



## TEACHING VOCABULARY TO ENGINEERING STUDENTS

D.Anjaneyulu

Assistant professor/English  
GRT Institute of Engineering and Technology,  
Tiruttani, Tamilnadu, India

### ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with learning and acquiring words to enrich the vocabulary. In this paper, the focus is on how to teach vocabulary to engineering students. It emphasizes the usage of terminology in different situations. It also aims at the ways and means of teaching vocabulary to technical students. Vocabulary plays a vital role in science, engineering and technology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of learning words in any language cannot be exaggerated. When we say that we know English, we mean that we know the meanings and usage of a few thousand words in English. Communication in any language is impossible without some mastery of the words used in that language. It is mainly through using words that we compose and express our thoughts to others. A second or foreign language learner of English is required not only to focus upon the sentence structures but also upon the acquisition of words. Often, the learner seeks to learn the words before even attempting to understand and use the sentences. When a new sentence is presented to a learner, he tends to break it into manageable units called words.

Everyone intuitively feels what a word is on most occasions. However it is indeed hard to define word, because sometimes two or more “words” may be combined, printed, and used as a single word. Learning words in any second or foreign language program involves not only learning the meanings of the words, but also learning how these words are used appropriately in linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural

contexts. Words carry connotations which may be quite different from their literal meanings. *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, for example, uses several labels to indicate a particular attitude associated with the use of words: Approving, Derogatory, Euphemistic, Figurative, Formal, Informal, Ironic, Jocular, Offensive, Rhetorical, sexist, slang, and Taboo. Meanings of words often become clearer when they are used in proper linguistic structures and in appropriate social contexts. Some words from the native language of the ESL learner may look alike or share similar meanings in some contexts with corresponding English words. However, they may differ from each other in other more important contexts. Learning words involves learning structures of the language. So, it is important that when a word is learned, students are encouraged to learn not only the words but their grammatical characteristics (usage).

### 2. QUESTIONS REGARDING VOCABULARY TEACHING

The questions which concern the ENGLISH teacher as regards teaching vocabulary are listed by Allen (1983:6):

1. Which English words do students need most to learn?
2. How can we make those words seem important to students?
3. How can so many needed words be taught during the short time our students have for English?
4. What can we do when a few members of the class already know words that the others need to learn?
5. Why are some words easier than others to learn?
6. Which aids to vocabulary teaching are available?
7. How can we encourage students to take more responsibility for their own vocabulary learning?
8. What are some good ways to find out how much vocabulary the students have actually learned?

### **3. EXPERIENTIAL VOCABULARY TEACHING/LEARNING**

In the classrooms where there is a greater emphasis on experiential learning, teachers may prefer to have the students first experience the meanings in some manner before the words for these meanings are given to them. For example, students may be given a variety of fruits which naturally differ from each other in terms of color, shape, smell, and taste. Students feel and touch the fruits. Sometimes they may even taste the fruits. During and after this experience, words are introduced to refer to the fruits.

These teachers (who prefer an experiential mode of teaching and learning) suggest that we draw the attention of students to meanings before we drill the words. As Raimes (1983) points out, it is important for us to remember “the ways in which people learn vocabulary outside of school.” We do not seek the words first. We experience something and then we ask for words to denote what we have experienced. Students learn those words better which they really need.

To get the students really use the words and not just recognize them and reveal their understanding of the words, we need to make them compose simple sentences using these words. Putting words in simple commands has been found highly useful by the teachers for this purpose. One student will give a command, and another will perform. The students will take turns and this gives them an opportunity to actually produce the words and use them in a conversation or communication setting.

Remember that from the beginning it is important for the students not only to know the meanings but also to use the words appropriately. The Total Physical Response method is very useful at this stage. Using real objects and pictures of objects will help teaching the meaning of many non-action words. Parts of the body can be taught using the pictures and nursery rhymes. Again when commands are given to show the hand, leg, finger, etc., students begin to engage themselves in a conversational mode. They take turns in asking and answering questions.

While learning words for individual body parts, students learn also plurals and even possessive forms. In other words, we introduce words and their meanings while at the same time we teach the variations these undergo in certain grammatical contexts. A choral drill of spelling for some words whose pronunciation differs radically from the written spelling is a good addition to the classroom exercises at this stage. Dictation may also be considered. Some teachers encourage their students to draw pictures for the word they have just learned. Puzzle-like tasks are given to identify the objects referred to by the word. Some use “fill in the blanks” technique to enable students to recall the spelling as well as the word.

