

## **On English Vocabulary Teaching Methods in Chinese Senior High Schools**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper discussed the problems of vocabulary teaching in Chinese senior high schools based on the present situation of English teaching in China. By surveying and analyzing the main factors that affect English vocabulary teaching in Chinese senior high schools, the author proposed possible vocabulary teaching methods, and finally brought up some solutions so as to improve the relevant English teaching.*

**Keyword:** *English vocabulary teaching; Senior high school English; Method*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 The significance of the research problem**

As is known, language can't exist without vocabulary, nor could a foreign language live without vocabulary teaching. The famous linguist D. A. Wilkins has confirmed that "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Someone else thinks that the core of all kinds of English abilities is not the knowledge above the sentence level but language knowledge; However, Wang dawei (1997), a famous Chinese scholar, thought that "vocabulary is the core of the core".

The new Standard of National English Curriculum of Chinese senior high schools regulates that the students should reach the eighth level, on which they should grasp 3000 vocabulary, when they graduate from senior high schools. It is not an easy job for both English teachers and students. Seen from a lot of Chinese teachers' teaching experience, it is hard for their students to acquire enough vocabulary to get high marks in English exams, most of which also fail to memorize words efficiently both in class and after school. So it's necessary for English teachers to do research on vocabulary teaching in senior high schools.

On the purpose of improve students' communicative competence, a lot of Chinese researchers began with teaching of the minimum language unit. To help students enlarge their vocabulary and improve their lexical competence is the guarantee of the improvement of English language teaching. Many researches have been done to explore what factors may influence the learners' vocabulary development and how to improve the vocabulary memorizing in recent years.

#### **1.2 The situation of English vocabulary teaching in China**

Though the vocabulary teaching involves a lot of problems, the core of which is how to help students to acquire enough vocabulary for communication more efficiently. And many English educators and researchers explored the strategies that students used in vocabulary acquisition.

In *High school students vocabulary acquisition strategy* by Zhangchun, the author discusses the theoretical and practical aspects of English vocabulary acquisition for high school students, and puts forward the following strategies: the semantic strategy, the contextual strategy, the word-formation strategy, note-book strategy and the dictionary strategy.

In *The Application of the Context Theory in Senior High School Vocabulary Teaching* by Zhang lilan, the author focuses on the context theory. The context theory has been the focus of research in linguistic field in recent years, because it plays an important role in improving vocabulary teaching. Targeted at the problems in the present senior high school vocabulary teaching, the article probes into the vocabulary teaching methods which adopt the context theory, so as to raise the efficiency of English teaching.

In *The Schema-based SEFC vocabulary Teaching* by Ma zhenyu, the author concludes three aspects of Schema-based SEFC vocabulary Teaching: 1) compared with classroom rote repetition, the classroom schematic word presentation is significantly different in textbook new word retention, extra new word increase and old word consolidation; 2) the difference of the post investigation on schematic association for the experimental class is reported much greater than for the control class; 3) the more schematic the subjects associate words, the higher they score in post word test.

In fact, there are many factors that affect vocabulary teaching in senior high school. This paper aims to find how the teachers help the students learn vocabulary in senior high schools and to explore some ways to solve the problems in English vocabulary teaching in Chinese senior high schools.

## II. THE PROBLEMS OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING

### 2.1 The shortage of traditional English vocabulary teaching

In Chinese senior high schools, the students have to deal with many examinations; they pay much more attention to what will appear on the test paper, such as reading comprehension, but not vocabulary. Though they may not have a large scale of vocabulary, they still engross themselves in doing exercises such as multiple choice, reading comprehension, etc. The students are lack of their own strategies of learning vocabulary and their teacher may not foster their ability to form their own habit of learning vocabulary.

