

Toward a Vast, Vital, and Vigorous Vocabulary

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Abstract

It is impossible to learn a language without learning vocabulary. What ways to master words can we add to the usual memorization of lists presented with reading selections? Various practical strategies to learn vocabulary will be presented in this workshop. For example, teachers can use pictures, sketches and vocabulary cards in teaching words. Other strategies include how to make use of word families, tense and number changes, synonyms and antonyms, etc. as well as how to use context in developing vocabulary. Different ideas to use with beginners and more advanced students will be offered. We will discuss keys to successful memorization. Activities will be presented and we will practice some of these.

Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is an absolutely crucial part of mastering a foreign language, but too many students find it frustrating; they feel that it is both difficult and boring. This workshop aims to present specific practical ways through which both the teacher and the student can approach vocabulary learning. Teachers probably use some or most of these ideas; perhaps this presentation will bring to mind some ideas that have been overlooked. Teachers must remember, of course, that student learning-styles are different, so that what works for one student will not work for all of them.

Introducing Words

Many textbook lessons contain lists of new words. The teacher should spend some time introducing these words, if possible. After demonstrating pronunciation, the teacher should have the students say each word several times. The teacher should also say things about each word that might make it easier to remember; examples are its relationship to a word or words that have already been learned (introducing the concept of word families), anything in the students' native language that could help them learn the word, rhymes, alliterative phrases, mnemonic devices, amusing anecdotes, etc.

What information about a word should the teacher require the students to learn? All students should learn the word's spelling and pronunciation, of course. Beginners should probably only study these aspects, but when words are first introduced, intermediate students should also learn the plural form of any irregular noun and the past and past perfect forms of any irregular

verb. The teacher might want to introduce advanced students to a word's synonyms and antonyms.

What about teaching verb phrases, prefixes and suffixes? A specific phrase should be taught when students come across it; the teacher can handle it like any other vocabulary item. For example, the verb phrase "to run out of" does not seem to be related to the verb "run" and should be taught separately. Students need to be aware that many such phrases exist in English. Teaching a list including many of the verb phrases based on the word "run" would be much less effective than teaching each phrase when it appears in a reading. Verb phrases can be treated like idioms, for in a way they are idioms.

Requiring students to learn a list of prefixes and suffixes is probably not a good idea. It is difficult to learn such items out of context. When a word is first introduced, the teacher can point out its different parts. When students have had exposure to a number of affixes, the teacher can include a lesson that presents the ones the students have already seen in the words they have studied. At this point, students should be aware of prefix and suffix meanings and this will help them understand words they learn in the future. Students must, of course, be warned about false affixes. For example, the *sub* in the word "*subtle*" is not the common prefix *sub*.

Teaching Techniques

While teaching beginning students, use pictures illustrating the words when possible. If a student can relate an English language word to a picture rather than the native language word, thinking in English rather than the native language will develop faster. Pictures can also be used in vocabulary drills, including specialized drills. For example, the teacher can hold up pictures illustrating verbs and ask the students to give the past tense of each one. For a noun: the plural form. Teachers can ask the students to write or spell aloud the words indicated by the pictures. (Note: the first time the teacher uses a picture, he or she should use the students' native language to say what the picture represents. The students will remember this after being told only once -- or perhaps twice.) To obtain pictures to use, one can cut them out of magazines, make Xerox copies of pictures in books, draw stick figures, etc. When teaching the colors, a teacher can use a colored sheet of paper to represent the word for that color. Teachers can hold up an adjective picture with a noun picture in order to ask students to modify nouns. Example: "black shoe." Teachers can make pictures of opposites, too: one sheet might show both a tall person and a short person.

The teacher can use flash cards for drills. The teacher can make ones showing numbers, dates, times of day and amounts of money. These are excellent for teaching beginning students. In the middle of a class period, when student attention is flagging, the teacher can use pictures or flash cards for a very quick drill; this will awaken the students.

New words should be reinforced. In addition to brief vocabulary drills, an excellent way to use new words is as examples when teaching grammatical structures.

What can a student do when coming upon a word that he or she doesn't know? Study the context to guess what it means. Does it contain any clues -- does it have a prefix, root or suffix that he or she knows something about? Are there related words that have been learned? The teacher should teach, and reinforce, these pointers to the students.

The teacher should tell students that when they try to recall a word that has been studied, their first thought is probably the correct one.

