

Hirao School of Management Review 第9卷

Workshop on Vocabulary: Words and How They Function in Texts

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【Abstract】

This workshop session explores a number of vocabulary learning activities which can be put into effect immediately to help language learners identify the various ways in which words function. Vocabulary development underpins reading success, and forms part of a comprehensive language program focusing on extensive and intensive reading of whole texts via a genre-based approach. Special consideration will be given to reference chains and lexical strings, and the way vocabulary is unpacked through ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning.

【Keywords】

Reference chains, Lexical strings

1. Introduction

This workshop was part of a series delivered in Kyrgyzstan in 2018, held on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the teaching seminars that Teachers Helping Teachers has been running there. This particular workshop session called upon participants to reassess their approaches to the teaching of vocabulary. Some common issues touched on included whether classes offer students the right kind of instruction for their needs, sufficient variety to cover the ways words are used in English, or an explicit teaching focus. In particular, an effort was made to go beyond learning words in lists drawn from a corpus to examine the ways words are used in a living language where participants need to achieve socially situated purposes. Being able to make sense of vocabulary usage by first language (L1) speakers is an important step in helping learners organize words into clauses and sentences to construct meanings by themselves, thereby functioning effectively in the target language.

There has been an increasing tendency towards teaching and testing vocabulary via digital word cards, such as the popular application *Quizlet*, or by having students compete with each other in an effort to heighten concentration and motivation, such as through the well-known website *Kahoot!* for making quizzes. While instructors in common teaching contexts in Japan would be able to call upon these kinds of technological solutions to teaching challenges, and expect their learners to be able to download an application for self-study outside class, such pedagogical practices may still be in their infancy in less developed societies. Indeed, online solutions may need to be introduced at a manageable rate in the Kyrgyz educational environment, where precious resources are spread thinly. Furthermore, training novice or even experienced language instructors to use technological solutions which are constantly evolving and depend upon special equipment (reliable internet connection and mobile device for all participants) as well as frequent retraining might put too much strain on already stretched instructors, institutions and their facilities. In the process of moving from existing modes of instruction to a more multimodal approach, it is easy to lose sight of the main issues inherent to second language (L2) development. A focus on the learning of more and more new words, which technology may be perfectly suited to aiding the practice and retention of, may blind the teacher and students to the deeper issue of how those words function in texts.

2. Word Cards

This word card activity can be created quickly on strips of recycled paper or card, tapping into the most relevant vocabulary, grammar or content as identified by the instructor. It is based on an activity in the popular resource book, *Five-minute activities* (Ur & Wright, 2004). Such books offer a wealth of ideas for extending one's teaching repertoire, and are easy to model in these kinds of workshops.

2.1 Set up

The teacher identifies the target words, and prepares them on paper strips prior to class. It might be language required for a future test, a revision of words or forms that have already been taught in the course, target items from the textbook, or a slightly harder grammatical structure than the one just learnt in the course. The class will be divided into pairs, with each student holding a different word card. If the target word is new to the

student who has to elicit it from a partner, then that student will first have to look up the word in a dictionary. Allow time for familiarization with the target language, but set a limit (e.g. one minute) which gives both partners time to prepare.

2.2 Demonstration/Modeling

The teacher asks for one volunteer to sit at the front of class and play the role of their partner. She then shows the target word or phrase to everyone apart from that student. In this case, the target item for a beginner class learning adjectives of color is the word 'blue.' The teacher places the word face down in front of the student acting as their partner, and uses all the language resources at her disposal to make the partner elicit the target word. It is anticipated that she will be able to make a 'wh' question leading to the answer blue, such as a direct and literal hint as in, 'What color is the sky?' or 'What color are these jeans?' She could also demand of a more advanced class that they only employ figurative expressions or metaphor to arrive at an answer. In that case, the word blue might correspond to, 'What is the color that reflects your feelings when you are sad?'

2.3 Practice

The instructor distributes word cards at random, and partners take turns to elicit the correct responses - identical to the word or words on the card - from their partners. Importantly, they may have to make several questions, and partners make numerous guesses, to find the right answer. It pushes students to speak more, to be more creative in their use of language, and encourages heightened interaction. Because students are only tied to the word or phrase, how they arrive at the answer is entirely down to their creativity and imagination, hence they will be able to discuss expressions that are meaningful to them.

2.4 Extension

Students may be asked to come up with their own word cards, as directed by the instructor. For example, the students are focusing on frequent mistakes with the past tense, so they provide the target item (past participle of to shear, 'shorn') and how they would ask someone to arrive at that answer (What is the past tense of the verb used to describe cutting off a sheep's wool?). Some interesting cultural information may come out of the discussion. Such specific examples might be of limited use in a service economy or highly automated society like Japan, while being much closer to the lives of people in a culture like Kyrgyzstan where most families are extended and people still keep goats and chickens. In discussions, it is important for participants to reflect on the difference between a word list which students may be assigned to learn and this kind of dynamic activity where no word is used outside of the situation in which a student has given it meaning. The aim is to place all the words or phrases in believable everyday language scenarios in which they might be used.

