

Transformative Learning: Teaching Vocabulary To Disadvantaged Non-Native Language Learners

Andriansyah, Western Oregon University, USA

ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a foreign language to students from disadvantaged situations requires focus on vocabulary building through contextualization, development of student-teacher relationships, and building the curriculum around collaborative activities.

Keywords: Disadvantaged Students; Contextualization; EFL

INTRODUCTION

Many people in non-native English speaking countries learn English as a second language at school. Moreover, most countries build it into the curriculum of national education ranging from elementary to university levels of education. As a compulsory subject in many countries, it is necessary that the students learn the language. They must be able to use the language, although just in the form of simple conversation in order to communicate simple ideas at least with their teacher or with colleagues, or in a broader use with native speakers of the language.

To be able to understand English, non-native language learners must know the meaning of words and must study seriously and practice it in their daily life. Without mastering vocabulary, lack of skills will affect their ability to master the other skills in English. Pittman (2003) stated that “there is no aspect of language that is more important than vocabulary building and comprehension” (p.1). Although there are numerous techniques that can be applied by a teacher in teaching vocabulary for a non-native language, it is crucially important to consider the situation of the students, especially in disadvantaged communities and to figure out the ideas and techniques that might be effectively applied for the students in disadvantaged situations. Teaching in such situations is not only about teaching the language, but also about teaching learning strategies. Kieffer & Lesaux (2010) stated that: “to meet the needs of their students, teachers must not only teach academic language and vocabulary, but also must give them the thinking tools they need to be active language learners” (p.55). Teachers should know the problems that are faced by their students to make the teaching and learning proceed effectively in the classroom. By knowing the problems, teachers can deliver effective learning experiences to their students in order to build the essential skills during the class that will reach the goal or the purposed study of the class. This paper will focus on teaching students in disadvantaged conditions in an overview of the vocabulary teaching techniques of contextualizing vocabulary in situations meaningful to these students, developing personal teacher-student relationships to create the schema and desire to learn vocabulary, and using collaborative learning activities.

Recent research into best practices in teaching languages has confirmed the wisdom of creating authentic learning experiences. According to Pugh & Girod (2006): “instructional approaches emphasize the importance of connecting subject matter to student experience” (p.16). Based on this, and considering that so many students come from various backgrounds, it is extremely important for teachers to develop activities that will be useful to those students with weaker vocabulary skills, linking it with students’ experience to make it more meaningful. Lacking in vocabulary can affect a student in mastery of the ability to acquire other English skills.

Students will be more motivated and build up their intrinsic motivation when they are involved in the activity in the classroom if it is meaningfully connected to their own real-world experience. Ginsberg (2005) mentioned that “Intrinsic motivation can be defined as participation in learning experiences” (p. 220). Motivation is the key to all learning. Lack of motivation is perhaps the biggest obstacle faced by teachers, counselors, school administrators, and parents. Research has shown that behavior problems are often linked with a lack of motivation. Research has also shown that, “Intelligent students are often out-performed by less bright students with high motivation. If a child is motivated enough, he/she can accomplish learning of any scale” (Lile, 2002, p. 2). The importance of motivation has also been described as the “backbone” of classroom function (Lile, 2002, p. 2). When the students are motivated, the teacher can perform his/her job the best. In addition, parents must take part effectively in the students’ life; the goal setting must be followed in their home life to get a great result. In line with Lile’s (2002) statement, “Increased parental awareness is also crucial to a child’s motivation.” (p.2).

I have had some experience teaching in a school when I was in my country, Indonesia, especially when my province was slammed by a tsunami on Dec 26th, 2004. I did some volunteer activities by teaching English classes for students at the Junior High School level. The biggest challenge that I found at that time was that the majority of the students were from disadvantaged family backgrounds. It was very difficult for me to teach them when they did not understand much in English. Moreover, some of them were speaking in their own local language, Acehese language. That was really challenging for me. To overcome such problems, I was trying to help them focus on the vocabulary building first. I used some methods and techniques in teaching vocabulary for disadvantaged students. Also, I added context by bringing them to the field; for example, I brought them to the beach because mostly they were from the coastal community. This activity is in line with Ginsberg’s (2005) statement that, “for teachers, especially those in high poverty communities, designing lessons that help elicit students’ stories, opinions, values, and interests as a catalyst for learning is fundamental to encouraging intrinsic motivation across student groups” (p. 220). What I was trying to do was to make the teaching and learning process more authentic and meaningful, to build up the intrinsic motivation of students, and to let them be involved in the process of teaching and learning. The developmental approach of this activity made the use and recognition of words in English more contextualized. The activity was in line with the Deweyan perspective, where “the goal is to help students appreciate the concept’s origin as an ideas” (Pugh & Girod, 2006, p. 16). The teaching and learning process followed the curriculum provided in the English hand-book, but the way of delivering the subject was using alternative learning activities.

