

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

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One of the main objectives in English language learning is to provide the English language learner with a good working vocabulary, as it would facilitate economy and conciseness of expression in both written and oral communication.

The most popular method to improve and develop student vocabulary is reading. The more demanding the materials that students read, the faster their vocabulary would develop. They thus should not be satisfied with reading materials within a limited range as it would make vocabulary development static. Furthermore, continued reading of material intended for a reader a smaller vocabulary will only cripple development.

Dictionaries play an important role in the reading process, as students frequently make references to it when coming across difficult words. Students who are in doubt about certain words should always refer to a dictionary not just to find its exact meaning but to find out meanings assigned to it. A good dictionary supplies not only definitions of each word's area of meaning but also its illustrative contexts, its grammatical functions or inflexions, its derivations (whether Greek, Latin, French or Anglo-Saxon) and a guide to its pronunciation.

However, it can be noticed that our students through frequent use of dictionaries, in relation to reading, have become overdependent on them. They do not make any conscious efforts to "guess" at the meanings of new words themselves. Some teachers have even assigned their students to look up a list of words in a dictionary, in an attempt to broaden their vocabulary. This is not an effective learning device as these words do not have illustrative contexts and it would be difficult for students to remember so many words in that way. Also, students look up so many words in the dictionary, that when they do come across the words they may have forgotten the meanings and have to look them up again. It is therefore obvious that in vocabulary development, the problem is not finding out new words or even finding out what they mean. The problem is, to remember them and to fix them permanently in the mind. If students are merely introduced to words they will forget them very easily. The job of the teacher therefore in vocabulary development is to teach them,

and to make them apply some rules of learning that will firstly help them bring into sharp and permanent focus words that are easily forgotten and secondly, that which will make their meanings clear.

Illustrative Contexts

This is possible in two ways; firstly by use of illustrative contexts and definitions and secondly by glossing. If we ask ourselves a question, how did we acquire words that we did not know? The answer would be that most of us, probably learned from the sense they made in sentences we read or heard. According to Maxwell Nurnberg and Morris Rosenblum, "by sheer weight of encounter, repetition and association, the words gradually sank into our consciousness". Therefore nearly everyone begins to learn new words by hearing, seeing, reading them in certain illustrative contexts or in the company of other words. The context usually gives a clue to the meaning. Teachers can supply illustrative contexts to bring out clearly the meanings of new words or conversely they can make students supply their own illustrative contexts. This can be done by making them write sentences which bring out clearly the meanings of the words. This method is beneficial as it not only gives the students the opportunity to practise using the words, but also enables them to use them in a particular context. The students are also given the opportunity of seeing other contexts in which the words are being use by other students.

Definitions

A problem that students face is the fact that although they have learned meanings of words through a dictionary definition or as shown in illustrative contexts, they will soon realize that several definitions exist for one word. Also, words mean different things to different people. One method of making meaning even clearer is by using definitions. Several categories of definitions exist, but two useful definitions are, defining by using synonyms and defining by using antonyms.

The teacher can apply this by using antonyms in one sentence to distinguish their meanings. For example the words "imply" and "infer" are frequently confused by students and wrongly interchanged. Therefore a

sentence which uses these two words in a illustrative context would make both meanings clear and easily retainable.

Example:

A speaker or an author *implies* certain ideas and thoughts to his audience or readers whereas the audience or the readers *infer* certain ideas and feelings from what they have read or listened to.

Defining by using synonyms is important in vocabulary development, as students generally are unable to discriminate between synonyms. Most of them mistakenly feel that synonyms are fully interchangeable as they are words of similar meaning. Perhaps it is time for English language teachers to point out that instead of being defined as words of similar meanings synonyms should instead be defined as words closely connected in meaning. These “small differences” in meaning are the obstacles to accuracy of expression because if we are aware of them, we can improve our expression by selecting the word which most exactly conveys our meaning.

Teachers can illustrate the differences in synonyms firstly by demonstrating their narrowness of application as seen in sentences. For example two words “illicit” and “illegal”. “Illicit” is more limited in use than “illegal” for it refers to only those actions which offend against the law because they are performed without a licence or permit. “Illegal” refers to the general range of actions contrary to the law.

Example:

1. The immoral actions of the hippies are *illicit* in nature.
2. People who consume drugs might face imprisonment as it is *illegal*.

Thus by choosing words of “narrow application” we can gain more precision in meaning.

Secondly, we can distinguish between synonyms through levels of intensity. This can be seen for example in the following group of words which are always taken as fully interchangeable.

expunge; expurgate; extinguish; exterminate;

It can be seen that the first two words merely mean to remove or omit something for example certain sections of a book. The word “extinguish” on the other hand means “to put out” for example quench a fire, whilst the last word means to wipe out or obliterate, to root out or to destroy utterly.