Teachers should *require* students to make -- and use -- vocabulary cards to learn new words. Here are suggestions for what the teacher can tell the students.

When studying vocabulary, one of the most useful things to do is to make vocabulary cards. You should definitely make cards instead of simply studying from a list or your textbook. With a list, you will always see the words in the same order, and their relationship may give clues that you won't have when you come upon the word in a different context. You can make vocabulary cards out of any kind of small pieces of paper that you have available. They do not have to last very long; once you know a word, you no longer need its card (except perhaps for review). The act of writing down a word will help get it in your mind. You might want to include pronunciation clues on your card. Also, for irregular nouns and verbs, you might want to include plurals and tenses. Also, of course, make cards for idiomatic phrases.

If you keep a small collection of cards in your pocket, you can take them out and study them when you have a free minute or two. Try to do this for different short periods in the day instead of studying them for half an hour at a time. When using vocabulary cards, you should put a card at the very back of the pack if you know its word, near the front if you cannot remember it at all, and somewhere near the

middle if you can sometimes, but not every time, recall it.

Teaching Dictionary Use

Learning to use a dictionary effectively is a crucial part of vocabulary study. First, the students must learn alphabetical order. Chanting this, individually or as a class, is a useful way to involve students in a warm-up activity or when changing topics in the middle of a class period.

Teachers should make sure students understand that it is not always easy to find the correct word, or the correct definition, when using a dictionary. They can show students how to use the context of the sentence in which the word appears in order to get some idea of what the word might mean. If students are using a Lao-English dictionary to find out what word to use in English to express their meaning, make sure they know how to check to see that they chose the right word when several are listed. The best way to do this is to look up the chosen word in a Lao dictionary (or an English-Lao dictionary) as a check. Example: suppose the student comes upon the word "pool." It could refer to a swimming pool or perhaps a labor pool, and in many languages different words would express the two meanings.

The teacher should insist that a student write down a word after finding it, and practice pronouncing it, in hopes that the student won't have to look up the same word again.

Vocabulary Learning Activities for Use in Class.

1. Write ten letters on the board. Have the students -- individually or in groups -- try to make as many English words as possible from those letters. (Instead of writing assorted letters, you could use a long word that is on the students' vocabulary list, such as dictionary, beautiful or agriculture.)
2. Say an English word. Have the first student in a row say an English word beginning with the word's last letter. The next student should say a word beginning with the second word's last letter. Continue in the same way. (Tell students not to use words that end in x or z.)
3. Choose a letter. Have students, in groups or individually, write down as many English words as they can think of that begin with that letter.
4. When studying numbers, dictate them and have the students write them in digits. Go faster and faster, using longer and longer numbers.

5. Say to the class, "When I went to New York, in my suitcase I took an apple." The first student must then say, "When I went to New York, in my suitcase I took an apple and a book." The next student has to add a word beginning with the letter C. Continue in this way, going through the alphabet a second time if the class includes more than 23 students. (You might skip difficult letters, such as x and z.) Tell the students they must keep their dictionaries closed.

Additional Activities

1. Use items from English-speaking countries, if possible, to reinforce understanding of words. Bus schedules, advertisements, brochures and menus are some examples.

2. In a beginners' classroom, assign students to take turns writing the day of the week and the date on the chalkboard or whiteboard before each class starts. Example: Wednesday, May 30, 2007. Then class members should chant this phrase together. This helps them learn ordinal numbers, how to express the year and, of course, the days of the week.

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Finding the Main Idea

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Abstract

Reading for meaning can only succeed when the reader can grasp main ideas. In this workshop we will look at practical rather than theoretical ways to increase understanding of the central concept of a paragraph or longer selection. We will first consider why it is important to find the main idea. Next comes a focus on the topic sentence. Does a paragraph have a topic sentence? What does this tell us about the paragraph's main idea? What do the other sentences in the paragraph do? We will consider aids in a book that help the reader perceive what the book is about. These include charts, pictures, maps, etc. as well as appendices. Also useful are sub- headings in a chapter, bold print and spaces free of text. We will discuss and, if time allows, practice exercises designed to help the student understand the main ideas in a reading selection.

Introduction

Students reading material in the foreign language they are studying may be able to read the words they see without understanding the meaning of the selection. One of the most useful strategies in reading for meaning is to be able to identify the main idea in a paragraph or a selection. This workshop examines ways to do this, stressing practical activities rather than theory.

