

## Chapter 5. TCSL Lexis Teaching Method

### Objectives:

Towards the end of this chapter, the students should be able to

- ✓ develop an understanding of role played by vocabulary in Chinese language learning.
- ✓ use some frequently employed techniques to present new words
- ✓ apply some techniques to teach words in texts
- ✓ develop an understanding of the basic tenets of the lexical approach
- ✓ help learners to employ effective strategies of memorizing, learning and using new words

### 2.1 The Role of Vocabulary in the Language Classroom

The status of vocabulary within the curriculum has varied considerably over the years. It suffered significant neglect during the 1950s and 1960s when audio-lingualism had a dominant influence on methodology, but made something of a comeback during the 1970s under the influence of communicative language teaching. Since then, however, the status of vocabulary has been enhanced. Proponents of this approach point out that in the early stages of learning and using a second language one is better served by vocabulary than grammar, and that one can, in effect, “bypass” grammar in going for meaning if one has a reasonable vocabulary base. We can use Wilkins’s (1972) oft-quoted view to summarize this: “*Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.*” That is, our vocabulary knowledge and use play an important role in successful communication. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them such as listening to the radio, listening to native speakers.

**Activity 2.1** The value of vocabulary in the TCSL classroom, however, has not been fully recognized by TCSL teachers. Some teachers think that vocabulary should not be taught in the TCSL classroom and it is the students’ job to learn to remember and use the words. Their main arguments against vocabulary teaching can be summarized as follows:

- a. *Grammar should be emphasized more than vocabulary. Students would make mistakes in sentence construction if too many words are learned before the basic grammar has been mastered.*
- b. *Word meanings can be learned only through experience, and they cannot be adequately taught in a classroom.*
- c. *We do not have to spend much time on vocabulary since students will know by themselves what the word means and how to pronounce or spell it from the dictionary or word list.*
- d. *There are too many words to teach and there is a lot to learn about each word. Direct teaching could only have a very trivial impact on such knowledge. To have an immediate effect on vocabulary knowledge, substantial time has to be spent on teaching each word.*
- e. *There are other ways of increasing vocabulary size which require less teacher effort and less classroom time, and which have numerous other benefits.*

Now, examine these arguments and decide to what extent you approve of them, and then discuss the following questions with your partners:

## Questions for Discussion:

- To what extent do you find these arguments against vocabulary teaching justifiable?
- What if vocabulary is NOT taught in the TCSL classroom?
- What might be the teacher's role if vocabulary should be taught in the TCSL vocabulary classroom?

### ◇ *What's in a word?*

To teach a word means more than showing students the spelling, pronunciation and meaning of the word. In fact, to build knowledge about a word in the learner's mind can be vastly more complex than it may appear. Let's take the word 被 as an example, many senior Chinese learners know how to write or pronounce the word, but quite a number of Chinese learners will incorrectly collate the word with the word 受, as in the sentence: "这个规定在我的国家被受欢迎". The students who made this sentence knew very well about the writing, the pronunciation, the meaning as well as the grammatical function of the word 被, but he did not seem to know what verbs could collate with it.

It may now be clear to you that learning vocabulary is a multifaceted enterprise. These different aspects of our vocabulary knowledge can conveniently fall into three broad categories:

- **Form:** What does the word look or sound like?
- **Meaning:** What does the word mean?
- **Use:** How is the word used?

To "know" a word in a target language as well as the native speaker know it may mean the ability to:

- Recognize it in its spoken or written form,
- Recall it at will,
- Relate it to an appropriate object or concept,
- Use it in the appropriate grammatical form,
- In speech, pronounce it in a recognizable way,
- In writing, read it correctly,
- Use it with the words it correctly goes with, i.e., in the correct collocation,
- Use it at the appropriate level of formality,
- Be aware of its connotations and associations.

(Wallace, 1982)

The different types of word knowledge are not necessarily learned at the same time. Being able to use a word in oral discourse does not necessarily entail being able to spell it. Similarly, a learner will probably know at least one meaning for a word before knowing all of its associative forms. Each of the word-knowledge types is likely to be learned in a gradual manner, but some may develop later than others and at different rates. From this perspective, vocabulary acquisition takes place in an *incremental manner*, since it is clearly impossible to gain immediate mastery of all these word knowledge simultaneously.

