Vocabulary Strategies That Build Autonomy in University Students

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October 20, 2017 9:30 – 10:15 am
H2 Alameda, Santa Clara Convention Center
Santa Clara, CA
Teaching Context

- University of Southern California, American Language Institute
- Matriculated students (Students are concurrently enrolled in English language and major courses).
- Undergraduate, Master’s, and Ph.Ds
- Wide variety of majors including engineering, “hard” sciences, and law
Course Context

- 16-week semester
- 3 contact hours with students each week
- 4 levels of writing and 4 equivalent levels in speaking.
- Ideal writing course addresses writing, grammar, reading, and vocabulary....
- Ideal speaking course addresses listening, speaking, oral grammar, and vocabulary....
- BUT
There never seems to be enough time!
A few questions...

• How much time do you devote to vocabulary learning in your classes?

• How do you do it? Via textbook lists, listening samples, reading excerpts, or some other means?

• What sources do you use? Complete or partial works?
Rationale

• I wanted my students to benefit from vocabulary learning but often didn’t had enough time to teach it at length.

• Developed this “system” which takes a little time to set up but once students know, it can be easily repeated throughout the semester.

• Emphasis on importance of “passive” skills of reading and listening to help develop vocabulary.

• Biggest challenge is to convert students’ passive vocabulary knowledge to productive skills of writing and speaking.
Genre Selection

Genres
- Academic articles
- Newspaper articles
- Textbook
- Music lyrics

Important to Note
- Student choice BUT...
- Everyone reads from the same genre
- Everyone reads from the same reading material.
1. Choose an article
2. Read the article for general understanding and highlight unfamiliar words.
3. Group students based on who read same or similar article.
4. Group members discuss the article, creating an oral summary.
5. Groups share unfamiliar words and then determine which words are most important for them to learn.
6. Each group shares their top word choices with the class, creating a “class list”
7. Students can now change partners and use a jigsaw method to introduce their classmates to their article and vocabulary words.
Additional Tips

• I often read over the articles they have read and search for words/expressions they may not know, and I’ll add those too.

• Once all groups have their list, I ask them to write the words/expressions on the board to share with the whole class.
Class Vocabulary List: Accuracy, Meaning, Use, Practice

Accuracy
- Spelling
- Pronunciation

Meaning
- Suffixes and word forms
- Roots
- Prefixes
- Dictionary Definitions
- Synonyms
Class Vocabulary List: Accuracy, Meaning, Use, Practice

Use
- Find the sentence where word appears in order to gain context.
- Note differences (nuances) between the word and its synonyms.
- Note antonyms.
- Note collocations (search corpora such as COCA, the internet, or ask a native speaker)
- Note level of formality and real world context

Practice
- Write a sentence
- Use in a conversation
- Incorporate the word into daily life
Group Work/Classroom Activities

• Students identify unfamiliar words from article.
• Determine key words and summarize articles for classmates. Focus on using selected vocabulary.
• Ss read the articles and search for them and the word in context.
Independent Homework

• Keep a vocabulary notebook.
• Eavesdrop: Note when you hear any of the new words and bring examples to class.
• Read: Note when you see any of the new words in written materials and bring examples to class.
• Write sentences that could be used in daily life.
• Ask a native speaker.
• Notice and Practice!
Method Advantages

• No textbook needed
• Students read about topics they are interested in
• Students determine what vocabulary they want to learn
• Access to both informal and formal, academic and non-academic words
• Access to both spoken and written words and expressions
• Finite number of articles
Method Disadvantages

• Have to read student-selected articles “on the fly”
• Creating new materials each time and each semester
• Student don’t always choose the words you think they should
• Can be labor intensive
Any Questions?
Thank You!
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