



Introducing Vocabulary in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The paper deals with EFL and presents different theoretical and practical ways in language learning, that is learning new vocabulary. In the beginning it examines the two different ways of learning a foreign language, that is incidental (language acquisition) and intentional (language learning). Subsequently, it examines which is more important in language learning, grammar, or vocabulary and why. The central part of the paper focuses on ways of teaching and learning new vocabulary and the four key points in learning new vocabulary, which are exposure, repetition and multiple encounter, multisensory learning and learning stages. The paper describes the theoretical background for the four key points and tips on how to implement them. The paper argues that vocabulary trumps grammar in foreign language learning and that the four key points described in the paper are crucial in facilitating vocabulary learning. The paper is in terms of methodology theoretical in nature and uses the descriptive research method as it describes previous findings on the topic and comparative research method when comparing professional and scientific findings of different authors. The paper is also based on the author's personal work and activities in the classroom in her 20 years of teaching English.

Keywords: acquisition, exposure, repetition, multisensory learning, learning stages

1. Introduction

There are many different methods and ways on how to learn a foreign language. You can learn a foreign language under hypnosis, with an app, etc. Firstly, language learning can be broken down into two main ways, that is incidental (language acquisition) and intentional (language learning). These are the two main ways in which people learn a language, primarily their mother tongue and secondly a foreign language. The paper focuses on foreign language learning, i.e. EFL in the classroom and researches best practices, best ways on how to learn a foreign language quickly and efficiently. The central part of the paper **Introducing Vocabulary in the EFL Classroom** examines the importance of focusing on vocabulary rather on grammar and the reasons behind it and presents the key points when introducing and learning new vocabulary in the classroom, which are exposure, repetition and multiple



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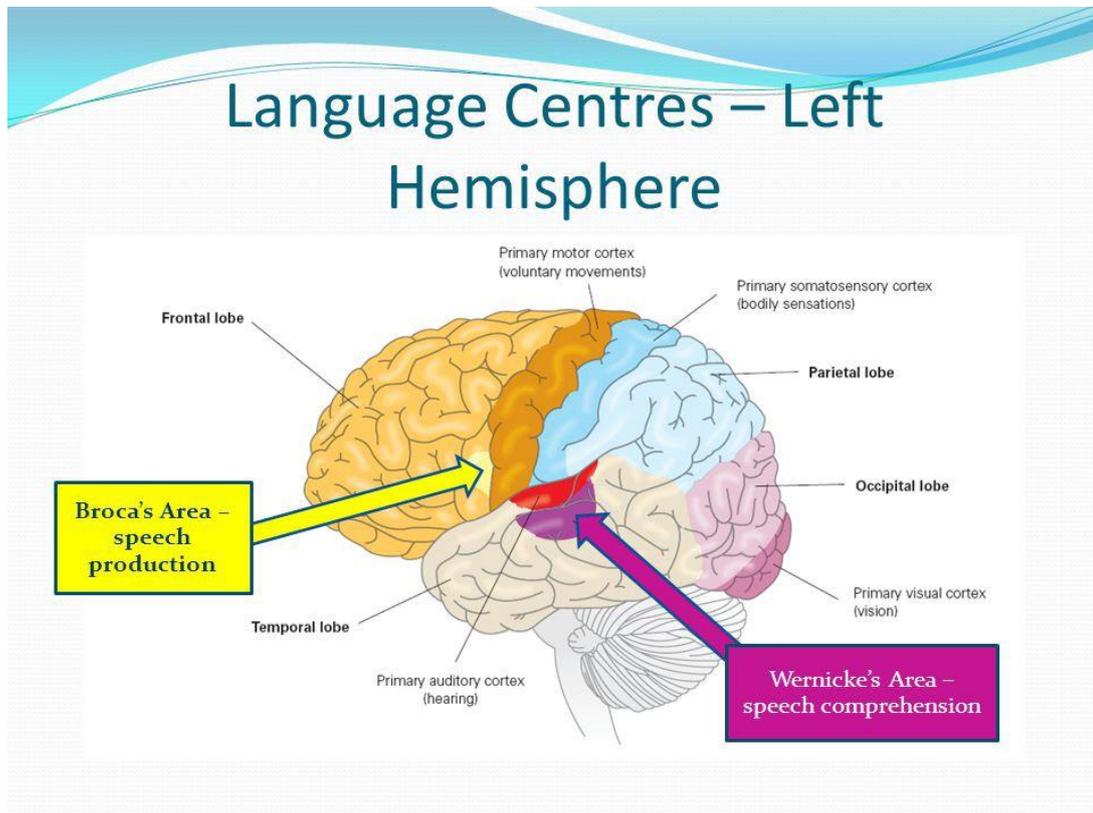
encounter, multisensory learning and learning stages. The paper is of theoretical nature, it uses the descriptive method in describing findings on the topic, as well as best practices and personal experience of the author in her 20 years of teaching English.

