‘Greek teachers’ preferences in ELT Methodology for the teaching of vocabulary’

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents the opportunity to place vocabulary in the pedagogic spotlight as its main aim is to investigate Greek teachers’ preferences in ELT Methodology for the teaching of lexis. It aims to offer some insight and understanding of how methodology of vocabulary teaching is practised in Greek classrooms, to indicate Greek teachers’ preferences, to offer some interpretation for these preferences, to find out if theory meets action in class, to suggest how best to facilitate teachers’ demanding task.

1. MAIN PRINCIPLES OF VOCABULARY TEACHING
According to Carter and McCarthy (1988) new vocabulary should be related to the students’ needs taking into account frequency and importance of the new word item. Teachers should also provide appropriate context when teaching lexis as it enhances the internalisation of vocabulary. When explaining, teacher’s role is to encourage learners to guess the meaning with the help of possible context clues such as discussing the topic, outline, title, grammatical structure, intonation in speech or even punctuation in writing can help the communicative guesswork (Dooling and Lachman 1971). Furthermore, pronunciative is important, as marking the stressed syllable on the board forms one of the main aspects of what ‘knowing a word’ entails. One main tenet of vocabulary teaching is that meaning should be made clear and the use of a dictionary can facilitate encoding and decoding (Jackson 1988). Moreover, revision is an essential and integral part in effective and permanent assimilation in learning vocabulary. As the decay theory suggests ‘information stored in memory falls into disuse unless activated regularly’ (Gairns and Redman 1986:89). Testing, regular updating of vocabulary record, grouping under a topic area, vocabulary lists are important forms of revising (Lewis 1993, Stewick 1976). Yet as ‘encouraging learners’ autonomy is probably the best way to foster good vocabulary memorisation, fun activities and games have got a place in classroom (McCarthy 1990:120).
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The intention of this study was to carry out a research of Greek preferences in ELT Methodology for the teaching of vocabulary at the Upper-Intermediate level in ten English Institutes in the town of Ioannina.

Observation
Ten teachers of different ages teaching vocabulary at the Upper Intermediate level were observed. The attention was to watch which teaching techniques were being implemented during the lesson, identify them and note them down.

The observation sheet was divided into four parts describing the techniques of the phases of teaching lexis. These were: presenting vocabulary, explaining vocabulary, practising new vocabulary to ensure comprehension of meaning and revising vocabulary.

Interview
The same teachers were interviewed in order to find out the relationship between what was ‘preferred’ or ‘believed’ in theory by the teacher and what was actually being practised in class.

Before moving on to the results, it is important clarify that the whole research aimed to offer a sample of teaching English vocabulary in the Greek reality.

2. DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS
According to the results, the most favoured method of presenting lexis was the contextualised one, from the course-book, mainly in a text and rarely on a vocabulary exercise. New lexis emerging from speaking or listening tasks was a rare phenomenon. Although teaching in bulk with vocabulary lists or companions was not highly appreciated in the teachers’ mind, yet, in practice, five teachers made great use of this method when teaching. Moreover, in both the theoretical and practical view, translation tends to be the preferred method of explaining a new word-item. Apart from one teacher, all the others were led to translation in order to explain more than half the new words they had presented. Although guessing the meaning and context clues were claimed to be invaluable in the interview, in the classrooms this was rarely demonstrated. Some attempts of peer and verbal explanation were made but always ended up in translation.

On the other hand, the use of dictionary was rejected by 80%. They thought it gives the wrong impression to the learners, that in other words they ‘lose face’. 50% considered repetition the most important tool for understanding new lexis. Providing examples, setting homework and extra exercises were considered useful, while there was less attention given to extension questions or illustrative context. During the observation, 70% used the technique of provision of examples in order to check comprehension of
the new word item. Yet, only 20% checked almost every new word item they taught. This shows that checking the concept of a new vocabulary item as a principle of vocabulary teaching was rather underestimated in the teachers’ minds. When revising was investigated, 80% thought that tests are a vital tool of revising. No forms of revision took place in seven classrooms for previously or presently taught vocabulary. Finally, games were considered a waste of time, out of the learners’ interests for more than 50%. The rest thought that fun activities form a valid and useful way of teaching and revising lexis. Yet, in practise, no games took place in any classroom.

3. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Teachers relied heavily on presentation of lexis in context in the course book. Context though includes spoken and other written forms. Furthermore, course book’s relation to learners needs was taken for granted.

Greek learners feel insecure if they are not sure of what an English word means in Greek. A closer study of the data though could unveil the insecurity of the Greek teachers too. Greek teachers are reassured only when they have given the Greek equivalent to their students and they do it sooner or later.

During the interview it is remarkable that translation in the teachers’ views was seen as a breach in the foreign educational ELT Methodology. Statements like “I know it’s a bad thing to do but I use translation a lot” were often offered and teachers sounded defensive. There are compensating virtues in translating like time saving and ensuring clarification of meaning, which forms one of the main principles in vocabulary teaching. Yet, as Bowen and Marks (1994) claim translation can lead to making students over-reliant on the teacher’s translation.

