Vocabulary in the TESOL Classroom: *Use It or Lose It*

by Nicole Guéraçague

There has been a renewed interest in vocabulary teaching and learning during the past decades as it has become increasingly apparent that vocabulary acquisition is central to successful language learning. Although no single approach can be hailed as more effective than another (Ketabi, 2011), past research has revealed the benefits of oral use of words in context. Dialogue writing and presenting in collaborative pairs provides opportunities to use relevant language, leading to better oral fluency.

The Challenge

TESOL instructors here and abroad frequently observe their students’ gaps and hesitations when speaking orally, due to their inability to retrieve a word or because they simply don’t possess the vocabulary necessary to complete their thoughts (Cornu, 1979; Swain, 2000). Clearly, vocabulary knowledge is essential for successful language learning and influences the learner’s oral performance, as well as all the language competencies (Milton, 2008). Nam (2010) states that EFL/ESL students feel the lack of vocabulary knowledge is an obstacle to learning (p. 127). All too often, students are assigned words to learn that are not useful for everyday conversation; moreover, they lack opportunities to orally practice new vocabulary, even in the classroom. Research has shown that vocabulary spoken aloud and used by learners in collaborative pairs leads to better long-term acquisition when compared to rote memorization (Ellis & Beaton, 1993). Unless students have opportunities to practice using new vocabulary words orally and in context, they may not retain them or lose them (Akbari, 2008).

Mizumoto & Takeuchi (2009) state that “mastering vocabulary is the most challenging task that a learner faces while acquiring another language . . .” (p. 426). Speaking a foreign language is complicated, involving many simultaneous processes, and can be cognitively taxing. Past research has indicated that for EFL/ESL students to partake successfully in a conversation, they need to have “greater than 98% coverage,” meaning that only two out of every one hundred words is unknown to the speaker (Nation, 2006, p.77). To reach the speaking stage in language acquisition, learners need opportunities for output or oral practice and use of new words. This output production is necessary, according to Swain (2000), as it causes learners to reflect upon form and meaningful communication, increasing the likelihood of acquisition: “output pushes learners to process language more deeply, with more mental effort than input” (p. 99).

The Activity

Research has concurred with the theory that “language learning is best achieved through collaborative dialogue, where learners help each other achieve a goal through supportive interaction” (Hsuan-Yu, 2011, p. 26). The collaborative oral vocabulary activity listed below, consisting of composing, rehearsing and presenting dialogues, contains an overall framework that provides:

1. Learner-centered instruction
2. Meaningful use of vocabulary
3. Collaborative interaction
4. Pushed output or use of target language

(Shintani, 2012; Swain, 2000)

This activity includes built-in opportunities for pronunciation practice, oral participation, grammar application, freedom of expression and meaningful use of words in a relevant context. The goal of the activity is to move beyond the receptive stage in vocabulary
acquisition to the productive stage. The “receptive stage” is when learners first come into contact with new words. Then as they gain more knowledge of the words, they eventually move to the “productive stage,” when the words become part of the learner’s oral repertoire and can be used “in their own speech” (Read, 2000, p. 156). There are no clear boundaries between the two stages, but, according to Read, a great deal of interaction with the words must take place before the productive stage is reached.

The dialogue activity can be done in these six steps:
1. Teacher introduces target vocabulary or theme.
2. Students form pairs, begin to brainstorm ideas for their dialogues.
3. Students begin to write a dialogue collaboratively, incorporating target vocabulary (teacher’s role is to guide and facilitate).
4. Teacher checks rough drafts, encouraging students to self-correct whenever possible.
5. Students begin orally rehearsing.
6. Students present their dialogues.

Because learners work in collaborative pairs, there are built-in opportunities for interaction, including: negotiating, discussing, noticing, listening, reading/writing and making use of existing knowledge.

Conclusion
In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest and recognition that vocabulary instruction is central to language learning, specifically oral expression and fluency (Nezhad & Shokrpour, 2012). Consequently, more and more studies are being conducted to investigate effective strategies, programs, techniques, and approaches to teaching vocabulary in the EFL/ESL classroom (Hinkel, 2006). According to Ellis (2003), the more the language learning activity calls for meaning-focused language use “that resembles real-life oral communication in the target language” (Ellis, 2003, pp. 4-10), the more the learners are pushed to use their language resources to communicate. The more interactive and meaningful the activity, the more opportunities the learner has to notice features, negotiate meanings, think about language forms, and use the language (Swain, 2000). Activities that provide opportunities for learners to interact and communicate in the L2 in collaborative dyads involve simultaneous cognitive processes—or, as Swain describes it, “linguistic problem-solving through social interaction” (p. 102). This paper puts forth one oral vocabulary activity that can be adapted to various contexts. While no single approach should be considered the magic method for vocabulary acquisition, dialogue writing and presenting has built-in opportunities for meaningful language use and relevant oral language practice.

References
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