2. Language learning and language acquisition

Language learning (LL) and language acquisition (LA) seem like two similar processes, although they are quite different. Language acquisition and language learning take place in two different places of the brain. The left temporal cortex is active in the language learning process, where the understanding of speech takes place, whereas the left frontal cortex is the word production centre of the brain and the one actively involved in language acquisition processes, although there are of course many areas of the brain involved both in language acquisition and learning.¹

Figure 2: The Theoretical Framework between Acquisition and Learning

¹ Limacher, 2021



Source: (Moreno, 2017)

Language acquisition is also termed as implicit learning, a natural process, without conscious operation, while explicit learning is a more conscious operation.

1.1. Language acquisition

Language acquisition is a natural phenomenon when a person acquires a language simply by listening and being exposed to the language and assimilating it. Acquisition takes place when we are surrounded by the language and absorb it, acquire the language in a natural, subconscious process during which we are unaware of grammatical rules. We do not learn about the language grammar nor about the structure of the language. This is the way we learn our mother tongue. Parents for example do not explain the objects around us and we do not memorise the words for them by repetition. We simply hear the names of words and objects around us so many times, that we remember and acquire it because of regular exposure. It is an unconscious process. Children do not learn their first language by repetition but acquire it by simple and regular exposure. We also learn foreign languages through acquisition, if we live a foreign country, if we are exposed to it in another way. As the paper explains a little later, language acquisition also takes place when children play video games.



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learning. In terms of language fluency, students who know 250 to 500 words are beginners, 1000 to 3000 words enable everyday conversations, whereas 10,000 words and more makes one fluent. Compared to the native speakers, this is still only a half or even a quarter.

In foreign language learning, vocabulary has not always played an important part. Kelly pointed out that direct instruction on vocabulary was presented only when a word exemplified a grammatical rule.⁴ Grammar was at the forefront of language teaching and learning for a long period of time and remains the central focus of language learning even today.

After the 1970s the Communicative Language Teaching concept and the Natural Approach were responsible for emphasising the importance of the lexicon and vocabulary in language teaching and learning.⁵ Things were perhaps shifting in theory, but all too often not so much in practice.

The importance of teaching and learning vocabulary before grammar is also explained by language instructor Jeff Brown, which is something that the author has also noticed in her many years of teaching English. If you learn grammar before you are fluent in a language, you become inhibited and worry too much about the grammatical rules and the mistakes you are making.⁶ The following quote pretty much summarises the reason to put vocabulary before grammar:

“Without grammar very little can conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

Wilkins, 1977

Based on the author’s personal experience of learning English in her primary, secondary school and during her university studies in Slovenia, the focus had been heavily on grammar. After the author graduated from university, she began working as an English teacher. She has been teaching English for over twenty years now and still notices that the focus unfortunately is all too often on grammar, even in primary school. Despite the Slovenian national curriculum for the English language in primary schools, which barely mentions the grammatical structures or tenses and focuses on the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, in practice the students still learn the difference between Present Simple and Present Continuous, the irregular verbs, the Past Simple with teachers dedicating and organising lessons around these topics.⁷ Whereas, vocabulary is typically in the background used for the examples for grammatical structures.

