
Individualization Made Easy: Student Centered Activities for Reading and Vocabulary Instruction

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It is no simple matter to individualize the classroom without adding to the already-overworked teacher's burden. If you want to individualize reading and vocabulary instruction, however, this paper provides a complete kit of needed materials. It describes a sequence of practical activities developed to individualize extensive reading and vocabulary development which I have used with college students ranging from low intermediate to high intermediate levels of proficiency. The sequence offers all of the advantages of individualized instruction without increasing workload. The activities have other advantages as well: self-selection of reading materials and target vocabulary, interactive learning, self-testing, and increased learner autonomy. The handout for students which describes the activities is included in Appendix A.

Self-selected Extensive Reading

The first activity requires students to select materials to read on their own throughout the course. Interest is probably the single most important determinant of readability, so students should ideally be allowed to choose whatever they want to read. However, I have run into problems with absolute self-selection. Since the reading materials will serve as the source for target vocabulary—archaic language or unfamiliar dialect, for example, has proven problematic since students have selected target words which are not useful to them. For this reason, my students now select their material subject to my approval. This requirement also insures that the material selected is at an appropriate level of difficulty for independent reading. I also require students to show their extensive reading materials to me. Past experience has shown that simply telling me what they will read is not sufficient; it is best to see that they have the material in hand at the start.

Self-selected Target Vocabulary

While reading, each student selects words and phrases that he or she does not know. These words should be useful ones, primarily nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that the student needs to know in English. If unsure, the student should ask the teacher if a term is one worth learning. The teacher sets a minimum number of target items for the term (I require 50 of low intermediate students and 80 of high intermediate students in semester-long courses).

Vocabulary Cards

Students fill out an index card for each target word or phrase. In the center of the unlined side of the card, the word or phrase is written; cards are numbered consecutively in the upper right corner. On the lined side of the card, the following items are written:

- (1) **the sentence in which the vocabulary item appears in the extensive reading material, with the target word or phrase underlined.** Long sentences may be shortened as long as what is written is a complete sentence. The sentence shows how the term is used in context and determines its part of speech.
- (2) **the part of speech of the word as it is used in this sentence:** N (noun), V (verb), ADJ (adjective), or ADV (adverb).
- (3) **1 to 3 synonyms for the word as it is used in the sentence, if they exist.** These must be inter-changeable in the sentence; that is, they can be substituted for the target word in the sentence without changing meaning or resulting in grammatical error. A monolingual dictionary and/or a thesaurus can help students to identify appropriate synonyms, but students need to learn that not all of the words listed in these sources are interchangeable in context.
- (4) **an antonym for the word as it is used in the sentence, if one exists.** Students need to become aware that not all words have antonyms.
- (5) **other words in the same word family/other parts of speech.** For example, if the target word is the verb “deceive,” the nouns “deceiver” and “deception” and the adjective “deceptive” would be listed. Learning these related forms now facilitates vocabulary expansion.
- (6) **anything else that helps the student to learn the word.** Examples are a cognate term in the student’s native language; the equivalent of the word in the native language; a known word with which the target word is related; a clear, concise definition of the word as it is used in the sentence; a common phrase or expression using the word; and so on. (See Appendix D for model vocabulary cards).

The student’s name and the title(s) of the extensive reading materials are written on a separate top card, and the stack of cards is held together with a paper clip or a rubber band. The cards should be kept simple and clear; unhelpful information on cards makes it harder to learn the vocabulary.

The teacher should demonstrate how the cards should look as well as how they can be used to study the target vocabulary. That is, students begin by studying the information about the target word on the lined side of the card. Later, they can test themselves by looking at the side of the card with the target item alone and, without looking at the other side of the card, verifying if they are able to define it, name other members of the same

word family, give a synonym or the L1 equivalent, and so on. Cards containing words that have been mastered can be set aside so that the pile of cards to study becomes progressively smaller. Studying and testing can be done by students working alone or in pairs or groups.

