Week 15 – Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

Schmitt (2000) Chapter 8: Teaching and learning vocabulary

The chapter here is rather simple and limited in scope. Schmitt (2000) does not make specific reference to a lot of the variables that we encounter in learners. We argued strongly in our discussion of learning in the previous chapter that learning is very much an individual process. Yes, there are certainly identifiable and systematic processes in learning but how a given person reacts to and learns from it varies quite a bit. While behavior is the outward manifestation and proof of learning it is also only the tip of an enormous iceberg of knowledge while underlies the behavior we can observe and measure. This clear disparity between behavior (even specifically elicited) and knowledge (even specifically elicited) underscores the overall weakness of formal testing and the danger of overestimating the results of any type of one-off test. It, is, however, a helpful notion in teaching.

Since we are never fully aware of what our students know and how they know things in relation to the massive area of vocabulary as we have proposed it here in the lexicalist tradition, this frees us up as teachers. Instead of trying to force feed vocabulary items into the minds of our students on the assumption that their minds are mouths and are both willing and able to gobble up all that we present them, or which they encounter, we need to think about learning as a more organic way. The gobble up model sees learners as receptacles that need to be filled. The success or failure of all this gobbling can be attributed to either the learners’ laziness to open their minds (attention and effort) or the teachers to manage their learning in an effective, engaging way. This is an oversimplified view of learning.

Learning is a messy process regardless of how well information is presented or how engaging the materials. Learners are not merely receptacles. In some ways this means that we as teachers do not have to obsess over what we do specifically. Based on the idea that vocabulary learning is incremental we need to focus on teaching as an ongoing process.

The driving force for all the different teaching/learning that we will do in relation to language is to understand that language is a system. Teaching is a way of helping students build and fine-tune their system. Although the system has parts (words), it is how those parts fit together to create something very complex that is of interest to us as teachers. We need to teach the system of language, not merely the parts.

How many words – which ones?
This are the two big questions that teachers/learners need to try to determine. Of course the answer will depend on where one is standing and where he or she wants to go. Learning is more efficient when it is goal oriented. Goal orientation leads to better motivation. Teachers play an important role in helping students choose and understand goals and objectives. As we mentioned in class, however, for English, there are often societal goals that may conflict with the goals teachers have set for students. Teachers are thinking about language as a system and the process for learning that system. Societies often envision languages very differently and
this leads to disparate and conflicting goals. It is, therefore, imperative that teachers as language experts explain the goals they have set and the reasons for those goals to students and parents. So teachers always have to have clear ideas and justifications for why they are doing certain things. These are the teacher’s beliefs and they should come not from societal beliefs (although it is important to be aware of these) but from current theories of language and learning.

Based on the current state of research, then, we can posit amounts and types of words for our students. In general, following Schmitt (2000), speakers of a language learn 1,000 word families per year for the first 20 years of their lives. But these are not learned at a static rate. It takes children longer to learn words at first. As we have discussed, these first 2,000 words are pivotal for communication, not just as a child but later as well. These same basic words retain their high frequency are used in a vast array of different ways by adults. Vocabulary changes across one’s lifetime not by abandoning the words we have learned and replacing them but by expanding the uses of those same basic words while adding others. So there are some very important milestones in lexical development. The 2,000 word level is one. Then there is the 5,000 word level and then the 10,000. At 10,000 one is ready to move into the greater world and start learning the more formal and specialized aspects of language required by educated speakers.

It should be clear that it is difficult and possibly not useful to consider the number of words separate from the type of words one has set to learn. As we move up from the 10,000 word level we start entering the realm of passive vocabulary. Everything below the 5,000 word mark is certainly active. Between 5,000 and 10,000 we have a somewhat less active type of activity, but these are words that are still expected to be used based on their rather high frequency of use. After 10,000 words may end up being passive with the speaker still being considered highly proficient. As we mentioned last week, learning vocabulary as passive is not necessarily easier. But, high frequency items are in general easier to learn because of their more restricted semantic profiles and patterns of use. It is at this level that teachers often lay on high numbers for vocabulary learning in English (often to help students deal with societal views and goals). This however can lead to an asymmetrical kind of vocabulary learning where the learner has in some way been exposed to thousands of low frequency, passive vocabulary items but has a very small active vocabulary. Since this is a very top-heavy approach it is not surprising when in the duration the system evaporates and very little is retained even as passive vocabulary.

Overt approaches - Covert approaches

When we think about approaches we can break these down in general to covert and overt. Before getting into this it should be clear that these are on a continuum and, as we already mentioned in class last week, the approach we take for the presentation of vocabulary items does not determine how they are learned, although there are some correlations. We need to present vocabulary, whether overtly or covertly, based on the idea of encoding. The assumption is that the learners are noticing the words in some way they are being encoded and/or recoded. So, in large part the presentation of the vocabulary is designed around the idea of what and how the learners will notice the items. Bearing in mind that good encoding leads to better storage and retrieval, we want to help learners encode better. Since encoding is based on perception and tempered by emotion and salience, we can do thus by making use of different perceptual routes and by raising interest.

