

# Teaching vocabulary: A discourse approach

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**Abstract:** *Teaching vocabulary in the view of discourse approach has proved itself a satisfactory and effective approach. This application has made several contributions to language learners' vocabulary improvement. In addition to the literature review on the approach, the study also resulted in suggestions which should be taken into account in vocabulary teaching with the approach.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching, vocabulary, discourse, approach*

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays an important role in mastering a language. Yet, English vocabulary catches only a little attention from Vietnamese learners of English in reality. As a result, English vocabulary has been inadequately taught and learnt here and there in Vietnam. There is no wonder why Vietnamese learners of English have long suffered from incompetence in communicating in English. It is high time to find effective solutions to this problem. As it is stated by McCarthy (1991) that "bringing a discourse dimension into language teaching does not by any means imply an abandonment of teaching vocabulary. Vocabulary will still be the largest single element in tackling a new language for the learner and it would be irresponsible to suggest that it will take care of itself in some ideal world where language teaching and learning are discourse-driven" (p. 64).

## 2. English vocabulary learning in Viet Nam

The teaching and learning of English vocabulary in Vietnam has somehow been attached to the focalization of the so-called Traditional Method which is more of the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual than of the Communicative Approach. Learners usually learn English vocabulary by memorizing English words in relation to the equivalents of these words in Vietnamese, mainly based on the written forms of the words. Little attention is paid to the pronunciation. An inadequate amount of actual use of the words is presented. Another thing is that the lack of practice also contributes to poor communicative competence and performance. These facts have set such problems which Vietnamese learners of English have been facing, including the following:

### (i) Bad choice of words

The link between the words in English and their Vietnamese equivalents inside students' mind is so strong that it becomes a means by which the choice

of word is selected no matter how suitable the word is. The choice of the English word bases mostly on the particularly isolated equivalent in Vietnamese that has been personally matched in the learner's memory. Learners learn the modal "can" and "may" by means of setting up a link to the equivalents of these words in Vietnamese. But they may have the same Vietnamese equivalent, "có thể", for these two modals. This results in problems like one in the case of: "Don't play football in the rain. You *can* have a cold". Similarly, when well-linked, the English verb "know" and its Vietnamese equivalent "biết" can create another case of the point: "I have never driven any sort of car because I *don't know* drive".

### (ii) Low accessibility

Even advanced learners suffer from this problem. More attention is paid to communicative competence than to communicative performance. When they receive a message in English, they can understand it completely. But when they want to express what they think in English, they encounter a nuisance of calling out the English words from their memory. This interrupts and sometimes breaks the process of thinking and also the continuity of the delivery of the speech.

### (iii) Incorrect use of words

The way of expressing by means of word-by-word translation is automatically applied when learners express their ideas. This may create lexical disorders in communication. This is also due to the fact that the use of the English words is affected by that of their Vietnamese equivalents.

### (iii) Bad recognition of words

Because of the difference in the way the learner pronounces English words and the way native speakers of English do this, learners sometimes do not recognize the English words although they know these words in the written form.

### (iv) Bad production of words

The habit of not producing word-final sounds of Vietnamese people prevents them from forming a new habit of producing word-final sounds when speaking English. Furthermore, some English sounds such as /ʒ/ and /ð/ are totally new to Vietnamese people's experience. All of these factors may lead to bad pronunciation of English words among Vietnamese learners of the language.

(v) Lack of contextual use of words

Many language learners learn English words just in isolation. They pay little attention to idioms, collocations and expressions. Ideally, learners should at least know the common expressions and collocations containing the words. Even advanced learners give little thought to connotations and cultural associations which can serve as a key to success in cross-culture communication.

### 3. Discourse approach to teaching vocabulary

Like knowledge of phonology and grammar, vocabulary knowledge and teaching can be viewed in terms of both top-down and bottom-up strategies.

*Top-down strategies* include the speaker's background knowledge of the topic or speech situation at hand with the interlocutor. Vocabulary tend to group or associate around topics. Halliday & Hasan (1976) call this "lexical collocation" at the textual level. For example, if we know a reading passage or an oral discussion is dealing with the topic of "art museums", we can expect words like *painting(s)*, *artist(s)*, *sculpture/sculptor(s)*, *curator*, *exhibit(s)*, and the like to occur as part of the discourse. Likewise, "in any language, speech acts and speech activities have describable macrostructures with typical steps or moves, often in a predictable sequence, with highly conventionalized words or phrases associated with each step or move" (Nattinger & De Carrico, 1992). When English speakers apologize, it is very common to hear something like "I'm terribly/really/very sorry" from the person doing the apologizing. Knowing the vocabulary and set phrases associated with a topic or speech activity is, therefore, a large part of being able to talk or write about the topic or perform the speech activity in the target language.

*Bottom-up strategies* related to vocabulary knowledge are suitable when learners do not know enough words. From a speech production perspective, the second language speaker can ask interlocutors question like "What's the word for the thing that...?" or "How do you say...in English?", or use gestures to express the meaning of the word. Second language learners can also use bilingual dictionaries in some cases to find out the possible equivalents to the words

they need.

