



OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING VOCABULARY AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

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Abstract: *Vocabulary teaching is still among the most important features of language teaching, particularly at the intermediate level, where learners transition from basic lexical knowledge toward more complex and contextually relevant use of words. In this article, common challenges teachers face in teaching vocabulary are addressed and effective strategies to bridge them are offered. The study borrows from theoretical proposals of illustrious scholars such as Nation (2001), Schmitt (2008), and Thornbury (2002) to suggest a balanced pedagogy. It argues that intermediate-level learning of words requires explicit instruction, metacognitive strategy training, and communicative practice to ensure retention and active use of new words.*

Keywords: *vocabulary instruction, intermediate level, language acquisition, lexical competence, strategies.*

Vocabulary knowledge is an essential component of language capacity and one of the strongest indicators of communicative success. Lexical knowledge is the core of knowing and using language, as identified by Nation (2001). Learning the vocabulary for intermediate-level learners has some challenges, as learners need to move beyond recognition of individual words to learn about collocations, idiomatic expressions, and pragmatic colouring. Teaching vocabulary effectively at this stage, therefore, requires not only an understanding of the nature of lexical knowledge but also of the pedagogical challenges facing teachers in the production of it.

Vocabulary teaching has long been referred to as a fundamental component of second language instruction. Early approaches, such as grammar-translation, considered vocabulary a secondary characteristic of language learning, with a focus primarily on memorization and translation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). With the emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT) during the late twentieth century, attention shifted towards functional use of lexis in real communication (Harmer, 2007). Thornbury (2002) claims that lexical knowledge involves not only the knowledge of the sense of a word but also of its form, usage, and collocational behaviour. Schmitt (2008) refers to the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary and observes that learners know more items in their vocabulary than they can use actively.

Research also indicates that intermediate learners have unique lexical problems. Laufer (1998) states that novice learners have difficulty identifying words, whereas intermediate learners will be subject to 'lexical plateaus'—a time when word growth is slower. This



occurs since the difficulty of words increases, and frequency effects as well as the need for more elaborate processing are present (Nation, 2013). Good vocabulary teaching should therefore include strategies that support retention as well as active use.

On the intermediate level, learners are confronted with a variety of challenges in learning vocabulary that are interconnected. Such challenges are of linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical natures.

Linguistically, most learners struggle with polysemy and context-dependent meaning. Words such as 'run' or 'set' have several meanings, and it is therefore difficult for the learners to select the right one for different contexts. As Nation (2013) states, this multi-sense of meaning requires explicit instruction and multiple contextual exposure.

Cognitively, learners often fail to retain new vocabulary due to insufficient exposure and inadequate recycling. Schmitt (2010) highlights that vocabulary retrieval is dependent on repetition, processing depth, and active processing. Additionally, metacognitive self-awareness of learners—how they tackle, monitor, and evaluate their own vocabulary learning—is usually underdeveloped (Anderson, 2002).

Pedagogically, teachers are constrained by such issues as insufficient classroom time, lack of authentic materials, and use of rote memorization on the part of students. Even intermediate-level learners will not engage in communicative tasks if they are unsure of their vocabulary range, which deters them from experimenting with new words (Dörnyei, 2005).

Those obstacles must be overcome with a comprehensive method that combines explicit instruction, communicative practice, and metacognitive strategy training. Research-based practices indicate a number of effective methods for teachers teaching intermediate learners.

1. **Explicit Vocabulary Instruction:** Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2008) advise incorporating explicit learning—such as direct instruction of high-frequency and academic vocabulary—into intentional learning through reading and listening activities. Teachers can present words in authentic settings, with a focus on collocations, word families, and variation in register.

2. **Contextualized Learning through Communication:** The communicative approach encourages the active use of vocabulary in communicative contexts. Role plays, discussions, and project work provide room for lexical use spontaneously, growing fluency and memorization (Richards, 2015).

3. **Metacognitive Strategy Training:** Students must learn to structure the learning of vocabulary (e.g., goal setting), monitor progress (e.g., self-checklists), and evaluate efficacy. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) point out that metacognitive training enhances learners' autonomy and awareness of their learning process.

4. **Use of Technological and Digital Tools:** MALL applications such as Quizlet or Memrise facilitate spaced repetition and multimodal interaction. Godwin-Jones (2018) states that technology facilitates individualized pacing and pushes the classroom beyond.



5. Lexical Notebooks and Corpora: Asking students to maintain lexical notebooks helps them with ordering and making their vocabulary learning more private. Additionally, corpora and concordance line work aid learners to recognize patterns of usage in the external world beyond the classroom (Boulton, 2010).

Teaching intermediate vocabulary is a question of addressing both learner autonomy and language complexity. The teacher must balance explicit instruction and communicative practice with reflection. A blend of metacognitive strategy instruction, technological assistance, and contextually acquired lexis can contribute significantly to lexical development. Finally, successful vocabulary instruction allows learners to bridge the gap between receptive and productive knowledge, to be able to communicate confidently and successfully.

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