

Incorporating interactive vocabulary activities into reading classes

IN MANY SCHOOLS STUDENTS DO NOT HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE intensive vocabulary-building classes. Vocabulary learning is usually incorporated into other classes, especially reading. In these classes, words may be defined only in passing or students may engage in more traditional individual exercises such as filling in blanks or matching words and definitions.

According to Boyd Zimmerman (1997), these activities are not enough for effective word learning. She describes a study she did which indicated that interactive and communicative vocabulary activities can lead to better word learning. Students in the study had a separate vocabulary class that met three hours per week and used a vocabulary-building textbook. Students also read self-selected and assigned reading passages and engaged in activities that required them to use the vocabulary words they were learning while interacting with one another. These students performed significantly better on a posttest than students in a control group.

The purpose of this article is to encourage teachers to incorporate interactive vocabulary activities into their reading classes. It also discusses ways to help students understand the complexities of vocabulary learning.

Assumptions and parameters

Boyd Zimmerman (1997:122) outlines three important assumptions of her study:

1. Word learning is a complex task.
2. Some word learning occurs incidentally as a result of context-rich activities such as reading.
3. Word knowledge involves a range of skills, and word learning is facilitated by approaches that provide varied experiences (i.e., with reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

The first assumption is important for teachers to acknowledge and for students to understand. Students realize the important role vocabulary acquisition plays in all aspects of their language learning, but few have really thought about what it means to learn a vocabulary item. On the student information sheet that our students fill out at the beginning of the semester, we typically ask our high-intermediate and advanced students how many words they think the class should learn each week. Answers typically range from 10 to 200 words. The next class period, we spend time brainstorming together about what it means to learn a vocabulary word. We ask them, "How do you know when you've really learned a word?" Once they think about it, they usually identify all the major aspects of word learning: part of speech, pronunciation, meaning(s), register, connotations, spelling, grammatical usage, context, and so forth. After our discussion, we again ask them how many words they think they can learn each week. Usually the students revise their estimate to a more realistic level.

The second assumption relates to the source of vocabulary items. In our reading classes, we do not always use separate vocabulary builders. Instead, the words on our vocabulary lists come from the context of the reading passages and discussions about them. Words that are new for all or most students make the vocabulary lists. At lower levels, teachers may fill in a set to complete the list. For example, if the word *senior* is used in an article about colleges, a teacher may add the words *freshman*, *sophomore*, and *junior* to complete the set. At upper levels, teachers may add words that are opposites or are close in meaning; for instance, if *covert* comes up in an article, *overt* might be added.

The third assumption is that learning will be enhanced by giving students various types of activities with the words. It is not enough to do just one activity with a word. Students must learn about the words in a variety of interactive ways.

Boyd Zimmerman's study (1997:125) set out the following parameters for teachers who would design the interactive vocabulary lessons. In her subjects' special vocabulary classes, each lesson was to include the following:

1. multiple exposures to words;
2. exposures to words in meaningful contexts;
3. rich and varied information about each word;
4. establishment of ties between instructed words, student experience, and prior knowledge; and
5. active participation by students in the learning process.

While reading teachers may not have time to include all of these elements in a single lesson, keeping them in mind can help in creating interactive lessons. For example, using a computer search of a newspaper or magazine on the Internet can yield a word used in several contexts. Students can often learn much about a word's usage from seeing it in various contexts. This activity would cover both parameters one and two. Parameter five is particularly important to keep in mind; the students must be active, not passive, learners.

Interactive vocabulary activities

Interactive vocabulary activities can be designed to fulfill any of the following purposes:

- a. Exposure (our interpretation of Boyd Zimmerman's concept of clarifying "word meaning and illustrate appropriate usage")
- b. Expansion (our interpretation of her concept of "using the appropriate word form in context")
- c. Expression (our interpretation of the concept of demonstrating "word knowledge in either oral or written original expression using the target words")

While each of the three purposes should be covered at each level of language proficiency, the proportion of class time spent on activities for each purpose will vary according to the level of the students. We have found that at

beginning levels, we tend to spend more time clarifying the meaning or exposing students to the words and refining usage. At the intermediate level, we spend a lot of time refining and expanding as well as expressing the word. At the high-intermediate and advanced levels, we find students can work on the first two purposes more independently, and this allows more opportunities for them to practice expressing themselves using the target words in class. For each level we will present activities which relate to each of the purposes above.

