

Two Effective Ways to Increase Students' Vocabulary

by Holly E. Andersen

*There once was a fisher named Fisher
Who fished for a fish in a fissure.
But the fish with a grin
Pulled the fisherman in
Now they all fish the fissure for Fisher.*
(Aitchison, 1987)

Words are the smallest independent units of a language. Native speakers (NS) use them fluently, at an intuitive level to express their meanings. It can be quite hard to pin down the concept or thing that a given word stands for in a single definition. Still, native speakers do tend to agree on what is and what is not a word, and they tend to agree what a given word means. However, non-native speakers (NNS) do not share these sets of conventional intuitions and often view words as major obstacles which hinder their ability to successfully communicate. The above rhyme exemplifies how confusing English words can be. For example, the words fish (noun) and fish (verb) share the same outward form and pronunciation, but have different functions in the grammar and meaning of English. The words fisher and Fisher share the same form, pronunciation, and both are nouns (though the writing system does mark the latter as a proper name); however, their meanings are different.

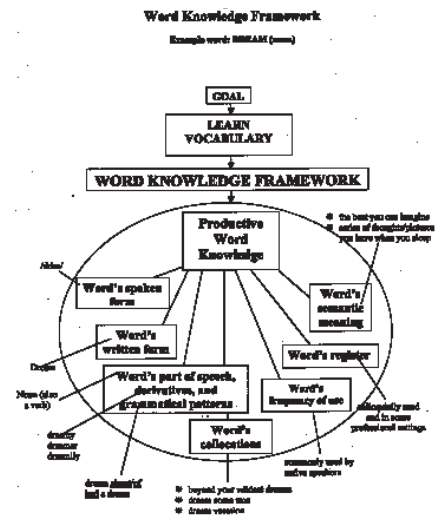
Complexity of form within one word and similarities of form and pronunciation across unrelated word forms result in many sound-alike and look-alike words in English. This is but one aspect that highlights the tremendous task that NNS face in gaining sufficient mastery of the lexicon. Research findings about NNS' vocabulary development support NNS who report they need more vocabulary instruction (Krahnke, 1996). We might have reason to be alarmed if we heed what Brown (1991) states: the average NNS entering an English speaking university has a vocabulary smaller than a native-speaker fifth

grader. In contrast, Zimmerman (1997) reports that a NS entering college knows 20,000 to 25,000 words and is aware of the subtlety and range of meanings of each word, as well as the appropriate contexts for its use. This disparity clearly shows why students learning a second language both want and need to learn more vocabulary! It is important for teachers to provide approaches to vocabulary learning and acquisition that enhance learning, considering the overwhelming nature of this task.

Word Knowledge Framework

To teach vocabulary successfully, we need to understand what it means to know a word. There are many different conceptualizations of word knowledge, one of which is Schmitt's (1995) Word Knowledge Framework (WKF). This definition divides word knowledge into two categories: (1) receptive and (2) productive word knowledge. Receptive word knowledge is the ability to recognize words when heard or read, but it does not necessarily include the ability to produce the words when speaking or writing. Productive word knowledge is the ability to properly use and have ready access to words when using a language to communicate. A key point to the WKF is that productive word knowledge goes beyond word meaning and form (Schmitt, 1995). It provides students with different ways to understand vocabulary items. It also helps to prevent students from the misuse of words that is a result of focusing only on only one aspect of a word. Additionally, because a word must be viewed between 5-16 times before it can become productively known (Nation, 1990), the framework encourages repeated exposure to a word while the word's components are being learned. Pedagogically, the WKF provides teachers with clear guidelines for what is needed for a student to gain productive knowledge of a word.

Diagram A (below) depicts the components necessary for having productive



word knowledge and gives an example of how each component functions.

To help our students develop their vocabulary, there are a couple of core activities we can use.

Vocabulary Word Bank Procedure


The vocabulary word bank replicates the vocabulary notebook suggested by Schmitt and Schmitt (1995). The objectives of the word bank are to help organize vocabulary items, to recycle words for better retention, and to approach word comprehension through the WKF. Each student in a class is required to have a ring of word cards, but students should be encouraged to make their word banks unique to their own learning style and to use the word bank as well for vocabulary learned outside of class. To make the word bank, students need to buy word cards held together with a ring that can open and close. The following format can be used to incorporate the word bank into language learning classes.

I. See Diagram B (next page) for an example of how a vocabulary word bank is structured.

II. Word banks are divided into different categories, (e.g. topics, parts of speech, units in the book,

Vocabulary Notebook Example

CARD FRONT

Word, pronunciation, and part of speech	Synonyms
STEADY /steɪdi/ adjective	Steady, even, firm
	This ladder seems very steady!
Word Illustration	Sentence

CARD COIN BACK

Definition	Opposite Information
1. Steady: fixed, not likely to move, change, or fall 2. (of a person) calm and reasonably not easily upset	unstable: not (of something) firm (of instability) unsteady: verb
person: calm adjective	Steady has a positive meaning +
relationship: opposite connotation	Connotation

Other categories you can put on the cards: Semantic maps, L1 translation, Number of times the word is heard in one day (if in an ESL environment), or any category that helps the student have productive knowledge of a word.

etc., and new categories can be added as necessary.)

