition; EFL vocabulary; Passive Vocabulary Activation; Vocabulary Retention; Pneumonic Devices; Vocabulary and Fluency

1. INTRODUCTION

The exposure to and comprehension of one or more aspects of a new lexical item at *some* point in time does not automatically lead to the ability to produce and have automatic control over it at *any* point in time. In other words, learning a new word does not necessarily mean one can use it. In second language learning situations, this lack of ability to produce a new word when it is needed is both a difficulty for learners trying to communicate in their L2 and a frustration for educators who have endeavored to endow their students with the capability to participate competently in spoken conversations and produce written communication that is acceptable in academic, business, and other formal environments in which learners might need to submit written material. This paper seeks to address part of this problem by discussing means by which learners can access and activate items in their receptive lexicons and improve their ability to produce and manipulate those items more fluently in spoken communication when they need to. It will also describe qualities and criteria of classroom activities that facilitate this process and which teachers might use with their students.

2. FOCUS ON FORM AND NATURALISTIC LEARNING

Before elaborating on vocabulary activation and retention, a note on different approaches to teaching and learning a foreign language in general is in order. A central debate in EFL pedagogy is whether second language learners should learn through explicit practice with certain language points, focus on form, or whether they should learn naturalistically by just being exposed to language in context and letting their brains process this comprehensible input naturally.

Curricula using activities solely focused on form are very rare these days and the dominant method in EFL classrooms today is the communicative approach, “the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning.” (British Council 2017). But many educators see a role for at least some focus on form. Celce-Murcia (2002) is one advocate of including some amount of focus on form within a broad-based communicative curriculum. Rod Ellis (2003, 2005) also advocates the use of some focus on form within communicative teaching, “consciousness-raising” tasks being his signature contribution.

But researchers such as Manfred Pienemann assert that focus on form is not only of no use to second language learners, but can actually impede their progress. (Pienemann 2012, and Pienemann and

Lenzing 2015). His processability theory says that there is a set order of cognitive acquisition of language points and that focusing on specific language points out of that order does a disservice to EFL learners. One of the more famous advocates of completely naturalistic language learning is Steven Krashen whose 1982 book, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* is still the basis of his approach, an approach in which there is no—or very little—focus on form. Instead learners are exposed to a large amount of comprehensible input and acquire language ability from the endeavor. A more systematized practical pedagogy incorporating the ideas of Pienemann and Krashen was published by Lightbown and Spada in which they outline a specific teaching methodology that can be turned into curricula following the principles of naturalistic language learning. (Lightbown and Spada 2013)

2.1. Incidental and Deliberate Learning

Paul Nation, one of the field's recognized experts on vocabulary acquisition, does not take a strong stance on which of the above approaches is the most effective. He says that whatever approach is chosen, a wide range of learning activities and contexts geared toward increasing vocabulary is what is optimum for its ultimate acquisition. Nation advocates four “strands” of effective language teaching and learning: 1) meaning-focused input; 2) meaning-focused output; 3) language-focused learning; and 4) fluency development. (Nation 2013a). He also gives a roadmap on implementing them in the classroom. (Nation and Yamamoto 2012)

Language-focused learning involves intentional focus on certain linguistic points. Two major types of learning Nation addresses are incidental and deliberate learning, stating that “learning a language involves both deliberate and incidental learning.” (Nation 2014) Incidental learning is the kind that happens subconsciously, for example, during extensive reading, when language is encountered and cognitively processed at the subconscious level in various ways. This is the type of learning advocated by Krashen and Pienemann as it gives multiple exposures to linguistic forms in a natural context. A good body of research supports this type of learning. One study (which also sought to improve upon methodological inadequacies of past studies) concluded that there were indeed “positive impacts of extensive reading on reading comprehension, reading rate, [and] vocabulary acquisition.” (Suk 2017). Another study found general beneficial effects for incidental learning, but noted that there are variations in what aspects of language benefit, stating specifically that “contextual richness had a greater impact on form-meaning connections and grammatical functions.” (Hu 2013)

Nation strongly advocates endeavors which promote incidental learning and is an advocate of extensive reading. But he also supports some explicit focus on certain language points in the form of deliberate learning. “Deliberate learning is very efficient and effective and so it is worth doing it.” (Nation 2014) One study, which advocated at least some deliberate learning, elaborated on the interaction of incidental and deliberate learning and found that participants in the study “performed better on the words they had previously been exposed to, and that this incidental learning effect occurred from as little as 2 exposures to the multimodal stimuli.” (Bisson, Heuven, Conklin, & Tunney 2014). While Nation supports this form-focused, deliberative learning, he cautions both educators and learners to “make sure that the language-focused learning is only 25% of a course.” (Nation 2013b)

So Nation's roadmap consists of engaging all four strands equally, which he sees to be the most effective method not only for retention of lexical items but of acquiring a language as a whole.

