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Developing a Bilingual Thematic Vocabulary Workbook

In Madagascar, secondary and adult English as a foreign language (EFL) classes commonly have limited resources and inadequate teacher preparation. Schools often have few or no textbooks and dictionaries. Computers with Internet access are a rare luxury. Teachers themselves may be underprepared, with no English teaching credential, minimal training, and limited English proficiency. Compounding these challenges, both teachers and students might not have any opportunities to engage with English outside the classroom and may have multiple primary and instructional languages—Malagasy and French, in the case of Madagascar.

This was the situation for one of the authors, Sahondranirina, as a high school English teacher in Madagascar. Her school had no books for students; in fact, there were few English teaching materials at all. Her students could not afford to buy a dictionary. Even if Sahondranirina had managed to convince the school principal to buy some French–English dictionaries, they would not have been much help because her students were not fluent in French—their first language is Malagasy. She therefore decided to help herself, her fellow English teachers, and her students by developing a bilingual Malagasy–English vocabulary workbook based on themes from the Madagascar national English secondary-school curricula. To help teachers facing similar challenges, this article explains the rationale and strategies to create useful vocabulary workbooks for multilingual students.

THE MADAGASCAR CONTEXT

Teaching contexts differ from place to place, so we offer a brief overview of the context in Madagascar to clarify the rationale and need for a bilingual vocabulary workbook. Madagascar's history as a former French colony continues to impact the linguistic features of its people and institutions. After the country gained independence in 1960, French continued to be an official language, and while Malagasy is the primary language (L1) for almost all citizens, there are at least 18 varieties of Malagasy corresponding to the same number of tribes. Those varieties are spoken especially at home, between friends of the same tribe, on the school playground, and in the street (Randriamasitiana 2004). Radio stations may use the variety of Malagasy of their location, official Malagasy is used at the administration level for local communication, and nearly all official documents are in French.

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The language of education is similarly varied. Malagasy is taught all through primary and secondary education; children start learning French at grade three and English at grade six. The instructional language for all school subjects, except for languages, is French. However, that does not mean that French is understood and widely spoken in Madagascar. Few Malagasy people can hold a basic conversation in French, and many teachers, especially in rural areas, do not know enough French to teach in that language (Rabenoro 2013; Randriamarotsimba 2013).

Adding English to this language mix poses further challenges. First, the materials and resources are inadequate; if schools have any English books at all, they are generally secondhand and were developed for the French school system, so the lessons are explained in French. Second, there are not enough English teachers with language training or even sufficient English proficiency. In rural areas, many public lower-secondary schools either have no English teachers at all or have "English teachers" who are reassigned from other content areas, such as French or social studies. Third, English is optional for many upper-secondary students. Literary majors must complete a foreign-language exam but can choose English or another foreign language. Science majors can choose to take a foreign-language exam in English or another language, or skip it altogether. Finally, typical classrooms overflow with at least 50 students who encounter English for only two to four hours per week, and neither students nor teachers are exposed to real-life English. In these situations, teachers often use multiple languages for instruction to keep their students engaged and cater to everyone's English language limitations (Andriamahavita 2013).

Madagascar is just one of many countries in which students speak one language at home, learn the official language of instruction at school, and then learn English and/or other foreign languages. For example, students in parts of Tajikistan speak a variation of Farsi at home, use Tajik and Russian in school and as official languages, and then learn English as a foreign language in secondary school. Instruction in these settings reflects the use of multiple languages in social and even official capacities (Dahl et al. 2005), which is why Sahondranirina developed the original workbook for bilingual Malagasy/English, with occasional use of French when there were no corresponding Malagasy words or expressions.

