**Леся Гуня**

**(Львів, Україна)**

**TEACHING VOCABULARY TO ADVANCED STUDENTS: A LEXICAL APPROACH**

Advanced learners can generally communicate well, having learnt all the basic structures of the language. However, they need to broaden their vocabulary to express themselves more clearly and appropriately in a wide range of situations.

Students might even have a receptive knowledge of a wider range of vocabulary, which means they can recognise the item and recognise its meaning. Nevertheless, their productive use of a wide range of vocabulary is normally limited, and this is one of the areas that need greater attention. At this stage we are concerned not only with students understanding the meaning of words, but also being able to use them appropriately, taking into account factors such as oral / written use of the language.

Traditionally, the teaching of vocabulary above elementary levels was mostly incidental, limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading or sometimes listening texts. This indirect teaching of vocabulary assumes that vocabulary expansion will happen through the practice of other language skills, which has been proved not enough to ensure vocabulary expansion [1, p.25].

Traditional science lessons have often begun with teachers presenting students with science vocabulary words and asking them to write the words, find the definitions in a dictionary or the glossary of the textbook, match the words to definitions, or use the words in a sentence. In this model of instruction, words are often presented in isolation and students are tested on the words alone, without application to concepts.

Many of us were “taught” this way, so we remember how little these practices contributed to conceptual development. These traditional strategies stem from the assumption that students absorb the meanings of many science terms simply by writing the words and their definitions. To many English-speaking students science words seem like a new language, and to English language learners, these words *are* a new language [5, p.108].

The job of science education is to teach students how to use thematic patterns of science to communicate meanings, “talking science” to solve problems in writing or speaking about issues in which science is relevant. The goal of helping students learn to communicate about science is important, but we must also be aware of potentially harmful messages that can be unconsciously communicated to our students. As science educators, we not only teach science but we may communicate a “mystique of science” attitude, promoting the idea that science is authoritative, impersonal and humorless, lacking creativity or values. This communicates a view that scientists are “experts” or “them,” rather than seeing ourselves as scientists.

Scientific writing and talk often project science as a description of the way the world works rather than as a human social activity that tries to make sense of the world. We instead should help our students learn that science is all around us, influenced by human uncertainties, judgments, values, and interests. It’s important that we emphasize the human side of science. These well-established ideas about the nature of science[2](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/7079#note2) have a lasting effect on students, so we need to be sensitive about the messages we communicate. Science is creative and science is tentative, which means that scientists recognize that we understand things based on current research. Just think how our understanding of the world has changed as a result of the invention of telescopes or microscopes!

Nowadays it is widely accepted that vocabulary teaching should be part of the syllabus, and taught in a well-planned and regular basis. Some authors argue that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching, because language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar. [2, p.54].

There are several aspects of lexis that need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary.

*Boundaries between conceptual meaning*: knowing not only what lexis refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (e.g. cup, mug, bowl).

*Polysemy:* distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form with several but closely related meanings (head: of a person, of a pin, of an organisation).

*Homonymy:* distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form which has several meanings which are NOT closely related (e.g. a file: used to put papers in or a tool).

*Homophony:*understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g.flour, flower).

*Synonymy:* distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g. extend, increase, expand).

*Affective meaning:*distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors (denotation and connotation), which depend on the speaker’s attitude or the situation. Socio-cultural association of lexical items is another important factor.

*Style, register, dialect:*Being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.

*Translation:* awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g. false cognates).

*Chunks of language:* multi-word verbs, idioms, strong and weak collocations, lexical phrases.

*Grammar of vocabulary:*learning the rules that enable students to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word (e.g. sleep, slept, sleeping; able, unable; disability).

*Pronunciation:* ability to recognise and reproduce items in speech.[3, p.85].

The implication of the aspects just mentioned in teaching is that the goals of vocabulary teaching must be more than simply covering a certain number of words on a word list. We must use teaching techniques that can help realise this global concept of what it means to know a lexical item. And we must also go beyond that, giving learner opportunities to use the items learnt and also helping them to use effective written storage systems.

Understanding how our memory works might help us create more effective ways to teach vocabulary. It seems that learning new items involve storing them first in our short-term memory, and afterwards in long-term memory. We do not control this process consciously but there seems to be some important clues to consider. First, retention in short-term memory is not effective if the number of chunks of information exceeds seven. Therefore, this suggests that in a given class we should not aim at teaching more than this number. However, our long-term memory can hold any amount of information [4, p.19].

Meaningful tasks however seem to offer the best answer to vocabulary learning, as they rely on students’ experiences and reality to facilitate learning. More meaningful tasks also require learners to analyse and process language more deeply, which should help them retain information in long-term memory.

The way students store the items learned can also contribute to their success or failure in retrieving them when needed. Most learners simply list the items learnt in chronological order, indicating meaning with translation. This system is far from helpful, as items are de-contextualised, encouraging students to over generalise usage of them. It does not allow for additions and refinements nor indicates pronunciation.

In my opinion the most important aspect of vocabulary teaching for advanced learners is to foster learner independence so that learners will be able to deal with new lexis and expand their vocabulary beyond the end of the course. Therefore guided discovery, contextual guesswork and using dictionaries should be the main ways to deal with discovering meaning.

Contextual guesswork means making use of the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning, or in some cases, guess from the word itself, as in words of Latin origin. Knowledge of word formation, e.g. prefixes and suffixes, can also help guide students to discover meaning.  Teachers can help students with specific techniques and practice in contextual guesswork, for example, the understanding of discourse markers and identifying the function of the word in the sentence (e.g. verb, adjective, noun). The latter is also very useful when using dictionaries [6, p.115].

Students should start using EFL dictionaries as early as possible, from Intermediate upwards.  With adequate training, dictionaries are an invaluable tool for learners, giving them independence from the teacher.  As well as understanding meaning, students are able to check pronunciation, the grammar of the word (e.g. verb patterns, verb forms, plurality, comparatives, etc.), different spelling (American versus British), style and register, as well as examples that illustrate usage.

By using scientific terms and phrases during science activities, science educators can model scientific thinking and questioning, including the doubts and dilemmas that are part of making sense of the world. The more opportunities we provide for students to experience scientific endeavors, the more natural their scientific talk will develop. Teachers can maximize these opportunities by beginning with very young students.

The suggestions in this article are designed to enhance science vocabulary development for English proficient students, students who depend on school to learn academic English, and English language learners. By using these strategies, teachers can begin to help all students engage in the language of science [1, p.162].

It is important to promote students’ dialogue as they have instructional conversations. We need to provide students with opportunities to use their colloquial language and translate back and forth with scientific and technical terms. We can use this strategy, called *interlanguage*, to discuss the different explanations of the students’ experiences in the classroom.

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