

Teaching Tips: Choosing the vocabulary we teach

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Probably the first step in teaching vocabulary is deciding what vocabulary to teach. Sometimes we are lucky and our textbook includes wonderfully logical vocabulary building activities and we do not have to do anything. However, more often than not, there is no vocabulary component in the text or we, as teachers, feel that maybe students can handle more vocabulary than the textbook writers originally envisioned. Two possible roads are available to us. We can choose the vocabulary we feel the students need or we can let our students do the work for us.

Generally we try to select the vocabulary that we think is both related to the topic being studied and that students probably will be using. So, if we have a unit that includes a restaurant scene, we might want to augment students' vocabulary related to food and ordering a meal; if they study air travel, we may want to include travel vocabulary.

Michael McCarthy (1990), however, has found some difficulties with this topic approach that we should keep in mind if we develop our own vocabulary lists:

1. The "topic" is often difficult to define. What would air travel really include? Being at airports and doing predictable things or also accidents, boredom, reading matter, etc.
2. What vocabulary are the learners really interested in? If we are at an Italian restaurant, we will obviously include spaghetti and pizza in our menus, but are our students *really* interested in eggplant parmesan, even if it is our favorite dish.
3. What about frequency? There are some well-known frequency lists, but these must be used with care. Often the most frequently used words are not the most useful for the learner.

Perhaps the best idea is to let students make up the lists themselves. Not only will they be more relevant for their needs, but the students will also enjoy the process. Here are some ideas for creating these student-generated lists.

Palmberg (1993) suggests giving students a key word, such as *travel*. Students are asked to write ten to fifteen words they associate with this word when they see or hear it. Their associations are then written on the board. It is important to be sure everyone knows the meaning of the words and how they are pronounced. *Voilà!* Your vocabulary list is ready.

Another variation (Sökman 1992) is through the use of "seed words" (which are really the same as *key words*). Students are given magazine pictures and asked to write a description using one new word they do not know in English. They can use bilingual dictionaries or ask the teacher how to say the new word in English. Next, all the pictures are displayed in the front of the class and students read their descriptions while others try to guess which picture was the inspiration. Finally, the "seed words" found by the students are put on the board and explained. One benefit of this method is that students have to find words they do not already know. One disadvantage is that the words usually won't be developed around a specific theme.

Finally, a third method is more individualized and could be useful in university-level or executive classes. Carroll and Mordaunt (1991) suggest encouraging learners to build a "frontier" dictionary of words they feel they will need to know in the future--words that are "on their frontier or verge of mastery" (p. 24). As students are reading and find a word they do not understand, they are asked to create 3x5- or 4x6-inch file cards with information about the word from the dictionary along with the original sentence containing the word and a new sentence written by the student. These cards should be checked occasionally by the teacher and could form part of a "student-generated" vocabulary list which could be later used by the entire group.

Now, we have our vocabulary list, what should we do with it? The next *Teaching Tips* column will give you some ideas.

References

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