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A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING VOCABULARY SELECTION, PRESENTATION, AND DEVELOPMENT IN EFL COURSEBOOKS

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Abstract: ***The study aims to present a comprehensive set of criteria for evaluating vocabulary in EFL coursebooks, focusing on three main aspects of this category of language content: (1) principles of vocabulary selection, integration, and presentation; (2) vocabulary practice activities; and (3) principles that promote learner autonomy in vocabulary expansion. The article provides theoretical input for developing a checklist for analysis, considering whether vocabulary is explicitly taught or integrated incidentally, the volume of lexical items introduced, and whether selection follows a principled approach to presenting structured vocabulary input. Additionally, the study examines criteria for assessing vocabulary development activities, particularly the types of decision-making and production tasks employed. Finally, it suggests criteria for assessing whether materials promote learner autonomy through strategy instruction for vocabulary development. The results are expected to contribute to a broader understanding of vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts and support a principled approach to vocabulary assessment in ELT coursebooks.***

Keywords: *EFL coursebooks, vocabulary selection criteria, presentation, practice, learner autonomy.*

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in foreign language learning, as it is essential for meaningful communication, with sustained interaction depending on a relevant and extensive range of vocabulary. The linguist David Wilkins pointed out that while grammar enables structure, it is vocabulary that truly allows for expression and understanding, and without it, nothing can be conveyed [1, p. 13]. Allan Cunningsworth adheres to the widely held view that, especially at lower levels, students can communicate more effectively using vocabulary knowledge rather than relying on grammar [2, p. 38]. For much of the 20th century, language teaching methods such as the Direct Method and the Audiolingual Method prioritized grammatical structures, limiting vocabulary teaching and learning to words that fit neatly into the lesson. The Communicative Approach of the 1970s shifted the focus, recognizing vocabulary as essential for effective communication. This led to vocabulary becoming a learning goal in its own right, with coursebooks integrating specific vocabulary activities. As Scott Thornbury notes, despite this shift, most language courses remained grammar-focused due to the perceived productivity of grammar rules in generating multiple sentences [3, p. 14]. However, the rise of the Lexical Approach, which introduced the syllabuses and recognized the importance of lexical chunks, challenged this dominance, emphasizing the role of vocabulary in fluency

and language acquisition. It questions the traditional structuralist view of language that divides it into grammar (structure) and vocabulary (words), emphasising grammatical patterns filled with restricted vocabulary. The Lexical Approach, by contrast, argues that language consists of chunks which, when combined, produce continuous coherent text. One of its core principles states, "Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalised grammar'", reinforcing the idea that grammar primarily serves to connect and refine the meanings already embedded in words [4, p. 7].

When it comes to assessing vocabulary in EFL casebooks, the following key areas of evaluation arise: principles of vocabulary selection, integration, and presentation; vocabulary practicing activities; and principles that promote learner autonomy in vocabulary expansion.

Selecting vocabulary for teaching usually is based on the criterion of level appropriateness, frequency, and usefulness. In addition, S. Thornbury lists the criteria of learnability and teachability [5, p. 34].

Aligning vocabulary selection to the learner's proficiency level is often guided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Frameworks like the English *Vocabulary Profile*, an interactive online resource, provide detailed information about the vocabulary learners know at each CEFR level (from A1 to C2), including words, phrases, idioms, and collocations used in both British and American English [6].

The criterion of *usefulness* depends whether words fulfil language use needs, *i.e.* they can be put to immediate use [7, p. 34]. The notion of *a core vocabulary* was devised to help identify useful words. Core words, according to Thornbury, share the following features: they are often used to define other words (e.g., laugh is used to define giggle and guffaw); they widely collocate (e.g., bright pairs with sun, light, idea, smile, and child, compared to radiant that has more limited collocations); they are superordinate terms (e.g., flower instead of rose or geranium); they are neutral in register (e.g., potato instead of spud or doctor instead of medical practitioner).

The Oxford Learner's Word Lists, developed with input from vocabulary experts to ensure reliability in learning and teaching, is based on extensive corpora and aligned with the CEFR. It contains the following categories: the Oxford 3000 covers the most important words for learners at A1 to B2 levels; the Oxford 5000 expands on this with an additional 2,000 words for advanced learners at B2 and C1 levels. In addition, the Oxford Phrase List provides 650 common phrases, including idioms, collocations, and multi-word expressions. The OPAL (Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon) offers specialized word lists for academic English, with separate lists for written and spoken words and phrases [8].

