

The Conversational Edge: Teaching Vocabulary through Speaking and Listening

Dr. Shyamal Acharya

Abstract

Conversation is an effective tool for vocabulary acquisition. It can help to enhance both speaking and learning skills in an ELT classroom. Correct fluency needs correct vocabulary. Vocabulary acquisition requires extensive effort on the part of learners because of the vastness and versatility of words. To help students acquire vocabulary in a simple, interactive and interesting way that encourages them to learn and retain words with accuracy, students were divided into groups and engaged in different situations of conversation. This exercise eventually helped in finding the answer to the question, "Is conversation a better way of acquiring and imparting word knowledge, and if so, how?" To ascertain, students were engaged in conversation. The response of the students revealed that vocabulary acquisition through conversation does improve learning in a more easy and fruitful way.

Keywords: ELT Classroom, Fluency, Conversation, Vocabulary Acquisition, Speaking and Learning Skills, Technique.

Introduction

Vocabulary teaching and learning has remained and still continues to be one of the biggest challenges. A vast vocabulary is not an embellishment but a necessity as the complexity of information has necessitated the need for right and clear understanding and expression of information. Impressive use requires knowledge of words, shade variations, accepted combinations, etc. Vocabulary acquisition, though an arduous task, improves the confidence tremendously.

Teachers have adopted different techniques from time to time but still lots of scope is left for imparting and acquiring it. There are various techniques using which learners develop vocabulary. Every technique requires an approach and yields different results. As far as vocabulary acquisition is concerned, any and every technique that adds to the existent body of words is desirable.

Some of the techniques already in use are similar word combinations, synonyms, antonyms, word combinations, one word definitions, language games, etc. However, much less effort has been made for teaching or learning vocabulary through conversation, which makes this study quite relevant. Conversation, though not thoroughly explored, appears to be a powerful technique because of its dual benefits simultaneously listening and speaking. When learners are engaged in conversations, the beneficial point is the active use of listening as well, a skill which otherwise remains passive or neglected. The active use of listening in conversation supports learning in a very fruitful way. It also results in wide coverage of words, high level of retention, smooth shift among the categories of words, and correctness of usage.

Importance of vocabulary:

Language acquisition enables learners to communicate in that language which invariably involves familiarity with and mastery of four main skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Though the four major skills of language listening, speaking, reading and writing, vocabulary remains an intrinsic part of all; its acquisition forms the basis of every skill. To convey thoughts, feelings, intentions, information, etc., one needs to have mastery over sounds which are clubbed into words and ultimately each other in the related to utterances.

Vocabulary acquisition demands meticulous and step by step learning, though it might seem a tedious and gargantuan task at first, but the results good vocabulary yields are worth it. Surprisingly, words in isolation convey only meaning, but when placed at wrong places or clubbed into unaccepted combinations, they distort the sense of the message to the extent

where things might get complicated. On the other hand, if words are used at the right places or used in the right combinations, the clarity of the message accentuates the impact.

Review of Literature:

Various teachers have expressed their view about vocabulary, its acquisition, retention and recalling. Uckun, Berrin (2008) in his paper "How Does Context Contribute to EFL Learners' Assessment of Vocabulary Gain clearly focuses on the importance of vocabulary when he states, "Vocabulary is necessary in the sense that words are the basic building blocks of language".

Mojtaba Maghsodi (2010) in his paper "Type of Task and Type of Dictionary in Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition" seems to take the above mentioned point of view further when he declares, "All in all, they all place emphasis on the fact that mastery of vocabulary is an essential component of second language acquisition."

Omid Akbari (2008) in his essay "Teaching Vocabulary Items through Contextualization and Picture to Elementary Iranian EFL Students" supports the opinion of all teachers. regarding the of importance vocabulary: "All experienced language teachers confirm the important role of words and know that the lack of them leads to a feeling of insecurity".

Though lots of work has been done in the area of vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary imparting, one of the major concerns is to retain the interest of the learners. Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen and Khuat Thi Thu Nga (2003) in their paper "The Effectiveness of Learning Vocabulary through Games" do realize that students "consider the teacher's explanation for meaning definition, pronunciation, spelling and grammatical functions boring." To retain the interest of the students in vocabulary learning has always remained a major challenge.

Words, unless learnt and used repeatedly, remain elusive and the real frustration occurs when the learner, despite knowing the word, finds difficulty in using it or understanding the meaning of it. This happens due to active and passive vocabulary, learners possess. Azadeh Nemati (2010) in his paper "Active and Passive Vocabulary Knowledge: The Effect of Years of Instruction backs the same point, "An individual's active vocabulary includes words which are used in speech and writing. Contrarily, one's passive vocabulary embodies those which are understood as they occur in reading materials or while hearing something." So vocabulary acquisition and retention remains multilayered practice.

Vocabulary acquisition is not merely cramming of words and using them in the same or similar contexts but to understanding them in totality and wielding the power to use them properly. Faith A. Brown (2010) in his article "Vocabulary Knowledge and Comprehension in Second Language Reciprocal Relationship?" agrees that proper learning takes place when learners are able to "rightly decide the precise meaning of a word based on the context of its use."

Zahra Akbari and M. H. Tahririan (2009) in their paper "Vocabulary Learning Strategies in an ESP Context: The Case of Paramedical English in Iran" expresses the idea that learners wish to "improve the depth and breadth of their vocabulary knowledge" which should eventually "enable them to retain vocabulary items in their memory for a longer period".

Learners are keen to have a good corpus of words because it directly and indirectly helps them have mastery of other components of the language. Saeed Mehrpour (2008) in his paper on vocabulary entitled "A Comparison of the Effects of Two Vocabulary Teaching Techniques" does talk about this point when he says, "A good knowledge of vocabulary has a great effect on the learners' improvement of other aspects of language".

