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On acquiring new vocabulary of a professional text

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Abstract

The paper is focused to teaching professional German. The introductory part of the paper shortly indicates the differences between the methods of acquiring vocabulary at secondary school and at university. A student's personality, his interest and motivation, but also the school's syllabus and its standard claims have an important significance here. The focus of the paper is in the description of the requiring process. Its method are mentioned and explained in detail. A component of this process is the choice of a suitable text. Such a text is a basis of further work in increasing vocabulary oriented to a certain science branch, to economics in this case. The texts are source materials for finding out new words, their looking up at a dictionary, for making notes of them, memorizing them and keeping in memory. The final part of the paper is devoted to testing new vocabulary and to the forms of such testing.

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1. Introduction

Teacher's personality plays the deciding role by acquiring new vocabulary in a foreign language teaching process at a basic and secondary school. The teacher usually uses a textbook and decides on the number of words that a student should learn in the time from one lesson to the next one. He determines the way of noting down new words and he tests the measure of acquiring. The stylistic field serving as source materials of new words is the common language needed to speak about ordinary daily themes.

2. On acquiring new vocabulary of a professional text

The situation at university is quite different. The student usually continues studying the same foreign language that he had been taught at the secondary school. He knows its basic grammar system and has some knowledge of its vocabulary. But now he studies the foreign language typical for the study field he had chosen. He extends his knowledge of its grammar, he refines his communication skills, but first and foremost he improves the vocabulary of a certain professional sphere. But nobody usually decides on the extent of this new vocabulary, on the form of its noting down, nobody tests it in regular time segments. The decisive factor in all of this is the student himself. He

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makes slow or rapid progress always in accordance with his interest, his time possibilities and his needs. He had chosen a certain scientific discipline in which he wants to work in the future. For a better assertion in it he feels not only a necessity of mastering its professional extent, but also a need to meet foreign experts and to gain new knowledge via the literature printed in a foreign language.

Sometimes he is led not only by his interest and his needs, but also by the program of university and the syllabus of the relevant study branch, because a certain level of one foreign language is prescribed as a condition for graduating from the faculty. Such an extent of mastering the language, a combination of necessity and interest are the determining factors deciding the student's attitude to the foreign language studies.

The already mentioned combination of necessity and interest charge the student with some restrictions. We want to indicate them as far as they are connected with school teaching process only. We do not turn our attention to the student's self studies, to his attending a foreign language course or reading foreign professional magazines. What a student often sees as his duty, a teacher holds to be his responsibility. Our responsibility for example, is to teach students of different disciplines professional German. We will illustrate our following explanation of some facts from our experience in teaching professional German of economics.

The student must have respect not only for entrance language materials selected by the tutor, but also for his methods, the time schedule of proceeding with these materials, for sporadic testing of his activity and work with the materials. These activities include both the level and extent of newly taught vocabulary. On the other hand the student might of course use his teacher's help and advice. He is being influenced by his criticism, but also by his encouragement and often – not being aware of it – even by his attitude to the language as a school subject.

On the second place, however, we must mention also an inanimate counselor and helper, very useful and important precisely by studying new vocabulary. It is a good dictionary comprising pronunciation, word's stress, grammatical characteristics of the relevant word and its collocation expressions. As far as German is concerned we consider to be necessary the following data: By substantives: gender, type of declension, form of genitive singular, form of plural, function and meaning of the word as a formant in compound expressions. For adjectives irregularities in their comparison. For verbs their government, their separable and inseparable prefixes, the forms of irregular verbs. For prepositions their case. For conjunctions their syntactic functions.

The grammar characteristics of each entry makes possible to use the relevant word as an active component of vocabulary both in spoken and in written modes of expression. Using a dictionary in the course of the passive mastering of a new word is a little complicated. We can speak here about two variants. Students should realize in connection with both of them, that they cannot master either the whole vocabulary of a foreign language or even its professional part.

What should a student do? Meeting a new word he should first of all try to estimate its function and meaning in the said sentence, in the broader context, in connection with other professional information. Then, consulting the dictionary, he should make sure of the accuracy of his estimation and if his estimation is adequate, he should not work at the word any more, but he should turn his attention to the word, if his estimation of it turns out as incorrect. The teacher should explain his students this proceeding and guide them to it.

The second variant has its connection with deepening student's study of his professional branch. It may happen, and it is even very probable, that a new expression contains quite a new piece of information and the student meets such a word for the first time. Then it is necessary to consult a dictionary. The student needs to know not only the mother tongue equivalent of the word, but also its meaning and function if the new word is by chance a new and important term. In such a case a monolingual dictionary may be more suitable and sometimes the teacher's help is almost necessary.