So there must be some misunderstandings in current English teaching in in senior high schools of China. Firstly, the English teaching lays emphasis upon the learning of grammar which exists in the text book. The students do the multiple choice, cloze test and proofing to gain the knowledge of grammar. Secondly, at present, the proportion of reading comprehension is increasing steadily in English examination, especially in NMET. So more and more students think it is a waste of time to learn vocabulary, and so do a great number of teachers. Therefore, the teachers spend less and less time on vocabulary teaching, more and more time on improving the ability of reading comprehension, which turns out to be just the opposite. Actually, the students can't make great progress without knowing the basic elements—vocabulary. Thirdly, vocabulary is the tool of practice. The teaching of vocabulary is still restricted to the textbook.

When those English teachers are required to tell about their vocabulary teaching approaches, they will probably admit that their methods are traditional and lack of variety and whose typical process of vocabulary instruction is shown in the following:

1. The teachers read aloud the new words, and students read afterward.
2. The teachers explain some key words chosen from the intensive reading materials, usually by offering meanings and sentence examples.
3. The teachers Interpret vocabulary exercises.
4. The teachers make dictations for checking whether students master the new words or not.

Following the above teaching process, not only the students consider vocabulary learning drudgery, but also the teachers find that vocabulary instruction monotonous and unsatisfactory. So the classroom teachers are faced with the challenge of how to help students store and retrieve words efficiently in the target language.

### 2.2 Analysis on the research questionnaire

The author of this paper did a survey in a senior high school of Nanchang, Jiangxi, China. The subjects of this survey involve 310 students from both grade one and grade two. The students responded to the questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale from “always use this method” to “never use this method”. To avoid possible ambiguity in understanding, the questionnaire was managed in Chinese and administrated during class. However, some students failed to respond to their questionnaire correctly. Therefore, only 293 students' questionnaires were put into the computer and Microsoft excel software was used to analyze them. Descriptive statistics was employed to get the means. Furthermore, a small sample of respondents was interviewed in order to probe more deeply into some issues raised by the questionnaire responses.

| Statements   | mean |
|--|------|
| 1. Our teachers taught us to read the new words again and again till we can write from memory.   | 3.05 |
| 2. Our teachers taught us to copy the new word again and again till we can write from memory.  | 1.86 |
| 3. Our teacher taught us to memorize the words according to the pronunciation.   | 3.58 |
| 4. Our teacher will explain the new words about their characteristics and some relative old words.                                     | 3.64 |
| 5. our teacher will explain the words which have the same etyma , classes and usages together  | 3.74 |
| 6. Our teacher will explain the new words in the content, such as phrases, sentences and texts.  | 3.31 |
| 7. Our teacher will use some doggerels or poets to help us memorize the new words.   | 2.27 |
| 8. Our teacher taught us to guess the meanings of new words in the contents.   | 3.84 |
| 9. Our teacher asked us to read extensively to memorize the useful words and phrases   | 2.80 |
| 10. I will learn all the explanations of the new words when I look them up in the dictionaries.  | 3.08 |
| 11. I have tried to use the words which I have learnt in my daily life.  | 2.64 |
| 12. I have tried many ways to memorize the words and I have found out a better way of memorizing.                                      | 2.86 |
| 13. I will check my English exercises when I finish them and correct the spelling mistakes, then analyze the cause of the mistakes.    | 2.57 |
| 14. I will termly review the words and asked myself to memorize a certain number of vocabularies in a certain time.                    | 2.38 |
| 15. I will check my methods of memorizing vocabulary at regular intervals. And I will try new methods if the old one is not efficient. | 2.06 |

### **III. THE METHODS OF IMPROVING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TEACHING**

#### **3.1 To foster students' enthusiasm**

“As language teachers, we must arouse interest in words and a certain excitement in personal development in this area...” (Wilga Rivers). How is this worthy aim to be achieved? One way is simply to timetable plenty from recent developments in research which seems to suggest a heavy concentration on vocabulary acquisition. It may be the case that mastery of the grammar system depends on there being a critical mass of vocabulary to work with. Teachers need no fear for the idea that they are “wasting time” in teaching vocabulary.

