Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners (Linse, 2005, pp. 120-134)

Very young children learn vocabulary items related to the different concepts they are learning. When children learn numbers or colors in their native language, they are adding concepts as well as vocabulary items.

Coursebooks for YL often emphasize nouns because they are easy to illustrate and because often YL don’t have literacy skills, so the only words that can easily be featured are nouns. However, language is more than nouns and it is important to include verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions and also different lexical fields (colors, animals, days of the week, food, jobs, etc.) as part of the vocabulary teaching.

It is important to help them expand their vocabulary knowledge through formal (planned instruction: teaching the meaning of the words and ways to discover the meaning) and informal instruction (“by the way” instruction: with no rule or systematic approach). Both formal and informal vocabulary instructions are important to engage students’ cognitive skills and to give opportunities for YL to use the words. Having different learning opportunities improves learners’ overall language ability by improving their vocabulary.

Teachers should facilitate vocabulary learning by teaching learners useful words and by teaching strategies to help learners figure out meanings on their own. Useful words are words that children are likely to encounter and words that occur in a high frequency.

Learners need to acquire vocabulary learning strategies, in order to discover the meaning of new words. The strategies are useful in in-class and also in out-of-class situations where they encounter new and unfamiliar words. These strategies also help them acquire new vocabulary items they see or hear. The students can benefit from how to use contextual clues and guessing the meaning from the content to deal with unfamiliar items.

Vocabulary development should include both Direct instruction (teaching the words and their meanings such as pre-teaching vocabulary items) and Indirect instruction (teaching the strategies to help learners figure out the meaning themselves such as teaching the prefixes and suffixes).

When vocabulary items are taught before an activity, the students may benefit from it in two ways:

1. It helps them comprehend the activity better.

2. It is more likely that they acquire the target vocabulary words.

Vocabulary Teaching, 1
YL should be exposed to vocabulary items repeatedly in rich contexts. We can’t expect them to learn the items we teach and to remember all in the lesson two days later. Thus, a newly taught word should **reappear** many times and in different situations for the following weeks of instruction. The vocabulary items should be revisited/recycled in different activities, with different skills and for multiple times.

Another important component of vocabulary teaching in YL classes is **deep processing**, which means working with the information at a high cognitive and personal level. Deep processing makes it more likely to remember the information, as the students build connections between new words and prior knowledge. Instead of memorizing list of words and their meanings, personalizing vocabulary lessons greatly helps students’ deep processing.

**Dictionaries** and vocabulary **notebooks** help the EFL and ESL instruction as a tool. Picture dictionaries for very young learners show the vocabulary items in different categories and help YL increase their vocabulary knowledge and their use of contextual clues. That’s why, it is important to teach them how to use a dictionary and guide them while using electronic dictionaries. They may also create their own picture dictionary by drawing or cutting/pasting pictures from newspapers or magazines.

Some of the useful classroom **activities** for YL are:

- a. Connecting vocabulary to young learners’ lives through personalizing
- b. **Word for the day**
- c. **Categories**
- d. **Scavenger hunt**
- e. What’s missing?
- f. **Mystery words**
- g. **Concentration**
- h. **Vocabulary basket**

Learning Words (Cameron, 2001, pp. 72-95)

Children are clearly capable of learning foreign language words through participating in the discourse of classroom activities; thus, vocabulary teaching has a centre stage in foreign language teaching. Besides, although opinions differ in how much grammar can be taught, vocabulary learning can be a stepping stone to learning and using grammar.

Young learners of a second/foreign language are still building their first language vocabulary, which is tied up with their contextual development; thus, in planning and teaching a foreign language we need to take into account this first language background to know what will work and what may be too difficult for children. The role of words as language units begins with the early use of nouns for naming objects in first language acquisition and use of other words to express the child’s wants and needs, followed by a period of rapid vocabulary development.

As Vygotsky states, although children may use the same words with adults, they may not hold the same meaning for those words. The acquisition of word meaning takes much longer than the acquisition of the spoken form of the words, and children use words in their speech long before they have a full understanding of them.

If we had to have complete knowledge of words before using them, we would be restricted to very limited vocabulary. In this sense, our production races a head of our comprehension and vocabulary development is a continuous process not just adding new words but of building up knowledge about words we already know partially.

Learning a new word is not a simple task that is done once and then completed. Learning words is a cyclical process of meeting new words and initial learning, followed by meeting those words again, each time extending knowledge of what the words mean and how they are used in the foreign language. Learning a word takes a long time and many exposures to the word used in different situations. (Metaphor: Cleaning a house)

Vocabulary development is also about learning more about those words and about learning formulaic phrases or chunks, finding words inside them and learning even more about those words.

The gap between vocabulary size in the first language and in the foreign language is very large and seldom closed even by adult foreign language learners after many years of study. A realistic target for children learning a foreign language might be around 500 words a year in good learning conditions.
No one person knows all the words in the language and not all words are equally useful to learn in using a foreign language; frequency plays an important role in the word’s usefulness:

- Adult NS: 20K (18yrs. Starting University) > 37K (Shakespeare)
- Child NS: 4K-5K by the age of 5 + 1K each year.
- Non-NS: 1K each year (for who attended English speaking school)
- Child non-NS: 500 words each year given good learning conditions.

