Learner centredness in vocabulary learning

Miriam Manzanares Codesal
Profesora de la E.O.I. de Santander

Abstract

Vocabulary learning has, to a great extent, been left to the students to cope with, possibly because teachers, in general, prefer to dedicate time and effort to more complex teaching matters. But, although vocabulary acquisition is still a neglected aspect of language learning, it is rapidly changing status and becoming an area of growing research and publication.

Current second language methodology has drawn attention to the shift in who is at the helm –now it is the student; the teacher merely supervises– and ways to foster the learners' acceptance of their responsibility for how and what they learn. The most in-depth section in this paper deals with «how» this learner training should be implemented.

Resumen

El aprendizaje de vocabulario ha sido tradicionalmente considerado tarea de los alumnos, posiblemente porque en general el profesor piense que su ayuda es más necesaria en otras áreas del aprendizaje de una lengua. Pero aunque la adquisición de vocabulario siga siendo un tema un tanto descuidado, su estatus está experimentando un cambio rapidísimo y se está convirtiendo en un campo de creciente interés para investigadores y editoriales.

En la metodología actual se puede apreciar claramente quien lleva las riendas en el estudio de un segundo idioma –ahora es el alumno el que toma el timón de su propio aprendizaje y el profesor se limita a supervisar– y también se fomenta que sea el alumno quien decida cómo y qué quiere aprender. Este estudio dedica su sección más extensa a las estrategias que se deben poner en práctica para lograr el entrenamiento del alumno hacia este nuevo enfoque metodológico.

1. Learner autonomy

One of the leading goals of the research on Second Language Teaching is an autonomous language learner. The idea is that learners become not only more efficient at learning and using their second language, but also more capable of self-directing their endeavours. However, although methodological trends in the 70s highlighted the

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central role of the learner, an explicit commitment to autonomous and self-directed learning is relatively new.

Thus, our aim as teachers should be to favour reflection by the learner on ways of learning and to develop individual approaches to solving problems. Learners are encouraged to ask themselves what is important for them to know about individual words. They are also encouraged to assess their own vocabulary and shortcomings regularly.

Experiencing words subjectively is seen as a vital component of learning them. Therefore student motivation should be prioritized. Learners can also be encouraged to develop their own personal learning styles for vocabulary in such areas as memorizing and retaining words. Research (Atkinson 1972) has shown that learners who control how they learn words perform much better in retention tests than when they had to study random word lists set for them. Morgan and Rinvolucri (1986) suggest activities to promote such idiosyncratic associations: students are asked to categorize a given list of words under headings such as «nice» words and «nasty» words. Other headings could be «hot» and «cold» words, or «boring» and «interesting» words.

Another mission of the L2 teacher is helping individuals to develop the attitude that learning is a lifelong process and to acquire the skills of self-directed learning. Attention should also be paid to helping learners be aware of the need that they will have to continue learning the language on their own once they leave the classroom, together with the skills they need to do so.

It is important that the two dimensions of autonomy be kept in mind: self-instructional techniques or strategies (fixing objectives, selecting the methods and techniques, monitoring the acquisition procedure, evaluating what has been acquired, etc.) must be accompanied by an internal change of consciousness. The importance of critical reflection should not be played down: if learners are to be weaned away from their state of dependence to one of independence and autonomy, they must also experience a change of psychological attitude towards what learning is. It is necessary that he/she re-examine prejudices and preconceptions like «you can only learn a language in the presence of an expert teacher» or «objectives cannot be defined by someone who does not know the language» (Wenden and Rubin, 1987).

2. Traditional representation of the learning process and new roles

In «traditional» systems the teacher makes decisions concerning objectives, materials, techniques, and the teacher also evaluates, learners do not. The end result is that they do not get much chance to learn. Instead they internalize the ideal that learning means «being taught», doing what the teacher or teaching material tell them to do and not being actively responsible.

