

Role of Cultural Connotations in Teaching Vocabulary

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Abstract

Vocabulary is the first and foremost step in language acquisition. Language teaching is an ancient art and has always existed in every civilization. Every child born in the community was initiated into language learning which compulsorily included learning of vocabulary. The recorded history lets us know that basically teaching was confined to religious teaching mostly done in oral form, leaving little or no scope for change in words or acquisition of words. As days progressed man started discovering new avenues and resources, involving in new ventures, growing in population and migrating. This resulted in the diversification of language and the growth of region-specific vocabulary and ultimately in the birth of new languages. Whenever a learner comes in contact with a new language his first impulse is to pick the words or the vocabulary and try to use it. The study of vocabulary is at the center of language learning. While learning a new language one cannot deny the importance of vocabulary – not only for reading achievement but also for social and economic advancement. Vocabulary acquisition in teaching of English as a second language involves a crucial part of the process, ESL needs a vocabulary for communication in the area of wide currency and also to operate the patterns and illustrate the pronunciation of the language.

Key Words-Communication, Culture, Language, Vocabulary, ESL, ELT, SL.

Language teaching has been an ancient art and can be dated back to the earliest stages of settled civilizations. Language existed in some or the other form, right from the time human being learned to communicate in every civilization and every community. Each and every child born in the community was initiated into language learning and this definitely included learning of vocabulary as well. However, it is difficult to find any evidence about teaching practices and methods; the recorded history lets us know that basically teaching was confined to religious teaching mostly done in oral form, leaving little or no scope for change in words or acquisition of words. As days progressed man started discovering new avenues and resources, involving himself in new ventures, growing in population and migrating. These variegation and curiosity to know more and learn more resulted in the diversification of language and the growth of region-specific vocabulary and ultimately in the birth of new languages.

Vocabulary is commonly defined as 'all the words known and used by a particular person'. It is a set of familiar words within a learner's language. Vocabulary serves as a fundamental and useful tool for communication and also for acquiring any further knowledge. Vocabulary is the first and foremost step in language acquisition. The core vocabulary of the first language or the mother tongue (L1) is learned at home naturally as a part of the automatic struggle of a child to communicate (Lado, 1964). While learning his first language the people and needs around him, who address him or who need to be addressed become the teacher and also the target of the learner. In the next stage the learner or the child goes to school where he learns to recognize the alphabet of the words, he was using all this while and also to write the words he knows. His vocabulary is also arbitrarily expanded following the school curriculum. However, in learning second language in school the student is not required to learn the same type of vocabulary that he needed for the first language, since the purpose is also not the same. The learner is not supposed to address his family or his everyday needs, neither to communicate socially as he does with the help of L1. The vocabulary of SL is selected or decided by the teacher or the textbook or the school. Since the SL is mostly learned with the help of the first language of the learner and therefore the two sets of vocabulary often match to an extent.

Here, we need to notice one more fact that while learning and teaching of the first language, alphabet and spellings are always learnt in the next level of learning *i.e.* after the very first level of the usage of words as a unit and formation of sentences as well. While on the other hand teaching/learning of SL begins formally with alphabet recognition and then follows the words

and sentences. And it is here that the learner starts learning or knowing the vocabulary of the second language.

The size of vocabulary, the degree of knowledge required and whether the vocabulary is for speaking, listening, reading, writing and /or for specialized or technical uses are several aspects in the vocabulary acquisition of the second language by an adult learner. Vocabulary is a vital threshold for ESL/ELT learners specially those at a beginner's level. The intermediate level learners need vocabulary to achieve fluency and the advanced level learners need to store vocabulary stacks with all its paraphernalia for a comprehensive knowledge of the English language.

To clarify further the idea of the vocabulary of the second language three levels are distinguished for the learners by the linguist Robert Lado in his book *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach* (1964):

1. Vocabulary to operate the patterns and illustrate the pronunciation of the language.
2. Vocabulary for communication in areas of wide currency.
3. Aesthetic and technical vocabularies.

