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## A VOCABULARY SOURCE: THE DORLING KINDERSLEY BIG BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE

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*O sursă în predarea vocabularului: "The Dorling Kindersley Big Book of Knowledge"*  
(Rezumat)

*In efortul nostru de a stabili un echilibru între știință și arta de a preda o limbă străină, suntem înclinați să acordăm mai multă atenție celui de-al doilea aspect: creativitatea profesorului în oferirea celor mai bune activități/exerciții și a unui mediu propice elevilor săi. Lucrarea evidențiază rolul important, în predarea limbii engleze, al activităților bazate pe materiale ce provin din viața de zi cu zi sau similare acestora. După stabilirea criteriilor folosite în alegerea vocabularului ce urmează a fi predat, lucrarea prezintă câteva tehnici folosite în predarea vocabularului. Fiecare tehnică este ilustrată de exerciții și activități menite să îmbunătățească procesul de predare și învățare.*

### **1. The Big Book of Knowledge – an enriching pedagogical material**

Most of the teachers seem to be overwhelmed by the difficulty of using materials that are not intended for the classroom. Still, dealing with authentic materials in the classroom seems to be one of the most important tenets in teaching English for Specific Purposes.

*The Big Book of Knowledge* (The Dorling Kindersley, 1994) could be considered a good possible alternative. Being a publication written in English and for English – speaking readers, its value as an authentic material is out of question. In order to demonstrate the practical importance of encyclopedia-like material I will refer to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students of intermediate level. Those who have come across such a material realized that it may have a motivational value in the classroom as we shall see further in this paper. This book consists of short passages in which the difficulty of lexical items and grammatical constructions is minimal, thus the teacher will not need a high amount of time either to prepare the lesson or to use the material. Students usually associate this type of material which includes articles about space, people in the past, science and machines, arts, people and places, transport, with entertainment and do not think of it as a didactic tool. Besides it has an attractive layout with its eye-catching pages that show pictures accompanied by explanations. Therefore students must refer to the text because most of the pictures are not self –explanatory. Let us consider as an example the steel mould (p. 448). Students will not be aware of how it works and what it is used for unless they refer to the text near the image. A first encounter with such a material will make them be curious after which they will experiment the feeling of success when they can read and understand the information from a genuine and authentic book in English.

*The Big Book of Knowledge* could also be considered an excellent source of general knowledge and global education since it covers as we have stated earlier different areas of interest, the most important of which being: Earth and Space, The Natural World, Our World, Science and Technology.

## 2. Using The Big Book of Knowledge for content

As teachers of English as a Foreign Language we all know that new proposals of films, magazines, books with didactic purposes are being publicized all the time. Still, for a given tool to be useful, it is essential for the teachers to be aware of the true potential as well as of the difficulties that may arise from using it.

The application of the criteria for selection in foreign language teaching asks for a certain content to be taught at different levels of instructions. Moreover we should also take into consideration that the foreign language topics included in the syllabus for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students at different specialisms focus on the form of the new language items, on getting new information, on specific structures, functions and expressions. In the first year they have much practice of lexis, grammar or syntax whereas in the second year students are drawn attention to comprehension and expression of the message.

Since *The Big Book of Knowledge* covers common topics such as: people, travel, places, mass media, the environment, money, transport, technology, education it can be considered a way of supporting language skills because of its input: narrating, describing, exemplifying and interpreting data. The main objective of the book is to develop communicative skills by acquiring new vocabulary, words and structures. Specific objectives should also be taken into account. Thus students should be able to recognize language items they know as well as the overall structure of a text; they should predict the information contained in the text. And last but not least they should be able to present and retrieve information, to evaluate and respond appropriately.

The very nature of this book favors its exploitation from a wider perspective. It is not a source just for teaching vocabulary but it covers such topics as: grammar, integration of skills and culture.

Let us consider the following text which can be used for teaching the passive voice (p.444):

*“Every few seconds, somewhere in the world, a brand- new car rolls off a production line and out of a car factory. Each car **is made** from raw materials, such as iron ore, sulphur and sand which **are shaped** into more than 30,000 parts. Most of the ‘jigsaw puzzle’ **is put** together on a kind of giant conveyor belt. The other pieces **will be put** by different areas of the factory. The first car which **was made** like this was the Model T Ford”.*

### 3. Teaching vocabulary

What should we choose? What would be the most appropriate material that I should use for teaching vocabulary? These are frequent questions that teachers of English for Specific Purposes come across quite often.

It is a well - known fact that vocabulary is an essential factor in learning a foreign language. As a significant part of linguistics vocabulary cannot be taught or learnt without taking into consideration the rest of the linguistic components, namely grammar, phonetics and phonology, and notions and functions.

Diverse criteria have been proposed to the rightness of the decisions on the vocabulary items to teach at every educational level.

