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How to Help Students Acquire Vocabulary

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1. INTRODUCTION

I am an English teacher in a grammar school. My students are 15 to 9 years old and the majority of them come to our school after four years of learning English. Their knowledge is quite good, they are able to lead a simple conversation using appropriate functions, grammar and vocabulary. Since they feel their previous knowledge of vocabulary is enough to express their thoughts, they are unwilling to put a lot of effort in expanding their vocabulary. They also have a feeling that their knowledge is bigger because they have a richer passive vocabulary but when it comes to use the words in the active area of the language they find out that they cannot cope with it.

In my opinion it is important that intermediate students expand their vocabulary. Of course there is a limit to what students can process at any one time and there is no use demanding the students to learn endless lists. Estimates vary as to how many words people can cope with it one time. Some suggest that it is as few as nine, and twenty is certainly the upper limit.

A very few students recognize the need of learning the vocabulary at this level and they develop their own learning systems. Nevertheless, the majority of them are quite happy with the level they have achieved, that is why they do not bother about learning the new words until the test is to be written. Of course, they cannot be very successful if they try to remember all the new words on the eve of the test.

This is the reason why I started to think about the ways how to introduce the new vocabulary in a more effective way and to find out whether the effort is worth trying.

I started to study the different ways of vocabulary teaching and the factors that influence our learning new words and expressions. There are many factors that play an important part in learning the vocabulary and our perception of words can be affected by, for example:

- the sounds of the word
- the shape on a page, on the blackboard, on a poster, etc.
- the associations the word has for the student
- conventional associations: semantic and syntactic categories to which a word is seen to belong, collocations, metaphors, etc.
- the circumstances of meeting the word (not just the narrow context of text, but the room, the people present, the atmosphere in the classroom, etc.)

All these factors will play a part in "learning" or memorizing a word.

When I discussed this problem with my colleagues, I found out they face similar problems in their teaching regardless the language they teach. When we discussed the methods we use in teaching new vocabulary, we could see that the approaches are more or less similar (by introducing the new words through discussions connected with the topic, sometimes by using the pictures, by listening to a new text, writing the new words on the blackboard, etc). Although these approaches seem to be working, the output is not within my expectations.

So I decided to find out what the students think of this problem and how they learn new words. I made a questionnaire and handed it out to my second class students. I taught in two classes at that time: there was a class of 23 students and one of 11 students. All the students had been learning English for five years. I wanted the students to answer the questions in the questionnaire 1: How I Learn New Words.

2. QUESTIONNAIRE 1

1. Do you learn new words after every lesson?

YES

NO

SOMETIMES

2. I learn new words only before the test.

YES

NO

3. I do try to remember new words during the lesson.

YES

NO

SOMETIMES

4. When I learn at home, I write down every new word.

YES

NO

SOMETIMES

5. I remember the word the best if I hear it.

YES

NO

OTHER

6. When I learn at home, there is a music at the background.

YES

NO

7. I put a new word in a context (I make a sentence of my own including the new word).

YES

NO

SOMETIMES

8. I have a notebook where I write new words.

YES

NO

9. I always translate the words.

YES

NO

SOMETIMES

10. The best way to remember the word is if

- I see the word written
- I write it myself
- I repeat the word

The students answered the questionnaire anonymously. After they had answered the questionnaire we discussed how they had felt when they had been doing it. The majority said it was not a problem, nevertheless it was the first time they started thinking how they actually learn.

3. QUANTITAVE ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE 1

67,6% of the students said they do not learn new words after every lesson.

61,8% of the students learn new words just before the test.

79,4% of the students try to remember new words during the lesson.

While learning 47,8% of the students write down a new word.

61,8% of the students remember the word best if they hear it.

Only 11,8% of the students learn with the music playing at the background.

Only 11,8% of the students make their own sentence with a new word.

44,1% of the students have a special notebook to write new words in.

67,6% of the students translate words into their mother tongue.