Knowing a word includes:

- **Receptive knowledge**: Recognizing & Understanding its meaning when heard/read
- **Memory**: Recall it when needed
- **Conceptual knowledge**: Use it with correct meaning
- **Using it correctly in spoken form (in isolation and in discourse)**
- **Grammatical knowledge**: Accurate use
- **Collocation knowledge**
- **Orthographic knowledge**: spelling
- **Pragmatic knowledge**: style and register
- **Connotational knowledge**: positive and negative associations
- **Metalinguistic knowledge**: grammatical properties
- **Cultural Content**: what is the significance of use in the culture (deliver milk)

Increasing the depth of vocabulary knowledge does not happen automatically in a foreign language, even in most favorable circumstances such as immersion programs. **Conceptual knowledge** grows as children experience more of the world in their daily lives. It depends on the maturation factor as well.

Younger children tend to make **syntagmatic associations**, choosing a linking idea in a word from a different part of speech or word class (dog: bark). Older children are more likely to respond to cue words with words from the same word class (dog: animal), which is called **pragmatic responses**. Children’s shift to pragmatic responses reflects other developments:

- **They become more able to deal with abstract connections** (dog is an animal) and develop skills for working with ideas and talking about what is not present.
- **They build up more knowledge of the world and words**, and ways of organizing, classifying, labeling, categorizing, comparing and contrasting them.

**Schooling** helps children sort things into sets, classify and label sets and categories, compare and contrast them. Schooling moves children from concrete to the abstract as it develops skills for working with ideas.
When a word is encountered, the schema that they are part of will be activated, and the network of activated meanings becomes available to help make sense of the discourse and the words at a holistic level. These schemas are usually being constructed throughout childhood within the first language culture. When foreign language words are learnt, they are likely to be mapped on the first language words and to enter schemas that have already been built up. (E.Q.: “fetch the milk” in British culture)

The words for basic level concepts are the most commonly used words, they are learnt by children before words higher or lower in the hierarchy and they are more likely to have been mastered than superordinate and subordinate levels that develop through formal education. Early vocabulary learning may be ineffective, if words are not consolidating (unite) and used regularly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate</th>
<th>Basic level</th>
<th>Subordinate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>furniture</td>
<td>chair</td>
<td>racking chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>animal</td>
<td>dog</td>
<td>spaniel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Younger children
a. need Concrete vocabulary
b. need recycling the words again and again in new contexts.
c. need Basic level words
d. learn words as collections

Older children
a. can cope with Abstract words/topics
b. need recycling the words again and again in new contexts
c. can benefit from superordinate and subordinate vocab. linked to basic level words they already know.
d. Can learn through pragmatic organization.

Content words form an open set in that new content words can be invented, whereas the set of function words is closed. Each set needs different teaching approaches. Content words can be taught in more planned and explicit ways. Function words are acquired through repeated use in different contexts.

http://www.wordcount.org

Among 86800 words, the first 25 are function words:

1. The 6. in 11. I 16. Be 21. have
2. Of 7. that 12. For 17. With 22. are
3. And 8. it 13. On 18. As 23. this
5. a 10. was 15. He 20. at 25. but
Techniques in presenting the meaning of new items to Young learners

I. Demonstration
   a. Visuals: Magazine Pictures/ Flash Cards/ Filmstrips/ Photographs/ Images from TV or video
   b. Real Objects (Realia)
   c. Black/white board drawings
   d. Mime, gestures, acting

II. Verbal Explanation
   a. Definition Lexical Meaning (requires preexisting knowledge)
   b. Putting the word in a defining context (requires preexisting knowledge)
   c. Translation: (This doesn’t require learner to do some mental work in constructing a meaning for the new foreign language word.) *

* The amount of mental work done by learners affects how well a new word is engraved in memory; the more learners have to think about a word and its meaning, the more likely they are to remember it.

Sometimes a new word is first explained in the foreign language or with pictures, but is then immediately translated in the first language. Pupils will soon realize the pattern of their teacher’s explanations and learn that they don’t have to concentrate on working out the meaning because the translation is predictable given afterwards.

Form, how a word is pronounced and written, is a key part of word knowledge. Pupils need to hear a new word in isolation as well as in a discourse context, so that they can notice the sounds at the beginning and at the end, the stress pattern of the word, and the syllables that makes up the word. They need to hear the word spoken in isolation several times to catch all this information. When children encounter the written form of a new word, their attention should be drawn to its shape, to initial and final letters, to letter clusters and to its spelling.

After the YLs meet with a word and the word enters their short term memory, it is essential to build up the memory for the word to use it in the long run. Memorizing activities are needed at first, but then it is essential to recycle the vocabulary at regular intervals. Organizational networks may help students memorize the words:

i. Thematic organization: things that go/happen together (shopping list: milk, eggs, yogurt... etc.)
ii. Relations of whole to parts (Parts of Body: head, shoulders, knees, toes... etc.)
iii. General to specific (fruits > banana, apple, orange... etc.)
iv. Ordering words/degrees/antonyms: (always, usually sometimes, rarely, never... etc.)
v. Ad-hoc categories: collection of things that go together (Picnic: food, ball, basket ... etc.)
Difficulties in learning vocabulary may result from the vocabulary not being sufficiently connected to pupil’s real lives. In order to extend children’s vocabulary beyond textbook:

(1) working outwards from the textbook  
(2) learner(s) choice  
(3) incidental learning through stories

**Strategy** use changes with age, and successful and less successful learners vary in what strategies they use and in how they use them.

Teachers have to encourage young learners to adapt vocabulary learning strategies:

- Guessing meaning
- Noticing grammatical information about words
- Noticing links to similar words in first language (cognates)
- Remembering where a word has been encountered before
- World knowledge

Teachers can model strategy use, teach sub-skills needed to make use of strategies, include classroom tasks for strategy use, rehearse independent strategy use and help young learners reflect on their learning process through evaluating their achievement.