I collect the first three cards from each student very early in the term to verify that the cards are being completed properly. Improperly completed cards must be revised until I am satisfied that the student knows what to do. Thereafter, it is the student's responsibility to complete the cards correctly and turn in a specified number of cards on the due dates I have set. It is not necessary to scrutinize each card after the first three; a quick check is sufficient to verify that the words selected are good choices and that the information on the lined side is clear, adequate, and correct.

The students learn not only specific vocabulary items but also a technique for learning vocabulary. It is a study skill which one hopes would transfer to personal reading, mainstream courses, and standardized tests such as the TOEFL, Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

20-Point Vocabulary Tests

Needless to say, students will have greater incentive to learn their self-selected target vocabulary if they are tested on it. The job of writing individualized vocabulary tests for all the students is of course unthinkable, so students write their own 20-point vocabulary tests. The words tested are the target vocabulary items selected by students from their extensive reading material and listed on their vocabulary cards. Related words and other parts of speech in the same word family can also be tested. Vocabulary quizzes given in the class provide students with models of several question types, and other kinds can be modeled in class. I require at least three different question types on student tests. Each answer is worth one point, and there are 20 answers (target items) on the test. Many question types require using the sentence copied from the extensive reading material. Instructions to students for writing their tests appear in Appendix C.

I require two of these tests, one 4 class periods before the mid-term exam and the other 4 class periods before the final exam. This schedule allows for revision before turning the final test in the class period before the exam. First drafts of tests usually contain problems such as an incorrect number of answers/points, questions containing insufficient context, questions having more than one correct answer or no correct answer, and language errors. The polished test is attached to the student's exam and counts as one part of the exam, 20% of the total score, or whatever percentage the teacher prefers.

Some students find the idea of writing their own tests bizarre and are initially reluctant to do so. I overcome this initial reluctance by pointing out that it is normally their teachers

who decide what they will be tested on and how they will be tested and that this is an opportunity for them to gain some control over their testing. (An added benefit, one I do not point out to my students, is they may begin to appreciate the work teachers put into test-writing!)

Oral Report on Extensive Reading

As the final activity in this sequence, students report orally on their extensive reading. Students sit in pairs and take turns reporting, without reading. While one student reports, his or her partner takes notes on the report. (See Appendix B for a model oral report form.) The partners then switch roles. The teacher should walk around the class and listen in on the reports. Students turn the oral report forms in to the teacher at the end of the activity.

I have never tried this sequence of individualized activities with low level students. It should work if the students can find authentic reading materials which are not too difficult for independent reading. Because students may not be familiar with individualized activities, careful and repeated explanation is necessary no matter what level the students are at.

Some students question the value of and/or need for individual instruction. Initial resistance can be overcome by pointing out the advantages of having some control over what they learn. Students learn best what they want to learn and what they are interested in learning.

The above sequence has advantages beyond individualizing without drudgery. Students get the chance to read what they want to read. They learn the vocabulary they want and need to learn. They practice all the language skills. They interact with other students. They take responsibility for completing tasks. They learn a valuable study skill. And finally, assessment is based on content selected by the students.

About the Author

Sylvia Mulling has been an ESOL teacher, teacher trainer, and administrator for over thirty years in Puerto Rico, Algeria, China, and the United States. Active in NYSTESOL and NJTESOL-BE, she is an International TESOL delegate to the United Nations. Interests include introducing peace education and global issues into the classroom.

Appendix A

Course Requirements

Although the title of this course refers only to vocabulary, reading is just as important as vocabulary in this course. Your textbook provides practice in both reading and vocabulary development. This material will be supplemented with the following activities.

Extensive Reading

You will read material outside of class. Generally speaking, you may select whatever you want, as long as I approve it. In the past, some problems arose, and for this reason I must reserve the right to approve your selection.

Good choices in fiction are novels, short stories and plays. Good non-fiction choices are a series of newspaper and/or magazine articles related to the same topic, biographies, and autobiographies. Do not choose something you are reading for another class. Choose something you are really interested in. You should take into consideration the language of the material you choose to read: It should be neither too easy nor too difficult for you. It should contain vocabulary that you want and need to learn.

