



THE USE OF THE STORY-TELLING TECHNIQUE IN TEACHING VOCABULARY IN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

One of the most crucial aspects of learning a language is vocabulary acquisition. In Vietnam, the definition and translation-based method in teaching vocabulary is extremely popular in most high school classrooms because of its time-saving nature and undemanding implementation. This article; therefore, aims to introduce an innovative yet effective presentation of vocabulary through stories and visual aids in the hope that this technique could assist high school teachers in creating lively vocabulary instruction lessons in their classrooms.

Keywords: teaching technique, stories, visual aids.

TÓM TẮT

Sử dụng phương pháp kể chuyện trong việc giảng dạy từ vựng ở các lớp học phổ thông

Một trong những khía cạnh quan trọng của việc học ngoại ngữ là vốn từ. Ở Việt Nam, phương pháp giảng dạy từ vựng thông qua định nghĩa và dịch thuật rất phổ biến trong hầu hết các lớp dạy phổ thông vì đặc tính tiết kiệm thời gian và dễ dàng sử dụng của nó. Vì lẽ đó, bài báo nhằm giới thiệu một phương pháp giảng dạy từ vựng mới lạ nhưng hiệu quả thông qua việc sử dụng câu chuyện và hỗ trợ trực quan, với hi vọng phương pháp này có thể hỗ trợ các giáo viên phổ thông tạo ra những bài học từ vựng sinh động trong lớp học của mình.

Từ khóa: phương pháp giảng dạy, câu chuyện, hỗ trợ trực quan.

1. Introduction

It is obvious that vocabulary plays a key role in developing students' language competence. Schmitt (2000, p.55) stressed that "lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language". In other words, poor vocabulary knowledge has a negative impact on language learning and hinders successful communication.

In Vietnam, the teaching and learning of vocabulary is of critical importance for students' success since considerable emphasis has been placed on teaching reading,

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writing, and grammar so that students are able to achieve the best results in their written exams such as the National High School Graduation Exam, and the University Entrance Exam. Paradoxically, the most frequent complaint from high school English teachers is the insufficient amount of time to cover all the language areas and language skills presented in English textbooks. Therefore, it is a fact that the majority of high school language instructors would design a list of vocabulary, and ask students to pre-study it at home before attending the classroom while others would depend on word-by-word translation to present new lexical items as it is deemed the most time-saving and undemanding way to ensure that all of the exercises are corrected and clearly explained to the students, from which they could gain a high level of their language competence. The definition and translation-based method may seem to enable students to learn new words very quickly, thereby enhancing their vocabulary range. In a study done by Duong and Nguyen (2006), it showed that the majority of students and teachers alike hold positive attitudes towards translation as an effective way to enlarge the vocabulary. Empirical research also reveals that students who learned with the decontextualized teaching of vocabulary demonstrate a better performance in post vocabulary tests than those who learned with the contextualized presentation of new lexical items (Amirian & Momeni, 2012; Unaldi, Bardakci, Akpinar & Dolas, 2013). However, the posttests in these studies only involve multiple choice vocabulary questions, which may encourage rote learning only. Despite this, the definition and translation-based method in teaching vocabulary yields promising results in terms of students' vocabulary expansion. It is; therefore, tempting for teachers to place their reliance on this teaching method. When it comes to writing, which requires a more controlled application of words in particular contexts to convey concise meanings rather than rote memorization of grammar rules and lexical items, this method may fail to provide students with such fundamental knowledge to perform a writing task. In addition, the definition and translation-based method would be a common cause of boredom to students, leading to their demotivation to learn new words and English as a whole. In Vietnam, this issue is complicated by limited class time for English, eventually resulting in fewer chances for students to put their newly-built vocabulary and grammar into practice in order to gain profound insights into word usage in specific contexts. For most Vietnamese students, they find writing in English such a highly demanding task. In reality, the issue has been mirrored in many recent news reports.

