Dear Parents,
Your teacher asked me to write to you because there seems to be a modern misconception that good principles of modern foreign language teaching encourage your child’s teacher to purposefully neglect to provide you with a list of vocabulary and grammar items that your child can study at home. You teacher is often asked “which grammar should my child know, which vocabulary?”

Just because language aims are not spelled out in terms of structures and words does not mean that these structures and words are not there, otherwise volumes of respectable academic literature (Babylonia 4/08) would not be dedicated to these topics! Moreover, the new curriculum does provide some suggestions for vocabulary and structures, but generally, how well you know a language is generally more and more defined by what you can DO in a language and this links more to reading, writing, speaking and listening. Grammar and vocabulary fall under the skills.

Let’s take a concrete but openly formulated example from the inter-cantonal curriculum and a corresponding descriptor from the European Language Portfolio II at Common European Framework Level of A1.2: „Die Lernenden können über ihre Vorlieben Auskunft geben” or “Ich kann andere darüber informieren, was ich mag und was ich nicht mag (z.B. in Bezug auf Sport, Musik, Schule, Farben)”. It seems that whoever made these descriptors has hidden the vocabulary and grammar away – where are they? Let’s take a closer look!

Child A says: “I liking hockey, swimming and baseball” (first choice Seasons).
Child B says “My favorite animals are bears and dogs.” (first choice Animals)
Child C says “English is no fun”. 
Child D says “Fish smell horrible.” (first choice Senses)
Child E says “I love Easter. I hate Halloween”. (first choice, One World, Many People)

Without overanalyzing the above utterances, you will see that all five children have demonstrated possible achievement the level of A1.2 (you might need a bit more input to decide officially). Though not all grammatically correct, all utterances are comprehensible (a native speaker would understand or would only have to ask once for repetition).

However, what you see are four different contexts. Within these contexts, there are different words used (animals, adjectives, sports). The four different grammar structures could be used interchangeably in the four different contexts.

You see that Child A made a grammatical mistake. Teaching the structure does not ensure that a child will master the structure, especially the first time around. However, the descriptor is successfully demonstrated though within the descriptor you can also analyze the range of structures and words, the accuracy of the structures and words, the pronunciation and the task achievement. It could be that Child A has achieved the lower end of A1.2.

If your other child is in upper-primary and has started with Explorers, you will also see that vocabulary and grammar are assessed in speaking and writing. Obviously if a child didn’t understand something or understood incorrectly in the listening and reading tests, then vocabulary and grammar played a role.
The only thing the official curriculum can do is to SUGGEST structures and vocabulary but why should these be set in stone? Your child’s teacher needs you to trust in her that she can work flexibly in different topics to make contexts relevant to your child and the entire class. She needs you to see language not as a list of vocabulary and grammar items that are to be memorized and drilled, but that a good range of structures and words support your child’s ability to read, write, speak and listen to a language.

So let’s end with a bit of food for thought:

If this is the era of post-methodology, why can’t we cater to the needs of the learners within the contexts appropriate to a certain class? If a child learns to say “I love bananas. I hate apples” in the context of food, because that class enjoys food, and another child in another class learns to say “My favorite sport is hockey” because that class is an athletic class, then what’s the big deal? Your child will certainly learn the structure “My favorite… is …” because that will appear in another context at another point in the upcoming years. There ARE clear guidelines through the curriculum, through the descriptors, through the textbooks and through the various assessment means and vocabulary and grammar are a part of them.

Do we need to stop teachers from teaching “My most preferred source of entertainment happens to be spending my Sunday afternoons hiking in the lovely forests around Rafz”? No! Your teacher has some common sense and can set language goals based on the class’s needs, the descriptors in the official curriculum and based on what textbook she is working in.

There is so much to learn – why limit it to lists? There’s nothing wrong with defining language goals with vocabulary and grammar lists but this is a bit rigid and encourages drilling language (which has its role, too) and limits creativity. Moreover, it doesn’t guarantee a certain standard. Defining contexts first or defining what a learner should be able to DO in a language tends to take the needs of the learners a bit more into consideration, includes vocabulary and grammar, but does not place them in the forefront.

Why do things have to be spelled out clearly – language is not black and white? Would you like your child to be in a class where every child says “I like bears and dogs” because those are the language goals? Perhaps your child is afraid of dogs! Let language live lively and let language goals be flexible!

References
Achermann, B. and Sprague, K. Explorers series. Lehrmittelverlag des Kantons Zürich, Switzerland.
Andrew Littlejohn and Helgrid Hammesfahr Schofield. First Choice series.
Lehrmittelverlag des Kantons Zürich, Switzerland.