

# *Teaching Vocabulary to Fifth Year pupils in Libyan Primary Schools*

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## ***Abstract***

The paper has evaluated a sample of material which focuses on the teaching of vocabulary in Libyan Primary Schools. The major objective was to examine the underlying organising principles, teaching approaches and the learning processes, and to discover any shortcomings that might hinder the achievement of the intended outcomes. To fulfil this aim, as much information as possible was collected from various resources such as books, theses, study papers, journals and the World Wide Web. The discussion of the topic has covered three main points. They are a review of the relevant literature, analysis and evaluation of the material in question and, finally, suggestions of how this material might be improved. Because it was difficult to assess the material in isolation, reference to other involved factors such as the teacher, the student and the teaching/learning environment was occasionally made.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This work will critically evaluate and examine a sample of material which focuses on the teaching of vocabulary. This material is taken from a book taught in Libyan primary schools to learners who are at the beginner's level. The assessment will cover such things as the underlying principles, the teaching approaches, the learning processes and the intended outcomes.

The importance of this study lies in the fact that the material assessed is part of a new set text book and this will provide the opportunity to gauge the appropriateness and suitability of this new material to Libyan students. This will ultimately shed light on any weaknesses in order to help teachers be aware of them and to find ways of how this material can be optimally taught in its current form and improved in the future.

The paper will be divided into three major parts. The first part will try to review the relevant literature and trace the historical development of vocabulary teaching. The second part will be concerned with evaluating the material in question. The third part will consider ways in which the material can be improved. Ultimately,

the conclusion will constitute the final part of the work in which the findings of the research will be summarised and some recommendations for further research will be given before providing a list of the references used.

## **PART I: THE LITERATURE**

### **1.1. What is vocabulary?**

According to a dictionary definition, vocabulary is the words that a person uses. However, we are still faced with the question: what is a word? Any attempt to define a word will be confronted with some problems. First, it is not always the case that the written form matches the spoken form. For example, the two words *write* and *right* have the same pronunciation but they differ in writing. Moreover, the word *right* may have two meanings according to the context in which it occurs. Another issue is whether to consider groups of words like *bad*, *worse* and *worst* as a single word or different ones. A third consideration is related to compounds such as *head teacher* which conveys a different meaning from its separate constituents. A further problem concerns the use of idioms. For instance, is the idiom *to kick the bucket* which means *to die* a single word or a group of words? Finally, what about words like *since* and *therefore* which almost bear no meaning unless they are used in context.

An attempt to resolve these problems is to use the notion of lexemes (Carter, 1998, p.7). A Lexeme is the abstract unit of vocabulary in a language which underlies a variety of related words. According to this definition words like *go*, *went* and *gone* will be found under the lexeme GO. The term will also embrace multi word expressions such as idioms and phrasal verbs and, therefore, the phrasal verb '*catch up with*' and the idiom '*kicked the bucket*' are considered single lexemes. Using the term lexeme will also help in dealing with words that have the same form but differ in meaning and thus words like present (v) and present (n) are considered different lexemes. However, there are words which are still problematic. For example, are the words *paper*, which means *newspaper* and *paper*, which means academic paper, one lexeme or two distinct lexemes? (Carter, 1998, 8)

As we have seen from the discussion above, although the term *lexeme* may have solved some of the problems of using the term *word*, it still has its own limitations. In our discussion and for purposes of simplicity, the terms *word*, *lexical item* and *vocabulary* will be considered variants for the same concept and, thus, will be used interchangeably.

## **1.2. How is vocabulary acquired?**

A native speaker of a language knows thousands of word families, the most of which are learned by natural exposure to language and some of which are learned through formal study. The former type of learning is called incidental learning while the latter is known as explicit learning. Learning the vocabulary of a second language follows the same procedure. However, the acquisition of the second language vocabulary is influenced by some factors such as the learners' native language, their culture, age and motivation. This makes it difficult to build a theory that accounts for learning vocabulary in both languages. Another difficulty concerns tracing the process of learning words in the human brain which involves very complicated neurological activities that yet need to be explored and explained (Schmitt, 2000, 116-117).