38,5% of the students remember a word best if they see it written.

61,5% of the students remember the word best if they write it.

15,4% of the students remember the word best if they repeat it.

The results of the questionnaire only proved what I had expected. The majority of the students do not learn vocabulary regularly, nevertheless they do try to remember new words during the lesson.

So I decided to choose a few texts of similar level of difficulty to find out whether different approaches and methods used would affect the output, i.e. whether the students would remember more words during the lesson.

4. TEXT 1

I introduced the text (appendix 1) in a “traditional” way, i.e. I introduced the topic and the new vocabulary through discussion. I wrote the new words on the blackboard and the students copied the words into their notebooks. They read the text for gist , they did the true-false exercise and after that they read the text in detail. When they had finished, they did a comprehension exercise. As their homework they did a written exercise connected with the topic.

In the beginning of the following lesson I tested the vocabulary of the previous lesson.
(appendix 4)

The result:

The students remembered about a half of the words.(the average was 57,3%).

After a few lessons I decided to do another text with my students. This time I decided to deal with the text in a different way which I hoped would be more interesting for the students.

5. TEXT 2

The text (appendix 2) contained about twenty new words. I browsed through a few reference books that dealt with vocabulary. Finally, I decided for the activity “Words on the double” from the book “Headstarts” by Natalie Hess.

I went through the text and copied out the words I wanted to teach for active use on slips of paper. Next to each word, I wrote the number of paragraph it came from. I wrote three words on each slip of paper. I photocopied each slip of paper, so I had two copies of each. I made as many slips as there were students in my class.

I put the sheets of paper, some monolingual dictionaries and blue-tack on my desk where they could be reached by everyone.

I asked the students to pull one slip each from the bag. After that the students had to walk around the room and find one person who had exactly the same words as they. When they had paired up, partners checked that at least one of them knew the words they had been assigned. If neither knew, they could look them up in a dictionary.

Once they knew the meanings of their words, they looked in the text and located them according to the paragraph numbers on the slips. When they had found the sentence in which each word was used, they copied the sentence colourfully on a sheet of paper adding a sentence of their own. If they wished, they could decorate the “word poster” they had made. When they had finished the task, they put the poster on the wall using blue-tack.

Once all the posters were up, each pair read its own sentences, wrote the words on the blackboard and explained them to the rest of the class. Then the students read the whole text and did the comprehension check.

Since it was a double period lesson I still had enough time to give them a questionnaire to find out what the students liked or disliked during the lesson.

6. QUESTIONNAIRE 2

1. How much of the lesson did you enjoy?

- All of it
- Some of it
- None

2. How many new words do you think you learnt?

- The majority of them
- About half of them
- Three

3. Was the lesson
 - boring?
 - interesting?

4. How did you find this work?
 - Easy
 - Hard
 - Just about right

5. Write down anything which made it hard for you to learn.

6. Write down anything you particularly enjoyed about this lesson.

7. ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE 2

The majority of the students (88,2%) enjoyed the lesson. However, 61,8% of the students thought they learned three new words, 28,5% thought they learned about half of the words and only 9,7% of the students thought they learned the majority of new words.

All the students thought the lesson was interesting.

15,4% of the students found the work easy and the majority (84,6%) thought it was just about right.

The majority said there was nothing too difficult, but just a few said they did not like making sentences of their own.

They enjoyed looking for the partner with the same words, making posters, looking for the words in the text, they enjoyed the lesson because it was different.

The results of the questionnaire were not a big surprise for me. I had expected that the majority of the students would remember at least the three words they had been dealing with.

I had also expected they would have fun walking around the classroom and looking for the partner.

Two students who said they had not liked making sentences of their own are quite weak and not very hardworking, and two of them are good students, but not always willing to work hard.

Although the lesson was quite noisy, I enjoyed it. It demanded a lot of preparation but it was worth doing because there was a really creative atmosphere in the classroom.