The relative *frequency* of a word is another key factor in determining its inclusion in a syllabus. The argument for teaching the most frequent words is based on the premise that the most frequent words express the most frequent meanings in the language [9, p. 38; 10, p. 22]. As Raquel Criado asserts, the criterion of frequency has a twofold importance in vocabulary learning, as the most frequently used words enhance communicative efficiency, while their repeated occurrence provides opportunities for practice, ultimately reinforcing retention and usage [11, p. 865]. Another reason for the importance of high frequency words is that they cover a very large proportion of the running words in spoken and written texts and occur in all kinds of uses of the language. According to P.

Nation, the common method for determining the number of high-frequency words is to analyse the text coverage provided by successive frequency ranked groups of the words [12, p. 22]. The classic list of high frequency words is Michael West's (1953) *A General Service List of English Words*, which contains 2,000 word families. About 165 word families in this list are function words such *as a, some, two, because* and *to*. The rest are content words, *i.e.* nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs [*Ibidem*]. When creating a list of high-frequency words, both their frequency and range must be analysed. *Range* is determined by assessing the number of different texts or subcorpora in which a word appears. A word with a broad range is found in many different texts or subcorpora [*Ibidem*, p. 23]. Dilenschneider and Horness [13], drawing on research by West [14], Schmitt & Schmitt [15], and Nation [16], identify the following categories:

- *High-frequency words*, typically the first 2,000 to 3,000 most common words, along with proper nouns, transparent compounds, and marginal words, make up about 90–95% of a typical text;
- *Mid-frequency words* include approximately 7,000 words beyond the first 3,000, covering the 3,000 to 9,000-word frequency range and contributing around 9% of a text;
- *Low-frequency words*, found beyond the 9,000-word level up to the 25,000th word, are more specialized and account for only 1–2% of a text.
- *Off-list words* are words beyond the 25,000-word level, along with proper nouns and other non-core vocabulary, make up around 3–4% of a typical text.

Nation's categorization of words into tokens, types, lemmas and word families has significantly contributed to refining the tools used in vocabulary analysis [17*,* p. 11-12.]. A *token* is any occurrence of a word form in a text, regardless of repetition. Each time a word appears, it counts as a separate token. A *type* refers to each unique word in a sentence or a text, counted only once, regardless of how many times it appears. A *lemma* consists of a headword and some of its inflected forms and reduced forms, belonging to the same part of speech. The English inflections consist of plural, third person singular present tense, past tense, past participle, -ing, comparative, superlative, possessive. A word family consists of a headword, its inflected forms, and its closely related derived forms. For instance, he word family for "act" might include the inflected forms *acts, acted, acting* and the derived forms *action, active, activity, activist, activation*.

Scott Thornbury includes two more factors that determine the choice of vocabulary in a syllabus: the learnability and teachability of words, mainly for beginner students. The first principle refers to how easy is for learners to acquire a particular word, often influenced by factors like its similarity to words in the learner's native language (e.g., cognates or loanwords). Teachability refers to how easily a word can be taught, often depending on whether it can be demonstrated or illustrated. Concrete nouns are generally easier to teach than abstract nouns, verbs, and adverbs [18, p. 35].

Vocabulary in coursebooks is incorporated in three main ways:

- in segregated vocabulary sections;
- integrated into text-based activities;
- incidentally, as in grammar explanations and exercises, task instructions etc. [Ibidem].

In segregated vocabulary lists, vocabulary input is often presented in lexical sets featuring clear *semantic relationships* with one another, such as synonyms, hyponyms, and opposites, part to the whole, or *situational relationships* – word sets associated with particular situations [*Ibidem,* p. 37]. This type of vocabulary presentation, according to Thornbury, seems to reflect the way words are stored in the mind and clarify meanings through different semantic relations. Additionally, words in the same set fit more easily into grammar structures. However, evidence suggests that words too closely related can interfere with each other, hindering learning, as words filling the same sentence slot can often be confused [*Ibidem*].