It is also important not to short-change learners by depriving them of vocabulary learning activities that arise during the course of the lesson, even if there might seem to be peripheral to mainly focus on the lesson. A lot of vocabulary that surfaces during teacher-students, and students –students conversation may in fact be more useful and more memorable simply because it derives from the students' own needs and interests. Similarly, classroom texts, whether in the course book or prepared by the teacher, offer a rich source of words. There has been a tendency in recent classroom practice, in dealing with texts, to focus on superficial reading skills such as skimming and scanning. Students are cautioned “not to try and understand every word”. It seems a wasted opportunity, though, not to exploit such texts to the full, especially since many students feel that they would like to “understand every word” in a text. To deny them this satisfaction may be counterproductive.

As a teacher, possibly a learner, and definitely a user of words, one should share his sense of the excitement and fascination of words with the students. Vocabulary learning never stops, even long after the grammar system is firmly in place. New words are being coined daily, and old words are assuming new meanings.

Finally, the teacher should share their own learning experiences and those of the other learners, both successful and unsuccessful experience with the learners.

#### **3.2 To ameliorate students' methods by classroom teaching**

##### **3.2.1 Explain the words by vivid classroom language**

Language teaching is a kind of teaching art that the teachers use frequently. The use of this language art is appropriate or not, exert great influence on the effect of teaching. When the teachers explain English words, using good illustrative sentence examples can attract students' attention and help the students understand and grasp the words easily. If the teaching of language is sole and arid, the students also inevitably show less interest in learning the words. Therefore, in English classroom, if the teachers explain the words supplemented with relative stories, jokes, English proverbs and idioms, the students can understand the words in a lively atmosphere. Meanwhile, students can enrich their knowledge and open their eyes.

##### **3.2.2 Diversify the form of vocabulary teaching**

###### **(1) Students find new words and meaning by themselves in group work**

The teacher divides the text into several parts, each group deal with each part. The students should find the new words in the designated part, and then look up these words in the dictionaries. After discussion, the group representatives explain the new words to the whole class. They express the meanings of new words, and lead the other read for several times. In the course, the teacher can correct the errors of the students and make some replenishment. At the end of the class, the teacher gives the class the normative vocabulary list, and explains the words.

###### **(2) To classify the words by group work and discuss on certain topic**

After learning the new words, the students group can classify the words according to the features and meanings of the words. Each group should make a presentation before the whole class. The teacher makes replenishment and correction during the presentation.

The same form can also used to deal with the learned vocabulary on certain topic. For example, the students have learned the words environment, pollution, sewage and so on; the teacher can give a topic called “Environment Protection”. The talking on the topic can first be carried on in each group, and then the representatives give a presentation to the whole class.

###### **(3) To set real environment, carry out the communicative activities**

In the review class, the teacher can carry on some language communicative activities, in order to consolidate the new words which have just learnt. The teacher can play some videos, cantons or slides to introduce the conditions. Foreign friends can also be invited to join in the activities. What's more the activities can hold on outdoors.

##### **3.2.3 Introduce methods of word-formation throughout teaching**

English vocabulary is a huge system. To learn the basic methods word-formation can help students memorize vocabulary easily and effectively. Stem, prefixes, suffixes are three elements which constitute the words. The process by which words are formed by adding affixes to a root is called affixation. English affixes

can be divided into prefixes and suffixes. Affixes that come before the root are called prefixes; those that come after the root are called suffixes. In English, derivational morphemes are mainly prefixes and suffixes. These affixes often change the part of speech of the new, derived word from that of the stem. The affixes thereby help us to identify relationships within words. Most prefixes, when added to words, effect a change in meaning, but without converting one word-class to another (natural-unnatural, like-dislike). Some prefixes have the effect of converting one word-class to another (force-enforce, rich-enrich). Some suffixes, when added to words, can transform one word-class into another (laugh-laughable, willing-willingness); others merely modify without converting (cartoon-cartoonist, star-starlet). In teaching, teachers can help students to summarize the rules and enlarge the vocabulary.

