

Vocabulary Lesson: If a Runner Runs, Does a Sweater Sweat?

Rolf Palmberg

[rpalmber \[at\] vmail.abo.fi](mailto:rpalmber[at]vmail.abo.fi)

Department of Teacher Education, Abo Akademi University (Finland)

Introduction

It is true that a person who runs is a runner, but is it also true that a person who sweats is a sweater? And if you call someone who writes a writer, would you call someone who draws a drawer? And does the fact that a teacher points to something make him or her a pointer?

English words that end in "-er" fairly often follow the pattern "to run" - "a runner". As demonstrated in the first paragraph, however, this may not always be the case. Sometimes the "-er" words may have additional meanings, and occasionally they have entirely different meanings.

Purpose

Playing with words and word meanings is something that appeals to linguistically intelligent learners in particular, but also to other types of language learner. The purpose of the classroom activities presented below is to increase EFL and ESL learners' vocabulary awareness and dictionary skills. Although the activities are aimed primarily at intermediate and advanced learners, the teacher can easily modify their level of difficulty by selecting or adding words that suit less proficient learners as well.

Sample Classroom Activities

To introduce the topic, ask the learners to produce sentences such as: "A person who buys is a buyer". Next, ask them to share and compare their sentences with their classmates.

Give the learners the following list of words:

- carrier
- diner
- drawer
- duster
- hanger
- joker
- mower
- prayer
- pointer
- poster
- reader
- rubber
- shower
- sleeper
- slipper
- starter
- sticker
- sweater

- thriller
- toaster

Next, ask them to look up the words in a dictionary and decide which words

1. refer to people,
2. refer to animals,
3. refer to objects,
4. refer both to people and to something else,
5. have three or more distinct meanings.

When they are finished, ask them to compare their results with their classmates.

Ask the learners to produce sentences such as: "Although he plays records he is not a record player". Next, ask them to share and discuss their sentences with their classmates.

Ask the learners to produce sentences such as: "The man sleeps in a sleeper". Next, ask them to share and discuss their sentences with their classmates.

Ask the learners to produce sentences which all include several of the words listed above. Next, ask them to read out their sentences in class.

Invite the learners to search their dictionaries for words that end in "-er" but do not fit the "to run" - "a runner" pattern. Next, ask them to produce sentences such as "A smoker smokes, but what does a holster do?" and "A listener listens, but can an oyster oyst?". When they are finished, ask them to read out their sentences in class.

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VI, No. 5, May 2000

<http://iteslj.org/>

<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Palmberg-Runner.html>