In spite of the above mentioned difficulties, there have been some models proposed to explain some aspects of the learning process of words in both L1 and L2. Schmitt (2000, p.117) suggests that vocabulary is acquired incrementally. This means that components of word knowledge are not learned all together. Instead, they are assimilated gradually and one at a time. Therefore, the denotation or the basic meaning of the word is learned before its connotations: the additional meanings associated with it. When a student is exposed to a word for the first time only some idea of its form and meaning is learned. The learning of the written form or the pronunciation of the word will mainly depend on the type of exposure. That is whether the word is seen in written text or heard verbally. In subsequent exposures, additional senses for the same word will be learned. Later and through sufficient number of examples, the learner will be able to develop awareness of the frequency, register and collocations of the item learned.

## **1.3. What strategies are used to learn vocabulary?**

There have been several attempts to create and develop some strategies for use by learners to help them work out the meaning of unfamiliar words. The following are suggested by Nation (2001, p. 217-222) and are grouped in three categories: planning vocabulary learning, finding information about words and establishing vocabulary knowledge.

### **1.3.1. Planning vocabulary learning**

In planning vocabulary learning, some important factors have to be considered. Firstly, the choice of vocabulary to be learned should be consistent with learners' goals. For example, vocabulary learned by a student in education is different from that learned by one in medicine. Secondly, learners should also be aware of what aspects of word knowledge they should concentrate upon. Learners often focus on learning the meaning of the word; however, using words in certain contexts may require knowledge of other aspects such as their grammatical features and collocations. A third consideration will be the choice of various strategies. Learners should be able to decide which the most suitable strategy is for which purpose. They should also be able to switch between strategies when necessary. For example, a learner may try to infer the meaning of a word from the context before consulting a dictionary. Finally, since learning vocabulary requires recycling it, then repetition should be intentionally planned and organised, for example, by writing words in cards and repeatedly revising them.

### **1.3.2. Finding information about words**

The second type of strategy is concerned with how to find information about lexical items. This information can be obtained from the lexical item itself; from the context, from a reference or by comparing it with other lexical items. First, looking at the parts of the word may help in guessing its meaning. For example, suffixes and prefixes may provide valuable information about the grammatical category of a word and its meaning. A second factor is the context in which the word occurs. Being aware of the background knowledge and the linguistic cues preceding and following the word may also help in determining its meaning. Another important strategy is to consult a reference source. Reference sources can be written like dictionaries or they can be oral, such as asking a native speaker for information about a word. A final procedure is to compare the learned word to others either in the first or second language. Learners often use their native language as a reference system in the process of learning a foreign language. They use it to make hypotheses about what is being learned (Muftah, 2001, p.xii).

### **1.3.3. Establishing vocabulary knowledge**

This set of strategies comprises certain techniques that may help in remembering words when they are needed for use. These include noticing, retrieving and generating. Noticing a word is the first step in learning it. When a new word is noticed by the learner, s/he can write it down in a notebook or s/he can repeat it orally or silently. Retrieving a word involves remembering a previously seen word and this enhances the link between the written or spoken form of the word and its meaning. A learner can, for example, try to retrieve the meaning of a list of words in his/her notebook by covering the written meaning, which can be an effective way in learning vocabulary. A final but most important strategy is generating. Generation includes procedures such as creating sentences containing the word and using the word in different contexts that involve the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

## ***PART II: EVALUATION OF MATERIAL***

In order to gauge the suitability of the material, we need to find criteria that can be used to select the taught vocabulary and whether the material examined is following such criteria. According to Nation (2001, p.380), there are four main factors that should be considered in designing a vocabulary component of a language course. They are goals, principles, needs and environment.

### **2.1. Goals**

The material is taken from a book authored by Terry Phillips (2007) and taught to fifth year primary pupils. They are in the beginners' level and this is their first school year in studying English. The book is a part of a new series of a new syllabus. The new set syllabus is a serious trial from the Libyan government, which aims at improving the status of the English Language after changes in the international political policy of the country. By looking at the material we also find that the book comprises 8 units centred on the following themes respectively: myself, school, home, colours, family, animals, fruit and drinks, and finally people and objects. This is based on the principle that learning a new language can be best learned through direct association of words and phrases with objects and actions. Therefore, the book starts with words of objects that are close to the pupils. Objects

that they can see and touch in the classroom and in school before moving to wider circles including home and family.

