

TEACHING WORDS

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

Why do words in Latin seem to be so different from words my mother tongue and other modern languages I know? Take a word like PROPTER: I know its meaning (for, on account of) its spelling, its pronunciation (within Church Latin contexts in Italy and in UK) and the fact that it takes the accusative as in " propter magnam gloriam tuam ". And yet I do not feel that I know the word as a word. Maybe this is because I have never had anyone I care for use it in genuine speech or writing and because I have never "produced " it myself. PROPTER has no depth, little feeling, and no associations. It is a two dimensional label, not a living, growing word.

When I first come across a new word in my mother tongue there is a similar feeling of distance and lack of trust. Understanding the labelling function of a signifier is only a small part of owning it.

Let's look at these three new words in English:

A TRANSGENIC PIG is one that has had the DNA of another species injected into its embryo (in current experiments often human DNA)

A SELF PIG is one that has had the DNA of a specific person injected into its embryo so that it becomes an excellent, potential organ donor for this person.

A XENOTRANSPLANT is an organ transplanted from one species to another.

I don't like the word xenotransplant : it sounds ugly, it looks ugly, it borrows from both Latin and Greek and feels just like its meaning: it is a nasty linguistic transplant. Self pig, on the other hand, is a real English word, it is intriguing, a bit mysterious at first

and it exactly expresses its meaning: a part of the pig becomes part of the person's self.

As I talk to you about the words they become a bit more familiar, a bit less out there, a bit more real. To really take these words on board I need to hear and see them in many contexts, to make friends with them, to make them fully my own.

In teaching students new foreign language words we need to do more than simply make sure they know the mother tongue equivalents. We need to give them the chance to see, hear, feel and handle the new words in as many varied ways as possible.

Through the rest of this article I want to offer you a number of ways of making new vocabulary stick in the students's minds by letting them play with it in a wide variety of ways.

VOCABULARY EXPLORATION EXERCISES

1. FROM THE EXPLANATION TO THE WORD

Ask the students to go back over the reading passages in the previous two or three units of the textbook and to jot down a dozen words they reckon their classmates may find hard to remember. They check the meaning of the words chosen. They work individually.

Pair the students in some random way (eg students with birthdays on even dates work with students whose birthdays are on odd ones). Student A chooses a word from her list and explains it to Student B. Student A does not say what the word is. Student B tries to guess it. Let me give you an example:

A: (chooses the word "mustard") It's something you eat... you eat it with other things.

B: Butter?

A: No... the taste is.....not soft...it's... it'sstrong?

B: Is it for salad....? Not oil.....

A: Not vinegar..... some people use it in salad - it's yellow or brown.....

B: Mustard!

In doing this exercise Student A is effecting a kind of componential analysis of the word chosen and Student B works through an ever narrowing set of semantic fields until she lights on the right word. The exercise is thought-provoking and fun and you usually get a good voice level in class.

2. PERCEIVING WORDS (1)

Choose thirty important words you want the students to get more closely involved with. These should be words they already "know" semantically.

Ask them to rule four columns on a sheet in front of them, with these headings:

I SEE I HEAR I FEEL THRU MY BODY I TASTE/SMELL

Explain that you are going to dictate some simple words to them. They are to notice what representation they get of the word. Suppose the word is CAT, did Helmut smell it, did he hear it, did he feel its fur or did he get a picture of it? Suppose Helmut's FIRST representation of CAT was a miaow then he writes "cat" down in column 2 , under I HEAR.

Stress that the first representation is the important one. Ask the students to work fast and not to "think" too much.

Dictate fairly fast, so the students intellectualise as little as possible.

Group the students in threes to compare their categorisations. Ask them to describe the representations they got for the words that interested them most.

Basic vocabulary is very suitable for this exercise and it is excellent to go back to such words with intermediate and advanced students. You are deepening and enriching their grasp of the words.

If you use the exercise with beginner students then the discussion phase will need to be in mother tongue, a welcome occasional relief in English-only classrooms.

