

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

- Akbari, R. (2008). Transforming lives: Introducing critical pedagogy into the ELT classroom. *ELT Journal*, 62(3), 276–283.
- Cornu, A. M. (1979). The first step in vocabulary teaching. *The Modern Language Journal*, 63(5/6), 262–272.
- Ellis, N. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, N., & Beaton, A. (1993). Psycholinguistic determinants of foreign language vocabulary learning. *Language Learning*, 43(4), 559–617.
- Hinkel, E. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching the four skills. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(9), 109–131.
- Hsuan-Yu, C. (2011). Structuring cooperative learning in teaching English pronunciation. *English Language Teaching*, 4(3), 26–32.

- Ketabi, S. (2011). Vocabulary in the approaches to language teaching: From the twentieth century to the twenty-first. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2(3), 726–731.
- Milton, J. (2008) ‘Vocabulary Uptake from Informal Learning Tasks’, *Language Learning Journal*, vol.36, no.2, pp.227-237.
- Mizumoto, A., & Takeuchi, O. (2009). Examining the effectiveness of explicit instruction of vocabulary learning strategies with Japanese EFL university students. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(4), 425–449.
- Nam, J. (2010). Linking research and practice: Effective strategies for teaching vocabulary in the ESL classroom. *TESL Canada Journal*, 28(1), 127–135.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening? *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63(1), 59–82.
- Nezad, G., & Shokrpour, N. (2012). The impact of task type and cognitive style on vocabulary learning. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 17–23.
- Read, J. (2000). *Assessing vocabulary*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shintani, N. (2012). Input-based task and the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar: A process-product study. *Language Teaching Research*, 16(2), 253–259.
- Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 97–114). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Nicole Guéraçague is a doctoral student at the University of Exeter, UK, and teaches EFL in La Rochelle, France.