Of course, most teachers and students want to use only English in class, especially when the classroom is the only place they encounter and use it. However, even in settings where there are sufficient resources and teachers possess advanced English skills, research shows that using the L1 in English classes can facilitate rather than impede English learning when used strategically for certain situations—such as clarifying grammar rules or giving instructions—while still ensuring maximum exposure to English (Miles 2004). Using the L1 can help teachers convey meaning, organize the class or tasks, and make individual connections with students, especially when students do not have the English proficiency level to understand even simple words and phrases (Cook 2001; Noor, Embong, and Aigbogun 2015). Bilingual or multilingual English teachers who share an L1 with their learners can draw on that language as a resource in the classroom, connecting new information to familiar events or experiences, which can be a distinct advantage for language learning (Copland and Neokleous 2011). In addition, students who use their own language at times

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may feel more confident when trying to use English and feel more positive relationships with their peers and the teacher (Miles 2004). A bilingual vocabulary workbook in English and the shared L1 can help teachers and students achieve many important language-learning objectives.

CREATING YOUR OWN BILINGUAL WORKBOOK

Could you, your students, and your colleagues benefit from a useful text to support English teaching and learning, using the shared primary language of your classroom? Sahondranirina developed and self-published the original workbook using available materials and her own knowledge, then shared it with other teachers in Madagascar. However, the more voices that contribute to developing this resource, the more comprehensive, useful, and engaging it will be. There are two potential sources of co-developers for such a project: colleagues and students.

Teachers in larger schools or school districts have an immediate pool of colleagues who can support one another by sharing available resources. In more rural areas, teachers may have to contact their relevant districts, administrators, teacher associations, or training colleges to find partners to collaborate with in creating resources for themselves and their learners. Collaborative partners who share the same native language and work with the same grade-level or type of learner will reap the greatest benefit from this project. When working with a group of colleagues, some can develop content while others can proofread and check for accuracy. Over time, teachers can collect the material created by successive groups of students in their classes, English clubs, and language programs. The students' shared notes then become the foundation for a comprehensive bilingual vocabulary workbook, including thematic content, exercises, and activities. This project may take a few months or an entire year, but the resulting material is a valuable resource for teachers and students alike. (See Table 1 for a suggested model for the workbook.)

Whether you want to create a publishable version for ongoing use or start a class project that students can build on over time, here are five steps to developing a bilingual thematic vocabulary workbook.

Step 1. Create a list of themes

Sahondranirina began by noting down the topics listed in the Malagasy curriculum for early beginners (starting in grade six), then expanded to higher class levels. After an introduction and instructions for use, the workbook is organized by 18 language themes that support the secondary-school curricula, recommended by the Madagascar Ministry of National Education, including "Phonetics," "Numbers," "The Human Body," "Items of Clothing," "At School," and "Using a Computer."

Step 2. Brainstorm L1 vocabulary

Sahondranirina found a number of Malagasy words and expressions. She referred to the national English curriculum materials, drew from her own knowledge and students' experiences, and searched through other available texts for useful words.

Step 3. Find English translations and phonetic transcriptions

Teachers can start with their own knowledge to translate and transcribe words. This is especially effective when groups of colleagues work together and supplement their knowledge with available dictionaries. All examples, activities, and reading passages in

the workbook are presented in English, while all instructions are presented in Malagasy, with some French terms used if there is no corresponding equivalent in Malagasy. Free images from the Internet are included to illustrate some words, and an artistic teacher or student can create drawings for others.

Step 4. Create exercises

Each section includes vocabulary and expressions based on the relevant theme with (1) phonetic symbols, (2) illustrations, (3) sample sentences using the target vocabulary, and (4) practice exercises such as fill in the blanks, matching, forming sentences using word banks, answering questions, finding definitions, and translation from Malagasy to English. Include as many local words related to landmarks, music, food, and customs as possible in the sample activities to make the content relevant and engaging for students. Also, provide an answer key in the appendix.

Bilingual Vocabulary Workbook Model

Use the following sections as a model for developing your own bilingual workbook. Add subsections, exercises, images, and activities to suit your teaching context and students' needs.

1. Table of contents

- List the sections, topics, and page numbers.

