

Second language acquisition: teaching vocabulary to college students

Abstract

This paper discusses the way Shaanan College teaches English for academic purposes (EAP) to students who are not English majors. The hypothesis was that the lack of proper coordination among the various levels, and controlled, progressive, appropriate material would be an obstacle to achieving proficiency. Moreover, while the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) now demands longer articles with a higher ratio of academic vocabulary, these were too often beyond our students' grasp, as they had not prepared for these new demands. The findings showed that students need more practice with readings which are shorter and have a higher ratio of high frequency words (HFW) and a lower ratio of academic words. The conclusion was that instead of long, difficult articles which satisfy the CHE, but which our students can deal with only because the questions are easy, we must first build up their vocabulary and lead into academic reading more slowly, in order to produce students who do well in their major and can graduate with the appropriate English skills as required by the system.

Keywords: EAP; HFW; academic vocabulary

I have been a teacher of EAP for many years, and all along the way I have felt strongly that we are neither given enough time nor the right materials to help our students overcome their poor English skills. Every student must reach proficiency level and earn an exemption from further English studies based on psychometric exam cut-off points which place the student at a given level. The college offers four levels of English EAP courses, as well as a pre-academic prep course, and passing the final exam of the exit level earns the student college credit so s/he can graduate.

The problem begins with a lack of coordination between the various levels and uniformity at any given level. Teachers of the lower levels may not really know what the requirements for proficiency level really are, and teachers of the upper-level EAP courses are not required to correlate their material with those of the entry levels. Till recently there was no separate syllabus for each level to guide students as they move up the proficiency ladder: each teacher decided what the students' needs were, worked from the students' level and tried to raise it, or decided what the level should be and tried to raise the students' proficiency so they could master the material. More seriously, when two teachers teach the same level, they have not been required to deal with similar material. Over the years, half-hearted attempts have been made to establish specific guidelines, but they never really reached the classroom.

All this is now changing. I teach a B-level course, the pre-exit level, and as of 2011, it is my task to bring students to a level where they can read 2000-word articles with a 10% ratio of academic words. Since this requirement was added in the middle of the spring semester of the 2011 academic year, no one was truly ready for the huge jump in difficulty in terms of vocabulary, length and scope of the articles, and even subject matter by the end of that year. However, with these new demands, the teachers have clearer guidelines.

As we have no set textbook, the material comes from journals on education and related disciplines, and teachers have to design every unit on our own. All they have is the text itself. As of 2011, there also is a website where teachers can check articles they want to use, for content and academic words. This is helpful in choosing material.

Based on psycholinguistic theory students are encouraged to dialogue with the text and use their knowledge of the world and the given topic to do some intelligent guessing, and while students struggle with the very chore of reading in English even at the level they bring to the class, it is not the grammar that proves to be the biggest hurdle. Rather, it is the students' lack of appropriate vocabulary, and so, as their teacher, I tend to spend a tremendous amount of time on increasing their active and passive vocabulary. In order to deal with the long and off-putting size of the articles, reading starts with small, digestible chunks which I cut from the full-length text, and focus on three levels of vocabulary: sight words, K1-12 words, and academic words. Lists with these kinds of words are readily available on the Internet, and on the website which analyzes our reading material, at conc.lex tutor.ca (n.d.). When I analyzed this text by doing copy/paste for instance, the read-out showed that this paper would not be suitable for a B-level, pre-proficiency level student. According to the parameters set by the CHE, this article is too short, lacks academic words, and is, therefore, too easy, yet I strongly question whether my students would find this paper easy to read. Nevertheless, the website does give a certain framework for class material.

As stated, even at the penultimate, pre-proficiency level, students are still weak and read English haltingly and slowly. This impedes their motivation and hinders comprehension profoundly. The slower the reading, and the more effort is required for sounding out the

words, the less time there is for actual chunk-building and comprehension. Therefore, although theoretically I teach a fairly advanced course, I have developed some strategies which are helpful to building up my students' confidence and enhance their achievements.