2.1. Role of the learner

A majority of teachers and learners alike have traditionally tended to think that the learner's responsibility should be limited to being the beneficiary of the process, its active manager being the teacher. But from another standpoint, learners should have the choice between taking full responsibility for the process or simply submitting to it. And it turns out that good learners are capable of assuming the role of manager of their learning. In other words, they know how to learn.

Therefore learning can be considered as a management process because it involves the making of a whole range of decisions necessary to plan and carry out the learning process. The first of these decisions is choosing *objectives*, i.e. what vocabulary items? do we want to get familiar with their full range of meanings? Then there is the choice of *contents or materials* that will be used to reach the objectives chosen. *Methods and techniques* also have to be decided upon. These decisions are usually taken concurrently with decisions about materials since means and ways are closely interdependent. Will the learning activities be by drills? cloze tests? learning lists of words by heart? practising with a partner? transcribing them?... *The outcome is assessed* and more decisions are made as to the degree of appropriateness of the chosen objectives, materials, methods and techniques.

2.2. Role of the teacher

The teacher becomes a counsellor whose function is promote learner autonomy. He/she should provide language learners with the training they need to become more critical, efficient and, ultimately, more autonomous.

Learners do not work with a teacher in the traditional sense of the word. From an omniscient «causer» of learning, teachers become experienced language resource persons whose job is to facilitate the learning process. It is their role to give advice, provide explanations, help find suitable materials, suggest procedures, pass on information coming from other learners, etc. Teachers are no longer seen as someone to listen to, to obey, as a pilot to trust blindly. Rather they are viewed as someone who can help and the teaching they can provide is received as a series of methodological proposals that is the learner's responsibility to test for efficiency, to select from and add to.

2.3. Role of Materials

Whether didactic or authentic, the role of materials also changes. They get the status of potential learning resources to be selected, adapted and suited to one's objectives. Textbooks, sets of exercises, language games, recordings, films are all considered as raw material to which learners must allot both a purpose and a use (Holec 1987).

3. Selecting what vocabulary to teach

Predicting what learners will need in the way of vocabulary is important in selecting what to teach; equally important is «creating a sense of need for a word» (McCarthy

1990). Four questions need to be answered in order to predict learners' vocabulary needs:

A. Which words must the students know in order to talk about people, things and events in the place where they study or live?

B. Which words must the students know in order to respond to routine directions and commands? (The vocabulary for «open your books» and «write these sentences» and other routine instructions should be learnt early, so that such frequently repeated directions can always be given in English)

– Which words are required for certain classroom experiences, such as describing, comparing, having imaginary conversations with speakers of English?

– Which words are needed in connection with the students' particular academic interests? (Those who will specialize in science need vocabulary that is different from those who plan business careers). (McCarthy 1990)

A sense of need in the learner should be fostered by the teacher. Developing this sense of need for words may not be always easy, but most students will probably be motivated enough to acquire at least a «survival» vocabulary for its obvious usefulness. The learner's own sense of their needs, which may conflict with the teacher's perceptions, should be catered for.

4. Classroom interaction

Both teachers and pupils have to work hard to «construct» meaning. The teacher has to present meaning in a way that is comprehensible to learners, and learners have to relate new meanings to the ones they already know and, ideally, try out newly acquired words in class to provide feedback for both themselves and the teacher.

The vocabulary class is a place where meaning is «negotiated» between teacher and learner. Active learners contribute towards the establishment of meaning of new words in interaction with the teacher: they attempt to organize new words and try using them in examples or give synonyms. Note these examples from Pender's (1988) data:

1. **T:** Story and history, what's the difference?

   S: Story is a tale and history is the truth, something that happened in the past.

2. **T:**Developments, any idea how you could explain that, another word for development, or another way to say it?

   S: To discover something

   T: To discover or to...

   S: To invent.

In such interaction, teacher and pupils engage in a problem-solving activity together; students fix new words and their meanings, and acquisition is enhanced by such interaction.