Reinforcement of learners’ autonomy is achieved when they manage to guess the meaning of a word item. Learners could benefit from syntactic and pragmatic relations of word items. (Ferst 1984 and Lewis 1993). However, it is a procedure that should start from an early age so that it will gradually become a natural procedure. Moreover, guesswork when used slavishly or over-zealously can prove to be frustrating for the learners (Bowen and Marks 1994).

It was surprising to notice, in retrospect, the absence of a dictionary in all classrooms, let alone the use of it. During the interviews, two teachers unveiled the reason for not using dictionaries. That is because Greeks don’t know how to use them in their own language. They were especially negative with the monolingual dictionaries, as those would probably create panic to the learners. The most important consequence of neglecting the use of dictionaries in the researcher’s opinion though is the overuse of ‘companions’. The ‘companions’ are considered as mini-dictionaries, but
this is not always the case. As one teacher explained: “They say the use of
the word in English, they explain what the word means in English, then they
have the Greek explanation. Of course, no-one is going to read the English
one”. Relying heavily on companions has serious implications in language
teaching and learning. As Gairns and Redman (1986:74) suggest
“Definition alone is often inadequate as a means of conveying meaning and
clearly contextualised examples are generally required to clarify the limits
of the item”.

Surprisingly enough, only two teachers checked almost every new
word they had introduced. A careful study and consideration can indicate the
reason for this. These teachers were the only teachers who rarely used
translation while explaining. That is probably the reason that they kept
seeking feedback from the students that they have understood the meaning of
the words.

When revising, tests seemed to have a tremendous influence on
learning. It is understandable because tests monitor success in the teaching
goals, form an indispensable tool for clarifying learning objectives and
provide feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching program. They also
provide a diagnosis of students’ weaknesses and strengths (Bachman and

Quite surprisingly, not one teacher at any point of teaching,
presenting, practising or revising vocabulary by setting a fun activity. Still,
as Cross (1992:63) emphasises “games should not be viewed as mere
warming up activities or time-fillers”. Games are likely to create a friendly
atmosphere and make the lesson, less predictable and far more involving.
However, teachers felt that games placed them in an embarrassing situation.

4. CONCLUSIONS
1. Selection and presentation of vocabulary needs care and preparation
New language is to be presented clearly, efficiently, in a lively, interesting,
appropriate and productive way. Is it possible that any ‘perfect’ course book
on its own can guarantee that? I think not. The teachers should take their
students’ individual needs into consideration when selecting vocabulary. It is
certain that this will mean a more careful and time-consuming planning of
the lesson, but they will find reward in watching their students’ rapid
progress. To further ensure a varied opportunity of learning, teachers should
also provide the students with written and spoken context in which to present
and practice new vocabulary items.

2. Communicative guesswork and dictionaries merit a place in the lesson.
As far as the explaining of vocabulary is concerned, explanation could
benefit from communicative guesswork, even if it is done in their own
language because it stirs up mental activity which in turn has an immense effect on memory. It is clear that the more actively the students are trying to sort out a meaning in a context, the more likely they are to store it in mind permanently.

Teachers ought to be aware of the fact that learners are given considerable autonomy if they learn to use the dictionary appropriately and this could enable them to continue learning outside the classroom. *Dictionary training* should be an integral part of any syllabus because apart from the explanation given and the fostering of independent vocabulary study, the use of phonemic transcription helps students become even more self-efficient.

It is true that reference to the pronunciation of lexis, although a significant part of vocabulary teaching was almost ignored. *Phonemic charts* in Greece are not used but a selective use of them might prove to be a valid strategy.

Since the use of translation was of great concern to the teachers, a way of mitigating this circumstance is the use of *delayed translation*, which means using different ways of explaining and resorting to translation only when absolutely necessary. As Taylor (1990) claims, banishing the mother tongue is said to diminish its status whereas using translation cautiously can form a useful strategy especially when there are ‘false friends’ or no direct equivalent.

3. Teachers should not forget that checking the concept is essential for the learner

It is thus suggested to teach vocabulary in separate, spaced sessions instead of teaching it all at once. Words could therefore, be taught briefly at the beginning of a lesson, and reviewed later in the same lesson and again in the next one. It goes without saying that as Ur (1996) explains, this procedure shall require more careful and detailed lesson planning but will eventually repay the effort.

4. A vocabulary lesson should be fun!

In general, what strikes me most from the research is the rejection of games or fun activities in the classroom. It was noticeable that no word pools, mind maps, labelled pictures, ostensive means, mnemonics, were used by the teachers observed.

It is known that motivation is enhanced by play and competition at all ages and levels. The learner’s spirit requires constant challenges and flourishes with obstacles or mind games. The learners stay mentally active and get immersed in the game. Fun activities can form excellent and effective retrieval methods, creating opportunities for the expansion of
vocabulary. Crosswords, anagrams, songs, films, role-plays, taboo, pictionary, miming, bingo and so many others merit a planned place in the lesson procedure as they can make the lesson unpredictable and far more involving.

It is certain that a variety of flexible and adaptable techniques are recommended, some of which will be highly individual and idiosyncratic. Still, teachers should aim to motivate their students. Students, who enjoy their lesson, will enjoy learning and both teachers and learners will feel a sense of achievement. And this, in my view, is the very essence of teaching.

REFERENCES