Beginning-level exercises and activities

At the beginning levels of language and vocabulary acquisition, we address the problems of English language learners with very limited vocabularies—perhaps recognition of only 100 to 200 English words and, often, production control of far fewer words. Leaving aside the difficulties of defining precisely what it means to know a word, we realize that recognition of even 800 to 1,000 English words limits students to the reading of simple, usually adapted materials. For students at these very beginning levels of language and vocabulary instruction, recognition of and exposure to English words are critical. Thus, many of the vocabulary activities we recommend focus on beginners.

1 Discrete Point Recognition of Differences (Exposure)

One very basic exercise is to train students to spot differences between words that are similar in appearance but often radically different in terms of grammar and/or meaning. Often, elementary readers do not notice these distinctions and are processing (or trying to process) text using the wrong semantic element. The teacher should anticipate these difficulties and make students aware of the micro-level at which they must initially process these items.

Exercise

Directions: Cross out the word that is different:

1. dairy dairy daily dairy
2. butter better better better
3. quite quite quite quiet

While the initial exercise is usually done in writing, the simple act of checking answers in class can provide an oral production exercise that also helps students associate what they see with what they hear.

2 Semantic Framing (Exposure/Expansion/Expression)

At the lowest levels of vocabulary instruction, we feel it is also important to provide a semantic frame for vocabulary words that are part of a larger schema. Some examples of these are levels of education (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior; primary, secondary, undergraduate, graduate), foods (meats, vegetables, fruits) or kinds of books (reference, fiction, nonfiction). Again, because we are presupposing that, for the most part, students do not have these completed frames, the first task of the teacher is to provide them. This presentation can also form the basis for further practice or testing.

Exercise A

<i>Animal</i>	<i>Meat (general)</i>	<i>Meat (specific)</i>
Pig	Pork	bacon, ham, sausage
Cow	Beef	hamburger
Chicken	Chicken or Poultry	
Duck	Duck or Poultry	
Turkey	Turkey or Poultry	
Sheep	Mutton	
Lamb	Lamb	

In this example, the teacher has discretion in whether she chooses to introduce *poultry* or even *drumstick*, *thigh*, or *wing*. But the student starts to see a system as well as the refinement of some basic vocabulary items, such as using *pork* instead of *pig*. The following exercise can help beginning students practice what they've just learned. Students can explain why they have chosen to eliminate the word they did. For example, in number one below, beef is not an animal but a kind of meat.

Exercise B

Directions: Cross out the word that doesn't belong in the same group.

1. pig chicken beef sheep
2. bacon ham sausage pig
3. elementary junior freshman senior

While our focus is still on recognition at the elementary levels, a teacher can do a simple production exercise, again using a chart.

Exercise C

Directions: Fill in the missing spaces on the following chart:

Grade Levels in American Education			
freshman	_____	_____	senior
Primary Colors			
red	_____	_____	_____

It should be noted that in a framing exercise such as this, not only the vocabulary is being emphasized but also the ways in which items can be organized. Teachers should be prepared for alternate configurations and the students' explanations for why they see the system as they do.

3 Grammatical Charting of New Word Forms (Expansion)

Along similar lines, making grammatical distinctions among vocabulary items at the lowest levels is also a useful reading and vocabulary skill. Teaching students to use their rudimentary knowledge of a word to extrapolate to a word family is a valuable skill. Many students recognize and understand the word *different* but are unaware of the verb *differ*. Many textbooks attempt to treat this issue in one of two ways. Often, the text will provide a part-of-speech chart, and ask the student to complete the chart, such as the following:

Exercise A

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
difference	_____	national	_____

Sometimes, especially in highly contrived texts, the reading actually contains all (or most) of these word forms, but more often, it does not. Without a reading context from which to draw these items, the student is usually left to dictionary work, which may or may not be successful at this level. The texts may attempt to teach students to generate these forms from their knowledge of suffixes.

