Vocabulary Instruction and the Use of Direct Strategies on English as a Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper looks at the use of direct strategies in the teaching of vocabulary to students of English as a Foreign Language. It will consider the memory, cognitive, and compensation methods. This paper will establish a clear definition of each method and examples of the use of the strategies will be provided throughout.

The most powerful thing we can teach is strategic knowledge: knowledge of the procedures people use to learn, to think, to read, and to write. The most effective way to introduce students to how to use these tools is to model them in the contexts of meaningful tasks and then to assist students in their own use of these strategies. (Wilhelm, n. d)

Introduction

There has been a fundamental shift in the way educators view vocabulary instruction from generations past to the current peer group. In the past, the emphasis was on the teachers and the way they taught. Today, the emphasis has shifted away from the teacher to the student. Research is taking a closer look at the learning method and how students process and
remember new information given to them. A leading researcher in the field of second language education and specifically learning styles and strategies is Rebecca Oxford, in 1990 she created a classification of learning strategies in which she differentiated between direct and indirect approaches to language learning. Oxford argued that within the direct strategy there are three subsections: memory, cognitive, and compensation. Memory strategies are defined as techniques that “store and retrieve new information,” cognitive strategies “enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means,” and compensation strategies “allow learners to use the language despite their own large gaps in knowledge” (Oxford, 1990, p. 37).

The use of direct strategies in the classroom aids students with academic language, which in turn helps students see the correlation between words. The more a student is exposed to English, the better off the student is. Unfortunately, most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students are not exposed to enough English. An example of the type of English students are lacking is incidental exposure to the English language such as through talking to friends in English, watching English television and movies, or listening to English songs on the radio. All of these activities help to improve their English vocabularies (Carlo et al., 2004). Because the students lack this exposure to English, many of them are not able to make connections to vocabulary learned in class and the relationships between other words. The result is that students have more difficulty using the context of the material used in class to understand other words that they do not know the meanings of (Carlo et al., 2004). It is important that teachers use strategies that utilize the student’s own abilities to understand and learn new vocabulary on their own. The use of the direct
strategy approach and the subsections within it allows the educator the flexibility to use various approaches to help the students develop their English language vocabularies.

**Memory**

According to Oxford, there are four subsections to the direct strategy of memory: creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing action (Oxford, 1990, p. 17). As with all of these strategies, the most important facet is that the student needs to select the technique that he or she feels most comfortable with and which meets his or her needs based on the content learned in the class. An example of a memory exercise to help students create mental linkages is the use of a word map diagram. Authors Schwartz and Raphael believe that by focusing on three questions: “What is it?” “What is it like?” and “What are some examples?” Students are able to make mental linkages to the definition of the word (Schwartz & Raphael, 1985).

![Word Map Diagram](image)

With memory, it is important that students use as many of their senses as possible to help them in the learning process. Visualization is an effective way of helping student remember words. The use of visualization
implies both “an internal process (the formation and manipulation of mental imagery) and an external means of communication (the creation of graphic imagery)” (Roth, 1993, p. 2). Having students draw a picture, explain the word or phrase using their own lexicon, or writing words that are associated with the new word are all helpful tools.

The use of memory is becoming one of the crucial ways of teaching vocabulary. Practical uses such as word map diagrams and the use of pictures to help remember words help students increase their English vocabularies. Every strategy is not ideal for every student. A cognitive learning strategy takes a different approach to helping students develop their English language vocabulary.

Cognitive

In the English language, there are around 54,000 word families. The average native speaker knows about half of the word families. Research shows that for a student learning English as foreign language, knowing 3,000 to 5,000 word families is sufficient to communicate effectively in the classroom (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, p. 18). To help students understand and produce new language, cognitive activities such as repeating, analyzing expressions, and summarizing have been useful (Oxford, 1990, p. 7).
example of a cognitive activity is the Morpheme Triangle that was introduced by Winters, who believes that this technique “provides an entry point into language” (Winters, 2009, p. 285–86). The Morpheme Triangle breaks down a word into small units such as the root word, prefix, and suffix. When a student encounters an unknown word, he or she can use this technique to surmise the meaning of the new word.

Using cognitive techniques is beneficial in helping the student not only understand the new vocabulary but also create a base for learning that will help with lexicon that is not found in the text. Another useful technique in helping students better their English vocabulary is the use of compensation.

**Compensation**

Compensation in this context refers to having the students guess intelligently about the meaning of the word and having the students overcome limitations in speaking and writing (Oxford, 1990, p. 17–18). This language learning strategy can be broken down into five subsections:
1. Getting help.
2. Using mime or gesture.
3. Adjusting or approximating the message.
4. Using circumlocution or synonyms.

Getting help: This occurs when the student directly asks the teacher for help, such as verifying the use of a word in a specific context.

Using mime or gesture: When a student does not know how to express a word, he or she uses physical motion to help the listener decipher the meaning.

Adjusting or approximating the message: A student may omit some information, simplify the information, or be less precise while giving the information to help his or her partner understand the meaning of the passage.

Using circumlocution or synonyms: Having the students use synonyms makes it easier for their partners to understand the meaning of the passage and/or the context in which the word is being used.

Avoiding communication partially or totally: Sometimes it best for the student to not try to communicate at all if a passage is so difficult that he or she will be discouraged from learning.

It is evident that compensation strategies are helpful tools in the language-learning process. Each student is different, so not all of the techniques in the compensation strategy need to be used for the student to be successful.
Conclusion

In summary, educators of English language learners cannot assume that there is one ideal method for teaching vocabulary to all students. With the use of a direct-strategies method, an educator has the latitude to use a variety of techniques to support students in their goal of learning English. These include the memory, cognitive, and compensation methods that were outlined by Oxford in 1990. Educators must remember that not all of the instructional techniques mentioned in this article will be suitable to all English language learners at all times. Teachers must be aware of each student’s language ability and skills. With this knowledge and the information given above, instructors can best match students with the techniques that are appropriate to them.

References