2. Introduction

- Phonetics: Provide a brief description with examples from the L1 on phonetic transcription. This is to ensure correct pronunciation of the English word(s).
- Present basic grammar points that your students may need, with explanation in the L1. The following list gives examples:
  - Question words (*who*, *where*, *what*, *when*, *why*, *how*)
  - Linking words (*before*, *after*, *then*, *since*)
  - Prepositional phrases (*instead of*, *even if*, *in spite of*)

3. Theme 1: Ny Fotoana—Time (L1 word, English word)

- Vocabulary: List vocabulary items in the same format (L1 word, English word, phonetic representation); group words for related contexts (general concept, times of day, weekdays, etc.); and use images where possible.

  fotoana: time /taɪm/

  amin'ny vao mangirandratsy: at dawn /ɑt dɔːn/

  Alatsinainy: Monday /mʌndeɪ/
- Exercises: Provide exercises for practice in using the vocabulary correctly, as in these examples:
  - Fill in the blanks: "_____ is the cold season."
  - Match words with parts of sentences: "I am tired today because I didn't sleep much _____." (tomorrow / in a week / today / last night)
  - Answer questions: "How often do we have English class?"
  - Find the word for each clue: "When something happens once every month."
  - Write a descriptive clue for each word.
  - Translate a phrase into English.

Appendix: Answer key

- Answers to the exercises in each topic

Table 1. Suggested model for a bilingual thematic vocabulary workbook

Step 5. Move on to layout and production
The format for your workbook will depend on the intended use (for teachers or students), who is developing it, and your budget. This project could be professionally printed with a cover and binding at a local printer, or it could be developed entirely by hand with students handwriting their own sections, then having the handwritten pages stapled or compiled in a binder. You can make it a picture dictionary if teacher/student artists draw images to support the vocabulary and expressions.

The excerpt in Table 2 is based on the workbook theme "Time" and demonstrates the content, organization, and use of Malagasy and English words.

USING THE VOCABULARY WORKBOOK

The workbook can be used to facilitate English teaching and learning in several ways. Sahondranirina's original idea was to create a self-contained workbook for use by teachers during instruction or as practice material for individual students. She and other teachers use the exercises by copying them onto the blackboard for students to complete. Also, teachers demonstrate a few exercises and activities for the class, and then students work in pairs or groups to create new examples that can be added to their own notes or successive issues of the workbook. The exercises in the workbook can also be used as part of formative and summative assessments to develop items for quizzes and tests.

After students have developed, learned, and practiced using the vocabulary for each theme, the workbook can be used for communicative instructional activities. In multilingual contexts where students have limited exposure to and practice in English, teachers' and students' oral language proficiency may vary greatly. Some teachers may promote English-only approaches in their classes. Other teachers may encourage students to use as much English as they can, or to *code-switch*—alternate between the L1 and English—when necessary. Students help each

VOCABULARY THEME: NY FOTOANA—TIME

fotoana: time /taɪm/	volana: month /mʌnə/
segondra: second /sek(ə)nd/	folotaona (décennie): decade /dekeɪd/
televolana: term /tɜ:m/	vao mangirandratsy: dawn /dɔ:n/
andro: day /deɪ/	herinandro: week /wi:k/
isan'andro: daily /deɪlɪ/	isan-kerinandro: weekly /wi:klɪ/
rahampitso: tomorrow /təmɒrəʊ/	rahafakampitso: the day after /ɑ:ftə(r)/ tomorrow
matetika: often /ɒf(ə)n, ɒft(ə)n/	fahavaratra: summer /sʌmə(r)/
toujours: always /ɔ:lweɪz/	ririnina: winter /wɪntə(r)/

Exercise: Fill in the blanks

1. *Midi Madagasikara* and *Taratra* are _____ newspapers, whereas *Vidy Varotra* and *Jejoo* are _____ ones.
2. At the end of every _____, the students get their school reports.
3. We rebury the dead for famadihana during the _____.
4. Today is Wednesday, so _____ is Friday.
5. People start working in the rice fields at _____ because it is too hot to work there when the sun is out.

Answer key

1. daily, weekly; 2. term; 3. winter; 4. the day after tomorrow; 5. dawn

Table 2. Content, organization, and use of vocabulary in a bilingual workbook

The workbook can be used for communicative instructional activities.

other if someone knows a word or expression in English that the others do not. The goal is always for students to increase how much, how often, and how confidently they speak and use English.