In the next lesson I tested the vocabulary (appendix 5) and the result was slightly better than with the text 1. The students remembered about 65% of the new vocabulary.

8. TEXT 3

I chose the text based on a documentary made by David Attenborough in which David Attenborough asked himself and us if the Earth is really a Dying Planet (appendix 3).

I again used the idea from the book Headstarts by Natalie Hess.

I made a list of ten clear statements of opinion related to the subject. There were new words

included in these statements. The statements agreed with the point of view of the writer. I stuck such lists on the walls of my classroom. I told the students that all the lists stuck on the walls were identical. The lists were shop windows from which they had to choose displayed items. I asked everyone to get up and look over any one of the lists. They had to take paper and pen with them. Their job was to find three statements with which they agreed. If a statement was very close to something they agreed they could make a small change in it just to clarify a point of view.

Once they had found their three statements, they wrote the numbers of the statements on a piece of paper and pinned that piece of paper to their clothing.

Their task was to move around the room looking for other students who had written at least two of the same numbers. They told each other why they agreed with those statements, and whether they had changed anything and why. Since they were wandering around with just numbers, not statements, they forgot the statements and had to double-check. At that point they also checked the meanings of unknown words in a monolingual dictionary available in the classroom. After that I told the students to read the text.

When they had done the comprehension check, they did a gap filling exercise where mainly new words were missing.

As their homework the students had to find the synonyms or write explanations of new words. Since it was again a double period I distributed the questionnaire 2 to the students.

The result was similar to the one in the questionnaire after the second text. The students found the lesson interesting and they enjoyed it.

The next lesson I tested the knowledge again (appendix 6). Since the students had to find the synonyms or write explanations of the words given at home, they were better prepared for the test, although they did not know in advance they were going to write one.

This time the results were better. The students remembered about 75% of new words.

9. CONCLUSION

In my “mini research” I wanted to find out whether different approaches in pre-teaching new vocabulary result in better active knowledge of the vocabulary.

According to the results obtained from the questionnaires and from the tests given to the students, the approaches themselves do not affect the knowledge to a large extent. The result was about 15% better than while using more “traditional” approaches. Nevertheless, the effort is worth making because the students are better motivated, they find such lessons more interesting, they are not bored and they enjoy learning the language, which influences the learning of the language in general.

To get better results I will still have to prepare a lot of exercises and activities to consolidate the knowledge of the vocabulary and to make the students use the new vocabulary actively, and so will the students have to make some effort to expand the knowledge and to use richer vocabulary.

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APPENDIX

Text 1: Charity appeals

This might be the age of high technology in many western countries, but for the majority of the world's children, everyday life is still a fight just to survive. In Africa and Asia, ten per cent of babies die before they are one year old. Average life expectancy is about 46. One in four Third World children can expect to suffer malnutrition. In developing countries nearly three quarters of the people do not have access to safe water, yet eighty per cent of the world's disease is caused by dirty water.

Action Aid has started development programmes in eight of the poorest countries in the world. Our sponsorship scheme is based on the belief that individual people relate much more easily to the needs and problems of one other person than to the statistics expressed in millions. Sponsorship is a personal relationship with one child in need, and sponsors have a link with the child, either through reports on progress at school or by direct correspondence. Our first aim is to provide a basic education and where needed, food, clothing and medical care. Over the years we have helped more than half a million children, but we need your help to continue. You can give a child a chance. Just contact a branch of Action Aid.

Mencap is the Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults. It has been operating since 1946, and has grown into an organization with 55,000 members, most of whom are parents and friends of mentally handicapped people. Mental handicap is not an illness; it cannot be cured by medical means, it is a life-long disability. Our aims are to educate the general public and to provide the care that the mentally handicapped need. About one in every hundred people is affected by some form of mental handicap. Most of the rest of us know very little about it. But our ignorance and fear can mean that we treat these people in a way which is hurtful and discouraging to them.

