
PEDAGOGY

Topical Interview to Motivate Medical Vocabulary Intake

S. Danilina

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv
Corresponding author. E-mail: sv.danilina@gmail.com

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Abstract. The article discusses the potential of language- and content-focused reading input for the acquisition of new medical vocabulary by Iranian students of English. An authentic interview with the prominent oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee has been selected as a source of vocabulary to be acquired mostly in an intentional way, with some lexical items also learnt incidentally, as a by-product of a content-focused activity, which was expected to interest the students both by its up-to-date medical content, as well as by the interviewee's engaging English.

Keywords: *ESP, vocabulary intake, content-focused reading, incidental and intentional learning.*

Introduction. The previous year of studies at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv saw numerous Iranian students who were planning to enter a newly created Department of Medicine. Before taking entrance exams though, the students had a course of studies at the Preparatory Department, taking several disciplines taught to them in English and a course of the English language itself, which consisted of General English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Although ESP has been defined by many scholars, broadly it can mean "learning English to be used in specific fields related to labour market, such as science, nursing, technology, and business" [6, p. 113]. Teaching vocabulary in the ESP classroom can turn out rather boring, even more so when it comes to medical terminology, which involves long lists of names of diseases, parts of body and skeleton, symptoms, etc. To liven up medical ESP classroom teachers are bound to come up with a variety of communicative activities, i.e. pair- and group-work, roleplay, case study, project-based methodology, etc. This article will discuss the possibilities of using an authentic text in ESP medical classroom of Iranian students who are going to specialize in medical science.

A brief overview of relevant publications. As Esfandiari and Hezari maintain, "Most foreign language learners are aware that the achievement of vocabulary is a central and important component in the course of their learning process. A great command of word knowledge is essential for EFL/ESL learners, particularly for advanced learners of English for specific purposes (ESP)" [3, p. 94]. Because students have to gain command of various kinds of vocabulary, it is helpful for them to familiarise themselves with particular strategies to retain new vocabulary. The authors argued that understanding the structural form of ESP vocabulary and deducing the meaning of a word in the texts are the most important characteristics of the vocabulary learning strategy [3].

They also referred to Nattinger, who suggested that "different techniques for memorizing words include mnemonic devices, with the help of which a person can remember things, loci (methods of memorising information by placing each item to be remembered along an imaginary journey), and the use of word association, helping recall new vocabulary". Nattinger also pointed out that cognitive processing can be enhanced through

three ways of vocabulary learning: situational, semantic, and metaphor sets [3, p.95].

Numerous recent studies on ESP vocabulary acquisition have urged researchers to concentrate more on integrating new digital tools into the teaching process. In her article on fostering the vocabulary breadth of Iranian students, Fatemeh Behjat quoted a number of scholars who focused their research on supplementing traditional ESP instruction with the use of the internet. For example, Motteram concluded that the Internet could enable the traditional classrooms to be connected to the real world, whereas Trajanovic, Domazet and Mistic-Ilic highlighted that by applying the combination of pedagogical insights and modern technologies available on the net, it is possible to realize a successful foreign language learning course [1, p. 1756]. To compensate for the lack of communication with the native speakers, Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė reported learners "positive attitudes toward using eportfolios to learn ESP and thus foster sustainable lifelong learning". Similarly in Iran, Fazeli compared the result of teaching ESP materials through traditional text – with Web-based instruction [6, p. 113].

Apart from all these suggested solutions, studies and theories have attempted to explain the role of memory on vocabulary retention. It is a widely acknowledged fact that forgetting is part of retrieving information from memory, according to Lewis. Due to that and as mentioned earlier, much attention has been paid to techniques that help learners remember lexis encountered in course materials as well as improve the rate of vocabulary retention. Saudi Arabian scholars Madini and Alshaikhi refer to the studies which documented the effect of word repetition on recycling vocabulary. For example, Heidari-Shahreza & Tavakoli and Chang "examined learning vocabulary through repetition. The studies revealed repeating vocabulary increased the possibility of learning them and reducing the possibility of forgetting them. Chang further claimed that it is beneficial to expose words in context and repeat them as that triggers the short term memory to focus on meaning – making and eventually storing words in long-term memory" [6, p. 114].