3. KNOWING A WORD

As Nation (2013a) and others have pointed out, the question, “What is it to know a word?” is far more complex than one might expect and entails much more than just “knowing what it means.” One's knowledge of a word is not complete until one has mastered multifarious aspects of it—its inflected and derived forms, its common collocates (Centre for Independent Language Learning, 2003), words commonly associated with it, and so on. For the purposes of this paper, though, only some passive knowledge of and limited ability to produce its prepositional, dictionary meaning will be assumed. For example, if the word, sun is encountered by a learner, it will conjure an image of the golden disk in the sky with which everyone is familiar. Further, I will also assume that the learner, if given time, will be able to recall and produce a lexical item if called upon to do so. For example, if asked to make a list of things that might be seen in the sky, the learner would be likely be able to produce the word “sun.” It is not necessary in the context of the activity types described in this paper for the learner to have knowledge of less common forms and uses of the word like “eggs sunny side up.”

4. ACTIVATING A WORD

The main focuses of this paper, though, will not be on what it means to know a word, but rather on what might be done to activate a lexical item of which an individual learner has passive knowledge. This will facilitate its long-term retention and ultimately allow learners to use it with increased fluency, at least in the aspects of it that a learner is already in possession of. I will begin by reviewing some of the research on the different methods that have been used to present new (or promote retention of passively known) lexical items and then continue on to a discussion of characteristics of classroom activities which are suited both to the lodging of lexical items into long-term memory and increasing the fluency with which they can be manipulated in spoken discourse.

5. METHODS FOR “DEEPENING” LEXICAL RETENTION

Learners in classes in which the activity criteria discussed in this paper are used will be encouraged, when pedagogically appropriate, to engage in a variety of endeavors which research has suggested facilitate retention of new words—devices like the key word technique (Levin et al 1992, Ellis 2003) and semantic elaboration (Schmitt & McCarthy 1997). They will also certainly be encouraged to embark upon a journey of extensive reading (see Cho and Krashen 1994 for an especially enthusiastic endorsement of the virtues of extensive reading for vocabulary acquisition). The methods of introducing new or facilitating retention of passive vocabulary which relate the most closely to the tasks and activity types discussed in this paper are: 1) associating lexical items with memorable images and 2) generation of original utterances using the target items.

5.1. Associating Lexical Items with Memorable Images

Pavio (1971) did research (still relevant today) which led him to propose what he termed “Dual Coding Theory.” This theory holds that words with which a memorable image can be associated are more likely to be able to be recalled later. Consider, for example, one who might be having trouble remembering the Japanese word “osoii” (meaning “late” in this context). If he or she were chastised with a jocularly brusque “osoii!” by a co-worker for not commenting on that co-worker’s haircut for three hours after first greeting them in the morning, one might never forget the word (or to comment on future haircuts).

The results of an experiment by Bower and Winzenz (cited in Ellis 2003) give evidence for this assertion that associating a word with a memorable image like the haircut example above facilitates retention of words. In this study, participants who were asked to associate new lexical items with an image were able to recall more words than participants who were asked to remember the words using other methods of memorization. Ellis summarized the conclusions of this research by stating that “the greater the imageability of a word, the more likely it is to be recalled.”

This study yielded one surprising result as well. It was not surprising that participants who associated words with a memorable image were able to recall them better later than those who simply saw them in the course of reading something or who engaged in mass repetitions of those words directly after being exposed to them. What was surprising was that those who associated words with memorable images outperformed those who endeavored to learn new words by making and then creating original utterances using the new words. It is this generation and its efficacy that I will discuss next.

