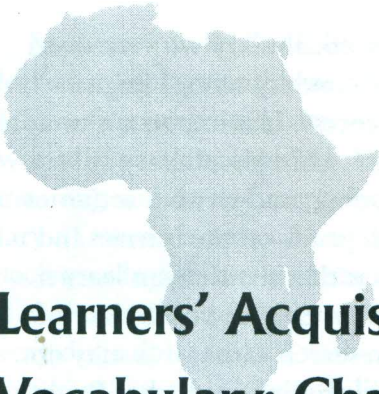




Learners' Acquisition of English Vocabulary: Challenges and Implications for Classroom Teaching Practice (Kenya)

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Issue

While teaching and examining English language in Kenyan high schools, we observed that learners displayed difficulties in the acquisition and use of vocabulary. In this connection, we got interested in discovering the factors that come into play during the learners' acquisition of English vocabulary. Thus, we sought to investigate our own classrooms so that we could develop strategies to alleviate the difficulties our learners experienced in vocabulary acquisition and use.

The teaching and learning of English lexical items in the Kenyan context is through formal instruction and learner motivated processes (Kenya Institute of Education [KIE], 1995). One of the suggested instructional methods is the use of synonyms. In our study, we thus chose to focus on the use of synonyms because, apart from being evident in grammar patterns (Snow & Kim, 2007), synonymy also reveals the way the learners have been instructed.

The use of synonyms is based on interchangeability or substitution. For instance, a learner who asks for the meaning of the word *skinny* could be told that it is *slender*. Interchangeability of synonymous words is, according to Cruse (1986) and Diana and Graene (2006), the best method of delimiting synonyms. However, Aitchison (1994) and Carter (1994) argued that the interchangeability should be determined by the propositional meaning of the sentence as a whole for the interchangeability to be appropriate.

The Kenyan learner of English acquires his or her vocabulary without overt structured instruction. As the Kenyan syllabus for secondary school English states, the learning of vocabulary is a continuous process. It is important to note that there is no such a thing as a formal vocabulary lesson. Vocabulary is best acquired in context through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities (KIE, 1995). The lexicon to be learned, therefore, depends on the learner and is not stated beforehand. What the syllabus implies is that the Kenyan learner of English is capable of acquiring on his or her own an English vocabulary of the ideal depth and breadth. The argument in our research is that this may not be the case. Therefore, in our classroom research, we investigated what English lexical items the Kenyan learner acquired against such a pedagogic background with the aim of arguing for different lexical pedagogy. Our classroom research thus sought to answer the following questions: What are the challenges with lexicon and synonyms which the learners in our classroom experience? How do we explain the prevalence of these challenges in our classrooms?

Background Literature

Literature on second language (L2) lexis (e.g., Jiang, 2000; Jullian, 2000) has shown that English language learners use idiosyncratic features that deviate from native norms. These features, some of which are lexical in nature, are accounted for variously. Jullian (2000) found that the learner's vocabulary could have semantic features which indicate transference of meaning from one language to the other. However, as Martin (1984) noted, the nonnative features could also emanate from confusion of lexical items in the L2 itself. The L2 learner could, for instance, confuse English lexical items that are semantically similar or have slightly different shades of related meaning.

In addition, literature on L2 lexis (for example, Martin, 1984; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997) indicates that some aspects of a word are complex. Diana and Graene (2006), for instance, said that the use of words with related meanings presents learners with perception and production problems. The presence of nonnative lexical features could thus emanate from the learner's first language (L1), lexical shortage, and lexical confusion or from the L2 itself. What is of interest in the current research is how the lexical features of words with related meaning of the L2 manifest themselves in the learner's use of the language.

Jullian (2000) observed that an L2 lexicon could manifest varied features related to reception and production. On the reception side, learners fail to understand any word which falls even slightly outside ordinary language, and on the production side, they produce very plain utterances which are unable to convey different emotional loads, or to express shades of intensity or connotation.

Snow and Kim (2007) further noted that even the lexicon of advanced L2 learners displays problems of lexical shortage and confusion. Learners of an L2 are first presented with core words that are the “simplest and most frequent words in any language” (Jullian, 2000, p. 38). Core words are universal in meaning and do not carry connotative or associative loads. The active vocabulary of most learners of English as a second language (ESL) is thus made up of such words. Of interest because of the underlying implication is the observation that the core words become “deeply rooted in the learner’s lexicon and become very difficult to replace with others which have a more specific meaning, or a different semantic load” (Jullian, 2000, p. 38).

