

# Defining Words: What Can Teachers and Students Do?

Jennifer Yun and Marely Cervantes  
yustjenny[at]yahoo.com  
(Fullerton, California, USA)

## Introduction

The process of learning a new word can be a long one. Between encountering a word for the first time and being able to use the word in speaking and writing, students must acquire many different kinds of knowledge about the word. The first step, however, is to look for a definition. How do teachers and students define words? What are common mistakes that are made when defining words, and how can teachers and students define words effectively? In order to investigate these questions, we conducted a survey on dictionary use for intermediate and advanced learners in academic university programs. We also interviewed teachers and observed various classes at the postsecondary level focusing on vocabulary and word learning strategies. We first noted some of the most common difficulties that teachers and students encountered when defining words. From our findings, we compiled points of practical advice to inform teachers and students of how to approach defining words.

## What Are Common Pitfalls for Teachers When Defining Words?

- Not revisiting a word once it is defined; assuming students have learned a word after only one encounter.
- Not providing enough examples for students to be able to produce the word.
- Giving too much information (multiple meanings) at once. Low-frequency uses of a word can confuse students and keep them from learning more salient meanings.
- Not attending to the "mechanics" of knowing a word, such as spelling and pronunciation.

## What Are Common Frustrations that Students Have When Defining Words with Dictionaries?

- Not enough sample sentences are given.
- Definitions contain more unknown words.
- A dictionary entry may have multiple definitions, causing confusion over which is the needed one.
- A bilingual dictionary may not have the correct meaning for the context.
- Students may not know the correct spelling of the word when trying to look up the word.

## How Can Teachers Define Words for Students?

### Use a Variety of Techniques

Going through a long list of vocabulary words one by one Using a variety of approaches will (1) address the different learning styles of a student group, (2) develop students' receptive knowledge (reading and listening) and productive knowledge (speaking and writing) of the word, and (3) engage students' interest.

- Use visuals (realia, pantomime, mnemonic devices).
- Explain definitions inductively (e.g., with a short story that employs the target word) and deductively (using synonyms, examples, or translation, if appropriate).

- To help students recognize target words when listening, bring in recordings (TV shows, songs, etc.) where the words are used by various speakers in various contexts. Cloze activities with natural speech are an excellent listening comprehension and spelling check.

## **Teach Word-Learning Strategies**

Teaching about words is as important as teaching words. Combine direct word instruction with word-learning strategies .

- Take advantage of the students' knowledge of their native language knowledge (cognates, etymology).
- Show the strategies that native English speakers use when learning new words (using roots and affixes, word associations, mnemonic devices).

## **Recycle Words**

Consider that learners need to be exposed to a word at least seven times before they can use it.

- Incorporate the four language skill areas by having them write, read, say, and hear the same word.
- Reuse the target words in everyday classroom talk. (e.g., the day's agenda and explanations of new words).
- Have a word box in the classroom where they place words they need more exposure to and readdress these every week.

## **Be Brief and Relevant**

When giving on-the-spot definitions in class, keep these principles in mind.

- When students ask for the definition of a word, start by finding out where the students encountered the word.
- Choose only the most relevant aspects of a word's definition. Don't overwhelm students with the various meanings of the word at once.
- Check students' comprehension by eliciting examples or explanations of the word.

## **How Can Teachers Help Students Define Words?**

### **Raise Awareness of the Different Parts of Word Knowledge**

While we want students to have a breadth of vocabulary, we also want students to gain a depth of word knowledge. Without knowledge of how to use a word appropriately, students will not be able to produce the word in speaking or writing.

- Teach about the different elements of word learning (Who says this word? Where is it said? What words occur with it?)
- Remind students that word learning is complex and takes time.
- Have students keep a word log with the different parts of word knowledge (e.g., grammatical constraints of the word, associated words, example sentences).

### **Show Students How to Be a Better Dictionary User**

A dictionary can be a powerful vocabulary learning tool, but many students have never been taught how to use one effectively.

- Encourage students to choose a dictionary that fits their needs. An (English-only) English learner's dictionary may be more appropriate than a bilingual dictionary or a dictionary for native speakers.
- Teach students to mine as much information as possible from a dictionary entry (pronunciation, grammar usage, synonyms or antonyms, associated words).

### **Push Students to Become Active Word Learners**

The majority of word acquisition will occur outside the classroom. The more one knows about a word, the more one will notice it being used in real world situations.

- Encourage students to take advantage of non-dictionary sources (native speakers, T.V., radio, newspapers).
- Remind students of the effects of word learning on other language tasks; for example, even small gains in a learner's word bank will improve reading comprehension.

## **Conclusion**

As teachers, we must continually remind students that their goal is to not only recognize a particular word, but to produce it on their own. In order to gain the confidence to use a word, students must have knowledge of how to use it within the constraints of grammar, appropriateness, and meaning. This comes through repeated exposure to the word and careful attention. It is a slow and long process; as teachers, we must be as knowledgeable and encouraging as we can be.