VOCABULARY TEACHING PRINCIPLES IN EFL TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract: Vocabulary is one of the bones of language structure, once words bring in themselves meaning to convey what we want to say to other people. Teaching vocabulary effectively is necessary, if EFL teachers want their students to success while communicating. The present study focuses on the principles of vocabulary teaching stated by Brown (2007) and Blachowicz (2001) when teaching in an EFL context. The study also aims to analyze under these principles and theories of vocabulary teaching how well two EFL textbooks are aligned with the principles for an effective vocabulary teaching and learning.

Key-word: Vocabulary teaching; EFL textbooks; English teaching practices.

Resumo: O vocabulário de um idioma é um dos ossos da estrutura do mesmo, uma vez que as palavras carregam significados nelas mesmas para expressar o que queremos dizer a outras pessoas. Ensinar vocabulário efetivamente é algo necessário, se os professores de língua inglesa desejam que seus alunos tenham sucesso ao se comunicarem no idioma. O presente estudo é focado nos princípios de ensino de vocabulário estabelecidos por Brown (2007) e Blachowicz (2001) em aulas de língua inglesa. O estudo também tem como objetivo analisar sob estes princípios e teorias de ensino de vocabulário, quão bem estão dois livros de língua inglesa alinhados aos princípios de um ensino e aprendizado de vocabulário efetivos.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de vocabulário; Livros de língua inglesa; Práticas do ensino de inglês.

Introduction

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Keith Folse (2004) once wrote about an experience he faced when he had just moved to Japan. As an English teacher and language learner, he tried to learn Japanese language and was already able to say some sentences in order to get by with the language. One day he wanted to buy some flour at a nearby supermarket. He was able to ask the question "*Sumimasen ___ - wadokodesuka?*", which in Japanese means "*Excuse me, where is the _____?*". As he did not know how to say the word *flour* in Japanese, he saw one of his students at the supermarket and asked him about the word. Some minutes later, the English teacher was given a chrysanthemum in the produce section of the supermarket. Later on, the teacher noticed that his student taught him the word *flower* and not the very word *flour*. The author of the experience (2004) says, then that what he really needed in that situation was one simple word (vocabulary) and not necessarily a well-formed structure (grammar).

Throughout many times, specialists in the English as a Foreign language (hereafter EFL) field have said that grammar is the vital part of a language learning (FERGUSON, 1991; KETTLE, 2008). As time passed by, many English grammar books were sold, as if they were the best solution for helping EFL learners to produce language speech. In the many experiences I have had with my students in English classes, I notice that many of them are still focused on learning the grammar of English language, which means that even in our students minds is the thought that grammar is more important than vocabulary learning. Wilkins (1972) said many years ago that without grammar, little can be conveyed. But, without vocabulary nothing could be conveyed.

An example of what was said in the last paragraph would be a sentence like this one: *I met a person who works in an airplane*. Even though the sentence is well-structured, with its correctness in grammar terms, it could be a shorter one, whether the person knew the words *flight attendant* (*I met a flight attendant*). Lewis (2000) states that nowadays the EFL teaching is primarily focused on grammar, rather than in vocabulary. According to the author (2000), students have a grammatically correct sentence production, but, on the other hand, a poor vocabulary production.

If vocabulary learning is an important factor in the understanding of a language, so it is the teaching of vocabulary (NATION, 2001). Vocabulary teaching field of research has received attention in the last couple of decades. The linguistic fields of Sociolinguistics, Discourse Analyses, Second Language Acquisition, among others, have helped teachers and researchers to change the Chomskyam view of language (in which grammar and language

syntactic structures rule the way a given speaker makes a sentence). The field of Pragmatics also helped the specialiststo have a greater view of a word, which is not only the union of a *signifier* and a *signified* (SAUSSURE,1974), but a complex of a broader concept inside a mental lexicon of each speaker of a language (GUPTA, 2003). These new perspectives on language learning helped also some professionals of the area of vocabulary teaching to develop principles and approaches to vocabulary teaching, which will be addressed in the following sections of this article.