Martin (1984) expressed similar views on the lexicon of advanced learners of ESL. She reported that as the fluency of advanced language learners increases, so too does the number of vocabulary errors they generate, both in speaking and in writing. Some of the errors are a result of L1 transfer, but the majority are intralingual; that is, they reflect confusion between and among lexical items in the L2 itself.

These observations by Snow and Kim (2007), Jullian (2000), and Martin (1984) call for attention to lexical reception and production problems in the L2 learner’s lexicon. These include failure to convey different emotional loads or confusion of lexical items. However, unless the grammar patterns and lexical strategies in the learner’s lexicon are identified and analyzed, it would not be possible to make informed conclusions about the features of their lexicon, hence a rationale of this study. These features of lexical meaning can be revealed by the grammar patterns in the learner’s lexicon. We note that the literature available on L2 lexis is not sufficient to account for the phenomena we investigated in our classroom. This, therefore, provides a rationale for our research.

Procedures

The mode of research used in this study is what Nunan (1990) called *applied* rather than *experimental*. We based the research on our students during the actual class time. We taught these students English for 6 months in 2006. Our respondents were Kenya secondary school students in Form 3. The rationale for using these students is that the secondary school level is a critical stage in the acquisition and use of English (Francis, 1996; Snow & Kim, 2007). It is the final stage of formal English learning for most of the learners. Some of the secondary school learners graduate into the tertiary level of the education system. The research sample was made up of 160 secondary school students of English in the school that we taught. A bigger sample would not necessarily have given varied data (Milroy, 1987). The research sample is representative according to Nunan

(1990), in that it includes different types of respondents in terms of levels of intelligence, exposure to the language in and out of the class context, and different L1 systems.

We presented the respondents with a list that had 20 sets of synonymous nouns and 20 sets of synonymous verbs. They used these synonyms in gap filling exercises that required them to choose one of the words in each set as the correct answer, some of which are presented in the results section. The respondents also used the synonyms to construct sentences.

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The study required a framework that would describe the learner's use of the selected lexical items into grammar patterns and also categorize the lexical strategies. The model used for pattern identification and description was adopted from the COBUILD pattern grammar series (Francis, 1996). The model was adopted for two reasons. First, the methodology used in the research leading to the grammar pattern series was the examination of lexical item by lexical item (Hunston & Francis, 2000). Second, the grammar series uses word-class coding for the words, phrases, or clauses that co-occur with the target item. This coding has the advantage of presenting pattern information consistently without mixing functional and word-class labels. It also gives the surface categories in actual words. The patterns are mainly sorted to the right to give the verb or the noun complementation, but for the nouns some patterns are sorted to the left as well.

After identification, the patterns were grouped according to the meaning of the node lexical item (Hunston & Francis, 2000). Patterns that shared meaning were grouped together. For such patterns, the respondents constructed sentences in which the items were fully interchangeable or partially interchangeable. The analysis of the study data also identified the words that commonly co-occur with the target items. Collocates were determined by the lexical and grammatical features of the target item (Hunston & Francis, 1998; Willis, 1993).

Results

Our classroom research indicated various lexical challenges for the Kenyan learners. These challenges are recalling lexical items for use because of inadequate lexical knowledge and failure to make use of lexical information, imprecise presentation of lexical information, and shifts in meaning. Some of the data from our classroom research that support our findings are presented in the next section in relation to the two research questions we sought to answer.

CHALLENGES IN THE RECALL AND USE OF ITEMS

We found out that the learner's language background has varied influence on the recall and use of the L2 lexical items. Our findings concur with Swan's (1997) observation that the L2 learner's L1 "can influence the way second-language vocabulary is learnt, the way it is recalled for use, and the way learners compensate for lack of knowledge" (p. 179). Each of the three areas of influence is confirmed by the findings, as illustrated in this section.

Recall of English Items

The L1 influence evident in our research results is more often syntactic than semantic. Syntactic features from the L1 are manifested as problems of omission of a required item, inclusion of a redundant item, and collocating the wrong items. For example, absence of prepositions in the L1 can account for the construction of sentences in English that lack the necessary preposition:

- (1) The teacher *responded* our argument.

The syntactic construction without the preposition, however, is appropriate in Gikuyu, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya. The direct translation for it is *Mwarimu niacokirie mateta maitu*. The noun *answer* in Example 2 is redundant because it is implied in the meaning of the node verb.

- (2) The student replied the answer.

