



Tips for Teachers

Lifting the Lid on a Treasure Chest of Words with a Thesaurus

Lorraine Lucrecio, Brigham Young University-Hawaii, USA

Advanced ESL learners in university writing classes frequently find themselves in a rut while attempting to expand their vocabulary. Teachers emphasize reading to build vocabulary, but it remains a passive activity for many students. Putting new vocabulary into active use continues to be difficult. In my experience of teaching ESL writing classes, two constant problems are repetition and limited vocabulary. Although grammatically correct, word usage is weak and does not get to the core of what students are trying to convey. They are unable to fully express themselves because of their limited vocabulary.

Dictionaries are helpful, but only to a certain extent. Often they lack information about word usage or collocation. In addition, English language learners often see the dictionary only as tool for passive understanding of unknown words, not for putting them into active use. Publishers are addressing this problem with a growing array of learner dictionaries now available on the market. Another way to address the problem is by introducing students to the use of a thesaurus.

The thesaurus is a native or fluent English speaker's tool to improving writing. We use it to demonstrate our knowledge and to exhibit our skill as wordsmiths. Native speakers know that there is a better way to say something, and we are constantly searching for it through our mental library and our printed reference books. For many writers, the thesaurus is an indispensable tool in this process. I have found the following sequence of activities useful for introducing the thesaurus to my advanced ESL writing students.

Creating a Need For New Vocabulary

To establish a context for needing and learning new vocabulary, I have my students take a personality “test.” In actuality, this is a popular game played by American teens just for fun. Directions for the students are as follows.

1. Draw a four-by-four grid on a piece of paper.
2. Label the four columns Color, Animal, Body of Water, and Room with Light.
3. Put the answers to these four questions in the first box in each column.
 - a. What is your favorite color?
 - b. What is your favorite animal?
 - c. What is your favorite form of water? (ocean, river, snow, rain, waterfall etc.)
 - d. Imagine you are alone in a room with no windows or doors. It is very black and very quiet. A white flash of light zooms past you and disappears. How do you feel?
4. Write three descriptive adjectives below each answer, one in each box. (Common answers include nice, beautiful, big, friendly, cold, scared, etc.). Now, their completed grid should look something like this one.

Color	Animal	Body of Water	Room with light
Blue	Dog	River	Room
<i>Cool</i>	<i>Happy</i>	<i>Quiet</i>	<i>Scared</i>
<i>Nice</i>	<i>Friendly</i>	<i>Beautiful</i>	<i>Lonely</i>
<i>Popular</i>	<i>Smart</i>	<i>Comfortable</i>	<i>Worried</i>

5. When the class is finished, randomly select a few students to share their answers with the class. Then, “psychoanalyze” them by explaining that
 - a. The color and adjectives represent how you view yourself.
 - b. The animal and adjectives represent how others view you.
 - c. The water and adjectives represent your ideal spouse/family relationships.
 - d. The room with the light and adjectives represent how you feel about marriage.

Introducing the Thesaurus

After the laughing and giddiness cease is the time to introduce the thesaurus. This is most effective if you can have several on hand for students to examine. Explain what they are. Show how to use them. Tell where to find them. This part of the lesson will

depend upon your teaching situation and students. If your students have access to computers, you may want to tell them how to locate the thesaurus under Tools in Microsoft Word, for example. If public bookstores are available, you may want to show what you consider to be the best buy for your students' needs. You may also want to caution students about buying just any thesaurus in the same way that you would help them evaluate dictionaries. Some have too little information, some too much, some too difficult, and so forth. Next, give the students an in-class assignment that will utilize the words they have already written and find related terms. Three related terms per word would suffice.

Using The Thesauri

Now ask students to locate three possible substitutions for each of the twelve words in their table. Working with the words in the grid, students might find these.

Cool	composed, nonchalant, casual
Nice	pleasant, kind, polite
Popular	admired, trendy, fashionable
Happy	ecstatic, jovial, blissful
Friendly	open, welcoming, sociable
Smart	clever, sharp, bright
Quiet	silent, gentle, soft
Beautiful	stunning, exquisite, charming
Comfortable	calm, secure, snug
Scared	terrified, fearful, petrified
Lonely	isolated, secluded, forlorn
Worried	apprehensive, nervous, troubled

Putting Their New Words To Use

Now, students have a total of 48 words to express themselves, 36 of them new. They can put these words into active use with any number of extension activities.