The first stage needs a simple and straight forward approach in order to allow teacher to concentrate on the grammatical patterns and the sound system. Since this is the initial stage, the vocabulary to operate the patterns and to illustrate the pronunciation of the language is required to be developed; some authorities advocate using vocabulary from the immediate environment – the classroom, family, home etc. When the role of first language and second language can be defined and distinguished viz; the first language for home and the second for cultural development and or educational purpose, it is better to use that set of vocabulary that does not refer to the first language vocabulary or the immediate environment of the home. For example, while learning ESL in the initial stage the learner learns a word 'book' and observes it as translation of the term found in his first language *i.e.*, 'pustak' or 'kitab'. But later he comes across the various meanings and usage of the word 'book'; viz, to book a seat (confirm a seat) and booked for a crime. These forms of the word book have nothing to do with the mother tongue term used for 'book'.

In the second stage, the learner needs to acquire the vocabulary for communication in a wider sense. The contextual area has a say in this stage. The contextual areas and the particular areas vary not only on the age and education of the student but also on where the language is being taught, whether the teaching takes place in the country of the learner or, in the country where the language is spoken. If the language is taught in the country where it is spoken the vocabulary will be oriented towards contextual areas of everyday chores since the learner will have to use the language for this purpose and also for further intellectual growth. While if the language is taught in the learner's country the contextual areas are decided on the goal of the usage varying from liberal education to learning the language for particular purpose.

Therefore, the third stage duly follows the second as here the vocabulary acquisition and usage are aesthetic and technical. After mastering the two levels of vocabulary only the aesthetics of technical usage can be mastered. Aesthetic effect may be lost if the basic vocabulary for communicative use is not known as aesthetic and artistic expression deals in selective use of words. Similarly, in technical and scientific vocabulary words are defined for particular purposes. For this a learner both native and foreign must study the technical matters and the technical vocabulary that goes with them.

Vocabulary is such an important part of day to day classroom instruction of the teachers of English that much of their time is consumed by explaining the meanings of words. Students note down difficult words, teachers get them note down the difficult words and at some cases make them memorize the same. In spite of the obvious importance of vocabulary, grammar is emphasized more in a classroom. However, the fact cannot be overlooked that even the most elementary level of teaching begins with words. The teachers at each level be it elementary or secondary cannot afford to ignore the words, their usage, different shades of their meanings, their relations with each other and the way they can be used or the way they act in various contexts. This complete process becomes more challenging in the case of English as a Second Language; for English may be a SL for some it has won the tag of global language and is also accepted as one in India as well. Every day new words come into being, new phrases are coined, more over the older ones earn a new or additional meaning, therefore making the understanding of the dynamic nature of words or vocabulary necessary at each level of learning and teaching. Learning vocabulary makes some sense even to a layman as it plays the most vital role in learning of a language but what does teaching a vocabulary mean can be answered or understood when we know what a word is. Defining a 'word' is actually a difficult task as the most obvious

and popular definition such as 'smallest meaningful unit' is not complete in itself. 'A word is defined by the boundaries it has' (Mohanraj, 2014), specifically in the written text where the boundaries are quite clearly perceived. A word and its concept are subconsciously acquired by the learner with the help of these boundaries. This process basically takes place for one's mother tongue, later it helps in learning another language or languages. Knowing a word means knowing about its source, meaning and usage. Some other factors are also involved, but source, meaning and usage stand foremost. When the words are used in texts or in speech, these aspects become clear and vice versa as when the aspects of a word become clear it is duly used in text and speech in different ways. When we consider a word of English language, a word may have a set of affixes and a root. A combination of these two or the root alone can constitute a word, for e.g. both 'go' and 'going' are words, where 'go' has no affixes while 'going' has _ing as an affix adding a specific meaning to the word. Another example possible and impossible are both words with different meaning, one without an affix while the other with an affix 'im_'. These examples show that we should be familiar with words like go, possible etc., as well as with smaller parts called suffixes like, _ing, im_, a_, _tion etc.

Words are largely learnt through exposure to the language; the more we come across a word or the more frequently we use them the more engraved is their meaning, aspects and usage in our subconscious. All the words are neither used by everybody nor are important for each and everybody. Rather each individual has a repertoire of one's own which contains words which form the part of their 'productive' set of vocabulary *i.e.* they make use of these words while writing or speaking. Another set of vocabulary is also there in a human mind known as 'receptive' vocabulary. These are the words one is familiar with in the sense of recognition, these words are recognized and understood when used by others but are not used or rarely used by the listener. However, here lies an interesting fact that 'receptive vocabulary is always larger than our own 'productive set of vocabulary'. Apart from these two sets of words there are still certain other words which when heard give only a vague idea of what is being said, and to be sure about the meaning we use a dictionary to confirm our vague idea or to understand the meaning. Even after such words there are a lot many words still left which don't leave us even with a vague idea about them especially when used in isolation. The repertoire of productive vocabulary keeps growing with the help of attentive reception of receptive vocabulary. With the help of words known well, we learn new words by association, use and exposure.

