

Presenting business vocabulary to beginners Teaching English British Council BBC.

Pre-selecting, grading and presenting business vocabulary - Is this the way forward?

Traditionally curriculum developers and materials writers have assumed it would be worthwhile to make a selection out of a set of to-be-learned vocabulary items that they would then grade (which in effect means that some words would come before other words) before presenting them. Others going by the time-honoured method of PPP (present-practice-produce) would first present the items of vocabulary that are then practised by the learners in controlled activities which would then be finally followed by freer practice, leading to production of the practised items by the learner in question.

It would however be beneficial to us at this point to find out if that is indeed the way in which second language learners acquire vocabulary items as a matter of course. Let us assume that a group of beginners has been presented with a vocabulary item, "voucher." Here is how the lesson proceeds next:

- ? Pronounce and spell target on board
- ? Class reads a memo instructing employees to submit expense vouchers (transportation, medical and other expenses) to accounts department and obtain plastic tokens in return
- ? Exchange plastic tokens for cash on payday
- ? Class takes a reading quiz and chooses the meaning of the target from among other options

The lesson: the controlled activity phase

Learners in pairs take part in a role play between an accountant and an employee. Their cue cards present language models - useful words and phrases - to make use of while playing their roles.

A sample role-play

Accountant [A]: Can I help you?

Employee [EMP]: Yes, I'd like to know if the money that I spent the day before yesterday on traveling from London to Cambridge and back again yesterday can be refunded. I took the National Express coach and it cost me £80.00 return. And, can I also be refunded what I spent on my meals and accommodation these past two days?

A: Well, you know the procedure. You'd just have to hand me your vouchers and the accompanying photocopies of your tickets, restaurant and hotel bills now and you'll be refunded by the fifth of next month!

EMP: I'm new in here and I was wondering if the accounts department would be able to keep track of all the vouchers that employees keep handing in!

A: It's actually quite simple - you see, when you give me your vouchers I would immediately give you back a few plastic tokens that are colour coded according to the value of the voucher you handed in and you would just have to keep collecting all the tokens you obtain from us until payday and then hand them over to us for the refund.

EMP: Oh, I see. Thanks very much for explaining it to me.

A: You are welcome! There's nothing to it really.

The lesson: the freer activity phase

This time around the teacher sets them a task with the following requirements:

- ? Learners cooperatively plan their day-to-day expenses for their trip to Berlin to display their company's products, and calculate expenses redeemable by vouchers and by other means
- ? Each meal, journey, accommodation and unforeseen expenses are to be planned for in advance on a shoe-string budget

Observers watching the learners grapple with the task would immediately perceive the shortcomings of this method and realise that the learner at this level is not able to choose from among the competing key words (vouchers, luncheon vouchers, gift

vouchers, bills, receipts, etc) with a view to producing the item appropriately while doing the task.

Is there a more effective way of presenting vocabulary to the learner?

A straightforward way of presenting business vocabulary is to get the learner to listen to an oral presentation or conversation in which the target item (e.g., "brochure") is embedded. The teacher gets the class to come to terms with the topic of the conversation / presentation: how much of it do they know already? During the pre-listening discussion if teacher realises that the class knows very little about it, then she can raise it to their consciousness and then proceed to play the CD / tape recording.

After the first listening, the teacher can talk to the class to find out what it now knows about the topic / key facts. Let's now manipulate a listening text in order to get the learner to focus on the target and to get them to produce it appropriately.

An extract from the transcript of a discussion between a manager and her assistant

Sarah [Sa]: There're several things ... need to talk about.

Frank [Fr]: Yes, but in ...we can't it wouldn't really matter.

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Sa: ... cost of phone calls... worries....

Fr: ...e-mail ... seem... cheaper

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Fr: You want to... limit ... expenses...?

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Sa: ...let's move... training

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Sa: ... agree. OK, ...next?

Fr: Um, there's ... printing ... new brochure.

Sa: ...basic information changing?

Fr: Not... but ... really needs to look different. The current ... doesn't give the right idea at all...

Sa: Yes, ... bit old-fashioned, and it just doesn't have the right image for the company...

This lesson's plan:

- ? Get class to listen for the gist and for specific word to be highlighted in some way

- ? Talk with class to enable learners to recall target and produce it appropriately

The lesson might unfold thus:

T: So, what ... main idea ... passage?

SS: to discuss several things

T: Yes, the first key idea is...?

SS: cost of phone calls

T: what ... solution?

SS: using e-mail ...

T: correct. The next topic...?

SS: limiting expenses

T: the next topic?

SS: training

T: and the final topic was?

SS: brochure

T: Which of these topics is vital to the image of the company?

SS: A brochure relates to the image

T: Correct

The above exchange shows us that the target that was embedded in the text was listened to, recalled and produced appropriately by the learner.

Conclusion

I started off this article by presenting and discussing a typical vocabulary lesson using the PPP method and pointed out that learners hardly seem to be able to recall and make productive use of the target word when the situation demanded it. I next presented an alternative approach to presenting vocabulary to beginners and discussed the possibility of getting learners to listen first for the gist of a spoken text with the target embedded in it and then getting them to listen for the specific item which they are led to focus on as a result of the teacher's questions. A natural offshoot of this technique is that when next the teacher gets the class to relate the vocabulary item with the topic or key fact with which it is associated, the learner would be ready to do so -- having already grasped the gist / key facts of the passage.

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