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Two ways of second language vocabulary acquisition

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Abstract

The study covers two modes of teaching foreign language vocabulary. The traditional way – translation pairs – is drafted in the introductory paragraphs; the approach of studying new words in context of a sentence is dealt with in detail. The author, backed up by her long-time experience as a teacher of German, compares the advantages and disadvantages of both teaching techniques. She appreciates the new method in dependence on the type of the relevant foreign language, of German in that concrete case, and on overall language knowledge of students. She warmly recommends the usage of the new method in teaching reading skill. The present study is discussing the using two ways of teaching and learning new words in German as a foreign language. The suggestions given here are reflecting long-term teaching experience of the author looking back on her student childhood in secondary school many years ago. This happens especially in the introductory section of the study to reveal one way mentioned above.

Keywords: Second language, foreign language, Teaching, vocabulary acquisition

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1. Introduction

For many year students – no matter if beginners or advanced learners – had approached new foreign language vocabulary via translation from their mother tongue. At the end of a lesson the students were shown in their school books or given a list of mother-tongue words with their translations in the relevant foreign language as their counterparts. They were supposed to rewrite those translation pairs into their special school notebooks and to memorize them. It was commonly assumed that the translation pairs would be strictly tested in the next lesson. In German, the selected words were accompanied with some specifics. Firstly, the students might be sure, that all of the words listed would be not only tested, but also spoken about or used in exercises or in contexts taught in the lesson. Shortly speaking that new words would be worked with. Secondly, only one and usually most common meaning of a word chosen was given. Secondary meanings of a relevant word were tackled with at other opportunities. Thirdly, all words were given in their basic dictionary form. That was very important in the case of adjectives. And finally, when it came to nouns and verbs, their basic grammatical characteristic was given simultaneously with their meanings: verbs were classified as regular or irregular with relevant changes of their stems. As for nouns the grammatical gender was stipulated. (German ascribes masculine, feminine or neuter gender to its nouns.) Sometimes the declension pattern of the relevant noun was allotted. It usually applied the form of genitive and plural respectively. Those grammatical characteristics used to be more important than the accurate knowledge meaning of the word under discussion during oral checking or testing.

2. Discussion

There are some facts worth mentioning or even highlighting in that connection: Almost all foreign language teachers were familiar with students' mother tongue and they used it in their instructions and communication with the students. There were no native speakers among them.

Translation was the basic technique of teaching. Translation pairs of new words reflected that reality very clear. Communication skills were not the aim of foreign language teaching. The most frequent mode of checking new words was translation of sentences requiring the relevant new vocabulary items.

The method of approaching vocabulary via translation was perfectly elaborated. It had many varieties, very different tools had been used, but in its base form it remained still the same in all cases. And as a such it could be and so it really was – used form the very first lesson on.

The resource books texts were adapted to the learners' level of knowledge. A sentence hardly ever had more than one new lexical item. The others were those ones used in previous lesson texts already. As a result, a good student understood the text perfectly utterance by utterance, word by word.

Every school textbook of German contained an alphabetical survey of words used in text. That summary was usually supplemented with numbers identifying the lesson in which was the relevant word used for the first time. The summary list, a vocabulary of its kind, was in no case a collection of randomly used lexical units. Their choice was very carefully organized and represented the basic words of German vocabulary. One aspect merits special attention here. From the very first beginning the school – and secondary school in general – instilled into student's mind the subsequent basic notion: If you want to master a language you have to understand every word you write or read.

Concerning the method of translation pairs must be emphasized here. With a new word a student had to learn not only its basic meaning but also something what was important for its next and further usage. And – as mentioned above – that important factor was given and had been introduced into student's linguistic awareness simultaneously as an unseparated part of the word meaning.

Rather special was the situation in higher classes in terms of reading of set books. The progression was directed by the teacher identifying the length of a reading homework. The aim here was to understand the contents of the section predetermined, the task was to put down its content into a special notebook. Every senior student was supposed to have a dictionary at his disposal so that he was able to find out and write up words needed for the understanding the relevant part of text. It was up to him which words he would consult with the dictionary, listed – and memorize. He was not obliged to do so, the items chosen and rewritten were never checked by any teacher- The students were seen as trustworthy and aware of their interest.