Words belong to various categories but the two major categories which all of us recognize are the content words and the structure words. Structure words are not large in number -around 200 (Tickoo, 2003), while the content words are open ended and an exact number of such words in any living language cannot be estimated. English being a global language obviously is said to have the largest vocabulary among all the existing living languages. It is estimated that more than a million words comprise the vocabulary of English language (Gradoll, 2010). A million words is too large a number to learn even in a whole lifetime and moreover it is not necessary or even needful to know them all. Even the first language learners have knowledge of about only 10% of these words and that too when a majority of their vocabulary repertoire is receptive rather than productive. A native speaker has greater exposure to the language and is hence capable of acquiring larger vocabulary, whereas in the case of a second language learner the exposure is often restricted more so when the second language is taught in the native land of the SL learner. Not only the environment is often restricted but also the communication mostly takes place with the country men who speak the same language as of the learner therefore, leaving the option of switching from SL to mother language always available. When the second language learner learns the second language in a foreign land, he has no option left than to stick to the SL which adds to his stock of words.

National Focus Group on Teaching of English, National Council of Educational Research and Training, holds a very modern and contemporary view on 'how to teach vocabulary'. It holds that 'Vocabulary is acquired in both manners 'instruct' and 'incidental' and both the process together contribute to the large vocabulary which is to be built for academic purposes of a learner 'high school learner' to be precise, is built up naturally and gradually through reading' (2006).

Nation, also shares a similar idea in his book 'Learning Vocabulary in Another Language' that,

Deliberately teaching vocabulary is one of the least efficient ways of developing learner's vocabulary knowledge but nonetheless it is an important part of a well-balanced vocabulary program.(2001)

It is true that deliberate teaching of vocabulary is not effective as the incidental learning of vocabulary but it is also true that incidental learning could give expected results only when it has a focused approach which is not a case since it is 'incidental'. This argument has helped present

day teaching of English vocabulary rest its focus largely on helping learners to look at the word in a context. Also, Lexical knowledge is now acknowledged to be central to communicative competence and fluency. The learning of a second language also depends more on the language's vocabulary. Even in a first language, "... whereas, the grammar of a language is largely in place by the time a child is 10 years old . . . , vocabulary continues to be learned throughout one's lifetime" (Schmitt 2000:4). The foundation for vocabulary development and writing at later levels is through reading extensively with comprehension and interest. A 20-year-old university student receiving instruction through English is estimated to have or require a knowledge of 20,000 "word families" (a word along with its inflected and derived forms). Assuming acquisition of 1,000-word families a year, a 17-year-old school-leaving student should know between 15,000 and 17,000-word families to be prepared for university education. When language is adequately taught in the early years, the learner can naturally build up these higher-order skills independently, with some guidance from the classroom. Researches have proved that when language instruction moves away from the traditional approach of learning definitions of words (the dictionary approach) to an enriched approach, which encourages associations with other words and contexts (the encyclopaedia approach), the gains are larger. (Fawcett and Nicolson 1991; Snow et al. 1991). Materials used or available as texts in language class rooms may be in print as well as multi-media formats. Children must be exposed to a whole range of genres. At all levels of learning the materials need to be sensitive to perspectives of equity (gender and societal) and harmony (between humans, and between humans and nature), given that a quantum of independent reading is expected (at least half a dozen pieces in a year). Sensitization to language as a vehicle of gendering can also be initiated for those groups where teacher and student permit this. This is an ideal area for an across-the-curriculum exploration of language use. Traditionally, language-learning materials beyond the initial stages have been sourced from literature: prose, fiction, and poetry. While there is a trend for inclusion of a wider range of more contemporary and authentic texts (due both to a functional orientation of the language curriculum and a broader definition of what constitutes literature), accessible and culturally appropriate pieces of literature continue to play a pivotal role.

