

# An Analysis on English Vocabulary Teaching in Primary Schools

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## Abstract

*Vocabulary teaching is an indispensable part in English teaching in primary schools since vocabulary is considered as the basic element and mainstay of any language. However, it is also one of the most difficult parts for many teachers since the process of vocabulary teaching is often considered as a boring and monotonous one. How to teach vocabulary effectively is the concern for many teachers. Teachers in primary schools need to stimulate the learner's learning motivation by applying various teaching methodologies into their teaching practice. This paper aims to provide some strategies for vocabulary teaching in Chinese primary schools. It first analyzes the current situation and the importance of vocabulary teaching for primary students, then it discusses the problems which exist in vocabulary teaching, finally it puts forwards several suggestions to improve the teaching and learning efficiency for English vocabulary teaching.*

**Key words:** vocabulary teaching, young learners, learning motivation, learning interest, rote-learning

## 1. Introduction

Words are considered as the basic element and mainstay of a language. British linguist Wilkins (1972) once said: "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed". Language structure is considered as "the skeleton of the language" and words are "the virtual organs and flesh of the language" (Harmer, 1991). Vocabulary or the word is the smallest unit of a language. Just like bricks

for a tall building, words are the constructing materials in a language. Therefore, vocabulary teaching plays a crucial part in English teaching. An abundant vocabulary is the precondition for communication.

Since September in 2001, English has become a compulsory course for Chinese pupils at Grade 3, therefore, pupils will learn English at about the age of nine or ten and many of them have no experience of learning another language before, and that can be either good or bad. On the one hand, some students show great enthusiasm for learning English. On the other hand, some may find that English learning (especially the learning and memorization of new words) is quite difficult or even dull for them. Students may understand the importance of learning vocabulary, still, many are passive to vocabulary learning owing to several factors. First, teachers' teaching approaches may be boring since they may spend much time explaining grammatical rules and require students to memorize new words by rote-learning. Second, some students cannot understand what the teacher says or express themselves freely on account of limited vocabulary and their tender age. Third, many students seldom practice about what they have learnt after class so the new words may be always new to them.

For English teachers, it is of great importance for them to cultivate learners' learning interest and teach effectively by adopting different teaching approaches in vocabulary teaching.

## **2. The current situation for vocabulary teaching in primary schools**

Vocabulary teaching is an indispensable part in English teaching in primary schools. How to teach vocabulary effectively is the concern for many teachers.

### **2.1 The current situation and problems of vocabulary teaching**

Vocabulary teaching is one of the most difficult parts for many teachers since it is often considered as a boring and monotonous process. For many English teachers in primary schools, they still dominate the classroom and spend little time fostering learners' thinking ability and creativity. Actually, most new words in the textbooks are given only the Chinese definitions and not explained in detail. So the teacher's interpretation is crucial for students' understanding of the new words. New curriculum criteria for compulsory education advocates English teaching should be carried out through various forms that are acceptable to students. However, many teachers still adopt the very traditional way to teach pupils new words which often goes like this: teachers read the new words, then students follow their reading, and that kind of practice can be repeated for several times until students can memorize the new words. That is called "rote memorization" or "rote learning".

Besides, many English teachers in primary schools attach little importance to vocabulary teaching, spend most of class time explaining grammatical rules or doing pattern practice and instruct few vocabulary learning strategies to students. They explain the new words one by one without relating them to the contents in the textbook. For some words which are closely related to western culture such as Easter, Halloween and Christmas, students may understand them better if teachers can introduce some background information. Teachers spare no effort to teach students dutifully but sometimes ignore learners' engagement in the learning process.

As for vocabulary teaching itself, some teachers give equal time to each word without emphasizing the key words or phrases. They want to cram all the new words in the textbooks into learners' heads. When

there are many new words in a unit, the learning task will become a burden for both the teacher and students. It can be very harmful for stimulating learners' learning motivation.