The Gikuyu translation is *Murutwo acokirie macokio*, and it is an appropriate pattern. Because the verb *reply* in Gikuyu is synonymous with the verbs *respond* and *answer*, a speaker has to clarify what the object of the verb is. The L1 influence is denoted too by the collocation pattern of the item, especially the right collocate as in the following example:

- (3) She *responded* using her head.

- (4) I was surprised to meet him *weeping* in his bed.

In Example 3, the phrase *using her head* denotes the meanings *answering* or *responding*. The head is a reference that supplies answers or an instrument that is used to answer. This is a literal translation of *she answered without consulting any references*, which in Gikuyu is *Acokirie na mutwe*. The left collocates that are indicative of the L1 are mainly denoted by a co-occurring verb, as in Example 4. The collocation of *weep* and *meet* is a literal translation from the respondent's L1, which in Gikuyu is *Ndimukorire akiririra uriri*. The pattern structure is appropriate, but the appropriate verb in this sentence is *find* (Francis, 1996).

There is evidence that the L1 of the learners in our classrooms overtly

influenced the way they learned English lexical items. There was no appeal to the learner's L1 in the process of learning English. If anything, learners were discouraged from "thinking in their first language" when dealing with English vocabulary (see KIE, 1995, p. 46). However, the learner's L1 was seen to play a pivotal role in the learning of the L2.

The semantic inappropriateness we observed could be attributed to the fact that synonymous English items once translated into the learner's L1 have different lexical sets. For example, the items *respond*, *answer*, and *reply*, when collocated with items such as *question* or *letter*, are semantically equivalent to just one word, *cokia*, in Gikuyu. So the L1 item has several equivalents in English.

Compensating for Lack of Knowledge of an English Item

There is evidence of L1 influence in the way the learners compensated for lack of lexical knowledge of English. For instance, there is the implication that the respondents were in some patterns using the lexical item of the L1 but taking its equivalent in English, as in the following:

- (5) He wrote a letter to his girlfriend and asked her to *reply* back after reading.

The lexical item *reply* is in English, but the grammatical pattern is from the respondent's L1, as can be deduced from the co-occurring adjunct "back after reading." In Gikuyu, *reply* could be equated to *give back* or *answer*, both of which are represented by one lexical item, *cokia*. In Example 5, the English item was used in the syntactic frame of the L1. The two meanings of *reply* in the L1 could have influenced this usage. There were very few instances of such observation, but wherever they were identified they suggested the influence of the L1 on the recall of English items for use.

Our research findings reveal a correlation between the processes of lexical acquisition and the use of such items. The grammar patterns observed in the respondents' lexicon could be interpreted in view of the lexical strategies these respondents employed. The following interpretations of the research data are appropriate.

The Learners Acquired Lexical Items in Chunks

The grammar patterns and the lexical strategies attest that the learners in our classrooms acquired lexical items in chunks and not as single items. For instance, instead of acquiring *answer*, the learner acquired *answer a question*. It is possible that the collocates for core words such as *answer* are learned this way too. The chunk provides a frame and any related items learned after the core items are fitted into the existing frame.

Snow and Kim (2007) and Moon (1997) argued that the lexical chunks

tend to be retrieved and used as such. The lexical chunks reveal the word relations and associations that are part of the L2 learner's lexicon. In view of this, the learner associates the synonymous lexical items with specific words, for example, *information* with a source such as *books, library, teacher, or head*. *Chance* is associated with *to go abroad, for higher education, or pass the exams*. Moon (1998) argued that the lexical chunks became like fixed phrases or almost idiomatic. There is very close association between certain lexical items because of the way the items are presented to the language learner. The retrieval of items in chunks is thus directly related to the narrow range of collocates in the grammar patterns.

Equating Related Items Because of the Lexical Strategies Employed

When the learners in our classrooms asked lexical questions, we usually gave the synonym of an item or a paraphrase of the meaning. Such strategies were not supplemented with relevant lexical information that would enable the learner to determine the subtle differences between the related items. The learners, therefore, acquired the items as substitutes of each other and they did not differentiate the items even in subsequent use. The related items substituted each other in the same syntactic and semantic slot. The substitution was overgeneralized, leading to inappropriateness in some of the contexts.

The Existence of More Than One Lexical Store

Although the question of lexical stores is peripheral to this research, it has an interesting relationship to the findings, which strongly suggest that the L2 learner has different lexical stores for the L1 and L2. The two lexicons seem to operate parallel to each other, but there are some partial semantic and syntactic overlaps. The English items are not used in exactly the same way that they would be used in the L1. If this were the case, the patterns would make a strong argument for the L1 influence and not for a shift in the meaning of the synonymous items.