III. Have students put only one word on each card so the front and back of a card can be used to add more information later.

IV. An entire card should not be filled out at once. This means that a word is recycled each time new information is added to it. Suggest to students what opportunities (in and out of class) there are to add new information about each word to the card (e.g., key synonyms, parts of speech, related information from semantic maps, etc.) Also, try having them add synonyms or near synonyms to the words currently being learned, or, in review, to all of the words studied so far.

V. Instruct students in dictionary use and use of the text glossary before assigning vocabulary word bank work.

VI. Carefully model how to use the notebook.

VII. Occasionally check what students have written on their cards.

VIII. Incorporate the Vocabulary Word Bank into the class work. Have students use their word banks during vocabulary games. Display student cards on the OHP and have other class members question the author of the card on its contents. Have students teach each other new word information and copy it into their word banks. Give students freedom to decide

which information they want to include as they learn how to use the notebook. Students should become more independent and individualized in their word bank development over the course of a term or school year.

Word Wall

The format for the Word Wall (WW) comes from Stoller's 1997 CoTESOL presentation. The WW's objectives are to recycle words, to create a focus for class discussion, and to teach students a versatile strategy for vocabulary learning. The WW is a student-generated wall of words which displays various types of relationships. Each word is placed on a strip of poster board and then attached to the wall according to a specified relationship, for example, parts of speech, article topics, connotative meaning, or semantic relations. The words are displayed on the wall in any way the students see fit, but should continually be moved in order to place the words in positions that reflect the strategies (from the WKF) that the students are learning. Also, the WW items are not limited to single words—phrasal verbs, phrases, and idioms are all appropriate. The following procedure will help you start the WW in your classroom and give ideas for how to integrate it in the classroom work.

I. Introduce the word wall by having the students write the new words on pieces of poster board.

II. As the words are written, instruct students to place the words on the wall according to the parts of speech. To avoid confusion, label sections of the wall prior to the class with the words: noun, verb, adjective, adverb.

III. After the words have been placed on the wall, review them with the whole class to see that they were placed correctly. If not, solicit corrections from the students.

IV. Try to incorporate the WW into a number of activities, such as:

a. *Creative Stories*: Divide words between groups of four students and have each group create a story (verbal or written) using the words, then share the stories with the class.

b. *Sentence Writing*: Put students in groups of three. Have one member of each group go to the WW and get one word. As a group, students write

a sentence using the word, then show it to the teacher to see if it is correct. When the sentence is correct, repeat with a new WW word. When correction is needed, have students work further on the sentence. When all the words are off the WW, the team with the most finished sentences wins.

c. *Jeopardy*: The teacher chooses words from the WW and places them in categories (e.g., nouns, adjectives, content words). The teacher then supplies definitions to teams of students in a Jeopardy-like fashion (Zimmerman, 1997).

d. *Guessing Game*: One student describes a word on the WW (how it is used, its definition, etc.) to another student. The partner tries to match the clue with a WW word (Zimmerman, 1997).

e. *Cloze passage*: Cloze reading or listening passages can be based on the WW. Teachers can choose to delete every *n*th word at random (the higher the frequency of deletion, the harder the cloze passage). Or, they can delete certain words to highlight a linguistic feature or key vocabulary.

f. *Crossword Puzzles*: Construct crossword puzzles using the WW.

g. *Journal Entry/Poetry*: An opportunity for students to stretch the number of words they can use in active and creative expression.

h. *Synonyms*: Each student is responsible for providing two synonyms for words from the WW, teaching them to the class. The class writes the new information in their vocabulary notebooks and writes new WW cards for the synonyms.

i. *Categorization*: Students reorganize words (rearrange the groups) on the WW (synonym/antonym pairs, words with multiple meanings, noun/adjective combinations, content-area words, etc.).

Conclusion

By using the Word Knowledge Framework as a foundation, the two core activities of the Vocabulary Word Bank and the Word Wall can extensively, deeply and creatively enhance vocabulary acquisition. These tools can be used as outlined above or in a variety of other ways to meet the needs of a class. If used

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in a coordinated way that progressively asks students to do more, you will help expand your students' word knowledge and aid them in developing a more comprehensive and fluent productive vocabulary. By giving your students repeated opportunities to recycle and revise words in as many activities as possible, your stu-

dents' vocabulary learning will actually grow to be interesting and fun!

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