Thus the knowledge that there are differences in intensity of tone even among synonyms would encourage closer examination of words by students, as they would realize that the ‘wrong synonym’ could either de-emphasize or overemphasize their meaning.

Thirdly it is possible to discriminate between synonyms according to connotation and denotation. If students are made aware that the meaning of a word has two aspects, denotative and connotative, vocabulary development would be facilitated. A word’s denotation is what it literally means, as defined by the dictionary. Its connotation is the associations evoked or the emotional meanings, that is; they express a range or feeling for example, disapproval, neutrality or approval.

Example: three simple synonyms
thin (neutral)
skinny (disapproval)
slim (approval)

Thus all these factors should be borne in mind when using synonyms and they stress the need for a wide vocabulary.

Glossing

Besides illustrative contexts and definitions, another method to make meaning clear to students is to explain a word in the extract by using footnotes or putting the explanation in parenthesis or to give a simple equivalent of the word beside it for example as a form of paraphrase e.g. “They are extremely volatile, that is—they are changeable in temperament”. This method has been frequently criticised as it is regarded as encouraging the students to be lazy and not finding out words for themselves. There is no doubt however, that it gives the student a rapid indication of how to interpret a word without holding up his reading of the whole extract in order to get a full explanation.

Breaking words into manageable parts

Since most students find retaining meanings of words difficult it is obvious that teachers have to devise word study skills which would help them remember meanings of words easily and one of the most effective ways of “fixing” the meanings of words is getting at the root of words, or breaking words apart to find out what makes them tick. If students are made aware that words are made up of distinct parts or word elements, they could unlock the meanings of hundreds of new words. Teachers can teach them to be “word analysts” by making them examine words and realize that all words

are formed from word elements namely prefixes, roots and suffixes. They should also be taught to identify and recognise common word elements and this can be done by giving them a list of common or dependable prefixes, roots and suffixes and the simple meanings. From the list students will notice various combinations of affixes and roots in the words they are familiar with and also in the words that they are new to. They thus get a new insight into words.

The effectiveness of this word study skill can be seen in an examination of prefixes.

Prefixes

Prefixes can easily be distinguished as word beginnings. They are the syllables that start the word and they are often of Greek or Latin origin and are added to the front of roots. How significantly prefixes affect the meaning of a word can be seen in this pretest, in which students are asked to change the direction the word takes by substituting another prefix for the one appearing in the first column. The prefixes that they substitute should create a meaning opposite to the word given.

assent becomes dissent
 proficient becomes deficient
 regeneration becomes degeneration
 constructive becomes destructive

Through this test, students will realize the importance of prefixes in word formation as simply by changing prefixes they have supplied a list of antonyms. On closer examination, most of the students will also realize that the words in the first column are positive whereas the words in the second column are negative in tone and all begin with the prefix *di* or *de*.

Suffixes

Suffixes, are terminal word elements or word endings that serve as tags to identify a word as a noun or verb, adjective or adverb. Memorizing a list of meanings for 20 or 30 suffixes won't help a student but recognising how suffixes change roots probably can increase a student's word knowledge. For e.g. on looking at words like "communism, socialism, idealism and Hinduism", students will soon realize that all these words ending in the noun-ending "ism" are all doctrines or refer to a belief in something. The suffix "ism" can therefore be easily attached to the name of any religions, political or national entity.

The suffix "ous" as found in words like "generous, contemptuous and voluptuous", is usually an adjective and generally means "possessing" or "full of". Whilst,

the suffixes "able & ible" logically demonstrate capability or fitness as seen in *reliable, capable, eligible*. Thus after examining words, students will recognise many of the suffixes without even having been aware that they knew them. Recognising the functions of some of these suffixes would also make it easier for students to learn new words.

On the whole it can be seen that by breaking words into manageable parts namely prefixes, roots and suffixes students will build their vocabulary effectively. They actually learn how words are formed, they become "word analysts" and they gain further insight into familiar words.

Linking the unknown to the known

A further development of the "word study skills" method is for students to link the unknown to the known. According to Rae Price, "the learning process is mainly one where a person links new ideas or his knowledge of things to what he already knows. And most often he does this unconsciously without being aware of what is going on."⁽¹⁾ Thus in learning new words, students can also consciously link the unknown to the known. For example, they can link prefixes they have learned to roots they don't know but are learning or conversely they can link roots they are familiar with to new combinations of prefixes and suffixes.