By the passage of time the emergence of the communicative approach to teaching a foreign language appeared. It emphasized some specific skills but not the skill of translation among them. Simultaneously it tried to limit any usage of mother tongue during the lessons. As for the vocabulary it seemed to be better not to give the learner in advance prepared lists of new words identified to memorization. To new vocabulary should lead another path, perhaps even more comfortable and more reliable, going through a foreign language context and applying the study of a new word in all connections with its context.

The approach mentioned brings good results in terms of reading. Its success depends on two factors: on overall student's knowledge of the system of language under discussion, but first of all on the type of the relevant language. It may be suggested that English is a very suitable language in this case and that in terms of German any usage of this approach has its limitations. Subsequent examples will show more about it.

As a starting point let's suppose that a beginning learner is encountering a very simple and short sentence Mein Bruder hat ein rotes Auto (My brother has got a red car). Let's further suppose that the target word is rotes. Words left do not cause any difficulties, but there is nothing in the sentence that can serve as a clue concerning the meaning of the meaning of the target word. Admittedly, it is contextualized from the grammatical point of view. The utterance is syntactically very simple and transparent but that is its only priority in that case. Printed in a course textbook it is highlighted to eliminate any confusion. Of course, the student may already know that the relevant word is an adjective and its job is to identify a noun and that the general meaning of words belonging to that word class is an identification of a quality. But all that knowledge does not reveal the actual dictionary meaning of the word.

In some cases, the sentences of that type are accompanied by a color graphic illustration. Its job is to show that rot means red. It seems to be better to use the method of a translation pair. It is a great saving of time that may be utilized for developing of a communication skill.

The point to note here is that most important is the fact that the beginning learner understands the statement of reality that somebody's brother has got a car. The color of the car does not matter here. Basically, it is necessary to draw a sharp distinction between vocabulary and communicative approach to teaching basic language material.

As an additional example the sentence given is also syntactically transparent. Nonetheless it is a bit more complicated and so the learner's task is more demanding. The statement reads as follows: Hinter dem modernen Hause ist ein kleiner Garten. The target words here are hinter, kleiner. The lexical item kleiner may be put in the category discussed in the first example. Despite the same suffix the relevant words do not belong into the same word class. To know that, a learner must have broader knowledge of the German language system. The only clue here is the position of both words with their nouns. And in practice just that position may lead a learner to a conviction that the item hinter is not an adjective but an adverb or a preposition identifying a location. In those categories he may know some more frequented words as for instant in, bei, aus, but that knowledge will be of little use to him when it comes to the actual meaning of the relevant word. The context itself does not offer any information about the accurate sense. The learner may work out the relevant meaning and then use a dictionary to see how accurate his inference was.

It is the type of studied language that must be mentioned and clearly spoken about: German syntactical structures as for instance ein kleiner Garten, der kleine Garten, kleiner Garten, das rote Auto, ein rotes Auto, rotes Auto give not the base form of the relevant adjectives. It holds true for conjugation of time concerning verbs and for declension forms of nouns. And furthermore the item kleiner itself belongs into two different categories as to its form and can have a different grammatical and thus also dictionary meaning. It is very important for a learner not using the translation pair method to be well familiar with such and similar links between grammatical form and meaning.

So far the present study has treated in more detail the cases where a learner has been given the target words. That mode of approach to new vocabulary is very suitable and advantageous for a learner. That is why in modern course text books there are enough opportunities where the relevant lexical items are highlighted in longer coherent texts designed for reading. Accompanying instruction useably encourages a use of the book to get familiar with those words either getting their meaning by guess work or looking them up in a good dictionary.