## 2.2 Techniques of teaching vocabulary

### ◇ *Presenting new vocabulary*

The word *present* means "to introduce something new formally or officially". To present vocabulary means to introduce various aspects of the words that the students have not encountered before.

Vocabulary can be presented in many different ways and different teachers may prefer to present vocabulary

in different ways. For effective teaching of vocabulary, it is always useful for a teacher to have a repertoire of techniques so that he/she can choose a technique according to the type of vocabulary and different age level of the learners.

Listed below are some frequently used techniques of presenting new vocabulary to the students.

- **Illustration:** This is very useful for more concrete words (dog, rain, tall) and for visual learners. It has its limits though, not all items can be drawn.
- **Mime:** This lends itself particularly well to action verbs and it can be fun and memorable. Try to create a single movement for (if possible) all the new words presented. Even if it is only waving your hand in a specific way or touching your cheek, the chance that the students will remember a word better is much greater.
- **Synonyms/Antonyms/Gradable items:** Using the words a student already knows can be effective for getting meaning across.
- **Definition:** Make sure that it is clear (maybe check in a learner dictionary before the lesson if you are not confident). Remember to ask questions to check they have understood properly.
- **Translation:** If you know the students' L1, then it is fast and efficient. Remember that not every word has a direct translation.
- **Context:** Think of a clear context when the word is used and either describe it to the students or give them example sentences to clarify meaning further. If the possibilities are limited make use of the blackboard or furniture in the classroom, do not be ashamed to dress up! If possible, use sound recordings to create a required atmosphere in the classroom or watch a thematically related video beforehand.
- **Flashcards and Pictures:** As visuals appeal a great deal to learners, have a set of flashcards or pictures ready for any new words or phrases you want to introduce. Roll the cards over in many directions, show for a second and cover again, let them slowly appear from the back of a book. Not only will it make your students enjoy this stage more but it will also make them remember the new words better.
- **Realia:** Whenever possible bring realia to the classroom. There is no better way to make a person remember something than to see, smell, touch and taste it. Another way of making the lesson more attention-grabbing is letting the learners bring objects of their own.
- **Pronunciation:** Make sure you model proper pronunciation from the very beginning of the classes. Do so not only by making the students repeat the what they hear from a tape/CD. Pronounce the words yourself in many original ways. Drill the students as a whole class, individually and in groups (boys and girls, left and right side, front row and back row).
- **Cross Curricular Learning:** Having the chance, find out what your students learn during their Biology or History classes. If they talk about cities while studying Geography for instance, it will be easier for them to get to know some vocabulary related to the topic in Chinese as well.

**Activity 2.3** Given below is a case of presenting the words 热闹. Do you think which one is an effective way of presenting the words? What are the presentation technique(s) that the teachers have employed?

方法 1：老师问“形容一个地方人多，气氛热烈。比如街上很热闹/商店很热闹/晚会很热闹”

方法 2：老师：你们说兰州/北京什么地方很热闹？学生回答。老师：很好。我们还可以说某某路是一个非常热闹的地方。

还有，上个星期他的生日晚会开得怎么样？学生：开得很热闹。

## Questions for Discussion:

1. *Some techniques seem more popular than others. What are these techniques? Can you account for their popularity?*
2. *Are there techniques that are particularly appropriate for the presentation of certain types of words?*
3. *Are there techniques which are likely to be more, or less, appropriate for particular learner populations?*
4. *Do you, as an individual, find that you prefer some kinds of techniques and tend to avoid others? Which and why?*
5. *Should all the new words be presented “formally or officially”? If not, what are the guidelines of choosing the words to be presented?*

### ✧ *Teaching vocabulary in context*

Besides the above-mentioned ways of presenting new vocabulary, using context aids is also one of the most important means to vocabulary expansion. Language reflects the contexts in which it is used and the purposes to which it is put. If we assume that language is also best encountered and learned in context, then this has particular implications for practice. In the first place, it would argue against the learning of lists of decontextualized vocabulary items. Rather, the focus in class will be on encouraging learners to develop strategies for inferring the meaning of new words from the context in which they occur, and teaching them to use a range of cues, both verbal and non-verbal to determine meaning.

### ✧ *The lexical approach: The role of word chunks and collocations*

We could not talk about vocabulary teaching nowadays without mentioning Michael Lewis, whose thought-provoking ideas have been shaking the TCSL world since the publication of *The Lexical Approach* (Lewis, 1993). His most important contribution was to highlight the importance of vocabulary as being basic to communication. Lewis himself thinks that his lexical approach is not simply a shift of emphasis from grammar to vocabulary teaching, as 'language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary, but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks' (Lewis, 1997).

