

Learner-centered Vocabulary Building Practice

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Introduction

The humanistic view of education strongly proposes that learners must always be involved in the teaching learning process, right from when the 'facilitator' plans the teaching to when s/he tests them. Involving the learners gives them the much needed boost and propels them to take responsibility for their learning. What I advocate here is that something as dull and difficult as teaching vocabulary can become extremely interesting and rewarding if learners teach learners.

I teach functional English to nursing students as part of their diploma and baccalaureate in nursing. English is my students' third language. Vocabulary is one area, which requires constant attention at all levels of the English programme offered to them. Input is given to the learners in the form of reading practices and through word banks on each topic that is covered. However, my learners often complained that their vocabulary remained very weak. Consequently, I tried a learner-initiated vocabulary building exercise which really worked well. The best part is it does not require any preparation from the teacher.

Procedure

The exercise is done throughout the semester in every English language class. The whole plan was divided into four steps and is discussed in detail with the students who offer valuable suggestions. Each step is negotiable and open to discussion and review.

Step 1:

The students' names are typed out in alphabetical order at the beginning of the term and each student is given a copy of the list. Students are expected to remember their turn by referring to the list.

Step 2:

Students create a 100 page personal dictionary for themselves. My students came up with creative ideas like dictionaries in the shape of flower cutouts, Mickey Mouse's face and butterflies etc. Some conveniently bought notebooks and decorated them. This entire exercise motivated students and built-up their interest.

Step 3:

In each English class two students bring a word with its meaning to share with the rest of the class. If a word has several meanings and can be used as a verb as well as a noun then that is also mentioned. They are also supposed to tell the class what part of speech it is. The students turn is decided according to the name list provided to them. Once all the students have had their turn they start all over again from the top of the list.

Note: The words brought to the class can be words that the students encountered and were unaware of their meaning, or words they had heard often but were unsure of its 'right meaning'. They could bring any word they wanted and if they did not have any they could ask friends or just bring any word from the previous day's newspaper.

The aim is to familiarize students with words they commonly hear or read. Since, all the students are in the same class a difficult vocabulary item for one student is generally difficult for the majority of students.

Step 4:

The students put the words and their meanings on the chalk/white board and the rest of the class makes a sentence for each word. The words, their meanings, and the sentences are then written down in the students' personal dictionaries. At the end of the term the students display their dictionaries for other groups who are allowed to borrow them for a nominal sum to ensure that the dictionaries are safely returned and to generate some pocket money!

Conclusion

Students bring a variety of vocabulary items from technical terms and nursing terminology to French words used in English. Commonly used words that often confuse students are also brought e.g., accept vs. except; practice vs. practise etc. One student brought the word 'mademoiselle' to the class because a friend she chatted with on the Internet often addressed her as mademoiselle and she did not know what it meant. Another student said the word 'barge' fascinated her because a teacher once told her that she should not barge into a classroom and a friend told her that barge meant a ship.

The whole exercise is extremely rewarding; it does not take a lot of time and students feel motivated and proud of not only the end product, their personal dictionaries, but also of the words they bring to the class. Learner- initiated vocabulary building exercise puts the onus on the students for learning. They feel encouraged and important because the vocabulary items they choose are given importance.

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