The lexicon, as we have seen, is a system, a complex one but a system none-the-less. We therefore need to make use of what we know about the system. The system works on and therefore is based on connections. We therefore need to make use of connections while simultaneously building and strengthening connections. Vocabulary, therefore, needs to be
presented in a way that makes use of what is already known (in the L2, the L1 and world in general). In essence, it needs to be meaningful. Lists, as we discussed, can be useful tools for learning, but the list, as a very overt form of presenting vocabulary, needs to be based on some aspect of the lexical system. This is what makes it a principled list and one that is meaningful. Make sure there is some sort of anchor to which the learners can attach the new word or the new usage or form of a known word. This can be other L2 words, a theme, a setting, visuals, L1 synonyms or all of these.

Looking more specifically at overt approaches, it should be clear that overt approaches are ones that require learners to focus their attention on the learning process. This occurs when a teacher presents vocabulary items in class, when the teacher presents a list for the students to study, or involved the students in an exercise with a linguistic focus. As we can see, what students are supposed to learn and even how they are supposed to learn it is largely determined by the teacher. After doing something overtly, the teacher assumes the students have learned what their attention has been drawn to. Overt approaches also take more time. The number of items learned tends to be smaller. They are language focused and may therefore be less interesting for the learners.

For that reason the main way that learners are seen to learn vocabulary is through covert presentations. In covert teaching the students engage with language in a more meaningful way and in doing so are thought to learn new words and new aspects of pre-existing words. In short this way often involves the learners doing with language. This can be something inside the classroom, such as a task or an activity (performed with others or alone) or something that they are expected to do outside the classroom. In covert presentation the teacher may assign tasks but she is not certain what the students may learn as a result. While it is assumed that students will learn new forms, patterns, and uses of words what and how is not pre-determined. Covert approaches in the classroom are important and potentially more powerful in that they allow for greater opportunities to learn. They are also more authentic in the materials in the way the students are supposed to operate with the language. But there are also challenges with a covert approach to teaching. It is based on practice and the learning is only as good as the practice. If the practice is too hard or uninteresting the student may not learn very much.

Teachers very often like to sequence overt and covert in relation to each other. Using terms from the sociocultural approaches to learning we can say that overt approaches are sued to scaffold the covert practice students get with language. The idea being that the overt approach ensures that students will be able to handle the covert practice more effectively.

Input-based approaches
Input-based approaches, which use reading and listening as ways of helping students to learn new words, make a similar use of overt and covert ways of teaching. Often we precede a reading or a listening with a teacher-lead overt approach to some of the words in the text. This is supposed to lessen the load and reduce the number of unknown words in the text. If students are to deal with a text meaningfully they need to be able to process the text quickly and knowing too few words reduces the speed (in reading) dramatically and results in simply missing information in listening. A more intensive reading or listening in which the students are given time with individual items is very explicit and may involve large amounts of overt scaffolding. When considering input-based approaches to helping students learn vocabulary the teacher needs to think carefully of the ratio of known to unknown words.

Another important issue is that of how we can raise the ratio of known to unknown words. This is often achieved through more overt language focused exercises being done prior to a more general, meaning focused reading or listening. Teachers use aspects of overt teaching to scaffold the covert practice by pre-teaching words, activating schema, brainstorming and other
techniques that are designed to make use of what is already known.

Scaffolding
Spoken versus written input
Teachers need to be aware that the patterns created in written and spoken language can be very different. Spoken language is prototypically more informal while written language is formal. The types of settings are also very different. While we can use listening to scaffold a reading task and vice versa, it should be noted that they are not the same and the way we use the one to help the other should be considered. Typically, teachers use reading to help scaffold listening, but this often needs to no listening and since the reading is the text of the listening and was written first it is generally not very authentic. Simply, we need to think about how we are using these to help. Before finishing up here it should be noted that input-based approaches focus on the encoding and storage aspects of memory, with encoding being the main focus. This correlates strongly to approaches designed to enhance receptive vocabulary development.

Output-based approaches, on the other hand, focus on the retrieval aspects of memory. Output involves not only being able to find something in the lexicon but also being able to take it out and use it. This necessarily involves use of active vocabulary items.

Scaffolding
It is important to note that the processes for spoken and written output are very different. Speaking occurs under real time constraints. Responses need to be automatic. For this reason speaking uses much more formulaic language than writing, although writing does use formulas as well. Then patterns in speaking are rather simple and repetitive. It is hard to develop any of the skills we have discussed about vocabulary without going through this speaking stage. Basic spoken communication is of paramount importance in laying down the basic structure of the system.

MWUs and collocates
Among the major themes we have explored in this course is the idea of lexical patterning that goes beyond just single words patterning to make grammatical constructions. We highlighted the importance of MWUs and collocations as ways helping even beginning proficiency learners deal with the language faster and more accurately. So, it is important that we teach them and that students learn them. The common argument for delaying MWUs and especially idioms is that they are heard to learn. If we think of them as single words then they are not any harder to learn than a single word. The tricky part is getting learners to notice that they are MWUs and not just single words. Getting students to notice them can be hard. So this is what we need to focus on first. Students need to know from the outset that MWUs and collocations exist in the language and are important. They need to be able to look for and recognize them. This is obviously true in reading but is somewhat different in spoken language and listening. In listening one needs to know immediately if something is an MWU or a string of single words. There are also many clues given that an MWU is being used such as stress and intonation patterns. They are, therefore, more noticeable in spoken streams of speech so this might be a good place to start.