Each lesson should also build in "note-taking pauses" to allow time for students to add new words and expressions to their own bilingual workbooks. No special materials are needed other than the blackboard, workbook, and paper and pencils. As with any activity, the teacher should model the activity with the whole class first then have students work in pairs or groups.

STUDENT-CREATED VOCABULARY NOTEBOOKS

After the first teacher workbook is created, there should be at least one extra copy for students to refer to. Students can use this extra copy to create their own bilingual vocabulary notebooks with the same format—vocabulary organized by themes and listed in the L1 and in English, along with the phonetic transcription, if used. Students continue to add new words and expressions in and outside the classroom, and the project continues throughout a semester or an entire academic year. Students work in small groups to develop vocabulary on a selected theme, as follows:

1. The teacher assigns students to small groups. Students brainstorm all the words related to a selected theme, starting with their native language.
2. After a set time, a representative from each group writes the group's findings on the blackboard or poster paper, trying not to write the same words or ideas their peers have already written. An assigned leader can review the words and eliminate duplicates.
3. Back in their seats, students work in groups again to find the English equivalent of these words (and their phonetic transcription). Even in low-resource settings, some students may have mobile phones with digital dictionaries and other language resources downloaded. To save time and avoid duplication, the teacher may assign a certain number of words to each group.
4. After a set time, group representatives add their findings to the blackboard or poster-paper lists. The whole class helps fill in any blanks, using other available resources and notes.
5. Students add the new vocabulary and translations to their individual themed notebooks, and the teacher periodically checks them throughout the year. Each student works with a group of peers but writes his or her own notes.

Variation: The teacher creates note cards by tearing up slips of paper and has students write one L1 word from the board on one side of each card; the cards are kept at the front

After studying a unit on a particular theme, even beginner students can use the workbook to scaffold and creatively use their limited English vocabulary.

of the room. A student representative from each group comes to the front, takes a card, works with his or her group to find and write the equivalent English word and expression on the back of the card, then returns it to the front and takes another. Groups try to complete as many cards as they can until there are no more available cards or time is up. The cards will then be reviewed and shared with the other groups.

USING THE VOCABULARY WORKBOOK FOR THEME-BASED ACTIVITIES

After studying a unit on a particular theme, even beginner students can use the workbook to scaffold and creatively use their limited English vocabulary.

Diagramming a Family Tree

In this activity, students use vocabulary from the workbook theme of "Family" to create family-tree diagrams. Sentence frames help students form questions in a structured format and solicit single-word answers to the questions. The teacher first models the activity by using his or her own family tree and sentence frames. Next, students create their own family tree and draft questions, then work in pairs to ask each other questions using only English and to draw each other's family tree, as follows:

1. Student A asks one or two questions about Student B's family and draws the information. For example:

   A: Do you have any <u>brothers</u>?

   B: Yes/No. [If the answer is "No," the turn is finished. If the answer is "Yes," it continues.]

   A: How many <u>brothers</u> do you have?

   B: Three.

2. Student B then asks about Student A's family and draws the appropriate information.

3. Students continue asking each other questions and drawing details until they have described as many relatives as they can.

4. Finally, they check each other's work to make sure the details are correct.

5. In small groups, students present their partner's family tree by displaying the diagram and describing the family members. If there is limited time, the teacher may select a few students to present to the whole class.

6. For homework or as a follow-up activity, students write a one-paragraph description of their own or their partner's family tree. The teacher again models this activity by using a sample family tree and sentence frames, for example: "This is [my/name's] family tree. [I/She/He] have/has [#] brothers and [#] sisters."

Reverse Guessing Activity

This short, interactive activity can be used with the whole class at the end of a lesson for students to practice using target vocabulary, or at the beginning of a class to review what they learned previously. Instead of one person knowing the answer and giving clues for the others to guess, in this game the group knows the correct answer and gives clues, while one person must guess, as follows:

1. Choose the theme for the activity.

2. Choose the first guesser. This student will stand facing the class with his or her back to the blackboard.

3. Choose a notetaker. This student will write a word on the blackboard so that the guesser cannot see it, but the rest of the class can.