We have opened two new residential homes for children this year, and we have been trying for several years to find residential accommodation for mentally handicapped adults whose relatives are no longer capable of looking after them. It is for this, and our many other projects, that we need your help. Please give generously.

Amnesty International will only be satisfied when it is no longer needed. We are a worldwide movement, independent of any government, political party, economic interest, or religious belief. Our activities focus on the release of prisoners of conscience. These are men and women imprisoned for their beliefs, colour, sex, language, or religion. We try to get fair and early trials for all political prisoners, and we oppose the death penalty and torture of all prisoners without reservation.

Amnesty International has been working for over twenty years, and in that time we have helped prisoners in over sixty countries. We have won several peace prizes, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 and the United Nations Human Rights Prize in 1978. Each year we handle, on average, nearly 5,000 individual cases, regardless of the ideology of either the victims or the governments concerned. Please help us, and so make us redundant in our world.

Drought and famine have come to Africa again this year, just as they have every year for the past ten years. In some parts of Africa it hasn't rained for three years. There have been no crops, and the animals on which many people depend died long ago. Refugees are pouring from the

countryside into the towns in their desperate search for food, and it has been estimated that over 1,000 people are dying every day.

Your help is needed now. This situation is catastrophic. We need to get food, medical supplies, blankets, tents, clothes, doctors, and nurses to the area urgently. Please give all you can. No pound or penny will ever have been better spent, or more appreciated.

Text 2: Life in Space

We haven't conquered space. Not yet. We have sent some 20 men on camping trips to the moon, and the USA and the Soviet Union have sent people to spend restricted lives orbiting the Earth. During the next few weeks, for instance, the US Space Shuttle will take Spacelab into orbit, showing that ordinary (non-astronaut) scientists can live and work in space - for a few days only. All these are marvellous technical and human achievements, but none of them involves living independently in space. The Russians need food and even oxygen sent up from Earth. And they haven't gone far into space. The residents of Sheffield are farther from London than those of the Shuttle or the Soviet', Salyut. It is only in fiction, and in space movies, that people spend long periods living more or less normally deep in space.

But in a couple of decades - by the year 2000, say - this could have changed. There could be settlements in space that would house adventurers leading more or less normal lives.

The picture on this page shows where the settlers would live. It seems like science fiction - but it is not. It is based on plans produced by hard-headed people: engineers and scientists, headed by Gerard O'Neill of Princeton University, summoned to a conference by NASA. They are space enthusiasts, of course, but they are not dreamers.

The settlement is a gigantic wheel, a tube more than 400ft in diameter bent into a ring just over a mile across. The wheel spins gently once a minute. It is this gentle rotation that makes this settlement different from the Shuttle and Salyut, and infinitely different from the Lunar modules that took man for the first time to any non-terrestrial soil, because the spin produces a force that feels like gravity. Every space trip has shown that the human body needs gravity if it isn't to deteriorate, and gravity also makes normal activities possible. Nobody would want to live for long in a space settlement where everything - people and equipment and the eggs they were trying to fry - moved weightlessly around.

With gravity, life in space can be based on our experience on Earth. We can have farming and factories and houses and meeting-places that are not designed by guesswork. The need for gravity is one of the reasons for building a space colony, rather than sending settlers to an existing location such as the Moon or the planets. The Moon is inhospitable. Its gravity is tiny - and any one place on the Moon has 14 days of sunlight followed by 14 of night, which makes agriculture impossible and means there is no using solar energy.

In the settlement, which floats in permanent sunlight, the day-length is controlled. A gigantic mirror about a mile in diameter floats weightlessly above the ring of the settlement. It reflects sunlight on to smaller mirrors that direct it into the ring, through shutters that fix the day length. The sunlight is constant during the "daytime", so farming is productive to an extent which can be reached on Earth only occasionally. The aim is to provide a diet similar to that on Earth, but with less fresh meat.

The farms will be arranged in terraces with fish ponds and rice paddies in transparent tanks on the top layer; wheat below; vegetables, soya and maize below that.