3. Identifying Language Used to Express Meanings in a Text

Discovering the multiple and simultaneous meanings in a text requires the instructor to provide their students with explicit instruction in text deconstruction. This goes against the tendency to quickly scan a text or gloss over the main points, or to answer

comprehension questions. It may be helpful to consider a variety of ways to help learners engage critically with what they read. Consider this text taken from a textbook:

The Railroad Connects East and West

The first settlers in the United States lived mainly on the East coast. By 1860, there were many more people on the West coast of the United States, too. At that time, people usually used horses to travel. It is 3,000 miles from the East to the West. This was a long way on horses. The people in the West were cut off from people in the East. Letters took about two months. Sometimes they never arrived.

The government decided to build a railroad to connect the East and the West. There were two companies to build the railroad: the Union Pacific Company and the Central Pacific Company. One company started to build in the East. The other started in the West. The two companies met in the middle to make one railroad.

The government gave prizes. For every mile of railroad, the company received 12,800 acres of free land on both sides of the railway. Both companies worked hard. Each company used over 10,000 workers. The Central Pacific railroad had a more difficult job. The builders worked on high mountains and made tunnels through them. The work was hard and very dangerous. They hired Chinese workers. The Chinese worked harder than the other workers.

In 1869, after 7 years, the two railroads met in the state of Utah. It was a very important moment. There were celebrations. The railroad connected East and West at last.

Broukal, M. (2008). *All about the USA 1* (2nd ed.) NY: Pearson Education

A reading passage may differ from a text, in the sense that a text should have a complete message. The passage above is not just a fragment, or a paragraph, so it can be said to form a unified whole. Students using this text should have built background knowledge of field through watching videos about westward expansion in the US, be familiar with the terms East and West as used in American Studies, and have discussed the railroad. They can then be asked about the text as a piece of written prose. If this were a conversation, it would look quite different. Have students explain what would be different, and why.

3.1 Multiple Meanings

Ideational meaning (Eggins, 2004) is the field of the text. It is clear that there is some historical information, discussing the linking up of the US and it becoming one nation physically. The class would fail if the teacher just opened the book and directed students to read about the topic and then answer comprehension questions. Pre-reading activities in a reading skills class or textbook do not build knowledge of the field.

Thinking about the railroad with no prior knowledge is not the same as studying the railroad, or learning about the railroad as a symbol of uniting the country as the USA. The real-world meaning is about a real railroad linking the east coast and west coast of the United States, and we should not interpret it as ‘the East,’ in other words, Asia, or ‘the West,’ which might otherwise be thought of as Europe. The final sentence, stating that the railroad connected the east and west at last, is confirmation of the real-world meaning.

Interpersonal meaning is the tenor of the text. Questions might involve how much power the writer has over the reader. Evidently, the writer of this text is not addressing the reader as their boss, or their lover. Indeed, the reader is more like a stranger. The writer displays the confident assurance, the authority and power that comes from knowledge of the topic and knowledge of English. The student is forced into a subservient position in which they are likely to obediently believe this version of events that took place. Participants were asked how frequently they challenged students to question canonical texts, or if they turn texts into ‘accurate’ sources when they ought to doubt them. The writer’s relationship with the reader, and the writer’s attitude to the subject matter, comes across clearly. By stating in the first paragraph that letters took about two months to arrive, we already have a feeling of empathy with the writer. It is very hard to disagree with what sounds reasonable. She later adds that the government gave prizes, in a positive or admiring tone, and that the work was hard and dangerous. The concerned or caring tone is designed to draw in and convince the reader. When talk turns to celebrations, it becomes hard to challenge or dispute the upbeat and triumphant tone.

Textual meaning is the passage’s mode, the degree to which it is spoken or written. Texts are organized as pieces of writing or speaking, in this case through the use of personal nouns and the passive voice. The words company, government, and railroad sound factual, indisputable and uncontroversial. There is nothing threatening about these kinds of neutral words, and it is normal to trust in institutions of authority like the government. The text reveals that the government decided to build a railroad, that the two companies met in the middle, and that the government gave prizes. Furthermore, it is mentioned that the two railroads met, almost as if it were preordained that they should do so. The organization of the text lends it a motive force, building towards a natural endpoint as if it were destined. Yet, in fact there was absolutely no certainty that the United States should become a nation spanning the whole continent from east to west, or that the railroad should be the agent of this great change.

3.2 Identifying Reference Chains in a Text

Teachers can help students to identify reference chains, revealing the participants in the text. Language is often treated in a formal sense, as blocks of words bound together, but this does not explain the way language functions. Reading effectively means that the reader can decode the words on the page and make sense of them. Just seeing words on a page, even if knowing the words in isolation, may enable a student to answer a comprehension question of the type commonly found in school tests, but does not empower a learner to be a critical reader.

Teachers have their students search for words with the meaning of people. Turning to the first sentence of the first paragraph, it can be seen that ‘the first settlers’ were people. In the second sentence, the reader learns there were ‘many more people,’ and in the third that ‘people usually used horses to travel.’ Further down in the same paragraph, the text describes ‘people in the West’ contrasted with ‘people in the East.’