We must of course have in mind that if we use even a very good contemporary dictionary, there will always be some delay behind the tide of the new information that students get in their lectures or in seminars. The lecturers teaching in them are aware of such situations and find the solution to them by offering their students the parallels of key terms in the language they study at the faculty. Analogously behave some editorial staffs of professional magazines. All these facts influence the teacher's choice of language source materials he presents to students. In them he takes his careful notice first of all on terms and key words, but he turns his attention also to the style of language specimens, for example the length of sentences, frequency and kind of clauses important in German

because of their word order. He sometimes adapts the text didactically, but he mentions this fact in a short remark behind the copied text.

Before we will deal with the proper selection of new words from the relevant text we want to mention two spheres of knowledge important for every student. First he should know that a secondary sentence element following a noun used to be mostly an adjective or a prepositional phrase, a verb may be accompanied by a noun, an adverb or by a prepositional phrase, a relative clause may be connected by a relative pronoun or an adverb, but sometimes also by a mere article, a student should recognize such expressions in a text. Secondly, even at the beginning of his professional studies every student should have certain knowledge of the relevant professional field and its language. We mention here that it is a personal matter of a student. A teacher teaches professional language not a professional subject.

To make the work on the selected text easier, its presented copy should have enough blank space allowing students to make clear and legible notes written to the text. Or it may be printed not in full-length lines. In this case there is a coherent vertical column on the page, at least on quarter of the page of free space, that can be used for annotated remarks. Both arrangements have their advantages, but more advantageous seems to be the second one.

By the selection of words we want to work on we turn our attention to the expressions occurring in more than one meanings, building some of their forms irregularly or are parts of set phrases. In addition as specific of German are articles and cases after some prepositions.

The choice of new words to be explained begins with a solid acquaintance with the text. Even by reading the text for the first time, the student turns his attention to unknown words, he may mark them (he underlines them for instance), he tries to understand the text at least approximately. He reads the whole text first. Finding out a word used repeatedly he estimates it as a key word. Sometimes it is not a key word in the professional field but only a key word from the point of view of understanding the text. The student notes down all contexts of its usage and he tries to estimate its meanings. They can be a bit different in separate contexts. After consulting it in his dictionary he writes its Czech equivalent or meaning explained. He puts down also the meanings in that the word is used as a component of a compound term and he writes also other words with which the word is used repeatedly. Analogically he proceeds with words, that do not repeat but that seem to be important for understanding the sentence, not of course for its possible literal translation. He can for example leave out a noun or verb if they do not form a term just made by those two words or a set phrase. It is suitable to maintain this procedure. Our experience shows that after a “declassification” of individual words from the point of view of understanding important, we can often manage to estimate correctly also the meaning of other words used in the same sentence. After reading the whole text we have material of remarks and annotations and some lexical units repeated in it. This material is a basis for proper, usually shorter and more organized notes. Students are used to write them into a small notebook. Such a notebook may be satisfactory at a basic or secondary school, but it is not suitable for older students at universities. Much better is a bigger notebook in which at least three lines may be devoted to each entry. We count on its more permanent usage. And possible synonyms, autonyms, collocations, compound words, segments of sentences will gradually increase and fill out the blank lines.

Another way of putting down new words are recording register cards. They are of a smaller size, easily portable, you can put them in your pocket, you can extend their number, you can arrange them in alphabetical order. If we use them, we put down a word, its meaning, at least its short grammatical meaning, sometimes the whole phrase, collocation words. Also an entry of a short example clause illustrating the usage of the word in its basic meaning may be rewarding for further work with the vocabulary gained. The words used in collocations (even with words already acquired) in clause segments etc. can be memorized more easily and kept in mind better and for longer time.

The science didactic literature sometimes recommends also such set of cards where one is devoted for example to names of colors, animals, foods, other one again to names of sports, plays, games, to expression concerning weather and things like that. But at work with a professional text in German concerned with economics are more suitable cards of another type, for example the cards with lists of compounds with the back formant -bilanz, -kredit, -deposit etc.

Students sometimes make also mere lists of new words written on separate sheets and they use them when they memorize the words. Such lists should not be done mechanically. New words should not be arranged in the same order in which they occur in the given text. Experience and experiments say that when memorizing we always remember very easily the words from the beginning of a list. It is suitable to put at the beginning the words they seem the most difficult. We sometimes make the sequences of words with the same endings or with the same back formant of compounds. We are able to remember more easily the words arranged in groups than the isolated words.

So far we have spoken about putting down professional vocabulary. It is of course obvious that the same is true with customary vocabulary. We mention this fact, because we often meet extent passages of a very good professional text with a minimal number of professional terms. It is paradoxical, that if one has good knowledge of a field of science, he may read and understand a text from this branch much more easily than a text of a contemporary fiction. Our experience speaks also about another important fact: A student has meticulous lists of new vocabulary, but very low level of mastering them. Memorizing of new vocabulary is of course the basic condition of its promulgation. That is why we devote our further explanation just to this fact. We want to formulate it as certain recommendations. It turns out to be a failure to proceed to memorizing only then when the list of new words are too long. We take for much better way to work at several lexical units only at the same time. It is quite unreasonable to continue making new lists of words and have only fixed idea that we will learn them – one day. In case when the list of new words is very numerous it is suitable to divide it into two or even three parts and to study them separately. It proves even successful to insert another activity between studying two parts of a word list, for example to work with computer, to study another subject, read newspaper etc. The first encounter with a new word is usually a visual one. If a student works with the relevant text at home, not for example in a reading room, he should accompany his putting down new word with its pronunciation, even with a several times repeated one.