The population of the settlement is fixed at about 10,000 people: farm output can be accurately

planned. Research reports suggest that about 44 square metres of vegetables will be needed for each person, and just over five square metres of pastures.

The picture here shows where the people will live. It doesn't look very different from modern small towns on Earth, and this is deliberate. Science-fiction films feature vast glass tower blocks and subterranean warrens, but real-life space settlers won't want these. Throughout history, settlers have tried to put up buildings like the ones they left behind, because these are familiar: space settlers will do the same.

And where would the settlement be? "Why", say the experts, "at L5, of course." This reference describes a point on the Moon's orbit around the Earth, equidistant from Moon and Earth, where the gravitational forces of the two bodies balance. (The L stands for Lagrange, a French mathematician who listed a number of "balance" points). Those who intend to settle in space have formed an L5 Society. The members are not impractical eccentrics: that is, they are not at all impractical.

Text 3: An Interview with David Attenborough

I = Interviewer

A = David Attenborough

- I: David Attenborough is very gloomy about much of what he's seen. What's depressed him most has been the huge speed and scale of change that human beings are inflicting on the world. A powerful symbol of that change is the simple act of felling trees.
- A: In the Himalayas, for example, people cut down forests simply because there are an awful lot of people who need firewood to keep warm. And so they cut down huge hillsides, in a few years... are stripped of their forests.
- I: This leaves fertile Himalayan hills naked, unprotected from the heavy rains. The trees were umbrellas, but now the rain washes out the good soil, which ends up as mud a thousand miles away in the channels of the river Ganges.
- A: When the next rains come, instead of the forests on the hillside holding the rains and letting it out a bit at a time as though it were a sponge, the forest isn't there, so the rain water runs straight off and when it goes down in a huge flood; and it gets into the channels which are clogged with mud, so it then floods, so then the whole area is under water, people lose their farm land and people drown.
- I: So cutting down trees in Nepal drowns people in Bangladesh. In Africa the gathering of wood is making the desert grow.
- A: In parts of Sudan, the desert in just 15 years has advanced sixty miles. And it's a devastating statistic and what's more, it's a heart-breaking one, because how can you go to these people and say, "You mustn't cut down that tree in order to cook your food"?
- I: But is it universally so bad? Or are some environmentalists just getting into a flap about isolated, extreme examples? David Attenborough used to wonder that, too.
- A: I remember very well flying over Amazonian Jungle for hour after hour after hour and not a sign of the hand of man beneath me, just this green carpet of trees. And I said to myself, "It can't be true that this will disappear by the end of the century." And so I looked into the question as to how people made these estimates. I mean I thought, was it one of these things where you suddenly multiplied one statistic by 500,000 and you get an extraordinary answer? The fact of the matter is that those statistics are based on surveys by satellites with infra-red

cameras which actually measure the change of patch of green leaves into a patch of bare ground. And even on that level the rate at which the jungle is being destroyed amounts to about 29,000 square miles in a year.

- I: That's an area the size of the whole of Scotland disappearing every year. Trees are a vital part of the water cycle, and of course they give us the oxygen that we breathe. And cutting down the rain forests kill the plants beneath the trees as well, plants which help us fight disease.
- A: Forty per cent of our drugs, our medicines, are derived from plants and most of those come from the tropical rain forests, and most of those come from the Amazon.
- I: Those plants also help fight the diseases that threaten our food. The funguses and moulds that attack wheat, for example, are continually growing stronger. But they only evolve to match specific varieties of wheat. So plant breeders beat the funguses by changing the varieties.
- A: What does a plant breeder need to change a variety? Answer - new genes. Where do they come from? Answer - wild plants. That happens with all our food plants. With rice, with potatoes, with wheat, with barley, all that applies. And if we lose those wild strains, the field could be devastated and mankind would starve.
- I: David Attenborough insists that none of what he's just said is exaggeration. It's not just a distant problem somewhere on the other side of the world.
- A: What we're talking about is the survival of human beings, of men women and children. It is happening now. The floods that we hear of in India and Pakistan, the starvation that we hear of in parts of Africa, these aren't accidents. These are direct consequences of what we are talking about. And the tragedy is that the people who suffer first are the deprived people, the people who are living on the edge of prosperity. And, but if we think that we are insulated from that, that it's always going to be them, we are wrong. They are the start. As sure as fate, they are coming our way.
- I: David Attenborough's thoughts after seven years of travelling around the world.