I shall further consider the criteria proposed by Gairns and Redman (1986: 57-63):

- *Frequency*

The most frequently used words should be taught first. In the following text the underlined words could be considered frequently used words:

*“The biggest airliner today is the Boeing 747, which can carry around 500 passengers. Because of its size and powerful jet engines it is called the jumbo jet. Big planes have made flying much cheaper, and millions of people pass through the world’s airports each year.”* (p.472)

- *Students’ needs and levels*

Since the lesson itself should be appropriate to the students’ levels and it should respond to the students’ needs so should be the vocabulary. Mention should be made to the fact that the texts used for teaching vocabulary to students who study English for Specific Purposes will be different from those used for students who study English as part of the curriculum. Let us reflect on the following examples:

*“Blasted iron ore*

*A stream of iron is flowing from this huge oven, called a blast furnace. It has been burned out of iron ore by blasts of hot air.*

*Iron in, steel out: the liquid is poured into a converter. After a powerful jet of oxygen has burnt out the impurities and most of the carbon, the converter is tipped up to pour out steel”.* (p. 442).

*“Where the Vikings went*

*The Vikings roamed great distances. Merchants traveled to Russia, Persia and around the Mediterranean Sea. They traded such northern things as furs and walrus tusks for southern things such as silk and silver. Explorers sailed to Europe, Iceland, Greenland and to Newfoundland in North America. They called this Vinland”.* (p.265)

While the text about the blasted iron ore is used in teaching English for Specific Purposes because it contains words specific to metallurgic processes the other text may appear in every English textbook as part of a unit entitled *Raiders from the sea*.

- *Cultural factors*

Humans living in groups have cultures and cultures are formed to meet human needs. When talking about cultural factors we should consider the learner's background. People from different countries may need different words to express realities in the second language. *Bullfighting* is a word which is clearly understood by a Spanish student whereas a Romanian student will be at a loss.

- *Expediency*

The classroom requires specific types of vocabulary such as grammatical terminology and activity instructions as in the following examples

- *Make notes about the following;*
- *Scan the text and find out what is the topic of each paragraph;*
- *Match each definition in the right column with the concept in the left column;*
- *Find a phrase or sentence which tells you the following.*

Harmer's criteria proposed for the rightness of the decisions on the vocabulary items that are to be taught focus on the following points (1991: 154-156):

- *Criterion vs. abstraction*

On the basis of the cognitive development of each student he considers that concrete words should be taught at lower levels while abstract terms should be taught at higher levels. The following exercises are meant to develop students observation ability and to check their understanding of the text:

- *Identify the concrete words in the following text;*
- *Identify the abstract words in the text above;*
- *Fill in the following table by identifying in the text fragment concrete and abstract words.*

- *Coverage*

General words such as *metals, electricity* should be taught first before more specific words like: *alloy, coke, blast furnace or the spinning magnet, turbines, condenser* etc. This technique should be supported by exercises such as the one below in order to improve student's ability of reading for specific details:

*Scan the text and fill up the chart with the words fitting each category*

- *Rapport*

Harmer considers that some words are easier to teach and learn than others either because of the way they are spelled or because of their pronunciation. The rapport, the student's personal involvement with the word, is a major motivator for vocabulary learning. The more related a word is to the student, the sooner it should be taught. This is quite difficult because how could we possibly know which words will touch our students. Personal experience helps us decide that *confederates* will be learnt with much difficulty than *soldiers*. *Make up sentences with the following words or fill in the blanks with the missing words selected among* are good exercises to support this criterion and it also helps students develop their creativity and imagination.

#### 4. Techniques used in presenting vocabulary

The more the teacher uses a wide variety of techniques the more the students stay alert.

Some techniques following Gairns and Redman's (1986: 73-76) classification will be presented. As we shall see the long-term retention of newly-learned vocabulary is favored.

The techniques are divided into two groups: visual and verbal techniques.

##### 4.1 Visual techniques

###### ▪ *Realia*

Teaching and learning vocabulary can be made most efficient if we use a variety of real objects. Still, teaching English for Specific Purposes does not allow that because in this domain realia refers to objects such as: the lathe, the furnace, a propeller which are can't be brought in the classroom. The computer could be considered an exception. The following exercises will enable students improve their skills of oral communication: *answer the questions below: What is a computer? What are the main parts of a computer?* or *Identify in the text the words corresponding to the following definitions and write them in the boxes.*

###### ▪ *Pictures*

Showing pictures can be of great help. They have the advantage of illustrating very large objects which is difficult to bring in the classroom. Exercises such as *Look at the photograph and identify the main parts of the mould* will help students activate the "passive" vocabulary and acquire new items.

###### ▪ *Mime and gestures*

Such a technique makes use of the Total Physical Response which clearly promotes the understanding and meaningful retention of new vocabulary items. The teacher instead of giving commands such as *Stand up* or *Sit down* he/she makes the gestures corresponding to such a command. The students will carry out these "commands" while naming them. The inventory of commands move from simple to complex, from a few to many.