Vocabulary teaching approaches: traditional vocabulary instruction

One of the approaches which have been addressed in the field of vocabulary instruction is the traditional view of vocabulary teaching. In this kind of instruction, it is usually involved the use of word definitions, as students combine some words in writing and memorizing words on the EFL book (DEMIR, 2013). In this way of teaching vocabulary, students are usually given a wordlist and with the help of a bilingual dictionary, they are told to copy the definitions in a worksheet and then asked to write down some sentences using this new vocabulary learned. Unfortunately, Demir (2013) states that this is the way in which vocabulary is taught the most in the United States (SARGENT et al, 2006). Authors like Philips and collaborators (2008) and Constantinescu (2007) strictly criticize this model, as they believe that English language learners do not work with contextualized examples when learning new words.

Rio (2015) when citing Greenwood (2002), presents the experience of the previous American president George W. Bush, who was studying at the Philips Academy in Massachusetts. The future president was asked to write a story about the death of his sister. The young future president asked for help and his mother was prompt to give some tips to him. She asked him also to look up in the dictionary for some synonyms, in order to be more creative in his writing. The young man decided, instead of using the word *tears* in his text inside some of the paragraphs, to change it for the word *lacerates*. Greenwood (2002) says that George Bush in this situation was not able to understand (a homograph problem) the tears of sadness and the tears, meaning the verb *to rip*. This example, although seems to be a silly one, demonstrates how important it is for us, English teachers to overcome the barriers of traditional vocabulary instruction and their non-contextualized wordlists.

Implicit (Incidental) vocabulary instruction

Rio (2015) presents another way of teaching vocabulary, which in fact, is practiced in some countries. The teaching of vocabulary is made up in a more inferential mode. In proficient classrooms, this approach is more used, as vocabulary is taught indirectly.

The implicit vocabulary teaching instruction tends to be used with more proficient students, once they are able to understand many words they are having contact with. Students in this way of teaching are more active than the beginner ones because they usually have the necessary repertory of words to speak in class and to learn few more complicated words. According to Nation (2005), students are engaged to guess from the context and to use morphological and second language reading strategies to understand the meaning of new words.

Two main words play a very important role in the implicit vocabulary instruction. Stenberg (1987) points out that the words *context* and *inference* are the most vital ones, as the author says that most of the vocabulary we learn is due to the context. In fact, learning from the existing context clues in a text is a very necessary strategy that every reader needs to have when trying to master the meaning of new words in a foreign language (Carlo et al, 2005). There is a growing body of research which shows that the context has a positive effect when students are engaged to learn new words in a text and in a conversation (Baumann, 2002; Carlo et al, 2004). Goodwin and collaborators (2010) say that the use of inferences and morphological word analysis strategies are great ways to also grasp the meaning of new words.

In Baumann's research (2002), the author shows that his language students were better to learn new words using context clues than the other ones assessed in the research, which did not receive any contextualized teaching of words. Glopper (1998) in his article analyzed 21 studies reporting the use of context clues with English language learners. The results from the studies analyzed showed that in all the vocabulary teaching contextualized classes studentswere quite well in deriving words meaning from the context. In the research made up by Carlo et al (2004), the English teacher analyzed in terms of his teaching performance demonstrated a very contextualized and implicit method of English teaching: the teacher used to read books aloud, discuss some groups of words in some excerpts of the text and also lead students to infer the new words meanings from context reading strategies. Sedita (2005) presents also some context reading strategies. For instance, she points out the *Clunk word*

context reading strategy, in which every time a student could not understand a word in a text, (s)he would follow some basic steps in order to get the word's meaning:

1. *Reread the sentence with the clunk. Search for key words.*
2. *Reread the sentence without the clunk. What word makes sense?*
3. *Reread the sentence before and after the clunk. Look for clues.*

Although in the previous paragraphs we have presented some positive sides of teaching students from the context and inference strategies, there are, on the other hand, some articles showing the possible problems which may arise when we use the implicit vocabulary teaching approach.

Sedita (2005), for instance, presents some cases in which the negative side of context takes place. The author believes that not all contexts are really helpful for EFL students. She says that the helpfulness of a context will depend on how much information is provided to a given reader. In some cases, the context may provide a *direct explanation* of the meaning of a new word:

I. Up to this point we have been referring to the process in which light energy is used to make food simply as the food-making process. But this important process has its own special name: *photosynthesis*.
II. Prince Henry started a school for sea captains. These captains were taught the science of *navigation*. That is, they were taught how to figure out a ship's location and the direction and distance that it travels

In both sentences I and II we have a straightforward explanation of the highlighted words in the following sentence of the text, respectively, *photosynthesis* and *navigation*. Koch (1997) believes that in contexts such as this one, the student only needs to draw his/her attention to the logical-semantic chain of thoughts in the sentences.