Another way of using word elements is to couple a word of Latin Origin with one of Greek origin; that is to find their parallels. The students are asked to pair off the words as every word has a parallel in which even the root and prefix have substantially the same meaning. Therefore, in fact, students are asked to find "synonyms" or words closely connected in meaning.

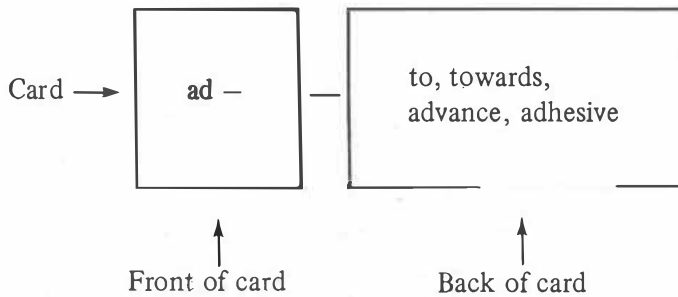
circumference	=	periphery
circumlocution	=	periphrase
indomitable	=	adamant
irregular	=	anomalous
mullilingual	=	polygot
transcendental	=	metaphysical
transformation	=	metamorphosis

Thus it can be seen that student practice their knowledge of word elements by paralleling them with others of different origins. For example it can be seen that the word "circum" as found in "circumference and circumlocation" mean to go around and "peri", as found in "periphery" and "periphrase" also means the same. Furthermore, the root "locution" means speech and "*phrase*" means to say. Therefore both "circumlocation" and "periphrase" mean to speak in a roundabout way.

Data Retention Cards

A problem in vocabulary development that was discussed earlier is that of students remembering meanings of words. The problem persists even when they break words into word elements as they will have hundreds of word elements to remember. An added problem would be the uncertainty of whether they are combining word elements in the correct way. An excellent way to learn these word elements and to refer to their validity, is to place these elements on separate Data Retention cards. They are supply cards on which students can write information they wish to retain.

The card should be used in this way.



- 1) on one side of the card write for example the prefix "ad".
- 2) on the other side of the card write to, towards, which is what "ad" means. Below that, they can write a sample word they know which uses "ad", for example adhesive, advance, advocate. Thus by using the Data Retention cards, students can get immediate feedback on the correctness of their response in any test of the knowledge of word elements. It would also give them confidence in using affixes and roots in vocabulary building.

Derivations or the Development of words.

Vocabulary development would be made more interesting if students are made to realize that words are derived or are a distillation of many languages. A word taken from other languages may be a shorter version of a many worded idea or it may express the idea as no other word can. Also the student by studying these derivations realizes that more often than not these words are invented because they aptly describe certain native situations. For example in studying the word "apartheid" which is derived from African, "heid" (pronounced 'hate') denotes separateness towards racial segregation and is specifically a policy of economic and political discrimination against non-whites in South Africa.

The word "hegira" from Arabic means flight and refers specifically to the flight of the prophet Mohamed from Mecca in Ad. 622. Therefore "hegira" today means exodus, mass migration. From Sanskrit comes the exotic word "nirvana" meaning "a blowing out", freedom from pain and passion or complete inner peace, complete freedom from worldliness.

Words therefore have stories to tell about their derivations and similarly the names of many men and women have been turned into words. This became names of a trait of character, their position in the world or some action associated with them. For example, the word "boycott" was coined when a lang agent Charles C. Boycott in Ireland, refused to lower tenant rents during very hard times. They in turn, refused to have anything to do with him:— they "boycotted" him.

The word "maverick" which means a non-conformist was invented when Samuel A. Maverick a Texan rancher did not bother to brand his cows as others did and therefore the meaning of Maverick has been extended to anyone who does not follow the common herd.

Teachers can also increased student interest in word power by showing them how alive the language is. As new discoveries in science are made, new inventions are created through man's ingenuity and as new situations arise, men must find words to name them.

For example, words like "psychedelic" became a vogue word, and interestingly enough this word appeared only recently in a period of drug-taking and it means a myriad or conglomeration of colours. As one student described it, the word refers to the colours one might see if one has taken drugs and gone on a "trip".

Another word is "detente" meaning relaxation of tensions or a step towards friendlier co-existence. It is a vogue word reflecting the world political situation. Therefore students would find it interesting and easy to build their vocabulary by remembering words that reflect the given situations around us and it would prove that words "do make sense".

Thus the above methods for vocabulary development should help students, to develop a keener interest in words, obtain a greater insight into words and finally acquire many new words and hold on to them longer.

References

1. A. Rae Price: *Developing Your Vocabulary*
2. Maxwell Nurnberg and Morris Rosenblum: *All about words: an adult Approach to Vocabulary Building.*
3. G.H. Vallins: *The Best English.*