5. Learning strategies

The importance of encouraging learning strategies is undeniable. Students need to be taught how to learn words, rather than simply the words themselves. The increasing awareness of the complexity involved in actually «knowing a word» (not only recalling it for active use, but also being aware of its frequency and its functions, derivations, collocation patterns and full range of meanings) has fostered a correspondingly complex series of approaches beyond mere memorization.

Among the most common strategies that students employ and favour learner autonomy are *decoding unknown words in context* by making guesses and inferences. Learners should rely on context clues for discovering meaning. Nattinger (1988) advises that the dictionary be used only as a last resort. Students draw conclusions as to word meaning by following certain rational steps in the face of the evidence available. If, for instance, the learner is faced with the sentence «There are a lot of nasty snags to overcome» (taken from a British newspaper) and does not know what «nasty snags» means, it is possible to infer that «snags» is a countable noun, that they are something that can be overcome and, therefore, may mean something like «problems», «obstacles» or «difficulties». Inferring in this way is an example of the «construction» of meaning by the reader/listener.

If we take a closer look at this process we notice that first of all our guesses are guided by the topic. Secondly, we are guided by the other words. Discourse is full of redundancy, anaphora and parallelism, and each offers clues for understanding new vocabulary. Finally, grammatical structure, as well as intonation in speech and punctuation in writing, contain further clues.

These are the guidelines we might hope the good learner would follow when faced with difficulty in reading, or during a test, or any situation where running to the dictionary or asking someone is not possible or appropriate. And research shows that careful considered guessing, specially in advanced levels, carries a high rate of success in decoding unknown words and that strategies for successful guessing can and should be actively encouraged (Nation 1990).

Further helpful learner strategies may be *word morphology*. Some texts present students with unfamiliar words for them to interpret by using the meanings of the affixes they have learnt. Knowledge of word-building to make guesses about the meaning of unknown items can also favour learner autonomy. The idea is to break down the word and examine the meaning of its parts. For example, «oversleep» could be easily guessed by familiarity with the words from which it is a compound.

Being able to participate in conversations with some degree of fluency leads to the self-confidence necessary to take more chances with the language. We should teach students the knack of circumlocution, for example using such devices as derivation - adding suffixes to a root. It is the most common method for creating new words and thus aids fluency.

Many researchers feel that people learn best from a language in which they have a strong personal stake or investment. We not only have to ask *how* learners go about learning language, we need also to ask *why* they learn it. And it seems clear that the answer has to do with social motivation: children learn language as part of a social interaction in which they have something they want to say. The sociolinguistic dimension is crucial to successful acquisition of language (Nattinger 1988).

Learning words in another language cannot be easily divorced from *motivational factors* such as how important or useful lexical items are perceived to be by learners themselves (Carter and McCarthy 1988).

Many theories of language performance suggest that vocabulary is not stored as isolated words but as longer memorized chunks of speech. This is what has been called *prefabricated speech*, which displays a clear ready-made unity, examples of which are:

- Multi-part verbs (put up with, fill in)
- Idioms (keep tabs, kick the bucket)
- Binomials (sick and tired) and Trinomials (cool, calm and collected)
- Semi-fixed patterns –language which is not completely fixed but is at the same time limited in the shapes it can take (a while/a year ago, down with feudalism/the king...).

Alexander (1984) identifies a whole series of fixed phrases regularly used in conversation, including:

- Gambits (first of all, lets face it)
- Links (that reminds me, another thing)
- Responders (I guessed as much, you must be joking), and
- Closers (nice taking to you, I'd better go now).

Nattinger (1980) also includes as «institutionalized phrases» the following kinds:

- Situational utterances that provide the framework for particular social interactions such as greetings (how are you today?).