My first focus is outside the academic requirements, and I spend some time on teaching sight words. This is a list of some one hundred and fifty words which students are expected to recognize, and read globally. They are expected to know what the words mean. Helpful sites are They are expected to know bogglesworldesl (n.d.) and Mrsperkins (2012). It should be clear that the sight words in the above mentioned list are neither academic nor advanced, and yet, about 25% of the students did not know all the words. This fact bears out the extreme discrepancies between the students at this level of their EAP studies.

While mastering the sight words is essentially a self-study component of the course, it is dealt with in class as students get discouraged by seeing so many different words on their own. Sight words may be taught in various ways. Lists are accessible on the Internet sorted around themes, but introducing these words completely disconnected and out of context is helpful as a first step in turning these words into active/productive vocabulary.. It is the students' task to provide the context and show that they have actually gone beyond recognition of the words. They do this with the help of writing text, whether single sentences or short essays. The method seems effective.

The next step is to introduce the salient vocabulary from the text at hand which will allow the students to decipher/decode it. Swain (1993) claimed that "[t]he most successful vocabulary activities are those that allow students to accomplish three goals: (1) focus on the vocabulary, (2) experience multiple retrievals of the vocabulary, and (3) develop successful vocabulary learning strategies" (Folse, 2008, p.16).

In the first stage students are shown the words out of context. The words are projected on the screen one at a time, and after students try to think whether they know this word, we move on. There is no talking during this phase. After the students have seen all the words, we go over them, and they are given content. The content is connected to the article the students are about to read, but it is not identical. They find the word, check its meaning, discuss it together and move on. The next step is production, where students need to choose one of the words they have studied, use it in a sentence, or provide context another way. Hebrew plays a role, but dictionaries are out of bounds unless there is a discussion concerning the meaning of a word. Sentences offered may be similar to the content of the text, but not identical. In order to anchor their grasp of the word and to try and make the new vocabulary part of the students' productive knowledge, we play with the word using strategies of inflection and derivation. Only after this do students get to see part of the text whose vocabulary should now be mostly accessible to them. They read silently, in pairs or small groups, and mark words they notice and know, or those they do not yet know. They write down these unknown words and go and search for meaning with the help of friends and/or dictionary. The above echoes Schmidt

(1990) and Laufer (1997) and the need to “focus attention on ... vocabulary” (Folse, 2008, p. 16).

As Folse wrote, this kind of teaching is helpful to students who must pass a set examination. Today, with the specific requirements of length and academic word list ratio, we have something closer to that kind of exam (p. 17). While Folse mentioned bolded and underlined texts as part of vocabulary learning, I have found that it is more helpful when students do their own highlighting. Not all students have the same gaps in their vocabulary, and highlighting and marking new words focuses extra attention. Having text pre-highlighted may actually be distracting. At no time may Hebrew translations be written above the English problem words. Translation may appear in the margin, or at the bottom of the page, but there must be eye movement to go from English to Hebrew, so as not to blur the English words.

Important vocabulary would be those words which are likely to return in other texts, and if unknown would result in a lack of comprehension, whereas understanding these words allows students to draw intelligent conclusions about the text at hand. Vocabulary, however, does not mean single words only. Vocabulary relates to meaning, and may consist of one word alone or several. Teaching collocations is also conducive to faster learning. Folse (2008) recognized the following types of vocabulary items: (1) a single word, (2) a set phrase, (3) a variable phrase, (4) a phrasal verb, or (5) an idiom (p. 12).

In the end, when the text is read in its unabridged form students should be proficient enough to deal with the text on an intelligent level. At this point they may be willing to guess and draw conclusions and trust their innate ability to decode successfully. The best students are those willing to take that leap of faith, guessing correctly at times while failing at others, yet remain undiscouraged, as they understand that nothing will replace their own effort in mastering the language and its vocabulary.

Before academic content became required reading, teachers were able to adjust content and the level of their material to the ability of the students, but now we can assist their progress by providing longer pre-reading practice, go more slowly with smaller blocks of the texts at hand, and at the end do a close, complete reading of the text studied. Quizzes which serve as assessment of both the method used and the students' progress support the notion that a patient teacher, who spends time on analyzing the difficulties of a text, and has the willingness and ability to get her students to read at home, can raise their level of English. The quizzes also show that students are motivated by small successes. These, in turn, will hopefully lead to larger and more consistent ones, including their academic degree and good English reading skills.

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