Vocabulary gap-fills: from testing ______ teaching – Philip Kerr

Philip Kerr is a teacher trainer and materials writer with over 30 years of experience in ELT. He lives in Vienna where he is part of the team that has developed the Oxford English Vocabulary Trainer. He joins us today to explore the ________ of gap-fills.

The potential of gap-fills

When it comes to vocabulary learning, gap-fills are everywhere. But do they have a place in communicative language learning? They are often criticised for being boring and for promoting only a passive knowledge of words. It is not unreasonable to see them as better suited to testing than to teaching. Research, however, may cause us to rethink.

Learning new words involves a degree of memorisation. For new words to be stored in their long-term memories, learners will need to be exposed to them many times. The best-known way of making this possible is through the use of flashcards. Flashcards work best when they are used with increasing intervals of time between each period of study (i.e. one hour later, then one day later, the one week later, etc.). This is known as spaced repetition.

We also know that this kind of memorisation works best when learners are not simply given words and their definitions or translations, but have to generate the word they are trying to remember. The most usual way of doing this is to get them to fill in gaps.

The value of gap-fills, then, is greatest when they are used repeatedly, and not just once. Unfashionable though it is, repeated practice testing is known to work¹. In vocabulary learning, a gap-fill repeated a number of times is likely to lead to more learning in the same amount of time than a more creative or imaginative exercise, such as getting students to make up sentences including the target word².

Exploiting gap-fills

I’m not suggesting, of course, that teachers simply ask their students to do gap-fill exercises again and again. That really would be too dull! The exercises need to be rewritten so that the target words are presented in new contexts. This approach is taken by the Oxford English Vocabulary Trainer, a vocabulary learning app which uses spaced repetition and gap-fills. But for teachers and students who are not using technology like this, there are a number of simple things that can be done. Here are a few suggestions:

- After completing a gap-fill exercise, tell the students to translate it into their own language. Collect in these translations, and, in a subsequent lesson, get the students to translate them back into English.
- Return to a gap-fill exercise some time after the students have already done it, and give it to them this time orally.
- Select a gap-fill that the students have already done. Write it on the board (it doesn’t matter if your writing is not very legible). Tell the students that their task is to memorise all the sentences and, to do this, they must read the sentences aloud, in order and repeatedly.

¹ Dunlosky, J. et al. 2013. ‘Improving Students’ Learning With Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions From Cognitive and Educational Psychology’ Psychological Science in the Public Interest Vol. 14 No. 1 pp. 4-58
² Folse, K. 2006. ‘The Effect of Type of Written Exercise on L2 Vocabulary Retention’ TESOL Quarterly Vol. 40 No. 2 pp.273 – 293
After about a minute, begin making more or less random swipes across the board with the board cleaner. All the time, the students should continue memorising / reading aloud. Continue making swipes with the cleaner until very little of the exercise is still visible.

- Select four or five gap-fills that the students have already done. Write the page numbers of these exercises on the board and give the students an impossibly short time limit (for example, five minutes) to do as many of these tasks as they can. (You’ll need to make sure that the answers are not still written in their books.) The activity should be managed as a game: who can complete the most items?
- Select two or more gap-fill exercises that the students have already done and return to them some time later. With different students working on different exercises, get them to copy out the exercises on sheets of paper, but tell them to gap different words from the original. Ideally, they should gap collocating words or dependent prepositions. The papers are then passed around the classroom to be completed.

**Gap-fills and feedback**

As with any language learning activity, learners will benefit from getting feedback\(^3\) – not just on what was right or wrong, but why incorrect answers were incorrect. And, after getting this feedback but without being given the correct answer, they will benefit from having another attempt. Vocabulary mistakes broadly fall into four categories: meaning (the word that students have entered in the gap does not have the meaning that is needed), grammar (students have found the right base form of the missing word, but have used singular instead of plural, the wrong tense or the wrong part of speech), spelling, and word choice (students have entered a word which does not collocate with other words in the sentence).

The *Oxford English Vocabulary Trainer* provides this feedback automatically in the form of a butterfly, where the size of the wings indicates where the learner has had a problem. It would be useful for teachers who are not using technology in class to collect in gap-fill work that students have done, from time to time, and provide feedback of a similar kind, perhaps using the same four categories.

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