Facilitating Vocabulary Teaching in EFL Classrooms with Concept-checking Questions

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Abstract: *Concept-checking questions might be a useful tool to estimate learner's understanding of the meaning and usage of the vocabulary being taught. Acknowledging the necessity of employing concept-checking questions in teaching vocabulary to EFL learners, this paper reviews certain fundamental theoretical issues on concept-checking questions and gives conclusions on effective use of concept-checking questions in teaching vocabulary to EFL learners.*

Keywords: *Concept-checking questions, teaching vocabulary, EFL learners*

1. Introduction

In an EFL classroom, to check whether learners have understood a specific concept (i.e. a grammatical structure or vocabulary item) which has been taught, concept-checking questions appear to be an effective alternative to the question like "Do you understand?", which could hardly indicate whether learners truly understand the presented concepts or not.

Being an indispensable part of a lesson, concept-checking questions help teachers recognize problems with learners' understanding of the newly-taught concepts, thereby coming up with possible solutions to facilitate and consolidate learners' comprehension of those concepts (Workman, 2006; Ingham, 2014; Florkowska, 2018 and Liashenko, 2018).

In conjunction with the scope of this paper, the construction of concept-checking questions used when teaching new vocabulary items to EFL learners is focused on. It is noteworthy that the central focus of this paper was not on the teaching of vocabulary but on the usage of concept-checking questions in teaching vocabulary to EFL learners.

2. Content

2.1. Types of concept-checking questions

A concept checking question can be an interrogative sentence that ends with a question mark or it can be an incomplete sentence which teachers provide for learners to complete (Liashenko, 2018).

Concerning the types of concept-checking questions that could be used in vocabulary teaching to EFL learners, Ingham (2014) and Florkowska (2018) proposed two kinds of concept-checking questions. These are display questions and referential questions. While display questions are those requesting information already known and requiring short and mechanical responses, referential questions are more open and are the ones that allow learners' free and personal responses (Ingham, 2014 & Florkowska, 2018). Between display questions and referential questions, it is asserted that referential questions might encourage learners to produce "longer and more syntactically complex responses which are meaningful to the learners." (Florkowska, 2018, p. 14)

Table 1 below presents how the meaning of the word "bustling" in the sentence "We went to a really bustling market full of life" is checked with the use of display and referential questions.

Table 1

Examples of Ingham's (2014) Concept-checking Question Construction

Types of concept-checking questions		Examples
Display questions	Closed questions	"Are there a lot of people or very few people in a bustling area?"
	Open questions	"What can you see in a bustling area?"
	Trick questions	"Those who cannot stand noises or who extremely love quietness will prefer a bustling area, right?"
	Sentence finishers	"A bustling area is where there are a lot of _____"
Referential questions		"Where is a busting area in your city?"

From Table 1, it is seen that display questions are divided into four sub-categories, which are closed questions, open questions, trick questions and sentence finishers. While closed questions provide two options (i.e. Yes/ No) for learners to choose, open questions allow learners to think of the answers on their own. To form trick questions, teachers provide false information to check if learners truly understand the

meaning of the vocabulary items. In Table 1, learners' comprehension of the word "bustling" is checked with a trick question asking whether a bustling area is a suitable place for a person who loves quietness or a person who might be annoyed at noises. By asking this trick question, the contrast between "bustling" and "quiet" is highlighted. If learners truly understand the meaning of "bustling", they would recognize the contradiction in this trick question. The other sub-type of display questions is sentence finishers. With sentence finishers, teachers give the first half of a sentence in which the vocabulary item (i.e. "bustling", in this case) being checked is embedded and let learners complete the second half of the sentence. Upon listening to how learners complete the sentence with appropriate and relevant information or details related to the vocabulary item given in the first half of the sentence, teachers can measure learners' understanding of the vocabulary item.

2.2. Stages in employing concept checking questions

To exercise concept checking, teachers are advised to follow "TAPPLE", mentioned in an article entitled *Checking for Understanding: How to Verify that English Learners are Learning* (n.d.). TAPPLE is the acronym for "Teach first", "Ask a question", "Pause, pair-share, and point", "Pick a non-volunteer", "Listen to the response" and give "Effective feedback".

As its name indicates, in the first stage of concept checking, "Teach first", teachers have to provide the knowledge of the vocabulary items being presented before asking concept-checking questions. If teachers do not teach first, then what they are assessing is not checking if learners understand the concepts being taught, but learners' background knowledge.

In the second stage, "Ask a question", teachers will ask specific questions to measure if learners are catching up with what is being taught. One recommendation is to avoid yes/ no questions such as "Does everyone understand how to do this?", "Are you ready to go on?" and suchlike because learners are likely to just answer "Yes" or "No" in response to these questions.