In 2015, there was a controversial educational reform which involved the integration of the National High School Graduation Exam and the University Entrance Exam. The English test, in particular, had a new yet very challenging section, which was writing, namely sentence transformation and paragraph writing. Undoubtedly, the new feature of the English examination not only required a good command of grammar but also proper

use of vocabulary in order to attain desirable writing scores. The traditional teaching and learning of vocabulary has failed to equip students with adequate knowledge of lexical items and grammar structures to achieve this aim. Based on the 2015 statistics figure on the score spectrum among the eight subjects chosen for the national examination, English ranked at the bottom, at 2.5 (Quynh, 2015), and the writing section score was unbelievably low, with over 60% of the exam papers being marked zero (Thanh & Gia, 2015). It represents a reliable indicator of unsuccessful teaching and learning of vocabulary in most high schools in Vietnam. This article; therefore, aims to illustrate a more effective and interesting way to deal with teaching vocabulary by means of stories and visual aids.

2. The use of stories in EFL classrooms

The use of stories in teaching English is reflected in a wide range of gripping activities which are widely favored in the classroom. For example, Spencer (2013) suggested one activity called “word by word story” where each student says a word to complete an entire story. This activity can be utilized to practice the past tense when students are required to describe a past event. Another story-based activity which captures students’ undivided attention is “guessing what happens next”. In this activity, the teacher reads a short passage of the whole story, and has students make a guess on what is going to happen next. Then, the teacher reveals the result and continues reading another passage. Stories are also used to deepen students’ cultural knowledge. For example, the teacher can give students two stories which share a slightly different content. One story is written in their native language, but the other in the target language. Students are asked to read and uncover the similarities and differences based on details presented in the two stories. This way allows students to make a good comparison between the two cultures, thereby sharpening their cultural understanding. Finally, stories may be employed to encourage creative writing where students write a different ending to the original text.

With regard to the exploitation of stories in teaching vocabulary, this practice brings significant benefits to learners of English. First of all, they can be a motivating source of information in that stories trigger students’ curiosity in the content. For instance, the teacher could make use of his own personal story or celebrities’, or even invent a completely new but interesting one to draw students’ attention. As a result, students will have their concentration level dramatically improved without being aware of it, eventually leading to increased retention of lexical items. Second, stories can reinforce language input memorization as Brewster and Ellis (2014, p.7) viewed them as the “natural repetition of key vocabulary and structure”. In other words, when the teacher is telling the story, he may recycle the words several times to help students grasp their full meaning, or use a single tense (e.g., past tense) throughout the whole story to familiarize students with the past

tense structure before teaching it. Concerning emotional benefits, stories “provoke a shared response of laughter, sadness, and excitement” (Brewster & Ellis, 2014, p.7). This is particularly important in prompting students’ enthusiasm for learning since there is evidence on the positive relationship between learning and emotions (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). The use of stories is widely acknowledged in many countries with empirical research reporting on the favorable effect of stories on students’ vocabulary acquisition (Elley, 1989; Lin, 2014). However, the scenario is reversed in Vietnam where using stories to teach vocabulary has neglected attention from language teachers.

3. How can teachers improve the quality of their own stories?

It is indisputable that some teachers are better storytellers than others, and storytelling is not a straightforward skill to acquire. Notwithstanding, with meticulous preparation and research, language teachers can devise their own stories to instruct vocabulary lessons effectively. Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2004) suggested many techniques in order to enhance the quality of stories.

- *Use visuals and gestures*: This would be immensely helpful in that students can follow the stories and know what is going to happen afterward. It also adds an exciting atmosphere to the class since students get a chance to see vivid images if they are carefully prepared.

- *Ask questions*: Teachers are advised to provoke questions about the content of the story in order to maximize students’ engagement in the learning process. From my point of view, the simplest thing to do is to show a picture and set the scene with background questions like “What can you see? Where are the characters? Can you guess what they are going to do next?” These questions would motivate students to participate in the lesson, thereby stimulating their enthusiasm for learning English. This tip also slows down the pace and assists low-level students’ comprehension of the content. More importantly, it activates their cognitive capability to think and make reasonable guesses before the revelation of the answer.

- *Use appropriate tone and voice*: It is recommended that the use of stories in the classroom requires thorough preparation from teachers since they have to employ their voice and tone appropriately to surprise or amuse students. Teachers need to ask themselves what part of their story is surprising or exciting beforehand so that they know when to vary their voice and tone to add dimensions to the story. In my opinion, this preparation step is of ultimate importance.