Chunks include collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expressions and idioms, and, according to him, they occupy a crucial role in facilitating language production, being the key to fluency. In fact, according to Lewis, chunk is a broad notion that covers many types of multi-word constructions.

As we know, one of the reasons why native speakers are fluent speakers is that vocabulary is not stored only as individual words, but also as parts of phrases and larger chunks, which can be retrieved from memory as a whole, reducing the processing load of memory. On the other hand, learners who only learn individual words will need a lot more time and effort to express themselves. Consequently, it is essential to make students aware of chunks, giving them opportunities to identify, organize and record these.

Apart from the chunks/collocations identification tasks, Lewis (1993, pp123-312) also introduced a few other techniques that can be used in TCSL classrooms. The collocation box is in particular worthy of recommendation. These boxes are designed to show adjective-noun, verb-noun, noun-verb, verb-adjective-noun groups. Within the 'adjective' category, for example, the nouns that can be used adjectively must be included.

## Questions for Discussion:

1. *What other techniques can you recommend to your students to learn chunked words or collocations?*
2. *How are you going to **teach** chunks once they have been successfully identified?*

### 2.3 Developing Vocabulary Learning Strategies

As has been indicated in our preceding discussion in 2.1, both teachers and learners have their own role to play in TCSL learners' vocabulary learning. Actually, the words that can be taught by the teacher constitute a very minor part of a TCSL learner's vocabulary repertoire, and the majority of the words should be learned, recognized, memorized and put to use by learners themselves.

Learning new vocabulary can be both fun and simple if learners employ the right vocabulary strategies. Since everyone learns differently, TCSL may want to adjust their vocabulary strategies to their own personal learning style. Fortunately, there are some great ways for anyone- whether an auditory or visual learner- to learn new vocabulary words.

#### ✧ *Remembering words*

The role of memory is crucial in any kind of learning and even more so in vocabulary learning. Without fail, learners tend to forget some components of their vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, presenting words in the classroom is just the first step in vocabulary teaching. The teacher should also help to relieve learners from the tremendous burden of memorizing long lists of vocabulary item.

In order to develop TCSL learners' ability to remember new words and to retain them in their memory, it helps to have a general understanding of how our memory works. For thousands of years of human history, great interest has been shown to explore the mystery of memory, which has shaped our current understanding of the mechanisms of memory.

#### ✧ *Building words associations*

Learning a new lexical item means forming a relationship between form and meaning. This relationship may take the form of an L1 equivalent; L2 synonym or definition; visual image; feeling; sound; emotion; a certain situation or context; or a combination of these. The greater the number of connections we make, the more likely we are to remember it.

Below are two most frequently employed techniques of building associations between words, *i.e.*, the keyword technique, and the words mindmap.