Sometimes, the context may be able to show some sort of information of new words, but not efficiently or enough for a student to be sure about the word's meaning:

III. In order to gain active immunity to a disease, one of two things must occur – either you come down with the disease, or you receive a *vaccination*.

IV. Cartier found the mouth of a large river, which he named the St. Lawrence River. He sailed up this river until he came to a *rapid*. Ships cannot pass across a rapid.Disappointed, Cartier had to turn back.

In the excerpt III, the given EFL student may guess that the word *vaccination* is related to health care or preventing a disease, but (s)he may not be able to fully understand the meaning and usage of this word. In the excerpt IV the word *rapid* is related to something that is not letting the ship pass, although the student may not identify specifically what is impeding the progress of the ship.

At last, the author (2005) says that sometimes the context could actually lead a student to a misunderstanding in the correct interpretation of a word (Beck et al, 2002).

V. Sandra had won the dance contest, and the audience's cheers brought her to the stage for an encore. "Every step she takes is so perfect and graceful," Ginny said *grudgingly* as she watched Sandra dance.

The student usually thinks that in this context Ginny likes or even admired Sandra dancing style. Actually, the adverb which is used in the following sentence is *grudgingly*, which is the derivation of the noun *grudge*, which, according to the Oxford Dictionary (2005) means a long-term feeling of evil desire or resentment resulting from a past insult or injury. It means that Ginny did not really admire Sandra dancing style. Nation (1990) suggests that a successful activity of guessing only takes place when an EFL student already knows 95% of the lexical items in a text. It seems, then, that the implicit vocabulary teaching approach may not be indicated for beginner students, as they do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge to get into guessing and morphological word analysis activities. Unless the context is restrict and students have enough encyclopedic knowledge about the topic of a text, the chance to understand the meaning of a new word might be minimal (Kelly, 1990).

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

In this vocabulary teaching approach, vocabulary itself is the main focus. Lower proficient students of English are taught in this approach, as the main task for them is to get the meaning of new words (Demir, 2013).

In a study carried out by Demir (2013), the researcher separated two groups from 129 EFL students in Turkey, one receiving the traditional vocabulary teaching approach, the Controlled group (CG hereafter) and other Experimental Group (EG hereafter), which received explicit vocabulary teaching. The author separated 30 target words to be taught to the EFL students. Both EG and CG received a teaching section, which lasted 15 minutes. The CG group followed the traditional steps in a traditional vocabulary class:

a. *See the word* (visual or spelling representation)

b. *Hear the word* (the teacher modeled the pronunciation)

c. *Understand the word* (definitional meaning)

d. *Say the word* (repetition)

e. *Use the word in a context* (writing)

The EG, on the other hand followed the following steps:

a. Students are asked to circle the words they do not know on the magazine article.

b. Students cut and glue the new words on their netbooks.

c. Students are asked to create anagrams with the initial of the cut words in order to make new ones (for instance, word like Chin, Adult and Thrill, may form both CAT and ACT words.)

Both EG and CG were tested one day after the instructions. There was another test for both groups after 10 days, as the author wanted to see whether the vocabulary retention (DEMIR, 2013) had really taken place or not. There was a significant difference (p<0.05) in the long-term and short term right after the students received vocabulary instruction.

Table 3. *Independent-Samples T-test comparing vocabulary retention of EG and CG one day after the instructions*

Group	N	Mean	Sd.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
EG	66	23.3571	3.12306			
				3.622	127	0.001
CG	63	15.4615	2.77461			

**p<0.01

Table 4. *Independent-Samples T-test comparing vocabulary retention of EG and CG ten days after the instructions*

Group	N	Mean	Sd.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
EG	66	19.1786	4.28179			
				3.005	127	0.004
CG	63	10.6538	3.72562			

**p<0.01

Figure 1: Results from Demir's (2013) study about vocabulary retention. It is interesting to notice that even 10 days passed after the vocabulary instruction, the EG group still had better results than the CG one.

After presenting some different approaches to vocabulary teaching, the question that may arise to the reader is what makes in fact a vocabulary lesson effective. That is what the next section is all about.

What makes a vocabulary lesson effective?