4. An illustration of this technique to use in the classroom

The principal idea of the technique is to put the words needed to be presented in a story. Instead of presenting the words separately, teachers would create a story context in

which words are linked together. This story-telling technique encourages students to learn vocabulary more effectively in many ways. First of all, students get a chance to see how words are related to each other in a specific context. This, in turn, would allow students to use the words with precision. Second, stories never cease to amaze students since various forms of stories with different contents and endings can be generated. For instance, teachers could use their own personal stories, or even write a new one as long as the story covers the language taught in the unit. It would excite students to learn words with enthusiasm during the whole lesson. As for teachers, when designing a story to teach students, they have a great opportunity to exercise their creativity. Below is the illustration for a list of new words taken out from Unit 13: **Hobbies** in a reading passage of the grade 11 English textbook (basic edition). It creates a meaningful connection between the words to create an easy-to-follow and engaging story.

guitarist *accomplished* *indulge* *occupied*
accompany *modest* *avid* *discard*

T: Play one part of the song “I knew you were in trouble” and ask students to guess the singer’s name.

T: Introduce an American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift and say “Today, we are going to learn more about this famous singer.”

Word 1: guitarist

-T: Show the picture of Taylor Swift playing the guitar and ask “Is she playing the piano? What musical instrument is she playing?”

> Expected answer: No, she is playing the guitar.

-T: Explain “A person who plays the guitar is called guitarist.”

-T: Show the word meaning and example.

Word 2: accomplished

-T: Ask “Can Taylor Swift play the guitar very well class?”

> Expected answer: Yes, she can/No, she can’t.

-T: “Well, she is a VERY GOOD guitarist, or I can say she is an accomplished guitarist.”

-T: Challenge students by asking them to give another word which is similar in meaning to “accomplished”, but starts with the letter “t”

> Expected answer: talented

-T: Show the word meaning, example and other word forms of “accomplish”[e.g. accomplishment]

Word 3: indulge

-T: “Class, you know, in order to become an accomplished guitarist, Taylor Swift indulges in playing the guitar every day.”

-T: “Can you guess the meaning of “indulge” from this sentence?”

> Expected answer: practice something regularly/spend time on doing something.

-T: Explain the word and give its meaning.

-T: Remind students that “indulge” goes with the preposition “in”

Word 4: occupied

-T: Show the picture of Taylor Swift writing songs and ask “What is she doing?”

> Expected answer: She is writing her songs.

-T: “Good, you know, apart from indulging in playing the guitar, Taylor is also occupied with writing her songs. She spends HOURS writing her songs.”

-T: Explain the meaning of “occupied” and give an example.

-T: Check students’ understanding by asking “If you are really occupied with something, do you have time for other activities?”

> Expected answer: No

Word 5: accompany

-T: Show the picture of a band and Taylor and ask “What is Taylor doing?”

> Expected answer: She is singing with her band.

-T: “Good, but what is her band doing? Are they playing some musical instruments too?”

> Expected answer: Yes

-T: “Tell me what musical instruments they are playing.”

> Expected answer: piano, guitar, cello.

-T: “Well done, so if you’re singing and other people are playing musical instruments alongside with you, they are accompanying you”.

-T: Give the word meaning and example.

Word 6: modest

-T: Show the picture of a very big house and ask “What is this? Is this a big house or a small house?”

> Expected answer: “a big house”

-T: Show the picture of a small house and ask the same question.

> Expected answer: “a small house”

-T: “Taylor is very rich. She has lots of money, but she doesn’t want to live in a very big house or a very small house. She wants to live in a warm modest house.”

-T: Show the picture of a modest house between the very big and the very small house to demonstrate the meaning.

Word 7: avid

-T: Ask “Who is the fan of Taylor Swift? Please raise your hands.”

-T: “Wow, I am also a big fan of hers, too. I usually download her songs and collect her posters. I listen to her songs every day. I am an avid fan of hers.”

-T: Ask students to guess the meaning from the context and check understanding by asking: Who is an avid fan of Messi? Who is an avid fan of Ronaldo? Who is an avid fan of Obama?

Word 8: discard

-T: Show the picture of an old Taylor Swift poster and ask students “What is this? Is it old or new?”

> Expected answer: It’s an old poster.

-T: “Right, it is old but I’m an avid fan of Taylor so I don’t want to discard it. I don’t want to throw it away.”

-T: Give the word meaning and example.

