Chapter 7

From Lexis to Discourse:
A Five-Stage Pedagogy for ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Any exercise of structuring written or spoken discourse starts from Lexis, the most basic unit of communication. We may call it the initiator of discourse. Despite considerable efforts made towards developing the word power of the ESL learners, they face difficulty in using the vocabulary appropriately in a variety of socio-cultural contexts in which they are required to operate. The present chapter attempts to demonstrate how this five-stage pedagogy will enhance learner's ability to make use of the available lexical items in authentic situations so as to produce meaningful discourse. The proposed pedagogy is the result of our experiment with authentic sample of students and language exercises. The five-stage pedagogy comprises the following stages:

INTRODUCTION

Learning of a language is essentially the learning of meanings. According to Halliday (1978), language being the product of social interaction gets developed in a person's life through a continuing interchange of meanings with people around (p. 1). Many linguists have strongly recommended that greater and more systematic attention be paid to 'lexis' as against 'syntax' to enhance learner's competence to use English

for actual communication. Widdowson (1989), observes that communicative competence is a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns and not a matter of knowing rules (p.135). He pleads for generative rules that promote the use of lexis disregarding regulative and subservient rules. According to Sinclair and Renouf (1988), focusing on lexis while teaching has several advantages (p.155). The language teachers can primarily emphasize the common usage of language, important meanings and patterns for words which are frequently used. In addition, the teachers can motivate learners to make maximum use of the repertoire of words that they are already in possession of. Willis (1990) also endorses the view that learners should explore language from the concrete lexis rather than focus on abstract grammatical rules.

In order to reinforce the meaning of newly learned words, the teacher should create opportunities in the class to use the new words in a variety of socio-cultural contexts, and conduct exercises providing new connotations, associations and so on (Hunt & Beglar, 1998). The following activity is oriented to develop ESL learner's ability to develop their skills to use language creatively in various contexts by training them to use their lexis to construct meaningful discourses. This activity can be administered to ESL learners of any age, from any background having reasonable knowledge of English. The activity intended to achieve this goal can be conducted in five stages as described below.

5 STAGES OF THE SUGGESTED PEDAGOGY

Stage-1

Each student is asked to think of five words, preferably, from the categories of main verbs, adverbs and adjectives and write them down in their notebooks / note pads. They must be instructed to avoid names of people, places, things and pet animals. The students should be called one by one to write their set of words on the black /white board in the classroom. On an average, if the strength of the class is of forty students, we shall have a collection of 200 words. Out of these 200 words approximately fifty words may be estimated to be repetitive which may be removed from the list. At this stage, we thus get 150 words contributed by the students. Some words may be new for some students. The meaning of these new words may be explained in the classroom thereby enhancing the vocabulary of those learners who are not familiar with these words. Now the learners are to be guided to make good creative use of this word bank.

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