We found some evidence of L1 transfer, but the findings more consistently support a shift in meaning. The evidence available is not strong enough to prove that in the examples given, the meaning was transferred from the learners' L1. The findings, therefore, bear out what other researchers (Nunan, 1990; Swan, 1997) have reported on the L1 influence. The findings also add a new dimension to the L2 learner's lexicon—that of a shift in meaning of an English item in the respondent's lexicon.

CHALLENGES FROM LEXICAL INSTRUCTION

The lack of awareness of the subtle differences between synonymous items also accounted for some of the inappropriate grammar patterns we observed.

For instance, the omission of a grammatical item occurred in the following examples:

- (6) Kamau did not *respond/answer/reply* the question.
- (7) The teacher *responded* our argument.
- (8) He *responded* the teacher's advice.

In these cases, the respondent assumed that synonymous items shared a syntactic frame even in contexts where this was not the case. The inappropriate grammar patterns could be attributed to methods of presentation, in the textbooks used for the teaching of English and by the teachers of English. Specific findings of this research are seen to emanate from lexical instruction, as described in the next section.

Lack of or Inadequate Lexical Knowledge

From the findings, it is evident that the learners in our classrooms were not given sufficient lexical information and that even when such information was given some details were missing. Where the lexical information was given, the learner did not access it.

The inappropriate grammar patterns could be interpreted as an indication that the learners of English in this study lacked understanding of some word features. The respondents' lexicon implied inadequate knowledge of the form, syntactic, semantic, and lexico-grammatical features of the synonymous items. What is most relevant to this research is the inadequate knowledge of lexico-grammatical features of synonymous items. However, even what is considered elementary word knowledge can have adverse effects on the use of L2 lexical items. The use of a noun in place of a verb in a sentence or the nominalization of a verb, for instance, implies inadequate knowledge of form features. This inadequate knowledge can lead to confusion between different word classes, as in the following examples:

- (9) She *answered/replied* the letter.
- (10) The *answer* to this question is correct.

In Examples 9 and 10 the lexical items have the same morphological shape, but there is a lack of distinction between the noun *answer* and the verb *answer*. Though knowledge of the form is considered to be basic knowledge of a word (Melka, 1997), it is significant in the use of lexical items.

The observations on inadequate lexical knowledge present a case for the need for formal instruction on vocabulary in context or for the learners in our classrooms to acquire vocabulary in context. For instance, when presented with

danger and *menace* (KIE, 1987), a learner might be supplied with a context in which the two words were synonymous. However, this is not enough. The learner also would need to be supplied with contexts in which the two words were not synonymous. In so doing, the learner's awareness of the subtle differences between the two items would be raised. Such contexts would minimize or eliminate cases of word-class confusion.

Imprecise Presentation of Lexical Information

The lack of contextual vocabulary instruction is evident in the textbooks that the learners use for English lessons. In most cases, related words are presented to the learners without any explanations on how they are related and in what ways they are different (KIE, 1987, 1990). The presentation of synonymous items in test exercises does not go beyond the sense relation that is relevant in the textual context. The respondents are, therefore, not encouraged to think of syntactic or semantic contexts in which the lexical items may not be synonymous. Such presentation of words could confuse the learner into thinking that the related words are interchangeable in all contexts.

From the observation sessions, we noted that the teacher of English hardly ever supplied lexical or grammatical information to the language learners when they asked questions on word meaning. The language learners therefore could have assumed that the items were used interchangeably in all contexts, which could have led to inappropriate patterns similar to those observed in the respondents' lexicon. Similar methods of presentation were observed during the English lessons. The teacher would simply supply a synonymous word or a paraphrase of the meaning without any explanations when the learners asked for word meaning.

Given that imprecise presentation of synonymous lexical items has been shown to be counterproductive in the use of the items (Jullian, 2000; Martin, 1984), there should be a review of the presentation methodology in the textbooks and by the teachers of English.

Failure to Make Use of Lexical Information

We deduced that students were not making use of available lexical information because the inappropriate patterns were not consistent in all the samples. If all the respondents used any one of the synonymous items in an inappropriate syntactic or semantic frame, it could have been argued that all the respondents did not have the requisite lexical information. However, this was not the case. The samples in the schools ranked at the bottom in the examination results roll had more instances of inappropriate selection than those ranked at the top. The use of lexical information, therefore, correlates with the level of proficiency, with the respondents from the highly ranked schools performing better than those in the low ranked schools. The inference that some of the respondents failed to

make use of lexical information is confirmed by the fact that even in the same respondent sample, there were inappropriate and appropriate grammar patterns for items in the same lexical set. This means that some of the respondents utilized the lexical information at their disposal and others did not. It is not likely that some of the respondents in the same sample had been exposed to lexical information to which others had not been exposed.