## **2.2 Learners' problems in vocabulary learning**

Language learning cannot do without vocabulary learning. However, many students are not active in the learning process even if many students have realized the importance of vocabulary learning, and even though many students spend much time both in and out of class in memorizing new words, sometimes the outcomes are not desirable. The reasons are listed as follows:

First, the teacher's interpretation for them may be boring, especially when a teacher spends much time practicing the pronunciation or spelling and explaining the usage of a new word. Second, some pupils may have formed improper habits in learning new words. For example, they may resort to the dictionary whenever they encounter the new words in their textbooks or reading materials. Third, each class has, on average, three or four English courses a week in many primary schools. Actually, the time is insufficient for most students to learn a foreign language. If students do no review after class, they may forget what they have learnt when next English class comes. Finally, many students rely on the teacher's explanation too much and they just receive what the teacher tells to them passively. All these factors will, obviously, lower the learning efficiency. Hence, even though students may feel interested in learning English at the beginning, some of them may lose enthusiasm as time goes by. In all, learning and memorizing the new words without the language context, lacking persistent practice of the learnt words and improper learning ways are the main obstacles for pupils.

## **3. Strategies for vocabulary teaching in primary schools**

According to mental and physical characteristics of students in primary schools, teachers need to stimulate their learning motivation and arouse their learning interest by applying various teaching methodologies into the teaching practice.

### **3.1 The employment of catchy tongue twisters and English songs for vocabulary teaching**

The employment of tongue twisters and English songs into English teaching can benefit learners a lot because it helps learners improve their pronunciation and become articulate. The catchy tongue twister is very suitable for pupils in vocabulary teaching because of its readability, especially for those words which can be both a noun and a verb. For example, while teaching the word "notice", teachers may find this twister can be very helpful: "If you notice this notice, you will notice this notice is not worth noticing". Also, while learning the word "cook", students may bear in mind it more easily when this twister is shown to them: "How many cookies could a good cook cook if a good cook could cook cookies?" Both for the word "notice" and "cook", students can learn from these two twisters that they can be used as a noun and a verb.

In addition, English songs are very appropriate for pupils in vocabulary teaching. Teachers can choose some rhythmic and pleasant songs for students to build up their language sense such as "Twinkle, twinkle, little star", "Edelweiss" or "Somewhere over the rainbow". Sometimes, there are more than ten new words in one unit, so teachers may even guide students to compose songs by using the new words. This kind of

activities can make the process of vocabulary learning become more interesting and add enjoyment to students' learning experience.

### **3.2 Introduction of cultural background knowledge for certain words**

Language and culture are closely related to each other. Culture is the core and language is the carrier of its culture. Vocabulary reveals its corresponding culture and some English words are closely related to western culture and traditional customs such as Easter, Halloween, turkey, pumpkin lantern (also called Jack-o-Lantern), Thanksgiving Day and Christmas. Students may understand them better if teachers can introduce some background information of these words or even organize some activities for these special days. For example, when Easter comes, teachers can introduce the origin and customs of Easter and direct students to prepare some Easter eggs to take to the class. For Halloween and Halloween, students can be organized in the class to carve pumpkin lantern and play "Trick or treat". Through these activities, students can not only learn more words and gain pleasures from learning, but also learn more about Western culture.

### **3.3 Carrying out more reading and speaking activities in vocabulary teaching**

Another way for students to memorize more words is to read and speak more. Reading will take a lot of time and the time in class is very limited, therefore, autonomous reading after class is crucial for students. Teachers can assign extracurricular reading to them. Instead of the long and complicated passages, short passages or stories are the best choices for young learners. Students can know more about Western culture, tradition and customs as well as accumulate more words through reading. Teachers can guide students to make a detailed plan for their reading tasks and check whether they have finished their tasks by designing small tests from time to time. Teachers may leave a special space such as "English corner" in the classroom where English magazines, comic books, pictures and maps in English-speaking countries are displayed.