It is also clear that the book is based on integration of the four language skills. For example lesson one in unit one starts with the imperative listen, read and say followed by numbers and some pictures of flags. That is the, the pupils will start the lesson by listening to a model saying the new words while looking at the pictures representing these words. then they will repeat these words while looking at their written form and finally saying these words themselves. this procedure based on the integration of the language skills is found throughout the whole book and is rooted in the idea that the four language skills could not be disentangled from each other in language performance (Brown 2003, p. 9).

## **2.2. Learners needs**

In order to consider the learners' needs, the teacher needs to know what vocabulary the learners know, what vocabulary they need and what vocabulary they want. This can be achieved by using different needs analysis tools such as observations, tests, discussions, interviews and questionnaires (Nation, 2001, p.382).

However, as mentioned above, the book containing the material is taught to a fifth year primary class, which is the first year in studying English in Libyan public schools. All students have to pass this primary stage and the following preparatory and secondary stages before they can choose a major. This means that the learners have no choice but to study this material irrespective of their interests and future intentions. By looking at the book as a whole I found that the vocabulary is basic and simple to cope with the learners level. It is also centred around themes directly related to learners' environment and surroundings including words related to the learners themselves, their school, their home, food, and animals.

## **2.3. Environment**

Environment comprises three elements. They are the learner, the teacher and the teaching/learning situation (Nation, 2001, p. 382). With regard to the teacher, the material is new and challengeable. Most of the teachers are not well qualified and, therefore, find it difficult to teach the new syllabus. To overcome this difficulty, the government has been organising annual teacher training courses to improve their

teaching skills. However, because these courses are not well planned and organised, teachers fail to benefit sufficiently from them.

Because learners have been taught for a long time using traditional methods of teaching, they are reluctant to be taught in a different style. They share one linguistic background and, thus, they prefer use of translation by the teacher to define words, which is also preferred by unqualified teachers. Although teachers are permitted to use L1 judiciously (Larrea, 2002), they should encourage the learners to use L2 from the beginning which will eventually lead to more proficiency in the target language.

The teaching/learning situation is also important. The time specified for English lessons, which is four periods per week, might not be sufficient to benefit from the course satisfactorily. The number of students in one classroom, which is often over 30 students per class, is another negative factor. Not all students will have the opportunity to participate in class activities. Also, classrooms and schools lack necessary facilities such as computers, TV screens, CD players and visual aids. Therefore, teachers have to be creative in order to compensate for these facilities by maximally exploiting what is available. They can, for example, ask the learners to draw pictures or to bring some objects from their homes that may help in illustrating the meaning of some words. Specifically, Teachers can bring their own CD players to give the students the chance to practice listening to the native speakers of the language by using the audio material accompanied with the coursebook.

## **2.4. Principles**

The principles that we need to consider in evaluating the material in question are related to three major areas. They are content, presentation and assessment. The first two are dealt with in this part while assessment will be focused on in a separate section. That is when we talk about ways of improving the material in the third part of this paper.

### **2.4.1. Content**

The vocabulary focused on in the material in question is limited to nouns. Some adjectives and verbs as well as prepositions are also found but in a very limited extent. From the very beginning, learners are taught to make the plural form of nouns by adding s to the singular form. This also necessitates giving numbers also from the very beginning. Teaching of words is done by direct association with objects

represented by pictures. Moreover, emphasis from the beginning is given to the use of these words in phrases and sentences by using articles (*e.g., a flag*), pronouns (*e.g., my dad*), a statement (*e.g., I am African*) and, finally a question (*e.g., Is it a flag?*).

Adjectives, on the other hand are only introduced in the last unit by giving a very small number of adjectives such as *short, new, small* and *hot* although the names of some basic colours are introduced earlier, (*Unit 4*), and which are used as adjectives in subsequent lessons.

As for verbs, their use is limited to verb forms of BE that are necessary to generate simple sentences (*e.g., I am Omer, This book is red, They are monkeys*). Moreover, what is said about verbs applies to prepositions. That is, their existence in the book is very limited. Only four prepositions were found throughout the book. these are *from, on, in* and *about*. They are either illustrated by pictures or by using them in simple sentences (*e.g., I am from Libya*). However, neither the illustration nor the frequency of their occurrence was adequate.