Lack of Understanding of Lexical Information

Students' lack of understanding of lexical information seemed apparent, but this argument is difficult to verify. Evidence from the textbooks and observation of the English lessons showed that lexical items were presented to the learners in lexical phrases. Presentation of vocabulary as lexical phrases could lead to some inherent problems in the use of related lexical items, as reported by Martin (1984). Specifically, the learner could use a related word in the grammatical frame open only to the other word. For example:

- (11) Kamau did not *respond/answer/reply* the question.

As explained earlier, respondents tended to use the three lexical items interchangeably in the same syntactic slot. Yet, this slot is not open to *respond* or *reply* because the verb requires the particle *to* as a link to the noun *question*. When such usage occurs, it indicates that the learner does not understand clearly the role the core item plays in defining the new or related item. The learner misses out on the kind of lexical association that exists between the two items and how far it can be extended syntactically or semantically.

CHALLENGES OF SHIFTS IN MEANING

The term *shift in meaning* denotes usage that is not in accordance with the lexicon of the educated native English speaker's standard. In this study sample, the semantic and syntactic features of the patterns could indicate a shift in meaning, and this argument is reinforced by the lexical strategies taxonomy observed. Some of the grammar patterns identified imply that the L2 learner considers certain senses of a lexical item synonymous with those of another item when the native English speaker does not consider them synonymous. These patterns are unique to the Kenyan learner's lexicon and imply a shift in the meaning of an item from the native English speaker's lexicon. The patterns are distinct rather than inappropriate because they would be deemed appropriate in the L2 learner's context yet inappropriate in the native speaker's context.

We observed that these distinct usage patterns stemmed from the L2 learner's inferences about the underlying meanings of the items. For one, it could be inferred that the L2 learner has slightly different core meanings of some of the items from that of the native speaker. For instance, in the set *respond*, *answer*,

reply the learners in this study have the core sense *saying something as an answer to what has been asked*. However, the native speaker corpus COBUILD (n.d.) and ICE-EA (n.d.) illustrate that this is not always the case, especially for *respond*.

The shift in meaning could also imply that the learner of English has stronger lexical relations among certain related items than the native speaker does. For instance, in the learner's lexicon *respond*, *answer*, *reply* are likely to be first encountered and used often in the classroom situation, which conjures up association with words such as *question*, *teacher*, or *correctly*. Yet this is not always the case in the native speakers' context, where according to Jiang (2000) the verbs are likely to be encountered first in informal contexts.

The shift in meaning has not been attributed to the learner's L1 factor illustrated in this chapter. L2 acquisition literature apportions most of the problems that lead to inappropriate selection to L1 interference or influence (as in Jiang, 2000; Swan, 1997). In this research however, there is not enough evidence to support this view. Rather, what the shift in meaning draws attention to is the need to define the scope of the L2 lexicon. Defining the scope of each language is essential when one is dealing with learners from a multilingual context because many issues arise that are crucial for their theoretical relevance.

The Respondent's Context Supplies the Sense of the Lexical Item

Some aspects of the meanings of a word are culture-bound, such as connotations, and they are elusive for the L2 learner. It follows, therefore, that the lexical items of the L2 acquire some cultural features specific to the L2 context, which are different from those of the native speaker context. Although the sense expressed is from English, there is some shift in the associative meaning of the items. Such associative meaning would account for a pattern such as in Examples 12 and 13, where the verb is followed by a noun object:

(12) She *answered/replied* Jane.

(13) N *replied* him / the letter / the question.

The shift in meaning is manifested in collocations, as in Examples 14 and 15:

(14) I was surprised to meet him *weeping* in his bed.

(15) The mourners were *weeping* in the funeral.

Reply collocates to the right more frequently with a noun group than with the other right collocates such as the preposition group. Although *reply* also appears in patterns in which it is used with a preposition and then the object noun group, in the respondents' native lexicon this pattern, which co-occurs with the noun group directly, is prevalent and acceptable (see KIE, 1987, 1990). In the

respondents' native lexicon, *reply* is a true synonym of *answer* and the syntactic requirements for *answer* are used for both items. This denotes a change in the meaning of *reply* that is marked by the collocation pattern seen in Example 13.