3. PASS THE WORD OR PHRASE ROUND

Preliminary exercise: get everybody standing in a big circle, including you. Imagine you are holding an object or a living creature in your hands. Mime holding it and then mime passing it to the person on your left. She mimes taking it and passing it on to the next person. Ask people to do the taking and passing carefully and in silence.

When the object comes round to you again stop the game and say to your neighbour on your left:

"I passed you a- what did you receive? "
She then says what she received and passed on. Each person does this in turn. Amazing how differently mimes are perceived.

The above is the lead-in to the main exercise:

Tell the group you are now going to pass words round the circle. Each person will both "hand" the word to her neighbour and say it to her neighbour.

Start off yourself: hold the word thoughtfully in your cupped hands, turn to your neighbour and show her you

want to give her the word- when her hands are ready give her the word carefully and say it clearly and feelingfully at the same time. She then passes it on and says it to her neighbour.

As the word goes round the circle the pronunciation of it may slip into error. To correct a student who has got it wrong cross the circle silently and hold out your hands to the student after the error-maker in the circle. Take the word from him and then hand it and say it clearly and feelingfully to the person before the error-maker. This person then gives and says the word to the error-maker. Often the person responds to this thoughtful, indirect correction and gets the word right.

This is a sensorially powerful way of getting students to savour and feel words. The focus is on physically owning the word or phrase and then offering it as a gift to another person. The exercise stimulates a lot of attention to the auditory shape of the word. It appeals specially to students who are kinesthetically and auditorily inclined.

The exercise is useful at all language levels.

When you first do it with early teenagers there is an embarrassment barrier to be broken through, as is the case with quite a number of excellent activities.

4. BITS I LIKE

When students have read a passage from the coursebook ask them to go back and underline two sentences, phrases or words they particularly like, for whatever reason. Ask a student to read out the word/s of her choice in the voice and pronunciation that makes them appealing to her. Then ask her to describe why she likes it/ them. Ask half the students to do the same. Be non-judgemental in your physical response and do not comment on a student's choice and reasons. A "Wow, that's interesting" to one student means that no comment to another becomes an implicitly negative judgement. No need at all for you to gloss their choices.

It is amazing the variety of reasons for which students like a word or phrase. The exercise can teach you a lot about what is going on in your students' heads.

5. FREE CATEGORISATION (2)

Put 15-30 words you want your students to work on where they can see them (board or OHP).

Tell them to sort the words into categories. There must be more than one category and less categories than the total number of words. Do NOT tell the students what the categories should be. When the students have established their categories and given them headings ask them to share their work in groups of four or five.

From this set of words three students produced the categories below:

history / stuff / kafir/queer / peach brandy/ to visit /
drought/musical / to keep your feet still/ to alter /
to sweep over / applause

Student 1. NOUNS: history - stuff - kafir - drought -
applause
ADJECTIVES: peach brandy - musical
VERBS: To sweep over - to keep your feet
still, to alter, to visit.

Student 2. BLACK PEOPLE : kafir - history -
musical - drought - to keep your
feet still - applause.
MOVEMENT WORDS : to alter - to visit -
to sweep over.
MISCELLANEOUS : stuff - queer - peach
brandy.

Student 3. LIQUID WORDS : peach brandy - drought -
to sweep over - musical -
THINGS PEOPLE DO : to alter - to visit -
to keep your feet still, applause -
history -
NASTY WORDS : Kafir - queer -
BAD SOUND : stuff -

Free categorisation allows the students to network the
words they are working with in their own idiosyncratic
ways and so make them much more understood and owned.

Help the students to play with words, to hear them, to
see them and to explore their meanings. In this way they
will come to really know and trust these slippery fish in
a foreign sea.

(1) This exercise derives from Neuro-Linguistic-
Programming, NLP, a field brought into being by John
Grinder and Richard Bandler.

(2) I first met the idea of free categorisation in the
work of Silent Way teachers, people who learnt their
craft from Caleb Gattegno.

Bio data

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