Techniques for Teaching Vocabulary

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Because of requests for help with teaching vocabulary from teachers in several different countries, we have been on the lookout for material in this field. So the arrival of two articles from different parts of the world seemed most opportune. One, this article, was written by an English-teaching specialist from New Zealand now on a teaching assignment in Indonesia. The other, "Vocabulary Building," by James W. Fox, is the work of an English-teaching specialist from Canada. The geographical spread of the requests and the sources of these two articles attest to the wide interest in this aspect of TESL/TEFL. We are happy to bring you these ideas of well-qualified colleagues, in order that you may weigh their suggestions and test them for possible help in your own work—or, perhaps, take exception to them. If the latter should be the case, write and tell us what procedures you have found most effective for teaching vocabulary.

The first point to make in connection with teaching vocabulary is one that most teachers take for granted today: that the meanings of words must be taught *in context*—not from lists of unrelated words. For they realize that the meaning of many words can change according to their use in particular sentences and particular contexts. And they are primarily interested in presenting words to their learners as vehicles for relaying information and ideas. In other words, for communicating in the new language. But, recognizing and following this basic approach, a teacher will often find that some word will not "stick" in the minds of the learners without extra effort on the part of the teacher to help them along. The techniques suggested here are for selective and appropriate use when such situations arise—not for teaching lists of words.

When we teach a word we must teach three things: (1) We must teach the shape, or form, of the word. (2) We must teach the meaning of the word. (3) And we must teach that the form and the meaning of the word go together. So, if we teach *a fork*, we must teach the learner to recognize or produce the word *fork*; we must teach him what a fork is; and we must teach him that the sound or shape of *a fork* and the meaning of the shape go together.

Let us look at the techniques for teaching each of these three aspects of a word. After that, we will consider techniques for adding interest to the teaching. Then, hopefully, by combining ideas from these various parts in ways suitable to your own situation, you can develop some new and interesting techniques for teaching vocabulary.

TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING

teaching the form of a word

We can teach the shape, or form, of a word in many different ways. Here are some ways in which we can help the learner perceive the word by means of three separate senses:

Visually —by showing the written form of the word
—by showing the mouth movements involved in saying the word
—by showing hand movements that draw the letters of the word in the air
—by showing wooden or plastic letters that spell the word

Tactilely (meaning the learners use their sense of touch)
—by using letters made of wood, cardboard, sandpaper, and so on, so the learners can feel the shapes of the letters that make up the word
—by using a system of writing like braille (the writing for the blind)
—by writing the word, letter by letter, on the learner's hand

Aurally —by saying the word
—by producing the word in morse code or some other aural code

teaching the meaning of a word

Here are ways in which we can help the learner understand the meaning of a word by using different approaches:

Demonstration—by showing an object or a cutout figure
—by gestures
—by performing an action

Pictures —by using photographs, blackboard drawings, illustrations cut from magazines or newspapers

ETForum (1974) 12,3: 18-21

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Explanation —by description
—by giving synonyms or opposites
—by putting the word into a defining context
—by translating

helping the learner connect form and meaning

We can help the learner connect the form of a word with its meaning by presenting the form and meaning together, so that the learner knows they are connected to each other—and this knowledge is firmly implanted in his automatic responses.

Techniques for Creating Interest

Unless there is some challenge, the learner may not be interested enough in learning new vocabulary to give his full attention and enthusiasm to the task. Without interest, he will not pay attention to the teaching. We can add challenge and interest to the teaching by:

1. Making it difficult for the learner to get the form of the word.
2. Making it difficult for the learner to get the meaning of the word.
3. Making it difficult for the learner to connect the meaning and the form.

Making it difficult, as I use the phrase here, means that the teacher does not give the "answer" (form, meaning, or form-plus-meaning) directly to the learner. He forces the learner to guess, or to follow clues by the teacher or found in his own previous knowledge. Thus he must use his reasoning and interpretative abilities to find the answer. In other words, the teacher and the learners play games. The teacher must be careful to see that he makes the job difficult enough to challenge the learners but not so difficult that they give up. Instead, he should help them toward a sense of achievement—a feeling of having won the game.

