Teaching Vocabulary to Develop Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Classrooms

Kayo Yoshida

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to introduce effective vocabulary teaching with collocations and chunked phrases as relatively new methods, in order to improve learners’ communicative competence.

Firstly, this paper investigates the importance of vocabulary in learning foreign languages and the necessity of developing vocabulary in the setting of communicative language teaching. Then, effective roles of collocations and chunking to enhance vocabulary acquisition are introduced. Some features of vocabulary learning strategies are also explored in accordance with the four basic elements (cognitive; metacognitive; social; affective). In the last section, pedagogic implications utilizing collocations and chunking are recommended for successful classroom teaching.

2. The importance of vocabulary in foreign language learning

It has been widely accepted that vocabulary acquisition is one of the essential elements for learning foreign languages. It is considered to be a good indicator of general language skill (Meara & Jones, 1990; Morra & Camba, 2009) and also plays an important role in classroom success (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; McCrostie, 2007). There are a number of researchers who regard learning vocabulary as a key aspect to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Even if learners do not have enough knowledge of the language structures, an adequate knowledge of vocabulary helps learners to maintain a certain degree of communication (Celce-Murcia & Rosensweig, 1989; Wallace, 1982).

However, when vocabulary items are taught in foreign language classrooms, there are many instructors who mainly employ classical vocabulary teaching techniques, such as mother tongue translation, definition, synonyms, antonyms, etc. (Siyanova & Schmitt, 2008; Erten & Tekin, 2008). It is not surprising that learners do not feel interested in learning new items and they cannot retain the words and phrases with these traditional methods. Even though they
remember the meaning, it may be difficult to use the vocabulary in an appropriate situation. Therefore, it is worth examining the effective way of teaching vocabulary and suggesting some strategies to improve learners’ vocabulary acquisition. Siyanova and Schmitt (2008) stress that teachers should make fundamental changes in their vocabulary teaching pedagogies by focusing on phrasal elements rather than individual words. Balçi and Çakır (2012) also support the idea of introducing new techniques to teach vocabulary in foreign language classrooms:

Traditional memorization techniques, preparing bilingual word lists or other classical vocabulary learning techniques should be given up since they create a kind of unwillingness on the part of the students. Teachers should be familiarized with the current vocabulary learning techniques and apply them in the class. Since collocational vocabulary learning is a kind of widely-accepted modern technique, it can be used in the classroom safely even in the primary school language classes. (30)

3. Vocabulary teaching to improve communicative competence

3.1 Collocations to facilitate grouping similar vocabulary

Since vocabulary acquisition is thought to play a significant role in foreign language learning, many techniques and approaches to teach and learn vocabulary have been examined. Especially, in order to develop learners’ communicative competence, ‘collocation’ is considered to be one of the most effective techniques. ‘Collocation’ is a group of words that occur together with high frequency or with a certain mutual expectancy (Balçi & Çakır, 2012), and McCarten (2007) states “the way in which two or more words are typically used is generally called collocation” (5).

According to Nation (2001), collocations facilitate learning similar items such as, ‘take medicine’, ‘take a pill’, ‘take a tablet’. Learners can further stretch their knowledge to acquire other vocabulary that has the same structure (e.g. take a rest, take a break, take a holiday). Thus, focusing on some particular phrases enables learners to help grouping vocabulary. When students cannot find the relationships between words, they find it more difficult to learn these lone-standing words rather than the ones connected with other known words (Carlo et al., 2004). Nattinger (1988) stresses that it is very effective to introduce new vocabulary with collocations because students can learn the associations with other words. Cook (2001) also remarks “the effective way of learning vocabulary is to organize the words into groups in our
In addition, Shin and Nation (2008) explain that collocations can improve learners’ language fluency and provide the input of native-like selection. Ellis, N. (1997) supports this view and mentions “speaking natively is speaking idiomatically using frequent and familiar collocations” (129). Jaén (2007) also states that collocation technique contributes to accuracy as well as fluency in speaking and writing the language.

Balcı and Çakır (2012) proved that their Turkish students at primary school learned vocabulary better with the use of collocations than the students who had classical vocabulary teaching, such as definition and mother tongue equivalence. Hsu (2010) also investigated the effects of vocabulary learning with collocations on Taiwanese college students and found collocations facilitated vocabulary learning and improved their retention.

Many researchers criticize that the idea of introducing collocations has not been paid enough attention yet and it is still common that single lexical items are taught individually in foreign language classes (Nattinger, 1988; Chan & Liou, 2005). Therefore, it is highly suggested to include collocations for more effective vocabulary teaching.

3.2 Chunking phrases to improve fluency

Chunking approach is also considered very practical to improve the fluency and to expand the knowledge of vocabulary within a relatively short period (Nation, 2001). Nattinger (1980) mentions that teachers should assume “language production consists of piecing together the ready-made units appropriate for a particular situation” (341). Zhao (2010) states that the acquisition of language chunks helps to achieve native-like fluency. For example, we often hear a variety of useful phrases such as, ‘Could you please ~ ?’, ‘Do you mind if ~ ?’, ‘Just a moment’, in the real world conversation. In addition, it is not difficult to imagine particular situations in which these phrases are used appropriately. Myles et al. (1998) also mention that chunked phrases “facilitate entry into communication and speed up production” (358-359).