Some of the most important productive prefixes are: anti-(anti-war, anti-European, anti-hero, anti-novel); de-(deplane, detrain, debug, deemphasizes)

The stem with the fixed form and certain meaning constitutes the essential components of the words. One word includes at least one stem, sometimes two or more. To teach words by introducing the stem can help students learn more deep meanings about the words and associate the new words with the old ones. Since then, students can learn words effectively.

For example:

- 1) adds prefix: dis-, in-, ir-, mis-, un-, im-, express the negative meaning. E.g.: Un: unable, unimportant, unfortunate, undress, unfit, unhappy, uninformed, unknown, unfair; In: inability, incorrect, injustice, incomplete, invisible.
- 2) Adds suffixes: -ese, -or, -er, -ian, -ist, -eer and so on expresses the meanings of the person and the thing. E.g.: thinker, writer, speaker, actor, inventor, sailor, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese and so on. Adds suffixes: -ful, -less, -able, -ive, -ion, -ish, -ous, -ic, -al, -y, -ant, construct adjectives. E.g.: careful, useful, helpful, beautiful, grateful, faithful, cheerful, funny, snowy, rainy, windy, cloudy, dirty, starry and so on.
- 3) add stem : -aud express the meaning of listen. E.g.: audience, means hearer or watcher; audible, means can hear; audio, means sense of hearing auditorium, means part of a theatre, in which an audience sits.

### **3.2.4 Carry out vocabulary teaching in context**

With regard to contextual vocabulary learning, three principles are proposed by Hulstijn (2001:214 — 215):

- 1) New vocabulary items should not be presented in isolation and should not be learned in rote fashion.
- 2) New vocabulary items should be presented in a meaningful context.
- 3) Learners should elaborate on a new word's form and meaning in order to facilitate retention.

Several studies also prove the effectiveness of employing this technique to remembering meanings of new words. For example, Wu Xia and Wang Qiang (吴霞 and 王蔷, 1998: 54-55) declare that among all the strategies adopted by their subjects, learning through context is established to be the most effective for the subjects' vocabulary memorization. And compared with poor learners, good learners are more inclined to use this method in their learning.

However, one fact that cannot be neglected is that embedding in a meaningful context alone is not enough for successful retrieval of the word's meaning when a word form is encountered in a raw context. Accordingly, this procedure requires intentional rehearsal. In spite of this, remembering the target word in a semantically salient context, and to commit this sentence intentionally to memory is undoubtedly a good mnemonic technique to facilitate retention of new words, which needs to be more emphasized by the teachers.

### **3.2.5 Pay attention to the different meanings of words in different culture**

It is known that teachers play a crucial role in teaching activities. Since they are the providers and the quality controllers of the teaching input, teachers' attainment will influence greatly whether teaching succeeds or not. Thus, for cultural instruction in vocabulary teaching, teachers themselves should at first be aware of the inseparable relationship between vocabulary and culture. Meanwhile the knowledge on the cultural aspect of vocabulary is also necessary, which nevertheless is not enough.

To raise teaching effectiveness, teachers should first be aware of the fact that they are the mere medium of teaching, and their instruction of knowledge is not the full but the vehicle through which skills can be acquired by students. Therefore, teachers should change their roles according to specific teaching situation and students' expectations. When teaching vocabulary, teachers should use various teaching techniques to create a clear image of those culturally loaded words. When students need knowledge about the target culture in vocabulary, the teacher's role should be an informant. In addition, teachers also need to design some workable activities to provide students with chances to practice the culturally loaded words. When students practice using these words, teachers should act as an examiner to examine students' comprehension and their accomplishments.

The more important task for teachers to fulfill is to observe and analyze students' attitudes toward and demands of the culturally loaded words' learning, so that they can evaluate the effect of teaching. It is equally important for teachers to keep an eye on students' learning difficulties and then make practical advice. Finally, teachers should give students the assignments on this aspect. Checking the assignments and giving feedback are also important, which will encourage students to make efforts to do them.