Some compound nouns are also included such as *sitting-room, downstairs, grape juice* and *milk shake*. When learners learn these words, they may face some difficulty not only related to their length and structure in which they have a different meaning from their separate constituents but also related to placing stress in the right position. Therefore, teachers should not only be aware of the fact that English stress placement system is different from that of Arabic but also of the negative effect that may this difference have on learning English by Arab students.

Limiting most of the vocabulary to nouns can be attributed to the fact that this is the first year learners study English and this beginner's level demands associating words with objects which can only be obtained by the use of nouns.

Other related elements to the content of material are core vocabulary, frequency, range, and learnability. Core vocabulary is those words which are more central or basic to language than others (McCarthy, 1990, p.49). It is not easy for a non-native speaker to decide which word is core and which is not. However, since the level of the material is beginners' level, all words seem to belong to core vocabulary of the learned language. They are familiar to ordinary people and are highly frequent words.

Regarding the frequency of these words, it is needless to say that the most frequent words in a language are the most valuable for language learners. Therefore, there is a tendency to start teaching a foreign language with these words. However,

there is no absolute agreement to what is frequent and what is not. The reason for this is that different people use different criteria for deciding on what is frequent and what is not. This will involve factors such as whether the corpus from which the words are chosen is spoken or written or both and of what size. The type of words included is also important. For example, whether multi-word items are included or excluded (McCarthy, 1990, p.66-67).

For the material we are considering, it is very difficult for me as a non-native speaker to decide whether the words included are the most frequent words in English. However, because the new series was prepared by native speakers of the language and professionals in course design, the words included are likely to be of high frequency. It is believed that highly frequent words must be taught in the early stages of learning a language to provide learners with the basis necessary for understanding and communicating in the target language (Ibid, p.66-67).

Range is another important element in determining the significance of the vocabulary contained in teaching/learning material. Vocabulary can be considered of a wide range when it is found in a variety of texts. Again, it is difficult for a non-native speaker to decide whether the word is of a wide or small range. However, one can refer to a good dictionary to find out about the range of a word. The English, from which the material analysed is a part, is general English and intended to a beginner's level and, therefore, it is not likely to contain words that are field –specific.

Finally, as for Learnability, teachers have to consider some factors that make words easy or difficult to learn. Words might be difficult due to their spelling or pronunciation or their syntactic features. Similarity in meaning between some words might also be a source of trouble to the learners (McCarthy, 1990, p.68-87). They may have some pronunciation problems with words like *cat*, *chair* and *pencil* in which the c letter has different pronunciations. They may also face some problems pronouncing words like *dog* and *orange* due to the variation in the pronunciation of the letter g. However, the Activity Book accompanying the Pupil's Book provides a number of exercises that may help in learning the words and overcoming any learnability difficulties.

#### **2.4.2. Presentation**

In dealing with presentation, two main points will be discussed. They are the vocabulary teaching approach and the teaching activities and techniques used to

achieve the intended outcomes. According to Nation (2001, p.388) there are two types of vocabulary learning: direct and indirect and the latter should be given more time than the former. The direct approach focuses on teaching words in isolation and explicitly by giving exercises such as matching words and word lists. The indirect approach, on the other hand, focuses on the implicit teaching of vocabulary by integrating it in various communicative activities such as listening to stories, task based activities, conversations and games. This will not only encourage receptive acquisition of vocabulary as in the direct method but productive acquisition as well.

### **Teaching approach**

When we examine the material we find that the vocabulary is generally taught using the direct approach. Words most of the time are presented with pictures representing objects. As mentioned above, associating words with the objects representing them will enhance the learning of these words and incorporating them in the learner's linguistic knowledge in the brain.