Let's consider ways to make the three aspects of learning a word (as listed above) difficult for the learners—to provide challenges that are real but are not so difficult as to discourage the learners:

1. We can add interest and challenge to the teaching (and learning) of the *form* of a word by:

a) Altering the arrangement of a word—for example, by scrambling the letters or writing the word upside down or right to left. When the teacher uses scrambled letters, he can write the letters (out of order) on the blackboard and ask the learners in turn to guess the first letter by pointing to it, then the second letter, and so on. Or he can say the word and ask the learners in turn to put the letters written on the board in the right order by using the pronunciation as a guide.

b) Making it difficult for the learner to identify the parts of a word—for example, by writing them in code, or by teaching the form tactilely without allowing the learner to look, or by saying the word without letting the learner see the teacher's mouth.

c) Making it necessary for the learner to choose the form from among other possible choices. The most common example of this tactic is requiring the learner to find words in a passage that match the set of meanings given at the end of the passage. The teacher can make this exercise easier by putting the meanings in the same order as the words appear in the passage—or harder by mixing up the order. He can make it easier by providing a dash for each letter in the word, right by the meaning. Or easier still by giving the first letter of the word and a dash for each remaining letter. Another way is to write many words on the blackboard. Then as the teacher quickly says one of the words written on the board, a learner must point to the proper word. To be most effective, this procedure must be carried out with rapid-fire speed.

2. We can add interest and challenge to the teaching of the *meaning* of a word by making it difficult for the learner to identify the meaning. For example, when the teacher uses real objects, he can wrap them in tissue paper or cover them with a cloth and let the learner guess what the object is by feeling it or simply by contemplating its disguised appearance. Or the teacher can have the learners close their eyes while he taps the object or hits it

against the desk, and the students guess what the object is by listening to the sound it makes. If the form of the word is also new, the teacher should repeat it many times during the activities, with the learners indicating what they think the meaning is by pointing, drawing, or translating.

When the teacher uses demonstration to teach the meaning, he can perform a given action in such a way as to be slightly ambiguous, and the learners guess in turn what the meaning is. Later the teacher checks by asking the learners to translate the new word into the mother tongue.

When he uses drawings, the teacher might draw a series of dots on the blackboard and invite the learners in turn to connect the dots up in such a way as to make a picture of what the word means. The teacher might make this game easier by numbering the dots or by telling the student who is performing at the board when he has made a correct connection. He might refine this game by letting the individual learner draw one line at a time—and continuing to draw only as long as he draws each succeeding line correctly. When the teacher uses cutout figures, the learner can be blindfolded as he tries to identify the cutouts.

When the teacher uses verbal explanations, he can employ many of the techniques used to introduce interest when teaching the form of the word. For example, he can write the meaning (synonyms, opposites, synonyms in the mother tongue, a description) in code or with scrambled letters. Or he can omit some of the letters of the words in the meaning. Another useful and adaptable technique is the game "What Is It?" Here the teacher gives clues about the word he is teaching, but he makes sure that the first clues are general enough to force the learners to think hard. Here is an example. The teacher is dealing with the word *refrigerator,* which the learners do not know yet. He says (and note that he uses the word in *each* clue):

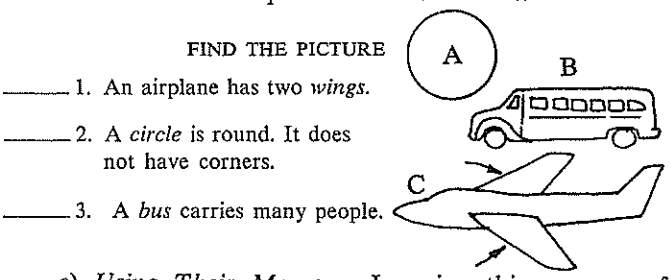
A refrigerator is useful.
A refrigerator is big.
A refrigerator is usually white.
A refrigerator has a door.
A refrigerator uses electricity.
It is cold in a refrigerator.
A refrigerator makes ice.
People put food in a refrigerator.

(The teacher uses the word *refrigerator* many times during the presentation of clues. When the teacher is keeping the meaning away from the learners, he should repeat the form of the word as much as possible.) The teacher asks the learners to raise their hands when they think they can translate the word they are working on into the mother tongue, or when they are able to draw or to point to a picture of the object indicated by a word.

3. We can add interest to teaching the connection between the form and the meaning of a word by asking the learners to match the form and the meaning from several possible choices by:

a) Guessing. For example, the teacher might show about 12 objects or pictures. He then says the name of one of the objects, and a learner points to the objects one by one until he points to the correct one. If the teacher wants to make a game of it, he can declare the learner who points to the correct object in the fewest tries the winner of the game.

b) Following Clues. For example, the teacher provides the learners with a list of words and a list of meanings. Each word on the list is connected to its meaning by a wiggly line. But the wiggly lines cross each other in such a way that it is not so easy to follow a line from the word to the meaning—but it can be done. Another type of matching up word and meaning uses several pictures and several sentences containing underlined words. Using the clues provided by the sentences, the learner must match the underlined words with the pictures. Here is a short example. Usually this exercise in matching should contain about 20 or more pictures and sentences.



c) Using Their Memory. In using this process, of course, the teacher will be reviewing and reinforcing words that the learners have had before. He can, for example, use a multiple-choice test, or he can ask the learners to match meanings in one column with words in another column. These would be examples of teaching by testing.