At the beginning levels of English language instruction, we prefer that students keep a running chart of new words based on previously learned vocabulary and complete the chart as they actually encounter these new forms. This focus on recognition in natural occurrences has two advantages. It helps students learn word forms by allowing them repeated exposure over time. It also prevents the problem of over generalizing, for example, looking too long for the adjective form of *disappear* or generating *friendly* as an adverb. Production of words may be most appropriate for intermediate or advanced levels of students who are more familiar with the morphological forms.

As lower-level students gain an appreciation of new words and the families they belong to, it may be useful to have students

produce sentences, initially in writing, which highlight their understanding of the different parts.

Exercise B

Directions: Write short sentences, using each of the following words. Use only one of the words in each sentence.

<i>n.</i> happiness	<i>n.</i> friend	<i>n.</i> diet
<i>adj.</i> happy	<i>adj.</i> friendly	<i>v.</i> diet
<i>adv.</i> happily		<i>adj.</i> dietary

Note that an exercise like this has several advantages. It demonstrates that not all word families have the same members, that is, there is not always an adjective or adverb form. Also, even at this simple level, students can be exposed to some of the irregularities of English. For instance, *-ly* is not exclusively an adverbial ending, and sometimes the noun and verb or the noun and adjective are the same. By providing the appropriate form, the teacher keeps the student from the over generalizing errors noted above. It should also be noted here that in the example above, discretion has been exercised in not introducing *befriend* at the elementary level. This is a judgment call and is completely within the teacher's purview as the most knowledgeable assessor of her own students' abilities.

4 Oral Production (Expression)

Finally, at all levels but especially at the elementary level, helping students make the connections between how new words appear and how they sound is an important part of vocabulary instruction. While we are not advocating pronunciation exercises per se as part of the reading curriculum, it is important for learners to hear as well as see new vocabulary. For that reason, in exercise 1 above, the teacher could also use oral exercises or combine oral with written input in having students find the differences between minimal pairs. Similarly, the sentence production exercise noted above could be done orally in class.

Intermediate-level exercises and activities

If beginning levels of reading and vocabulary instruction are characterized by recognition, then perhaps a useful way of looking at intermediate instruction is through the lens of refinement and expansion. While the elementary-level student is grasping for a word to communicate meaning, the intermediate stu-

dent is seeking to expand that basic vocabulary. For example, while a beginning-level student learns that *elementary* school is the first level of formal education, the intermediate student may learn that *grammar* school, *primary* school, and *grade* school are other ways of characterizing this same concept. To give another example, the teachers may be satisfied if a beginning student learns the word *thin*. At the intermediate level, however, the student may be ready to go on to learn the new words *slim* or *skinny* as well as their connotations.

1 Differentiating Related Vocabulary Items within a Set (Expansion)

Exercise

Directions: Give an example of a food that can be described by each of the following adjectives.

sweet	bland	bitter	pickled
salty	tasteless	spicy	rich
sour	plain	hot	heavy

Note that this vocabulary application exercise could be completed before, during, or after a reading about food. As a prereading exercise, it not only provides a more complete frame for talking about foods, but allows students to assess which words they already have in their individual vocabularies and which ones they must add. It also allows for refinement of vocabulary by having students apply their understanding of a given word. For example, is rice tasteless? If so, why or why not? Is a lemon sour or bitter? How about an orange? Do students need to learn *tangy*? These kinds of exercises generate practice in a context that requires them to fine-tune their knowledge and learn more about the nature of vocabulary acquisition.

2 Application Questions (Expansion)

Another application exercise that allows students to expand a basic vocabulary is preparing lists. For example, having read an article in which terms such as *symbol*, *motto*, and *oath* occur (and are defined within a given context), students are asked to apply their understanding of these terms.

Exercise

1. List three entities that might have a motto.
2. List three symbols and what they represent.
3. List three situations in which you might be asked to take an oath.

4. List three different kinds of ceremony.

They must not only distinguish between similar constructs—a symbol versus a motto—but they must also apply their definition of each term in a new and different context. Thus, students are exposed to a number of attributes about the various vocabulary items they have encountered in the reading text. Item 4 may provide an opportunity for further refinement; many intermediate and advanced students confuse *ceremony* and *celebration* because they are used in overlapping contexts.

