Vocabulary in an EFL classroom
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Despite our increasing knowledge on vocabulary and its learning and teaching, the reality in a classroom may still be somewhat more traditional. This paper looks at how lexical knowledge is portrayed in an EFL classroom and in pupils’ ideas of words. The data derives from a longitudinal study that investigated the development of children’s metalinguistic awareness during their first six years at school. This paper concentrates on exploring Finnish 4th grade English classroom learning of new verbs. The study considered empirical evidence from children’s interviews, classroom observation, and used textbooks and other materials. The participants (N=16) were 9-10 – year-olds in their second year of English studies.

Children’s metalinguistic awareness in interviews
In interviews that were carried out in the 1st grade and again in the 4th grade the participants were asked about various metalinguistic terms. Not surprisingly, they did not always share the same ideas with their teacher. For instance, they thought that to walk cannot be a word because it is a verb, and a dog cannot be a noun because it is a word. Even though the children encounter various metalinguistic terms in their English as well as Finnish classes, and the teaching materials, they have not yet quite grasped the hierarchy or simply, what different terms refer to.

On the other hand, there was much heterogeneity as some children showed to be quite aware of linguistic structures and their labels, and were able to explain, for instance, the basics of the English article system. In addition to heterogeneity within the group, individual participants showed great inconsistency and originality in their logic. For example, a pupil, who was prompted with several words and asked if they were nouns or not, rejected all proper nouns because they were names. When asked to give an example of a noun, the response was Eric.

Verbs in the classroom
Not surprisingly, when the teacher introduced a set of new words (verbs of movement) to the class, she used metalinguistic terminology, expecting everyone to be familiar with it. This led to several misunderstandings, some of which were left unnoticed by the teacher. There were, however, interesting flashes of confusion from the pupils’ part that the teacher had to respond to:

Example 1
Simo: I am swim.
Teacher: Ei kun tässä jätetään se am-sana pois.
No, here you leave the word ‘am’ out.

Since the aim of the lesson was to learn and practise new verbs, different verb structures were not dealt with, and this is probably why the teacher did not explain the usage of different verb phrases any further. However, this kind of blurring of what a word/lexical chunk/grammatical structure is perhaps will not help to root out pupils’ confusion.

When practising the new verbs in the class, they were seen mostly as separate, single items and not part of any sequences or structures. However, different vocabulary teaching strategies (see e.g. Schmitt 1997, Thornbury 2002) were applied by the teacher and the verbs received a very versatile treatment when it came to the tasks. Even though the pupils did not necessarily understand what a verb is, they got to know the mother tongue equivalent of e.g. jump, they saw pictures of people jumping, they saw the word written, heard it several times, and they also practised jumping themselves.

Much of vocabulary studies have focussed on the depth and width of knowing a word (Nation 2001, Read 2004). The classroom life may not recognise six or so different levels of knowing a word, despite practising words from several angles. Knowing a word still means being able to produce the word in isolation when given the L1 equivalent, or being able to reproduce phrases that were in the textbook. A good example of this is a sample from an exam where the participants were asked to fill in a cartoon with suitable cues. The cartoon was a copy from their textbook. Help me! was considered wrong by the teacher. The expected (textbook) answer was I need your help! Even though the deep meaning of the two expressions is approximately same, and the pupil had written his answer correctly and even included the exclamation mark, he was not given any points for his answer. This reflects the strong emphasis on form rather than meaning that still prevails in many materials and in the classroom, and also unnecessary heavy reliance on the textbook. What is important in learning is perhaps not to be able to produce new expressions but to repeat those heard/read in the class. This is also resonated in the exercise books: although task types are quite versatile, they concentrate on treating words as objects of learning rather than as something that might have a function in real life.

This same concept of vocabulary learning can be seen in the classroom discourse:

Example 2
Teacher: Laskin teidän kolmannen luokan kirjasta, että siellä tuli jo nellytisvii verbiä ja näistä tulee nyt kausi lisäät.
I checked your 3rd grade book and you have already encountered forty-five different verbs and these add another six.

Vocabulary learning does not appear to be about being aware of the different dimensions of a word’s meaning, or not necessarily even about being able to use a word in any particular context, but to be able to list as many words as possible. Adding to the lexicon as a word list
is a concrete target that is perhaps also easy for the young pupils to realise and perceive. The goals of learning can then also be easily checked if, for instance, the students are simply asked to produce an equivalent for a L1 word, a task that was the most commonly found in the data of this study.

The examples above only describe one classroom and cannot be generalised. However, they do reveal that although vocabulary knowledge and learning have been discovered to be much more complicated than mere L1-L2 wordlists, the message has not reached everyone, or is not applied in everyday teaching. Furthermore, the heavy reliance on metalinguistic terms in teaching and in materials adds an unnecessary burden to students. Some students learn regardless, but poorer students do suffer from this terminology jungle. If the structure and functions, and even the very essence of words are explained through terms the pupils do not comprehend, their gain from language classes cannot be optimal.

Example3
Interviewer: mikä on substanttiivi?, muistaksää? 
Maria: en, en oo hyvä naisää. 
Interviewer: What is a noun? Do you remember? 
Maria: No. I’m not good at these.

Example 3 was preceded by a painful interview session where the interviewer was forced to skip several issues in order to stress out the nine-year-old interviewee. With all the terminology in the interview, the student did not even remember what different colours in English meant. Although the interview as a situation probably added to her anxiety, lessons with terms and teaching through terminology that she is not confident about do not perhaps offer the best possible learning environment. Students like Maria who would need more support in their language learning are not likely to find much encouragement in a traditional language lesson. This was also apparent in Maria’s learning achievements that were below the average.

In addition to dimensions of vocabulary knowledge and various vocabulary teaching and learning strategies, word characteristics that might pose problems to a SL learner have been addressed in the literature (e.g. Laufer 1997). There was not much evidence in the data of taking advantage of this vein of vocabulary research, either. On the other hand, even in the sixth grade the teaching concentrates on most frequent, simple, concrete words or the most basic meanings so that there is not much room for speculating about difficult words. From the very beginning, however, spelling is paid special attention to, and this was also obvious in the data. This is partly because of the strong position of written language in general, and partly because in Finnish, written and spoken form of the word do not much differ from each other and, thus, the difference between L1 and L2 systems is prominent.

The results show that despite the emphasis in the Finnish national curriculum, based on CEF, on a functional and communicative view of language, vocabulary is more often seen as a target than a medium. Teaching and learning are very closely tied to the teaching materials, as is the assessment of vocabulary knowledge. Various levels or dimensions of knowing a word are not apparent. Furthermore, metalanguage on vocabulary is often applied and understood differently by the teacher and the students, making the world of words unnecessary complicated. Especially the learning of the poorer students is, if not hindered, at least slowed down and made more difficult with the terminology.

References