Let's have at least one example where the learner wants to use the method of studying a new word in a context and has to rely only on himself and on his good orientation in a longer coherent text. The following longer complex sentence has been elected from a work of Watzlik, one of German writers. Its text had been used in an older resource book of German in an abstract representing a coherent text. The book is organized according to lessons. Each of them has a separate section called The school of translation. The sentence reads as follows: Das Bild stellte einen einsamen dunklen See dar, worin sich ernste und stille Taunen schwermutig spiegelten. To a learner who knows the word See only in the meaning of a sea is the sentence quoted incomprehensible and misunderstandable. And just that word has been chosen here as a target item, even if two or three other words may also be regarded as unfamiliar to an average advanced student. Before he begins identifying their meanings he should read the whole text to see what role plays the sentence elected besides the fact that it is the introductory sentence of the whole abstract. Doing so, he learns the role being important. The abstract is a story and not the picture as a whole, but its main motif comes again. For grasping the gist of the story it is substantial to know the accurate meaning of the key word in the main clause. The path to that key word is represented by the content of the secondary clause. The path to that key word is represented by the content of the secondary clause. If the learner knows the meaning of the verb – darstellen (to reflect) – he can omit the secondary clause as a whole with all its unknown low frequency words. If he is not familiar with the verb mentioned, there is not much left – only to look it up in a dictionary. But knowing that verb he may – perhaps quite easily – work out the meaning of the word See. But he has to perform very consistently and intently and identify it precisely according to the context. He must not overlook that the lexical unit under discussion is masculine. He can get its meaning by guess work – a lake. The dictionary will prove his guess and point out that the item in feminine means a sea.

It is necessary to admit that all procedures mentioned have got their value and as for reading they are almost unique. On the other hand they may be seen as too lengthy and possible on the basis of solid general knowledge of the language. The procedures have their own linguistic value. It surely is useful to study the features of the foreign language in detail, but it has to be clear that such proceedings do not develop communicative competence. Practically, at least a limited use of a dictionary may occur as necessary and useful. But the last word will always be said by the type of the relevant foreign language. The situation of English is specific and it is quite different but much more favorable than the position of German. In the last section of the study let us turn to teaching of vocabulary. The practice had and still has shown a weakness just in that area. It is sometimes hypothesized that both techniques – translation pairs and study new word in its context conditions – bring the same results, that either approach to vocabulary acquisition has the same value concerning the students' long term memory and their foreign language development. The practice, on the other hand, sees the things a bit differently.

The conclusion of the article demands to take a personal attitude. If I speak about practice here, I keep in my own many – yearlong – experience. During that time I had paid my attention almost to

everything that had been written about in national and German professional magazine on the issue under discussion. And here I am giving nothing going against other teachers' practice in that area. The lack of my own research is the cause of formulating some thoughts with the caution, nonetheless with a conviction about their practicality.

To start with I want to mention that the study of new words in a sentence context is based on student's ability to orient himself on a sentence, on its content and grammatical structure. My students' mother tongue always has been Czech. The syntactical structure of a German sentence is different from the Czech one and very different when it comes to secondary clauses in a combined sentence. That was why I had started the reasonably often use of the new method by a simple training in the orientation of a sentence: Underline two most important words in a sentence given. In passage of time the sentences had become longer and more complicated, but the key words still were remaining only two. Only after some time I incorporated exercises using new approach to vocabulary acquisition. Students had been really interested in the new technique revealing the meaning of a new word. They took their study too competitive when working in a group, they hurried for their work to get the meaning of a new word as quickly as possible. They were usually very attracted by the seeking the accurate meaning of the word. They consulted their results with dictionaries with apparent restlessness. During their hurried effort they neglected the embedding of a new lexical item into its language context, they overlooked some important features and grammatical links. Especially weaker students acted in this way very often quite unwittingly lacking overall knowledge of the language system they learnt.

3. Conclusion

The crucial point was that the translation method pushed a student into memorizing new words. The other technique usually did not so. The students took their findings gained into their short-term memory. They worked with new vocabulary very well immediately after their studies, but were not prepared to use the studied words in new formulated sentences and in new linguistic context later. Many of them were not even able to recall some of new words from their memory.

Nonetheless I am still suggesting that the new approach of studying, identifying and gaining new words is suitable even for weaker students if only they get transparent and syntactically not too much complicated context with a simple „linguistic environment“ of the target word. As for reading, it should be used more often and even regularly.

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