Therefore, it seems that chunking approach plays an important role in vocabulary acquisition to improve learners’ communicative competence. However, native-speakers use a great deal of ‘chunking’, while non-native speakers do not (Zhao, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to include this chunking approach for more effective classroom teaching.

On the other hand, some might have doubt for the effect of chunking since groups of vocabulary are taught without grammatical analysis. However, Nation (2001) takes a positive
view that “memorized unanalyzed chunks can be later analyzed, or smaller chunks can be grouped into larger chunks” (319). This chunking approach is also considered useful especially in the early stages of language learning (Nation, 2001).

4. Analysis of vocabulary instruction in terms of learning strategies

This study has focused on ‘collocation’ and ‘chunking’ as recommended methods to teach vocabulary. In this section, the analysis of vocabulary teaching will be explored further in terms of the following four aspects of language strategies (Oxford, 1990).

1) **cognitive strategies** for storing language in the memory as part of the internal process of acquiring
2) **metacognitive strategies** for planning, monitoring and evaluating the way of learning
3) **social strategies** for having the chance to interact with others
4) **affective strategies** related to learner’s feeling, motivation, attitudes to learning

It is considered that the use of **cognitive strategies** plays an important role in making efforts to remember new words that learners encounter. For instance, it is necessary to repeat phrases as collocations or chunks several times in order to memorize these new items. Some learners might practice new words by assuming a specific communicative situation. Nation (2001) stresses “by having chunks of language in long-term memory, language reception and language production are made more effective” (321). **Social strategies** are also essential especially to acquire communicative skills. In order to promote learners’ acquisition, it is necessary for instructors to provide them with opportunities to ask questions, to have discussion, and to hold conversation. Schmitt (1997) strongly agrees with the value of enhancing this strategy “by interacting with native speakers or other students who had studied overseas” (225). **Metacognitive strategies** seem relatively difficult to be improved because they usually depend on individual learners’ habits and preferences. Gu and Johnson (1996) mention that the most successful learners are those who actively draw on a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies. Thus, we can offer some advice that multiple and elaborate use of strategies is very effective. Regarding **affective strategies**, it is essential to consider how to draw learners’ attention by linking target items to their interests or goals. Setting goals with reasonable explanation stimulates learners’ motivation. Since most of the collocations and chunked
phrases are practical, we can create a situational environment as a goal to introduce some useful items.

However, there are plenty of learning strategies. In order to train learners to employ learning strategies effectively, it is necessary to examine the characteristic of each strategy and the appropriate combination with various strategies. In addition, the educational or cultural backgrounds of learners are important factors in introducing new vocabulary items with learning strategies. We need to grasp what learners have already known and need to know. Sometimes learner’s cultural background may influence their preference of learning strategies, as Schmitt (1997) remarks “learners from different culture groups sometimes have quite different opinions about the usefulness of various vocabulary learning strategies” (202).

5. Pedagogic implications for communicative language teaching

Recently language pedagogy has emphasized the need to provide learners with real communicative experience and highlighted to enhance their communicative competence (Ellis, R., 1997). Cook (2001) also states the importance of producing and remembering new words through communicative output:

A speaker of English knows not just what a word means and how it is pronounced but also how it fits into sentences. Teaching cannot ignore that the student has to learn not just the meaning and pronunciation of each word, but how to use it. (71)

Ellis, R. (1997) suggests that it is effective to use, for instance, phrase books which have lists of useful utterances, such as ‘How do you say … in English’, according to the purpose of everyday survival in foreign countries. However, appropriate items need to be carefully selected and need to be introduced as collocations or chunked phrases. It is also important to consider whether or not we should provide explicit instruction to facilitate ‘unpacking’ of chunks, as Myles et al. (1998) state.

It is worth noting that teachers should keep learners’ variables in mind, no matter what strategies they attempt to employ in the classroom teaching. As stated above, understanding the learners’ goal is one of the significant elements. Nation (2001) emphasizes that “learners should know what their vocabulary goals are and what vocabulary to focus on in terms of these goals” (218). Even though the use of collocations and chunked phrases is effective, it is
meaningless if the item is irrelevant for the goal. Gersten et al. (2007) also stress the careful
goal setting for vocabulary instruction and state that words are only learned completely when
they are usable. Strategy instruction is essential for learners’ successful comprehension so as to
make meaningful associations when placing new vocabulary into categories with known
vocabulary (McKeown et al., 2009).

6. Conclusion

This study has explored effective vocabulary teaching with the methods of collocations and
chunking for improving learners’ communicative competence and developed practical
application of learning strategies. Although it is impossible to learn every type of vocabulary
through these methods and strategies, it has been confirmed that they are very useful in order to
acquire vocabulary for the communicative settings.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the selection of instructional techniques
depends greatly on the learners’ needs, goals and language proficiency levels. There is no
perfect method which is suitable to all English language learners. Therefore, teachers need to
take into consideration how they can effectively combine several teaching methods with
careful attention to learners’ variables.

References

Balcı, Ö. & Çakır, A. (2012) Teaching vocabulary through collocations in EFL classes: The
case of Turkey. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning, 1* (1),

teaching. In F. Boers & S. Lindstromberg (Eds.), *Applications of cognitive linguistics:
Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to Teaching Vocabulary and Phraseology*, 1-61. Berlin:
Mouton de Gruyter.

(2004) Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English-language learners in

Celce-Murcia & L. McIntosh (Eds.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*,