Oral Reports on Extensive Reading

You will report orally on your outside reading twice in the semester. Partners report to each other in class; while one student reports, the other takes notes on a worksheet.

The number of pages you are required to read for each of the two reports depends on what you are reading. If you are reading a novel, short stories, a biography or an autobiography, you should read at least 50 pages for each report. If you are reading non-fictional newspaper or magazine articles, you should read at least three full-length articles for each report. I will be more specific about this requirement when you show me exactly what you are going to read.

Information to be included in all reports is as follows: title(s), author(s), kind of writing, why chosen, and number of pages read so far. If the work is fiction, also include the following: what the work is about, the main characters, the setting(s), a brief summary of the action, and your personal reaction. If your reading is non-fiction, include a brief summary of what you've learned about the topic and your personal reaction.

Extensive Reading Vocabulary Cards

As you read your outside reading materials, fill out a vocabulary card for unfamiliar words or phrases that you want to learn. Be wise in selecting vocabulary; choose words and expressions which are commonly used today and will be useful to you.

Appendix B

Oral Report on Outside Reading

Reporter: _____ Note-Taker: _____

Titles(s): _____

Author(s): _____

Kind of Writing: _____ Number of pages read so far: _____

Why Chosen: _____

FICTION (novel, short story, play)

What it's about: _____

Main character: _____

Setting: _____

Summary of action (check if given): _____

Opinion: _____

NON-FICTION (News articles, biography, autobiography, etc.)

Topic: _____

Summary of what has been learned (check if given): _____

Any comments the note-taker wishes to make on the report:

Appendix C

Instructions for Writing Vocabulary Tests

—Each answer on your tests is a target word on your vocabulary cards. An answer may be the word written on the front of a card, another form/part of speech of that word, or a related word.

—Each answer on your test is worth one point, and the total points or answers on your test is 20.

—Include at least three of the following question types:

A. Synonyms: Use sentences and underline the words for which synonyms are to be given.

Instructions: Give synonyms for the underlined words.

B. Antonyms: Use sentences and underline the words for which antonyms are to be given.

Instructions: Give antonyms for the underlined words.

C. Parts of Speech: use sentences and underline the words whose part of speech is to be identified.

Instructions: Identify the part of speech of each underlined word.

D. Completion: Provide sentences or definitions with blank spaces and a list of words or answers. Include at least 4 sentences and 6 words in the list.

E. Matching: List, for example, target words and their (brief) definitions in two columns. Include at least 5 items in the first column and 2 more items (for a total of 7) in the second column.

Instructions: Match.

F. Prefixes and/or Suffixes: Use sentences and omit the affixes; underline where affixes are to be added.

Instructions: Add prefixes and/or suffixes.

G. Word Forms: Use sentences with target words omitted which require different forms or parts of speech as answers.

Instructions: Give the correct form of the word in parentheses.

H. Multiple Choice: Use sentences with words omitted. Be sure that the four choices are similar in form, with no choices obviously wrong or right.

Instructions: Circle the letter of the best answer.

Appendix C (continued)

Draw blank lines, all the same length, for each answer (20 of them).

Each question must have only one correct answer. Be careful with parts of speech!

Each part of your test (A, B, etc.) must have **several** questions and answers in it.