The use of the direct method can be justified by the fact that this book is taught to pupils who have just started learning English, which means that their language is still very limited. However, this does not mean that communicative activities are not used. From the beginning, learners are encouraged to use words in meaningful utterances such as phrases (*e.g., my family, a bag, p.7*) and sentences (*e.g., She is short, they are big, p.52*) by using a variety of techniques including *listen, read and say, ask and answer, listen and complete, etc.*

To enhance the memory of the learners and make them remember the words they have already learned, the book includes exercises intended to recycle the lexical items which encourage them to memorise, remember and produce these words when needed. For example, the *read and complete* exercise includes sentences in which the last word is replaced by a picture of the object which that word represents. Learners are required to read and complete each sentence with the word represented by the picture (See p.31 in the Pupil's Book for an example).

### **Activities and techniques**

There are five essential steps that need to be followed in learning vocabulary (Hatch and Cheryl Brown, 1995, p.373). These steps are, encountering a new word, getting its form, getting its meaning, linking the form and meaning together in

memory and, finally, using the word. Therefore, techniques must be designed and sequenced in a way that is consistent with these steps. Furthermore, they must be designed to ensure that “repetition, retrieval, generation and thoughtful processing occur” (Nation, 2001, p.389). This can be achieved by including sufficient number of activities of various types to provide the learners with the opportunity to have adequate practice in the language being learned. This will also ensure maintaining their interest in the taught material.

In our material and as previously mentioned, the new words are presented using pictures. However, the presentation of these words in this way is not enough for learning the form of these words and the meaning of the pictured items. Learners will face problems producing these words accurately and spelling them properly. Moreover, writing the words may also cause trouble to learners. As for pronunciation, teachers are encouraged to use the CD accompanying the book to give the learners the opportunity to hear the words from native speakers of the language. With regard to learning word forms, the book does not provide the chance to write the full form of the word. Instead, writing exercises found in the book (See p. 55 for an example) let learners practice writing single letters not full words. In a similar manner, the activity book also focuses on writing single letters or completing words in which a single letter is dropped. To solve this problem, teachers can give students additional practice in writing full words and simple sentences. This procedure does not only help pupils improve their writing ability but it also enhances vocabulary learning in general.

When the learners are familiar with the visual or auditory form or both and when they know the meaning of these words, they are ready to consolidate form with the meaning in their memory. Oxford (1990 cited in Hatch and Cheryl Brown, 1995, p.384) suggests some strategies that strengthens the link between form and meaning of words. These strategies include putting new words into a context, regularly reviewing the taught material and connecting the new learned words to information already in the memory.

The new words in the book investigated are generally presented with pictures or in context in the form of meaningful short simple sentences in most of the activities in both the Pupil's Book or the Activity Book. Moreover, words are given some amount of recycling which is especially achieved by including two revision units through a variety of exercises such as *look and remember*, *read and complete* and *listen and choose*.

Using the new words is the final essential step in learning vocabulary. Using words does not only test the learners understanding and whether the intended outcomes are obtained but also ensures that the meaning learned will not be forgotten (Hatch and Cheryl Brown, 1995, p.390). However, this will only be achieved if that use was regular and continuous. Although the material given in the units provides some activities that help in learning the words and using them in context, the teacher should always provide chances to the learners to revise these words whenever possible both in class by the use of complementary activities and at home by asking the learners to do some relevant homework. It is the responsibility of the teacher, then, to try to give his learners sufficient opportunities to practice these words regularly and to use them in generating meaningful sentences suitable to their level.

### ***SECTION III: WAYS OF IMPROVING THE MATERIAL***

Before we critically examine the material again in order to suggest how this material can be improved, some important facts should be mentioned. First, the material taught is only one factor of the teaching/learning process and any evaluation of this material or the intended outcomes should consider other factors involved such as the learners themselves and the teacher. This, however, will not be easily obtained. Lack of resources and references about the environment where the material is taught in addition to limitations of space and time will restrict our examination and, thus, these factors will only be minimally touched. In what follows, elements such as organising vocabulary, presenting vocabulary and learners' activities in the classroom will be discussed.

#### **3.1. Organising vocabulary**

By examining the content of the Pupil's Book, we find that most of the vocabulary is presented in a form of single words associated with pictures to illustrate them and clarify their meaning. Teaching words by presenting them in a list is one of the features of the direct approach (Nation, 2001, p.388), which is only suitable for developing receptive skills. Therefore, teachers are advised not to teach these listed words in isolation and to integrate them in different contexts. throughout the book, some of these words are used in meaningful short simple sentences and conversations suitable to the pupils level. My contention is that these are not enough and thus, it is

the responsibility of the teacher to help learners generate similar sentences and conversations in which they can use these words.