There are other general ways of introducing interest. One important way is to make the learners use their powers of observation and memory. "Kim's Game" is a good example of this. It is used for practicing words that have already been introduced. The teacher gives the learners a one-minute glimpse of about 15 objects or pictures whose names they know. Then he covers the objects or puts them away. The learners must write or say the names of as many of the objects as they can remember. In another version of "Kim's Game," the teacher uncovers about 15 words that he has previously written on the blackboard. After one minute, he covers the words again. Then he asks the learners to write the words in their notebooks in the same order in which they appeared on

the blackboard. This gives practice with the forms of the words.

Putting time-pressure on the students is one way of arousing interest. "Kim's Game" uses this technique effectively, as the learners have only one minute to look at the words. Using the spur of time-pressure, the teacher can make a simple job such as copying new words in their notebook more interesting by telling the learners that they have only 30 seconds to do it in.

TEACHING A SAMPLE WORD

1. The teacher writes *h r s u b* on the blackboard. He says *brush* several times, and the learners try to write the word by unscrambling the letters. They do not know the meaning yet.

2. The teacher shows a chart with about 12 drawings on it—one of which is a brush. He says *a brush* several times while one learner comes to the front and tries to guess, by pointing, which picture is a brush. When he points to a wrong picture, the teacher just repeats *a brush.* When he points to the correct picture, the teacher says, "Yes, a brush." He repeats this process with several other individuals until each one points to the correct picture on the first try.

3. On another day, the teacher brings to class a brush, in his pocket or wrapped in a piece of paper. He asks the learners to guess what he has.

4. On another day, the teacher tells a story—a story that has the word *brush* in it. When he reaches this word, the teacher does not say the word aloud, but just moves his mouth to shape the word without saying it. The learners must read his lips to get the word. When a learner can read the word, he says it aloud.

Another way to handle this supply-the-word technique is to write on the blackboard a dash for each letter in the word: _____. The teacher then repeats the sentence that contains the word *brush*—again without saying the word. If no one in the class provides the word, the teacher writes *h* on the last dash: ____h. Then he writes *s*, then *u*, working backward, until someone is able to provide the word. Another way is for the teacher to write *brush* in the air with his finger.

5. The teacher asks some learners to come to the front. He blindfolds them. Then he hands the blindfolded students several objects one by one, one of which is a brush. By feeling the objects, the learners must find the brush.

6. The teacher plays "What Is It?" He says:

We use it every day.
We hold it in our hand.
It is not good to sit on it.
It cleans our shoes.
It cleans our teeth.

When a learner thinks he knows what the word is, he raises his hand.

7. The class plays "Kim's Game." A brush is one of the objects or one of the words.

8. The teacher or one of the students (who has been selected and prepared beforehand) asks, "What is in my hand?" There is really nothing in his hand—but he pretends to brush his shoes, or brush his hair, or brush his teeth, until someone guesses the word. If the learners are still not sure about the form of the word, the teacher writes several words, including *brush,* on the blackboard. The learners choose their answer from this list.

9. The teacher has some wooden or plastic or cardboard letters. He blindfolds a few learners. The teacher spells out *brush* with the letters and asks the blindfolded students to "read" the word by feeling the letters. When a blindfolded student thinks he has read the word, he must choose a brush from a group of objects—still blindfolded, of course—to demonstrate he has read the word correctly. For many activities of this sort, the teacher can divide the class into teams.

10. The class has a reading passage in which the word *brush* appears. When the class completes reading the passage, the teacher gives several meanings or shows several pictures or objects. The learners must find the word in the passage that corresponds to the meaning thus demonstrated.

Can you think of other ways in which to fix the word *brush* firmly in the minds of learners?

In teaching vocabulary, the following considerations are highly important: The learners must be interested and must make an effort to understand. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide a variety of activities that will keep the learners interested and will help them understand. The teacher should also provide frequent spaced-out repetition, to reinforce the learning process and to fix the new vocabulary firmly in the minds of the learners.

I close by pointing out that the techniques suggested here are not intended to occupy a major portion of any class period.

The suggestions are rather for selective and appropriate use when the situation calls for making clear the meaning or form of a word that for some reason or another the learners have trouble grasping.

I hope that this presentation of a wide variety of techniques for teaching vocabulary will help you to select and use an effective technique for a particular purpose when you need it in the course of your teaching. ■