

TEACHING VOCABULARY:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “KNOW” A WORD?

AE TEACHER'S CORNER



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In any English class around the world, you'll find learners studying new sets of vocabulary words related to a unit of study or topic of discussion. To create these sets of vocabulary words, teachers may use or draw from existing word lists, such as the Academic Word List and General Service List, or from content word lists presented in textbooks and materials, such as food words and neighborhood words. Teachers may also pull vocabulary words from readings and listening materials that they see as necessary to classroom success. From such vocabulary sets, students make flash cards, list words, practice spelling, and memorize definitions in an attempt to acquire new language. They do this work all while studying the other skills in a language.

Since teachers are tasked with teaching vocabulary in addition to the skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar, vocabulary ends up getting a small amount of attention in the classroom. Regardless, we must remember that vocabulary is at the center of language teaching and learning. In fact, research linking reading comprehension to vocabulary knowledge has shown that a reader must know 98% of the words in a text to process and comprehend the text independently (Hu and Nation, 2000). Such findings reinforce the fundamental role that vocabulary teaching and learning play in the English classroom. Given what we know about vocabulary, how do we teach it in a way that supports language acquisition and all language skills?

In this month's Teacher's Corner, we will discuss the teaching and learning strategies that best support vocabulary learning and examine how we can adapt our existing lessons to incorporate vocabulary.

Teach the Whole Word

For many years, vocabulary learning had a singular focus: a word's definition. We now know that acquiring a new vocabulary word involves much more. Each word has many parts that help learners understand it. In addition, each word is part of a larger family of words that derive from a root word of a similar meaning.

Consider the word *economic*. There are a number of derivations of the word *economic*, including different forms, meanings, and uses. For example, *economic* is an adjective with multiple definitions and connotations in its use. For learners to know the word *economic*, they must recognize its part of speech, identify its various definitions, acknowledge appropriate synonyms and collocations, and understand that connotations across contexts may vary. This is all in addition to knowing how to pronounce and spell the word. Then, if we change *economic* to *economics*, we get a similar word but which is a different part of speech that carries its own definitions and connotations. For students and teachers, learning these many pieces of information in vocabulary requires explicit time and attention in the classroom, particularly taking time to look at the whole word in context.

Focus on Context

Vocabulary words must be taught and learned in context. Learners need to see how the word is used. Is a word only used in speaking or writing, or both? How does it change within each of these contexts? Is a word used with a particular connotation in speaking but never in writing?

Learners also need to see what other words are paired with vocabulary words. For example, to go



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back to the word *economic*, we often see it paired with the word *development* or *growth*. At the same time, *economic* might not be used with synonyms of *development* or *growth*. Knowing these word collocations can prove important in using a word appropriately in a specific context. Finally, it is helpful to understand at what level of writing and speaking the word is used. Does the word tend to be used primarily in academic writing, or is the word also used in more casual writing? Once again, this contextual information builds students' acquisition of the vocabulary word.

Repetition

Students need to be exposed to new words repeatedly and in different contexts. Frequent encounters with new vocabulary words help learners acquire words in their various forms and contexts. Students need many opportunities to see the vocabulary words, practice using them, and retrieve the words regularly. Essentially, teachers should practice vocabulary every day with students in an effort to develop full acquisition (Folse, 2004).

Vocabulary learning and teaching is a language skill that needs explicit and repeated instruction. This month, begin thinking about how you currently teach vocabulary and what adaptations you would like to make to your lessons.

Next Steps

Each Monday we post something new for you to explore or do. Here is the schedule for this month:

1st week: Join our private Facebook group here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/AETeachersCorner/>. Please answer all three questions completely. You will not be accepted into the group unless you answer the questions.

2nd week: Respond to the question prompt that will be posted Monday morning on the AE Teacher's Corner Facebook page.

3rd week: Discuss vocabulary teaching with other group members, using the prompt that will be posted on Monday on the AE Teachers Corner Facebook page.

4th week: Browse the list of resources on this topic, which will be posted on the AE Teacher's Corner Facebook page.



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References

Folse, K. S. (2004). *Vocabulary myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hu, M., & Nation, I.S.P. (2000). *Vocabulary density and reading comprehension. Reading in a foreign language, 13(1), 403–430.*

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