Another problem with this material relates to the distribution of words in the lessons of the units. Every unit is divided into six lessons and while some lessons contain many new words (*e.g., lesson one, unit 7*), other lessons have included no new lexical items at all (*e.g., lesson six, unit 5*). Teachers, then, will face difficulty teaching some lessons in one period each since the number of words that can be taught in one period and can be assimilated by learners should be suitable for the learners' cognitive abilities. Therefore, any future editions aiming to improve this material should take this into consideration.

A final remark regarding the organisation of the material concerns integrating the Pupils' Book and the Activity Book in a single book. The two books are relatively small and most of the exercises in the Activity Book are directly related to the material in the Pupil's Book which makes it more practical and beneficial if they are put together. In addition, some teachers only rely on the Pupils' Book in their teaching without paying attention to the Activity Book except for asking their pupils to do the exercises found in the activity book on their own as homework. The two books are intended to complement each other and to be worked on simultaneously. Thus, integrating the two books will not only save valuable time but will help learners to concentrate and avoid confusion when searching for material for each exercise. This also makes teachers pay more attention to the exercises found in the Activity Book and give beneficial feedback to their pupils.

### **3.2. Presenting vocabulary**

As far as the presentation of material is concerned, it has been noticed that most of the focus in the Pupil's Book is given to listening, speaking and reading while writing is given more emphasis in the activity book. In order to provide balance between the four language skills and give them equal attention, teachers are advised to pay equal and simultaneous attention to both books. In addition, they can convert some of the listening, speaking and reading activities into writing exercises. Moreover, these writing exercises should not be limited to copying single letters but it should include full words and sentences.

As for speaking, it might not be realistic to expect students at such a low level to speak fluently. However, teachers can encourage them to read aloud simple

sentences and to play the roles of the conversations found in the book not just to listen to them read or said by teacher.

Listening is also an important skill which also requires sufficient attention. Unfortunately, most of the Libyan teachers are not aware of this or they complain that time is not sufficient to conduct the listening activities. Some others attribute their neglect of this skill to the lack of equipment such as recorders and computers. This can be overcome by giving pupils a tape of the recorded material to copy at home themselves and to assign the listening activities as homework. This, however, is not an optimal solution since pupils at this level need some direct instructions before, while and after listening. Moreover, some of them will not have enough enthusiasm to do the listening exercises individually.

To conclude, although the organisation of the set books in addition to the teacher's book, if available, may draw guidelines that can be followed in presenting the material and dealing with the students activities, it is the teachers themselves who can make the choice between these learning processes and techniques or invent others that, they think, are suitable for their learners capabilities and needs.

## ***CONCLUSION***

This work has critically evaluated a sample of material which focuses on the teaching of vocabulary. Evaluation of the teaching material helps in determining whether the material is suitable for the learners, their needs and their goals. Also, it enables the identification of any problems that the material has and this will help teachers to find suitable solutions to them. Evaluation provides the opportunity to learn from the experience of others and to try to improve what is being assessed accordingly.

The sample was a course book taught in Libyan public schools to 10 year old pupils who are at the beginner's level. Elements such as organising principles, teaching approaches, the learning processes and the intended outcomes have been examined. Suggestions on how the material might be improved and justifications of the suggestions were also given. Throughout the paper links to relevant background literature were provided.

Although I tried to cover all the related topics, it was impossible in a limited time and space to deal with all aspects in more detail; many other aspects remain ambiguous and need to be investigated. Another factor is that it was difficult to deal

with the material in isolation. Therefore, reference was made whenever possible to the other important constituents of the teaching/learning process such as the teacher, the student and the environment. Another difficulty concerned the lack of Libyan sources related to the material such as the teacher's book and the taped material.

It is, therefore, a recommended task to my Libyan colleagues who are interested in carrying studies in the field of teaching a foreign language to try to investigate in more depth the teaching situation in Libya and its circumstances and how these can be improved in the future.

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