



CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING VOCABULARY WITH MULTILEVEL ESL CLASSES

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Abstract. *Teaching vocabulary to English as a Second Language (ESL) student presents unique challenges, particularly in multilevel classrooms where learners possess varying levels of proficiency. This article explores the multifaceted challenges faced by educators in such settings, including addressing diverse learning needs, managing varied paces of acquisition, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and implementing effective pedagogical strategies. The article further discusses the impact of these challenges on student motivation and achievement, and proposes potential solutions and strategies for creating inclusive and effective vocabulary instruction for multilevel ESL learners.*

Keywords: *ESL vocabulary, vocabulary acquisition, multilevel classrooms, second language acquisition, ESL instruction, vocabulary knowledge disparity, pacing curriculum, vocabulary tiering.*

Annotation. *Vocabulary acquisition is a cornerstone of language learning, enabling learners to comprehend and express themselves effectively. However, teaching vocabulary in ESL classrooms, especially those comprising students with diverse proficiency levels, poses significant pedagogical challenges. Multilevel classrooms, characterized by learners with varying degrees of vocabulary knowledge, language skills, and learning styles, necessitate differentiated instruction and careful planning to ensure all students progress. This article delves into the specific challenges encountered by teachers in such classrooms, examining their impact on both students and educators, and suggesting practical strategies for navigating these complexities.*

Several interconnected challenges arise when teaching vocabulary in multilevel ESL classrooms:

Addressing Diverse Learning Needs: Students in multilevel classes often exhibit a wide range of vocabulary knowledge. Some may possess a basic understanding of common words, while others might have a more extensive vocabulary. This disparity makes it challenging to select appropriate vocabulary items and design activities that cater to all learners' needs. "Teachers must balance the need to introduce new vocabulary to some students while simultaneously reviewing and reinforcing previously learned words for others. Furthermore, learners may have different learning styles, requiring teachers to employ diverse teaching methods to accommodate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners."¹ (p 34)

Managing Varied Paces of Acquisition: Students learn vocabulary at different rates. Some learners may grasp new words quickly, while others require more time

¹ Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.



and exposure. This variation in learning pace can create difficulties in pacing the curriculum and ensuring that all students are keeping up with the material. Teachers must find ways to provide individualized support and differentiated practice to cater to learners' varying speeds of acquisition. This can be particularly challenging in large classes.

Selecting Appropriate Vocabulary: Choosing the right vocabulary to teach is crucial. In multilevel classes, teachers must consider the relevance of the vocabulary to students' lives, their academic needs, and their current level of English proficiency. “Introducing complex vocabulary can frustrate lower-level learners, while focusing solely on basic vocabulary can hinder the progress of more advanced students.”² (p. 214).²

Teachers carefully need to curate vocabulary lists, considering frequency of use, contextual relevance, and the potential for students to apply the new words in meaningful communication

Implementing Effective Pedagogical Strategies: Teaching vocabulary effectively requires more than simply presenting lists of words and definitions.

Multilevel classrooms demand a variety of pedagogical strategies to engage learners with different learning styles and proficiency levels. Teachers need to employ techniques such as contextualization, visual aids, realia, games, and interactive activities to make vocabulary learning engaging and memorable. Moreover, they need to provide opportunities for students to use the new vocabulary in meaningful contexts through speaking, writing, and listening activities. Differentiating these activities to suit the various levels present in the classroom is a significant challenge.

Assessing Vocabulary Learning: Assessing vocabulary learning in multilevel classrooms can be complex. Teachers need to employ a variety of assessment methods to evaluate students' understanding of new words, including their meaning, form, and use. Furthermore, “assessments should be differentiated to reflect the different levels of proficiency within the class.”³ (p. 213) This can involve creating different versions of quizzes or tests, or using alternative assessment methods such as portfolios or oral presentations.

Impact on Student Motivation and Achievement: The challenges described above can significantly affect student motivation and achievement. Lower-level

² Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

³ Coxhead, A. (2000). *A new academic word list*. TESOL Quarterly, 34(2), 213-233.



learners may feel overwhelmed and discouraged if the vocabulary is too difficult, while more advanced, students may become bored if the pace is too slow.

Creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where all students feel challenged and supported is essential for fostering motivation and promoting vocabulary acquisition.

Potential Solutions and Strategies

Addressing the challenges of vocabulary instruction in multilevel ESL classrooms requires a multifaceted approach. The following strategies can be implemented:

Needs Assessment: Begin by conducting a thorough needs assessment to determine students' existing vocabulary knowledge, learning styles, and learning goals. This information is used to inform vocabulary selection and instructional strategies.

Differentiated Instruction: Implement differentiated instruction by providing different levels of support and “scaffolding to meet the diverse needs of learners. This might involve creating different versions of worksheets, providing individualized tutoring, or using tiered assignments.”⁴(p. 145)

Vocabulary Tiering: Introduce vocabulary in tiers, focusing on high-frequency words that are essential for communication. This approach allows teachers to prioritize essential vocabulary for all learners while providing opportunities for more advanced students to expand their vocabulary knowledge.

Contextualization: Teach vocabulary in context by using stories, articles, and real-life examples. This helps learners understand the meaning of new words and how they are used in communication.

Visual Aids and Realia: Use “visual aids such as pictures, diagrams, and realia to make vocabulary learning more engaging and memorable.”

Interactive Activities: Incorporate interactive activities such as games, role-plays, and group work to provide students with opportunities to use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Technology Integration: “Utilize technology to enhance vocabulary instruction.”⁵ (p. 289) Many online resources and apps that can be used to provide students with interactive vocabulary practice and personalized feedback.

⁴ Read, J. (2004). *Assessing vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in a second language*. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 289-302). Cambridge University Press



Collaborative Learning: Encourage collaborative learning by having students work together in pairs or small groups. This allows learners to learn from each other and practice using new vocabulary in a supportive environment.

Regular Review and Recycling: Regularly “review and recycle previously learned vocabulary to reinforce learning and ensure that students retain the new words.”⁶ (p.178)

Ongoing Assessment: Use a variety of assessment methods to monitor student progress and identify areas where they need additional support.

Conclusion

Teaching vocabulary in multilevel ESL classrooms presents a complex set of challenges. However, by implementing the strategies discussed in this article, teachers can create inclusive and effective learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all learners. By carefully selecting vocabulary, employing varied pedagogical techniques, and providing differentiated instruction, teachers can empower their students to develop the vocabulary skills they need to succeed in their academic and personal lives.

Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of different vocabulary instruction strategies in multilevel ESL classrooms and to develop best practices for teaching vocabulary to learners with diverse needs.

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⁶ Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. Pearson Education