5.2. Strengthening Retention by Using New Vocabulary in Original Utterances

The generation of original utterances containing new or newly retrieved lexical items is a well-known method of promoting the retention of those items which is supported by a good body of research. Despite the study by Bower and Winzenz mentioned above in which associating a new word with a memorable image resulted in retention that was superior to that yielded by the generative processing of newly encountered words, not only did generative processing perform very well in in that very study, but in many other studies as well, including experiments by Joe (1995), Newton (1995), and an especially impressive study by Hall (1992) show that generative processing is a very effective method of acquiring and retaining new vocabulary items.

This method is also an eminently more practical and ultimately more efficient method of remembering new words than trying to think up a memorable image for every new lexical item encountered in the course of learning another language. One can quickly create and subvocalize an original utterance for any new word encountered where and whenever one is studying. In an EFL

context one can endeavor to use that word in classroom activities whenever possible. And in the ideal setting of an ESL context, one can go out and use new lexical items in real conversations with native speakers of the target language.

Classroom activities can be designed to promote fluent use of lexical items. Those activities can also include creating memorable images and would certainly require the retrieval and generative processing mentioned above. To recap, some features which promote the retrieval and generation of passive vocabulary items and some features which seek to improve the fluency with which those items can be used by the learners in spoken discourse. Examples of features that are designed to trigger retrieval of passive knowledge include brainstorming activities and tasks in which learners create something like a description of a person, an explanation of a map, or a story. In performing these tasks, learners must retrieve and generate the vocabulary necessary for their completion.

Thus, one very effective way of promoting the retrieval of passively known vocabulary and its use in original sentences generated by learners is material used in activities performed in class to be student-generated. Not only does student-generated material promote retrieval and lend itself to generation, it is also usually very motivating for learners and thus provides prime conditions for the creation of memorable images with which learners might associate items resulting from the creation of the materials.

6. COMBINING FLUENCY-BUILDING AND VOCABULARY RETENTION

Nation (2013a) lists four features activities designed to promote fluency development generally need to include: 1) They involve material that is mostly familiar to learners rather than material that has recently been presented or of which the learners have not achieved a relatively high mastery; 2) they are focused on meaning; 3) at least some of the steps in the activity are performed at a rate higher than what the students would naturally perform them at; 4) they involve a relatively large amount of language being processed (i.e. learners are writing relatively long texts or speaking or listening for more than just a few seconds).

To this list, I would also add another characteristic that seems to be facilitative of fluency: namely, repetition. For example, in the course of performing a “Find someone who...” activity in which learners ask other learners if they have ever done something, been somewhere, etc., the fact that they have to repeat the phrase, “Have you ever...?” (Have you ever been to Mongolia? Have you ever eaten horse meat?) over and over again qualifies as being a fluency-promoting endeavor. Indeed Nation (2013b) suggests teachers and learners “make use of both repetitive and recycling activities to ensure repetition, retrieval, and creative use.”

Fluency activities such as those described above contain features which promote the retrieval and generation of passive vocabulary items, but are mainly fluency-focused activities. They include to some degree all four of the elements of fluency activities mentioned above. The majority of the lexis in activities such as these is student-generated and is at least familiar to the learners in that they were able to retrieve it from their own memories. They are focused on meaning in various ways, including the fact that learners are relaying information both that they must understand (since they had to create the material) and also that must be understood (and demonstrated to be understood by the fact that the interlocutor has to produce something that reflects what the speaker said). When learners perform the task, it is under the pressure of time and thus must be done somewhat faster than the speaker might normally choose to do it. These types of fluency activities do not necessarily have to involve speaking for a greatly extended period of time as long as they involve speaking for a greater amount of time than the speaker would normally take in a turn in normal conversational discourse.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed itself to the issue of how learners can activate lexical items from their passive knowledge and use them in spoken discourse with greater fluency. It has summarized some of the research concerning some of the ways in which learners might effectively retrieve vocabulary items from their store of passive knowledge. It has also described some characteristics of classroom endeavors which promote fluency and result in learners retrieving items from their receptive lexicons: associating lexical items with memorable images and generating original utterances using those items in order, both of which entrench vocabulary more firmly in long-term memory. Finally, it has shown that fluency-building activities can also improve the fluency with which learners use items when engaged in spoken conversation and written discourse.

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