Vocabulary test 1:

Fill in the gaps with a suitable word from the text Charity appeals.

1. A number of people or things that form more than half of the larger group is _____
2. A way to a place; an opportunity of reaching, using or approaching smth, e.g. books, water, building, etc. _____
3. The financial support that is given to someone by a sponsor. _____
4. The act or process of writing letters to someone is called _____
5. The care of people's health is _____ care.
6. A physical or mental disability that you are born with, or that is caused by an illness or accident which prevents you from living a totally normal life. _____
7. Lack of knowledge abou something is _____.
8. If they cause you to lose your enthouisasm or willingness to do something, they _____ you.
9. The part of your mind that tells you whether what you are doing is right or wrong is called your _____.
10. Something that is _____ is no longer needed.
11. A continuous period of dry weather causing distress; want of rain - is called _____
12. A serious shortage of food in a country which may cause many deaths is _____
13. The plants that you collect at harvest time when they are fully grown and ready to be stored, processed or sold. _____
14. If you _____ am amount or quantity , you calculate it approximately.

Vocabulary test 2:

Fill in the gaps with a suitable word from the text Life in Space.

1. When something lies on or just below the surface of a liquid when it is put in it, we say it _____
2. Something (especially an abstract thing, e.g. life) that is quite small or limited. _____
3. Surprisingly large in size - _____
4. Opposite of practical - _____
5. Wooden or metal covers fitted on the outside of a window are called _____
6. If you don't like having guests, you are _____
7. Someone who is practical and determined to get what she/he wants is _____
8. A place that is _____ from two other places is the same distance away from each of these places.
9. If there was no gravity, things would move _____ around.
10. If something becomes worse in condition or quality, it _____
11. A period of ten years is called _____
12. If you _____ someone, you order them to come to you.
13. If you _____ something difficult or dangerous you succeed in getting control of it, usually through great effort and determination.
14. If something is not on the planet Earth, it is _____

15. If you can see through an objects , it is _____
16. Land that has grass growing on it and that is used for farm animals to graze on. _____
17. To _____ someone means to provide a house or flat for them to live in.
18. A place where people have come to live and have built houses, is _____
19. If you have planned something or decided on it beforehand, you do something that is _____
20. The process of trying to guess or estimate something without knowing all the facts or information, is called _____

Vocabulary test 3

Fill in the gaps with a suitable word from the interview with David Attenborough.

1. To become blocked with waste water, dirt, grease, etc. so that flow of liquid is difficult or prevented, e.g.: Pipes were _____ with dirt.
2. Soft, wet soil,e.g.: Rain turns dust into _____
3. Gas without colour, taste or smell, present in the air and necessary to the existenceof all forms of life. _____
4. Plants and animals that no longer exist on Earth are called this - _____
5. In Brazil there are still some tribes that live amongst the trees in the _____
6. A person is this if she/he is depressed and pessimistic about life. The weather can also be this -

7. The heavy rain caused the river to overflow and the streets were _____
8. You have really good _____ in your garden. No wonder the flowers and vegetables grow so well.
9. A part of a surface or area which is different in appearance from the surface or area around it is called _____
10. A type of plant in a species of plants whichis produced by special breeding is _____
11. If something damages an area or a place very badly or destroys a lot of things that are there, it _____ it.
12. If someone doesn't have the things that people consider to be essential in life, for example acceptable living conditions, we can say this person is a _____ person.