In Example 15, the prepositional phrase consisting of *in* and the noun group *the funeral*, indicates that *funeral* has a different meaning in the respondents' context. In this example, funeral means a period that starts at death and ends after the burial. This is in contrast to the meaning given in monolingual English dictionaries in which funeral means an event, a meaning that is denoted by the preposition *at*. Because both prepositions are evident in the research data, the use of *in* may be interpreted as denoting a different meaning for the noun group *the funeral*. This meaning of the noun group affects the node verb in that *weeping* is also seen to be a continuous action, extending over time. The continuity of *weeping* is emphasized in other patterns where *weep* co-occurs with direction adjuncts. For instance in the following sentence:

(16) My mother *wept* on my shoulder as I walked away.

The prepositional phrase consisting of *on* and the noun group locates where the *weeping* takes place, and the adverbial phrase *as I walked away* gives a duration over which the *weeping* took place.

DIFFERENT LANGUAGES SUPPLY THE GRAMMAR PATTERNS

Apparently, the grammar patterns described in this study are based on English lexico-grammar. During the presentation of English lexical items, the core meaning was given but was illustrated with a context familiar to the Kenyan learner—for example, *cry* co-occurring with *baby* and *answer* with *question* (but not *phone*, *bell*, or *his critics*). The outcome of such illustrations is that from the time the Kenyan learner was introduced to English, he or she was forming lexical associations between the English items on the bases of the L2 context.

The lexical associations based on a Kenyan context are reinforced by the lexical strategies that the learner employs, such as the use of the textual context and reliance on the teacher. In most cases, the lexical associations the L2 learner forms are appropriate in the context of the L1. But as Sinclair (1988) argued, these associations would not be considered natural in the native speaker's context. For instance, the subject noun group is an integral part of the meaning of the verb. As noted previously, *weep*, *cry*, and *wail* tend to co-occur with *baby*, *she*, or *mourners*. In such sentences, the meaning is expected in the sense that these are the people who are expected to *weep*, *cry*, or *wail*. When the subject is *he*, the right collocate has a negative connotation. For example:

(17) He *wept/cried/wailed* like a baby.

(18) He was *crying* like a baby.

The subject in Examples 17 and 18 behaves in an unacceptable manner. This is evident also in the adverbial or prepositional phrase that locates the *weeping*, *crying*, or *wailing* when the subject is *he*, as in Example 14 where the subject *weeps* in bed. The *he* does not express his emotions or feelings in places where he can be easily observed. Such negative connotations are not part of the native speakers' patterns, as reported by Francis (1996). Although common in other societies, men in traditional Kenyan society are not expected to express emotions or feelings in public places; as a result, reference to the collocation of *he* and *cry* in this example brings about negative connotations associated with weak men who cry in public as babies do. The connotations marking the shift in meaning are denoted by the choice of collocates.

Similar lexical association is portrayed in Example 19, in which someone or something causes *weeping*, *crying*, or *wailing*.

(19) The sad love story made her *weep*, *cry*, *wail*.

Something negative necessitates the action denoted by the node verb. The exception to this is when the node verbs co-occur with a phrase such as *tears of joy*, which is a fixed expression.

Reflection

Our classroom research has given us a better understanding of the task of vocabulary teaching and learning. We have used our findings to understand the complexities of vocabulary learning, which in turn has guided us in establishing reasonable goals for our learners. We also now allocate specific time to vocabulary learning during which we teach techniques of vocabulary development rather than specific words. We now know that explicit teaching is vital in vocabulary acquisition.

Our findings have made us reflect on the role of the learner's L1. We are currently investigating how we can positively use knowledge of the L1, although it is a daunting task due to the prevailing attitude that it interferes with rather than facilitates learning.

We have changed our approach in teaching vocabulary to our learners. We now do the following: give the collocates of node words to the students; indicate that the interchangeability of the synonymous words must take into account the syntactic and semantic context of the node word; and encourage the learners to examine their usage of words by reflecting on how they use words of similar meanings in their L1s. As we teach vocabulary now, we are careful not to imply that words are absolute synonyms through our presentation methodology.

Our study has also shown that contextualizing the use of lexical items,

especially in situations where learners ask for the meaning of a new item, could alleviate challenges in vocabulary teaching. Reference materials and the methods of presentation and practice have room for improvement. We have learned that as teachers, we should constantly enrich our knowledge of presentation methodology by examining the language of the learners in order to make informed decisions about teaching vocabulary.

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