One-on-one with Words

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Early on in my EFL/ESL teaching career, I worked with a lot of students one-on-one. Vocabulary always seemed to be important to these learners even though their individual vocabulary needs were sometimes very different. At university, I teach much bigger classes and my one-on-one time with students is often couched in a conversation about an assignment or a point of clarification from a lecture. Recently I have taken on an informal role as a language advisor attached to a language learning center in my university, and again, I am one-on-one with students and talking about learning vocabulary. What follows are some tips that have grown out of these one-on-one vocabulary teaching experiences, as well as from research conducted by both myself and others.

Tip 1: Invest time in Learning About Your Student's Vocabulary Level and Needs

While I was studying for my postgraduate diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, one of my one-on-one students was a 15 year old New Zealander who was taking extra lessons to boost his reading and writing skills in preparaton for high school courses. Building a larger vocabulary was one of his priorities, but I had never taught a native speaker before and was uncertain about where to begin. We spent the first session discussing his goals, strategies, experiences, and needs for reading and writing. I also gave him the Vocabulary Levels Test (see Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001; Coxhead, 2006; and Cobb, n.d. for online versions of the tests), so we had a rough estimate of his receptive vocabulary knowledge. In addition, he wrote a short essay, which gave me a sample of his productive vocabulary. From then on, we analysed vocabulary-based

activities by measuring them against the baseline information we had collected during that initial session. We asked ourselves whether the words that came up in our sessions were important for his studies, whether they were familiar when he was reading but not readily available for use in writing, what strategies he might employ to commit these words to memory, and so on. Had I been tutoring a non-native speaker, I might have been more tempted to assume that I knew what words he knew and what instruction he needed. In his case, because I was less sure of myself, I took extra time to study his needs and to assess his proficiency and in so doing realized how important this step is for all one-on-one instruction. Finding out about my learner helped us both to set and meet our goals. Nine months later, after meeting once a week for an hour, he showed considerable gains in his vocabulary as measured by another version of the Vocabulary Levels Test.

Tip 2: Keep Up To Date With the Field

Earlier this year, a student of Japanese came to an advising session because she was having trouble learning to read Japanese characters (*kanji*). She reported that after taking weekly tests of words based on her textbook, she often could not remember the meaning or form of the *kanji* that she had just worked so hard on the week before. Together, we analyzed her study habits and experience. We found that apart from the weekly tests, she had no other contact with *kanji*. Furthermore, she was merely matching the form of *kanji* to their meanings and trying to produce them under time pressure. I realized that Paul Nation's (2007) "four strands" concept might be very useful for her.

Briefly, these strands are interwoven means of approaching vocabulary study: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, fluency, and form-focused instruction. The first three are meaning-based, while the last one is language-focused. Nation recommends a balanced program of vocabulary instruction, with equal time on all four. After we talked about Nation's ideas, this student decided to apply them to her own study of *kanji* by trying the following:

1. Developing ways to use her *kanji* in her daily communication, for example, by leaving Japanese messages for her husband who was also learning Japanese. This idea addressed meaning-focused output.
2. Having a Japanese friend write out stories in *kanji* based on her own words and ideas and record spoken versions of them. This strategy provided reading and listening material, or meaning-focused input.
3. Rethinking her approach to studying similar *kanji*. Although she was focused on the form of the *kanji*, she found that she often confused characters that looked similar. Because I was familiar with another of Nation's works (2000), I encouraged her to try learning characters that looked as different as possible, focusing first on the most frequent or useful one, and once that word was stable in her vocabulary, turning her mind to the other.

4. Keeping a daily journal and seeking out a language buddy for conversation time.

These plans addressed the fluency strand.

Talking about the four strands provided some organisation and purpose for this student's learning. It also drew more people into her vocabulary learning circle—her husband, her Japanese friend, and her language learning buddy. Formerly, this learner had been isolated in her language learning efforts even though she had been attending language classes. The concept of the four strands helped break down some of that feeling of loneliness. It is possible that other strategies might have been equally effective in helping her, but the point is that without knowing about the research of others, I would not have been able to use such a principled approach in guiding her.

Tip 3: Focus on Different Aspects of Knowing a Word

An Arabic-speaking learner of English stopped me after a lecture on vocabulary one day. He wanted to talk about how he had trouble using words that he "knew" in his writing. In the lecture, we had discussed Nation's four strands, and he had been thinking about how to work on meaning-focused output. Until then, his main concerns when learning words were meaning and spelling. He wasn't sure what other aspects of words might be useful to know about. Specifically, he had not considered word use. He needed to ask questions such as:

- What words or types of words are frequently used with this one?
- In what contexts are this word commonly used?
- Can you use this word in a sentence to talk about yourself?
- What other words are related to this one? Or, if X is a noun, what is the related verb?

Thinking about aspects of word knowledge, beyond meaning and form, was a way to help this student work towards productive vocabulary use.

Tip 4: Continue to Add Tools to Your Arsenal

Working with websites such as Tom Cobb's *Compleat Lexical Tutor* can be useful for one-on-one teaching and looking at aspects of word knowledge. Cobb's website has a wide range of vocabulary-focused activities, such as concordancing, whereby learners can search for words in different corpora and see examples of the words in use in both spoken and written English. I once looked up the word *haberdashery* with a student because he wanted to learn that word. We discovered that this word did not occur in any spoken or written corpus that we could access online. Seeing the computer come up with no instances of this word in use was a more powerful way to demonstrate word frequency (or lack of it) than asking him to take my word for it when I said that the word was not widely used or worth his time and effort While concordances may not be useful for everybody, they are one way to access vocabulary in context and to explore different aspects of word usage. Recent work on individual differences in learning styles and

preferences makes it clear that we must be able and willing to offer our students choices in the strategies they employ for vocabulary study.

Tip 5: Give Students Frequent Opportunities to Be Involved With New Words

Another problem the same Arabic learner raised was forgetting words very quickly after working with them in class. This forgetting might be caused by too much time elapsing between encountering words, in which case it is important to build in regular meetings with words. In this way, new learning becomes old learning, which means it is harder to forget, or easier to remember. Forgetting can also be caused by a lack of conscious thinking about words, their meaning, and their use. One time-worn strategy for involving students with words that is supported by recent research is using word cards (Nation, 2001).

Typically, word cards are made with stiff paper and are small enough to fit comfortably in the user's hand. On one side the learner records the word, and perhaps its pronunciation and part of speech. On the other side, the learner records the meaning of the word (in L1 or L2), a sentence using the word, related words, and special information about the use of the word such as was mentioned above. The information on the cards is based on the needs of the learner and varies from learner to learner. Word cards can be collected into a box for classroom use or created by individual students for their own use. Once made, word cards can be used in a variety of interactive activities focused on matching, meaning, categorising, common collocations, and so forth.

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested several tips for working with learners one-on-one with vocabulary. Some of these tips involve talking with our learners about research into vocabulary, as well as ways to work on building vocabulary knowledge itself. One of the best features of one-on-one teaching, in my experience, is being able to build a shared understanding and vocabulary for talking about learning together. I believe a slightly adapted old adage fits this approach. These tips are not just about giving a learner a word to help them today. Instead they are about giving them tools and ideas for learning that will help them for life.

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