5. Reflections on the technique

As can be seen from the illustration above, all of the words are used to form a story about Taylor Swift, and it could bring lots of benefits to learners.

First, words are put into a clear context, allowing students to understand the word meaning and usage clearly. Also, from the aforementioned sample, almost every word could be recycled before the teacher moves on to the next one. Such repetition bolsters students’ memorization. Second, new words taught in an unorthodox way will attract students’ attention since teachers are able to provide students with continual surprises when they come up with refreshing and captivating stories to connect the vocabulary

together. Third, good use of visual aids and questions would stir students' interest in the lesson and simultaneously ensure a smooth interaction between the teacher and students. Furthermore, teachers could draw pictures to demonstrate the word meaning or tell white lies such as "Last week, Taylor Swift invited me to her house, and I was so surprised." This would bring some mild laughter in class.

Finally, there is an array of good follow-up activities based on stories. For example, the teacher can hold a speaking competition in which students are divided into smaller groups (probably of 4 or 5) and asked to make up another story including as many words as possible. Remind students of the story taught at the beginning of the class as a sample. The group who thinks of the most logical story, and uses the most words presented in the lesson is the winner. In addition, the teacher may consider assigning writing homework where students have to integrate all of the words taught in class into their essays. The assignment certainly sharpens students' writing skill through the application of words to produce a piece of writing. Another interesting activity is to have students work in groups at home and write songs based on the words they have learned, and perform in the next class. It would be difficult and more appropriate for advanced levels. But if this activity is successfully implemented, the class would be great fun. There is no need for students to write complicated songs. Instead, they could write their songs with basic rhythms as in the "alphabet" or "happy birthday" songs, and they should not be forced to put all of the words into their songs, just half of which would be perfectly acceptable. In actual fact, students would love all of these activities because they bring a novel change of activities in class and are instrumental in motivating students to make full use of their creativity potential by putting words into practice. In conclusion, the primary purpose of these activities is to have students form a connection among the words they have learned to produce a meaningful work.

However, there is a critical consideration concerning class time constraints. One argument would be that the story-telling technique may take up a significant amount of time for other class activities. In order to solve this problem, teachers should be conscious of how many words they would like to present in a story. In my experience, a group of six to seven words is a good choice. If teachers would like to present more than that in a story, then they have to contemplate the time permitted for vocabulary instruction, and also their preparation time for designing a story since more words mean more incidents and details required. For the remaining words, the employment of the definition and translation-based method should be encouraged to present them quickly, but still ensure the effective teaching and learning of English words at the same time.

6. Conclusion

Although the definition and translation-based method of teaching vocabulary has a positive effect on students' acquisition of new words, the story-telling technique appears to be a more interesting way to present vocabulary, but still guarantees students' acquisition of new lexical items. This technique may seem difficult to apply in the classroom. However, with careful preparation, teachers would be able to interest their students through stories. Here are six simple things which should be kept in mind.

1. Think of a story in advance and how to link the words together. This is a time-consuming step but a rewarding process in promoting teachers' creativity. Furthermore, when teachers gain more experience in inventing stories to teach vocabulary, this would be no longer a problem.

2. Choose appropriate characters. By this way, teachers could invent an imaginary friend, or mention a well-known singer or footballer whom the majority of the class admires, or even talk about their own experience. This nature of stories would never fail to capture students' imagination since it connects learners to the outside world and provides them with nice twists and turns in the story.

3. Prepare visual aids to clarify the meaning. In the case of abstract words, create situations, or use synonyms, antonyms and pictures to elicit the word meaning. Google may be a wonderful resource of images. There can be a problem with copyright infringement for some of them. Therefore, teachers should take notice of this issue. In addition, if possible, they can divide the blackboard into different parts where each of them is associated with a particular time period in the story.

4. Pause to ask students questions to foster their involvement in the story and make sure they are all following the story. Moreover, it could increase teacher-student interaction through the question and answer time.

5. Try to recycle the words before subsequent explanations to improve students' memorization. The repetitive nature of words in stories helps prolong learners' vocabulary retention.

6. Add humor when appropriate and use different tones if the story has more than one character. Without a doubt, humor can enliven the class atmosphere, and various tones add dimensions to the story as a whole. It, in turn, keeps students focused on the lesson.

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