Vocabulary learning is considered as a crucial and implicit part of the process of learning a language. Whenever a learner comes in contact with a new language his first impulse is to pick the words or the vocabulary and try to use it. This argument exemplifies the use of Direct Method for teaching vocabulary at the primary level. The Direct Method is the most conventional

approach to teach vocabulary to primary learners. It is also a very simple approach where the teacher simply shows the object or the pictures of the object/objects to the students and articulates the name of the object through the target language (L2). No intervention of mother tongue (L1) is needed here. The Grammar translation method is also used generously to teach vocabulary at primary and secondary level. This approach is used for a step more complex than Direct method. Here the words from L2 or the target language are translated into the mother-tongue of the learner to convey the proper meaning to the learner. Sentences are also translated from L2 to L1 and vice versa. But the most popular approach to vocabulary teaching is the context-based approach. The words from target language are used in various contexts and the learners are encouraged to comprehend the meaning without the help of any object actual or visual and without any intervention of the mother-tongue even. The contextual method thus tries making vocabulary teaching and learning more meaningful and natural. The vocabulary acquired through this process is actually acquired quite naturally and thus it helps retain the new word learnt as a part of the learner's active vocabulary. The contextual approach is more often used and proves effective at a higher level when the learners have already acquired primary set of vocabulary from the target language and also adequate command over the language. The command over the target language helps a learner to comprehend the meaning/s new words with the assistance of the known words and context. The higher or the advanced learners are usually taught vocabulary through context especially in a classroom. Hiray and Malashe analysed in their paper 'Analysis of the Use of Call Application for Teaching Academic Vocabulary by the ESL Teachers in the Technical Institutes in Pune'(2014), that the requirement of advanced learners' changes from English for General Purposes (EGP) to use of L2 for specific purposes or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The advanced learners need a vocabulary related to English for specific purposes, a set of vocabulary which caters to their academic or technical or professional needs. The students of journalism would need an entirely different set of vocabulary than those from engineering field, vocabulary of management students would be in juxtaposition to that of law students. A focused and deliberate attention and approach is therefore indispensable at this stage of learning English for Specific Purposes. At this stage of learning conventional methods are not adequate for the purpose, and here the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) needs implementation for a focused approach. CALL applications are software and web based which can integrate both traditional approach and modern methods to achieve the target. But even before a learner enters a particular field of engineering, medical, business management,

computers, law or the like they spend two more years studying English for General purposes at +2 level.

A word may have different shades of meaning and to learn a second language or a foreign language better the need to focus on the learning of vocabulary with all the shades of meanings of the words becomes inevitable. Meanings of a word are basically categorized as follows:

1. **Conceptual Meaning:** It is the literal meaning or core sense of a word. It is the straight forward, literal dictionary definition of a word. Conceptual meanings are also known as cognitive meaning. Continuous and frequent use of the word in a particular context by a speech community gives a meaning to the words. These words are listed in the dictionaries with the same meanings as description of the words. The meanings so described are the concepts of the community about the things around them and about the idea and attitude they have developed.
2. **Cultural Meanings:** Language is a social activity and is woven with the life of the community. The communities have their own notions about the things they come into contact with and the world they see. In this context, meanings could not be general in nature. The dictionaries may give meanings of these words (conceptual meanings) but each culture group interprets it according to their own notions. The meaning hence, attached to a word by a culture group is called its cultural meaning.
3. **Individual Meaning:** Members of a group are individuals also. They have their own life experiences. No two individuals are same, and no two individuals can have same experiences, likes, dislikes, emotions or attitudes. Every individual is a unique being. They have their own notions, perspectives and ideas which are highly individual. Therefore, a word may contain different connotations for two different people from the same speech community or the culture group. The meaning which an individual attach to a word the individual meaning.

However, the cultural aspect of the meaning and vocabulary remains important and cannot be overlooked at while acquiring and learning vocabulary of a FL or SL. Since language is so intimately woven with the culture of the native speaker, the learner of a foreign/second language is required to be familiar with the culture to learn the language and its vocabulary.

We need to remember that the study of vocabulary is at the center of language learning. While learning a new language one cannot deny the importance of vocabulary – not only for reading achievement but also for social and economic advancement. With English being recognized as a

universal or global language and its importance and presence expanding with every passing day, an ESL learner needs to be equipped well with the words of English language along with cultural learning which is integral to vocabulary learning. Meanings of words are better understood in their association of specific culture and the contexts they are used. The whole purpose of vocabulary teaching is to make learners able to grasp meanings of words in a socio-cultural milieu as a language is basically cultural and so is the meaning of words.

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