⁴ Kelly, 1969

⁵ Laufer, 1998

⁶ Brown, 2018

⁷ Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, Republic of Slovenia, 2016



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When it comes down, a language consists of two basic things – vocabulary and grammar. Vocabulary represents the meaning, the feelings, the actions, the ideas that people are trying to communicate, and the grammar provides the rules and structures for putting the meaning together. If you go into a café and want to order a coffee in a foreign country, you need to know the word for coffee. It does not matter whether you say I had a coffee, I would like a coffee, please, or coffee, the most important thing is to say the word coffee. The larger your vocabulary size, the easier it is to learn more new words. Whereas if you know the difference between Present Simple and Present Continuous, the text could be in any made-up language and you could still know how to put the –ing ending in Present Continuous examples without any understanding.

3. Introducing vocabulary in the FL Classroom

Therefore, in learning a foreign language, especially in early teaching, vocabulary is key. In introducing new vocabulary, the author suggests four key points for facilitating and enhancing vocabulary learning. These are exposure, repetition and multiple encounter, multisensory learning and learning stages.

3.1. Exposure

Exposure is of crucial importance because of the language acquisition process. The more you are exposed to a language, the faster you learn it. Which is why, the fastest and easiest way to learn a foreign language, is to move to a country, where the language is not foreign, but mother tongue. Although the foreign language classroom is different than the world and it is difficult to emulate the natural process of acquiring the mother tongue, because there is that much less exposure, the process is still the same. The process also takes place outside the classroom, even if you are learning a foreign language, and especially so if you are learning the English language, as English is all around us, because of the popular culture, music, films, video games, etc. Video games alone are a major contributor in acquiring the English language. Postic writes in his paper on the impact of videogame playing on English proficiency that video games have a profound impact on language acquisition.⁸ Therefore, exposure is of great importance when learning a foreign language. Teachers should use as much of the target language as possible in the classroom and as little of the source language or mother tongue as needed.

3.2. Repetition and multiple encounter

Use it or lose it. Repetition and multiple encounters are important, because of the way how the memory works. The short-term memory holds vocabulary items in the mind for a few

⁸ Postic, 2018



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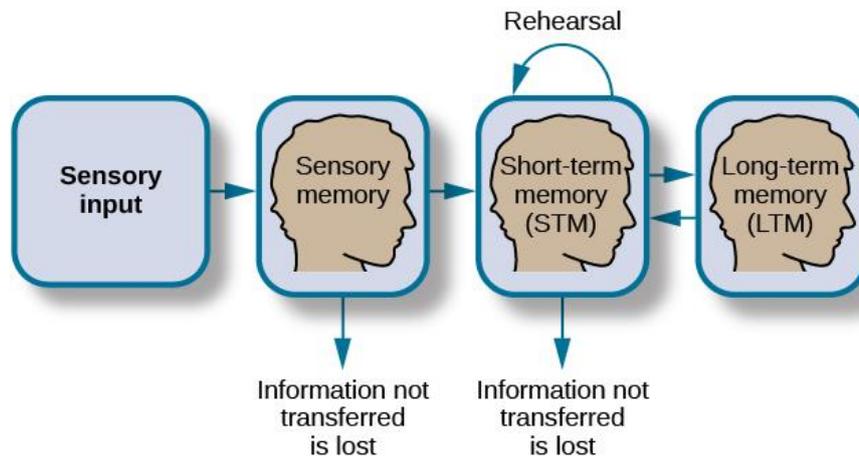
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seconds. These vocabulary items become part of the working memory once learners start working with them through activities. Vocabulary items are stored in the long-term memory over time when learners repeatedly meet them in different contexts.



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Figure 2: How memory works



Source: (Pedley-Smith, 2020)

Therefore, when learning new vocabulary, teachers should focus on practicing and repeating it and using it in different situations and contexts. In the foreign language classroom, repetition is key. Revisit topics, expand on them, use synonyms, etc.

3.3. Multisensory learning

Multisensory learning in a way continues the trail of thought from the previous chapter, that is encountering and repeating new vocabulary in different situations and contexts. Multisensory learning focuses on the fact that people learn best in different ways or that a certain type of intelligence prevails in them. The theory suggests that there are many different types of learners. It is estimated that most people are **visual learners**, who learn through seeing. Then there are **auditory learners** who learn through listening, **sensory-motor learners** who learn through moving and touching and other such as **logical mathematical learners**, **naturalist learners**, etc.⁹

The author supports this theory not in the sense that people can only learn in one way, but in a way that multisensory learning is beneficial to all of us. Students need to be introduced to new information, new vocabulary in different ways, they need to hear it, see it, read it, feel it to remember and learn it as quickly as possible.