Vocabulary integrated into text-based activities is generally realized through pre-teaching lexis before reception or production tasks. Words chosen for pre-teaching are usually unfamiliar yet essential for completing the task. However, not all unfamiliar words need to be pre-taught; teachers often decide based on their knowledge of the students. Sometimes coursebooks specify particular words for pre-teaching [*Ibidem*, p. 40]. Allan Cunningsworth claims that the presentation of new vocabulary in meaningful contexts, *i.e.* in association with visuals, or in a text, has the built-in advantage of encountering words in non-linguistic (visual) or linguistic (text) contexts that clarifies the meaning or encourage students to deduce the meaning of unknown lexis based on contextual and other clues, therefore fostering effective communicative strategies. Also, the author maintains that the amount of the new vocabulary in a text should not exceed five percent of the total to ensure a manageable learning load. The process is supported by enough familiar words that provide context for the learners to deduce the meanings of new words more effectively [19, p. 102].

The next important criterion in the analysis of vocabulary in the EFL coursebooks is the nature of *vocabulary practising activities aimed at ensuring memorability*. For vocabulary retention and recall to occur, new words must be integrated into the learner's existing mental lexicon. Drawing on neurological and psychological studies, Raquel Criado and Aquilino Sánchez list three basic conditions that help vocabulary transition from short-term into long-term memory (I) rehearsal or repetitive practice and activation, (II) drawing attention to specific data, and (III) associating new data with already consolidated information [20, p. 864]. In terms of vocabulary practice activities or exercises, teachers and teaching materials must meet conditions to guarantee vocabulary retention. These include providing opportunities for multiple repetition of the presented vocabulary items and engaging learners in "deep" cognitive or affective operations, such as being taken apart and put back together again, comparing, combining, sorting, visualizing, and repeatedly recalling the words. Thornbury prefers the term of *integration activities* for these operations, as it emphasises the cognitive aspect of vocabulary acquisition [21, p. 93]. The range of activities suggested by the author contain a varying degree of cognitive processing that contribute to committing vocabulary to memory and are roughly arranged in an order from the least cognitively demanding to most demanding:

- Identifying – finding vocabulary in written or audio input;
- Selecting – recognising words and making choices about them;
- Matching – recognising words and pairing them with a visual representation, a translation, a synonym, an antonym, a definition, a collocate;

- Sorting – involve grouping words into different categories;
- Ranking and sequencing – putting words into a specific order, e.g., a cline of preference or importance [*Ibidem*, p. 93-98].

These are decision-making tasks and are mainly receptive, where learners make operations about the words without necessarily producing them. On the contrary, productive tasks, such as completion of sentences and texts and creation of sentences and texts require learners to use newly learned words in speaking or writing [*Ibidem*, p. 100]. Allan Cunningsworth underscores the importance of vocabulary development activities that sensitise learners to the structure of the English lexicon and the different relationships that exist within it: *semantic relations*, *situational relationships*, *collocations*, and *relationships of form*, referred to as *word building* [22, p. 38].

The final criterion for the analysis of vocabulary activities in coursebooks is whether material enables students to expand their word stock independently by helping them to develop their own learning strategies for vocabulary building [*Ibidem*, p. 41]. P. Nation suggests the following strategies for vocabulary learning [23, p. 355-356]:

- Analysing word parts: Awareness of the word parts, i.e. affixes and stems, help learners connect related words, confirm guess from context, strengthen form and meaning connections, and even deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- Consulting a reference source: formal sources, such as dictionaries, glossaries, lists, concordances.
- Using parallels with other languages: when encountering unknown vocabulary, similarity of its various aspects to patterns and items the learner already knows from their first language, second language, or other languages, reduce the learning burden, with the most conspicuous similarities found in cognates.
- Using context: drawing on contextual clues and prior knowledge to infer the meaning of unknown words.

To conclude, the evaluation of vocabulary selection and integration criteria include the following: frequency, and range, with high-frequency words being prioritized for their broad application and retention, learnability, and teachability. Vocabulary can be incorporated into coursebooks in diverse ways – segregated lists, integrated into text-based activities, or incidentally through grammar explanations or tasks instructions.

Vocabulary activities that ensure retention must meet key conditions such as repetition, focused attention, and meaningful associations with existing knowledge. Cognitive tasks – matching, sorting, and sequencing – promote deeper processing, while productive tasks – sentence or text creation – ensure that learners actively use and reinforce their new vocabulary. Moreover, activities should also encourage learners to explore the relationships between words, such as collocations and semantic connections, developing a deeper understanding of the language structure.

An essential criterion for evaluating vocabulary activities in the EFL coursebooks is whether they promote learner agency in vocabulary expansion by equipping students with adequate strategies, such as analysing word parts to understand affixes and stems, consulting dictionaries or corpora, drawing parallels with other known languages to reduce the cognitive load, and using context to infer meanings.

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