

Vocabulary Workshop

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

Words are intensely subjective entities. Each person's perception of a given word is very different from that of her neighbour. To make this point clear, the group took dictation of a string of uncontextualised words. Participants were asked to write each word down in one of four columns:

I see

I hear

I feel thru
my body

I smell/
taste

Suppose the word was CAT. If your first reaction to the word was to see a cat, you put the word in the first column. If your first impression of the word was to hear scratching or miaowing then you put the word in column 2 ... etc.

Naturally enough, people's perceptions of the words dictated varied a great deal. The point that words are intensely subjective was made patently clear by this exercise.

In the next exercise people were asked to complete each of these sentence stems six or seven times:

An egg

Eggs

It's hard to eggs

Participants then left their seats and tried to find people with a world view of the egg relatively similar to theirs. Only a few people found soul-mates round the word EGG!

Each word we hear and speak is intensely subjective.

Emotionally meaningful contexts

It is important that students should meet new words in the foreign language in emotionally strong and meaningful contexts. One way of having this happen is to choose to work on strong areas of experience. I described two or three flights of stairs that have been important in my life. I jotted down on the board any words needed to talk about stairs, tread, banister, spiral, step, etc. and words describing light and dark, feeling etc. Two or three other people told the group about stairs that had been important for them and I helped with words that were needed - these were put up on the board. Participants then worked in small groups, each person telling stairs anecdotes or describing significant flights of stairs. The initial vocabulary input helps with these freer own descriptions.

David Hill led the same exercise, this time focused on a scar he had. We ended up all telling our scar stories.

This is a personally relevant way of treating certain word fields.

Words in External Text

Scars and Stairs are examples of text generated from the students. But naturally teachers often find they have to teach words from external text: text from a tape; text from the textbook; from a video. Here are some techniques for teaching words in external text:

- A. I read the group an article about aman who forced his wife to accept demeaning contractual agreements within the marriage. I asked them to pick out all the words they felt were connected with aggression. Participants jotted these down as they listened. The lists of words participants came up with differed. People are different and the way they think about words is largely subjective. These differences provoked discussion about the words and some desire to read the passage they had just heard.
- B. The group were shown a set of words taken from a reading passage. They were asked to work in small groups and decide what they thought the text might be about. The sub-groups shared their hypotheses. The text was given out.

The words chosen for this exercise are semi- or sub-key words. If you give the group full keywords, they will have littel difficulty in all correctly predicting the contents of the text. So there is no fun in the prediction.

- C. The group were given a text and asked to correct it. There were plenty of semantic oddities to deal with. They were then given the text as it was before the semantic oddities had been introduced.

Some students find it fun to clear up a text with messes in it. Others like messing up a text and introducing surrealistc vocabulary items. This was the next exercise: people were given a 'clear' text and asked to have a good time introducing words that did not fit. This is an excellent way of coping with an empty, badly-written textbook reading passage. It is a kind of revenge exercise.

- D. Thirty words were put on a hidden blackboard. The group saw the words for 10 seconds. They had then to write as many of them down as they could. They saw the board again for 6 seconds. Again, they wrote. They were then allowed to read the text from which the words had been taken. This is an excellent way of pre-teaching new lexis. After focusing on the words on the board, students really want to find out the meaning of the ones they don't know. Not more than 50% of the set of words should be unknown.
- E. I told a story in English but peppered it with words in Greek that could be understood from the context. It was striking how many words people could recall after the telling. Some words were only partly remembered. A person would remember the stress pattern of the word, or the first syllable or the overall rhythm of the word.

To remember 50% of a word is to be 50% right, not 50% wrong! We should respect our students' brilliance rather than dwell pathetically on the minor things they get wrong.

F. These words were taken from a text:

Goodbye; horses; luck; jaguar; office; money; train; morning; town; London

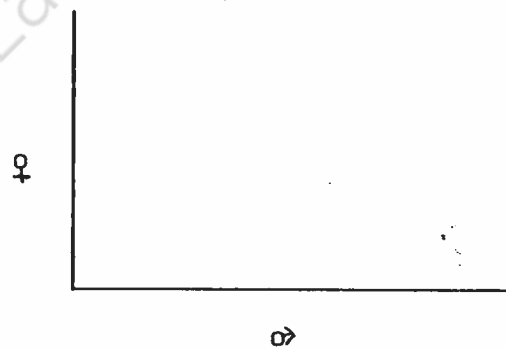
People were asked to draw a graph with Freedom along one axis and Adventure along the other. They placed words on the graph where they felt they fitted best. Naturally there were a variety of graphings within the group, so people were asked to explain to their neighbours why they had graphed the words the way they had.

They read the passage from which the words were taken.

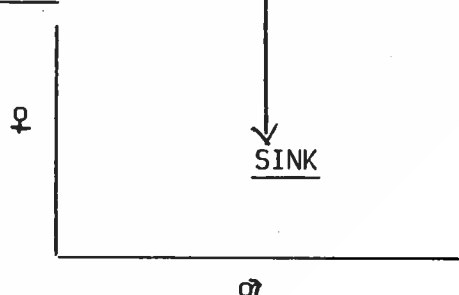
To give you another example:

Where would you put these words on this graph

hoover
TV
car
bed
baby
teenage son
scissors
sink
cellar



Personally, I would put the sink about here:



I am male and I do most of the washing up in my house.

Don't teach words that people already know

I had these Greek words I wanted the group to become aware of:

panteloni
karekla
kefali
ipokamio
pantofles
kapnos
tsimbuki
efimeritha

I had to teach, ie. frontally present, kapnos, smoke and tsimbuki, pipe. All the other words were produced by work in the group - they were not given the words: they had to find them in Greek while looking at a picture of an anthropos reading an efimeritha while sitting on a karekla. I did not teach words I knew the participants could reach for and find from within their own knowledge of the other languages. If I know that people know words like encephalogram and encephalitis why should I waste their time teaching kefali? I can draw the word from them and they will remember it for long after.

We often waste our time teaching people what they already know or half-know. To prove this point, I asked the group to write down all the Japanese words they knew. At first, there was a feeling of disbelief: "we don't know any". Fifteen minutes later, there were 40-50 words up on the board - they spanned areas like literature (haiku; Noh); war (samurai; banzai); administration (mikado; shogun); greetings (ohio); linguistics (hiragana; katakana); dress (obi; kimono); etc. People who did not believe they knew any Japanese in fact knew quite a bit. Why teach people what they already know? Why not, when teaching vocabulary, elicit before you present?

The above ideas and many more will be found in Vocabulary, Morgan; Working with Words, Gairns and Redman, CUP, 1986.