

STAGES OF VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AT THE GYMNASIUM LEVEL

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Rezumat: *Articolul urmărește să definească rolul predării vocabularului la nivel gimnazial. Metodicienii afirmă că predarea vocabularului este un element important în dezvoltarea și consolidarea abilităților de vorbire a elevilor. Îmbogățirea vocabularului este foarte importantă pentru cultivarea modalităților de exprimare a elevilor și se realizează sistematic în cadrul lecțiilor de limbă engleză. Dar aceasta nu se reduce doar la sesizarea sau însușirea de cuvinte noi. Este demonstrat că pentru realizarea finalității cognitive a noilor unități lexicale, acestea trebuie explicate și utilizate în contextul potrivit. Este evident faptul că un vocabular bogat contribuie la o comunicare eficientă în diferite situații. Dar, în*

același timp, nu ar trebui să uităm că vocabularul este predat împreună cu alte componente importante, cum ar fi gramatica, ortografia și pronunția.

Articoul, de asemenea, reflectă opiniile lingviștilor notorii despre rolul vocabularului în însușirea limbii, aspectele și clasificarea acestuia, precum și etapele de dobândire a vocabularului la nivel gimnazial.

Cuvinte cheie: *vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary mediation, word aspects, main steps in vocabulary teaching, facets of the vocabulary, vocabulary learning drills.*

Vocabulary has always been considered as a core element in language teaching as it directly leads to the mastery of the language. Being a non-stop developed area, vocabulary is generally viewed as one of the most significant aspects of a language and plays an integral role in the successful outcomes of a language learning process because only by mastering vocabulary English learners are able to improve their reading, speaking, writing and listening skills.

Speaking about vocabulary E. Hatch and S. Brown defined it as “*a list of words for a particular language or a set of words that individual speakers of language might use*” (Hatch 1995:88). Another famous linguist A. Wilkins in his research affirmed that, “*Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed*” (Wilkins 1972: 111). Thus, these statements lead to the idea that it does not matter how many grammatical rules language learners know, successful communication cannot be achieved without vocabulary mediation.

Reflecting upon this issue M. Lewis drew a significant conclusion expressed in a metaphorical way, and, namely, that “*lexis is the core or heart of language*” (Lewis 1993: 89). His ideas were shared and supported by another famous scholar W. Rupley, who described the role of vocabulary in the language teaching as “*of irreplaceable importance*” and underlined that vocabulary stock is “*the glue that holds stories, ideas and content together,... making comprehension accessible for children*”(Heilman 1998: 99). This denotes that without establishing a vocabulary base, comprehension and usage of a language will not be successful. The language learner should be able to recognize and use a word in different contexts and know all its meanings, as well. As researches show understanding language is bound with the amount of words the learner knows, it proves that learners should have sufficient word knowledge in order to understand what they read. According to P. Nation’s research, a

reader should know the meaning of at least, of 97% of the vocabulary used in the text in order to understand the author's message. The perfect knowledge of vocabulary is seen as an important factor in *speaking* and *writing, reading* and *listening comprehension*. He considers that vocabulary helps learners with *language production*, in his opinion the more words a learner knows, the more precisely he/ she can express the exact meaning of what he/ she reads. It means that language learners should know a large amount of word meanings to communicate effectively and avoid misunderstanding. He affirms that learners who have a rich vocabulary in several domains tend to be deeper thinkers, express their thoughts better and read more. Accordingly, improving language by absorbing words will help them be more successful from academic and communicative perspectives. The scholar affirms that using the right words in communicative acts, makes students be more effective communicators because a rich vocabulary helps them to express their thoughts and ideas in nice, sophisticated and well-structured vocabulary patterns in both oral and written forms. Considering this idea researcher Johnson O'Connor states that a rich vocabulary helps learners not only make a good impression on others but it is also a precious indicator that motivates learners to extend their vocabulary knowledge. In his opinion learners should use a more formal tone when writing rather than a conversational one. According to him a person's vocabulary level is the best predictor of his occupational success. In addition, when learners improve their vocabulary, their social and academic confidence and competence become stronger (Stahl 1999:174).

Developing this idea linguists consider that a language learner should be aware of the fact that vocabulary elements can be represented by more than one single word. Thus, according to the research made by M. Lewis and J. Hill, vocabulary can vary in its forms (Lewis, M., Hill J 1985:98): *Single words* (house, sun); *Set phrases* (up and down, it is up to you); *Variable phrases* (mathematic operation); *Phrasal verbs* (go away, make up); *Phraseological units* (once in a blue moon).