### **4. WHAT WORDS TO TEACH?**

How do we decide which words to include in our language teaching? Perhaps we should aim at teaching the most useful words for the learner, as well as the most frequently used words in English. However it is very difficult to strike a balance between the two. Since frequency counts depend upon the topics of passages, etc., frequency count alone will not be of much use. Fortunately for us, scholars have come up with several lists of important and most useful content words as well as function words in English. These words are used in most ENGLISH textbooks. Most of the ENGLISH materials at the beginner’s level revolve around these identified words. Hence, if we could choose those textbooks which seem to match our interests and skills in teaching and the needs of our students, then we can follow the suggestions given in the textbook. That is, it may be a safe bet often to follow the order, arrangement, and presentation of words in a textbook, making improvisations wherever necessary.

Freeman Twaddell recommended that we should help develop vocabulary skills by encouraging them to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. He also recommended that the teachers should tolerate some vagueness of meaning where precision is not absolutely needed.

Content words are innumerable and are used to meet the needs of the context. Addition to the lists of content words can always be made. On the other hand, the structure words are few and additions to these words are not permissible. Students learn the structure words when they begin to use the content words in larger units in appropriate sentence and social contexts. Structure words are more frequently used, whereas the use of the content words will depend upon the frequency of the field in which it is used. Students add to the content word list as they are exposed to new environments.

### 5. ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOCABULARY

Textbooks tend to introduce the basic English words in the beginning level of instruction. Basic vocabulary consists of all the vocabulary items that are found in daily use in listening, speaking, reading, and writing contexts of the native speakers of English. It excludes all the items not found in the every day language activity. Thus the most frequent words that occur in the daily language activities are the basic vocabulary of English. Moreover it is generally assumed that the basic vocabulary consists only of the root words and not their derivatives.

A distinction is often made between **active** and **passive** vocabulary used by the native speakers of English. The ENGLISH teachers as well as the textbook writers make use of this distinction in classroom practice and in writing lessons and exercises. The active vocabulary is defined as the number of words we actually use. The passive vocabulary refers to the larger number of vocabulary we are able to understand, but use only rarely. Scholars have defined the active vocabulary as the one which is learned very intensively with respect to form, meaning and use in such a way that the learner will be able to use it in all the listening, speaking, reading, and writing activity. In contrast, the passive vocabulary is the one which is understood by the students in a spoken or written context but the student cannot reproduce the same on his own. Some words will be taught as active vocabulary, and some others will be treated only as passive vocabulary.

**Recognition** vocabulary is defined as the one which is recognized or identified in listening or reading responses. The **reproduction** vocabulary is identified either in actual spoken or written responses. Teachers may or may not make much of these distinctions. They may give the meanings for all the words they are about to introduce. However, the distinction between active and passive vocabulary is bound to be established sooner or later in the speech habits of the student. So, in order to use the class time efficiently and

economically to the best advantage of the learner, teachers would do well if they give more exercises for the use of the “active” vocabulary. The teacher presents a lesson, making use of a situation appropriate to the course design and to the particular group of students. She introduces the vocabulary in meaningful contexts, but leaves the students to make their own active/passive choices through her focus or lack of focus on particular words. “The words in a student’s passive vocabulary, when the need for them arises, will move into the active vocabulary. We might also expect some movement from the active to the passive, as students learn more words and don’t consistently review older ones” (Bowen et al. 1985).

### 6. USE THE WORDS FOR COMMUNICATION

“Understanding, hearing, and seeing a word are only first steps toward knowing it. Those first steps should be followed by activities that require students to use the new words for communication. ... the emphasis has been on experiences which require students to use English words for communication. ... the new words are used for making something happen. (An action is performed, or a picture is drawn, according to directions that are given in English.) In other activities, English is used for giving and receiving information. For instance, students find out, by using English, what a classmate is doing or they guess which pictures a classmate has drawn. The instructional value of such activities is this: when someone has to accomplish something which can be done only by using certain words, those words will be learned” (Allen 1983:42). It is useful to collect pictures which may be displayed in the classroom. Collect and group these pictures showing kinds of animals, vehicles, vegetables, furniture, buildings, occupations, etc. Write below the names of these objects/events/actions. Give the words to students and ask them collect pictures for the words. Remember that words are learned not only through a formal introduction in a lesson in the classroom but also through reading and conversations/interactions with the native speakers as well as other users of English as a second/foreign language. The lessons given to students for extensive reading should use simple structures and use only those words already known to the learners. A few words, however, may be introduced here and there without affecting the comprehension of the text. Some have suggested that one or two new words out of one hundred words would be a good proportion.