3 Generating Sets (Expression)

A production exercise that can also be used to help students examine and practice their schema for certain constructs is an adaptation of the commercial game Outburst. In the commercial version, one team of players gets a card with 10 preselected items that fit into a category, and the other team has 60 seconds to guess which items that fit the category are on the list. For example, the card might read “Countries beginning with the letter C” or “Harrison Ford movies.” The guessing team gets points for every match they make within the 60 seconds. Teams alternate and points are totaled after the game is complete.

With this exercise, we almost always begin with teacher-generated categories, and the students complete the lists of items. Later on, we modify these cultural categories to ones which correlate with new vocabulary, such as academic majors or Olympic sports, and have one team of students generate the lists themselves. Then, the other team is given the category and creates a list or guesses the items listed by the first team. All students get to practice vocabulary in a specific frame.

Exercise

After reading a unit on recreation, for example, have teams of students create cards for “Things you can do at the beach” or “Equipment you need for camping.” Give teams five minutes to generate the cards. Then allow the opposite team to guess what is on the card. This provides multiple exposures to the specific vocabulary and the larger frame to which those vocabulary items belong.

4 New Context Prompts (Expansion/Expression)

A final example of an intermediate-level exercise that helps students expand and refine

vocabulary is applying a set of vocabulary items to a completely new context. For example, consider some of the vocabulary associated with a disaster:

survivors	crashed	serious
fatalities	destroyed	fatal
injuries	tallied	miscalculated
consequences	investigated	tragic

If students have read an article about an airplane crash, the teacher can ask them to write a news article about a natural disaster or even the misuse of a recalled drug. Students can also be assigned to describe the events depicted in photographs of a rescue attempt, avalanche, or earthquake. When using old frames in new ways, students practice expression and expansion of vocabulary terms.

Advanced-level exercises and activities

After vocabulary words are gathered from reading passages and put on a list, students at the high-intermediate and advanced levels can find most of the basic information about the words using a good English-English dictionary at home. At the beginning of the semester, we spend a little more class time going over parts of speech, the meaning of each word in the context of our reading passage versus other meanings the word might have, and what we call related word forms (noun form, verb form, etc.). In class, we quickly go over this information together. Students also bring questions about synonyms and make notes about connotations or register given in their dictionaries. During discussion, we can clarify the subtle differences between synonyms, such as *aggressive/assertive*, and contexts in which each word might be used.

The new words advanced students encounter usually do not fall into neat sets or frames. In addition, new words are often used less frequently than words students may have studied at lower levels. For example, one high-intermediate reading passage yielded the following new words:

to long for	deceptive	mentality
broke	to halt	to land in

Even if they are avid readers, students could wait quite some time for another opportunity to encounter these words. Therefore, students at this level need opportunities to practice using words on their vocabulary lists so that they will feel more confident

using the words independently later. These activities also allow students to further refine their knowledge of word usage. We try to include both oral and written activities with each set of words, with the written work preceding the oral work.

1 Web Contexts (Exposure)

This activity can be done by students or the teacher. The activity is similar to Grammar Safari (Mills and Salzmänn 1995) in that the class can examine several contexts in which the vocabulary words are used. Find an online magazine or newspaper that is searchable. Type in the vocabulary word and copy the sentence(s) in which the word is used. These sentences can be copied into a word processor or posted on a web page. Be sure to note the source of each sentence. Students can see the words used in different contexts.

An example of a web site using this technique was developed by one of the authors (Wesolek 1998) and contains examples of the word *evolved* from sources such as the *Smithsonian*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the local campus newspaper.

2 Pre-paraphrasing (Expansion)

At the high-intermediate and advanced levels of reading and writing, we spend a lot of time working on paraphrasing. Part of good paraphrasing is changing the grammatical structure of a sentence, but students can also benefit from a vocabulary activity that challenges them to use different forms of the vocabulary words.

This activity can be done with sentences from the reading passages, teacher-generated examples, web contexts, or even student-generated sentences from activities such as 3 below. Sentences must be chosen with care because this activity will not work with all words.