The Main Idea

Why is it important to find main ideas?

The main idea makes the purpose of the paragraph or the selection meaningful. A person who cannot grasp the main idea of a paragraph will have a hard time understanding the selection.

By the way, note taking or highlighting text is helpful in retaining the meaning of what one reads. Even native speakers of the language being read sometimes do this, especially with complicated material. Taking notes helps one's understanding. The mere act of writing something helps implement it in one's mind. The most important thing -- and often the only thing -- the reader should note down or highlight is, of course, the main idea. The second language reader should work at identifying a paragraph's main idea in this way.

The Topic Sentence

A topic sentence often expresses a paragraph's main idea. This sentence may be the paragraph's opening sentence, but not always. Some paragraphs have no topic sentence and some lead up to one, not expressing the topic until the very end. Poorly written material, too, often lacks topic sentences. A writer who presents material clearly, because he or she wants the reader to understand it, will write clear topic sentences.

1. How can you find a topic sentence? There are a number of clues; here are some.
 - a. Examine the paragraph's opening sentence very carefully.
 - b. Look for one of these words: *who, where, when, why, how*. (Note that the common question word *what* is not included here; *what* is often too general to be useful.)
 - c. Look for words that are repeated in the paragraph.
 - d. Words including *always, all, never, none* can help identify a topic sentence or main idea.
 - e. Read the entire paragraph and then go back to look for a topic sentence and to find the meaning of the paragraph.
 - f. Reading a few paragraphs beyond the one being studied on may help.

2. How can a reader identify the main idea if there is no topic sentence?
 - a. Think about what the sentences in the paragraph have in common. Does this help?
 - b. Try to figure out what the author is trying to say.
 - c. Try to form one sentence that sums up the entire paragraph. That will be its main idea.

Other Sentences

Support sentences - These sentences include details and examples that strengthen or prove the main idea of the paragraph. They can therefore be clues to finding the main idea.

Summary sentences - These can be topic sentences; they will appear at the end of the paragraph, of course.

Transition sentences - These sentences help prepare the reader for the idea to be found in the next paragraph. To find a transition sentence, look for words like *next, also, then, finally, but, however*.

Organizational Aids

Aids in a chapter or book help the reader understand it and help him or her pick out the main ideas being expressed. ALWAYS CHECK THROUGH THE BOOK OR CHAPTER FOR THESE -- BEFORE READING

Aids for a chapter

- a. Chapter titles and sub-headings (Some authors write chapter titles that are not helpful)
- b. End-of-chapter summaries
- c. Pictures, graphs, charts (Some authors do not explain charts well)
- d. Highlighted items, vocabulary word lists and definitions
- e. Questions in a textbook
- f. Bold type or italics or underlined items
- g. Large spaces free of text

Aids for an entire book

- a. Table of Contents
- b. Index
- c. Glossary (ALWAYS check for this; it can be very useful)
- d. Time-line or chronology

Activities

When presenting a class considering these ideas, the teacher can assign groups or individuals to work at locating main ideas in specified paragraphs. The students can be asked to identify topic sentences, supporting sentences, summary sentences and transition sentences in these paragraphs and the teacher can ask them how they made their decisions. If groups disagree, a useful discussion should follow.

If several different paragraphs are used for this activity, the teacher can include one that does not appear to contain a main idea. When a student or group realizes this, the teacher can ask the groups to revise it so that the point they think is the main idea becomes clear.

A second activity consists of groups writing a clear paragraph. The instructor can suggest a topic. If groups write paragraphs on topics of their own choice, others in the audience can be asked to identify the topic sentence or main idea. The class can then discuss the sentence and perhaps propose alternatives.

Concluding Thoughts

Remember that not all books are well written. Some may not have clear topic sentences. Some magazine articles do not give you the topic for three or four paragraphs.

Remember your reasons for doing the reading. (You may read differently depending on your reading purpose.)

- a. Quick reference -- to find a fact
- b. Critical reading -- preparing for a test
- c. Absorbing information -- to learn about a topic
- d. Pleasure

Note that when you understand how to read for the main idea, you can be the judge of whether the author has made his ideas clear!

Use these ideas when writing your own material. When writing in a language that is not your native language, it is a good idea to express the main idea of a paragraph in a topic sentence that opens the paragraph, and then follow it with supporting sentences. This will help make your writing clear.

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