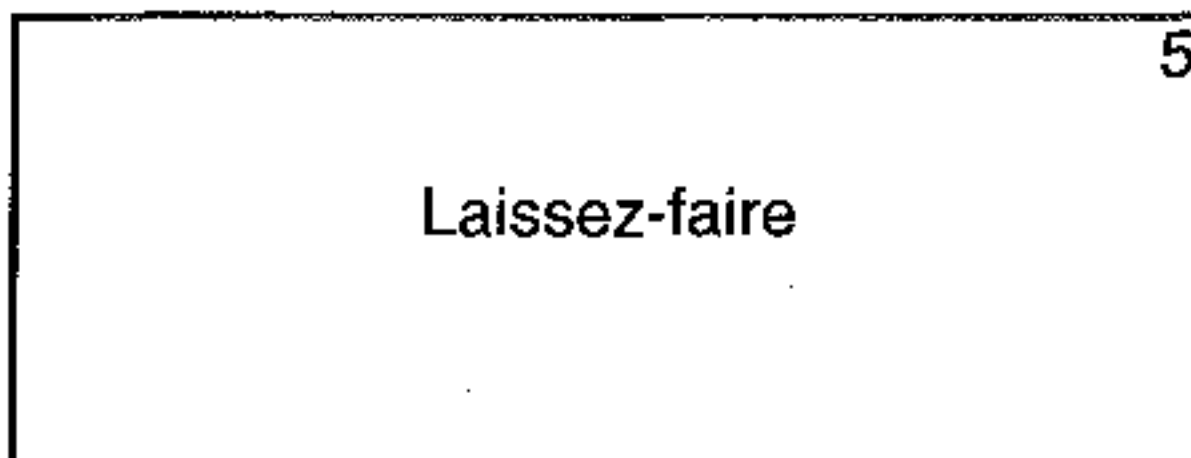
Everything you write must be **correct** English.

Do not test the same target more than once.

I will attach the tests that you turn in to me to your exams, so they must be perfect and clearly written. If you need any help, you must see me. If there is any problem with what you turn in, you will lose points on your exams.

