



Seven Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary

By Chiu Siu Miu



'book' b-o-o-k book 書本
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usually hear the above loud and enthusiastic chants whenever I pass by the classrooms in many schools in Macao. This is a typical English lesson, or I should say, a typical method the teachers used for teaching vocabulary.

Such a way of teaching vocabulary has the target merely set at the word level, and the word only. Teachers are "obsessed" by helping students memorize list and list of words in every possible way or by all sorts of means (like using a huge number of worksheets, dictation, tests or quizzes); instructing them to memorize the word's spelling, pronunciation (with different variation of sound make-up according to the proficiency of teachers), meaning, and its equivalent L1 translation.

The formula of such an English lesson in Macao is:

English lesson = vocabulary chanting, memorizing and dictation



Four questions raised for teachers

Let me ask you four basic questions about vocabulary and vocabulary instruction. Please think about the answers before you look at my views.

Question one: Have you ever asked why our students need to learn vocabulary ?

My view : I agree with Tompkins (1998) that vocabulary knowledge is a principal contributor to reading comprehension. However, I want to point out that vocabulary is not just used for comprehending reading but also for listening,



speaking and writing. We cannot simply acquire vocabulary without using it for other language skills. Temple and Gillet (1996) reported that we usually remember our experience better if we are able to put it in words. Therefore, our experience will become richer if we stock up on vocabulary items. Vocabulary instruction has become important because we can help our students to "experience their lives in more interesting detail." (p.5)

Question two: Have you ever wondered why our students are not able to compose a short text correctly, and not able to speak and listen to English properly when they reach P6 ?

My view: Memorizing English vocabulary, its spelling and its meaning in L1 does not help our students to use it properly. It is because the meaning of the vocabulary can be changed depending on its allocation in a sentence. According to Bromley (1998), more than 70% of the English language has multiple meanings.

For example: the word "book"
 "Could you pass me the **book** ?" (noun)
 "Could you **book** a seat for me ?" (verb)
 "**Book** sir! May I be excused ?" (proper noun)

Therefore, learning vocabulary should also include learning about collocations, associations, and related grammatical patterns as well as meaning.

Question three: Have you ever lamented that your students have a huge amount of vocabulary which does not help them in their reading comprehension and writing?

My view: Jacques Barzun's quotation is inspiring, "Both speech and writing are ultimately copycat experiences. Words get in through the ears or eyes and come out at the tongue or the end of a pencil." (in Broomley, p.255)

If words become part of children's listening and speaking vocabulary, they are more easily identified in reading and become part of the sight vocabu-

lary. The words also then transfer more naturally to writing.

Question four: Have you ever asked the number of new words your students should learn before they enter university ?

My view: For the second language learners entering university, Laufer (in Hunt and Beglar, 1998, p.2) found that knowing a minimum of about 3,000 words was required for effective reading at the university level (because this amount covers a high percentage of the words on an average page of a textbook), whereas knowing 5,000 words indicated likely academic success.

Our Macau students have already memorized vigorously approximately a total of 17,280 English vocabulary items after they finish twelve years of study (30 items x 48 weeks x 12 years). How could you expect our students to squeeze more into their already overloaded heads ? How many vocabulary items could they retain when the test, quiz or the examination is over ? I wonder !

Seven strategies for teaching vocabulary

In order to make teaching of vocabulary a meaningful task in the classroom, I am going to introduce seven instructional strategies for teaching vocabulary.

Strategy 1: Concrete effects

We can use authentic items, or pictures such as board drawing, wall pictures, charts, flash cards, or magazine pictures. There is quite a stack of commercially produced concrete items supplied by the publishers. Teachers should make the best use of them.

Other than the visual image, demonstration is a quick and convenient way of teaching certain words. We can show the meaning by using mime, action or facial expression.

For example: 'Beeno **scowled**.'

Teacher: "Children! Look at my face (teacher shows an angry or displeased face). This is how Beeno scowled."

Strategy 2: Contextual cue

We should encourage our students to guess the meaning from the context of the passage they are reading. Three methods can be used.

Method 1: Inference

We may either guide our students to continue reading to the end of the sentence or paragraph so that all the available information can provide clues to the word, or we can help our students read between lines to get the clues.

For example: The word '**LOST** his way home' in *New Welcome to English 3A Chapter 1 p.3 Picture 4*

Teacher: "Who is talking to Tim?"

Students: "The policewoman."

Teacher: "Do you know why Tim is crying?"

Students: "He doesn't know how to go home."

Teacher: "Good, children! Tim doesn't know how to go home means he has lost his way home."

Guiding the students to guess the meaning of the word by inferring it to the information, the teacher is able to help the students understand the meaning effectively.

Method 2: Contrast

Teacher can teach words that show contrast e.g. but, however, in contrast to, on the other hand in the sentence.

For example: The word "crazy" in *New Welcome to English 6A Chapter 2 Typhoons p.10*

"If the red flag is hoisted, it is dangerous to go into the water but the surfers took no notice..... Those surfers were really **crazy**."

Teacher: "When you see the word **but** here, that means the surfers are not supposed to surf in the sea because it's dangerous. They must be out of their mind as they still went into water. The word **crazy** means you still do something even when you know it's dangerous."

