CACHE-ING IN ON VOCABULARY

by Jeffrey Butler

A common problem for ESL teachers is how to teach vocabulary so that students will remember and use the words correctly. Even when a student has mastered the meanings attached to a new list of words, he often uses them in improper contexts or forgets to change their forms when necessary while writing them.

This semester a few of us who are teaching an advanced ESL writing course are trying an approach for teaching vocabulary

with which we are pleased. We call it a Word Cache, and it is both simple and organic.

We begin the Word Cache in class by listing a general topic on the blackboard. The topic we select is always a single word, like "weather," and generally originates from readings within the students' writing text. For the next four or five minutes after the topic word is presented, students write down as many words as they can think of which relate to the topic word. They are allowed to use the dictionary if they wish, and some students even talk to each other as a way of generating topic-related words.

When time is called, we ask students to share with the class those they consider to be the "best" words from their lists. As we call on students who have volunteered to respond, we write some, but not all of the words on the board. We try to list about ten good content words, many of which may be unfamiliar to the class as a whole. We then review each of these words, talking about both their meanings and about how they can be used in sentences.

The next step is to expand the word list by writing each word in as many of its content word forms (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) as possible. Some words, like "gale," or "typhoon," may only be written as nouns or adjectives, while other words, such as "humid," or "temperate," may be expanded to three or four content forms. We ask the students to fill in the available form categories for each word, and frequently find them generating

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both forms and words which were previously unfamiliar to them. We believe that through this content form expansion students see possibilities for using new words in a variety of ways.

As homework we require our students to finish expanding their own lists of content categories for the words they wrote down, but which we did not use on the blackboard. From these lists each student is asked to write at least ten sentences, using one or more items from their word cache in each. We also require that at least two words from each of the four form categories be used in the ten sentences. In meeting this requirement, students show us both that they understand the words and their forms, and that they can use them properly in written sentences.

The next day we call for Word Cache lists and sentences, and we frequently read some of them to the class. I should note that we require each of the ten sentences to relate logically and grammatically to the one which precedes it. In essence, the ten sentences become a mini-essay on the topic we initially listed on the board. We believe the students will learn words more effectively by using them in a unified piece than if they simply write ten unrelated sentences.

We find that the ten minutes each day which we spend doing the Word Cache is beneficial to the writing course generally. Not only is the Word Cache an effective and non-time consuming content area, but it is flexible enough to support the course at each stage of its progress. For example, when we're teaching verb forms, we require students to use those forms and their topic words in their Word Cache sentences. The same holds true for count/noncount nouns, sentence combining, or for any grammar or usage skill we are teaching. The word cache is always available as a support for future writing as students keep their lists and may refer to them while writing in-class essays.

At this point we are still adjusting the ways we use the Word Cache to make it as

effective as possible. We have found, regardless of the variations with which each of us applies it, that the Word Cache is effective. Our students are remembering new vocabulary words and are successfully integrating them in their writing. In other words, they are using their Word Cache to develop a linguistic cache.