### **3.2.6 Improve students' vocabulary learning strategies**

Another effective way of memorizing vocabulary is using vocabulary cards, in which learners can control the order of the words they study (Atkinson,1972; *ibid.*). Based on the following principles drawn from general memory research, Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) make some practical suggestions on how to keep vocabulary notebooks:

- 1) The best way to memorize new words is to incorporate them into the already known language.
- 2) Organized material is easier to learn.
- 3) Words which are very similar should not be taught at the same time.
- 4) Word pairs (native words/ L2 target word) can be used to learn a great number of words in a short time.
- 5) Knowing a word entails more than just knowing its meaning.
- 6) The deeper the mental processing used in learning a word, the more likely that a student will grasp it.
- 7) The act of recalling a word makes it more likely that a learner will be able to recall it again later.
- 8) Learners must pay close attention in order to learn most effectively.
- 9) Words need to be recycled so as to be learned .

### **3.3 To replenish vocabulary through extracurricular learning**

#### **3.3.1 Learn vocabulary out of the textbook by indirect teaching methods**

The vocabulary in the course book is the basic vocabulary in teaching. Students are required not only to recognize the words but also use the words expertly. Thus, the basic vocabulary is the key point of classroom teaching. Nevertheless, students should learn some useful words and expressions in order to carry on the communication successfully. To learn the practical vocabulary outside the textbook, teacher should adopt the indirect teaching method, i.e., doing practice of listening, oral, reading and written English through massive textbooks outside. Through these courses, students will receive more information and learn the vocabulary which covers various domains of modern life.

When teachers chooses materials for students to practice, they must follow several points:

- 1) The material used should be original text or source material as far as possible but not the materials which have rewritten, like English newspaper and magazine, the advertisement explanation and so on. The content from 'American album', 'new concept English and 'voice of American' can often be chosen as supplementary learning materials.
- 2) The topics of the material can be various. Meanwhile, the stories which happened in the mother tongue country will be better. Students can feel more natural and true. Some English short drama games and speech competition are good opportunities for students to practice.
- 3) The difficulties of the material should be proper. The text should mingle the information with the interest. The difficulty of the text should be slightly higher than the students' capacity of vocabulary, and cannot excessively be high. However, the text must be usable and enable the students to master the new words naturally. Newspapers, like "English weekly", "21century for middle school students" are suitable for students to read.
- 4) The type of the material should have the multiplicity. The different source material can meet the students' needs of different levels, which enables each student to make sure their own interest. The potential of the students can be explored through such a way. From English novels to English magazines, from popular English songs to English movies, all these materials will meet different students' taste.

#### **3.3.2 Teach vocabulary by scientific methods through research study**

The Ministry of Education documented the appendix to define "research study" : "Research study is that the students under teachers' instruction, choose and determine the topic from the nature, the society and the life, then do the research by their own. In the course, students are active in acquiring the knowledge, applying the knowledge, and solving the problem. The research study exactly may help us to train the students achieve the destination of "the independent study, the discovery study, the cooperation study". In recent years, in the college entrance examination, some words outside the English examination outline appeared. These words cover different aspects of daily life and benefit senior school students in acquiring more practical words. Ask students to make their own words list which covers various aspects, such as politics, economy, technology, science, etc. And through studying independently in the research, students can grasp word formation knowledge and the vocabulary learning methods, and raise their interest in study ,improve study efficiency, then enhance the academic record, and feel the pleasure in learning English vocabulary.

In brief, through the input of research study on the massive information outside the course books and practice in various English extracurricular activities, teachers can help students to expand their vocabulary and improve their communicative abilities in English.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This paper analyzed the factors that influence vocabulary teaching in Chinese senior high schools, and it put forward several methods of vocabulary teaching in senior high school. The paper also emphasized that the teachers should not only pay enough attention to vocabulary teaching in senior high schools of China, but also should employ some effective teaching methods in teaching English vocabulary. Words and phrases are essential to the language learning. Students are required to use a language for potential academic purpose. By proposing the vocabulary teaching methods, the author tried to provide insights into promoting English learning and teaching as a second Language in senior high schools.

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