Method 3: Experience

The Teacher uses prior knowledge or personal experience to help students understand the word.

For example: The word "**surfing** the Net" in *New Welcome to English 4A Chapter 1 p.4*

"Candy and Beeno like computer lessons. They like **surfing** the Net!"

Teacher: "Do you also like computer lessons?"
"Have you ever tried to find information from the internet?"



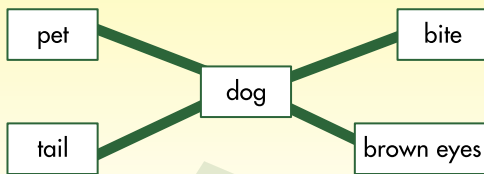
"When we are getting information from the internet, we call it '**surfing** the Net'."

Strategy 3: Semantic web

This strategy is also known as graphic organizer or vocabulary chart. We help our students make connections between what they know about the words and how they are related. It allows students to associate words meaningfully.

For example: Instead of learning a list of vocabulary about "dog", students are asked to construct a concept map about dog with the help of the teacher.

The students will understand the word "dog" better if they are able to associate the animal with its various features.



Strategy 4: Collocations

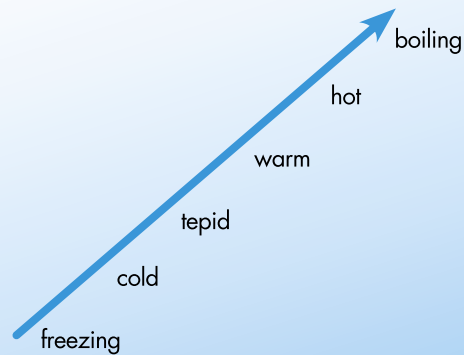
Teachers should point out to the students that some words are always used together as they are related. The meaning of the expression will become incorrect if any word in the phrase is changed.

For example:	correct expression	incorrect expression
	pay attention to	give attention to
	tongue tied	tongue fixed
	lose his way	miss his way

Strategy 5: Word cline

Word cline is a visual aid which shows shades or different degrees of the word meaning.

For example: the words "cold", "warm" and "hot"



By working out the word cline with the students, the teacher is able to show the difference in degree of the three words as shown in the cline.

Strategy 6: Word games

There are quite a few commercially produced games available in the market. Teachers can use guessing games, cross-word puzzle, bingo, matching games, or vocabulary cards to arouse the interest of the students.

For example:

Bingo game for the "action verbs" (for more games and activities please refer to Watcyn-Jones, 2002).

Strategy 7: Keeping a lexical/vocabulary notebook

Recording vocabulary can be an effective way to learn new words. One simple tool for this purpose is the vocabulary notebook. A traditional way of recording vocabulary is in small notebooks. If these are to be helpful they need to be organized well. A number of ways have been used commonly:

Organizing the notebook **alphabetically**, devoting two



- to three pages to teach letter
- Organizing the notebook according to **situations**
 - at the bank, at the restaurant, etc
- Organizing the notebook according to **functions**
 - complaining, agreeing, etc
- Organizing the notebook according to **topics**
 - occupations, food, leisure, etc

For example:
The word "COUGH" in *New Welcome to English*
6B Chapter 7 p.40

"COUGH"

/kɒf/

~ to send out air from the lungs noisily
e.g. *He coughs in order to clear his throat.*

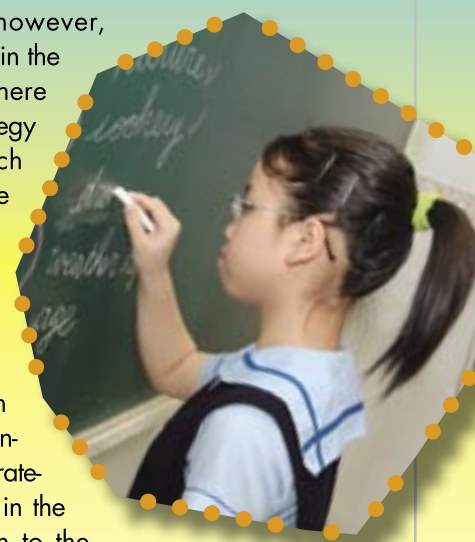
Verb (V) cough

Noun (N) cough; coughing

My favorite sentence: *A sore throat can make you cough, and coughing makes the throat worse.*

Vocabulary, however, must be taught in the classroom. There is no best strategy when we teach vocabulary. We should go for a combined strategy i.e. to find a useful method of figuring out unknown words by combining the above strategies that result in the least disruption to the natural flow of listening, speaking, reading and writing. 請

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Conclusion

Students do not write or speak words that they have never heard or read about before, and they do not learn words that they only encounter once. In our English lessons, students often hear or read a word once and never again. How can we expect them to learn new words? When we teach new words, we must have some criteria for selecting words (Graves, 1987):

1. Choose words that are related to topics
2. Choose words that help to comprehend a passage
3. Choose words that students can use in language skills

According to research, the best way to help our students develop vocabulary is by extensive reading.

References

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