##### 4.2 Verbal techniques

###### ▪ *Definitions and illustrative sentences*

If the teacher introduces a word in English using other words in the same language the student is offered the advantage of contextualization. Moreover sample sentences complement the definition because they show how the new word is used. This technique should rely on exercises which will help students not only practice the vocabulary but enrich it: *match the following words with the definitions below; look up the terms and provide their definition as in the example: an X is a Y used for Z or an X can be defined as Y; identify in the text excerpts the words corresponding to the following definitions;*

###### ▪ *Synonyms and antonyms*

This is a very important technique because it helps students build up their vocabulary and it gives them the ability to use known vocabulary.

Students could be asked to read again the text previously discussed and find adjectives that mean the following.

- *Explanations*

It explains the meaning and the use of a given foreign word in the foreign language itself. It helps students enrich their vocabulary. The exercises that will best suit this technique are similar to the one presented above.

- *Translations*

Even if many linguists consider translation a bad presentation technique it may become as such if it is the only presentation technique. Translation exercises could support this technique.

The great advantage of using *The Big Book of Knowledge* is that it presents vocabulary through the use of pictures, charts, graphs and so forth. The photographs in the book no matter if they are shocking or charming they can be used by themselves or with the written text that accompanies them thus facilitating the combination of both visual and verbal techniques.

It is worth emphasizing that the teachers can simply provide students with real instances of definition and sample sentences or explanations taken from an authentic book.

Let us consider the following example taken from *The Big Book of Knowledge* (p. 420):

*“Engines and motors provide power to make things move. Motors usually run on electricity and drive small things, like hairdryers. Engines are usually more powerful and run on heat. In steam engines – the first real engines – heat boils water to make steam and the steam pushes the engine round, just as steam in a pan of boiling water pushes up the lid. Cars have ‘internal combustion’ engines. In these, the engine is pushed round by the gas produced from burning petrol inside the engine.”*

Choosing such a material encourages the use of both visual and verbal techniques such as pictures, explanations and illustrative sentences.

### **5. More Sample Activities**

The type of authentic material provides the student with an excellent chance to interact with words through the use of discovery techniques. Guessing from context is an excellent teaching tool as the vocabulary can be relevant to any passage or excerpt within the book.

- *Track the misfits*

This kind of activity is based on a combination of both visual and verbal techniques.

LEVEL: Intermediate

TIME: 15-20 minutes

PREPARATION: Choose a short passage that you think will be easy for your students. Change some of the words so that it no longer makes sense. In class you will need copies of the original passage and the changed one.

IN CLASS: Give each of the students a copy of the changed text and ask them to read it. Don't tell them what you have done to the text – let them discover it. Eventually one or more students will point out that there is something wrong. Then you ask them to make corrections. After they have done that give out the original passage.

FOLLOW-UP: In a later class: When the students have done two or three editing exercises like the one above, give them an original text and invite them to change it. Students take even more pleasure in constructing texts than in correcting them.

▪ *Vocabulary network*

It consists of a series of related items of vocabulary with a certain degree of semantic affinity. The words are related in terms of categorization from general headings to specific items contained under them.

LEVEL: Intermediate

TIME: 15-20 minutes

PREPARATION: Read the selection you have chosen carefully. Your selection will become the main heading. Select three or four subsections. Afterwards, decide on the particular vocabulary items fitting each category. Finally make a chart with both heading and subheading, leaving blanks for the rest of the items.

IN CLASS: Let the students scan through the section of *The Big Book of Knowledge* you have been working on. Give them a copy of the chart previously designed or draw it on the blackboard. State that the purpose or the task is to fill up the chart with words fitting each category by scanning through a particular section.

## 6. Conclusions

As a conclusion I would like to summarize the main points of this paper by highlighting a number of recurrent features.

First, I insisted upon the flexible nature of *The Big Book of Knowledge* for classroom practice. When I mentioned flexibility I thought of different aspects of teaching that must be taken into consideration such as levels of proficiency, teaching and learning styles materials in use, and time and length of implementation.

It is also worth pointing out that the text of the book together with its photographs, charts, or other graphical information contributes to making it easier for the students to move unreservedly through the different passages. Such materials are also a great advantage for teachers of ESP because the layout saves them much time when they have to prepare different activities: imagine how much time a lesson about the petrol engine would take to be prepared. The success of an encyclopedia – like material depends on applied activities such as: selecting the material, creating activities and evaluating materials.

Even if we talk about 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year students who study English at an intermediate level they would appreciate the enjoyable nature of such a book. To put it

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in a nutshell, the flexibility of adaptation and implementation together with the highly motivational aspects embodied in *The Big Book of Knowledge* makes an excellent tool to use in introducing authentic material into the ESP classroom. Such a book could be considered the perfect complement because it discusses a wide range of topics and it has the unquestionable advantage of being an authentic material.

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