In this section, we present principles established by Brown (2007) and Blachowicz (2001), which have been study in the last couple of years. Blachowicz (2001) says that throughout a long time, vocabulary was just like the weather, as everyone could talk about it, but no one was really able to know what to do with it. In order to help EFL teachers in the teaching of English, she presents 7 (2001, p. 3-7) principles to an effective vocabulary teaching:

1. *Immerse students in words*: Rather than teaching isolated words to students, the EFL teacher should immerse the student in words, in order to give them opportunities to discuss and grasp new words; as a helpful tool, the teacher may use words, puzzles, word calendars, word games, dictionaries, among many others to create an enthusiastic word learning environment.

2. *Make your students active in finding out ways in which words are related to experience*s so that learning takes place better in an environment in which students have also a role to play in the learning experience. Students should not be lazy or passive, as the construction of meaning is better made together and not alone.

3. *Help your students personalize word learning*: In an effective vocabulary lesson, students are engaged in creating semantic webs, maps, organizers, charts, clusters in order to represent the semantic part of words and concepts.

4. *Help your students build their vocabulary learning* on multiple sources of information. It means using the Internet, newspapers, magazines, maps and any kind of authentic information to students understand new words.

5. *Help students gain control* over their own learning.

6. *Help your students* develop independent strategies.

7. Provide students with the *usage of words in meaningful ways*.

Brown (2007) has also presented some principles for an effective vocabulary lesson:

I. *Allocate specific class time vocabulary learning*: As words are the building blocks of any language (Rio, 2015), it is important to focus in vocabulary, as survival-level communication may take place even if the speaker does not know how to create perfect well-structured grammatical sentences.

II. *Help students learn vocabulary in context*: The comprehension and production encounters should take place in every classroom, as context may play, as showed some pages before, a central role in learning words within a given context. It is not preferable to teach words in isolated contexts (as in the traditional vocabulary teaching approach). Students will then be able to associate new words in meaningful ways to a broader repertory of contexts to which that word may be inserted in.

III. *Play down the role of bilingual dictionaries*: EFL teachers should help the students avoid the overuse of bilingual dictionaries. Students should take a look at dictionaries only when there is a highly frequent word in a text which is unknown by them.

IV. *Encourage students to develop strategies for determining the meaning of words:* Morphemes recognition, synonym, antonym and context information clues are known as some of the "attack words" strategy.

V. *Engage in "unplanned" vocabulary teaching*: Sometimes, the attention a teacher may give to anunknown word is unpredicted. When the teacher feels that a given word is worthy some attention, then the teacher may help his/her students to understand that important word to that context.

After presenting some of the principles above, this article presents a qualitative study carried out by the author (Rio, 2015) in the last couple of months.

Vocabulary exercise analyzed under Brown's and Blachowicz's principles

As the number of pages is limited, the author presents one of the three books analyzed in his academic research (Rio, 2015). The book which we will take a look at is *Keep in Mind*, one of the books that the author in his experience used at State schools when teaching English. The objective of the study was to verify whether the books followed or not the principles displayed before.

*Keep in mind*was developed by Elisabeth Chin and Maria Zaorob. This book seemed to have being used a lot in 2011 among State schools, as the author listened to many EFL teachers saying that finally EFL books had arrived at State schools, which, we believe that is a very interesting initiative of our Brazilian Government.

The book has interesting additional materials about vocabulary teaching and some theoretical background data presented at the very end of the book to the EFL teacher. There is also a *wordlist*, in which the students might use it as a rapid-search glossary. The wordlist presents words contextualized according to the texts they are in, which in turn, facilitates the student to grasp the meaning of the new word. This initiative in the book tends to agree with Brown's principle about the overuse of bilingual dictionaries, as students do not need all the time to look up for words in a bilingual dictionary (Nation, 1990).

There is also a part in the book which displays the theoretical background to support the teachers' ideas about EFL teaching methodologies. We believe that this initiative is a great one when it comes to helping the teacher to be updated about what has been taking place in the EFL teaching field. In the section named "AssessoriaPedagógica" (pedagogic assitance), the teacher may find help for using extra materials in the given subjects (s)he is teaching, such as movies, documentaries and websites. This initiative goes well with the principle (Blachowicz, 2001) about using multiple resources for English teaching.

Figure 2: Cover page of the book and one of the wordlist pages in the book *Keep in Mind*.

Let us see now move to the principles' analysis. According to Blachowicz's (2001) principles[3]:

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[3] The exercise evaluated according to these principles was about teaching students the vocabulary related to weather conditions.