The personal teacher-student relationships are also essential in terms of reaching the goal of teaching English vocabulary for non-native learners. Teachers are involved in the social interaction with students from different backgrounds including family, social structure, and culture among other things: “Culture plays an important role in the day-to-day classroom activities. It is important for the teacher to recognize potential negative culturally based perceptions of their learners and vice versa” (Ryan, 2001, n.p.). Poverty has defined education in a negative manner which has affected low income families’ views on education. In order to combat this situation, teachers must create a new definition of education which is positive for students and families. The willingness of teachers to make a good interaction with the students will bring a great stimulus in terms of reaching the goal in teaching.

Knowing the problems and finding suitable methods and techniques in teaching students with disadvantaged situations are essential issues in building student-teacher relationships. The issues encompass many areas, such as the personality of the student, learning styles, and family backgrounds. It requires a lot of work from teachers and critical thinking toward this situation. It means that the teacher must be able to understand the condition of their learners; knowing the issues that students face and trying to figure out the problems, and being a problem solving person for their students. This condition can also steer the children away from dropping out.

Collaborative learning in the classroom can support and bring new ideas and is inextricably interconnected with contextualizing: “Collaborative learning is a method of teaching and learning in which students team together to explore a significant question or create a meaningful project” (Cooperative and Collaborative Learning, 2004). Students can share their knowledge and ideas and work together with other students.

Collaborative learning is especially powerful in disadvantaged situations where situational and social aspects have tremendous influence on learning. “Collaborative approaches to learning are beneficial for individual

and collective knowledge growth . . . [and] can help students develop affective qualities, such as confidence and motivation.” (Darling-Hammond, 2008). According to Smith and MacGregor, “Collaborative learning produces intellectual synergy of many minds coming to bear on a problem, and the social stimulation of mutual engagement in a common endeavor. This mutual exploration, meaning-making, and feedback often leads to better understanding on the part of students, and to the creation of new understandings for all of us”. (Smith et al., n.d.).

According to Srinivas, there are many benefits that can be gained by applying collaborative learning, (n.d.) such as building self-esteem in students, enhancing self-management skills, setting high expectations for students and teachers, and classroom anxiety is significantly reduced. Collaborative learning is essential to success in educating disadvantaged students. In one study on collaborative learning, “low-income students benefited more than high-income students” (Darling-Hammond, 2008).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is necessary to teach vocabulary to disadvantaged non-native language learners. To help disadvantaged non-native language learners acquire vocabulary, it is important to meaningfully contextualize vocabulary, develop a strong student-teacher relationship, and provide collaborative learning opportunities. Putting the concentration on how to teach vocabulary is the most important part, “Students need instruction in comprehension strategies, vocabulary, and learning the English language” (Donnelly & Roe, 2010). By mastering vocabulary, a student who is learning English as a second language can master all the skills in English such as writing, reading, speaking and listening. In contrast, if a student is poor with vocabulary it will affect the other skills: “Gaps in reading performance are often associated with gaps in vocabulary knowledge” (Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010). Teachers must understand the condition of their students and arrange the techniques for teaching vocabulary that can encourage and motivate students.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Andriansyah is currently completing graduate studies in Teacher Education in the School of Education at Western Oregon University. Previously he was a lecturer of education at State Institute of Islamic Studies Ar-Raniry in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Correspondence concerning this paper can be sent to Andriansyah, School of Education, Western Oregon University, 345 N. Monmouth Ave, Monmouth, OR 97361. E-mail: andriansyah10@mail.wou.edu

REFERENCES

1. Cooperative and Collaborative Learning. (2004). Concept to Classroom. Educational Broadcasting Corporation. <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/coopcollab/index.html>
2. Darling-Hammond, L., & George Lucas Educational Foundation. (2008). *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
3. Donnelly, W., & Roe, C. J. (2010). Using sentence frames to develop academic vocabulary for English learners. *Reading Teacher*, 64(2), 131-136. doi:10.1598/RT.64.2.5
4. Ginsberg, M. B (2005). Cultural Diversity, Motivation, and Differentiation. *Theory into Practice*, 44(3), 218-225.
5. Kelley, J. G., Lesaux, N. K., Kieffer, M. J., & Faller, S. (2010). Effective academic vocabulary instruction in the Urban Middle School. *Reading Teacher*, 64(1), 5-14. doi:10.1598/RT.64.1.1
6. Kieffer, M. J., & Lesaux, N. K. (2010). Morphing Into Adolescents: Active Word Learning for English-Language Learners and Their Classmates in Middle School. *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(1), 47-56. doi:10.1598/JAAL.54.1.5
7. Lile, W. (2002). Motivation in the esl classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, VIII (1), 2.
8. Pittman, W. (2003). Building vocabulary through prefixes, roots & suffixes. *The Internet TESL Journal*, IX(7), 1.
9. Pugh, K. J. & Girod, M. (2007). Science, Art, and Experience: Constructing a Science Pedagogy From Dewey’s Aesthetic. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 18, 9 27.
10. Ryan, S. (2001). Overcoming common problems related to communicative methodology. *The Internet TESL Journal*, VII(11), 1.

NOTES