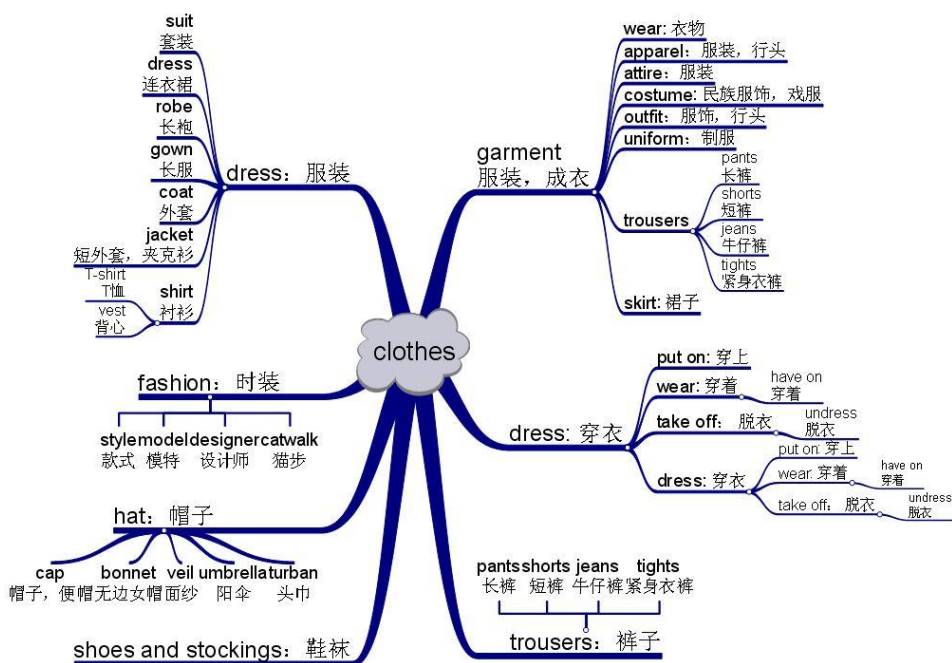
##### ● **The keyword technique**

● When learners meet an unknown word and discover its meaning, they may wish to make an extra effort to remember the word. **The keyword technique** is an effective way of doing this. In this technique the learners create an unusual association between the word form and its meaning. Here the target vocabulary item is paired with its native language equivalent in an idiosyncratic way. For example, in learning that the Spanish word *perro* means “dog”, one might notice that the first syllable of the new word sounds like “pear” and would then visualize a large pear-shaped dog waddling down the street. Another example is when foreign learners learn the Chinese word 熊猫, they might visualize a fat and big panda in their minds.

##### ● **words mindmap**

A **mind map** is a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. Mind maps are used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid to studying and organizing information, solving problems, making decisions, and writing. Recently, mindmapping has become a very helpful means of helping learners to build word connections visually.

For instance, a teacher writes a single word in the center of the board, and ask students to brainstorm all the words they can think of that are connected with it. Every item that is suggested is written up on the board with a line connecting it to the original word, so that the end result is a “sun-ray” effect. For example, the word tree might produce something like the sketch below.



### Questions for Discussion:

- What advantages do you think that mindmaps help learners learn vocabulary?
- Apart from organizing words according to the categories they belong to, what other types of connections can be built by mindmapping?
- What do you think is the organizing principle of associating the words in the following mindmap? What implication can it have on vocabulary teaching?

### ◇ Incidental vocabulary learning: “picking up” words in the context

In the recent years, there has been an increasing awareness among researchers and language teaching practitioners that TCSL learners can *incidentally* gain knowledge of vocabulary meaning and use through text reading or listening tasks. Some researchers even claim that except for the first few thousand most common words, TCSL vocabulary is predominantly acquired incidentally.

Incidental vocabulary learning occurs all of the time when we read, listen or watch a movie. Based on the way a word is used in a text we are able to determine its meaning. Consider this example: “我抽空去看你”. While you may not know the word “抽空” you could guess that it has something to do with time. However, it should be made clear that the benefits of incidental vocabulary learning would be very slim without effective pedagogical intervention. For instance, a learner may incidentally infer the meaning of the word from the context the word occurs in a text, but he may not be able to remember exactly how the word is wrote or how it is used. There is now some evidence that a combination of attention-drawing activities, such as presenting words to learners before reading and defining words as they occur in context increases the amount of vocabulary learning, and this turns out to be an effective way to take advantages of both incidental learning and intentional learning of vocabulary.

### Conclusion

In this unit, you have learned

### Group Project

The following statements were made by second language learners when asked to describe their approaches to learning vocabulary. Ask a group of learners to write **A**(agree) or **D**(disagree) next to the statements.

1. I think learning new word is the most important part of learning another language. I don't care if I get the

*grammar wrong, as long as I have the words I need.*

*2. I try to learn five new words each day. I make lists and stick them up around my room. Every evening I spend a little time memorizing the new words and revising the ones I have learned.*

*3. I read a lot and use a dictionary. Every time I find a word I don't understand, I look it up.*

*4. You don't really need a big vocabulary. When I'm talking to people, I can usually find a way to get my message across, even if I don't have the exact word.*

*5. Chinese and English share some words, so I try to find similarities between the languages to help me remember.*

*6. I try to avoid having translations. I put new words into a sentence and then memorize the words in context.*

Now get the students to write a statement summarizing their own attitude toward the learning of the vocabulary.

Get the students to compare and discuss their responses. Tape the discussion and make a summary of the issues which emerge. What attitudes and beliefs about the learning of vocabulary are implicit in the discussion? Are you happy with these? Would you like to encourage learners to develop different/more flexible approaches? Suggest some strategies for doing this. (Nunan, 1991)