Methodology Used:

Learning words through reading provides limited learning opportunities as the learner plays a passive role; however, during conversation every participant remains a member. Conversation approach is used in three stages: exposure, explanation and usage. These three build up the required provide enough stages ambience and practice for the first time.

Step One : Exposure

Fifteen words were selected and students were exposed to them. The words are pragmatic, aver, loquacious, demur, fiasco, incredible, oblivious, charismatic, lucid, incessant, knack, innocuous, illegible, veteran, and prudent. These words were picked up randomly; no specific relationship among words was kept in mind. No deliberate attempt was made to adhere to any of the techniques to select these words.

Step Two: Explanation

Once the students were exposed to the words, they were also informed about pronunciation and categories of the words (verb, noun, adjective, and adverb). The next step was to tell them the meaning and the various shades attached to them. The explanation was duly buttressed with proper differentiation of points; for example when 'placid' was explained, it was clearly mentioned that it can be used for people, animals and objects. The shade variations were highlighted by telling them the possible meanings, the first being 'not easily excited or irritated' and the second being 'calm and peaceful, with very little movement. Further, it was also explained that the category of the words gets changed by slight changes, for example, oblivious is an adjective but the moment we change it as oblivion, it becomes a noun. Similarly, incessant is an adjective but when we add -ly to it, incessant becomes incessantly, then often the category of the word is also changed; the adjective becomes an adverb and instead of acting independently starts supporting a verb. Loquacious' was 'explained' with synonyms. It was explained though loquacious' means 'talkative', it is not the only word that means 'talkative'. The other words which more or less mean 'talkative' are 'garrulous', 'verbose', 'glib', 'voluble', 'chatty', 'effusive', etc.

Step three: Implication

Nine students were involved in the activity; the remaining forty one analyzed their performance and gave the feedback in the end. These nine students were divided into three groups. Three different situations were given and all the three groups were asked to use the selected fifteen words in these situations. The situations were selected from three different streams.

Situation One:

The first situation was about a discussion among the members of an organization to keep the morale of the employees high so that the organization runs smoothly without any hassles.

Situation Two:

The second situation focused on the discussion among the students to change their study habits and preparation strategies for getting good grades and thorough knowledge.

Situation Three:

The third situation was about the picnic on the last Sunday when a whole group of friends went out.

Findings:

When the learners were taught vocabulary through conversation, the output substantiated the hypothesis that conversation is obviously one of the best techniques to teach words in a more learner friendly way.

Simultaneous support of speaking and listening:

When students converse they simultaneously indulge in the use of both the skills listening and speaking. Since they are required to react to one another, listening takes place in a very active way. It helps them speak, explain, support, question

and agree to others in the group. Since conversation duly accommodates a healthy balance of both the skills, acquisition of vocabulary becomes sounder and long lasting.

Accessibility :

Learners used the words in the specified situations, which helped them think clearly about situations. Next, when the words had already been specified, it was easy to trace the connections, which made it easier for the students to frame sentences. Since they had already been familiarized with the words, their meanings and usage, it helped them think and use the same words in different contexts, thereby adding diversity to their usage. Since the words, their meanings and usage were fresh, it was not very demanding to use them in sentences.

Correct Fluency:

Correct vocabulary is the backbone of fluency. In an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) classroom, using the right words reduces cognitive load, allowing students to speak without constant pauses for "word-hunting." Correct word choice prevents "broken" speech. When students use accurate synonyms instead of generic terms (e.g., "enormous" vs. "big"), their communication becomes more fluid and professional. Fluency relies on "chunks." Teaching words that naturally go together (e.g., "fast food" not "quick food") helps students produce natural-sounding English at a faster pace. Knowing the "right" word reduces the fear of being misunderstood, which encourages students to speak more often and more rapidly.

Extensive of words:

Words were explained with synonyms. Some of the students used only the original words but some used original words as well as their synonyms. When they conversed and used these words, students got to know about different usage. Since the synonyms were explained and used, students also inquired about the difference among the shades of their synonyms. Even when they had prepared the content, they kept on crosschecking the differences among synonyms, which ignited the curiosity of other students and they started creating sentences and verifying the correctness of expression.

Retention of Words:

Repetition of words and their usage in different contexts immediately after the explanation buttressed the fresh information with sound practice. It helped the students retain the words for a comparatively longer period of time. Even the students, who were listening to the conversation, did seek clarification about the usage of the words in specific sentences, which clearly indicated the retention of the words.

Retention power works in a better way when words are learnt this way as two or three students learn the words in real context. Moreover, recalling the word in the right context also adds to the impact.

Easy shift among categories:

Since the students had been exposed to different categories of words, they also used them. For example, for loquacious, they also used loquacity. A conscious effort was made to use 'demur' as both noun and verb; while agreeing with the idea, they repeated the same word/sentence and then moved ahead.

Correct implementations:

Similarly, when the word was explained, it was made clear that this word stands for something big and grand in a positive sense, and the students used this word in the right way. Similarly when the students used 'aver', it was very clear to them that it is not merely telling; the added meaning was clear in the mind which led to the right use of the word.

Conclusions:

Vocabulary acquisition might seem leviathan and arduous job but if the approach is changed and made user friendly, then the learning becomes accurate and long lasting. On the basis of the findings enlisted above it can be safely stated that students have responded well and learning has taken place at a reasonably fast pace.

Conversation acts as a powerful strategy because it enables students to use words in real day to day activities which in turn enable them to use them in a practical context instead of limiting them to mere bookish and literary usage. The learning process, theoretically, might seem very complicated and involved, but overall it proves to be a very good learning tool. On top of everything, practical usage helps learner acquire good vocabulary in the right context.

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