3.4. Learning stages

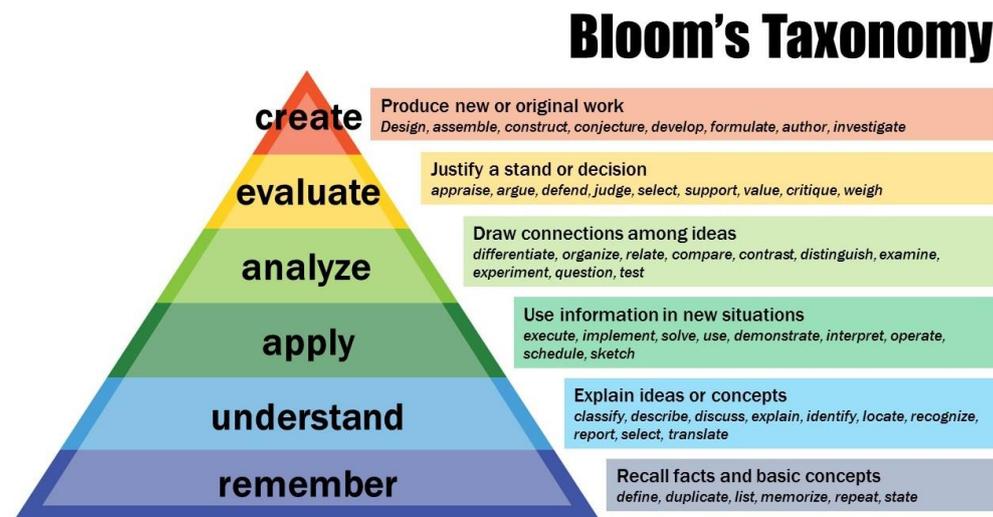
According to the generally known Bloom's taxonomy there are six learning stages when learning something new:

⁹ Armstrong, 1994



1. **REMEMBERING**, when we recall facts and basic concepts.
2. **UNDERSTANDING**, where we classify, describe, can explain, recognise or translate information.
3. **APPLYING**, when we can use information in new situations, i.e., vocabulary in new context.
4. **ANALYSING**, when we can connect among ideas, organise, compare, etc.
5. **EVALUATING**, when we can select, support, value new information.
6. **CREATING**, when we can produce new and original work.¹⁰

Figure 3: Bloom's taxonomy



Source: (Armstrong, 2010)

In learning vocabulary usually all six stages of the Bloom's taxonomy are not involved in the learning process and we are too often stuck in the bottom two – remembering and understanding and at times, only on number one - remembering. Which is unfortunate, as remembering new vocabulary without understanding is pointless. Bloom's taxonomy is even more meaningful in terms of teaching grammar. When we are teaching grammar in the EFL classroom, we should focus on all the learning stages and make sure that we go through all of them. To not only use the 'fill the gap' or 'put the verb in the correct tense' exercises, therefore barely touch on the third learning stage – applying, but to also go higher, where students need to analyse, evaluate, and produce.

¹⁰ Armstrong, 2010



4. Conclusion

The paper presents key tips and best practices for learning a foreign language, focusing on learning new vocabulary and describes the ways on the how to learn it. It examines the two learning processes that take place while learning a foreign language, language acquisition and language learning. The paper then explains the importance of focusing on vocabulary rather than grammar in the EFL classroom and presents the four key points on how to facilitate and expedite vocabulary learning. It furthermore describes the theoretical background behind the four key points. The paper is theoretical in nature and uses the descriptive research method, but also based on the author's work in the classroom in her 20 years of teaching English. In her opinion and from her experience, the following five key points presented in this paper are in fact accurate and significantly contribute to faster language learning:

1. Vocabulary trumps grammar, especially in the beginning or in early learning stages.
2. The more exposure, the better.
3. Use it or lose it – repetition is key.
4. Read it, say it, act it out, etc. Multisensory learning or learn with all your senses.
5. Keep in mind the learning stages of Bloom's taxonomy and do not stop at remembering or understanding.

Acknowledgment

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