

Vocabulary awareness activities for EFL learners*

Rolf Palmberg shares some activities for making students more aware of vocabulary.

Introduction and aim

Most language learners no doubt have their favourite way(s) of learning foreign vocabulary. Some prefer traditional rote repetition, whereas others divide the target words into parts or components and focus on these instead. Some opt to look for similarities between the foreign words and words in their mother tongue or in other languages they may know. Some learners find mnemonic devices very helpful while others adopt different types of accelerated learning techniques.

Whatever learning strategies learners may have at their disposal, their intake of vocabulary items during a foreign-language lesson is (unfortunately) often no more than a fraction of the total vocabulary input that their teacher exposes them to. Furthermore, without recycling and repetition a large majority of the vocabulary items stored in learners' short-term memory during (and immediately after) a classroom activity will not be incorporated in their long-term system knowledge and therefore unavailable for subsequent word recognition and speech production purposes (cf. Nation 2001).

In a paper on vocabulary notebooks, Schmitt and Schmitt introduce and discuss eleven basic principles for vocabulary learning (1995). Two of the principles deal with the degree of learning effort undertaken by individual learners. More specifically, one of them states that learners must pay close attention in order to learn most effectively or, to put it differently, that mental processing of a language task is more efficient from a learning point of view than, say, concentrating on words for language production purposes. The other principle states that the deeper the mental processing used when learning a new word, the more likely that a learner will remember it. In other words, creating mental images of word meanings or grouping words with other conceptually associated words is likely to enhance vocabulary learning better than, say, rote repetition.

The aim of the present paper is to describe three activities that develop EFL learners' vocabulary awareness. More elaborated versions of these activities were originally published in Palmberg (2004a), and they all aim at various aspects of the development of learners' critical thinking abilities and their ability to explore and understand phenomena such as riddles, multiple-meaning words, and translational equivalence.

Activity one: Riddles involving the human body

Step 1. Ask the learners why the skeleton didn't go to the party.

(Solution: It had no body to go with.)

Step 2. Give each learner (or pair of learners) a picture of the human body and ask them to identify the English words for the main parts of the body, either productively (by filling in words they already know) or receptively (by combining given words with the appropriate parts of the body, e.g. arm, back, chest, ear, eye, face, foot, hand, head, knee, leg, mouth, neck, nose, and shoulder). Encourage the learners to use bilingual dictionaries whenever necessary.

Step 3. Display the following riddles on an OHP and ask the learners (working in pairs and using monolingual dictionaries if necessary) to figure out the answers:

- What similarities are there between a chair and a human being?
(Solution: Both have legs and a back, and sometimes arms.)
- What is the similarity between a needle and a potato?
(Solution: Both have eyes and yet cannot see.)

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Step 4. Ask the learners to consult their dictionaries (preferably monolingual ones) and compose a list of useful phrases and expressions including body words (e.g. 'second-hand shop', 'keep an eye on things', 'head of department', 'give someone a hand'). When they have finished, ask them to walk around in the classroom and share and compare their lists with their classmates.

Activity two: Words ending in 'man'

Step 1. Display the following 'man' words on an OHP and challenge the learners to try to guess the meaning of as many words as possible:

boatman, dairyman, gunman, layman, milkman, ragman, sandman, snowman, talisman, townsman

Step 2. Hand out the following list of definitions. Ask the learners to work in pairs and try to match each definition with its correct 'man' word (with the list still displayed on the OHP):

- a figure of a man made of snow by children for amusement
- a man who uses a weapon to rob or kill people
- a man who works on or operates a boat
- a mythical person who makes people sleepy
- an object believed to bring good luck
- a person who collects or deals in old, torn clothes
- a person who delivers milk to people's houses



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- a person who lives in a city
- a person who operates a farm that produces milk products
- a person without expert knowledge

Step 3. Write down the following 'man' words on the blackboard and ask the learners to discuss and agree on which of the words does not belong in the group:

ragman sandman snowman talisman

Solution: Ragman is the only human being in the group.)

Step 4. Ask the learners, again in new pairs, to work with a computer program entitled Odd Man Out. The program introduces 50 'man' words and requires learners to choose which of four 'man' words does not belong in the group. To ensure maximum communication between the learners in

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each pair, they must first decide on their individual answers and state their reasons, then compare and agree with their partner on the 'correct' answer (if the answers differ). (For a detailed lesson plan involving this computer program and instructions for free downloading, see Palmberg 2004b.)

Activity Three: Turning a car into a bike

Step 1. Ask the learners to write down half a dozen English words denoting different means of transport. After a minute or so, ask them to call out words from their lists, one learner and one word at a time.

Step 2. Choose two of the words that were called out (preferably short ones), for example 'car' and 'bike', and write them on the blackboard:

car, bike

Step 3. Tell the learners they will soon get a task and that there are four rules that must be followed. Display the rules on an OHP:

RULE 1: You may add a letter to a word

RULE 2: You may change a letter in a word

RULE 3: You may delete a letter from a word

RULE 4: You may not change the order of letters in any word

Step 4. Challenge the learners to see how fast they can produce a sequence of English words, starting with 'car' and ending with 'bike', and at the same time follow the rules for every new word they add. Encourage them to exploit their monolingual dictionaries.

(A possible solution is 'car' – 'care' – 'cake' – 'bake' – 'bike'.)

If the task proves too difficult, write the above solution on the blackboard and let the learners figure out which rule has been applied for each consecutive word. Then choose two new words from the learners' original list and write them on the blackboard. Next, invite the learners to come up with possible solutions.

Concluding remarks

The activities outlined above share two basic characteristics. First, they all concentrate on various aspects of vocabulary awareness and secondly they encourage the use of dictionary work in the classroom. As has been pointed out, in, for example, Moore (2005), it is crucial that EFL teachers train their learners in the use of both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. It is equally crucial that teachers emphasise the importance of using dictionaries for specified purposes. When choosing activities that learners feel are enjoyable, teachers can easily encourage them to try harder and at the same time make vocabulary learning both meaningful and rewarding.

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