1. Help your students build their vocabulary learning on multiple sources of information: This principle seems to be followed, although there could be more resources to both teacher and students to use inside the classroom. The vocabulary is learned in the listening exercise, leaving the teacher to the decision of creating other possibilities to teach vocabulary related to "the weather".

2. Help your students personalize word learning: There is no message or instruction to the teacher's book about this principle. There are some sentences following the "present the vocabulary to students and let them learn" way of teaching.

3. Make your students active by using the context: The teacher's instruction says: "*Explain to your students that the following vocabulary has refers to the New York City. With the students, build up a description that displays the reality in your city.*" The teacher is asked to use the text as a tool for vocabulary teaching, which seems to be a positive point regarding Brown's principle.

4. Immerse students in many other learning resources for an enthusiastic word learning environment: As said before, there are some suggestions for the teacher to use in the teaching of the weather vocabulary.

5. Help students gain control over their own learning: The teacher's book does not contain any advice to the teacher about it.

6. Help your students develop independent strategies: Unfortunately, there is no available advice to the teacher.

7. Provide students with the usage of words in meaningful ways: In this criterion, the teacher's instruction fits well here, considering that after the *Focus on Vocabulary* section, there is the *Let's practice* one. In this section students may use their creativityto ask questions to each other about the weather in their cities.
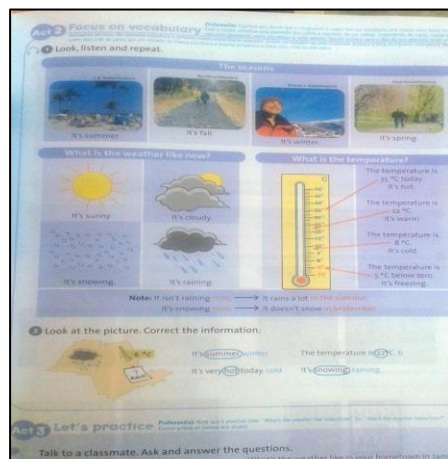
Figure 3: The book *Keep in Mind* has its teachers' instruction written in small blue letters above the exercises, which may be a problem if the teacher has any visual deficiency.

Regarding Brown's principles (2007) we may say that the principles such as a*llocate specific class time vocabulary learning*, h*elp students learn vocabulary in context, encourage students to develop strategies for determining the meaning of words* are the ones followed by this book. The wordlist may help the book to follow the principle of not using too much the bilingual dictionaries in the interpretation of the new words in the activity. Unfortunately, the principle *engage in "unplanned" vocabulary teaching* is not even mentioned or supported in the exercise.

After briefly presenting some of the principles which are (not) followed in the vocabulary exercise presented, we have the possibility to show the table made up by the author (Rio, 2015) about the principles followed in this book:

Book *Principle*	KEEP IN MIND
Principle 1	**P**
Principle 2	**X**
Principle 3	✓
Principle 4	**P**
Principle 5	**X**
Principle 6	**X**
Principle 7	✓

Table 1: Principles established by (Blachowicz, 2001) in which ✓ stands for applying the principle, X for not applying it and P for applying it partially.

From this result, we may see that only the third principles and seventh principles are followed, once two of them are partially followed. We do believe that there is still too much to be done in the future editions of this book. Despite all the problems it may arise, it still was the one used in English classes all over Brazil. We may follow now to the final considerations regarding this study.

Final Considerations

This study aimed to briefly present some theories regarding the teaching of vocabulary and how it should take place in the EFL classes. We have presented some data about studies which demonstrate the effectiveness of using the powerful force of context in order to guess new words' meanings inside a text. Later on, it was presented the theories which permeate the teaching of vocabulary nowadays and how important it is for us, English teachers, to focus in one of them in order to appropriately use the right approach for the right context.

We believe that, regarding the few principles followed by the book *Keep in Mind*, there is still a long road until the successful implementation of authentic materials to be used in the English classroom. We do assume that there has been a progress in the twenty-first century in order to help English teachers improve their performance, but still, there is a lot to do. The possibility the book Keep in Mind presents to help its teachers expand their knowledge about how language works and how to effectively teach it should be highlighted here.

We may suggest for a possible future research to develop a class in which the principles presented in this paper are followed. A deeper analysis of what students think about an effective vocabulary lesson seems to be a useful suggestion here. We hope the reader found this study useful for its research in the applied linguistics field, as the English teaching profession is not only made of theories and research, but of applications and practical studies about how language works in real and everyday life.

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