1. Following their teacher's earlier example, they can psychoanalyze a partner or themselves orally or in writing, using as many of their words as possible.

2. They can write a descriptive paragraph or essay using some, or all, of the new vocabulary terms.

3. They can transform one column of words from their table into a short story. For example, describe a dream in which you were alone in a room with no windows or doors...

Continuing Practice With The Thesaurus

In subsequent lessons, the instructor can demonstrate how and when referring to a thesaurus can be helpful. For example, during the editing phase of a writing assignment, choose several sentences from current or former rough draft pieces and write them on the board, or display them with an overhead projector. Discuss with the class which words seem trite or overused and might be improved by using the thesaurus. Show them what to do with a think-aloud demonstration. Then, students will be ready to revise their own writing.

Conclusion

Our word *thesaurus* is derived from the Greek word for treasure, and indeed, using the thesaurus opens up a treasure chest of vocabulary for ESL learners. Students say that they enjoy writing more since they have a tool that can help them better express how they truly feel. Some say that they wish they had known about the thesaurus earlier in their study of English. They climb out of their vocabulary rut; their writing improves, and their self-confidence about being able to express themselves in English soars.

About the Author

Lorraine Lucrecio has taught adult EFL and ESL classes in Japan and Utah and elementary ESL classes in her native home, Hawaii. She is currently teaching in the EIL department of her alma mater, Brigham Young University Hawaii.



Politically Correct Speech as Content in a Language Class

Marina Tsehelska, Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, Ukraine

Today political correctness is no longer a leading topic of discussion. Many words and phrases that first appeared in English due to this movement have now become mainstream. Use of politically correct speech by politicians, academics, and journalists grew out of the campaign for the civil rights of historically disadvantaged groups of people including minorities, women, the elderly, and disabled. As people became sensitive to bias on the basis of race, gender, age, and sexual orientation, for example, they tried to minimize the negative impact of the language that they used to discuss such issues.

Among the first signs of this movement was the attempt by feminists to make English less sexist. This meant, for example, avoiding the usage of male pronouns in cases when the gender of the person is unknown. For example, *Every student has to pass his exams* was replaced by *Every student has to pass their exams* which violates traditional rules of subject-verb agreement, but conforms to new rules of gender neutrality. General terms containing the segment *man*, like *mankind* and *man-made*, were replaced by synonyms like *humankind* and *artificial*.

The subject of politically correct (PC) English links historical, cultural, social, and linguistic issues. Since it also addresses current language usage, it appeals to language learners and teachers engaged in the study of English as it is actually used by native speakers today. Thus, politically correct English can be an interesting and useful subject of study for the ESL or EFL classroom. I have used the tasks that follow to help my students explore this topic.

Task 1

Below are five rules of traditional English usage along with advice about how to avoid traditional male-centered terminology. Read the rules of modern non-sexist usage and revise the examples to make them more politically correct.

1. Traditional rule: Male pronouns *he*, *his*, and *him* are used when the gender of the person is unknown.

- Examples:
- Someone is on the phone. What does *he* want?
 - A gardener is usually proud of *his* garden.
 - A child needs to feel that *he* is liked by his friends.

PC rule: Change unnecessary male pronouns to plural forms (*they, them*) or combination forms (*he or she* and *she or he*). In writing, *s/he* is also acceptable.

Examples: Someone is on the phone. What do *they* want?

2. Traditional rule: Words formed with the segment *man* are used when referring to people in general. (Notice, however, that words like *manager* or *manufacture* are not derived from the same morpheme.)

Examples: *Man/mankind* is polluting the Earth.
 No *man* has climbed this mountain before.
 Who is *manning* the office?
 This is the largest *man-made* lake in Europe.

PC rule: Use synonyms that refer to both men and women.

3. Traditional rule: Many job titles or activities are strongly associated with one gender or the other.

Examples: businessman chairman workman
 postman saleslady stewardess
 male nurse policemen cameraman
 cleaning lady clergyman

Examples: A manager has a duty towards *his* workers.
 The fall in prices is great news for *housewives*.
 A mother should never leave *her* baby alone.

PC rule: Use expressions and pronouns that apply equally to men and women.

4. Traditional rule: Male words frequently precede female words in common expressions. (Although note the common *Ladies* and *gentlemen*.)