10 Verbatim texts: aphorisms (the public seldom forgives twice) and proverbs (a rolling stone gathers no moss).

The teaching of these lexical phrases will relieve the learner of concentrating on each individual word and will lead to fluency in speaking and writing. Word association experiments suggest that *collocations* are very powerful and long-lasting. According to Aitchinson (1987), frequent associations like «unruly hair» merge into habitual cliches («agonizing decision», «glaring contradiction») and cliches overlap with idioms («call it a day»)

From what we have said about collocations so far it follows that the meaning of a word has a great deal to do with the words it commonly associates. These associations assist the learner in committing these words to memory. But they also permit people to know what kinds of words they can expect to find together. We often are able to guess the meaning after hearing only the first part of familiar collocations. This is a

demonstration of the above-mentioned idea that we understand in chunks. The whole notion of collocations has yet to be exploited to its full potential and its effectiveness in language production is beyond doubt. Students will not have to go about reconstructing the language each time they want to say something, but instead can use these collocations as prepackaged building blocks (Nattinger 1988)

6. Note taking

Keeping some sort of written record of new vocabulary is quite an important part of language learning. The very act of writing a word down often helps to fix it in the memory. Written records can take a variety of forms:

a. Card-index files are one; they are flexible as far as the amount of information recorded on each card is concerned; they can be flicked through for alphabetical searching or just «browsed» in and, most useful of all, they can be «rearranged» as the user perceives new possible groupings and associations between words.

b. The vocabulary notebook is probably the most common form of written student record. Small notebooks can be carried around easily, added to and studied at any time.

Teachers can learn a lot by occasionally looking at learners' written records. Student notebooks offer a fascinating insight into the individual learning styles and can alert the teacher to learning problems –e.g. persistent problems with spelling, mistranslation, over-reliance on translation– which might not otherwise be so clearly revealed. It can all act as important feedback on the lesson and on the performance and progress of individuals (McCarthy 1990)

7. Dictionary training

When integrated as a meaningful task, the dictionary can become an active feature of second language acquisition and the importance of dictionary training as an aspect of learner autonomy should not be underestimated.

For our purposes, the two kinds of dictionary that most concern us are monolingual learner's dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries. Monolingual learner's dictionaries have made considerable progress since the first edition of Hornby's *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* in 1948. They are aimed at non-native speakers and provide information relevant to L2 learners.

The ideal learner's dictionary should give a sufficiently clear explanation not only for the learner to decode meaning (find the meanings of unknown words) but also to encode (find words to fit desired meanings) without error. Choosing the best one is very difficult and depends on individual needs.

Bilingual dictionaries are often thought as inferior to good monolingual learner's dictionaries, perhaps because they often suggest a too simplistic one-to-one relationship between words in the source language and words in the target language, and perhaps because they do not seem to encourage the engagement with the target

language which is considered an important learning element in the use of the monolingual dictionary. However, they are widely used by learners, especially the small pocket-dictionaries. We must bear in mind that even the smallest dictionary used intelligently and skillfully can be most useful, however limited its information. The challenge is to make the learner aware of what it «can» do and, crucially, what it «cannot» do.

Dictionaries are overwhelmingly used just for decoding: the students mostly look up the meaning of words. Practical training may, therefore, be necessary to encourage fuller and more productive use, especially in the use of the learner's dictionary as an encoding tool (McCarthy 1990).

8. Conclusión

This paper's goal has been to provide some new perspectives on the question of what can be done to facilitate the learner's acquisition of L2 vocabulary. Learners should be actively involved in their vocabulary learning process. Teachers of second languages must not only help L2 learners acquire linguistic competence but these endeavours should be complemented by an equally systematic approach to helping them develop their competence as learners. This paper demonstrates the different ways of achieving this.

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Miriam Manzanares Codesal lleva 12 años enseñando inglés como Agregada de EE.OO.II. y en la actualidad se encuentra realizando su tesis doctoral en la U.A.M. sobre la *Evolución de la Masculinidad en las Novelas de Margaret Laurence*. Dirección electrónica: matt@mundivia.es