Thus, the **purpose of this article** is to discuss how successful was a combination of factors labeled beneficial for the ESP classroom for the acquisition of medical vocabulary terms by a group of Iranian students. The lesson

in question combined the use of an authentic text, traditional reading based tasks with web enhanced learning, guessing the words from context, dictionary work, repetition, recycling and checking retention in the next lesson.

Description of the main material. An interesting feature of working with Iranian students is their responsiveness to traditional learning methods, e.g. doing grammar exercises or looking up unknown words in a dictionary, and their overall reluctance to engage in communicative activities. This may be caused by the adherence of Iranian secondary and higher school to traditional grammar-translation methods of studying and domination of deductive learning. This observation is indirectly supported by Iranian scholar Avandz, who suggests that there is a significant relationship between using translation and reading comprehension for Iranian ESP students. The result of his study “was indicative of the effective role of translation and, accordingly, the necessity of emphasizing the contribution of the mother tongue to teaching of ESP materials” [1, p. 1756]. Although the use of mother tongue in ESP can be justified because much of ESP terminology will have direct equivalents in learners’ L1, which in turn can facilitate understanding, the use of Farsi in this particular classroom was limited solely to the interaction between students. Fatemeh Behjat further quotes Carter and Nunan, who maintained that first and foremost “students should enjoy authentic, self-directed and purposeful materials” [1, p. 1756].

The distinctive feature of using authentic materials in class is its emphasis on the interpretation of the language sample, with students being as a rule more interested in the content of the presented text than in the language forms available in it. This refers to the language acquisition theory by Stephen Krashen who stresses the importance of the interest that learners have primarily in the content, rather than the form, of the text, which prevents them from consciously concentrating on language forms and thus ‘acquire’ a foreign language subconsciously [5].

The group for which the authentic interview below was chosen is that of sixteen students of preparatory department, all of whom have reached level B1+/B2 according to CEFR. From the point of view of understanding key language expressions used in the article, their linguistic competences were quite sufficient. The reason for selecting this text was to assist students in preparing for their oral exam that they were going to take at the end of the course. They were supposed to come up with a monologue on one of the proposed topics which had to do with both general English topics and particular medical subjects.

Since ESP beginnings, it has been maintained that one of essential factors affecting the success of ESP instruction is proper learner’s needs and interests analysis, and the teachers and institutions ability to tailor their courses to these needs. This idea is supported by Serbian professor Savka Blagojevic, who emphasizes that, in order to properly select an authentic text for the ESP classroom, it is necessary, first, to undertake several analyses, namely: “1. The needs analysis of students’ particular academic discipline, which includes students’ both actual and anticipated needs, adjusted to the general and specific objectives of an ESP course; 2. The analysis of students’ prior knowledge of a language; 3. The analysis of students’

prior knowledge of a discipline” [2, p.120].

Although the accepted approach to ESP at the university is a competency based method which includes conducting needs analysis at the start of each academic year, the students of preparatory department were not subjected to the survey, probably because their needs are obvious, primarily, they need to be able to learn their non English-related disciplines through EMI and be able to communicate their medicine related interests to interlocutors, and secondly, be able to comprehend medicine related literature and articles.

The interview with prominent oncologist and writer Siddhartha Mukherjee has been selected as a source of topical vocabulary primarily for the ESP class due to the urgency of oncology for today’s medical discourse, but also because of the charisma and incontestable gift of word of Mukherjee, a brilliant ivy league graduate, acclaimed scientist, and now also a writer, whose book *The Emperor of All Maladies* has won the Pulitzer prize for non-fiction. The original interview can be accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/04/siddhartha-mukherjee-talk-about-cancer>. For the purposes of an 80-minute English class, the original text had to be shortened down to about 700 words.

The above factors definitely stirred up students’ interest in the text, which benefits the intake of vocabulary without conscious concentration on this retention but rather as a by-product of their involvement with the interview. Quoting S. Krashen, “optimal input focusses the acquirer on the message and not on form” [5, p. 66].

In his research devoted specifically to the uptake of medical vocabulary, Khan mentions that numerous English, Greek and Latin borrowings can constitute difficulties for learners, along with difficult word-structure and lack of opportunities to practise medical terms [4]. Aimed at arising general interest in the topic and being easily accessible for wide public, the interview in question does not represent a variety of complex medical terms nor does it abound in difficult words, therefore it was assessed as appropriate for the level of the students, who, before this course of studies, had not had any specialised instruction either in English or in medicine.

