

How to Teach Vocabulary based on General Senior High School Curriculum Standards

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Abstract

Vocabulary is fundamental to language learning, encompassing its phonology, grammar, and semantics. It plays a crucial role in communication, critical thinking, and the overall development of language skills. A learner's vocabulary size is not only indicative of their proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing but also serves as a key measure of their linguistic competence. Additionally, vocabulary has a significant impact on a learner's motivation, their ability to develop effective study habits, and their capacity to apply language in real-world contexts. Consequently, vocabulary teaching is central to the process of English language education. This paper explores how vocabulary instruction, aligned with the General Senior High School Curriculum Standards, can be enhanced to improve students' linguistic capabilities and engagement.

Keywords

English Teaching; Vocabulary; Learning Strategies.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is widely recognized as the foundation of linguistic competence, playing a critical role in the acquisition of fluency. Nation (2020) underscores this importance, arguing that a learner's mastery of vocabulary significantly impacts their ability to use language effectively. Schmitt (2019) further highlights the necessity of integrating vocabulary teaching into multimodal contexts, enabling learners to develop robust growth trajectories in their lexical competence.

The release of the National High School English Curriculum Standards (2017) by the Ministry of Education in 2017 has posed both challenges and opportunities for vocabulary instruction in high schools. The new curriculum standards state that, in addition to guiding students to gain a deeper understanding and a broader use of the vocabulary they have learned, vocabulary teaching in high school should focus on developing students' awareness of word chunks in context. It also emphasizes that vocabulary learning is not merely about memorizing words or practicing individual words in isolation, but rather a comprehensive language practice activity carried out within specific themes and contexts.

To meet these requirements, educators must adapt their teaching methods to align with the new standards, while also taking into account the cognitive development characteristics of high school students. This paper aims to tackle these challenges by identifying the existing issues in vocabulary teaching and suggesting innovative strategies to enhance instructional practices.

2. Current Challenges in High School Vocabulary Teaching

Despite the advancements in curriculum design, research highlights existing problems in vocabulary instruction:

2.1. Neglect of Phonology and Grammar

The curriculum standards state that students should perceive and understand the meaning of relevant topics through listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing, and use vocabulary to express information and meaning related to these topics. However, vocabulary is often taught in isolation, with minimal attention to its phonological or grammatical features. This approach disregards the interconnected nature of language learning, where phonology, morphology, and syntax support vocabulary acquisition (Read, 2018). Research suggests that teaching pronunciation patterns and grammatical usage alongside vocabulary can significantly enhance retention and application (Milton, 2021). Many teachers overlook systematic instruction in phonology and grammar, considering these areas as more relevant to primary or middle school learners. Consequently, vocabulary lessons often rely on mechanical repetition, with little guidance on phonological or grammatical rules.

2.2. Monotonous and Decontextualized Teaching Methods

Traditional vocabulary teaching methods, such as memorizing word lists and providing translations, fail to engage students in effective learning, which is against corresponding requirements in curricula. Zhang (2007) critiques this approach as overly simplistic, leading to fragmented knowledge that lacks cultural or contextual grounding. Modern theories advocate for contextualized and interactive methods that simulate real-world language use (Dörnyei, 2020).

2.3. Undefined and Overloaded Learning Objectives

The curriculum explicitly outlines vocabulary requirements, such as definitions, parts of speech, and usage, but some teachers fail to prioritize essential vocabulary, leading to inefficiency. Teachers often lack clear prioritization of vocabulary, presenting all terms as equally important. This leads to cognitive overload and inefficient learning. Recent research (Kremmel & Schmitt, 2019) highlights the need to categorize vocabulary into core, extended, and recognition levels, focusing on key terms for mastery.

2.4. Overemphasis on Quantity Over Quality

Many teachers emphasize rote memorization of a large number of words without providing sufficient opportunities for practice. Nation (2020) argues that meaningful usage of words in various contexts is crucial for long-term retention and functional application. Teachers may attempt to teach extensive lists of word meanings, mirroring dictionary entries, overwhelming students with excessive information. This undermines their ability to engage in meaningful language use.

2.5. Insufficient Strategy Guidance

The curriculum standards also mention requirements related to learning strategies, stating that students should be able to use various resources, such as dictionaries, to understand the meanings and functions of key words in a text, as well as the intentions and attitudes conveyed. Research indicates that meaningful exposure to a word must occur approximately ten times for it to be retained (Nation, 2020). However, many teachers neglect to guide students in adopting effective strategies, resulting in inefficient cramming and frequent forgetfulness.

3. Strategies for Improving Vocabulary Teaching

3.1. Integrating Phonology, Morphology, and Grammar

Teachers should embed phonology and grammar into vocabulary instruction. For instance, teaching the phonological structure, syllable division, and stress patterns of a word can aid its

retention. Incorporating morphological analysis (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, and roots) can further enhance understanding (Read, 2018).

3.2. Prioritizing and Differentiating Vocabulary

In alignment with curriculum standards, teachers should prioritize essential vocabulary, distinguishing between core and supplementary terms. By focusing on key vocabulary, teachers can avoid overwhelming students with excessive information and help them build a more solid vocabulary foundation. Kremmel and Schmitt (2019) recommend adopting differentiated instruction to cater to varying student proficiency levels, ensuring efficient vocabulary acquisition.

3.3. Contextualized and Multimodal Teaching

To make vocabulary learning more engaging and effective, instruction should be contextualized within thematic units or real-life scenarios. This approach allows students to actively engage with new words in a meaningful context, fostering deeper understanding and retention. Milton (2021) stresses the importance of integrating vocabulary learning into authentic communication scenarios. Teachers can employ gamification, multimedia tools, and real-world examples to enhance engagement and make vocabulary meaningful. Dörnyei (2020) advocates for multimodal approaches, including the use of role-play and situational exercises, to strengthen students' lexical competence.

3.4. Guiding Students Toward Autonomous Learning

In the requirements for vocabulary learning, the curriculum standards mention that vocabulary learning is a long-term process of comprehensive practice and effective accumulation. Therefore, it requires students should be equipped with strategies to independently acquire and reinforce vocabulary so as to learn consciously. Autonomy in learning is a central goal of modern curricula. Teachers should guide students in developing personalized learning strategies, such as using semantic networks and structured reviews and these techniques encourage deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention.

3.5. Reinforcement Through Practice and Application

The curriculum standards suggest that in daily teaching activities, teachers should continuously reinforce relevant vocabulary by integrating it into the thematic context. This includes the teacher's own classroom language as well as the language used by students in their speech, dialogue, and discussions. Vocabulary learning is most effective when words are used in meaningful contexts. Extracurricular activities, such as extensive reading, vocabulary competitions, and online learning platforms, can consolidate vocabulary knowledge while fostering students' intrinsic motivation. Teachers can design activities that require students to use new vocabulary in writing, speaking, and collaborative tasks. Nation (2020) highlights the importance of repeated exposure to words in varied contexts to strengthen retention.

4. Conclusion

Vocabulary is the cornerstone of language learning and a critical determinant of linguistic competence. Effective vocabulary teaching requires a transition from traditional, rote memorization methods to contextualized, strategy-driven, and learner-centered approaches. By addressing the challenges identified and adopting innovative strategies, educators can empower students to build meaningful and confident engagement with the English language.

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