Word Walls and Temples

Strategies for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

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Anecdote 1

Jenny, a colleague of mine, was teaching a class in which a Buddhist monk was one of the students. In one particular lesson, students were learning parts of the body. Jenny pointed to the side of the head—the hollow near the eye—and asked, "Does anyone know what this is called?" When she explained that it was called the temple, the monk's eyes lit up. After all, he had spent most of his life in temples. From that point onward, whenever Jenny reviewed the vocabulary from the course, the monk, unlike his classmates, always got this word right.

The moral of the story? A personal connection with words is extremely useful for helping students remember vocabulary.

Anecdote 2

During a lesson, I asked a question about a grammar point. Seeing the students hesitating, I said, "Take your time." To my surprise, I noticed one student writing this expression down. A few days later, I was searching for this same student's homework in the staff room. As I became increasingly panicked because I'd lost her essay, she said to me, "Take your time." I was delighted.

The moral of the story? Students don't always learn what we teach. I hadn't intended to teach, "Take your time." Even though I was teaching grammar, however, the expression somehow "clicked" with the student, and she remembered it.

The second moral? Expressions that use a combination of simple words *that our students already know*, such as "Take your time," "Take a break," "Work it out," and "Keep it up," help improve our students' vocabulary tremendously, and are probably more useful than longer, less common words they'll rarely, if ever, need.

The anecdotes made me increasingly aware that learning vocabulary is more complex than I had previously imagined. The more I delved into the topic, the more complicated and fascinating it became. I learned memorization techniques, and that seven is the magic number when it comes to the limits of most people's memory capacity.

I also became aware of how words operate together and that certain combinations do not always translate among different languages. In Japanese, for example, the verb *drink* not only collocates with water and beer, but also with smoking and tablets. I learned the vital difference between receptive vocabulary (the words students recognize) and productive vocabulary (the words students can use at will). As a teacher and serial language learner, I am constantly trying to discover what makes a word both teachable and learnable.

Here we will look at three stages connected with teaching and learning vocabulary: the presentation of words, the ways of recording them, and the ways of reviewing them.

Presentation of vocabulary

First, the words we teach need to appear in clear contexts. The context should be either familiar or memorable, and preferably both. Someone recently told me about a teacher in the 1960s who used to radically change his classroom according to what the lesson was. If the subject of the day was food, he would hang sausages from the ceiling and place fruit, bread, and cheese around the room. The lesson culminated in everybody eating the *realia*. Naturally, no one expects us to go to these lengths, but the students found his lessons and the vocabulary he presented unforgettable.

Presentation of new words should also include something visual. If we are teaching *elephant*, the word is obviously easier to draw than to explain. But visual representation of more difficult concepts might also be possible if the teacher thinks creatively. The use of *under* in idiomatic expressions, for example—*under the thumb, under the weather*, and *under pressure*—can be illustrated with simple line drawings.

After presenting the word, we need to make sure the students understand the concept, something that is usually done by asking gist questions. Then we need to make sure they can get their tongues around the pronunciation of the word, first in isolation and then in connected speech. The pronunciation factor is particularly relevant for words that look very different from the way they actually sound, such as *vegetable* and *psychologist*. And, of course, there are also tricky combinations of letters such as *ough* as found in *cough, through, though, plough,* and *rough*, none of which rhyme. Getting students to say the words is also useful because they are more likely to recognize vocabulary that is known both to their mouths and to their ears.

Once our students understand the meaning of the word and can say it, we need to get them to do something with it, such as put it in a sentence and personalize it. The more the students mentally process the new word, the more likely they are to recognize it (reception) and use it (production) as necessary. Personalizing vocabulary can be achieved simply by instructing the students to write a true sentence about themselves using the target words. After the words have been presented, the students need to record them.

Recording vocabulary

I am going to assume, perhaps wrongly, that the students have vocabulary notebooks. As linguist Michael Lewis once pointed out, students' notebooks tend to look like cemeteries: everything in them is black and white and in straight lines; things go in their allotted places, and they never come out again. We should sometimes encourage students to record vocabulary in non-linear ways, using mind maps or spidergrams, and to employ color and illustrations. If the target word is *big*, for example, instruct the students to write it in **BIG** letters. If the target word is *messy*, ask them to write it messily: **M**e**S**sy. The brain does not necessarily work in straight lines and in black and white; it uses images and color as triggers for memory. Language students should do the same as they note new words.

So, what do the students write in their notebooks? Essentially, they need lots of information about the words. They should write:

- A definition.
- Maybe a translation.
- Word stress. They can show this by underlining the stressed syllable, which is pronounced longer, louder, and at a slightly higher pitch than the other syllables.

- Words in the same family. Remember the phrase "one word is six words." Teaching word families (happy, happily, happiness, etc.) is a great way to raise awareness of the way English works, and it gives students added vocabulary "for free."
- Collocation, or which words go with the target word (i.e., *make a mess, listen to music, happy birthday*, etc., as opposed to *do a mess, listen the music,* and *merry birthday*).
- A personalized sentence (see "Presentation of Vocabulary" section).

With all of these elements recorded, students have the basic information they need to learn the word. Now they need to use it.

Reviewing vocabulary

I always train my students to observe The One Rule, which isn't really a rule at all, but a tip. It states that they need to review new vocabulary one hour after they've encountered it, then one day later, then one week later, etc. Some studies estimate that students need to hear, see, or use the new word a minimum of six times before it is acquired. What can we, as teachers, do to help our students review new words?

1. Vocabulary Box

Write the new words on small cards. Keep the cards in a box. Then in pairs, the students regularly take a pile and test each other on the meaning or spelling of the words, or put the words into lexical groups (furniture, mammals, adjectives, etc.). By the end of the semester, they will have learned hundreds of new words.

2. Word Wall

Again, write the new words on cards, but this time, stick the cards on a poster on the wall. Then, either the students or the teacher can choose the items. Once the students become familiar with the words from one specific unit, the class begins a new poster. The visibility of the words encourages students to use them.

3. Revision Games

(1) Backs to the Board: One student in a group of three or four sits with his or her back to the board. The teacher writes the word to be reviewed. The other students in the group describe the word, without using it, until the student with his or her back to the board has guessed it. Then the rest of the students take turns having their backs to the board.

(2) STOP: In groups, the students copy the chart of categories to be reviewed, as shown:

animals	body parts	adjectives	jobs	food	clothes

The teacher says a letter of the alphabet (in the example below, the letter is s). Then, the students complete each column with a word beginning with that letter.

animals	body parts	adjectives	jobs	food	clothes
snake	shoulder	stupid	secretary	sandwich	sweater

After the students in the group finish, together they shout, "STOP!" and win one point for completing the chart first.

Conclusion

There is no magic solution to learning vocabulary because people learn differently. Over the years, students have tried numerous techniques. Spending a few minutes each day reviewing new words and attempting to use them in spoken and written English are ways that work for many language learners. Some students, however, have stuck notes, with words in English, all over their homes. Others have arranged for recordings of the new words to play at night while they are sleeping. Still others have attempted to memorize whole dictionaries (a student once commented that "it's a good book but it changes topic too often," though this story may be apocryphal). Students need to find what works for them. As language teachers, we need to let them know the options, constantly encourage them through activities and games, and point out opportunities to use the new words. The rest is up to them.

Further Reading

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