After a thorough analysis of all definitions on the essence of vocabulary, we can conclude that vocabulary is a total number of words or stock of words with their meanings that create a language used by a certain community. But regardless the level of learner's competence in any aspect

of language, it is impossible to express a precise message without sufficient vocabulary, as firstly, vocabulary carries a lexical meaning rather than a grammatical one. Secondly, the grammatical mistakes occur because of incorrect vocabulary usage in an interactional process. And thirdly, a rich vocabulary stock improves four learner's skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Dwelling further on this issue a famous linguist A. Ur (1996) claims that words should be taught taking into attention three main aspects: *pronunciation and spelling*, *grammar* and *meaning* (Ur 1996: 60-62). Concerning *pronunciation and spelling*, the linguist thinks that the pupil has to know what a word sounds like (he refers to the pronunciation of the word) and what it looks like (the way the word is spelt). Mentioning *the grammatical aspect of words* he refers to the grammatical peculiarities of the unknown words that should be taught during English lessons. So, he considers that when teaching a new verb, for example, its past forms might also be given, if this is an irregular verb (*see, saw, seen*), and if it is transitive or intransitive. A similar situation happens when teaching nouns. Thus, the researcher says that for a better understanding how these nouns build their plural forms, teachers should also explain whether they are regular or irregular (*teeth, tooth*) or (*book-books*) or the pupils' attention should be drawn to the fact that the noun has no plural form at all (*information, love, advice*). And, of course, it is essential that unknown words should be also accompanied by appropriate prepositions (*to be interested in, responsible for, depend on*).

When it comes to *words' meaning*, linguists consider that the meaning of a word is primary what it refers to in the real world, in other words it is its *denotation*-the primary meaning that can be given in the dictionary. For example, the word fox will be explained in dictionaries as "*a wild mammal belonging to the dog family that has a pointed face and ears, a wide tail covered in fur, and often reddish-brown fur*". According to linguistics, a less obvious component of the meaning of a vocabulary item is *connotation* which refers to the associations, either positive or negative meanings it evokes, which may or may not be indicated in a dictionary definition. Thus, working with Cambridge Dictionary and thoroughly analyzing word meanings, we can say that the word "fox", can be interpreted as "*someone who is clever and good at deceiving people*" or "*an attractive woman*"; the

word “lion” can stand for “*someone who is fearless and brave*”; the word “jackal” may be interpreted as “*a mean and indecent person, a traitor*”. And it is worth mentioning that a more subtle aspect of meaning that often needs to be taught is its *appropriateness*, the context in which it can or cannot be used.

Speaking about teaching vocabulary we should refer to another researcher whose input into the development of the vocabulary study should not be omitted. Thus, he is certain that it is important to follow five essential steps in vocabulary learning: *encountering new words, getting the word form, getting the word meaning, consolidating word form and meaning in memory, using the word* (Hatch 1995: 373-380). Hatch explains that the first significant step in vocabulary learning is *encountering new words*, he refers to the fact that pupils can come across new words “*by reading books*”, “*listening to TV and radio*”, “*reading newspapers and magazines*”. Encountering words are more effective when the learners work with interactive and interesting material because the number of times a word is seen or heard also influences on its memorization. We also know from our personal experience that the more times a word is used, the easier and better it is memorized. The second essential step to vocabulary development, to his mind, is learning it through a clear image. Thus, it may be: a) *visual or auditory or even both*; b) *seeing and having both facets of the vocabulary*. The importance of receiving the word form occurs when pupils are asked to give definitions or explanations for certain words. As practice shows, at the beginning pupils make mistakes that are related to the confusion of other word forms, for example: “*then-than, ship-sheep, pen-pan, bed-bad, what-that*”. This leads directly to the third step and, namely, to *getting the word meaning*. The main peculiarity of this essential step refers to the fact that the very meaning learners need may vary. It is evident that depending on the situation words can be used with more or less precise or vague meanings. Thus, for instance, if someone is asked “*what is an azalea?*”, the answers we receive can be the following: “*a type of flower*”, or more precisely “*a type of honeysuckle*”. If pupils are in a botany class, the explanation can be as specific as “*a genus of flowering shrubs with funnel-shaped corollas and deciduous leaves. They are from the heath family and related to rhododendrons*”. We can clearly see that the level of distinction that must be made in word definition/ explanation can vary both

with the requirements of the tasks or situations, and it entirely depends on the pupils' level. It must be remarked, that one of the most popular ways in incidental learning is getting word meaning from the context. The fourth step here is *consolidating word form and meaning in memory*. It is worth mentioning that this step contains many kinds of vocabulary learning drills such as *flashcards*, *matching exercises*, *crosswords* that strengthen the connection between word form and meaning. Here scholars dwell on the four key strategies that should be taken into consideration while introducing new words to pupils: *creating mental linkages*; *applying images and sounds*; *reviewing well*; *employing actions*.

And, of course, the final step in learning words is *using them in context*. Language educators claim that if words are used in context, they are sure to be memorized easier and in such cases words will always be used correctly preserving their main aspects/peculiarities because their usage provides a strong guarantee that words and their meanings will not fade from memory. E. Hatch considers that in addition to increasing confidence and receptive knowledge, the usage of words seems to be irreplaceable for pupils while testing their knowledge of collocations, syntactic restrictions, and register appropriateness (Hatch 1995: 380-390).

In conclusion we can say that vocabulary plays a crucial role in the teaching / learning process of a foreign language as it enables language learners with the ability to express their thoughts clearly and precisely and, at the same time, be confident of their speaking abilities. Therefore, teachers should be very careful how to introduce new words to pupils, what word aspects they attract the pupils' attention to, in what context words are used, so that they could memorize the word forms and all their meanings better and easier. Researches prove that learning words can be regarded as the most cognitively requiring task language learners should deal with, as words are the basic elements of the language and, as it is proved, pupils cannot communicate successfully without a sufficient vocabulary. And, finally, we can rightfully affirm that a rich vocabulary is a hub for the development of four language skills: *listening*, *speaking*, *reading* and *writing*.

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