### 7. HOW TO ACQUIRE MORE WORDS?

One way to learn the meaning of unfamiliar words is to observe how they are used and make intelligent guesses. Over time the guesses are refined and the meaning comes to be specific. As Nation

(1994:viii) points out, “in addition to learning new vocabulary, learners need to be able to use strategies to cope with unknown vocabulary met in listening or reading texts, to make up for gaps in productive vocabulary in speaking and writing, to gain fluency in using known vocabulary, and to learn new words in isolation.”

Another good way is to ask about one’s surroundings, requesting from friends and acquaintances identifications and definitions. Quite a few exercise types are found in the commercial textbooks aimed at teaching English as a second or foreign language, which help us to teach and learn words in a graded manner. Carefully go through these exercises found in series such as Hello English and Success English. Use these exercises every day in your classroom.

### 8. SOME VOCABULARY EXERCISES

Consider the following as additional exercises. These are taken from Bowen et al. (1985):

- Pick out things you see around you, and ask what they are, what they are called, what they are used for, etc. This helps direct vocabulary building. Preferably things you don’t know or don’t recognize.
- Phrasal Verbs: Listen carefully to each sentence. Then paraphrase the sentence by substituting an appropriate phrasal verb for the single verb (or vice versa). (He arose 10 minutes later: He got up 10 minutes later; He ascended to the second floor: He went up to the second floor).
- Picture-cued responses: Describe the activities pictured in the following drawings.
- Noun compounds and noun phrases: From the clue you will be given, produce an appropriate response that distinguishes a compound from a phrase (a store that sells toys: a toy store; a box to keep firewood in: the wood box; a pin to hold your necktie: a tie pin; a toy in the form of a store: a toy store).
- Shortened forms: Your teacher will set up a sentence frame, then will suggest a substitute for the first word. When called on, produce the sentence as modified by the substitution.

- Literal acronyms: Pronounce the acronyms by giving the names of the letters that make each up. Then finish the sentence by giving the equivalent full form.
- Nicknames: As your teacher presents a series of names, make statements following the pattern given.

### *Vocabulary in Written Language*

Vocabulary teaching is a very important step. Even as we focus on the mastery of language skills and grammar, adequate attention must be paid to the mastery of words in English. Words are learned in many ways. Reading is an important means to learn new words. Is there any one best approach for teaching vocabulary in English? No.

### 9. SOME WAYS TO LEARN AND TEACH VOCABULARY

- Glossaries and Dictionaries.
- Use of the Thesaurus.
- The practice of penciling a small dot in front of an entry every time it is looked up.
- The idea of a vocabulary notebook. List the interesting words in a notebook where it will be convenient to review them from time to time.
- One widely acknowledged way to build vocabulary is through an understanding and application of word formation processes.
- Learning the Synonyms and the nuances that distinguish the synonyms.
- Connotations.
- Interpretation of words that are very similar in appearance.
- Structure Vs Content vocabulary
- Collocations Lists of words. Examples: Measurement vocabulary, color terms, converse form of verbs, semantic associations (homonyms, homographs (pairs of words with the same spelling, but with different pronunciations and meanings), relative generality-specificity of words with overlapping meanings, antonyms.
- Idioms.

### 10. CONCLUSION

Vocabulary tests are of several kinds. Beginner’s vocabulary skill is tested through questions which expect a yes or no answer, or by asking them to

perform a simple task. In multiple choice questions, “a sentence with a missing word is presented; students choose one of four vocabulary items given to complete the sentence. A third type, multiple choice paraphrase, is a test in which a sentence with one word underlined is given. Students choose which of four words is the closest in meaning to the underlined item. A fourth kind of test, simple completion (words), has students write in the missing part of words that appear in sentences” Synonyms and antonyms may also be elicited. Testing the knowledge and use of subtle shades of meanings reflected in words somewhat synonymous is another useful test. Asking the students to use words in appropriate sentences is another exercise which has been traditionally used in language textbooks.

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