Examples: men and women boys and girls
 husband and wife brother and sister
 his and her he or she

PC rule: Try to balance the order of male and female pairs.

5. Traditional rule: Although not a traditional “rule” of usage, it was not uncommon for words referring to men and women in some situations to be used unequally.

Examples: Ted and Angela are *man* and *wife*.
 I have three *girls* and two *men* working for me.
Mr. Lewis and *Miss* Masters are on the committee.

PC rule: Use equal male and female terms.

Attention to PC speech has led to revision of some literary classics including some contemporary versions of the *Bible* in which gender specific references to God have been removed. While most speakers of English would not consider going so far as to rewrite poetry or proverbs, my students enjoy the chance to work with them as a just-for-fun exercise in observing PC conventions.

Task 2

Read this poem by Lord Tennyson and edit it to make it more politically correct.

*Man is for the field and wife is for the hearth;
 Man is for sword and for the needle she;
 He is for head and woman with the heart;
 Man to command and wife to obey.
 All else is confusion.*

Task 3

Although famous, these proverbs are not politically correct. Try to change them.

1. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.
2. He who cannot obey cannot command.
3. A man's home is his castle.
4. Every man has his hobbyhorse.
5. He is happy that thinks himself so.

The movement for political correctness has both supporters and critics. This makes it a good topic for discussions, debates, and other exercises in critical thinking skills. Below are several topics for further investigation or discussion. They may not be familiar or appropriate for all settings, but they may help teachers think of PC issues that would be relevant to their students.

Tasks For Further Investigation

1. Terms referring to racial, ethnic, or indigenous groups of people. Sensitivity toward race and ethnicity is also reflected in language changes that have been motivated by political correctness. For example, in most common usage today *Asian* has replaced *Oriental* and *Native American* has replaced *American Indian*. However, there is not always universal agreement or understanding about which terms are favored, polite, or neutral in a particular setting. Have your students design and conduct a survey of their classmates, neighbors, and friends who represent the various

racial and ethnic groups in your local population and can serve as informants on this issue. Then, students can report their findings to the class.

2. Terms used to disguise unpleasantness. In an attempt to mask the truth or to hide unpleasant realities, governments or other special interest groups sometimes create euphemisms or expressions to put a more positive light on a situation. If *blind* sounds offensive, *visually challenged*. *Genocide* may be referred to as *ethnic cleansing*. Sometimes, the new terms seem awkward, funny, or even offensive. Again, there is unlikely to be agreement on whether such terms are good or not. Consider this opinion from Dr. Kenneth Jernigan of the National Federation of the Blind in the U.S.:

The blind have had trouble with euphemisms for as long as anybody can remember. The form has changed, but the old notions of inferiority and second-class status still remain. The euphemisms and political correctness do not help. If anything, they make matters worse as they claim modern thought and enlightenment. They attempt to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as blindness, blind, the blind, etc. and imply shame instead of true equality, and portray the blind as touchy and belligerent.

Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Jernigan? Try to explain why. Try to find other similar examples of euphemistic speech.

3. Political correctness in languages other than English. Politically correct changes are also occurring in languages other than English as a reflection of growing tolerance, inclusion, and other changes in modern societies. What examples of politically correct speech can you identify in the native languages of your classmates or community? Create a class list of examples.

4. PC point of view. Which of these two points of view most closely reflects your opinion? Explain, giving examples to support your opinion.

- a. PC speech is an important issue in modern society and reflects a growing respect for others.
- b. PC speech is just a form of conformism and does not represent a meaningful change in attitudes.

About the Author

Marina Tsehelska is Chair of the English Language and Methodology Department at Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University in Ukraine.



Integrating Skills and Strategies in a Content-based Course

Kevin Ballou, Transpacific Hawaii College, USA

As the new resource teacher for our institution's American culture and communication course, my task sounded simple: put a language focus back into a content course that had become an eclectic collection of new student orientation materials, tips for living in the U.S., and information about local and American culture. Teachers had become confused by the seemingly random and hopelessly disorganized materials available for use in the course, and students often commented that they could not see the purpose of the class and did not feel that it was helping them learn English. The process that we followed to re-establish a clearer link between content and language in this course may be of use to others engaged in curriculum development or revision.