Besides, more speaking can enhance learners' learning abilities. One of the goals of English teaching is to foster students' ability to communicate in English. Oral English is an indispensable component of communicative competence. "Practice makes perfect" and more practice can make students have confidence and dare to speak. At the beginning, students may feel that it is difficult to express themselves, therefore, teachers need to encourage students to speak more and not to be afraid of making mistakes. The best learning experience usually comes from the combination of language learning with stimulating activities. Hence, teachers can design and organize different activities to provide more opportunities for students to practice their oral English such as debate competition, role-playing games, retelling and so on.

### **3.4 The application of associative method into vocabulary teaching**

Compared with the traditional way of teaching new words, associative method puts more emphasis on the relationships between the words students are going to learn and the ones they have learnt previously. For example, while teaching the word "house", teachers can ask students to recall as many words they have learnt as possible that are related to "house" such as kitchen, bathroom, sleep, study, relaxing, comfortable, etc. For the word "fruit", teachers can guide students to think about all the fruits that they have learnt (apple, banana, pineapple, coconut, mango, and the like).

Some words are similar but have different definitions. Teachers can draw a conclusion for those words and remind students to pay particular attention to them. For example, quiet and quite, dairy and diary, sweet and sweat, pray and prey etc. Some words have opposite meanings such as old and young, tall and short and hot and cold. Teachers can encourage students to make sentences by using these antonyms. For instance, my older brother is thin and tall, whereas my younger brother is fat and short. In addition, there are many prefixes, suffixes and variations in English. Having some basic knowledge of word-building is of great importance for students in the process of vocabulary learning. If using the word “believe” as the root, then students may get believable and unbelievable. For the suffix “ful”, we can recall these words such as helpful, colorful, beautiful, wonderful and so on. It is necessary for teachers to lead students to master these language rules gradually and apply these rules to their learning flexibly.

### **3.5 Creating language environment for learners**

Language environment is very important for English vocabulary teaching. Many researches show the best and the most natural way for learners to acquire new words is the learning in the language context.

Chinese students are exposed to Chinese for most of time, hence, teachers sometimes need to create language environment for them. In PEP Book 2B, the title for unit 6 is “Shopping”. According to this title, teachers can ask students to prepare some books, toys, candies or things like that, take to the classroom and act their “shopping” out. Students can exchange or sale their items by communicating with each other in English. Teachers can provide necessary help if students encounter some difficulties in their deals. By participating in such activities, students can not only buy or exchange the objects they want, but also practice the new words in this unit.

Story-telling is also one of the approaches that can provide students with meaningful context. Teachers can make up or ask students to make up stories by using the words they have learnt. For example, in PEP English Book 4B, Unit 2 (Last Weekend), teachers can direct students to make up a story by telling what they did last weekend and using the words in this unit. Through doing so, students not only go over the words in this unit (e.g., stay, watch TV, magazine, yesterday and faster), but also review the usage of the comparative degree of adjectives in the former unit and the past tense for verbs they have learnt.

## **4. Conclusions**

One of the teacher’s responsibilities is to teach students how to learn and help them develop their autonomous learning ability. Teacher need to help students realize that they are the hosts of their learning. Due to their immaturity, limited vocabulary and incomplete mental and physical development, learning English, especially learning the new words can be a very difficult task for students in primary schools.

A rich vocabulary is the precondition for enhancing learners’ reading and speaking skills and important for improving learners’ comprehensive learning abilities. Vocabulary teaching should be combined with the teaching of communicative skills, culture and customs in English-speaking countries since teaching words alone may be time-consuming and boring for students. During the teaching process, teachers need to create a more relaxing as well as pleasant learning atmosphere. It needs quite a lot of time to have a rich accumulated vocabulary. Learning through activities, learning by playing various games are good options for teachers. Interest is the best teacher for any learner, especially for young learners. To arouse students’

learning interests, English teachers in primary schools need to continually renew their education concepts and improve their teaching methodologies.

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