For the effective application of these strategies, the following operations should be taken into consideration:

(i) *Learners should be made fully aware of the concept of knowing a word*

Many learners think that knowing a word means knowing its meaning, spelling and pronunciation. The concept of "knowing a word" includes much more than that. Micheal et al. (1997) suggest: "It is not enough just to know the meaning of a word. You also need to know which word is usually associated with, its grammatical characteristics, and how it is pronounced" (p. 2). This suggestion is generally useful for learners of English. In the current study, the author would like to suggest some additional aspects to this concept to make it more suitable to the contexts of Vietnam. These aspects include *recognition ability* and *accessibility ability*. If we know a word, we must be able to recognize it in communication (recognition ability). If we know a word we must be able to resume it or access it whenever we need it (accessibility ability).

(ii) *Learners should know what makes words stay longer in their minds*

What we think or experience can be recorded in the form of words by our brain. Words are stored in our brain in a way that there are links between their meanings and the forms of their beings (graphic, phonetic, visual, etc.). There are three basic types of these links: sight, sense and sound.

*Sight link:* This is the link set up when we see the thing the word refers to. For example, when we see a table, the link between "the picture of a table" and "the meaning of the word table" in our brain is activated. This process makes the word "table" available at the moment we need it.

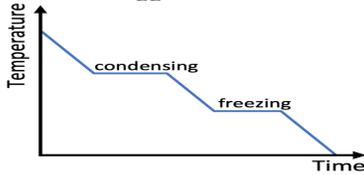
*Sound link:* This is the link set up when we hear a particular sound or cluster of sounds which leads us to a particular meaning or concept. For example, when we hear someone pronounce the word "hello", the meaning of this word as a form of greeting come immediately to your mind.

*Sense link:* This is the link set up when we feel or experience something abstract, both inaudible and invisible. Words such as "cold", "dangerous" or "mathematics" are accessed through links of this kind. The stronger these links are, the longer we can keep words in our mind and the better we can recognize and access words when we need. The more information we associate to a word, the stronger the links to the word are.

(iii) *Effective methods and techniques of learning vocabulary should be introduced to learners*

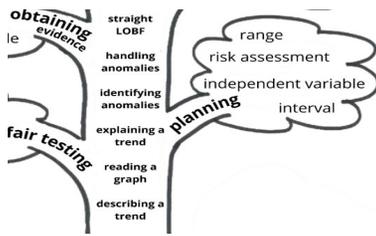
These methods and techniques may include:

*Using visual aids:* Using visual aids to teach or to learn vocabulary helps make the sight link much stronger. Visual aids in teaching vocabulary may include realia, pictures, graphs, word trees, bubble networks, and tree diagrams.



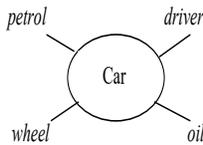
Source: <https://www.elewise.co.uk/gap3f.html>

**Figure 1.** An example of a graph for teaching vocabulary

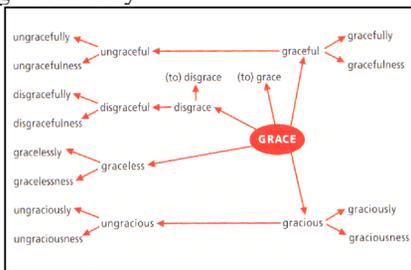


Source: <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource>

**Figure 2.** An example of a word tree for teaching vocabulary



**Figure 3.** An example of a bubble network for teaching vocabulary



Source: Crystal (1995, p. 198)

**Figure 4.** An example of a tree diagram for teaching vocabulary

*Building up word meaning from its semantic features:* This will strengthen the sense link inside the learner’s mind as in the case of “man + married + having at least one child” meaning “father”.

*Storytelling:* “Stories are the way we store

information in the brain. If teachers fill their students’ brains with miscellaneous facts and data without any connection, these things will be tossed and hopelessly lost. Stories help us organize and remember information and tie the content together” (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 121-122; Egan, 1992, p. 11). In storytelling, both teachers and students are emotionally connected by the nature of the story being told. This can help students develop a positive attitude towards the learning process, and also produces a sense of joy in the language and words, which is so often missing in the classroom setting. In this way, storytelling can motivate students during the learning process. Research backs up the idea that “even students with low motivation and weak academic skills are more likely to listen, read, write and work hard in the context of storytelling” (U.S. Department of Education, 1986, p. 23).

*Using a context:* Try not to learn new words in isolation, but try to learn collocations, idioms and expressions containing the words. Here are some examples of the most common cases.

Single words	Idioms	Collocations	Expressions
use	use your head	practical use	make use of
fair	fair and square	fair hair	to be fair
hand	hand in hand	shake hand	give a hand

*Using word games:* Various kinds of word games are available in books and especially on the internet. Learners can benefit from these games in enlarging their vocabulary.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is much more we could say about teaching vocabulary through discourse. This paper just suggests several techniques that are practically useful for the teaching vocabulary in Vietnamese contexts. Among the methods and techniques mentioned, using informative texts, contexts, visual aids are prominent ones. This paper also serves as a reference material for those who wish to deal successfully with teaching vocabulary.

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