If a student takes registered word for an element of his passive vocabulary, it is enough if he remembers its meaning. But if a new word should be an element of student's active vocabulary, it is suitable to remember also its grammar meaning and function. We cannot guess if the relevant word will be an active or passive element of our vocabulary. We therefore prefer putting down also the grammatical characteristics of the word not to have to search later. We remember better the words with the given Czech equivalent than the expressions with their meanings explained in German.

We may find out if a word has not stayed in our memory during putting the list of words down already. If one or two words came into our mind, it is a success. If a student gets used to this proceeding, at the same time he gets used to work attentively already in this phase of acquisition of new vocabulary. We proceed from the foreign expressions to their Czech equivalents. We practise the opposite progress of self-control not until in the next phase of acquisition.

Just from the beginning we try to make and put down a collocation or a very short clause with the new word which is an element of our active vocabulary. We can make for instance a collocation of an adjective and a noun with an obvious gender of the substantive, a collocation of a noun with an irregular verb in the past simple, a collocation of a noun and an adjective built from the participle of an irregular strong verb, a collocation with a prepositional phrase with correct form of the noun. It is usually not necessary to put down the Czech equivalents of such example texts if the relevant meaning is written down with the basic word.

It is purposeful to try recollecting the context in which the relevant word is used for the first time or to find out the context and recall the incorporation of the word into the clause. It is important to see the new word in the context of other words already known again. This progress might appear as an impractical and lengthy one to a student, but he will soon convince that it is rewarding even with regard to time.

We always memorize using the visual picture and the acoustic sensation of a word. We pronounce the memorized expression, we mention also its orthographic form. If we do not know which memory type we belong to, it is rewarding to pronounce and put down the memorized expressions at the same time. And even in this case it is not about a loss of time. We used to be surprised how effective this progress is.

To keep a word in our memory we must recur to it in a way. It should always happen sooner than the process of forgetting begins. It is probably not possible to determine in general a time dispersion from a memory acquisition to the first return to mastered words. Everybody must test his memory himself. We for instance have come to the

conclusion, that the interval of a week is too long for us. And we always recommend the interval no longer than four days also to our students.

It is useful to agree with the tutor the form of testing new vocabulary. In all probability it will be not the check of isolated words as it is used at secondary schools, but of the usage of the relevant word in a specific context, or a translation from Czech into German. We apply in practice the first kind of checking.

The tutor does not influence the increasing of student's professional vocabulary by the choice of suitable text only, he appeals to it also in other ways. He presents for instance his students isolated sentences with relevant themes instead of a coherent professional text. The student has to supply the missing professional words left out in the sentences. This progress is very supportive, especially if the tutor observes two rules: The first refers to the form of the task. At the beginning of an application of this method we present the clauses with one omitted professional term only. The second refers to the course of the teaching process.

We distribute the set of sentences to students for their home preparation. They have to supply the missing professional words in accordance with a dictionary. Only then we use some of the sentences in the lesson as the check of their preparation. It means that we do not begin this proceeding with a checking that would force students to an approximate estimate only and therefore it would augur their failure. The basic variant of this proceeding can be a list of sentences to which we offer a number of expressions. The students pick out the most suitable one after consulting it with a dictionary. At the same time he might record the relevant word into his copybook or the register card.

The purposeful variant in this case is the choice of sentences formulated in such a way that the expression which the student has to supply shall stand at the final position of a clause. The common German clause formulated in explanatory style has its crown – if it is not a subordinate clause – its content centre just in the last word. The mentioned forms of testing may have the form of a multiple choice. The preposition of its usage, however, is sound teacher's knowledge of the relevant scientific branch, in this case of economics.

Newly acquired vocabulary can be tested also by the task in which students give the equivalents or explain shortly the German terms. We use the variant with mere equivalents when we test compound words. In such words we test not only the meaning of the basic formant of the word but also knowledge of its other elements. The more difficult form of this task is in the test in which we demand the short explanation of the relevant term by means of a subordinate clause. In this case we test not only the knowledge of the relevant word but also some knowledge of function of conjunctions and the word order of the relevant subordinate clause.

A certain crown of the test is the paraphrase of the initial text or of a certain part of it. We demand explicitly to use at least the basic newly acquired professional terms.

3. Conclusion

A component of the process of Acquiring Vocabulary is the choice of a suitable text. Such a text is a basis of further work in increasing vocabulary oriented to a certain science branch, to economics in this case. The texts are source materials for finding out new words, their looking up at a dictionary, for making notes of them, memorizing them and keeping in memory.

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