

Words to be Avoided in Academic Writing: How to Cope with Them

Aleksandra Kledecka-Nadera

akledecka[at]plusnet.pl

Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan (Kalisz, Poland)

Many teachers, when teaching their students how to write a good piece of an academic text, come across a similar problem. Students very often use non-academic vocabulary or common words which should be avoided. Thus, the task of teachers is to teach their students how to find appropriate synonyms for these words to be avoided. Another task is to make the students realise the sometimes minute differences between apparently similar synonyms for a word. To achieve this the teachers should think about various ways to practice synonym finding. This article presents one of the ways in the form of a task which provides the students with an opportunity to easily learn synonyms for such basic and common words as good, bad, small or big.

Introduction

Many university teachers often share the same problem which occurs during writing classes, or while completing written assignments when their students persist in using and even overusing common words such as big, small, good, bad, get, interesting, different, and other common words. Unfortunately for students, academic writing is governed by many rules none of which should be broken. One of these rules concerns avoiding common words. Hence, at the beginning of the course, many teachers provide their students with a list of Dos and Don'ts of academic writing. Such a list tells the learners what they should not do while completing their written assignments, however, it often does not inform them what they should do instead, especially in case of these notoriously overused words. In such a situation students look for synonyms in a thesaurus, but very often they end up with finding synonyms which are contextually inappropriate. Thus, the task of a teacher is to guide the students and make them realise that not every word proposed by a thesaurus can replace a word in their essay, paragraph, thesis, or summary.

What Can a Teacher Do?

The teacher's task is to design such an activity which would help the students recognize differences between synonyms of one word. It is an especially challenging task for first-year students whose vocabulary is limited. They also have not yet developed the habit of checking meanings of chosen synonyms in a monolingual dictionary. Thus, the task must teach the students new words they could use instead of overused ones, make them realise that differences in meaning between synonyms for the same word can be tremendous, and develop the habit of always carefully checking the meaning of a chosen synonym. However, for the task to be successfully carried out and completed, each student has to bring to the class either a monolingual dictionary or a thesaurus. Eventually, there has to be roughly the same number of monolingual dictionaries and thesauruses in the class.

The Task and Task Procedures

The task is initiated by the teacher who, before the class, chooses which overused words are going to be worked with. It is advisable to choose only two words at a time because learning synonyms for more than two words may cause demotivating confusion among the students. Very often many of the synonyms may turn out to be entirely new words for the learners.

After choosing two words, good and bad for instance, the teacher picks 10 to 15 synonyms for each of them. Then he divides the class into groups of four. In each group there have to be two monolingual dictionaries and two thesauruses. Half of the

groups receive a list with synonyms for good, and the other half for bad. The task of the students now is to prepare gapped sentences for the synonyms. All the synonyms from a given list should be put at the top of the page of the test prepared by the students. Occasionally, to make the activity more challenging, one additional word, being also a synonym for the core word, could be added. Under the list of synonyms the students write sentences with gaps into which the words from the list must be put. As students have to prepare sentences for new words, they need to consult a dictionary about their exact meaning, and as a result they start realising differences between apparently similar words. By realising this, they start feeling that each new word should be checked for its definition in a monolingual dictionary, as a bilingual dictionary may happen to provide the same translation for the majority of synonyms of the same word.

When the tests have been prepared, the teacher takes them and distributes them in the class. Students who worked on the word good receive a test on synonyms for bad, students who prepared the test on bad, now deal with the one on good. The exchange is important, as in this way all the students will learn synonyms for both good and bad, in this case. After the test has been completed by a group, it goes to its authors' group for correction. If there happen to be incorrect answers, the test goes back to the group solving it. It is then revised by the that group, and returned to the authors again. Such self-correction enables the students to memorise the words already at the stage of test completion.

To finish off the task and to make sure that the students will remember the words, the teacher gives the students a list of all the synonyms they worked on during the class. The students are to learn them by heart, as at the beginning of the following class the students will have to complete a test based on the list of synonyms. It is also advisable to grade the test, as this will make the students learn the words.

Conclusion

The importance of acquiring the skill of writing is unquestionable -- academic writing is governed by many rules which should be taught gradually. One of these rules talks about avoiding common words, and the exercise described above aims at making the students notice the necessity of choosing appropriate words.

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