Identifying the Problems

First, we decided that we needed to examine more than just the collection of materials that we had been using. We began with our setting. Our school is a small, two-year college in Hawaii whose primary goal is preparing Japanese students for successful transfer to an American, Japanese, or other four-year university program. Students are typically recent high school graduates with minimal English proficiency. TOEFL scores range from 380 to 450. They live with host families for at least their first year in the college. In two years, average students are able to complete an ESL program and an associate of arts degree while preparing for the rigor of third-year university study elsewhere. The American culture and communication course that is the subject of this article is one the first classes that new students take, along with two hours a day of listening/speaking and four hours of reading/writing. Among the problems with the course that we found were uninteresting materials and activities, disjointed lessons, and a heavy emphasis on reading in an already reading-heavy program.

Revising Goals and Objectives.

The ESL program coordinator and I worked together to establish some new goals and objectives for the course. The overall purpose of the course would be for new students to experience particular aspects of American culture while they adapted

to life in the United States and improved their communication skills. We decided that the language component of the course should enable students to learn important daily and academic vocabulary and idioms while also using English to develop better oral fluency. The revamped course needed to fit better into our program's curriculum, which starts with extensive oral and written fluency work and is followed by a transition to a more intensive academic focus including essay writing and lecture note taking. We decided to take a more task-based approach to language practice that would encourage students to communicate not only in the classroom, but also with their host families and in the community. The overall outcome that we hoped to achieve was increased student success in the ESL and associate in arts degree programs. We also hoped that students would adjust better to host family life, feel more at ease in Hawaii, grow in their understanding of American culture, and become active participants in the life of our college.

Integrating Content and Language

From a seemingly endless number of possibilities, we chose six broad thematic areas for the content of our course: getting to know your host family, getting to know the college, personal safety and healthy dating, exploring American and Hawaiian culture, and preparing for our academic future. Each area has been developed in one or more units of instruction following the same general sequence of activities. (1) A preparation activity personalizes the topic and activates background knowledge. (2) Input, preferably a video or dialogue, serves as the primary medium for content transmission and as model for a later production task (3) Practice and awareness-raising exercises focus on the skills and strategies that will be needed to communicate in the task. (4) The production task gives students a chance to explore the content while making use of the skills and strategies modeled by the input. (5) Finally, time for feedback and reflection gives students the opportunity to think about and share what they have learned about both content and language use.

Below is a sketch of one of our units called “Getting Involved with Campus Activities” from the thematic area “Getting to Know the College.” Students who successfully complete this unit learn about the extracurricular activities offered by the college and have the language and social skills to find out more about a club or sport.

Preparation

Students discuss clubs and activities they participated in during high school and what interests they have now that they are in a new school and country. Afterwards, they read a short section from the Student Handbook about clubs and activities offered at the college.

Input

The class watches a short video of a student talking with a club officer about her club. During the interview, the student gets information such as where and when the club meets and why someone might consider joining this club. The student on the tape models good communication strategies including asking the club member if it is a good time to talk and verifying that he understood the information correctly. As they watch, the students fill-in a gapped script that draws their attention to the target strategies. Students answer questions to check for comprehension of the dialogue. Then, they discuss the strategies that the student used for communication.

Practice

Students practice having a similar dialogue with a partner, attempting to use the target strategies. Afterwards, they brainstorm questions they would like to ask a club officer using the questions from the dialogue as models.

Production

As a homework assignment, the students must approach a club officer, ask if it is a good time to talk, and find out answers to their questions about club membership. To avoid communication breakdown, they are reminded to make use of the strategies practiced in class.

Feedback and reflection

In the next class, students share the content of their interviews, putting the information together in a binder for future reference. They finish by discussing how the interviews went and whether they were able to use the target expressions to sustain the conversation.

Since we finished designing and implementing our new curriculum, course evaluations and feedback from teachers have revealed several improvements. Teachers find the language goals give clearer focus to the course and provide them with better guidance as to how to teach the required content. Students are more likely to say that they are learning English and improving their language skills. Finally, both teachers and students appear to be enjoying the course more. When we realize that it is not necessary to choose between language and content, everybody wins.

About the Author

Kevin Ballou is a resource teacher in the ESL program at TransPacific Hawaii College, a 2-year college located east of Honolulu, Hawaii. His primary interests are curriculum design and use of video materials for language learning.