Appendix D

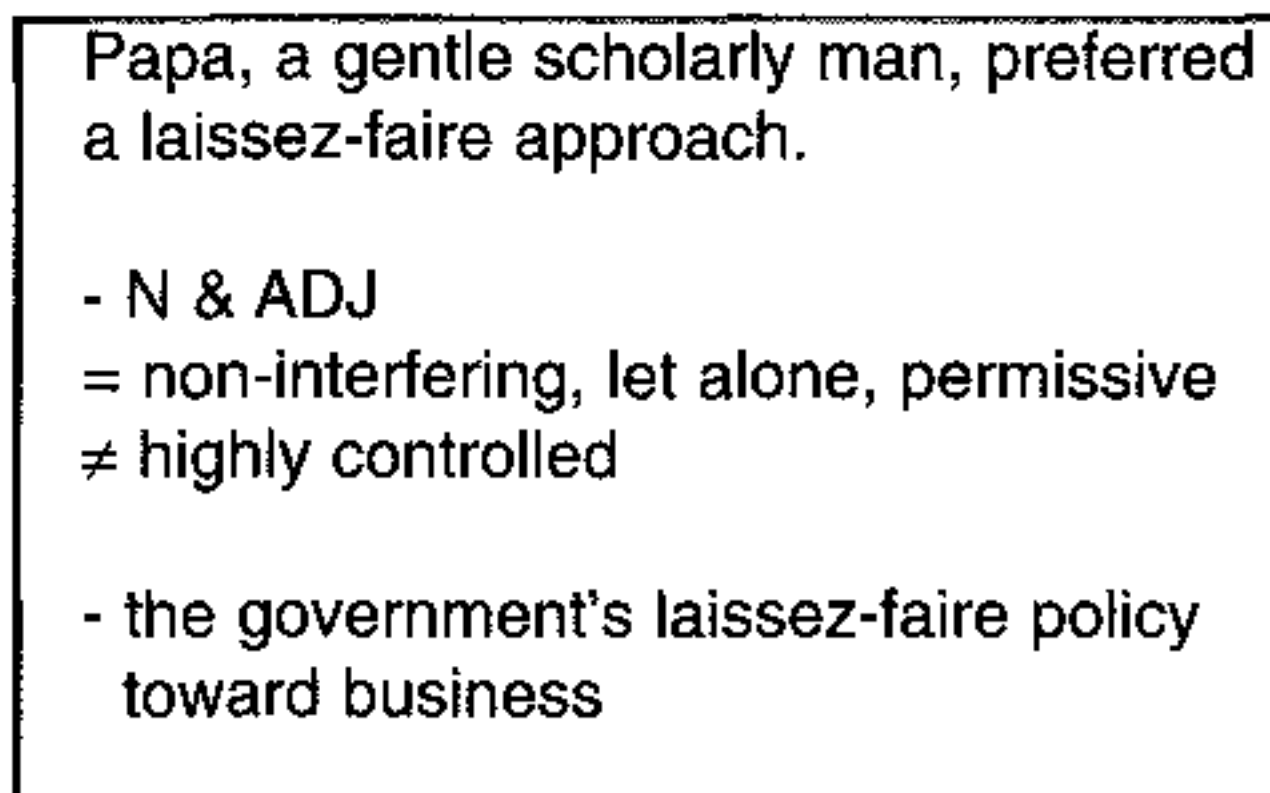
Two Model Vocabulary Cards



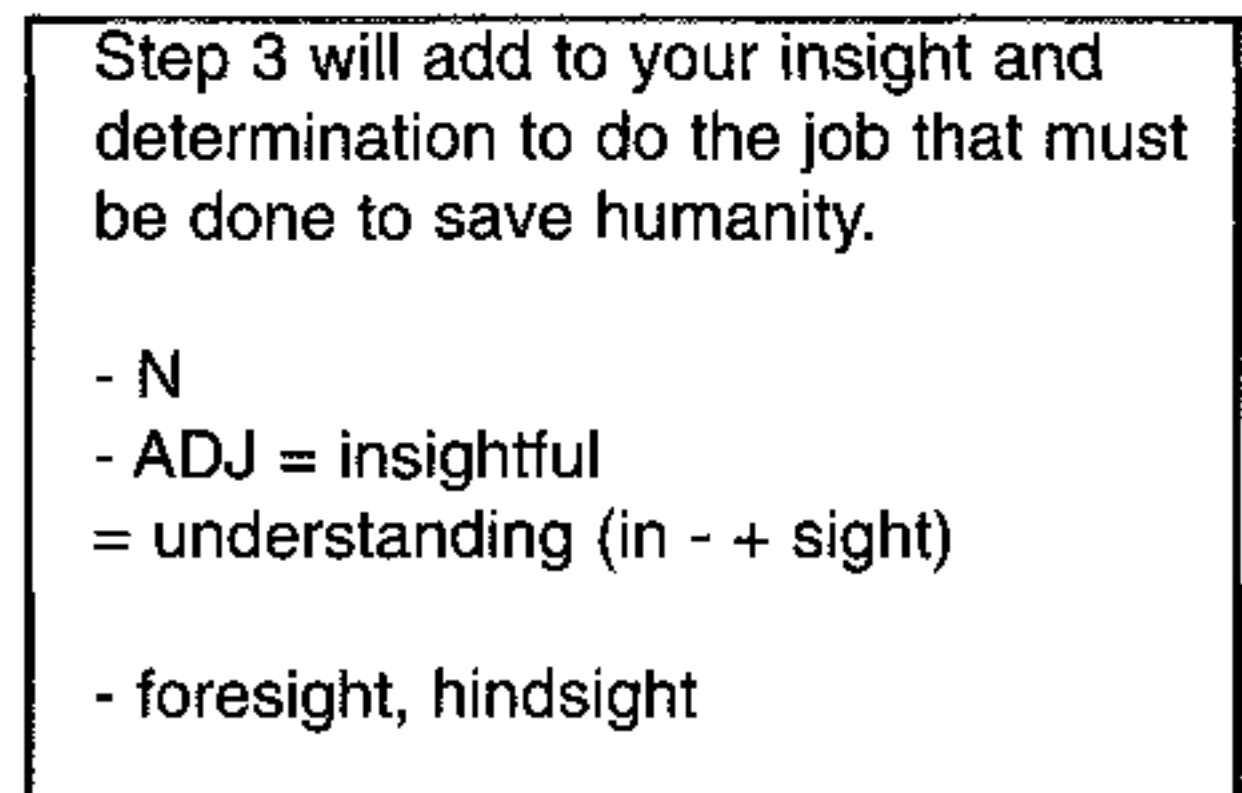
unlined side



unlined side



Lined side



Lined side