4. Students take turns asking questions or making comments to the guesser, who tries to figure out the correct word. For example, if the theme is "Jobs," and the job is catching fish, questions and

comments might be, "Did you catch a lot today?"; "You smell bad after work!"; and "What's the biggest one you ever caught?"

5. The notetaker adds relevant vocabulary to the board—such as *catch* and *boat*—as students ask questions and make comments.

6. When the student guesses correctly, other students will become the guesser and the notetaker. The game continues for a certain number of rounds or time period—for example, three rounds or ten minutes.

7. Follow-up activity: With the vocabulary words still on the board, students write one or two sentences or questions about each answer from the activity, such as, "Who leaves early in the morning, catches many things, and smells bad after work?"

Adaptation: This activity can be played in smaller groups of five to ten students when they are familiar with the procedure, to increase participation.

Yes/No Hangman

This guessing game helps intermediate students practice vocabulary while asking Yes/No questions and drawing a hanging man. The teacher should first demonstrate to the whole class by using sentence frames for asking Yes/No questions before students work in groups.

1. Decide who will be the first leader. The leader chooses a word from the workbook theme being studied but does not tell his or her group what the word is. For example, if the theme is "Sports and Hobbies," the leader might choose *volleyball*.

2. The person to the leader's left is the first guesser and asks the leader a Yes/No question. Possible questions include, "Is it a team sport?"; "Do you do this alone?"; "Do you need special equipment?"; and "Is it played on a field?"

3. If the answer is "Yes," the next person will ask a question. If the answer is "No," the leader will draw one body part of a hanging man (there will be ten parts altogether: head, torso, two arms, two legs, two hands, two feet).

4. Students continue asking questions until they guess the word correctly or the leader draws the whole hanging man, whichever happens first. The person who guesses correctly is the next leader. If that person has already had a turn, he or she should choose someone who has not been leader yet so that everyone has at least one turn as leader. Students continue playing until the allotted time is up.

5. As a follow-up activity, students write some of the questions in their notebooks, and the teacher adds them to the vocabulary workbook.

Chain Story

This activity helps intermediate and advanced students integrate vocabulary from multiple themes in the workbook by working in groups to create a story. Each group of three or four students chooses a leader and a writer. The leader makes sure all students participate and keeps the group on task. The other students suggest elements for the story by referring to the workbook. The writer writes a group sentence to share with another group, as follows:

1. The teacher writes the beginning of a story on the board. The story will use vocabulary from at least one theme the class has practiced. For example, if the theme is "Jobs," the starting sentences might be, "Malia is a doctor at the city hospital. One morning, three ambulances arrived at the same time."

2. The teacher gives each group three minutes to discuss how to continue the story. The writer in each group copies

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the starting sentences on a sheet of paper, and the group discusses ideas. The leader encourages all to participate and keeps everyone on task.

3. After the set time, the writer adds one sentence to the story (without focusing much on accuracy) and passes the sheet of paper to the group to the right. Students change roles each time they pass their story so that everyone has a chance to be leader and writer.

4. The teacher gives five minutes for each group to work again on how to continue the new story. When the set time is up, the groups write their new part of the story and pass the sheet of paper to the group to the right.

5. Students continue adding more parts until each group has added a part to all the stories and they get their original paper back. As the stories get longer, the teacher may give more time to complete the next sentence. The group reviews the whole story and improves it for grammar, spelling, and accuracy.

6. To finish the activity, each group is asked to read its story aloud. The class then can choose which is the best, funniest, and most creative, among other criteria.

CONCLUSION

While technology tools have made information in multiple languages more accessible, EFL teachers in many countries often lack access to these resources—teachers in multilingual settings may not have any books, let alone computers or Internet access. The books they do have may be in the official rather than the commonly spoken local language, and the teachers may themselves be limited English speakers. Creating bilingual thematic vocabulary workbooks is a meaningful learning experience for EFL teachers and their students and can be a big step towards bridging these gaps. Even if books and materials are available, incorporating local knowledge and vocabulary into language learning helps make English more meaningful and relevant to students, so they become more comfortable and confident in using English. Creating a bilingual vocabulary workbook does not have to be complicated: choose one theme, brainstorm words and expressions, and add other themes over time. Start today!

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