Hence even from the outset of the text there is a chain of references built around a particular participant. This commonly occurring structure is easy to teach students about, and is rewarding for them to notice. Language instructors can empower their students by carefully working through a reading passage, slowly and thoroughly, allowing learners to discover for themselves these kinds of crucial clues that add cohesion to the text. Given that the instructor is dealing with items of lexis, individual words within clauses that help to construct the direction and flow of a paragraph, it works well as a vocabulary-focused activity which shows how words function in texts.

As a classroom task, asking students to find new participants turns a relatively rudderless reading exercise into an active learning experience with a clear direction and purpose. In this text, there is an abundance of participants which do not necessarily have to be people. If the focus is on the word ‘company,’ in the second paragraph there is a discussion of the ‘two companies,’ which are ‘the Union Pacific Company’ and ‘the Central Pacific Company.’ Teachers can help students notice important signposts to meaning, such as how the word company has been replaced by ‘the other’ representing the phrase *the other company*, and *started to build* has now been reduced to ‘started.’ In the third paragraph, the terms ‘railroad’ and ‘railway’ are used interchangeably. Students soon learn that over-repetition of identical terms is considered poor style in English writing. Naturally, given that this text is aimed at lower proficiency language learners, there will be more duplication of terms than in a more advanced academic paper; yet even here, as we have already seen, synonyms are employed at times such as in the word settlers for people.

3.3 Identifying Lexical Strings in a Text

In addition, instructors can help learners identify what are called lexical strings. These are used for lexical cohesion of the field. Again, the aim is for students to understand what they read more deeply. The idea of the lexical string is that it involves more than just a simple replacement of a term such as settlers for people. Turning again to the model text, it can be viewed from the standpoint of the general word, land. Now evidently it is possible to think of the word land as the earth, the terrain, or the ground. However, the objective of the lexical string is to conceptualize the term by its associations. Taking the first paragraph, ‘settlers’ are people who *live or reside on the land*. The verb ‘lived’ refers to *existing on the land*. The noun ‘coast’ refers to *a discrete geographical feature of the land*. ‘Horses’ are used to travel *over the land*. ‘3000 miles’ is a description of *the land distance*. When we see ‘people in the West’ and ‘people in the East,’ we will instantly situate them *in an identifiable land area with boundaries*.

For students, it ought to be highly invigorating and motivating to form and create their own lexical strings. In the workshop, I asked the participants just as I have asked students in the past to find the most common string they could. Many of them came up with quantities or numbers as the dominant identifier in the text. Even with a cursory glance, it is easy to see why they came to that conclusion. Just in the first paragraph, quantifiers are revealed in ‘the first settlers,’ ‘by 1860,’ ‘3000 miles,’ and ‘two months.’ In the second paragraph, it is possible to identify ‘two companies’ and ‘one company.’ In the third paragraph, there are number references to ‘every mile,’ ‘12,800 acres,’ ‘both sides,’ ‘both companies,’ ‘each company,’ and ‘10,000 workers.’ In the final paragraph, further uses are ‘in 1869,’ ‘after seven years,’ and ‘two railroads,’ all the more extraordinary as they occur in the very same sentence. With greater class time, the

instructor could exploit the vocabulary by subdividing and classifying still further. There are differences between numbers per se, ordinals like the *first* settlers, and determiners like *each* and *both*, just as there are different textual reasons for using *in* 1869 and *after* seven years. If, on the other hand, the instructor wished to return to the theme of textual meaning, it might be more appropriate instead to focus on the lexical string of challenges. There are numerous obstacles noted in the text, such as the problems of it being ‘a long way on horses’ to travel from coast-to-coast, letters that sometimes ‘never arrived,’ and the ‘difficult job’ of building the railroad, with its ‘high mountains and tunnels’ in conditions that were ‘hard and very dangerous.’

3.4 *Wrap-Up and Reflection*

Participants reacted enthusiastically to this way of digging more deeply into texts and exploring words in relation to the organization of pieces of writing. They shared their frustrations of strategies that were prevalent but ultimately frustrating for the instructor and learner. Some of them are fortunately easy to identify, but just as unfortunately hard to rectify: the pressure to learn more words in lists as quickly as possible; rapidly working at a superficial level through a great number of reading passages, often incomplete fragments which serve as poor models; and posing comprehension questions rather than having students interact with the text to analyze what they read deeply. The workshop offered a path away from instructional practices which are hard to support yet remain ingrained out of years of unquestioned obedience on the part of institutions, materials writers and teachers.

4. Conclusion

By the end of the workshop, the participants had cause to reflect on their teaching of vocabulary and how words function in a wide variety of texts. Simple word card activities and text analysis do not require expensive technological resources, and can be utilized by teachers from across the Kyrgyz teaching landscape. Importantly, the activities described in this paper would still require the input of the language instructor. It is not enough to leave students to work alone and memorize a word list, for though this is also one part of vocabulary learning, it does not build knowledge of the ways that words function in English texts. Knowing the culture and social context of the target language is an integral part of the learning process.

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