Example:

This type of paint can *tolerate* extremely hot temperature; therefore, it is very popular in places like Arizona. (change to *tolerant*)

3 Finish the Sentence (Expression/Expansion)

Students are given the beginning of a sentence and asked to complete it in a way that clearly shows they know the meaning of the word. Students will need some examples to help them understand the concept of clearly show-

ing they know the meaning. Here is a simple example using a nonsense word, *slibdarty*:

He was *slibdarty*, so I gave him some soup.

He was *slibdarty*, so I gave him some soup and told him to get some rest and see the doctor the next day.

In the first sentence, the meaning of *slibdarty* is not clear; in fact, most people would probably guess hungry. In the second sentence it is clear that *slibdarty* means sick. Ask students for similar sentences using new vocabulary.

Examples:

a. Mark is such a *vindictive* person that his dislike for Margaret soon evolved into _____.

b. We decided to choose another *venue* for the concert, so _____.

After students write their completions, the other students and the teacher can check them and give feedback about whether or not the completion clearly shows the meaning of the word. Grammatical usage problems may also surface here and can be refined. Other students can give suggestions for improvement or propose alternative completions.

4 Stories and Role-plays (Expression/Expansion)

One way students can demonstrate word knowledge is to use several of their vocabulary words in a single context. Working in pairs in class allows students to discuss the vocabulary items together in an effort to use them correctly. This can be done at several levels, in writing or orally.

Exercise A

Using as many words as possible from a vocabulary list about capital punishment (e.g., premeditated, guilty, disposable), write a newspaper account or police report of the murder described in Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Exercise B

With a partner, use the words below to write a paragraph, story, or news report. (You may use any form of the words.)

question hassle master mentality
cost deceptive long appraisal
impulsive broke land halt
assess *hectic *foster *prolonged
*contemplate *mandatory *void
(*to recycle from a former vocabulary list)

Exercise C

Write a dialogue using one of the groups of words and phrases from the list below. (You may also add other words from the vocabulary list.)

1. extravagant flamboyant spurn
2. perceptive whitewash farfetched
3. self-reliant savvy spur on
4. stumble on out of the blue intuitive

5 Real-life Questions (Expression)

In small groups, students draw questions from a bag. Each question contains a vocabulary word or words. Students are allowed a few minutes to think and then must read their question out loud and answer it using the vocabulary word or a related form. Other students in the group listen to see if a vocabulary word is used and if it is used correctly. In more advanced classes, other group members can be encouraged or required to answer each question after the first person.

Examples:

a. What is something your country has an *ample* supply of? What is something that is *scarce* in your country?

b. Tell about a prominent company or university in your country that is known for being *on the cutting edge*.

6 Extended Writing (Expression)

Students can be encouraged or required to use the vocabulary words in a longer piece of writing.

Exercise A

Write a story (fictional or true) using as many of your vocabulary words as possible.

Exercise B

When writing your end of the unit essay, you must use at least five vocabulary words from either one of the two lists provided (or give extra credit for each correctly used vocabulary word).

Exercise C

Write a restaurant review or a description of a dish from your country, using at least ten of the words from the vocabulary list. If you like, you may revise your quick-writing activity to include words from the list.

Conclusion

Boyd Zimmerman (1997) describes several implications of her study on interactive vocabulary activities. For us, the most impor-

tant is to spend time on vocabulary instead of dealing with it in passing, because for students to learn a word they need many opportunities to see and use it.

Students know vocabulary development is essential for them to learn English, but often they do not have a clear understanding of how to go about really learning vocabulary. Helping students understand how complex a task they are facing, giving them the tools to learn vocabulary effectively, and making them work with the words instead of simply going over fill-in-the-blank exercises or correcting a matching quiz can help them develop more systematic and effective ways of learning vocabulary.

Incorporating interactive vocabulary activities into classes does take extra time for the teacher. However, designing these kinds of activities becomes easier the more you do them. By the end of the semester, students not only have a clearer understanding of how to go about learning new vocabulary, but also

they usually have more confidence in their ability to actually do so.

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