In the third stage of concept checking, "Pause, pair-share, and point", learners are given roughly eight to ten seconds to recall the vocabulary items and figure out the answer to teachers' concept-checking questions. Next, learners are asked to explain their answers to their partners. Lastly, learners are required to "point to specific textual information on the page and explain it to their partners one more time"

(*Checking for Understanding: How to Verify that English Learners are Learning*, n.d., p. 28).

In the fourth stage of concept checking, "Pick a non-volunteer", teachers are advised to check if random learners comprehend the vocabulary items. It is claimed that "3" is the ideal number of non-volunteers that teachers should call on for each concept checking question (*Checking for Understanding: How to Verify that English Learners are Learning*, n.d., p. 29).

In the last two stages of concept checking, "Listen to the response" and "Effective feedback", teachers should carefully listen to learners' answers to the concept-checking questions and thoroughly analyze these answers (*Checking for Understanding: How to Verify that English Learners are Learning*, n.d., p. 30). From these answers, teachers need to give efficient feedback to help learners realize the gaps in their understanding of the vocabulary item being taught.

2.3. Notices about the use of concept-checking questions

The first notice is that the use of concept-checking questions could also be combined with other techniques to check EFL learners' understanding of vocabulary items (*teach-this.com*). One of the efficient ways is to use visual aids to either check or consolidate learners' understanding of the vocabulary items that have just been taught. For instance, to carry an inspection on learners' understanding of the difference between two vocabulary items such as "stream" and "river", teachers could show two pictures: one is a stream and the other is a river. Then teachers can point at the picture of the stream and ask "Is it a river?" or the teacher can point at the picture of the river and ask "Is it a stream?". By doing this, teachers can easily check whether learners are able to understand the meaning of the two aforementioned vocabulary items. It is noteworthy that more complex concept checking questions might not be necessary if the vocabulary being taught could easily be illustrated with the use of pictures or images.

The next two reminders given by Ingham (2014) that need noticing when using concept-checking questions are language used in concept-checking questions and decision on the need of using concept-checking questions. First, language used in concept-checking questions should be simple enough for learners to understand. A concept checking question with complex sentence structures and unfamiliar vocabulary might not be an efficient tool for teachers to assess their learners' comprehension of the concept

being checked. Therefore, Ingham (2014) claimed that teachers should adjust the difficulty of the language used in concept-checking questions to suit learners' levels. The second reminder is that not in every situation will it be necessary for concept-checking questions to be used. In certain circumstances, concept-checking questions might not be needed. For instance, when introducing the word "eagle", a teacher shows the picture of an eagle and simultaneously asks learners "Can an eagle fly?". In this situation, this concept checking question is redundant or unnecessary since learners already understand the meaning of "eagle" as they look at the picture of the eagle.

3. Conclusion

The use of concept checking in teaching vocabulary to EFL learners has proven an essential part as it both facilitates teachers' verification of their learners' comprehension of the vocabulary item taught in a lesson and helps teachers realize the gaps in learners' understanding of the newly-learnt vocabulary. Based on the verification of learners' comprehension of the word meanings and the realization of learners' gaps in understanding particular vocabulary items, teachers could adjust and modify their teaching in such a way which suits or matches the learners' levels. This could possibly result in how effectively learners could use vocabulary in oral as well as written products.

It is noteworthy that when utilizing concept-checking questions, teachers ought to reflect on the construction of concept checking question types to guarantee the suitability of each concept checking question type for learners at different levels. In other words, before checking students' understanding of the vocabulary being taught, teachers should be selective with their choice of what types of concept-checking questions they should use. For low-level learners, one of the best choices is to use closed questions. However, for more higher-level learners, open questions or referential questions might appear to be better choices. Besides, teachers also need to pay attention to the way they use language to ask concept-checking questions. For low-level learners, teachers should use simple words and grammar structures so that these learners would understand the concept-checking being asked. It would be worthless if the concept-checking questions are so complicated that they hinder learners' understanding in such a way that learners could barely answer these questions, which eventually results in teachers' false assessment of their learners' understanding of the vocabulary items being taught.

With regard to the construction of concept-checking questions and consideration on the suitability of each type of concept checking question for different level learners, teachers should grasp how to use different types and sub-types of display questions and referential questions. The choice of display and referential questions might depend on the levels of learners. Display questions, especially closed questions, tend to be easier for lower-level learners to answer. On the contrary, referential questions seem to better fit higher-level learners who can make use of more adequate resources of vocabulary and grammatical structures as well as a sufficient amount of knowledge of the world to give answers to referential questions.

Regarding the language used in concept-checking questions, teachers should simplify the language used in concept-checking questions to optimize the effectiveness of concept checking process. To put it simply, the language used when asking concept-checking questions should not be so advanced that it can hinder learners' understanding of the concept-checking questions being asked.

In brief, the use of concept-checking questions should be planned carefully. In order to produce effective concept-checking questions, teachers should clearly understand how to construct different types of concept-checking questions and be selective in choosing the concept-checking questions as well as the language used in such concept-checking questions to ask learners at different levels.

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