As a lead-in activity, which would fuel the learners’ interest in the topic, the class were asked to predict if they believed stress generally led to oncological conditions (to which the absolute majority said it did), and what they thought was the doctor’s recommendation on prevention of cancer (the answers were “don’t overwork, eat organic food, do exercise, stop smoking”). After that the students had to read the article for detail – checking if their assumptions had been correct and also underlining the words which inhibited understanding of the text and failed to be guessed from the context.

After reading the article and the discussion of the findings on the doctor’s comments, the students revealed what lexis turned out problematic for them. Among the words which needed further explanation were: *haunted* (by fears), *obsession* (of today’s oncology), *hereditary* (causes of diseases), *pre-eminent* (message of the book), *spirital* (sense).

The idioms and collocations ‘to have one’s plate full’, ‘a silver bullet that could cure all diseases’, ‘to do smb a disservice’, ‘more power to smb’ were discussed.

The article was also scanned for the words and collocations that could be useful for the learners when talking, inter alia, about the current strategies of treating oncological conditions, a topic that they had to give a presentation on in their forthcoming exam (these lexical items were then in the focus of vocabulary retention activities): *Focus on hereditary causes, cancer causing viruses, cure a disease, different types of treatment, positive mental attitude, chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, immune system gets depressed, to be affected by smth, prevent cancer, spontaneous remission, recognize patterns, chronic relapsing cancer, miracle substances.*

Based on the findings of Nguyen and Boers, "The use of newly learned words in output tasks is also included as a desirable feature of vocabulary learning activities" because it requires retrieval of the new words from memory, which improves their retention. Particularly valuable for retention is "the generative use of newly learned words" when learners attempt to use them in their own contexts [7, p. 8]. Thus, the first instance of the newly learnt vocabulary output occurred right after the introduction to the new lexical items: the Sts were asked to look at the new words for two minutes, then close their notebooks and reproduce as many items as they could remember. No one managed to reproduce all of the items, three champions failed to remember two items. When asked what strategies the students applied to remember the words, some said they formed mental associations with the vocabulary, while others just said "they told themselves to remember the words, and did so".

The further application of the discussed vocabulary was its use in the students' written texts which would form a basis of their exam presentations. One of the proposed spoken topics was 'Current developments in oncology', under which the learners mainly chose to concentrate on cell therapy approach to the treatment, when T-lymphocytes are first extracted from a patient's body, then specifically 'trained' to fight the patient's type of tumour, and then returned to their body to overcome the disease. The learners were welcome to send in their spoken topics to get my feedback on possible improvements of their texts. Among those students who sent their topics

for my feedback, all of them used at least some of the discussed vocabulary items. The most popular expressions were *cure a disease, different types of treatment, positive mental attitude, chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, immune system gets depressed, to be affected by smth.* Obviously, the choice had to do with the theme of their monologues in the exam.

The next instance of revisiting the lexis was in the next lesson, when the students were asked to do a quick vocabulary quiz, with me giving them explanations of the words in English and asking them for the English language equivalents. Four students from the class managed to remember all the 15 expressions and the 4 idiomatic expressions. Predictably, the four students who were able to remember all the lexical items were among those who had used the newly acquired vocabulary in their writing task. Minimum remembered items were seven.

Conclusions. To sum up, an authentic text (in this case, a newspaper interview) can be a valuable source of lexical items which learners could further use in the texts of their own. Various strategies of drawing the students' attention to the vocabulary in question could stimulate noticing of new lexical items and enhance the consciousness of learning, which results in better retention of the material and the use of the learnt material in practice. According to scholars Nguyen and Boers, productive use of the target words "was found to bring about the best vocabulary gain" [7, p. 6]. It has been proved that several instances of vocabulary revisiting fostered its retention, and those students who used new lexical items generatively in texts of their own transferred them from their short-term into their long-term memory, which was proved by recalling the items in the next English class one week later.

Further research can be connected with deeper examination of content-focused activities and the incidental retention of vocabulary which is not given special focus to in the lesson. Ways of modifying texts could be investigated that could boost and facilitate vocabulary intake from reading, as well as the usefulness of various output tasks to stimulate intake.

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